Hello! Welcome to my new Stucky series!
Oof... This scenario has been playing in my mind for some time. Right after I finished Up In Flames, I knew I had to work this out.
This is gonna be crucially different than what I normally write, and I'm hoping I can live up to my own expectations about this one.

See the end of the work for more notes
The phone call came at three in the morning and special agent Steve Rogers was out of breath when he answered it.

"Rogers."

"Why are you out of breath?" Sam's annoying voice shrieked from the other end of the line. "Are you having sex? Are you having kinky gay sex and you answer in the middle of it?" Steve scrunched his nose in an attempt to calm the headache that always started when stupid Sam was calling him.

"I'll hang up in a second if you don't tell me what this is about."

"Sorry. Chief needs to see you. It's urgent."

"Now?" Steve scowled, although there was no one around. "Does he know I'm on leave?"

"Of course he knows that Steve, don't be an idiot. He did sign the goddamn request, but something big has come up. Really big."

"Fine. I'll be there in half an hour."

"Make it twenty," Sam said and then hung up, leaving Steve to roll his eyes into nothingness.

He went straight to the shower. There was no point in pretending that he was sleeping. He hasn't slept for more than three hours a night for a very long time. Steve sighed heavily as the spray hit his back, soothing him and washing down his dark thoughts, at least for a short period.

Around four years ago, after he lost his family in a car accident, he quit his job as a regular police officer and entered Unit 6, also known as *Avengers*. There were no more than twenty people assigned to this squad, mostly for security issues. You couldn't trust many people when your life was on the line. Not that his life was worth much nowadays.

He dried and dressed with efficient moves. Ten minutes later, he was out of the house and his unassuming car merged into the lazy traffic of New York. He drove in silence for a while, the radio just a still presence in the darkness of the car. He scowled at a driver and postponed taking an exit just so he could rattle the guy some more. Sometimes Steve was petty like that.

He was still a bit bothered by the fact that his chief called him out for duty when officially, he was assigned to a job desk and some time off after his last mission went terribly wrong. Not that he wasn't happy that the ring surrounding those illegal fights and prostitution was pulverized after his work was done, but that bastard Erik Killmonger and his lieutenant were still out there, probably licking their wounds and ready to start all over as Manhattan would become their ring of power again.

For almost two years, Steve posed as a fighter with nothing left to lose, ready to piss on his life and health as long as he would have something to do and someone to pummel. And it worked. Steve Rogers was a ruthless warrior, who would gradually take down any fighter, no matter how much experience in the ring they had or how much bigger than him they were. Soon, that attracted the attention of Killmonger and his cronies and not long after, he became an important member of their inner circle, being offered fights and women and then men when they found out about his preferences. All of their victims were trafficked, and Steve was suicidal for most of that mission.
When everything went down, he was shot, supposedly by a rival gang and then one day later, while he was still in hospital in an induced coma, the squad was able to make almost two hundred arrests. The good news was that they were able to free most of the victims and returned them to their teary families. The bad news was that Killmonger had escaped and disappeared into thin air. Nobody blamed Steve for it, and soon Steve Rogers retreated to New York and lost himself in the underbelly there.

His hands clenched on the steering wheel. If he had been there, he would have been able to make the arrest, but his chief didn't agree as he deemed the situation too dangerous for him to be present when all the arrests were made. Unfortunately, the sniper that was supposed to take him down made a terrible miscalculation and he spent three days in an induced coma to fight off the infection that had settled into his body. By the time he woke up, everything had ended.

He parked in front of a bland building, just on the outskirts of Brooklyn, far from the meddling crowd but not too far to attract attention. It was built perfectly to resemble a small center for a little company with not enough employees and even fewer funds to move into a better building. The underground parking lot resounded with the squeals of his tires its echo grating on his strained nerves.

He parked his car closer to the elevator and once in it, pressed the top button, followed by a strict code that changed every forty-eight hours. Without it, the elevator wouldn't budge or it would move just until it reached the first floor where one would find the security, who would either ask them for their identification in a polite way or make sure they never cross that threshold ever again in a not so very polite way. Steve dared anybody to defy their security team.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, he was welcomed by a very anxious Sam, who looked as if he hadn't slept in more than thirty hours and had too much coffee. A normal Sam was very annoying, a coffee driven one drove Steve up the wall. His red t-shirt was smudged with ketchup and it would look funny if it weren't for his anxiousness almost palpable in the cold air of the office.

"You're late," his colleague snapped and then pushed Steve in the direction of their equivalent of a conference room.

"Normally, I would punch you in the face, but because you woke me up in the middle of the night, I could just kill you right now and the chief would blame it on the stress induced by the last mission," he said as a matter of fact.

"Shut up, you love me, you blond goof-ball." Steve raised a eyebrow at that.

"I love you when you are quiet, Sam, which never happens actually."

"Shut up and just tell me who you were boning when I called."

"I wasn't boning anyone. Could you be cruder?"

"And could you be more prude?" Sam reached for a cup on his desk and pushed it into his hands. "So, details."

"I really wasn't sleeping with anyone."

"Oh, my God, who says sleeping with someone anymore?"

"Tone it down, idiot!"
"Oh, I'm sorry, grandpa." His colleague's face turned serious. "What were you doing then?"

"Sit-ups," he answered and entered the conference room which was already filled up with people.

His chief, Nicholas Fury who usually grinned like a lunatic, was seriously overlooking some papers, so he barely nodded to Steve's hey. His leather trench coat was a little wrinkled, a clear sign that he hadn't been sleeping either. His IT guy, Julian, the best forger of paperwork with whom Steve had the pleasure of working with, was listening to some music and grunted a hello back.

Sharon Carter, their medical advisor and also the psychiatrist of the unit, was perky as usual and she was the only one who made small talk with him. Maria Hill, their information officer, was there as well and again several alarm bells rang into Steve's mind.

"So, can someone explain to me what the hell is going on?"

Fury left the paperwork on his desk and sighed heavily.

"Six months ago, James Barnes moved to Brooklyn."

"Shit." Steve took a gulp of the far too bitter coffee. "James freaking White Wolf Barnes is in Brooklyn?"

"Yes. And three days ago, he and another madman that goes by the name of Wolfgang von Strucker had an altercation. Strucker is dead, his body showing signs of heavy torture and his operation has switched under a new commander." Fury pinched his nose. "I wished I could have been able to bleach my own brain so I would forget those images, but let's just say Strucker's death, although deserving, was far more painful than any human being should endure."

"Since when does the Barnes clan make moves on Brooklyn?"

"In case you have missed the memo, Rogers, they make moves everywhere they please."

"I know, remember? I was freaking there." The only way Killmonger had been able to rule over Manhattan in that line of business was because the Barnes clan had in fact allowed it and for that Killmonger paid every month a hefty tax for it. But he was all right with that because he knew that so long as he would do it properly, the Barnes clan would ensure his dealings were left alone. Nobody dared to mess with them. They were probably the worst thing that ever happened to the underground mob and even Hydra stayed the hell out of their way.

"I know," Fury answered, a flicker of something passing through his eyes before he looked around the room. "Maria, hit us with some info."

The picture of a man in mid-thirties appeared on the screen, his chestnut hair falling to his shoulders, blue eyes colder the whole ice in the world, dressed in a suit appeared on the white screen of the room. Steve would normally find him attractive, with his broad shoulders and aristocratic air about him, if it weren't for those really icy eyes.

He was talking on the phone and two other people were in the background watching his every move. One was a petite woman, with the same chestnut hair and the same blue eyes, poised and dressed in a purple silk shirt and dark trousers, and holding some documents. She would look like a businesswoman if it weren't for her very hard face, her knowing eyes seemingly scanning the people around them.

The other person was a man in his thirties as well, with brown hair and tattoos all the way up his neck. He was dressed in a white shirt, its sleeves rolled up, and some elegant trousers. His hands
were painted black as well and his muscles were a clear indication of a person who would use them to mean all the harm in the world. His ridiculously small brown eyes looked defiantly at a passer-by, while he was keeping a hand in the pocket and the other holding some keys. The other goons in the background were of no concern to Steve.

"James Barnes, thirty-five, also known as the White Wolf, for how 'nice' he treats his victims." Maria's ironic tone droned on. "He is involved in heavy drug trafficking and money laundering. Aside, he holds various fractions that are involved in underground fights, human slavery, prostitution, and God knows what else. He moved to Brooklyn six months ago, after his grandfather passed away. Apparently, he loved his origins and decided to make it the headquarters of his illegal empire."

Maria took a sip of coffee and proceeded:

"The woman is his sister, Rebecca Barnes, twenty-eight, the bookkeeper of their horrendous family affair, but also very fierce. Last year, when The Panther had the bad idea of attacking them, she cut off one of his arms and then fed it to her dogs. They say though that The Panther lost something far more precious than his hand." The captain made a lewd gesture before she was able to continue: "She is incredibly loyal to her brother and they saved each other's life more than one can count. The other guy is James Howlett, thirty-one, Barnes's right hand. He served in their family since he was a child and he is incredibly protective of them. This guy rules with an iron fist as well and it is very rare that his master needs to intervene. The Panther’s men were dead before they even knew it."

"Okay, so all these people are incredibly dangerous, fucking evil, and they rule over everyone from Manhattan to Queens to Brooklyn. What this has got to do with us?"

"Rogers, I present you with your new mission." There was something utterly bitter in the chief's voice when he said that. But Steve had little sympathy for him right now.

"Excuse me?"

"Look, I don't like it more than you do, but the higher-ups are sick and tired of this guy eluding them for more than ten years and although they are very much aware that getting that close to him is almost impossible, they still want to tear down as much as possible from his empire."

"How about telling them to fuck off?" Steve snaps. "Chief, they caught the last undercover cop they sent, and you know what they did to him? They tortured him for a whole month and when they finally inflicted all the possible pain that you can inflict upon a human being, they sent the recorded sessions to his family before they buried him. I'm sorry if I'm not thrilled to be going against this guy."

"Rogers, I am well aware of this, but there is nothing I can do. We need to send someone, or these guys will rule the entire States of America in a matter of years."

"They already are, so might as well let them." Steve drank the rest of the coffee and then scowled at Fury and Sam. "This is why you called me here? To tell me that I've just been put in front of the firing squad?"

"Look, Steve," Sam pushed the paperwork in front of him, "nobody wants you to do this. But here are the facts: these guys are monsters and unless someone stops them, they will eat us alive soon enough. You are the best agent that our squad has and there is no one else who could do this. Besides, no offense, but you are kind of perfect for the mission."
"Perfect for the mission? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't have any family left to see recordings of you being tortured," Sharon answered, her voice hoarse with emotion and a heavy silence settled in the room. Steve pinched his nose and tried to ignore the pain hammering his heart.

"What's the plan?" He finally muttered. At least if he was dead, he would be able to see his family again and stop this wretched ache in his heart. Living without them was as if all the light and colors had been sucked out of life and there was nothing but grey left. "Because since you called me here at this hour, I assume you've done your homework extensively and you want me to move as fast as possible there."

"You need to become one of his goons," Maria said as a matter of fact and annoyance flashed over Steve's face.

"Look, if we are to catch this guy, let's face it, it's not going to be easy and it's not going to be done the traditional way. I have to look like I don't want anything to do with their business and even more, like I don't want to be part of it. The more reluctant I will be, the more believable it will seem for him. Besides, I will never be more than a lowly goon, even if I want to enter the clan. They are ruled by family and the business stays in the family. I need another way in."

"It's your mission now. You decide." The chief leaned in his chair.

"Very well. Julian, give me all you can find out about this Howlett guy. I need to know what he drinks, what he eats and how many times a day he pisses. He will be my entry in the clan." Julian grunted affirmative and left the room with a new purpose shining into his usually subdued eyes.

"Sharon, I need all the psychiatric evaluations that you can make of these three based on what we know about them."

"Already on it."

"Maria, I will let you know, once I find out more about them, what new identity should be created for me. Don't call me again until you have all that and, in the meantime, I need all the files on the Barnes' and this Howlett guy."

He left without looking back and ignoring Sam's calls. He really wasn't in the mood for chit chat. The problem was that he was perversely happy to go into a new mission and forget about his goddamn empty life. Everything was wiped out in that car accident and he tried to pick up pieces of it ever since. Broken pieces that didn't match anything in him anymore. He was constantly feeling like he was trying to work with puzzle pieces that were all made not to fit and wasn't that ironic?

Since that day, he had constantly been looking in the mirror only to see a stranger looking back. As if along with the death of his father and his two sisters, everything had been wiped out inside of him, leaving nothing behind. His mother had died just two years before, a victim in a robbery gone wrong. Even now, after so many years, it felt as if they had been cursed and Steve had been left behind to carry the burden of it ever since.

The dawn caught him back in his miserable apartment, almost nothing screaming his name. There was just a mattress on the floor, with a lamp next to it and some paperwork array. His few possessions were hidden in a small closet, while the kitchen held exactly one glass, one bowl and a bunch of cutleries that he almost never used.

Steve Rogers had died three years ago and now only his ghost was living in his place, sucking the little energy that he had left. Perhaps one day he would merely rest his weary body and he would
He poured himself some bourbon and took the files that Sam gave him. He was going to find out everything about this White Wolf and he was going to make sure that if he was going to die in this mission, that he would take the poor bastard with him.

A week later, Steve Rogers was moving back to Brooklyn to occupy a new position as a nurse in a free clinic in a very poor neighborhood in Brooklyn, where almost all the members of the Barnes clan were going when they were stabbed, shot or maimed in any other way. The free clinic was run by a guy called Bruce Banner, an ex-military doctor, who now loved to impart his knowledge with the grateful poor and not so grateful mobsters. Because if you were part of the Barnes clan and you were presenting yourself with a gunshot wound to ER, most likely you were going to be arrested on the spot. Free clinics like Banner's were perfect for these guys to save their asses and then going back to whatever they were doing.

Steve rented a studio flat that looked like at some point some cockroaches made it their house and never left. He was going to appear like he was short of money but not desperate, who could afford to live on his own, but still needed a miserable job whatever that might be. Steve had medical training, but Steve Rogers was a med student that didn't manage to graduate due to the tragedy of his family, a guy who had been an illegal fighter for Killmonger for a while and who then had moved from town to town after he found out about the raid that the police had done in Manhattan.

Steve Rogers wanted to forget all about the illegal fights and the pain and perhaps of something more, so he was going to be Banner's nurse because the guy really needed someone to step in and from their conversation over the phone, the curt responses were still tinged with gratefulness.

Steve was going to be a normal person that owned furniture and a bed and some old books that Sharon managed to buy for him at the last minute. He was going to give his report every two weeks and under no circumstance, he was going to enter this clan. The approach needed to be extremely different on this occasion.

Two days later, he started to work for Banner, who was always brief in his instructions, never friendly, a surly air constantly surrounding him. They tended to poor people, who couldn't normally afford a medic, old people left behind by their families or children who soon would become foot soldiers for the Barnes’ and the likes of them. For that though, there was a huge amount of paperwork to fill and he and the other nurse, Claire Temple could barely fend off.

There was radio silence for almost a month but Steve hadn't expected anything to happen any time soon. The fieldwork always requested a huge amount of patience and incredible control of emotions. He was going to wait because something was bound to happen soon.

He wasn't disappointed. Almost a month and a half into his assignment, Steve finally met the members of the Barnes clan although not in the way that he expected.

He was drinking his coffee, his eyes closed trying to forget about how horrible the day had been, when he heard Banner calling him.

"Rogers, get your ass in here now!"

"What the hell, old man?" He snapped when he got into the waiting room, but as soon as he saw the two bleeding men, he snapped into his professional mode. "What happened?" Banner was bent over a guy who was bleeding all over the upholstery while grinning maniacally. The other guy was still held by the one and only James Howlett.
"That's not your problem. Just take care of them and mind your own business," Howlett snapped at him and almost instantly Steve felt his hackles raise.

"I didn't ask what happened specifically." Howlett spluttered while the bleeding guy that he was holding actually started to chuckle. "For all I care, they both slipped on a banana peel and fell into a knife. I just need to know some specifics so I can treat them."

"Do you know who the fuck I am, punk?"

"Right now? I don't give a fuck, but if I would take a guess, I would say an annoying asshole that right now stands between me helping his bleeding friends and the said bleeding friends." Steve scowled. Showing backbone from the very beginning would later gain him some respect. The brunet looked like he was about to have a heart attack, while his friend was dissolving into chuckle.

"Now listen up, bastard -"

"Later!" Steve interrupted him and looked at the bleeding shoulder of the guy. "What's your name?" he asked, all professional, knowing that he could come to blows with the right hand of the Barnes clan.

"Brock." Steve's heart stuttered. If this was indeed that guy, then these two were the famous hitmen: Jack Rollins and Brock Rumlow, one of the most formidable pairs that he had ever heard of. Jesus, he was so going to die in this mission.

"Well, Brock, apart from the very obvious wound to your shoulder, do you have any other that I should know of?"

"No, my friend got it worse, but Doc-E is already taking care of it."

"I thought I told you not to call me that!" He could hear Bruce yell from the other room.

"Okay, then step in here." Brock smiled at him as soon as he sat down on the chair in the other care room. Howlett mumbled something and left them alone and Steve was none too glad to see him gone.

"All right, doctor, I confess I'm actually surprised to see someone standing up to Howlett. Thank you for the show."

"I'm here to serve." He smiled tightly as he gathered all that he needed. "And I'm not a doctor, I didn't finish medical school."

"Oh, man, Rollins was lucky then, although I got the pretty one. What's your name?"

"Steve."

"Steve?"

"Yes, and if I hear some joke about my name, I swear I will drop peroxide on your wound. Now we wouldn't want that, would we?" Steve concentrated on the wound, a rather nasty cut, which was still bleeding but looked not too life-threatening.

"You aren't from around here, are you, Steve?"

"No, what gave it away?"
"The way you spoke to Howlett. A piece of friendly advice though. Try not to make it a habit."

Steve looked up at that, straight into the eyes of a possible murderer and said slowly, "I would rather suggest he didn't make a habit out of it. I am not responding well to such behavior. And when I say I don't give a shit about who he is, I literally mean that. Now would you rather speak about that freaking asshole or would you rather I concentrate more on your wound and give you the good kind of pills?" Steve winked at him and the other man chuckled again.

"Steve, I think I might like you already."

Half an hour later, Brock was back in the waiting room with Howlett waiting for Rollins to be patched up, while Steve cleaned the room. By the time he finished, Bruce was already done as well, and together they finished cleaning everything up before the doctor sent him home. Feeling dead on his feet, Steve was actually quite grateful to be able to leave.

He wasn't surprised though to see a slick car still waiting outside the clinic and a few passers-by watched anxiously as Steve approached it, for he knew they were waiting for him. The man was expecting him, all cocky confidence and power to back him up. However, if that asshole was going to start a fight with him, he had another thing coming if he thought that Steve was just going to take it. Still, he didn't want to get into a struggle with the guy because that pretty much was going to ruin all his plans.

"You really aren't from around here, Steve Rogers, are you?" Howlett said as soon as Steve stepped in front of him, as if ready to protect himself but not backing down, which probably said a lot in Howlett's world.

"What is it with people saying that?" He rolled his eyes and then passed his fingers through his hair. He shouldn't be surprised that his name was already known. "No, I just moved here, and before you tell me that I should know who you are, I will tell you that no, I don't know who you are. In fact, I don't care who you are and frankly if you are going to punch me, I'd rather you'd do it now, because I've worked twelve hours straight, I am tired, I smell like vomit because I had two people actually puking on me and I am just about to face plant on this sidewalk."

The sudden laugh was definitely not the reaction he was expecting from Howlett, nor was the clap on his shoulder.

"You are an interesting guy, Rogers. Go home and crash into your bed. There will be plenty of days to exchange punches with me." The hand on his shoulder abruptly tightened, gripping like a vice and almost painful. Howlett's eyes flashed dangerously. "I suggest though you find out who I am, punk, so we don't encounter the same issue next time. For the benefit of both parts."

Steve nodded curtly before the red-haired let go of his shoulder.

"And you should stop by The Red Room. Brock wants to buy you bourbon and find out all the gossip there is to know about you."

"I am afraid already."

"You should be. Brock is a terrible gossiper."

"Hey, I heard that." It was Howlett's turn to roll his eyes.

"That was the plan all along. See you around, blond brat." Howlett grinned maniacally and then got in the car, leaving Steve on the sidewalk and thinking he just struck gold.
Steve blinked sluggishly, but the aisle of frozen foods still looked as unappetizing as ever. There was nothing here that screamed a decent meal and he almost felt like crying. He needed a home-cooked meal, he needed something hot coming from human hand and not just heated in the microwave and hoping that it turned all right. His hand almost trembled as he took a box and read the ingredients, but not comprehending anything.

"You look like you are about to cry, Rogers." The voice startled him, but when he raised his eyes, he just looked pathetically at Rumlow, who was smiling softly.

It had been almost two months since that fateful night, but he neither went to The Red Room nor did he make any attempt to get in touch with these guys and for once the upper management seemed more than glad to leave him to his own devices and act as it suited him best. And Steve knew that sooner or later chance would present itself. The fact that he had moved in a neighborhood full of Barnes' henchmen helped a lot. Case in point.

He showed the box to the hitman almost whimpering. Yes, the lack of home-cooked meals and the tiredness were taking a toll on him, but he didn't feel like cooking when he was the only one eating. He hadn't cooked for himself for almost five years, he wasn't going to start now.

"I'm tired of this. Seriously, nothing looks appetizing anymore."

"When was the last time you ate a home-cooked meal?" Rumlow's eyebrow arched. "And actually, for that matter, when was the last time you slept?"

"About an hour ago." Steve patted his chest self-consciously as if the wrinkles of his t-shirt would suddenly disappear or he would be able to erase the mysterious stains on his sweats. "Look, this is my first day off since I started working for Banner and my apartment looks so bad that I thought that I'd rather come and buy something to eat, make myself some good breakfast, although it should be more of a lunch, and then maybe start on doing laundry. But this-, and he indicated pathetically to the aisle, "-is just too much for me."

"That's it. You're coming with me," Rumlow said decisively and grabbed his hand before pulling him towards the vegetable stand.

"What? No, please, I don't want to impose."

"As if," Rumlow scoffed as he put some potatoes in the basket. "Nonsense! Besides, I still owe you for saving me that night."

"You hardly needed saving. And besides, you strike me as a man that hardly needs saving in general."

"Thank you for that. I will be sure to let Rollins know of that." The hitman smiled at him cockily. "But seriously, why didn't you come to The Red Room, Steve? Every once in a while, everyone needs some bourbon in their life."

"Believe me when I say that I probably need tons of bourbon, but that local is just not for me." Steve kept his tone down but even Rumlow realized what he was talking about. Yeah, in the
meantime, he did save some other minor henchmen, however, he really didn't want to approach that place until he was absolutely established as a person of confidence. If something went wrong, his ass would be on the line before he would even have time to blink.

"I see you listened to the advice of Howlett." Rumlow went to the self-check-out and started to put the products aside. His lean body suddenly seemed tense for some reason. As if he was expecting some sort of judgment from him and wasn't this hilarious? Rumlow was, together with Rollins, possibly the best hitman in New York. Both of their work were completely clean and they never left a trace of any attack.

Most of the time all deaths looked like possible accidents, very few of them outright executions. They were never needlessly cruel, and they killed people ruthlessly and efficiently, which was a clear indication that they weren't the ones guilty for Strucker's murder. Though, the policeman in him made him have no doubts about how these two would react if they ever found out about his true identity.

Still, for a professional assassin, Rumlow was a nice person and the fact that he was trying to be friendly with him was saying something. Who knows? Maybe in another life, they could have been even friends, had it not been for this hired assassin/policeman thing stopping them. But getting into their circle was crucial and better yet, gaining their trust was vital, therefore Steve chose his next words carefully when he answered at last.

"Let's just say that Banner gave me all the right information so I can avoid a future incident with that Howlett fellow. Nasty temper in the guy. Does he rule the world or something?"

"You could say that." His former patient paid for all the shopping and then went outside, Steve following him like a lost puppy. "So, what did your boss say about me?"

"That you have a closeminded fashion sense," Steve dead-panned and for a second, Rumlow stopped in the middle of the sidewalk gaping incredulously at him, then he burst into laughter, making some passers-by stare at them. But Steve wasn't exaggerating – Rumlow was dressed in a black shirt and black jeans.

"Look who's talking," Rumlow replied after he stopped laughing at him.

"Pal, I'll let you know that these are my finest clothes at the moment."

"Which says a lot, you walking disaster. You have no sense of self-preservation, do you, Steve?"

"Hey, if I had some, I would turn around and go back home right now because I seriously don't want to get involved in whatever you guys seem to be doing." Rumlow's eyes were filled with hesitation, but then something seemed to blossom on his face when Steve grinned. "But since I have no self-preservation instincts, I'll follow you anywhere as long as that home-cooked meal will come."

"Thank you for the honesty. Now let's go. I have a hungry boyfriend waiting for me and he is worse than you."

If Jack Rollins was surprised to see him on the doorstep of his house, he didn't comment on it. He actually gave Steve some beer to drink, while he told the story of a recent street fight that he took part in. From the disapproving noises that Rumlow was making, he didn't seem very keen in the details, but Steve asked all the right questions for it seemed that he was telling about the The Panther men and how they ended up, of course though leaving the gory details.
What always amazed Steve about his line of work was how some of the scariest people could live in some of the nicest places and living a normal life, with impunity, as if their line of duty was just another normal one. The house where they lived was a small one, just one floor, but still with a bit of garden in front and some really comforting colors.

Everything was screaming comfort for that matter and he wondered if that wasn't by any chance Rumlow's merit. Both hitmen seemed comfortable enough to the displays of affection, with Rumlow kissing the top of Rollins' head. The other guy at least was dressed in a simple white t-shirt and some blue jeans. They made quite the pair, but Steve wasn't going to forget what these people were truly doing as a profession. He maintained the questions far from his person and answered vaguely the ones he couldn't dodge any longer.

By the end of the lunch (for it was lunch more than anything else), Steve was left alone and was mostly regaled with crazy stories involving a monkey, a drunk Howlett, and some really compromising photos.

"I'd love to see those," he grinned mischievously and finished his bottle of beer.

"I'm sure you would. There is no love lost between you and Howlett." Rumlow smiled back evilly.

"Hey, I wasn't the one going like 'do you know who I am' and 'you'd better ask around' and blah, blah, blah." Steve rolled his eyes. "Anyway, listen, guys, thank you for the lunch. Rumlow, you are a great cook and Rollins, I really hope you appreciate the man."

"He better, that's all I'm saying."

"When haven't I appreciated you?" Rollins scowled making Steve smile in return.

"But seriously, guys, thank you. I don't know many people in this town and I really appreciate the gesture, especially since you guys don't know me that well."

"It was our pleasure," Rollins said. "And you should really stop by The Red Room sometime. Trust me, you won't regret the experience. Here, take our phone numbers and when you feel the need to get out of your shitty apartment, just let us know and we will make sure that you will have a great night."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

They exchanged numbers and said their goodbyes before Rollins offered to take him back to his apartment. They drove in silence and Steve didn't push it; it was a comfortable silence and he mostly dozed off. When they arrived in front of his dingy block of flats, he turned to Rollins and said:

"Thanks for dropping me. See you soon."

"Wait a second." Rollins put his hand on his shoulder and Steve tensed completely, but the driver didn't seem poised for an altercation. "Relax, man, I'm not about to bite your head off."

"Sorry, I don't respond well to these sorts of gestures."

"No worries, I understand," Rollins took his hand away in a calming gesture. "I just wanted to say thanks for what you did for Rumlow."

"It was nothing. Glad I could help."
Rollins looked at him pensively as if he didn't know what to think of Steve and the cop found it hard to see what conclusion the hitman had reached for Jack Rollins was a hard man to read and that could prove dangerous in the future.

"You're a good guy, Steve." Rollins nodded finally. "See you soon."

Steve got out of the car and went up to his apartment where he sighed heavily. This mission was going to be the end of him. His instincts were screaming in alarm and something deep within himself told him to get the hell out of Brooklyn because nothing good was awaiting him. But on the other hand, either Brooklyn or the end of the world, it was all the same to him. He wasn't going to make it to next year, but these bastards, no matter how good and normal they pretended to be, were going down with him. He was just going to have to make sure that he didn't forget that.

The next few shifts at the clinic were a bit more peaceful, for once filled with children or old women and secretly Steve was glad of that. A couple of nights later, he took some time to wander to a very different side of the town, where nobody was going to notice him, and he bought a phone. He took a walk on the bank of the river, pretending to admire the stars and ignore the lovers dotted here and there and rang the usual number:

"TMPL gym."

"I would like to renew my membership."

"Rogers, what's new?" Fury's tone seemed relieved to hear from him.

"Nothing much except that I just made some serious contact with Jack Rollins and Brock Rumlow. Apparently, we are such good friends that we exchanged phone numbers and I'm expected to go out with them soon."

"Nice work," Chief seemed to hesitate before continuing, "anything else?"

"Nope, still nothing. Chief, if the higher-ups said something—"

"No, no, it's not about that. It's just, I know this mission is possibly going to end really badly, I just need to make sure you are taking all the necessary precautions not to get killed stupidly."

"Relax, I know what I am doing."

"Don't get cocky with me, Rogers!"

"I'm not." Steve sighed and sat down on the bank. "Look, chief, I'm not saying that I have a gut feeling that this is truly fucked up royally, but there is little to do now, is it? You gave me this mission and I accepted it. Now let's just hope that I will manage to become friends with these guys and to find out something useful for us. For as long as I can."

"Yeah, I know. Just don't get killed or Sam will only have me to pester and you know how he is after five coffees."

"I know." There was another moment of silence at the end of the other line. "ETA for next point of contact fourteen days, depending on what I find out."

"Okay, carry on. And take care."

"I'll try my best." Steve finished the conversation and then threw the phone in the water, letting himself be lulled into a false sense of security. On that bank, under the sky full of stars, everything
looked so peaceful and out of his reach. He should have known better.

On the way home, he pretended he didn't notice the wildlife of the city. Everything seemed to disappear into the background and he probably would have made it home safely, if it weren't for those annoying giggles, the ones that resounded throughout the entire area and he knew that they didn't promise anything good.

The misfortune of those punks was that Steve had to pass next to them in order to reach his street, which in turn made him have a clear vision of them desecrating some memorial that some grieving parents made for their child, most likely killed in a car accident, for the flowers and the small vase were attached to the lamp post, together with a boy's photo, who didn't seem older than twelve and who seemed frozen into a very shy smile that made crinkles around his beautiful innocent eyes. The punks were trying to break the vase and one of them pulled a black marker out to draw on the boy's picture.

Steve saw red.

"You punks have got to be fucking kidding me!" He sneered as his leg made contact with the back of one of them, while the other two scrambled into a mess of limbs. "You fucking bastards have nothing better to do than desecrate other people's memories? Nothing is untouchable to you?"

"You are a dead, you fucking asshole!" One of them screamed as he tried to punch Steve, but he kind of telegraphed his every move so it was really easy for Steve to just punch him twice and then knock him over. The other two were still recovering from shock.

The one he hit with his leg raised it and tried to kick him, but Steve was faster than him and he rendered the guy unconscious with some old-time moves that he learned during his time as a fighter for Killmonger. That guy might have been a lunatic, but he was the best trainer anyone could have. His knuckles were bloodied by the time he finished the second guy, which in turn made the third punk shakily pull up a gun.

"Don't you fucking move!"

Steve's whole body froze but it was still poised in a combat position. "I would suggest you pull the trigger now, boy, because if it doesn't reach me, I will come after you and you will end up the worst among them."

"You don't know who you're messing with!" The punk was yelling hysterically. "When I tell the boss, all hell will break loose for you, dude! Now let my friends come to me and I will make sure the boss kills you easily!"

"You can take these scumbags with you, but tell your boss that I will gladly wait for him, whoever he may be," he replied coldly as he let the two guys he had beaten to a pulp to re-join their friend on shaky legs.

"You won't be so brave when you see him tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah, fucking scram before I change my fucking mind and make you eat the fucking bullets!"

The mad bravery seemed to have the desired effect because the punks left with one last glare over their shoulders. He followed them with his eyes long after they were gone from his sight, his hands a shaky mess of bloodied knuckles. He sighed because he knew who those guys were referring to, but it was too late to react now.
He arranged the vase again and cleaned the photo of the kid and then went home and crashed into the bed without even changing; wishing he was dead already. He groggily woke up and he barely managed to drink a cup of coffee before getting ready for work. He shouldn't have been surprised to see Howlett waiting for him leaning on the same slick car, with a cup of coffee in his hand grin
ning maniacally at him, but he was.

"Well, color me surprised!" Howlett mocked him as soon as he got into earshot.

"I should have known that those punks couldn't keep their mouths shut and had to run to daddy to sort all their problems," Steve scowled at him. "I'm guessing you came here to finally take on that promise to punch me."

"On the contrary, I'm here to give you a coffee." Howlett held forth the coffee and Steve accepted it gratefully.

"Is this you luring me into a false sense of security and then killing me in one move?"

"Ah, I see you've done some digging." The brunet smirked and stalled, which in turn made Steve a little apprehensive.

"Listen, the bastards were desecrating a boy's memorial. I'm not sorry for teaching them a lesson in respecting the dead so just do what you're here to do."

"I know what they were doing, Rogers. Don't forget that I have ears and eyes everywhere and the stupid bastards received their righteous punishment. Nobody in our clan disrespects the dead." The harshness of the words was cemented by the coldness in his eyes. "I literally came here to give you a congratulatory coffee, so to say. Apparently, you knocked two of my guys down before you bravely pushed the third one to shoot you."

"They deserved it." Steve took a sip of the coffee and moaned. "Man, this is the good kind of coffee. You aren't a stingy bastard, good to know."

Howlett smirked and clapped him on the shoulder.

"You deserve it. Nobody knocks down my guys easily." He stared at Steve, as if considering something. "There's more to your story than you let Rumlow know and trust me when I say this: I will find out sooner or later."

"Then I prefer it to be later because you most surely won't find it out from me."

"Come on, you obnoxious blond punk! I'll drop you off at the clinic."

"I'd rather walk."

"It wasn't an offer."

Steve rolled his eyes but got in the car and on the short drive there, Howlett and he made small talk which was rather amusing to listen to.

"By the way, Rumlow said that you did a good job and Rollins invites you to a spare fight."

"Of course he does," Steve scowled as he drank his coffee. "Tell them I don't want to repeat the performance."

"But we want to see your fighting techniques. You seem too keen to impart them with others."
"Don't be an asshole."

Howlett laughed again as the car stopped in front of the dingy clinic.

"Talk to you soon, punk."

"Yeah, yeah, I think you like me."

"In your dreams, blondie."

Steve scowled at him for good measure and then stepped into the clinic, trying to regain his breath for about two seconds. Leaning on the door, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. For a second there, he thought that this might have been the end of him as the mob wouldn't take easily to a guy like him kicking their guys so easily. Yet Howlett seemed rather pleased. However, his words didn't sit well with Steve and they stayed with him for the remaining of the day.

He was coming out from the storage room where they kept all the supplies, locking everything up when he found himself being stared at by both Jack Rollins and Doctor Banner. Their faces were tensed and there was a certain urgency to the whole situation, which put Steve in alert in the blink of an eye.

"No," he said decisively, grabbing his bag. This definitely startled both of them.

"You don't even know what I was going to ask you, Rogers!" Doc replied tensely.

"By the looks of it, and because this guy is involved, it is nothing good and I don't want to have anything to do with it. So, my answer is no."

"Look, this isn't a request, punk. You're coming with me!" Rollins snapped at him, his face pale and only then did Steve see the blood on his shirt. It wasn't much and it was definitely not his, but this definitely wasn't good.

"Why do I have to go?" Steve whined. He most definitely whined. "Why can't Doc come with you?"

"Because Rumlow was so pleased with the way you sutured his wound that he recommended you to other patients as well."

"Right. And I have to believe that."

"Steve, take your damn things and let's go."

"Fine, what do I need to bring?"

Ten minutes later, he was in Rollins's car, his bag full of suture kits and other first-aid materials, scowling out on the window while Rollins drove like a maniac. Because he was rather annoyed with the whole situation, it took some time to realize where they were going. And when he finally realized, his heart stuttered in his chest.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Rollins?" He hissed. "You're taking me to the Barnes mansion?"

"Aha, so even an ignorant punk like you knows something about the world," Rollins smirked but there was no humor in his eyes.

"I'm ignorant, but I'm not fucking dead, and I know who the Barnes’ are. Just kill me now because they most likely will, if you don't."
"Relax, you're not in trouble, although you should be for what you pulled last night." Rollins glanced at him making sure that Steve understood the gravity of the whole situation. "It's just that we have a patient that needs some sutures and she is rather displeased with our worry or with our intention to bring her to any medical facility for that matter."

"She?"

"Rebecca Barnes."

The name rang inside of the car like a death sentence and Steve leaned back into his seat with the firm conviction that he was going to die tonight but that he was going to do anything in his power to take down as many bastards with him as possible.

The security was incredibly tight. The gates were made of enforced steel and guarded by armed security corps who looked like they were eating guys like Steve for breakfast. Even Rollins, so high up in the hierarchy of their clan, had to say a password in a language that Steve hadn't heard before, before the gates opened and they drove on a wooden alley before the car stopped in front of a very beautiful mansion, illuminated by various lights and guarded by invisible eyes.

Howlett was prowling, there was no other word for it, outside the house, and when he saw the car stopping in front of him, he almost wrenched Steve from the car.

"Where the fuck have you been?" He demanded as he nearly yanked off Steve's arm.

"This one was rather reluctant to come here," Rollins answered, smirking coldly. "Apparently, even he knows about the Barnes'."

"Of course."

"Hey, watch it," Steve scowled and pulled his forearm back. "Just take me to the patient, don't talk to me about anything else, don't mention my name, and then fucking take me back home and forget I exist."

"Steve—" There was a tinge of regret in Rollins's voice, but it was lost to Howlett's glare.

"Save it for someone who cares or believes it. Let's go before I change my mind and start running for the hills."

"Like you could," Howlett mumbled but he didn't say anything else and then guided him through various hallways that looked more like a labyrinth. While he was pretending to stare straight in front of him, Steve made sure he took in every single detail that he could, before Howlett finally stopped and knocked on a door.

"Enter."

"Rebecca, I brought the guy Rumlow mentioned," Howlett said as he opened the door and then ushered Steve inside as well.

There was a petite woman waiting for them in a very comfortable armchair that seemed to swallow her up. Her right leg was holstered on a small chair and Steve could see that a wound had been hidden under a white towel tinged with blood. While she must have been in great pain, the woman's face was carefully controlled as not to show any emotion. She was pretending to read some papers, but she clearly couldn't concentrate. She was beautiful in a very aristocratic kind of way and Steve approached her carefully.
"Steve Rogers," he said curtly as he knelt in front of her. "May I?"

"Rebecca Barnes," she said a little startled, "and yes, you may."

Howlett left the room and gave them some privacy. Steve carefully peeled the towel only to see a rather long cut on her calf. It definitely needed stitches, but it wasn't too deep to affect the whole leg and that was a good thing. A few days of rest and she was going to be in a good shape again.

"Ten stitches and no walking on it for a few days and you should be fine," he advised, taking out everything he needed from his bag.

"A few days?" She gasped. "I don't have a few days. I have some important meetings to attend to and you don't know what happens if I leave my brother alone."

"Would you rather I tie you down for a few days?" he interrupted brusquely before he could control himself and he could see her blush in anger.

"Do you have problems with women running businesses, Rogers?"

"Nope."

"Really? Then what? Am I too strong for you?"

"Rather too female," he answered blandly as he started to inject a local anesthetic to work in peace. But he still couldn't miss the way her eyes twinkled with amusement.

"They were right about you. You are a piece of work." Steve scowled at her.

"I am glad I am the hot topic of conversation in your household, now do you feel this?"

He tested to see whether the anesthetic made its effect and when she shook her head, he proceeded. He worked in silence for a while before she started speaking to him again.

"Why did you beat those guys up?"

"They were desecrating the memorial of a little boy."

"Yes, but most people would have just walked on and not bother."

"Yes, but then most people didn't have their family killed in a car accident," he answered bluntly, making her wince. "Sorry, sorry," he mumbled apologetically as he pressed gently into her skin. "It tends to be a sore subject for me."

"My parents are dead as well," she whispered back, this time with such emotion that he had to look up at her and smile bitterly.

"It's not a nice club to be part of, is it?"

"No," she smiled sadly at him, "it really isn't." A new silence settled between them, this one less tense. "So that's why you moved to Brooklyn?"

"No, I needed a change of scenery." He pressed another stitch into her skin. "Did you live in Brooklyn your whole life?"

"Nope, I moved here about half a year ago, but I rather like it." They kept on talking about Brooklyn and other light subjects and by the time he finished, they were conversing with rather an
easy camaraderie that surprised Howlett when he came to take Steve away.

"It was nice meeting you, Rebecca. Take care of yourself and try not to run into sharp objects anymore." She smiled much more relaxed now, probably an effect of the pain killer he gave her.

"Thank you, Steve. I hope to see you soon."

"Yeah, you too," he said vaguely.

Howlett ushered him out of the room and took him down on the same corridors without saying a word.

"She wasn't that bad, was she?" Howlett said finally, probably unable to face the silence anymore.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Howlett?" Steve turned around and stared at the brunet. "Look here, I appreciate the fact that you didn't murder me when you had the occasion, but I'd rather you do that next time because having me here tending to Rebecca Barnes is like a death sentence. I know who her brother is, I know what he is capable of. One wrong move from my part and my head would have probably rested on a silver platter somewhere in his private collection. I'm not a fucking medic! I'm just a fucking stupid nurse, who keeps on running into you guys when all I want is to be left alone. So next time when any of you are running into trouble, spare me the trouble and just fucking shoot me okay?"

"Steve, look-" For the first time, Howlett looked rather apologetic and Steve was really curious to know what he was going to say but then his phone rang. "Howlett!" he answered curtly but as soon as he heard the other person, he paled. "Are you sure? Fuck. No. No, I'll be there in a second. Just stall him. I don't know how, just do it." He snapped the phone shut and then looked at Steve. "Just wait for me here," he said ushering him in the library of the house. "I'll be right back."

"But Howlett-"

"Five minutes, Rogers." He slammed the door leaving Steve in the library.

He sighed and wondered what happened before putting his bag down and sitting on a comfortable couch. The room was not very well lit, just a few lamps here and there turned on, creating the impression that the room was smaller than in reality. Its walls were covered with bookshelves and a mahogany desk was sitting by the window, but it didn't seem used, so Steve didn't bother to get up.

He knew that he couldn't risk wandering around the mansion, so he decided to sprawl on the couch because he was exhausted, and his eyes were stinging. He almost moaned in pleasure when his back hit the couch and his head rested on the small pillow. This was more comfortable than his own bed and he probably would have continued to praise the couch in his head, if the whole day hadn't taken a toll on him and he fell asleep. A deep dreamless sleep.

It took a hand on his shoulder to wake him up, dizzy with tiredness and his back sore, but facing the most beautiful blue eyes that he had the pleasure to wake up to in his life. All his defenses were completely down because he didn't see the hardened face of the man, he didn't see the question in his eyes. Steve slowly raised his hand and passed it through silky strands of hair, beautiful chestnut, and smiled gently. The Angel of Death had come for him at last.

"You came," he said softly and then promptly passed out again.
your feedback keeps me alive! <3
Steve woke up in so many weird places in the last three years of his life that waking up in a library in the mansion of a master drug lord was hardly going to make it to the top three. However, because said drug lord was James Barnes, Steve couldn't help but tense. All the lamps had been switched off and he was covered with a fluffy blanket that cost probably more than his salary in a month.

He stared at the white-painted ceiling where some playful rays of the sun were dancing, chasing each other and he forced himself to breathe.

How he managed to sleep in the White Wolf's house Steve didn't know, but it was a loud and clear statement about his self-preservation sense. He inhaled deeply and forced each of his muscles to relax again. He had done nothing wrong; they weren't going to find this suspicious and he wasn't in trouble. Had he been in trouble, someone might have woken him up, not put a blanket over him.

Steve groaned suddenly and pulled the blanket over his head. There was a fuzzy image of someone trying to wake him up. His eyes widened comically abruptly when he realized that not only did that someone try to wake him up, but that he, like the idiot that he was, thought it to be someone else completely. His mind muddled with sleep had made no sense but...

Horror washed over him like a punch in the gut, its tentacles spreading throughout his body with renewed vigor. Jesus, did he comb his fingers through the White Wolf's hair? He prayed for a second to any deity that might hear him make the scene playing behind his closed eyelids a nightmarish illusion. But his mind wasn't contributing to this obstinate denial – he had indeed done that.

Wow, the fact that he didn't die so far was a miracle in itself and spoke volumes about how he really wasn't going to make it alive from this mission.

He pushed the blanket away and sat up, trying to make his limbs wake up as well; which was a rather easy thing to do since the couch had been really comfortable, better than anything he had slept in for the past couple of years. His things were still where he left them and there were no signs of someone tampering with them. Not that he hid anything incriminatory in them, because even he wasn't that insane but apparently, he became rather sloppy if the sleeping on the couch of a murderer said anything about it.

Man, he needed a hot coffee and a shower, although it might have been recommended to take them in a different order. He still wore yesterday's clothes and he'd been in them for more than twenty-four hours. His hair was sticking in all directions and he pretty much wreaked.

And then he looked at his phone.

"Fuck!" He yelled. Almost noon. Almost noon, he thought hysterically. Did mobsters not have any sense of time? Didn't they think that he needed to go to work? Didn't they have any work ethic? Steve grabbed his stuff while trying to speak on the phone at the same time to Doctor Banner.

He got out of the room just in time to see a security detail standing at his door. Of course, the mobster would put some people to guard him, he would have been mad not to do it.
"Can you show me the exit?" Steve said while trying to remember which direction he was coming from last night. The bodyguard looked at him like he might have grown a second head. "Damn its man, do you speak English? Exit! Now! I'm late for work."

The doc didn't answer so he started ringing again. Maybe the guy hated him already, maybe he didn't want to employ Steve's sloppy ass. As the phone kept ringing in his ear, he scowled at the security guy who finally seemed to make some sense of his words and guided him through the labyrinth that the mansion was. "Seriously, do you guys have no work ethic? Couldn't one of you wake me up? I was tired, man! So, I fell asleep, sue me. Where did that stupid asshole Howlett go? I will end him. Five minutes, he said," Steve mocked him as he finally realized that the doc wasn't going to answer. "Five minutes and I promise I will take you home. Five minutes, my ass." He continued to rant even as the security guy seemed completely indifferent to his words.

"Did I say five minutes to him and then never came back? No, I didn't, and do you know why? Because I am a damn man of my word!" Steve stopped in mid-rant as he finally took a look at his surroundings. He was now in a massive kitchen, probably the size of his whole studio flat. "Seriously," he sighed completely dejected, "I've had it up to here with you guys. You ask one guy to let you go, he lures you to a room with comfortable couches and soft blankets. You tell a man to point you the exit, he brings you to the kitchen. You ask a guy not to take you to the Barnes mansion because you will suffer a horrible painful death, that's exactly where he takes you to."

"Are you having a mental breakdown?" The voice was so completely out of the blue that Steve actually flinched and turned around just in time to see James Barnes peacefully drinking a cup of coffee and having what could have been an untroubled lunch with his sister, had it not been for Steve's complete meltdown.

To say that Steve was mortified was the understatement of the century. He blushed so heavily that even Rebecca had to smile gently at him, and he probably would have noticed that, if he wasn't trying to stop himself from hyperventilating, still not over the fact that he was there, speaking with probably the worst criminal in modern New York. Which of course didn't matter at all when he blurted in typical Steve fashion:

"Yes, and it's all because of your men!" He snapped because he was tired, cranky as hell, a little bit grumpy when he didn't have any coffee in his system and just a little bit scared because those beautiful grey eyes narrowed at him and Rebecca's turned wide. "Listen, while I do appreciate that you guys let me sleep on your couch, which was really comfortable I admit to that, I have a job or had because my boss didn't answer any of my phone calls. Couldn't one of you guys have helped me get up? You know, punch me in the face or something. Because your men seem really keen on fighting anyway."

"We tried," the same gravelly voice answered, "but you wouldn't budge." And that's Steve's cue to pretend that he didn't remember anything. At all. Nada.

"I see. Well, you guys didn't do a very good job if I am still here now, did you?" Steve smiled at Rebecca. "Good morning, by the way. How are you feeling? I thought I told you not to strain your leg."

"Good morning, Steve." This time Rebecca's smile was ten times lighter. "I'm fine, thank you. The stitches itch a bit, but I'm okay and just so you know, my brother carried me."

"I am glad to hear that. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm so late for work, it's not even funny. How do I exit this labyrinth?"

"I will admit that they were right about you. You are completely oblivious." James Barnes finally
spoke and stood up. Steve visibly took a step back because honestly, even in his obliviousness, he could still sense the sheer power and utter control that this man ostensibly exerted over everybody in this house. And although he had to pretend that he didn't know whom he was talking to, he could still sense that it was good to show a little bit of respect.

The other thing was James Barnes was so up his alley, it wasn't even funny. Those broad shoulders were covered by a white shirt, a black tie with a golden pin attached to it. His slacks were pressed perfectly, no wrinkle. Generally, the man looked like he just got out of a box. His hair was exquisitely cut to fall on his shoulders, framing that aristocratic face with his straight nose and strong jaw, the lines of which Steve would have gladly bitten in another life. Without a shadow of a doubt, the man was incredibly attractive – if one could ignore that he was evil incarnated.

"Do you truly believe that I would let that man fire you after what you have done for my sister?"

"Your sister?" Steve pretended to be confused. The acting was becoming second nature for him. And then the puzzle pieces seem to fall flawlessly.

"Steve, allow me to introduce my brother, Bucky Barnes." The chestnut-haired man appeared to completely ignore his sister as he kept staring at Steve.

"Steve Rogers," he said automatically.

"I already spoke with Doctor Banner and he saw fit to give you a day off after the work you carried out here. You will return to your normal schedule tomorrow morning."

"Well, that is a relief. Thank you, I guess," he smiled.

"Would you please join us?" The mobster said, surprising Steve again. "I am afraid that my men haven't been to their best behavior, and I would like to make up to you for what you did for my sister."

"Look, it's really not necessary." Steve grimaced when the man frowned. "I am pretty rank, and I am in serious need for a change of clothes so if you don't mind to just ask one of the guys to drop me home that would be great." The frown deepened.

"Steve, don't be silly," Rebecca intervened. "You can take a shower in one of our guest rooms and my brother can lend you some fresh clothes." She smirked when she saw her brother tensing. "I would really love to have lunch with you. Please, accept our invitation."

"I really-"

"Rebecca's idea is perfect," Bucky interrupted him and there was no point to argue with the guy. "Eric here will take you to your room, and I'll make sure you have a set of fresh clothes."

Steve couldn't debate with that, so he just nodded and followed Eric, who silently led him to a flight of stairs before opening the door to a rather lovely bedroom, which he probably would have admired at another time, had it not been for the fact that he just met officially the notorious and mysterious James… Bucky? Barnes. If he had a diary of an undercover agent, then this moment would have been colored with hearts and flowers as a major step. One that he hadn't expected at all in such a short time.

The shower was amazing, but Steve used his time in it to think of his next step. James… Bucky. Barnes didn't seem impressed at all by his behavior, but truth be told, Steve never thought that he might end up so close to the head of the clan. What their best hope for this mission had been was to take down Howlett and perhaps cripple the organization at least for a while.
Perhaps, in the meantime, with Howlett out of the picture they could attack the clan on different levels. This new development was changing the stakes of the game completely and bringing them to a whole new level. If by any chance he could get close to these two, then he could probably take the whole clan down. Or most likely die trying.

When he stepped out of the shower, he took one of the white towels on the rack and dried himself off before wrapping it around his waist and exiting the bathroom. On the bed lay his new clothes and some fresh underwear. Steve dressed quickly and although they were a little bit too large for his body, he accepted them gladly for he felt better. More human. With his head back in the game, Steve took his things and was just about to exit the room when the door opened to reveal Barnes leaning against the opposite wall and staring at him like he was something out of this world. Surprisingly Eric was nowhere to be seen.

"Thanks for waiting for me," Steve murmured just so that he can break the sudden tension, but the other man appeared less than inclined to do that. Instead his eyes seemed to devour every inch of Steve's soul, reading into its deepest corners and finding it wanting. It was jarring, to say the least.

"When I came to see you and thank you for the care you showed to my sister, you woke up."

"I don't remember." Steve swallowed but the man didn't seem to hear him. He stepped away from the wall and into Steve's breathing space, making the cop backing up a little. The eyes had darkened, and Steve could barely breathe under their scrutiny.

"You said," the older man continued as if he didn't even hear him, "you came." Steve tightened his hands into fists, the ghost of those silky strands still haunting him.

"As I said," he said a little more harshly, "I don't remember."

They both stared at each other for a little bit longer, those blue eyes seemingly searching for something, but Steve stared straight back at him, showing that he wasn't afraid of anything. And maybe Barnes was a tough son of a bitch, but Steve was tougher, and he was going to get this guy, one way or another.

"My sister waits for us." And just like that, the spell was broken, and he turned around and started to walk in the vague direction of the kitchen, expecting Steve to follow him, which of course he did.

Steve gritted his teeth and walked next to the man without exchanging another word. He really couldn't believe he had made such an obvious mistake. Leaving himself so vulnerable inside of this man's house where anyone could put an end to his life in a blink of an eye was truly a remarkable lack of professionalism.

While he was in Killmonger's squad, he slept with one eye open and here not only did he sleep comfortably in a house where everything could happen to him, but he also... he also...Steve faltered. He also caressed that man. He remembered so vividly the moment when he smiled at him when those blue eyes widened in surprise, but he still let him do it. For a second there he truly thought that the man was an Angel of Death. It was a little heart-breaking that Barnes indeed was an Angel of Death but only in a different way. Perhaps by the end of this mission, one of them was going to be the reaper for the other.

They both sat at the table and Rebecca smiled at him again as the cook arranged the plates in front of them. They ate in silence with a sporadic question from Rebecca here and there and the amount of awkwardness in the room was heightened for Steve even more than he expected. After they finished their meals, they received their coffees and Steve gaped like a fish a couple of times
before finally being able to say:

"Look, I'm really sorry for falling asleep on the couch," he mumbled and took a sip of coffee, not daring to look at the two people in front of him. "I was really tired and the number of hours I put at the clinic is sometimes inhuman, but it still shouldn't have happened."

"Nonsense, Steve." Rebecca smiled reassuringly. "I can only imagine how tired you must have been and on top of that, I asked for you."

"Since I am here, I think I should check your wound just to make sure everything is fine."

"Of course, we can do that after we finish lunch. You might."

"Excuse me, sir." Oh, so that damn Eric could talk, after all, Steve thought chagrined. Barnes, who so far had just listened to their conversation, looked up at that, his stony features betraying nothing. "You're needed. It's urgent." Steve didn't miss Rebecca's fleeting look of worry before wearing her happy mask again.

"I'll be right there." Eric just bowed respectfully and went out. Bucky finished his cup of coffee and suddenly focused on Steve. His dark eyes studied him for a while until Steve felt like a student in the principal's office. When he spoke, at last, it was not what the cop was expecting. "Rogers, enjoy your day off today. I'll ask Jack to drop you off home, if that's alright with you?"

"Thank you," he mumbled, and the powerful man left the kitchen and Steve felt like he could finally breathe again. It was as if an invisible collar had been taken off and the air could invade his oxygen-deprived lungs again. Rebecca looked at him knowingly, but she didn't say anything even as he checked her wound. She was less chatty than she had been the night before and by the time Rollins came to drop him off home, she was already on her way to her office to check some paperwork.

"Listen, Steve, what happened last night-" Rollins started after he drove a while in silence. 

"-should stay deeply buried." Steve interrupted him as he calmly watched the bald-headed man. "I don't know how you or Howlett or Rumlow got involved with this man and what you do for him, but I know it can't be good. I had my own police problems and the less involved I am with you guys, the better."

"I thought we were friends."

"I thought so too, until you dragged me into this shit," Steve said harshly and Rollins winced. "Apparently, lately everyone appears to be stabbed. You, Rumlow, some of Howlett's people, and now Rebecca. It can't be good, and I don't want to be involved in a story like this. I was once, and it got me shot. No more of this, thank you very much."

"For just a nurse, you are awfully observant," Rollins replied, his snark hiding something.

"In my line of work, you have to be." Steve pinched the bridge his nose. "And with the frequency that you people turn up, one doesn't have to be awfully observant, you know. He just needs to have two eyes. A lot of blood had been spilled since I came here. I can only imagine what is going to happen next."

Another moment of silence.

"So that means that we aren't going to see each other again? No more breakfast at our home?"
"Man, I wouldn't give up Rumlow's cooking for anything in the world." Steve frowned. "But I am serious, Rollins. After I sort out Rebecca's stitches, I really don't want to be involved in this shit anymore. I know who the Barnes' are and I don't want anything to do with them."

"Understood."

For the rest of the drive, they didn't speak, and the sound of the radio drowned their thoughts, the cop's mind filled up with images of his number one enemy. He couldn't forget the dark calculated look he received in the hallway and he couldn't understand what was going on in that man's mind, but he was ready to find out.

After he arrived home, he managed to finally speak with the doc and he was able to apologize, although by the looks of things, Barnes hadn't lied and indeed he had spoken with the man. Then he cleaned his apartment a little.

The evening fell quicker than usual and found him on the other side of the town again buying a cell phone.

"TMPL Gym! How may I help?" His chiefs annoying voice answered, way too happily.

"I want to renew my membership."

"Steve, how are things?"

"Good, good." He suddenly felt out of words. The moment of silence spread its wings over him and for a moment he just looked at the stars above him and tried to forget the time when he would watch them with his mother, and she would be able to name them all.

"Steve?" His chief must have frowned at the other end because there was a new tension in the conversation.

"Chief, this is a suicide mission, isn't it?" he murmured not taking his eyes away from the multitude of stars above him Sometimes it was good to remind himself how insignificant he was in the scheme of things.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I want to know if you thought even for a minute that I would stand a chance at surviving this mission."

"Steve, what happened?"

"Just answer me," he said tiredly.

"Yes, I thought that it was a slim chance that you could make it." Fury sighed. "Look, I know that you have some suicidal tendencies and it is understandable given your circumstances. However, I think you would do your best to catch the bad guy and complete the mission that you received."

"Then you will be happy to find out that I spent my night in the Barnes' manor."

"What the hell? What happened?"

"Rebecca was hurt. A clean-cut at her calf but apparently, I did such a good job with Rumlow that he recommended me to her. I even met Bucky Barnes. I'm still wearing his clothes."

"What?" This time his chief screeched. "You slept with James Barnes? And you're calling him
"Bucky!"

"Don't be a fucking moron!" Steve hissed. "Of course I didn't. And how could I anyway? The guy is straight."

"Actually-" The sudden silence at the other end made Steve's hair standing up.

"You son of a bitch!" He sneered. "You never told me that Bucky fucking Barnes was gay. It never showed on any report."

"James Barnes was never your fully complete mission." Fury's calculated tone angered Steve even more. "You know that. I thought that it didn't bear any importance because you weren't going to get that close to him."

"I don't understand chief, what the hell is your problem? How can you not tell me about it? No wonder I'm going to die in this mission with the amount of information that it is hidden from me."

"Steve, it was just one thing."

"I need to know every fucking little thing about this guy, chief! You haven't seen him. This guy-" Steve swallowed hard, "-this guy is huge, he has such a presence that everyone pales even just at hearing his name. I'm not saying I would use this information to try and get into his bed, even I am not that crazy, but this is something really important."

"It is not a very known fact. There were very few men that were in his life and most of them are outside the circle."

"Outside the circle?"

"Outside the mob. Normal men with legal jobs and everything," Fury mumbled. "You can only imagine why everything is such secrecy. If anyone would find out that James Barnes is gay, the clan would be constantly hit with attempts to overthrow him or just take that empire of his piece by piece."

Steve wondered if anyone could take down Bucky Barnes. The man seemed larger than life. And those eyes...Steve shuddered. Those eyes could see deep into his heart, like reading the lines of a forgotten letter but catching the hidden meaning of each line.

"Don't go there, it's not worth it," Fury said decisively when Steve didn't answer.

"I wasn't thinking of approaching the entire problem like that. It would be absolute madness," he admitted. He didn't have the guts. He would have to pretend that he was interested in a man that killed people on a daily basis and even he didn't have the stomach for that. But there was a voice inside of him, buried deep within the limits of his soul that reminded him of the slow-burning tension back in the hallway when it seemed like the world would stop if Barnes would take another step and if they would have to breathe the same air.

"Good."

"But someone is definitely trying to hit them and hit them hard. I need to find out who the hell is after them and whether we should help them or make them disappear as not to endanger the mission even more."

"Got it. I will ask Sam to do some investigations, but you do realize that there are a lot of people pissed off and some of them might have personal reasons to go against the Barnes’, right?"
"It was definitely personal if they went after Rebecca. Just get me the info. I will ring in the next couple of days to see what you find out."

"Okay. Until then take care and try to stay away from that guy."

"Definitely."

Steve ended the conversation and then gripped the phone tight. Bucky Barnes was gay. Well, that put the whole matter into perspective, but the chief was right. It wasn't worth it. He wouldn't choose that road because nothing good was going to come out of it.

That night his dreams were plagued with the image of a pair of blue eyes and silky strands of hair, manly arms wrapping around him and never letting him go, making him feel safe. Waking up was not as pleasurable as it had been the day before and he swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat when he realized that he had fallen asleep in the clothes that Barnes had lent him. His morning routine brought him no joy either.

The day was uneventful, and he didn't really care much about what was going on around him, too preoccupied with what had happened the day before. But he should have known not to trust the radio silence – it was as if it had been the calm before the storm.

That evening, while he was walking home, he noticed Howlett's car following him and when he stopped at a light, Howlett let the window down and nodded at Steve.

"Hey!" Steve nodded back.

"Come with me." The hardness in his eyes made Steve tense and scowl at the red-haired.

"No, thanks."

The barrel of a gun appeared in the hand of the man, casually leaning on the window, enough to be seen by the undercover cop, but not enough to be seen by the other passers-by.

"It wasn't an invitation," Howlett said casually, but his tone bore no doubt that it was a serious matter and Steve swallowed hard before he got into the car. As soon as he sat next to Howlett, Rumlow turned towards him from the passenger's seat and looked at him just as cold. Steve cursed. This wasn't good at all.

"May I know why both of you are pointing guns at me?"

"You'll find out in due time. Just shut up." Howlett sneered and Steve kept his mouth shut for the duration of the drive, his eyes constantly on the window because he wasn't going to show any fear to these bastards. He was going to die with dignity, and he was going to take them with him no matter what.

But Steve hadn't survived so long in this field without being patient and the most important thing was not to jump to conclusions, especially to the wrong conclusions. This smelt like a setup but most importantly at this moment, he had to keep his cool. Thanks to his stint into Killmonger's crew, he had a high tolerance for pain because the training and the fights had been excruciating. For a moment, he thought about jumping out of the car, but he knew that it wouldn't help. He was just going to find out a way to get out of this situation. He just needed to keep calm.

To say that Steve was surprised to see the Barnes mansion so quickly was an understatement. He thought that they were going to bring them to an abandoned factory or something, but not to that monster's house. Therefore, the things were much more serious than he thought. This time, security
didn't stop them at the gate – they just opened it and Steve heard its closing like final sound of his life. He tightened his fists – he was going to take them with him. He was going to take them with him. He would murder all of them if he had to, but he wasn't going to go down lightly.

Once they arrived, Howlett and Rumlow pushed him in an adjacent house, quite small and more towards the woods that surrounded the mansion. And the room where he was taken was bare of all the furniture except for a chair, on which he was forced to sit and have his hands cuffed behind his back.

"I knew that you people were up to no good," he sneered as soon as he felt the uncomfortable metal closing on his flesh.

"And how is that again, Steve?"

"Excuse me?" Steve noticed that Howlett pointed the gun at him point-blank. "Take that fucking gun away from my face or I'll make sure to shove it up your ass even if it the last thing I do in my life."

"Ever since you came to Brooklyn, there are have been various attempts to our clan," Howlett seethed with barely concealed anger. "Now upon further investigation, it came to our attention that you have a rather black hole in your history, more precisely what happened before you came here. There are no records whatsoever about you anywhere. Now since those attempts, we thought firstly that you were a member of a rival family. But it didn't add up because nobody would willingly send someone against the Barnes’ and not so soon after Strucker, unless they seek complete annihilation of their clan," Howlett hissed. "So, the natural conclusion that we came to is that you're a fucking cop."

Probably if someone would have dropped something on the wooden floor, its echo would have gone towards the end of the world, that deep was the silence in the room.

"I'm not a cop!" Steve seethed. "Now fucking free me!"

"I won't, because nothing adds up, Steve Rogers, if that's your fucking real name." It was Rumlow's turn to have a go at him.

"Look, I really think you have the wrong guy-"

"I believe they have the right guy." The new arrival startled everyone in the room but made Steve's blood freeze. Bucky Barnes entered the room, dressed in the same fashion as the day before. "So, what I would suggest, Steve Rogers, is to speak quickly so that your death could be smooth. However, dare to lie to me and I will make your death as painful as possible."

"And if you are wrong?" Steve bluffed.

"We are not wrong!" Howlett roared and next thing he knew, he hit Steve with the butt of the gun, making him see stars, blood gushing out from his wound. His head ricocheted so hard, that he could almost feel his neck snap. His head seemed splintered in two and it took a few moments to get a grip back on his breathing, trying to make the pain go away. Blood ran freely on his temple, clouding his vision on his left eye. But he still managed to glare at Howlett.

Sucking in a deep breath, he said the first thing that came to his mind and that would probably save his life. "You're wrong, you fucking prick! I used to work for you, you fucking morons!" Steve roared leaving everyone completely stunned.
your feedback keeps me alive! <3
"What?" Howlett finally managed to say. Steve swallowed hard.

Steve Rogers had all evil in the world to fear – it was a fact that these men could kill him in all horrendous ways. But *Steve Rogers* had nothing to fear because he had lived all his life on the brink of lawlessness and the fact that he was confused with a cop was a major wound to his pride. Therefore, he wore Steve Rogers like a second skin and hoped that it would save him and perhaps create an important new stone in his life.

"Technically, I was not employed to you, but a couple of years ago, I was down in Manhattan and I was part of Erik Killmonger's gang. I was one of his fighters."

"Impossible," Rumlow replied but his eyes betrayed his hesitation. Steve hated that he wasn't lying in the least. "Killmonger's gang has been cleansed by the police. There were very few people that managed to dodge the arrest and flee the town."

"And I was one of them. Whoever did the dig on me forgot to go further. Just because I come from nowhere, it doesn't mean I didn't exist at some point. Excuse me that I didn't want to advertise the fact that I was down in Manhattan and I managed not to get arrested by the police."

"I find it very suspicious that you escaped," Howlett growled and that gun didn't waver.

"Oh, really?" Steve rolled his eyes, a movement that brought even more pain to his head. "Probably because I was shot, you fucking asshole and I spent three months in the hospital. When I was out of the coma, I woke up to a bunch of policemen interrogating me about who the hell shot me and how I was related to Killmonger's gang. Yeah, it was really suspicious."

"You were shot?" Now Rumlow looked like he already regretted what was going on in that room.

"Seriously, what half-assed investigation have you guys been pulling off?" This time Steve scowled at Barnes. "You guys called yourselves professional. You bring me here, you threaten me with death and torture, you accuse me of being a cop, but you didn't even bother investigating me properly?"

"What was your name as a fighter?" Barnes asked him.


"I will also need the name of the hospital and the period of time you stayed there."

Steve glared at him but gave all the information. Bucky disappeared outside the room, and Steve kept on scowling at Howlett and Rumlow, who for the first time looked completely thrown off. Probably they didn't expect for this turn of events.

"Listen, Steve..."

"Don't even bother, Rumlow." Steve sighed and the other man stepped ahead with a handkerchief in his hand. Steve might have laughed hysterically at this, but then again Rumlow did seem like a guy carrying around handkerchiefs. He clearly wanted to take care of his wound, but if he thought that Steve was going to forgive him so easily, he had another thing coming. The funny thing about this whole affair was that he wasn't lying but his life was at stake and these guys would not hesitate even for a second to pull the trigger and feed his body to the dogs.
"Stay the fuck away from me!" He sneered when Rumlow continued to approach him. "I don't need your help. I can manage on my own just fine."

"You're pretty confident that the boss will come back and set you free," Howlett replied to him. Rumlow flinched but didn't say anything and went back to his initial position without touching Steve.

"Because I know I'm not lying. And the other thing is, which strikes me like the fucking most ironic thing of my life, is that I didn't want to be around you guys anyway." Steve tried to blink the blood out of his eyes. "Here's the thing: since I came to this town, all I did was take care of you guys and try to stay away from this place. It was you who invited me for lunches and brought me coffees and begged me to treat Rebecca. It was you guys who came to me, not the other way around. And now you have the fucking guts to stay there with the gun pointed at me and tell me that I'm a cop." Steve closed his eyes praying for Barnes to discover he wasn't lying and for his bluff to work. "Once this is over, you can fucking forget about me."

They waited for Barnes in silence as Steve became increasingly dizzy from the blow to his head. He tried a couple of times to just close his eyes and forget about everything, pretend that he wasn't there but it was hard with his hands bound behind his back and the threat of imminent death hanging over his head.

One hour later or perhaps more, Barnes entered the room again and Steve hated him almost instantly because he couldn't read anything on that stony face. He was so put upon that he wanted to mess him up so badly. Rarely did Steve have such strong impulses, the only impediment to it being his hands tied behind his back. The leader took a few steps in front of him and stopped.

"I need you to do one thing for me." He took out his smartphone and pressed a few buttons. "Can you hear me?" He said, his gravelly voice washing over Steve like a blanket of mass destruction. The other person must have answered because Barnes continued. "I will put you on Facetime and just confirm that it is him."

A few moments later the smartphone was shoved into Steve's face and it took a few more moments for him to blink and stare back at Erik's insane face, grinning maniacally at him. Steve hung to his mask with his teeth. For two years he tried to nail this guy and make sure that he paid for everything he did and yet he managed to escape and now he was the only one standing between him and imminent death. Steve felt sick to his stomach.

"Steve! You fucking punk! You're alive!"

"Erik, you asshole! I thought you were dead as well." Steve grinned back, filing the information for later.

"How did you manage to mess up this time, kid?"

"I didn't mess up! Your friends are paranoid bastards and should be locked up on principle."

"I remember a certain blond kid that did some crazy stuff."

"Stevie!" The squeal made both Erik and Steve wince as Andrea's face came into view. She was just as mad as her father, but she always had a soft spot for him, and Steve took serious advantage at the time, using her to find out all the insides of the gang. He felt sorry sometimes because Andrea had been nothing but kind to him, but there were people's lives at stake and there was little he could do to save her.
"Andrea, how are you, darling?" His voice became softer. "How many times have I told you not to call me that?"

"Lots and lots of times and I ignored you each time." She smirked. "Or would you prefer 'super soldier'?"

"No, go back to Stevie." He smiled softly. "I am glad to see you're okay." And the funny thing was that he wasn't lying. The children of fallen gang leaders rarely had a happy ending and the horror stories he heard were a daily occurrence.

"Me too. I am so happy to see you alive. There was so much blood that day." Her beautiful eyes looked concerned. "We tried to visit you at the hospital but there was too much police and we had to leave."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. The important thing was for you and your dad to leave so that the police could lose your trail. Now, do you mind if you pass me back to your dad? I need him to confirm to these guys who I am so that they can release me."

"Okay, Stevie. See you soon."

Barnes glanced at him before taking the phone.

"I guess it is him," he said, and Steve could hear Erik's voice replying, "Yeah, man. It's him. Steve was gunned down, a couple of days before the bust by what we suspect it might have been one of Hydra's men. You know that bitch was always a sore loser."

"I understand. I will talk to you later."

"See you."

When the conversation ended, all eyes went back to Steve, who would have wanted so badly to look smug except that his head was killing him. He tried to gauge Barnes' opinion but the man was completely unreadable, so Steve abandoned the idea. The evening had been a fiasco from the very beginning.

"Will one of you uncuff me?" Steve mumbled desperate to get out of that damn house and just thank whoever saved him. Probably his family was still watching over him.

Howlett was the one that finally reacted. He put his gun back in the holster and then went and took the cuffs off. As soon as he felt them free, Steve rubbed his wrists before trying to get up. For a second, the whole world moved too fast. Rumlow made a step towards him with the clear intent to help him but Steve's glare stopped him.

"I swear if any of you comes near me, I will go ballistic." Steve scowled at Barnes, who seemed a breathing statue, his eyes betraying nothing, and he wondered briefly if this man was capable of feeling anything at all. There was absolutely nothing to suggest that he was human other than his breathing process and in that sole moment Steve hated his guts. Generally, he hated bad guys on principle, but for some reason, this felt incredibly personal to him.

"Am I free to go?" he asked, knowing already the answer.

"Yes, Howlett will drop you."

"No, thanks. I will walk."
"Rogers, don't be a moron!" Howlett growled but Steve was already walking out of the room, passing Barnes like he was passing by a snake, giving him a wide berth.

"No, thanks. If I ever see one of you guys again, you'll be punched in the fucking face. Don't speak to me, don't dare even to look at me!" He continued to rant as he made his way out of the house and the adrenaline that pumped through his veins made him continue to walk, unable to stop, because if he did, he would realize that he might have died, that these guys would have been merciless to him and he really didn't need those thoughts if he was going to make it in one piece at home.

A car moved next to him with all windows down.

"Seriously, Rogers, don't be an idiot! Just get in the car."

"I don't need anything from you," Steve seethed. "I'm fine on my own, the way I've always been until you assholes showed up. You think threatening people is okay in your books. Well, it's not fucking fine in mine. And ever since I met you guys, you've done nothing but threaten and push me around and I had it up to here. So, I'll tell you one more time: fuck off!"

"Steve, you can send us to hell later, but can you just please get into the car?" This time Rumlow was actually begging a little.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"I will fucking shoot you if you don't get in the car!" Howlett growled, but Steve ignored him completely and kept on walking. Next thing he knew, a shoot resounded into the night and earth exploded closely to his feet. He actually growled when he stared in disbelief at Howlett, who was still holding his gun outside the window. Rumlow was just looking like he wished he wasn't there.

"I'm not joking when I say that I will shoot you if you don't get into the car and let us drop you home," Howlett grumbled, all righteous fury and everything. For a second Steve felt that he should just take the gun and shoot the man himself, end his mission, even if it meant ending his life. But then the moment passed, he took a deep breath and slowly got into the car.

"I'll stain your upholstery with blood, so I don't want to hear any complaints about it," he said as he leaned on the seat and closed his eyes. "And no talking," he added as an afterthought. He didn't open his eyes to see what their reaction was, nor did he care about it. The adrenaline surge was finally dissipating but that left him with a very bad headache, and he was unable to doze off for the remaining of the car ride. When they reached his block of flats, Steve got out of the car without a word and slammed its door for good measure before getting into his apartment.

When the door was closed behind him, he gingerly leaned against it and then sank to the floor, grabbing his head into his shaky hands. He could have died tonight. God only knows what Barnes and his men would have done to him had it not been for sheer luck and inspiration from his part. He remembered the mobster's face and how he looked at him like he was just another piece of meat. Steve swore that he was going to take down that guy. Now it was personal, now he was going to prove to that asshole that there is justice in this world, and he would make sure that Bucky Barnes would pay dearly.

Steve smirked cruelly in the darkness of his apartment. If he played his cards correctly, tonight he might have just gained some unknowing allies as Rumlow's eyes betrayed the emotion. For such a cold-hearted assassin, the man was like an open book and tonight he definitely looked more than apologetic. If he played his cards right, he might be back in the game sooner than he would expect. His eyes hardened. And he would also finish what he started a long time ago and take down Killmonger as well.
He gingerly stood up and went directly to the bathroom, taking his clothes off and letting the warm spray soothe the tension away and wash away the blood. He stayed underneath it long after the water turned cold, oblivious to the outside world or to his wounds. Sometimes it was best to just ignore his own thoughts and just breathe. When he emerged from the shower, at last, he changed into some fresh clothes, cleaned his wounds and sewed a few stitches, then took some headache pills and slept like the dead until his alarm clock went off.

If the Doc saw his purple bruise, his wound or the reddened wrists, he didn't mention anything, and Steve carried on with his work. He badly wanted to call his chief, however, the events from the previous night prevented him from going to the other side of the town for fear that Barnes would be paranoid enough to have people following him for the next few days. Although it soon became apparent that the mobsters were actually giving him a wide berth, as days passed, and they were filled with just the rush at the clinic and the good nights of sleep that he had.

For days at a time, it felt like he was at a standstill, as if his mission was completely suspended and he was indeed this mask he wore, this Steve Rogers that had nothing to live for and for whom, the work at the clinic seemed the only thing making him get out of the flat. The tragic thing about it was that Steve Rogers wasn't so different from the other Steve Rogers and he would sometimes be teetering in between these two identities with no point of return.

The reward for his patience came after a week of radio silence as Steve was filling out some of his outstanding medical records. There was a soft knock to his door and Steve raised his eyes just in time to see Rebecca Barnes in the doorway smiling shyly at him.

"Hi, Steve. Do you mind if I come in?"

"Hi," he finally mumbled, still surprised. "No, please, grab a seat."

"I wasn't sure whether you were going to speak to me in light of the recent events," she said, smiling kindly at him. He grimaced in response.

"You mean with everyone from your family trying to either kill me or punch me repeatedly?"

"Yeah, well, they are all paranoid, I will tell you that, but what my brother did to you was really unwarranted." She sighed. "It's just we don't have the easiest of lives and sometimes it is hard to see that there are people out there who don't want anything from him, like yourself."

"I don't want to be rude, Rebecca, but the kind of life that you all lead warrants such paranoia, just you know, aimed at the right people." She looked startled at him.

"I think that's why they all gravitate around you. You aren't afraid to pull punches and I think this is what baffles my brother."

"I baffle the mighty Bucky Barnes?" Steve replied sarcastically, rolling his eyes. "Well, consider me impressed."

"You should be," she said this time more firmly, her eyes diamond hard and for a second there, Steve was able to see why she was such an important asset to the clan. "There are very few people who are capable of impressing my brother. He mentioned that during the whole," she seemed to hesitate, "incident, you held your own and showed no fear."

"Because I had nothing to fear."

"I know. Look, I'm not trying to make up excuses for my brother, but I think you should forgive him and Howlett for what they did, especially Rumlow. He was most distressed when your
innocence was proven, even more so because he hurt you. He really likes you and he wants to be your friend. As for Howlett, well, let's just say he would rather die than apologize for it."

"I honestly don't think the man knows the meaning of that word," Steve grumbled and Rebecca smiled softly again.

"It's true. Ever since we were children, if he did something wrong, he would never apologize but he would always make up for it one way or the other." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "He's crazy like that and overprotective with us, but then again, he is a kind man."

"How long have you two been together?" Steve asked softly, shocking himself as well.

"That obvious?" She smiled, embarrassed. "About two years now. But I didn't come here to sing praises to Howlett."

"You could have fooled me." Steve smirked and she blushed. Really, he was never capable to understand how some people like her could still act so bashfully and God help him, but he liked her, he liked her toughness and no-nonsense attitude and her embarrassment at being there and having to apologize for her brother and boyfriend.

"Will you just forgive them please?"

"I will think about it. I'm sorry I can't give you a straight answer, but ever since I got shot, I'm not the best person to be around guns so it's not like I can say that this meant nothing to me. And it was extremely disappointing coming from Rumlow. From Howlett, not such a big surprise."

"I know, but can you stop moping around and punish them now?" She smirked at him. "You're worse than a girl."

"Oh, I'm sorry, who was talking about hurt feelings two minutes ago and drawing hearts around her boyfriend?"

"Okay, okay, point taken." She laughed and she was really cute when she did. "Come on, we're going for lunch. I'm buying and you can't say no."

"Yes, Your Highness." Steve scowled at her. "Can I grab my coat at least?"

"If you must." She waved her hand dramatically and then grinned at him. "See you in five."

Steve took his coat and gnawed at his lip. It was better than he thought, but still it made things more difficult – all the lying around was going to take a toll on him, assuming that it hasn't already done that.

When he walked out of his small office, Claire was already there grinning like the lunatic that she was, her brown hair tied in a messy bun and her eyes smirking mischievously.

"Doc-B said that you can go but be back in an hour."

"Stop calling me that!" The Doc shouted from the other room and they both laughed. "And be back in an hour, Rogers, or the things I'll do to you won't be pleasant."

"I will, Doc. See you in an hour." Steve winked at her.

"Bring me something good, Steve." Claire kissed him on the cheek and then sent him on his way. Outside Rebecca was waiting for him in another of those slick cars, one of those that now seemed
synonymous with the Barnes clan and Eric was the driver. He nodded towards Steve but otherwise didn't say anything.

On their way to the restaurant, they made idle chatter and he relaxed even more. But as soon as they reached the restaurant, Steve rolled his eyes at Rebecca.

"Seriously? The Red Room?"

"What?" She grinned innocently at him. "It has the best food in town."

"Of course it does."

As soon as they got inside the restaurant, the atmosphere became slightly charged but not in a bad way. Everyone seemed to know Rebecca and they were stopped at least a dozen times before they could reach their table. She had a nice word for everyone and appeared in her natural element as if used to the attention, which was something Steve rather hated. However, he recognized at least a few faces that were involved more or less in the clan's affairs and he decided to speak about it with the chief later.

The restaurant had a terrace outside for a better view of the river and it was indeed a beautiful day to eat there. The water was sparkling under the sun's caresses, and both of them sat for a moment in silence after their order was taken just admiring the beauty and the calm of the entire scene. On the other side of the river, the life of Brooklyn town was bustling, and the noise was far-reaching, but it was rather pleasant to hear it.

"Do you like it?" She said softly and Steve turned to her nodding. "I guess you didn't have many quiet moments in your life."

"It's just that even when I'm alone, my thoughts seem to scream constantly in my head," Steve admitted, surprising himself for how much truth was in those words.

"I know what you mean." Her eyes softened even more. "There are times when I want to just take Howlett and my brother and move on a deserted island and never look back."

"What stops you?"

"Their stubbornness.""Yes," Steve laughed, "it is indeed an insurmountable trial."

As their food was brought out, a sense of uneasiness crept into Steve's awareness. It was as if someone was watching them and not with the best intentions at heart, but when he looked around, there was no one who appeared to be interested in them or their conversation. But his instinct as a cop told him that there was something out there and he overlooked his food to scout the premises again as much as he could, given the circumstances.

It took him about five seconds to see the glim of something before his hands automatically gripped tight the table and turned it then he ducked behind it, pushing Rebecca to the ground in an unbelievable amalgam of horrifying screams and smashed dishes as the first bullet hit the wood.

"What the hell?" He heard Rebecca screaming but he just squeezed her shoulders tighter pushing her next to his body, the table acting as a shield. A second bullet broke a glass next to them in an explosion of shards, some falling over them like a punishing rain. People were shouting as they were falling over each other, trying to get into the restaurant to safety. They were stumbling like puppets without strings and Steve glanced at them chagrined as none of them seemed inclined to
help them and he didn't have a weapon to retaliate against their invisible attacker.

Suddenly, another spatter of bullets was coming from the opposite direction but all of them were intended for their attacker. Another bullet hit their table making the wood tremble before the noise finally stopped and no more guns were heard. Steve looked around their mock shield to see some of Barnes' men chasing a dark shadow in the distance, probably their attacker. He honestly doubted that they were going to catch him.

"Are you okay?" He looked down at Rebecca, all concern for her safety and she smiled shakily back.

"I've been better." They both rose to their feet. Her hands were trembling as she took in the mess around them. She tried to push a strand of hair behind her ear, but her hands were trembling so hard that he gently did it for her, and then his hands settled on her shoulders, as he spoke gently to her:

"You're fine, everyone is fine. Other than a little bit of mess, no one seems to be hurt, which is a great thing considering."

"Are you Superman?" She mumbled still dazed. "I've never seen such moves. One minute we were talking, the next you're using our table as a shield and protecting me."

"I'm no superhero. But like I said before, I had to fight for everything in my life. And," Steve's face darkened, "before I myself had been shot, I had the same feeling of unease, only I couldn't pin it to anything, and I thought I was paranoid. And now when I saw something gleaming in the distance-" He shuddered. "I'm just glad that I reacted fast."

"Yeah, me too, or we would both be dead."

"Rebecca!" Howlett's shout was fifty percent despair and fifty percent horror that his world was going to end, and Steve completely understood his reaction as he finally emerged on the terrace. Howlett's eyes were filled with instant relief as he scanned her body and made sure that she wasn't hurt, but that didn't stop him from sweeping off her feet and give her a tight hug, she reciprocating just as hard.

They hugged for so long that Steve started to feel awkward and he was just about to leave when they finally kissed briefly then separated, though Howlett's arm remained like a shield on her shoulders, and she seemed smaller compared to him.

"I'm fine," she said, blushing furiously when she saw Steve's grin. "If it weren't for Steve here though, I don't think I would have made it alive."

"You're giving me too much credit," he replied, but Howlett looked around them and then back at the table that still had a couple of bullets embedded into it.

"I don't think she is." Howlett reached out and shook his hand. "I'm really grateful, man. She is extremely important to me and I don't know how I'm going to repay you."

"How about not kidnapping me and threatening me with death? You don't do that anymore and we are even."

"How much are you going to milk this?" Howlett rolled his eyes at him, but Steve grinned.

"For as long as it takes."

"Seriously, thank you."
"No worries." Steve looked at his watch. "Now if you excuse me, but my hour is almost up and I had enough excitement for one day, I don't need the Doc to start preaching to me about punctuality. Again. Can one of your guys drop me back to the clinic?"

"Yeah, sure."

They shook hands again and Rebecca gave him a hug before Eric appeared out of nowhere and drove him back to the clinic. The Doc had one look at him, mumbled I really don't want to know before shoving him in his cubicle with the first patient.

The rest of the day passed in a blur as the clinic had quite a few patients, but the only thought in Steve's mind was who had been that daring to send a killer after Rebecca. Who was so insane that wanted to take the wrath of a Barnes over their head? Purposely going after them meant only one thing and that it was a dare for Barnes and with the blatant display of today, the power baRumlow had shifted and not in the best of directions.

When he arrived home, he took a shower and then prepared his dinner, all the time thinking of the possible ramifications that the event of today might hold against his plans. Thus, the bell took him by surprise, and it took him a couple of minutes to get up from the couch where he was eating his dinner and open the door.

He regretted the action almost instantly.

In his doorway, the mighty Bucky Barnes was standing as if he was a punisher, behind him two goons probably ready to sacrifice for his boss. Barnes was dressed in a grey suit and his hair was tied behind and he looked incredibly handsome. Steve hated himself for noticing that tiny detail.

Steve sighed.

"I didn't shoot at your sister; I don't know who did it. Can I go back to my dinner now?"

"Evening, Rogers. Can I come in?" Barnes said matter-of-factly and pushed past him, while the goons just stood on each side of the door. Steve scowled at them for good measure before he closed the door and looked at Barnes, who didn't seem bothered by his small surroundings.

"I didn't come here to kidnap you as you elegantly put it." Steve's disbelief and resulting snort seemed not to deter him from continuing. "I'm here to thank you for what you did for my sister and to offer you a job."
"What?" Steve stared at him in disbelief. He needed to sit down but this guy was going to look at it like he was surrendering, and he was far from accepting this. He looked at his flimsy sweats and his t-shirt, which had seen better days, and he thought for a moment that Barnes came and did this just to spite him.

"First of all, I believe it's my duty to thank you for saving my sister's life," Barnes began, startling Steve, who looked at him and almost felt like laughing. The other man seemed more inclined to suffer centuries of torture than to thank him.

"You look like each of those words were pure torture. Did you practice this speech on your way here? Because if you did, let me just tell you what a piss-poor job you did." Steve sighed and leaned against the wall, while Barnes watched every movement like a hunter supervising his prey. There was something subtly wild about this guy – probably because he seemed so composed all the time.

"Your manners are appalling."

"My manners are appalling?" Steve's disbelief reached new heights. "Listen," he pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to calm down, "just a little over a week ago, I was held at gunpoint by your men in an attempt to prove that I was a cop. Then your sister, who let me tell you, is the most gracious person I've ever met, came to apologize in your name when she shouldn't have done that. And then I was shot at just because I was with her, though believe me when I say I was glad to be there and protect her. And now you're coming to my home, insulting me with a half-assed excuse and an offer of a job, in which I'm not interested whatsoever, and you expect me to behave like a prince. Well, let me tell you, Barnes, that I'm not easily bought, and you can leave now."

Steve wondered briefly if he went too far when Barnes's eyes narrowed threateningly, and the older man took a couple of steps forward and right into Steve's breathing space. The cop's hackles raised, and his stance changed completely. He squared his shoulders, his arms poised as if ready for an attack, ready to take a swing at the mobster at any moment.

"You believe you can speak like this to me with impunity? You should show me some respect," he hissed, his voice a perfect mix of cruelty and iciness.

"Your name is not enough in my books to automatically gain you my respect," Steve replied back, his whole body on standby, expecting the worse. While he knew that in no way this was going to help his investigation, he also knew that Bucky Barnes was by far the most formidable player that he had come against and he was going to prove to him that he finally found his match in every way.

What he learned very early as an undercover agent was that eagerness lead nowhere good. The more he wanted to be part of a group or gang or be close to a particular target, eagerness was the one that would make everybody extremely suspicious.

The other problem was knowing your target incredibly well. Any detail was important, and all the files pointed to the fact that the Barnes heir was by far one of the most astute men and that he appreciated strong wills. Nobody weak was going to survive next to him. And Steve had enough stubbornness and will for both of them.

He watched as Barnes's eyes narrowed menacingly and he balled his fists ready to defend himself, but then Barnes did something so surprising that it took a couple of seconds for Steve to register
the action and comprehend what was going on.

With an abrupt gesture, Barnes grabbed his chin and made him look straight into his eyes. Suddenly, Steve became utterly aware of the strong body that pressed against him and the scent enveloping him. The White Wolf had a mesmerizing fragrance of aftershave, power and steeliness, and Steve responded by grabbing his shoulders, ready to shove back if things were going to end badly. However, the hold on his chin was rather gentle, the elegant fingers pushing into his skin with startling care.

Barnes stared at him, saying nothing, but seemingly trying to gauge all Steve's secrets if possible. His heart resonated with all the alarm bells in the world, all of them pushing hard into his awareness just to make him conscious of the completely awkward position in which he found himself. It definitely didn't look as though they were rivals, but more as... Nope, Steve most certainly didn't want to go there, especially when his body touched Barnes's in so many points.

"My sister needs a bodyguard for now as someone is definitely after me and my family. You're an ex-fighter with good combat-ready skills, you've clearly proven your instinct when you protected my sister back at the restaurant. You would need to move to the Barnes manor, but I assure you that you would be treated with the utmost respect by my men. You would also be paid handsomely."

To say that the offer caught him by surprise would be the understatement of the century. His whole life experience contributed to a lot of decisions that he took on the spur of the moment, decisions that sometimes came back to haunt him. But his instinct and experience were telling him that this was definitely a test. He didn't know what Barnes was after or what he was proving by giving a negative or affirmative answer to his offer, but Steve believed with all his might that Barnes was going to treat him accordingly.

"And for this, you need to molest me in my own home?" Steve asked mockingly, trying to buy some time.

"I'm sorry," the Barnes heir said, although there was nothing apologetic in his stance as he finally let Steve go. What was the purpose of this show of power, the cop couldn't understand; however it was clear to him now that what was happening at the moment in his flat was a game perfectly played by the man in front of him and he would have to give his best. If, by accepting his offer, he would be able to retrieve much more information at the high risk of being discovered, well, then Steve was going to accept it.

Being inside the Barnes manor meant an abundance of information that he would never be able to retrieve otherwise. While he did grasp the fact that he wouldn't be able to snoop around, he would be constantly with Rebecca, who handled all the financial aspects of their operations and thus he would be able to retrieve some great intel and a unique insight into their operations, perhaps finding out more than he could possibly do in other circumstances. Still, being so close to them and being under scrutiny so early meant that he would be in constant danger of being found out and the repercussions would be shattering.

However, this smelt like a setup and Steve had spent far too many years undercover not to listen to his instincts.

"Listen, I appreciate your offer. I do like your sister, she's far too nice for you, but I think I'm going to pass your offer. I care about my life and since I came here, it was nothing but threatened." The flash of surprise passed so quickly that Steve thought he just imagined it, but then Barnes was so hard to read that he just had to be careful.
"I understand." Barnes took a card out. "While I do sympathize with your position, I believe that
my sister would benefit from your presence next to her. I consider that both James and I would be
much more untroubled if we would to know you are there with her. Take my card and think about
it. Let me know when you are going to give me a definite answer."

"Are you telling me that you aren't going to consider this my final answer?" Steve said rather
amused as he took Barnes's business card. He was rather disappointed when he didn't read anything
else except his name and a phone number. He would have expected something much more
dramatic like 'Bucky Barnes, drug warlord, and all-time White Wolf'.

"Something tells me I'll see you soon, Steve Rogers."

"No offense if I hope you're wrong."

The White Wolf looked back at him and smirked all-knowingly before he left the apartment and
oh, man that annoyed Steve even more. He crashed on his poor couch and covered his eyes with
his forearm. His heart was still beating rapidly, and he chose to willingly ignore what that meant
because most certainly it wasn't because of the head of a mob clan. The offer had been unexpected,
and the results could have been incredible for the investigation but for the life of him, Steve had
only wanted to say no to it and possibly run away as far as possible.

Thoughts of Bucky Barnes and how he held him against the wall swirled in his head and it was by
far the worst thing that could happen to him. Being attracted to a dangerous guy was one thing.
Being attracted to a high-class clan heir, whose very name was synonymous with the devil's was a
completely different one. He asked himself whether he was suitable for this investigation as the
things evolved sometimes far beyond his reach. He sighed, remembering the story of the cop who
tried to infiltrate in the clan. Something told him that if by chance, Barnes would get to him first,
his punishment would be far worse than what that cop got.

He needed a clear head, he needed to be reminded of his priorities, so he decided that the next day
he was going to speak with his chief, to hell with precautions. He needed new info, someone to
scream at him and who was better to do that than his chief? He got up, scowling, and went to take a
long cold shower completely ignoring the idea of some elegant fingers and cold blue eyes focused
on him.

The next evening after he finished his work at the clinic, he chose to take a walk on the bank of the
river, after he bought a prepaid card. The night was warm and there were quite a few people
milling around which meant that he could get lost in the crowd and nobody would pay attention to
him. He sat on a bench a little more isolated from the rest and made the call, making sure that
nobody around him could hear even a whisper of the conversation.

"TMPL Gym."

"Hello, I wish to renew my membership."

"You can renew your fucking life after I'm done with you, asshole!" His chief yelled so loud that
Steve literally had to take the phone away from his ear. "How in the God's name you became a
cop, I don't fucking know! You were supposed to report more than a week ago and then no phone
call, no message. I was about to send the drones to find out where your body was already on its
way to be devoured by worms, you bastard." The words were not hitting as close to home, but the
worry that sipped through every word which was by far the worst thing that Steve heard, and it
made him feel guilty.

"Look, would you just calm down?" Steve swallowed hard; his throat suddenly tight. "A lot of
"You told me to calm down?" Chief's incredulity was a clear sign that he was royally pissed. "He told me to calm down, Sam." There were some muffled noises and Steve could almost picture his chief arguing with Sam, his friend trying to calm him down, but only managing to wind him up even more. "Don't tell me to calm down! I thought we lost you. We all thought we lost you and now we were fucking waiting for a goddamn tape so don't tell me to calm down."

"Well, they did think I was a cop and if you shut up for five minutes. I can tell you how I was held at gunpoint, and how I was almost shot, but how out of the people in the world, it had to be Erik Killmonger the one to save me," Steve snapped.

"What?" Fury's sharp intake of breath was the only sign that he finally caught his attention. Now his righteous furious discourse would have to wait. "Let me put you on speaker. I'm here with Julian and Sam."

Steve told them in detail what had happened since the last time they heard each other, including how he was taken to the Barnes manor and almost shot and killed when he went with Rebecca to The Red Room. His colleagues listened carefully to his story without interrupting him, knowing full-well that any information was more precious than they could imagine at this stage in the investigation.

"I think I've never been so happy in my life that we gunned you down before the bust in Manhattan because I think it is the only thing that took the suspicions off of you," Sam replied when he finished speaking.

"I live to please," Steve said sarcastically. "Now it's your turn, guys. Who the hell is after the Barnes'? Because whoever it is, he knows them very well and he is more than willing to sully his hands with their blood as long as he gains profit from it."

"Well, let's just put it this way. You won't like the answer," Julian said quietly and Steve had a really bad feeling about all of this.

"The one that is after them is no other than Alexander Pierce, the current head of the Hydra clan, the forth ruling family," Sam reported, always ready to pull off the band-aid really quickly and with minimal pain. Not that the news he just spewed at Steve was in any way good.

Steve felt a shiver down his spine, threatening to take over his body. Alexander Pierce was for the Hydra Mob what Bucky Barnes was for the rest of the underground world. He was completely ruthless. He killed his father and decimated his family in order to make sure that his gain of power would be absolute. He was always interested in the more serious side of the Hydra Mob business with the human trafficking running the main event in his business life. He had tortured one of his underlings for days for the simple fact that he got a ticket from the police and then killed the guy and sent the parts to as many acolytes as possible to get the message across that none of them would be ever safe in the family.

His terror was complete and unquestioning and not even one branch of the most secretive police forces dared to send a man undercover in his clan because death would have been actually kind compared to what would have happened to them.

"Steve, I wonder if, in the light of the new events, wouldn't it be better if we retrieve you from there and let them decimate each other?" Chief Fury commented in all seriousness. "The mission had been difficult from the very beginning with you trying to infiltrate the White Wolf's clan but now that this lunatic comes into play, there are small chances of police gaining anything other than
one of their clan's destructions. And if Pierce or Barnes fall in the process, so much better for us. At least, once one of these monsters is dead, we can take on the other."

"And if Pierce wins?" Steve gritted his teeth. The silence at the other end of the line winded him up even more but now his mind was calculating possible outcomes of Pierce's victory and not one of them was good for the police and everyone involved.

"Are you telling me that you want us to help Barnes win the war and take Pierce down because it would be so much easier to take Barnes on after a possible victory against Hydra Mob?" The sarcasm now was more than familiar to Steve, but he could work with it.

"Listen, chief, at least I'm already familiar with the Barnes’ and I can gain access to their family. With Pierce, I'm sorry, but you would be on your own. I am not going there undercover. This guy has no honor, he kills senselessly and for the sheer pleasure of it. In between these two monsters, I would always choose Barnes."

"Is there something you didn't mention?" Sam asked and for a second Steve actually blushed, thinking of the previous evening and the thoughts that came through his mind. But then he realized that Sam was actually thinking of something completely different, therefore he told them about the job offer that he received from the heir of the Barnes clan.

"Why did you say no?" Julian asked what was probably in everybody's mind.

"Because it was a test. I always seem like I don't want anything to do with their business and all of a sudden, I would accept their proposition. It would have been too suspicious and sooner or later they would have dug too close to home. Anyway, now I have a reason to say yes and I can find my way to that point. I need to know something else though. How are the other clans reacting to this show of power from Pierce?"

"Actually, they don't want to get involved and they secretly hope that Barnes might end up being the one to put an end to Pierce’s reign of terror. They also think of the possible outcome of Barnes winning all this and then finding out that the others help. Can you imagine this?"

"How come this is unfamiliar to Barnes?"

"I don't think it is. I just don't think he was crazy enough to tell a stranger after all, who is after his family." Steve sighed and his chief mirrored the gesture. "Steve, if you really want to remain undercover, you have to bear in mind that you might get involved entirely in this war. This will affect everybody involved and there are innocent lives at stake here."

"I know, chief. But there isn't much left for me here, is it? If I leave and we let them fight amongst each other, this war could take years and then a lot of innocent people would have to suffer. If I get involved in it, maybe there is a chance of me speeding up the process or at least take one of them down? Either way, the option of me leaving is out of the question."

"You are a suicidal bastard, aren't you?"

"Nope, I'm just a goddamn good cop, who wants to take the bad guys down." Steve looked around him, making sure that he was still alone, and nobody noticed him there. "I'll need all the info you gathered about Pierce and whatever you know about him. Make sure to post it like I ordered something online or whatever."

"Will do. Next contact?"

"Two weeks as usual. If I gain access in the Barnes family, then it would probably take a little
more, but I will make sure to contact you one way or the other."

"Good." Another moment of silence and then Fury's voice dipped with worry added. "Careful now, Steve, you fight with the real villains and they might eat you alive. These guys are monsters and your death would be horrendous at their hands. If you feel threatened at any time or you think you might be discovered, don't hesitate to get out. I care more about you than about this stupid suicidal mission."

"Thank you, chief. I will."

Steve ended the conversation and deflated, admiring the peaceful river and the people passing by it, ignoring his presence. His eyes raised to the sky and then without thinking any more he stood up and walked away, his phone dying of natural causes along his way home. His mind was made up and there was no turning back now. One way or the other he was going to help that bastard of Barnes take down Pierce and then go from there.

A couple of days later, the radio silence from everyone began to worry him. It had been a slow day at the clinic with mostly children having bad cases of flu and following him and the doc around like superheroes. It must have been the candy that they stashed in their pockets to make sure that the little urchins were being quiet while they listened to their lungs or took blood from the worse cases. While Rebecca had texted him to apologize for her brother's intervention, there had been no word from the others and Steve wondered briefly if he had gone too far with asking them to stay away from him.

"Hey, Stevie!" The yell startled him and almost gave him a whiplash as he turned his head in time to see Howlett grinning maniacally at him. Next to him, Rumlow was smiling shyly while Rollins was just sitting behind the wheel with a half-smoked cigar between his lips but just as amused as the rest of his friends.

"Hey!" Steve replied back, making Howlett sputter. When he got near them, he clapped Rumlow on the shoulder as a gesture of goodwill and the man seemed to relax almost completely. He was dressed as flamboyantly as ever, and he really admired the guy for his self-confidence. "What the hell are you guys doing here?"

"We were in the neighborhood, and we were just about to get a drink when we wondered what our good friend Rogers is doing, other than breathing and pissing us off."

"Well, how kind of you." Steve scowled.

"We're here to take you out drinking," Rumlow answered and smiled his beautiful smile. "There's a dive just around the corner where they're serving really good bourbon. Wanna join us?"

"What the hell?" Steve said with little hesitation left in his voice. "You guys owe me a lot of bourbon so let's go."

"That's what I'm talking about." Howlett clapped him and pushed him towards the car.

"I'm assuming you're buying, stupid asshole." And Steve relished in seeing Howlett sputtering while getting into the car.

"Of course I am, you stingy bastard."

"Hey, I'm not stingy, but the clinic doesn't pay much so the least you guys could do would be to pay for my damn drink."
"And just like that, we're forgiven?" Rollins finally dared to ask as he inscribed the car back into the traffic.

"Unless you want me to linger over the goddamn issue." Steve looked at him meaningfully in the mirror and Rollins nodded in understanding. "What's done is done and let's leave it at that. But hey, threaten me again and I might just show you why I was in Killmonger's squad."

"Now, now, tough guy, calm the hell down. Let bygones be bygones and let's get drunk."

"Won't Rebecca say anything about you getting drunk?"

"She's out of town so what she doesn't know can't hurt her, right?!"

"Oh, Howlett, why are you giving me material for blackmail?"

"What?" Howlett's confused look made even Rollins finally laugh.

"Rumlow, I'll need your phone tonight. I bet you I can drink under the table this pathetic loser and take some unforgettable pictures at the same time."

"Done and done." Rumlow smiled again from the passenger seat and took a picture before either of them could protest.

"Ha, ha. You're so funny."

"I know I am, jerk."

"You can dream on, douchebag."

The bar was basically a hole in the wall with red curtains at the entrance and it looked so dodgy that even the boys hesitated before finally going in. However, after the first cups of bourbon, everything seemed so much better. There were just a few tables inside the crowded room, most of the regulars seemingly sitting at the bar. Not one of them batted an eyelash when they entered and occupied the only free table and then managed to steal chairs from all the rest of the tables. Rumlow and Rollins crowded against each other and even Steve and Howlett were seated far more comfortably than one would have guessed they were comfortable with.

But then the first round turned into the second and then third and soon Steve lost count as a very fuzzy feeling shrouded him. He was not drunk but the alcohol rushing through his veins made him feel a lot looser and he enjoyed talking with the guys as if they were normal people and not a cop and his targets. Dangerous as the situation might have been, Steve loved to relax if only for a couple of hours and give Rogers, his alter ego, free reign.

"Finally!" Rumlow exclaimed and smiled softly at Steve as if he read his thoughts.

"What?" He scowled for good measure.

"It's so good to see you loosen up a little bit. You are always so tense as if someone is about to come and jump you."

"I'm sorry to say that since I've moved to Brooklyn, this has been the case." Steve swallowed the last of his bourbon and grimaced when he saw Rumlow's hurt face. "Sorry, I really didn't mean it like that."

"No worries. Honestly, I'm sorry too." The hitman looked at his partner, making sure he was in
deep conversation with Howlett before adding, "I should have defended you back then."

"Hey, no, let's face it. It looked suspicious and who knows maybe nowadays, they do accept crazy bastards within the force. I just wasn't one of them. Besides, I was a stranger to you. There's no way I was worth risking your neck for me."

"No, it's not like that. I just really thought that-"

"Come on, stop talking about it and have a drink with me! Can you make me something greasy in the morning?" Steve smiled shyly at his new friend. "I feel like I will be in terrible need of a good meal in the morning."

"Sure, breakfast at our home, then." Rumlow raised his cup and finished it then ordered some more. Soon Steve excused himself to go to the men's room, not that the small room with just two stalls and smelling really foul implied any confidence in the hygiene of the landlord of such a respected establishment.

"Mr. Rogers, I would like to have a word with you, if I may." The man startled him so bad that he flung water all over the place.

"Jesus fucking Christ, warn a guy, especially in a place like this," he said trying to control his breath and not let the other man just how much taken aback was.

"I'm sorry, it was not my intention." His apologetic tone was clearly dismissed by the glint in his narrowed eyes. There was something infinitely creepy about the guy that made his skin crawl as if something unpleasant touched him and he wouldn't be able to get rid of its mark for the rest of his life.

"How may I help you, Mr...?"

"Marcus Scarlotti, at your service."

"How may I help you, Mr. Scarlotti?"

"I believe we might help each other."

"I'm sorry, but words could be interpreted quite wrongly in such a place."

"Of course, I apologize for it, but it was the only place where I could get in touch with you without your constant friends hearing us." His narrowed eyes made Steve almost shiver. While his friendly face still remained completely unreadable, it was his stance and ultimately his eyes that made Steve compare the man in front of him to a hyena. A very dangerous and poisonous hyena.

"I don't see how I could be of any help to you, Mr. Scarlotti."

"Well, in the light of the recent events, I would say you could prove yourself extremely useful to me and to my boss. It has to come to our attention that you managed to obtain a definite position within certain circles in the Barnes clan and if you use your current position wisely, you would be able to obtain significant information that could prove extremely useful to me and my boss. Should we secure your services, we would pay a hefty sum of money that would help you retreat in a very quiet corner of the world."

"Seriously, you want me to spy on the Barnes’ for you?" Steve laughed mockingly. "Even if I would accept your offer, what use would your money be to me when the Barnes' hand is too long and would reach me wherever I go? Besides, I don't feel like being involved in this sort of thing so
if you would excuse me, I'd rather decline politely your offer and I'd ask you to let me join my friends. "But the menacing glint in the other man's eyes was becoming increasingly alarming.

"My boss won't be happy to find out that you refused his more than generous offer."

"You can tell your boss to fuck off then." The anger was getting the better of him. "I've never been a spy and I'm not about to begin now, Mr. Scarlotti. Also, I assure you, you completely overestimate my importance within the Barnes clan. I am held in no regard whatsoever."

"And yet, you drink with Mr. Howlett." Scarlotti tsk-ed as if Steve were a naughty child. "Mr. Pierce won't be pleased to hear about this." If the guy wanted to intimidate him, he was doing a really good job of it. In any other circumstances, perhaps if he were a better man, Steve would have accepted the offer. However, because he was a crazy son of a bitch and he couldn't give two shits if he were to die in this mission, he squared his shoulders and looked straight back into Scarlotti's eyes. "Interesting," the other man murmured, and he sniggered. "Take care, Mr. Rogers. I'm afraid you've made a choice, although you chose poorly."

"That's for me to decide."

"If you say so. Should you change your mind-"

"I won't." They stared at each other before the other man fleered and left Steve alone in the putrid-spelling room. For a man like Pierce to be so boldly trying to corrupt him made Steve think that this was more than a simple struggle for power. They were on the verge of a critical war and the winner was going to wipe the loser from existence.

So, it should have surprised him when the car exploded five minutes after he joined his friends back at the table, the flare pushing him over Howlett and making thousands of wooden shards and debris fall over him. But he wasn't astonished at all. In fact, as Howlett was yelling his name, though he could barely hear, while Rollins was carefully holding Rumlow in his arms, the cop inside of him realized that by the end of that evening he was going to make a decision that would influence the rest of his life.

He looked at the burning car.

And then he swore.
lying is my trade

The wound on his forehead still pulsed with incredible strength, but at least it had stopped bleeding. He could still feel the gauze trying to work out its magic and he dared to throw a look in the mirror at his pale face and the white bandage that covered half of his forehead. He and Rumlow took the brunt of the explosion mostly because they had been closer to the window that had exploded into a million shards. His torso was painted in black and blue and Rumlow didn't look any better but at least they were alive.

And inside the Barnes mansion.

Steve glanced at the clothes lying next to him. It was the second time he was borrowing clothes from the White Wolf. He was making a habit and he wasn't sure where it was going to lead. He glanced back into the foggy mirror and sighed. He was getting increasingly frustrated with the fact that he always ended up there, one way or the other with Barnes’ clothes next to him. If he continued like that, he would get a full wardrobe made entirely out that man's clothes.

Steve was dismayed by the explosion and he grimaced in the mirror. His ears were still buzzing with the impact of it. He sighed. Maybe, after this mission was over, he could take a break and maybe rent a small cottage by the sea and just enjoy peace and quiet for a couple of months. That is, if he made it out alive from this horror show.

He grabbed the grey t-shirt and carefully pulled it over his head, trying not to touch the head wound. He was not worried about it too much as he knew that most head wounds would bleed profusely without being very serious, but his headache was still a bad sign. He was expected and he had to inhabit Steve Rogers yet again. And Steve Rogers had nothing to lose, not that he had anyways.

He made sure he looked human enough before going back into the guest room and leaving his bloodied clothes on the floor, trying not to stain anything else. Everything looked so pristine in the room, Steve had a sudden impulse to mess it all up, but he was in the house of the White Wolf and he very much doubted that the man would appreciate his behavior – even though technically it was his fault for their attack. As he exited the room, he carefully ignored that voice inside of him that reminded him that he chose to support a mobster for fear of another, because maybe, just maybe there were some good parts from this guy winning the war. Though he failed to see those parts.

At the door, as usual, Eric waited for him and he escorted Steve to Barnes's office where the others were already waiting for him. Howlett was looking out of the window morosely, while Rollins and Rumlow were on the couch. Rumlow had his eyes closed, his ashen face and swollen eye the only signs that he was not feeling well, though he knew for sure that his back was black and blue as well. Rollins and Howlett were slightly bruised; however, they didn't show any sign that they were aching too much. And Barnes… well, he was sitting at his desk looking over some files like the insensitive bastard that he was. Nothing seemed to shake this man.

As everybody ignored his entrance, Steve took a seat on the armchair next to the couch and breathed softly through the nose, closing his eyes. If they were giving him the silent treatment, then they were in for a surprise.

"How are you feeling?" Howlett’s voice sounded strangely gruff, but Steve didn't open his eyes.

"Like a train hit me. I would be grateful if the buzz in my ears would disappear."
The atmosphere in the room was oddly stilted and Steve felt compelled to open his eyes and look at the people around him. They all seemed preoccupied with something, although none seemed keen to share with the class.

"Do we know who tried to kill us?" he asked a little annoyed that the men present in the office did not feel as this was an important matter to discuss. The way he was feeling at the moment, he would rather be anywhere else, but it was time to up his game and make a final decision.

"Us?" Rollins finally met his eyes.

"The last time I checked I was with you guys. So yes. Us."

Howlett turned to them and smiled grimly. His shirt was still stained with blood from where he held Steve against him to make the wound stop bleeding until Doc came to save their asses. Surprisingly, Doc Banner didn't seem in the least staggered by his presence at the Barnes mansion and Steve had a sneaky feeling that there was more to it than met the eyes.

"Sorry to get you in our mess again."

"Nah, I think this time it might have been my fault."

"Your fault?" This time even Rumlow blinked owlishly at him and Barnes raised his eyes from the file he was studying so intensely. "How come?"

"Well, apparently I refused a well-advised proposition." Steve turned serious. "When I went to the toilet, a guy with a hyena face was waiting for me. Apparently, he heard that I might be close to your family," Steve nodded to Barnes, "and wanted to offer me money in exchange of information about you. When I refused, he said that Mr. Pierce wouldn't be pleased by my refusal. Hence the blown-up car."

"Why did they approach you?" Barnes opened his mouth at last.

"Because I'm new? Because they thought I might be bought? Because they wanted something on you? Or because I saved your sister's life and they thought you might want me in?" Steve rolled his eyes, which brought a new wave of the massive headache plaguing him. "How the hell should I know what crossed a criminal mastermind when he thought about it?"

"So, you know who Pierce is." Rumlow concluded.

"Guys, I know I tend to be slow on the uptake, but even I know who the real monsters are. And Pierce is the type of monster that one only meets in hell. Evidently, I just made it on his blacklist."

"Why did you refuse then?" Barnes asked icily. "You could have befriended these fools and you might have given him some information about us, which in turn would have gained some good money."

"Right." Steve pinched his nose in an attempt to avoid the blow out. Again. "Firstly, I'm not a snitch. I would rather cut off my hand than rat on someone. I have principles, shaky as they may be. Secondly, in between you and that monster, thank you very much, but I would rather choose you. I don't deal very well with people hurting women and children willingly and sadistically. And thirdly, had you caught me doing that, you would have tortured and killed me, and he would have pretended that I don't exist. Thank you, but no thank you. I may be stupid, but not that stupid."

Barnes' blue eyes stared at him shrewdly, trying to read deeply into his soul and Steve just stared back unafraid. They were playing a game of wills here and he was certain that he was not going to
lose.

"I understand." Barnes acknowledged his words and then looked at James. "Pierce finally made his intentions clear and he openly declared war on us."

"I expected him to move much sooner."

"It's not in his nature. The fact that so far, he has only acted openly against Steve technically for refusing his offer could be interpreted by the other clans as just an act of mere revenge against a small timer. Nobody would be fooled, but no one would dare accuse him openly." Barnes leaned back in his chair, a pensive look on his face. "I just don't understand what it is in this man's mind. He knows that this would mean bloody battles that could take years unless one gets the upper hand over the other. Is he so keen to eradicate me?"

"Well, ruining and killing the White Wolf himself might be a top priority for a guy like Pierce, who most likely wants to take control over the entire underworld," Steve observed, startling the others. "And it's understandable. If he manages to succeed and take your throne, so to speak, he would be incredibly powerful and most of the other clans would probably follow him willingly for fear of the repercussions."

"You know an awful lot for a person that wants to stay out of these things," Rollins noticed, a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"When you lived like me, you tend to know this sort of thing." Steve shrugged, not fearing that he showed too much knowledge. "As I said, I'm not stupid, and I worked long enough for Killmonger to know how this world functions."

"Right now, Pierce has the upper hand because he made a public move on you, without technically attacking you personally," Howlett sighed. "There is not much we can do at the moment because since Steve isn't one of our men, we can't argue that he was the first to attack us."

"Unless I'm one of you," Steve interrupted him and the men in the room stared at him. Even so, he had eyes only for the man behind the desk who at the moment made a good impression of an ice statue.

"Excuse me?"

"If your offer still stands, I'll accept it."

There was no doubt in his mind that his sudden decision might seem a bit dodgy to the rest of the people present there, but honestly, he played the card of 'hard to get' long enough and he needed to step up to this game. Barnes narrowed his eyes.

"Why?"

"Two simple reasons: one, I just became a target of a madman so my chances of surviving on my own have just decreased exponentially. Two, if he just attacked me and I barely register on anyone's radar, then your close ones are walking targets. Might as well paint a target on their backs. And he will come for them, that's for sure."

Howlett didn't look surprised about what he was saying, but Rumlow and Rollins's puzzled faces were a clear sign that they had no clue about what was being discussed there.

"Alright," Bucky answered. "Nevertheless, you do realize that you will have to move here, to the mansion." As an afterthought, he added, "And you'll need to wear a suit." The dark heat in his eyes
gleamed for only a few seconds, but it had definitely been there, and Steve shivered under the scrutiny.

"Fine, monkey-suit it is," he grumbled. "The only request that I have is a week so I can finish my work with Doc and not leave him all of the sudden."

"All right. We will discuss the terms tomorrow then."

"Welcome to the team in this case." Rollins grinned at him and even Rumlow managed a faint smile.

"Thank you."

"Needless to say, that if you betray us or Rebecca gets hurt…" Howlett left the sentence hanging but Steve thought he knew pretty well how it was going to end.

"Yeah, yeah, my internal organs will become external; blood, pain, torture etcetera, etcetera."

"I see you got the gist of it." he grinned maniacally.

"We will stop here for the evening then." It was a clear dismissal and Steve winced as he got up.

"Can one of you guys drop me home?"

"Stop with the nonsense," Bucky replied and there was again that mysterious look on his face. "Go back to your room and get some sleep. Someone will drop you in the morning to work."

"Oh," Steve hesitated, "alright then." With a final wink from Rumlow, he left the office and followed the ever-silent Eric back to the guest room where he pretty much crashed in the bed and fell asleep almost immediately.

The next morning, he woke before his alarm went off and swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat. His head hurt with a vengeance and as he got out of the bed, he flinched at the light in the bathroom. Ever since he took this mission, he had been threatened, shot at and now even involved in a goddamn explosion. He was so going to die by the time he hit thirty.

After he showered, he dressed in Bucky’s clothes again and bagged the other ones. He checked the room to see if there was anything else left, then opened the door.

Outside the room, in spite of the early hour, there was a new guy waiting for him, instead of Eric. The man was well-built with deep blue eyes, a shock of dark blond hair and the most curious tattoo on his face: a lightning bolt.

"Hey," Steve mumbled.

"Morning." The guy's voice was just as gruff, a sign that he hadn't woken up too long ago. He was dressed in a dark suit which fitted really well his body and Steve felt grateful that at least he had something to admire this morning. "Bucky is waiting for you in the kitchen."

"Ok." Steve started to walk in the vague direction of the kitchen. The damn house was a labyrinth and it would take him a while to learn where everything was. "By the way, my name is Steve Rogers. I think we will be colleagues pretty soon."

"I’m Thor Odinson." They shook hands awkwardly.

"Working long for the Barnes’?"
"It seems like a lifetime," Thor answered vaguely but he didn't seem unfriendly and he was definitely an improvement from Eric. They walked down the hallways in a comfortable silence until they reached the kitchen at which point Odinson just opened the door for him and let him in.

There was a soft light glimmering in the kitchen, comforting tunes playing in the background. Steve was surprised to see a cook at the countertop preparing breakfast while Bucky was sitting at the table, he and Rebecca had had lunch at the other day.

The mobster was dressed in soft black t-shirt and grey sweatpants and his chestnut hair was tied in a messy bun. The strands looked so silky that Steve was amazed by his impulse of passing his fingers through them. He pinched his nose in an attempt to calm his beating heart. *It is too early for shit like this*, he bitterly thought.

Bucky was reading the newspaper, a cup of coffee resting next to him. The cook gave him a look and then went back to his business. Steve sighed and decided to announce his presence.

"Good morning."

A pair of blue eyes gazed at him from above the newspaper. Dark promises pooled in them and Steve almost shuddered. Seriously, what was wrong with him?

"Good morning, Steve." Bucky gestured to the seat in front of him and Steve complied with the silent order. He closed his eyes for a moment but opened them when he heard the clink of a mug being set down in front of him. He smiled at the cook who smiled back.

"Thank you."

"How are you feeling?" Bucky asked him after he took his first sip of coffee.

"Like shit, but what can you do?" Steve shrugged. "Can you please tell one of your men to drop me to work?"

"Odinson will drop you at work. We need to discuss the terms of our agreement."

"Sure." Steve drank a little more coffee. "I need one day off a week. I don't care which one it is, it will probably depend on Rebecca's schedule as well. And I really don't want to get involved in any other parts of your business. I'm a bodyguard, and this is how I want to remain."

"However, I hope that you are aware that this position sort of compromises completely your neutrality. Being so close to my sister, you will find out more information about our business willing or not. Also, you're friends with some of my men already, so you will get to become familiar with certain aspects of their job as well." Barnes leaned forward and stared into his eyes.

"Rogers, let's be clear here: you know what we do, and you know what we're capable of. Accepting this position will put you directly into the line of fire, not only when it comes to Pierce, but also when it comes to police and other government agencies as well. By accepting this position, you will be officially part of this family, and although you may refuse to be part of our business, people will not deem you worthy of their doubts. You will be very much guilty into their eyes. Are you prepared to face that, or do I need to get another bodyguard for my sister?"

"Look, by no means am I an innocent person and I know what I got myself into," Steve replied. "And frankly, I stopped caring about other people's opinions of me a long time ago. I've been beaten, shot at, put into a coma and most of the times, it wasn't even because of me. So yes, I understand the dangers, but no, I will not back down."
"Very well." The blue eyes narrowed menacingly. Their icy deepness made Steve wince. "I don't have to tell you that if you ever betray my trust or my sisters, I will personally find you in the furthest corner of hell and I will make sure that you will pay for it. I can inflict pain, Rogers, the likes of which will break you forever. And while it won't give me any pleasure, I put above all else my honor and my duty for my clan and I will make sure your blood will pay for any stain on them. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal."

The menacing words hang between them like the death's threats that they were. Steve felt the truth behind those words, and he remembered the pain through which the other policeman had gone and the cruel way in which Bucky had had the final word as he had sent that tape to his family. There was no doubt in his mind that Barnes was going to be the end of him.

"Perfect." Bucky leaned back. "I accept your terms. Also, do you know how to use a gun?"

"Yes." Steve shrugged off Bucky's mild surprise. "I was Killmonger's fighter for a long time. Sometimes fists can't protect you." There was enough bitterness in his voice to make Bucky understand.

"I will make sure I get one for you then. Also, the salary will be given to you once a month, at the beginning, and only cash. What you do with it is not my business. The day off is Rogers’, and you can discuss it with Rebecca, as you will mostly deal with her. The guest room which served you so far will be yours from now on. I’m sorry but I won't tolerate any strangers in my house."

"Strangers?"

"Your partners." Steve gave a startled laugh as the man in front of him looked annoyed.

"No man in his right mind would accept coming with me into Barnes' mansion. They will probably think that I want to kill them or something."

"You're gay," Bucky finally said. It sounded both as a question and affirmation at the same time.

"Not that it's your business but yes. I hope that it's not a problem."

"It would be highly hypocritical from me and I presume you do know the people that work for me." The dry sarcasm made Steve smile again. "But there will be people that will try to get in touch with you so they can get to me. So, you’ll have to be very careful. I’ll also give you a phone, which is untraceable. Please ensure that you use only this phone when dealing with anyone in the family or any of my associates."

"I understand."

The older man gave the cook a look and suddenly the breakfast was laid in front of them. Steve's stomach grumbled. They ate in a comfortable silence – well as comfortable as it could be in between a mobster and an undercover cop, interrupted every once in a while, by Steve's questions regarding the layout of the house and Rebecca's general schedule.

After breakfast, Odinson came for him and dropped him at the clinic. The car ride lulled him, and he drifted off for most of the ride.

When he told the Doc that he would have to leave him in a week’s time, he didn't seem very surprised and when Steve voiced his puzzlement, Doc Banner replied:
"You looked like you were going to be adopted by them from the first day you met them." He smirked. "You are aware of what you are getting yourself into, yeah?"

"I think so." Steve passed his fingers through his hair. He would miss the clinic so much. "But there is no other solution for me."

The warm hand of the doctor settled comforting on his left shoulder and when he looked at him, Doc gave him a little smile.

"If you ever think that you had enough of Barnes, you will always have us to come back to."

"I don't think it will be that easy."

"Something tells me that it will."

Steve swallowed hard and thanked the good doctor. Rebecca's excitement, on the other hand, made him feel really bad for lying to her.

"I can't believe that you accepted." She squealed into his ear. "I'm really happy to hear it, Steve. I've already ordered you the suits and everything."

"Oh, great!" He replied with mock disgust.

"Oh, please, it will be fun."

"For you maybe. You don't have to wear a monkey suit."

"True, but you will be my monkey."

"Ha, ha. I'm dying of laughter here." He could almost hear her smile.

"I'm glad you said yes, Steve. I really am."

"Me too."

The week passed in a blur and before he knew it, it was time to move into his new home. Steve looked back at the small apartment and felt oddly melancholic. In this dingy apartment he felt safer than in the mansion's huge rooms. When he told his chief that he agreed to take the Bucky's offer, Fury had been oddly silent and he seemed rather pained when he said good luck. Sam, on the other hand, had screamed at him to be careful and try and keep in touch with them as much as possible. It was as if they feared that he was not coming back alive and in between Pierce and Barnes, he was not so sure himself.

He took his bag with a heavy heart and closed the door behind him. It was Rumlow waiting for him downstairs. He was the welcome committee slash guide as he put it.

But downstairs there was another surprise and not of the nice kind.

A black limousine was parked in front of Rumlow's car and his friend was rather tensed as he was staring at the tinted windows. As soon as Steve was out of the building a chauffeur dressed all in black got out of the car and opened the door for a brown-haired man. He was dressed in a very expensive black suit and a blue shirt and he would have been rather appealing to look at if it wasn't for his poisonous smile and cold stare. Steve didn't know the man, but he guessed straight away who he was, and he shuddered. This man was making him feel dirty by simply being in his presence.
"Good afternoon, Mr. Rogers."

"Good afternoon, Mr…?"

"Pierce. Alexander Pierce." Steve steeled himself as the man smirked rather unpleasantly. "I was rather unhappy when I heard that my offer was not to your satisfaction."

"As I explained to your man, I'm not a rat, Mr. Pierce, and I would hate to think that he implied such a thing."

"On the contrary, I think it would have been a lucrative proposition for both of us." His eyes sharpened. "But I heard that Mr. Barnes had stolen you before me. I hope you chose carefully, Mr. Rogers, for my offer won't come a second time and any regrets that I might harbor at your possible demise won't deter me from considering you my enemy."

"I understand completely." Steve looked straight back at him. "I hope you realize as well that the feeling is mutual." His words startled the man before he finally laughed. It was a cold feeling, as if a mad man was laughing in an isolation room, and cold chills ran down his back. But he was not afraid, and his opponent seemed to realize that for his laughter turned into a knowing smirk.

"You are a rather intriguing person, Mr. Rogers."

"Thank you for the compliment," Steve mumbled. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"No, I just came here personally to meet you." Pierce shook his hand. "We'll see each other soon enough, Mr. Rogers."

"Don't be offended if I say I hope not." Pierce laughed again at Steve's surly words.

"Brave. Stupid, but brave." The man went back to his fancy car and Steve shakily put his bag into the boot before getting into Rumlow's car where his friend looked at him in astonishment.

"What the hell?" Rumlow words echoed perfectly Steve's feelings on the matter. What the hell did Pierce want from him and what reasons were hidden behind this unprompted visit?
To say that Steve was bored out of his mind would be the understatement of the year. No, of the century.

He would have rather watched paint dry than be there at that moment.

Weirdly enough, he had hoped that guarding Rebecca would have been more challenging, but she's been home for more than two weeks and she mostly stayed at home. The only times she actually went out was to do some shopping and have some dinner with whatever dark lord wanted to invest in their clan, which is to say really dodgy people, the likes of which Steve would rather not encounter on a dark night on an even darker alley.

Still, he diligently took any information that might help him give something to the chief. Any information at this point was more important than nothing, and Steve recognized some of the faces in her company, and most of them were people unknown to them, therefore worthy to be checked. He diligently made a mental list, too afraid still to make any evidence that might make any of them suspicious of him.

He sighed heavily. Man, this was so incredibly boring. He rolled his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. Wasn't like something else that he could do, while she was sitting around doing her files or whatever she was doing? He tried to loosen the tie. He was walking around with it all loosened and on more than one occasion he was stopped by Barnes and made to do his tie again. Asshole, as if it wasn't enough that he was looking like a monkey. Seriously, wasn't there anything else to do? Anything at all?

He looked out on the window and he enviously spotted Howlett, who was dressed casually and seemed to be off to something amusing. Nice, one more guy who had more fun than him.

"You know, you don't have to look like you're in hell ninety percent of the time," Rebecca remarked and although it made him blush a little as if he had been caught doing something wrong, he was still glad for the breaking off this stifling silence.

"Sorry." He passed his fingers through his hair. "It's just…"

"Way more boring than you expected?" She smirked at him and leaned on the backrest of the chair. "Sorry, if you wanted fun and adventures, you should have picked my brother or Howlett."

"I honestly doubt that Howlett would appreciate my presence next to him. And seriously, I don't believe even for a second that your brother would require a bodyguard."

"You would be surprised," she said and there was something in her tone that made Steve pay more attention. "You see, the more frightening my brother is for the people outside the family, the more in danger he is. Can you imagine how legendary the person to kill Bucky Barnes would become? And the funny thing is my brother doesn't enjoy killing people."

"But that doesn't stop him from doing it." He couldn't help but put some bite into his words, but Rebecca didn't seem angry, she just looked intrigued, which he supposed was good for him. She gestured him to take a seat and he obeyed her because he put his foot into his mouth, and it was the only thing to do at the time.

"Steve, what exactly do you think we are doing here?"
"Uhm," he hesitated, "drug trafficking, illegal fighting as the one I was part of in Manhattan, I don't know what mobsters do these days. I don't receive Mobster Daily, you know?"

"Yes, you are right. We do drug trafficking," she admitted, ignoring his sarcasm. Steve wished for a second he had his microphone with him. "But we provide quality drugs, clean, without any additives that might put in danger the consumer. While I know this sounds rather presumptuous to you, for us it is a business style. We carefully control all the merchandise that we put out on the streets and we ensure the safety of it. All the people that cross certain lines are severely punished and made to understand that we do not tolerate any deviation from our standards. While this may seem incomprehensible to you, we do care for the safety of our customers for they are the bone and marrow of our business."

"You still bring poison on the streets."

"True, but then again, if it weren't us, it would be someone else. It would always be someone else." Rebecca looked pensively at him. "But we don't force anyone to buy drugs from us, we don't put a gun to people's heads and tell them to take drugs. We are a provider of service. And at the same time, we keep Brooklyn's streets safe."

"Are you actually trying to justify your trafficking by saying that you keep the streets cleaner?" His incredulity made her smirk at him. "Yes, you single-handedly annihilated the gang wars, but you still make the same streets unsafe for everyone that doesn't want to partake to your business."

"It's very interesting to see that you stand there and judge us and yet you were one of the ones that enjoyed the fruits of our business when you were in Manhattan." Her words bore cutting edges and they didn't sit well with Steve Rogers, who, forced by the circumstances, had joined Erik Killmonger.

"I guess there is not much to judge, is there?" he answered morosely after a while. The defeat in his words softened her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I don't want to presume what we do is right or anything like that, I'm just saying it would have been worse."

"Like Pierce." Her eyes darkened at the sound of that name. "Yeah, I had the pleasure of meeting the guy," Steve continued sarcastically. "That man made my skin crawl and I'm not a special flower."

"Yes, well, his line of business is completely different than ours." Rebecca seemed further away at that moment, but shortly after, that faraway look disappeared from her face and she grinned at him. "But that's another story for another day."

A knock on the door interrupted them and Howlett strolled into the room like he owned the place. Rebecca's whole face became illuminated and the guy didn't seem better. Who knew how long it took these two chuckleheads to admit that they were in love? And how much longer to actually act upon it?

He kissed her softly and Steve's heart for a moment ached with so much loneliness that he had to look away or his eyes might have betrayed him.

"I've come to steal your bodyguard since you're not leaving home today. Bucky asked me to take him to the range in the city and see what he's got."

"Why are you grinning at me like I might be shit at it?" Steve scowled, which in turn made
Howlett grinned even wider.

"Oh, pretty boy, I can't wait to see what you got. Let's see if you're a match for me and my Glockie."

"Glockie? I'm so not surprised that you named your freaking gun." Steve stood up and cranked his shoulders. "Okay, let's see what you've got."

"Oh, this is how it's gonna be, Stevie?"

"Yap."

Rebecca just shook her head at them both as if they were acting like silly children and she had better things to do than listen to their nonsense.

"Please, go already! You are giving me a headache." She rolled her eyes at both of them. But Howlett was too cocky for his own good and he needed to give him a hell of a lesson.

Steve left them to kiss and grin at each other some more, so he could change quickly into a pair of black jeans and a baseball shirt and took the gun that Bucky gave him more than a week ago. It had a really nice touch to it, silver lines almost floating around the black handle. He reluctantly admitted at the time that it was a beautiful gun and the mobster definitely knew his taste.

The drive to the range was made of useless chatter and boisterous words and Steve reluctantly admitted that in any other life, Howlett and he could have been friends, maybe even best friends. And although, a cold voice at the back of his mind warned him that he might regret ending these people after he was finished with Pierce, in the last couple of years Steve had been just so good at ignoring this voice, that he didn't acknowledge it and carried on discussing with Howlett.

The range was on the other side of the town, just outside of it, multiple courses available for its clients. And by clients he meant, Bucky's people come to train and be the best marksmen. There were several courses, some of them really classical-like targets painted in red and ready to attract bullets, several marks confirming the distance.

Others included small walls and people painted on green stakes, all of them with multiple holes and all of them seemed to be begging for mercy and be put out of their constant misery.

Others were camouflaged by the trees with dangers lurking in the dark, several hiding places that offered the possibility to really hurt your target. It made one wonder how many 'happy' accidents happened that determined the fate of people coming to train here.

After Steve and Howlett tackled the first range with clear shots hitting their targets, the older man slapped him on the shoulder and congratulated him on being a good marksman.

"Well, well, well, it's not that bad, Stevie." There wasn't an ounce of malice or anger in Howlett's voice as the guy genuinely was glad to see that Steve wasn't bad at shooting. Probably because he was guarding the woman that he loved. "How about we go to the big boys' court then?"

"I agree. Let's see what you got."

They grinned at each other and challenging words flew between them as they charged their paint pistols. They were going to the hardest course, dressed in nothing but their clothes and vests that resembled the anti-bullet ones, only without the actual effect.

As a measure of precaution though, they kept their real ones in their holsters and didn't say
anything about it, then they ran in opposite direction knowing fully well that this was easily going
to turn into a man's hunt. Previously, the official that supervised the course gave them instructions
and described the course although it seemed like both of them were just really keen on taking on
each other.

Steve felt the adrenaline pulsating through his veins as he listened carefully for the sounds around
him. Small droplets of sweat were finding their way down his muscular spine and pooled down
just above his waistband. He carefully moved through the next tree where a small camouflage
wall was carefully positioned enough not to give his position away but offering plenty of
opportunities to see the enemy.

He forced his breath to slow down and remember his training from his academy years. He kept
perfectly still trying to gauge any movement when suddenly a whish sound penetrated the silence
and an explosion of bark drew his attention to his right.

"What the fuck, Howlett? We weren't supposed to use real bullets, asshole!" He yelled scowlingly
in the general direction when the second bullet came much closer and this time, Steve forced
himself to change position and throw the goddamn paint rifle down. He suddenly lunged from the
small wall just to be targeted by very much real bullets in quick succession.

What the hell was going on? It was definitely not Howlett as the man was mostly the direct type of
guy and if Bucky wanted him dead, he would have said so straight to his face. Which made him
conclude as he hid behind another tree that the guy shooting at him was most definitely not sent by
Bucky.

He inhaled deeply and then steeled himself. When he was in training at the Academy of Police,
they had an instructor called Phillips and he was probably the toughest meanest son of a bitch that
Steve had the pleasure to meet in the academy years. However, this man also taught Steve more
skills of surviving a battlefield than any other instructor that they ever had.

He was a war veteran, who spent some time abroad as well in mercenary troops, doing shady stuff
for the New York government. Still, the man was an encyclopedia of fighting techniques but, most
importantly, of shooting techniques. And he had the bad habit of taking certain students under his
wing and making sure that they had this important survival set of skills.

One of the most important things that he had taught them at the time was the sniper techniques.
Become still like the area around you, bleed into it, a breath being just a whisper in the wind, the
wind your ally and the hearing your friend. The hearing was just as important as seeing and Phillips
spent many days torturing them with different techniques by which he was trying to increase their
level of concentration on and off a battlefield. The training had paid off.

Steve sent a small prayer of thanks to the old bastard, wondering what he was doing and whether
he would have been proud of the way Steve darted next to another big tree and silenced first his
thoughts and then his breath. His small exhalations became nothing more than muted actions in a
world where any strange noise could mean the boundary between life and death. He gripped his real
gun harder. In the chamber, there were twelve bullets, enough to make some serious damage but
not enough to be squandered. He took a look around the area.

Not even a leaf was moving, and the sound of the city was muffled by the green sea. However, it
was lucky that due to the constant shooting on the training course, there were no birds there, so it
was definitely easier to hear any small scuff on the ground, any twig carelessly crushed under the
shoe.

A sudden whish and the intense pain flared in his left arm, but Steve dismissed it completely as he
was ready. This time he was finally able to see movement to his right and as soon as he had moved again, he was able to fire a bullet. A sudden groan pierced through the greenery and then nothing. Whoever had been shooting at him was now relocating and Steve grimly decided it was his time to hunt now.

The adrenaline level was skyrocketing as he pursued his attacker. Another bullet pierced the silence, this time uncomfortably close to his left foot, but Steve didn't let go of the prey. The bullets were raining down again, but this time they were less concise, more of a desperate act than anything else.

Steve grinned maniacally ignoring the desperate voice in the back of his head shouting that he shouldn't enjoy this, he shouldn't find pleasure into this hunt. It was all a survival game to him, and he was going to make it today alive.

All of a sudden, another bullet coming from an unexpected direction hit his mysterious attacker, who fell to the ground with a sharp cry of pain and then he heard the most unexpected question:

"Steve, are you alright?"

Howlett. The worry in his voice wasn’t fake and probably this shocked Steve more than anything else that had happened that day.

"Yes, I'm fine. You?"

"I'm okay too. Come on! I've disarmed the bastard."

As soon as he got into the clearing, he was able to see Howlett holding a gun to a guy that was bleeding from his right leg and left arm. It wasn't profusely, a sign that both he and Howlett missed any major arteries. For a second Steve wished the guy was dead. Nothing good would have waited for him now.

"What's your name?" Howlett seethed as Steve came closer to the asshole that had been shooting at him like a freaking coward from the shadows. The small narrow eyes of their enemy emanated pure unadulterated hate and remained silent for good measure. Steve kept his gun trained on him as Howlett came closer to the guy.

"I said," and his boot came in contact with the guy's leg wound, pressing mercilessly, as their prey hissed in pain, and then shouted, "what's your fucking name, you bastard?" The man groaned in pain again, but he remained silent. Howlett pressed again harder on the wound and this time the man shouted in pain, sweat covering his forehead, making his dark jet locks look even unctuous. "Are you waiting for your partner in crime to save your ass? He won't come as he is busy resting with a bullet through his brain not one hundred feet away from us. So better just tell me your name."

"Toshiro," the man mumbled in serious pain but Howlett didn't seem to care much.

"Look, Steve, he speaks." He spat the guy and then removed his foot from the wound. "Pierce's soldier."

"Great." Steve rolled his eyes but kept the gun strictly on the man. Just because he was unarmed and wounded, it didn't mean that he wasn't still a threat to them. Howlett took his phone out of his jeans and called someone. The conversation was quick and not with too many details but enough to make him think that a retrieval team was sent to them. The second phone call was scarier for their former attacker as it was clear that Howlett was talking to Bucky.
Toshiro seemed utterly terrified by the prospect of being taken to Barnes, but no amount of pleading could persuade him or Howlett to let him go and when the retrieval team arrived ten minutes later, the guy was literally screaming in terror. Steve just made sure that the walls built around his heart and mind grew higher.

"What are you planning on doing with him?" he murmured as Howlett was driving them back to the mansion. The man glanced at him then paid attention to the road.

"Do you really want to know?"

"No."

"Then don't ask stupid questions." He drove in silence for another couple of minutes before glancing back to him. "You did good today, kid."

"Don't act like you are older than me, jerk, but thanks." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Is Pierce really that invincible? Doesn't he realize that Bucky would obliterate him if something happened to you? You're his best friend and Rebecca's boyfriend."

"You too, Steve, you're important too."

"Yeah, right." Steve's shallow laugh made Howlett look back at him.

"If he wanted only me dead, he would have sent both his guys to me. But one of them came for you, Steve. This is no laughing matter."

"I know."

In spite of the fact that the guy had tried to kill him, he knew how much pain Bucky and his men were able to inflict on a person and he was not comfortable with the idea that he just brought a person to slaughter. On the other hand, he was at war not with not one, but with two mobsters, one more ruthless than the other. Additional causalities were going to exist until the end of this war. As long as there were their people, men that had chosen willingly this path, then he was going to have to live with it.

When they arrived at the mansion, Howlett left him to his own devices and went to the additional house on the ground which by now was dubbed into Steve's mind as the torture chamber. A cold shiver ran down his spine and he wondered how much he was going to lose from his soul in this legal endeavor.

The dinner was a quiet affair just between him and Rebecca, a weird tension floating around the house. Everyone seemed to be very much aware of what was going on just outside the house. Apart from asking him to recount what had happened at the shooting range, Rebecca didn't speak with Steve and he didn't feel inclined to share a conversation.

"Steve, Barnes would like to have a word with you." Thor's voice startled him, and he forced himself to groan in frustration. Though Rebecca seemed a little more than surprised at his summoning in the office.

"Isn't my brother going to join us for dinner?"

"I don't think so, miss," Odinson answered politely, bowing slightly before walking out of the room, Steve in tow, leaving her mulling over something as he went towards the office.

Barnes was dressed in a pair of gray slacks and a blue shirt, with its sleeves rolled up. He looked
impassive as always and he briefly wondered if this man was ever going to be rattled by anything. It appeared to Steve that Barnes didn't seem too much affected that Howlett, his best friend and right hand, had been so viciously attacked, that he could have lost one of the few men that he can count on, their loyalty unquestionable, their loss incommensurable.

"I want you to tell me exactly what happened this afternoon."

"But I thought that Howlett already gave you the report."

"But he was not with you when these gunslingers came after you, was he?" Bucky’s eyes narrowed a little, a small sign that somehow, he was a bit angered by the whole situation.

Steve saw that it was in his best interest to be sincere with the mobster and decided to recount him everything, ending with their arrival at the mansion. Bucky listened impassively to the whole story before nodding curtly when Steve finished.

"And your wound?"

"Just a graze," Steve said. "I already took care of it." There it was that dark light in this man's eyes again. It appeared every once in a while, when Bucky would look intensely at him as if the darkest corners of Steve's soul was up to discovery and sharing.

He always disliked that light because it stirred something in him, something that he didn't have any desire to acknowledge, much less respond to it. However, that light was always just a flicker, a blink and you'll miss it kind of thing and there were still some doubts in his mind about its existence.

"Alright. You can go."

Being dismissed so curtly annoyed Steve but as he didn't feel like eating anymore, he went upstairs to his room. The mansion was slowly becoming a known ground to him, but his freedom to walk through it was very much restricted to his floor and the kitchen. He took a shower, taking care not to wet the bandage on his arm and went to bed, tossing and turning all night and unable to sleep much of it.

The following days were miserable in their own way. Howlett was barely speaking and when he did, he merely barked orders or picked on Steve for not wearing his uniform properly, usually his tie. Bucky was an unbearable absence because he knew what this absence might mean. And when he tried to call Rumlow, the guy had the phone switched off, which meant that he was on a mission. All in all, the amount of crap that Steve had taken was taking a toll on him, which in turn only made him more than happy to hear that Rebecca needed to meet urgently with one of the top men in their clan, for an urgent matter.

Steve was watching the scenery passing before his eyes scanning the road and taking a glance back every once in a while, making sure that they were not being followed. This guy, Robert was living on the edge of Brooklyn and the roads were mostly deserted. All the more dangerous. The driver also seemed to pay increasing attention to traffic ahead of him. In the meantime, Rebecca was pouring over some files but even she couldn't remain indifferent to the tension in the car. She glanced at Steve and smiled a little.

"Relax, we are almost there."

It was the last thing she said as suddenly, a car crashed into them on Steve side, pushing his whole body over Rebecca, a massive pain in his leg making him groan, fogging his kind in that absolute
chaos of grinding metal and broken glass. The whole back of the vehicle was pushed into a pole by the side of the road, as the force of the impact had been incredibly strong, devouring any sense of stability that the vehicle might have had before that. The airbags deployed almost immediately, and Steve heard Rebecca scream in anxiousness more than in pain, for although the impact had been merciless in its effect, he had been carefully induced so as not to permanently damage the passengers.

As Steve finally managed to open his eyes, he was met with broken glass everywhere, his door completely pushed inside of the vehicle, bent into something unrecognizable, Rebecca's head was resting on the door on her side, the glass cracked, but not broken. The impact had been so strong, it made her head hit violently against the window, rendering her unconscious, and Steve groaned as he saw angry splatters of blood on the cracked glass. Her pulse was steady under his fingers though so, once again, he ignored the pain so as to look around and see what had happened to the other car.

Any thought of being just a random accident flew out of his mind as soon as he saw three men getting out of it. One of them went in front of the vehicle, took aim and shot the driver in the head without any remorse in his eyes, as blood and other matters splattered over Steve's face. One of the others, an older man with grim eyes stood outside his window, almost resting of the vehicle, with a Sig in his left hand.

"Don't even bother, big boy." He smirked at Steve as the third one took Rebecca out of the vehicle and then gestured Steve to get out of the car. He knew that there was nothing for him to do so he pushed out of the vehicle, trying to ignore the pain on his side, his leg especially.

As soon as he was out of the vehicle, the guy who had shot the driver took a look at him and smirked. He was not as scary as the other one who took Rebecca out of the car, for his eyes spoke of anger and thirst for blood, while the other man's eyes were completely dead and thus making him all the more dangerous.

"Oh, the pretty boy," the guy seethed. "I can't wait to hurt you, boy. I bet you will scream prettily." And before Steve could answer him, one of the other guys hit him in the back of his head thus knocking him out instantly.

When he came back to consciousness, Steve groaned in pain as he opened his eyes and then promptly lost it. In front of him was Rebecca tied to a chair, stripped of her clothes only in her underwear, with duct tape on her mouth. Her hands were bound behind and each of her legs was tied with duct tape to the chair. She was completely immobile, but her eyes betrayed her fear. Steve had never seen Rebecca looking positively horrified and the blood that was still tainting her forehead made her look even more anxious.

The pain in his shoulder made him conscious of the fact that he was hanging with his hands bound tight upon a metal hook which was attached to the ceiling of what appeared to be a warehouse by a heavy metal rod. He was also stripped down to his underwear and his leg was bleeding from a wound which was most likely caused by the accident. Most of his side was an angry shade of red mixing with blue and Steve groaned. This was definitely going to hurt later.

Four people were guarding him, none of the attackers on-site, though that didn't comfort him because as soon as they saw him awoken, one of them transmitted through the radio their status and almost five minutes later a guy followed by two of their attackers, the old man, and the bald guy who shot their driver, came inside the warehouse.

The man was wearing a very expensive suit, his hair slicked in the back and wearing very dark sunglasses, which promptly made Steve think that he was blind. The driver-shooter was dressed in a black t-shirt and some jeans and he was snickering behind his back while the old man looked
kind of bored by the whole situation.

"Good morning, Mr. Rogers. A pleasure to finally have you amongst us."

"Good morning. I'm sorry I can't say the same thing about you."

"Yes, I am afraid our method of bringing you both here was not a very elegant one. However, one must appreciate the efficiency of it."

"I am sure that my boss will be happy to see how you treated his sister and I."

"Please, what do you think we are?" The man's face grimaced. "We are not barbarians and we know what might mean hurting the sister of the White Wolf himself. However, we do intend to give her a lesson and we will start with you, Mr. Rogers. The amount of trouble that you have caused lately seems only worthy of corrective punishment."

"Oh, yes, how could I forget the preferred method of the cowards?" Steve scowled at them and then spit at their feet. "Torture."

"Torture?" The man laughed so emptily that cold sweat broke on Steve's skin. "Torture would imply the fact that we would inflict pain on you so as to retrieve useful information. However, since you have not been so long with the Barnes', I sincerely doubt that we would find out anything useful from you. However, we can give you a lesson into what it means to disrespect our leader. And after that lesson is thoroughly embedded into your skin, we will proceed to let Miss Barnes here free to tell her brother what happens when he steals people from us and we will take you to meet our boss so he can punish your indolence accordingly."

"Bring it, you fucking coward!"

"It will be Alfonso's pleasure." Only then, did Steve become aware of the sports bag that the bald guy had in his hand. The man grinned evilly at him and then opened it and unfurled a goddamn whip.

"Man, you people just love your fucking cliché, don't you?"

"Oh, man, it will be my pleasure to make you squeal like a pig, maybe even cut your fucking tongue when the time is right."

Alfonso went behind his back and Steve tightened his jaw. If this fucker thought that he would beg for his life or make a sound, he had another thing coming.

Rebecca started to trash and scream behind the tape and Steve tried to reassure her with a small smile, but his situation was pretty dire at this point.

More terrifying than the hit itself was the calm with which Alfonso seemed to prepare himself. Their boss was still next to Rebecca, impassively as always, almost bored with the entire situation.

"Alfonso," he ordered, "please, make him scream. You know it's the only way I can enjoy this scene."

"It will be my pleasure, Malick."

But they were both thoroughly disappointed because as the first hit of the whip hit the skin of his back, Steve tightened his jaw and not a single sound passed through his lips.
Steve kind of lost count after the twentieth lash. Alfonso was thirsty for blood, and he was making sure that he was doing as much damage as possible, but Steve was stubborn enough to remain utterly quiet. He was certain that he would have been dead earlier, except these guys appeared quite attached to him, or more precisely to the idea of tormenting him, which was futile as he tried to blank his mind. When that didn't work, he began to analyze the investigation.

The attempt was useless since each lash generated enough pain to curse himself, but he still made himself wonder just what the hell made Pierce so fascinated with his person. In the grand scheme of things, he was a fucking nobody, and not even Bucky would think twice about putting a bullet into his brain if that meant gaining something. Still, Pierce was taking everything to the next level and Steve didn't understand what the hell made him so important all of the sudden.

A new fire burst on his back, igniting a new wave of pain, the likes of which made Steve question his mental sanity. Whatever senses he possessed, they left him impaired to feel anything else except the agony of having his back flogged as if he was a simple piece of meat. Perhaps for Alfonso, he was exactly that: a slab of meat, which breathed, and capable of feeling the pain inflicted thus creating much pleasure to his torturer. His cheeks were raw inside from how much he kept on chewing them in the hope that he would not make a single sound of defeat, the taste of blood now a familiar fragrance on his lips.

When the lashes stopped for a blissful moment, he opened his eyes a little, his vision unfocused and painful. He saw Rebecca crying and making unhappy sounds behind the tape that decorated her mouth and Malick or whoever the guy was standing there frowning, as if the fact that Steve didn't cry in pain was a personal offense to him. The older man sat next to him just as puzzled.

"Come on, pretty boy!" Alfonso teased, his breath now on his nape, his damn body like a hulking presence behind Steve. "Come on!" Brusque fingers grabbed fistfuls of hair and pulled his neck back, almost to the point where it truly hurt. Steve's vision swam again. He could also most see the bald head of his aggressor and he promised to himself that if he was going to survive before this night was over, he was going to make sure that this fucking asshole was going to be detained in the darkest of cells where everybody would fucking forget about him.

Alfonso didn't look particularly happy about his passiveness, as, although he was inflicting the harshest of pains onto him, Steve was silent as a grave. Rebecca cried dejectedly and the bastard let him go so Steve could have a look at her. She was begging him with her eyes to do something, maybe even cry as bad as those lashes were in the hopes that the freaking bastards might stop.

"Don't worry, Rebecca," he panted, his harsh breaths echoing strangely into the abrupt silence in the warehouse, as if all these bastards waited for just one word from his part. "The big bad kitty behind me is just scratching my back." There was some sort of growl behind him as the other guys chuckled nervously, a little stunned by Steve's strength. It was not a good thing to annoy the bastard that was torturing him, but Steve had enough of standing there and just take it and he always excelled at being passive-aggressive.

Alfonso was suddenly in front of him gripping tightly his jaw, looking at him as if even he would see Steve in the deepest hell, it would still not be enough. His fingers dug deeply into the flesh of his face, his breath an unwelcomed presence on his face. He was looming over Steve, hate and thirst for blood tainting them both but Steve stood his ground.

"Maybe if I rip your tongue out, at least you wouldn't talk so much shit," Alfonso seethed, eyes
darkening a little more just at the thought of the gory prospect.

"Then fucking do it!" Steve scowled back. "Do you think that this is the worst that I got in life? That this pain or whatever the fuck your master is going to do to me is the worst I had?!" Steve hissed. "You know nothing of pain, you piece of shit."

"I'll skin you alive if I have to, but I will make you scream."

"I didn't expect anything else from a fucking coward like you."

"Coward?! Well, then let's see if-

"This bores me infinitely." The icy voice echoing inside the warehouse made Alfonso turn back so suddenly that Steve feared he might have given himself whiplash. His aggressor took a few steps back thus clearing the path for Steve to see Bucky strolling inside the warehouse as if he was the master of the place and everybody should have bowed to him. By the stricken looks on everybody's faces, nobody would have ever dared to think that Bucky was going to be there. In the flesh and blood, larger than life. And by God, Steve finally understood why his nickname was the White Wolf because his icy eyes could have killed the hearts in men and probably make them cower in fear. The four goons definitely looked paler than usual.

Malick had turned with his back to Steve, facing Barnes with his unseeing eyes, who for all intents and purposes looked like he was going to murder someone. He was dressed in a black suit with a blue shirt and he seemed also annoyed as if Steve and Rebecca's kidnapping had been something unplanned which ruined his agenda for the day. However, his eyes spoke of death and fury and let it be known that Steve truly didn't want to cross this man. He was alone as if he counted on the fact that his mere presence would suffice to inflict the greatest of horrors on his enemies and by the way the goons wanted to run from there, it surely was working.

For her part, as soon as she heard her brother's voice, Rebecca calmed down instantly. She seemed completely relieved but not surprised, which made Steve wonder how in the hell she had been so certain that the man would know where to find them.

"Barnes, who would have known that you dare to show your face here?" The old man mocked the head of the Barnes clan. Bucky simply narrowed his eyes a little and as the last sound left from the old man's lips, his brain was splattered all over the place, leaving him for eternity with a shocked look on his face. His body fell to the ground with a silent thud, but Bucky ignored it completely

"Malick," Barnes said unflinchingly as one by one the other goons were falling down like flies in a spider's nest, silencers hiding the swift death, "I'm not sure how your master thought that he might be able to kidnap my sister and get you out alive."

"How did you find out about this place?" Malick's voice was close to breaking, but he was still trying to maintain some sort of dignity in the whole situation. Bucky remained indifferent.

"I am not going to explain myself to the likes of you." Steve shivered. Even with Alfonso behind his back, still looming, using Steve now as some sort of shield, even with death present like an old friend, Steve couldn't shake the sudden fear that gripped tightly his heart.

This man looked like the angel of death himself and if he ever found out what Steve was, he was certain that there would be no mercy. His eyes were that of a man used to dictating the fate of men and in his dark and pristine suit, looking at the two men left, there was no doubt in Steve's mind that the destiny of the goons condemned to death inside of the warehouse had been merciful compared to what was waiting to befall on Malick and Alfonso. And what was even worse was that
Steve couldn't be bothered to feel sorry for either of them.

"I believe it is in your best interest, Barnes," Malick said at last, "to let me go. Remember, I’m an important man in my clan and should anything happen to me, Pierce would consider it a personal insult."

"First of all, it is of no importance to me what Pierce believes to be an insult to his honor, not that the man would have such a thing. Second of all, I assure you that you will help me to deliver a perfectly clear message to your master. In pieces, possibly for a few months, just to make sure that he gets it."

"You can't do that!" Malick screamed, his calm all shattered and wavering for his gun. Just as quick, a knife appeared out of nowhere and plunged into his hand, making the man drop the gun to the floor and scream in pain. Seconds later, Thor and Loki Laufeyson, another of Barnes's men, came down from the roof and incapacitated Malick, taking him out of the building while the man screamed himself in agony of knowing what was going to happen to him.

He was so enthralled by the events that it took him some time to realize that the cold barrel of a gun pressed coldly against his temple. He huffed almost amused at the idea that Bucky would negotiate his release and that Alfonso was that stupid to believe he would be able to do so. He had probably already ordered his men to shoot through Steve and kill the fucking bastard.

"Stand back or I will shoot him!" Alfonso screamed hysterically and Steve couldn't help himself but chuckle. Utterly ridiculous. One by one, the other Bucky’s men appeared in the warehouse, looking detached and unimpressed by Alfonso's threats. Moreover, Rumlow came close to Rebecca's chair and cut off the duct tape surrounding her body before giving her his hoodie. She was trembling in his arms, but she still looked mildly worried for Steve, who had probably completely lost his mind since he dared to laugh like that in the face of imminent death.

"Shut the fuck up!" Alfonso jerked him a bit, sending his whole body into a flame of pain.

"What is so funny, Steve?" Bucky asked, taking further steps towards them, making Alfonso crazed with fear.

"The fact that this fucker thinks he can negotiate with you for my life. Because he doesn't know you don't give two shits about me. Just put a bullet to his fucking brain and put an end to his misery."

"So be it." Bucky made the final judgment and Steve closed his eyes, thinking that he was at peace. At least he was dying shot and not tormented like Malick. A whish sound again caressed his left ear like the gentle whisper of death and Steve sighed heavily. Finally. But as he was slipping to unconsciousness, he resentfully thought that the silent scream that Alfonso freed was still agonizingly strident into his mind. Death had avoided him one more time and Steve hated it for it.

Strong hands gripped him tight as he was carried towards the car. He was floating in and out, sounds and noises a mess, voices concerned calling his name. But those hands never left him. But in this drifting state, he found it strange that in spite of his back feeling like someone doused him in gasoline and then set fire to him, those hands comfortably caressed his head, kind fingers passing through his matted hair. The gentle reprieve of unconsciousness was an unexpected friend that Steve embraced fully.

Steve woke up with his face smashed to his bed, his room bathed into a warm glow. He sensed that his back was full of foul-smelling compresses and that he was pumped with really fun meds, the kind that gave you a cottony taste in the mouth, but luckily reduced the pain of his body to a dull
throb. At least for now. Gentle whispers made him focus a bit on his surroundings just in time to see Banner lightly kissing Thor, who had a blush on his face, the likes of which no man with a lightning tattoo on his face should have.

"Oh, Doc," he groaned embarrassed, startling the men. "Seriously? This is how you do your job? Flirting with the employees of one of the scariest men I know?"

"Shut up." Bruce rolled his eyes in a very unbecoming manner for a man his age. "Thor has been my boyfriend for ten years now."

"Since he was seventeen?" Steve tried to raise his voice, but it came more like a harsh whisper.

"I was eighteen and a half," Thor replied morosely.

"Sure, keep telling yourself that." Steve moaned again this time because as soon as he moved a little, everything burned. "So how long have I been out?"

"For almost two days now," Banner answered as he finally let Odinson's hand go and moved towards the bed checking his bandages.

"How bad is it?"

"Let's put it like this: if you want to go to the beach, you might make the girls love you with your dark tales of the past."

"Luckily, I'm not into girls."

"That's what I was thinking." Banner's face was not too concerned which made him, in turn, thinking it was not as bad as he thought.

"Seriously, Banner, what's the verdict?"

"I still think you should go to the hospital, but Bucky doesn't want to hear about it. The lashes had cut deep into your back and honestly, I could even take small strips of the skin by the time they brought you here. I'm still not convinced that you won't get septicemia just to spite me, but for now, you seem out of the woods."

"And the wounds?"

"They will heal but they cut profoundly into the tissue and I am afraid you will be left with deep scars, even though I tried my best to suture them as best as I could." Steve closed his eyes for a second, breathing harshly. "I'm sorry," Banner continued in a much softer tone.

"It's not the scars, Banner. I'm not that vain," Steve mumbled, but his voice kind of broke. It was truly not about vanity, but one day, he might have someone significant in his life and he would have to explain to him how he stood there and took it just because he didn't want to make a freaking noise for the sister of a mobster that couldn't care less about his goddamn life. Yeah, it was going to be such a perfect story to tell.

Sensing the shift in the atmosphere of the room, Banner cleared his throat.

"I am going to tell Rebecca that you are awake," Thor said gently, smiling a little. Steve thought absently how the smile made the young man even more handsome. "She was really worried about you. She has been almost non-stop by your side."
"If she's sleeping, don't wake her up," Steve mumbled in the pillow.

"Okay, I won't."

Banner smiled ruefully at him once they were left alone. Dark shades painted his skin under his eyes, and his rumpled clothes said a lot about his exhaustion. He was dressed in a black t-shirt and some dark jeans as well, making him look more like a former soldier than a medic and for some reason, in his numb brain, Steve found that very amusing. He must have smiled or something because Banner looked back at him and frowned.

"I know what you're thinking. He's too young for me. I'm almost forty-"

"You mean you are forty."

"I mean almost forty," Bruce grumbled, "and he's too good for me, but I am not the type of person to ignore love, even if it came in the form of a troubled young man."

"Banner, I'm not judging you. Jeez, you can do whatever you want with your life." Steve licked his chapped lips and drank a bit of water as the doctor pushed a small straw into his mouth. "And besides, you're lucky. At least you fell in love. I didn't."

"You mean to tell me that you've never been in love?" When Steve nodded dejectedly, something soft passed through the Banner's eyes. "It will come. Just mark my words. It will come when you least expect it."

"You don't strike me as a romantic person, Banner," Steve smirked and the older man just rolled his eyes.

"Smartass."

"Steve!" Rebecca's frantic shout as she reached his bed and soft fingers pressed into his scalp, massaging it softly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a BDSM scenario that went out of control." While Steve chuckled, Rebecca just winced. "How are you? Are you okay? Those bastards didn't touch you, did they?"

"No, I'm afraid I was lucky this time. Being related to my brother had its perks." Steve sighed softly as she caressed his hair tenderly, smoothing his unruly locks. He closed his eyes, savoring this small pleasure. He was feeling less and less coherent by the minute, and he tried to stay awake as she continued her gentle administrations. "I'm so sorry, Steve," she whispered, and he forced himself to open his eyes and glanced at her. Her eyes were flooded by tears. "I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about," he mumbled, his voice breaking again because he always hated seeing women cry. "It wasn't your fault. This could have been so much worse."

"How, Steve? That terrible man… what he did to you…” Her voice sounded fierce even through the fog that fell like a veil over his mind.

"You could have been raped; I could have ended up murdered." Steve was starting to lose track of what he was saying. The unconsciousness was calling for him again and he gladly surrendered listening to Rebecca's voice. It sounded preoccupied, but the darkness was infinitely better than the constant fire in his back, so he succumbed to it with all the power that he had.

For the next few days, he mostly slept and was rarely awake, mostly when the doctor was changing the compresses to put some more antibiotic ointment on his wounds. Also, the doc was
making him swallow the pills that while they took away the pain, they also made him feel entirely
vulnerable. Banner told him that the sutures were healing great and it looked that there were no
signs of infection.

And then Steve had the misfortune of waking up one morning to the most astonishing view, a most
unexpected one being the understatement of the year for him. Bucky was sitting on a chair next to
his bed, in Steve's line of vision, leaning a bit forward, his elbows resting on his legs. He was
dressed in a soft grey t-shirt and some blue sweatpants. His hair was tied into a messy bun and
because he felt mostly drugged out of his mind, Steve admitted to himself that Bucky Barnes was
probably the most handsome man he laid his eyes on. For a long moment they stared at each other
in silence, the drowsiness not diminishing Steve's sense of vulnerability, but it lured him into a
sense of fake calm.

"Are you going to stare at me longer?" Steve finally mumbled unable to take his eyes away from
this man, timid sun rays slowly gliding past the curtains into the room. They had not seen each
other since the events in the warehouse and Steve was still wary of the half-remembered sensation
of someone carrying him in his arms. He was still hoping that it was just his imagination playing
with him.

"How are you feeling?" Bucky asked, ignoring completely his question.

"I actually feel better," Steve answered, surprised by the truth behind his words. While his back
was still bad, it felt less like he was roasting over a slow fire on it and more as it could actually
permit some slight movement. "It doesn't hurt that bad anymore. Although I really need to take a
piss."

"Do you want me to help you?" Wow, now that was such an unexpected question that Steve
blinked fast a couple of times, making Bucky frown at him. "You saved my sister's life, it's the
least I could do for you."

"Next you're going to tell me that it is your honor and duty that binds you to me." By the way
Bucky stared back at him, Steve was completely right. He chuckled softly. "Oh, man, stop, you're
giving me a headache, your thoughts are too loud."

"Rogers, stop mocking me." Bucky frowned deeper at him. "You have saved my sister's life and
the least I can do is help you in any way I can."

"All right, but a very important point here would be the fact that you are paying me to protect your
sister."

"Rebecca did tell me what happened in the warehouse, Steve, so don't mistake my antique ways for
stupidity. I may very well be old fashioned and indeed I pay you to ensure my sister's safety, yet
what you did in that warehouse, was far beyond your pay grade." Bucky's eyes became smoldering
in their intensity. "In fact, I would say that you proved your loyalty to us and for this, neither I nor
Howlett will forget this."

"I'm not mocking you." Steve licked his bottom lip, chewing on it a little. "I am simply saying that
if you truly want to be grateful, hire me a nurse. And answer a question for me." Barnes leaned a
little further. "How did you know that we were there? I thought that by the time you reached that
warehouse, we were going to be dead meat. Well, I was going to be Pierce's newest toy probably
and Rebecca would have been free to go."

"I put a tracker on my sister. Both I and Howlett have one too," Each word was falling down like a
heavy stone in a pond, but it was not because Bucky didn't trust him, Steve thought surprisingly,
even as his mind became clearer. It was because he was not accustomed to trust outside his family. And wow, that was a startling revelation, because this meant that Steve was in. By his courage or insanity in the warehouse, he made them believe in him.

"She has a tracker? Wait, like James Bond one?"

"Yes, I believe so if you refer to the fact that it is right under our skin. It is like a chip that transmits our position constantly. When I didn't have any news from my sister, I just checked the tracker and realized she was in a completely different area than she was supposed to… Then Howlett found the car and the driver, so we concluded on our own what happened." Bucky looked at him, a new light in his eyes, a light that looked suspiciously like marvel. "You didn't make any sound. Alfonso was whipping you and you didn't make any sound."

"Well, I thought that if I don't give them challenge enough the whole show my end up too soon."

"I want to correct a single mistake in what you said in the warehouse, Rogers." Bucky's eyes glinted. "I will negotiate with people for your life because you are mine now. You're entirely mine and they won't touch a hair on your head from now on. I will make absolutely sure of that."

These words sent shivers down his spine and not because of the profound possessiveness that resounded in every letter floating in the space between them. It was the way Bucky was leaning forward, almost looming over him and Steve not wanting anything else than to hide behind his shade forever, and okay, that was definitely a thought that didn't cross his mind before.

"So, what happened to Malick or whatever the guy's name was?"

"Let's just say that Howlett takes special care in dealing with him like the honored guest that he is." And the White Wolf was back. Steve closed his eyes and swallowed. This man's presence was everywhere around him and instead of making him feel threatened, he was bathing in all that attention. His heart trembled.

"Now do you want any help to get to the bathroom?" Bucky asked softly and when Steve opened his eyes, his heart stuttered. A few playful sun rays were caught in Bucky's hair making him look even more attractive than he was.

"All right, but no peaking."

"Stop being so crude, Rogers. Yours is hardly the first cock I've ever seen."

"Now who's the crude one?" Steve choked. His skin felt tight around his shoulders as if overnight he took on another's. This foreign sensation didn't help the matters at all because sometimes when Steve closed his eyes, he could still sense Alfonso's breath over his nape and hard hands pushing inside his body, clenching and unclenching over his heart. But Bucky's strong hands were surrounding him like a human shield and as their bodies touched almost into an embrace, Steve relaxed.

Here he was in the arms of the most ruthless crime lord and all he could think of was how good it felt to be touched like this, so tender as if he was precious. And this very thought made him choke on a sob and he bit his tongue hard but it was too late.

"Are you alright, Steve?"

His only response was to hide his face in between Bucky's shoulder and neck, inhaling deeply, letting himself be surrounded by this man's scent and he hated it that he felt so protected, he hated that all he wanted at this moment was for Bucky to hold him like this, not letting him go, because
people always let go of Steve, never to come back.

Steve's arms tightened around the man's waist and he burrowed even further. He was so going to blame the medicine and all the pills that they made him take for this moment. Also, he was going to apologize to Bucky later on, when his mind was clearer and he wasn't grinding his teeth trying his hardest not to make a sound, not to let all that lonely rage burning deep inside of him explode to the surface with devastating effects for all involved, he included.

"You are okay, I got you." Soft murmurs crept into his mind, the voice warm and kind. Nobody was going to believe him that the White Wolf had the kindest voice when he wanted it. His arms were holding him up, careful of his raw back, one snaked around his waist and the other around his nape, gently covering his shoulders. "You were very brave, so it's okay, you're all right and safe with me now." Bucky Barnes, the White Wolf, the absolute terror of even the most infamous men in the criminal world, was cooing at him, guarding him.

"Thank you," he mumbled, ashamed to even look at the man.

"No, Steve, thank you." No more words were exchanged, and Bucky helped him wobble to the bathroom, where he could barely stand on his own, but managed to take care of his business just fine. When they came back to the room, Bucky pulled the curtains aside and opened the windows letting fresh air into the room.

"It's time to make this room less somber," he said when he caught Steve looking at him. "Do you want breakfast? I'll ask the cook to prepare you something."

"Sure."

"Do you need anything in particular?"

"Nope."

"Okay, then I need to get going, I have a lot of things to do today."

"Will you-" Steve stopped biting his tongue but it was already too late as a perfect eyebrow raised slightly in response. "Will you come back? Later. When you have the time?"

"Yes, I will." And Bucky's word was enough for Steve. He smiled at the man slightly, but as soon as he went out of the room, Steve groaned into the pillow. Seriously? Did he just act like a silly puppy in front of the toughest man he knew? Oh, man, might as well kill himself now.

The following days passed in a blur of dinners shared together with what seemed pretty everyone in the house, even grumpy Howlett who kept staring guiltily at Steve and quiet breakfasts when he and Bucky mostly ate together in silence with the older man reading the newspaper while Steve just stared out of the window wishing he could be outside in the sun. At night though, well that was another story, one of which he didn't want to talk to about with anyone. He just piled them to the already traumatized life of Steve Rogers, the undercover agent, and prayed that he would heal up sooner because there was only so much standing around that he could take.

There were nights when he opened his eyes suddenly, barely aware where he was. In his mind, most of the time, he was either still trapped into that warehouse with Alfonso tantalizing him, bloody promises in his ear, harsh fingers through his bones. Or in the dirty room where he used to sleep while under Killmonger's command, wishing he would unsee the things he saw, wishing he would crawl into a hole deep in the ground and sleep forever. There were times when that room had been more at home than his proper apartment and wasn't that a whole other problem onto
These were the worst dreams, the feeling of a trap, convulsing walls strengthening their hold on him, coming closer and closer until Steve would literally wake up gasping for air, with the distinct feeling that the next breath was never going to come. And this sensation still lingered in his soul like a bad smell, unable to get rid of it, no matter how many showers he was taking. But then Rumlow's crazy stories would chase away the feeling of inadequacy, making him smile or laugh, or just listen carefully. And Rollins would mostly stay silent at the end of Steve's bed, always perched precariously on a corner as if he was ready to bolt until he realized that Rollins was listening just as wrapped up as Steve.

Other times it would be Rebecca with her gentle fingers massaging his scalp, making him feel better, more relaxed. She would tell her stories from when she was a child, Bucky older than her but still protective of her, always taking the time to speak and treat her as his equal. And then there was Howlett, who seemed grateful for what he did for Rebecca and at the same time mad at him.

Steve regained slowly his muscles agility back, in the sense that he could finally move without moaning in pain every step of the way. He refused to take any more pills for the pain because keeping sharp was his absolute goal. He started to take short walks around the house in an attempt to loosen up some of his muscles. Every movement was constricted, every step cutting him deep, but he pushed further. Doc had taken out the sutures and everything seemed in good condition. Now it was just a matter of time mixed with his goddamn stubbornness to find a way to heal quickly and plan his first major move into this new game of chess they were playing. Because if Steve knew one thing, it was the fact that Pierce was going to pay for what he had done.

"You don't speak with him, you barely look at him and when you do, it's just to make sure you creep at him like the idiot that you are." The harsh exchange took Steve by surprise, the door of the library wide-open, Howlett and Rumlow facing each other. They looked very angry at each other and this was definitely something new. Steve leaned on the wall, trying to slow his breath, wanting to hear this. Because most definitely they were speaking about him.

"I don't know what you want me to do."

"Man up and fucking say it," Rumlow challenged the guy and that's all it took.

"We fucking left him there!" Howlett almost yelled. "I was taking care of the men outside, but you could have least stopped Bucky from watching his whipping like a goddamn show just because he wanted to convince himself that he was loyal." Howlett inhaled harshly but nothing compared with the sudden pull at Steve's heart and he gasped softly, not audibly enough for the two other men to hear him.

And that hurt more than he thought it would. Of course, but of course the mighty Barnes had come much sooner to the warehouse, because if he could have a tracker then he must have known their position from the very beginning.

"You now that no one can stop him when he wants to do something, not even you or Rebecca," Rumlow replied shakily. "There was nothing we could have done."

Sure there wasn't, except there was, and Steve felt betrayed thinking about the agony of the final lashes, that goddamn man over him, and most of all, the nightmares that accompanied him like loyal friends. And what for? Just so that Bucky Barnes would be convinced of his loyalty. And while logically speaking, it was a smart decision from a man incredibly focused on his clan, it stung. It stung really bad and why Steve felt betrayed, he couldn't know, except he felt that way.
He was about to retreat in his room to ruminate over what he just found out when a sudden squeal made him look up.

"Stevie! I missed you so much!" Andrea screamed as she threw herself into Steve's awaiting arms making him groan in pain. He ignored the shocked faces of the men in the library to hug properly the girl.

Steve knew how fucked up his life had become by the fact that he really missed the girl in her arms and her constantly sugary scent.

"I missed you too, girlie!"

"Don't call me that!" She said but burrowed herself into his arms further.

"Well, well, well," Erik Killmonger entered into his view followed by Bucky and Rebecca, sending a cold shiver down his spine, "if it isn't the Super Soldier himself." His grin turned wicked.
"Well, boy, I hope you are ready because we came to stay."
"Well, well, well," Erik Killmonger entered his view followed by Barnes and Rebecca, sending a cold shiver down his spine, "if it isn't the Super Soldier himself." His grin turned wicked. "Well, boy, I hope you are ready because we came to stay."

"I don't feel like much of a soldier right now," Steve grumbled, trying to hide the anxiousness that these two were bringing. It was hard enough to be undercover in the Barnes' clan and trying to bring Pierce's one down as well. He really didn't need this additional complication, especially since he hadn't counted on it.

"Yeah, I heard about your little fights with Pierce's men," Erik replied and his smile turned feral by that point. "It means that you haven't trained a lot lately and this is a mistake that must be surely rectified, mostly by me."

"I'm not one of your fighters anymore." Steve rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, but you have always been a worthy competitor, and I really need to start finding a chink in your armor."

"Really? Are we back to this again? 'Oh, I could never defeat Steve although I always beat the shit out of him and it's my pleasure to torture him every once in a while.'"

"Yeah, but Dad is happy when he fights you, Stevie."

"Sweetie, don't interfere with this." Steve passed his fingers through his hair. "Man, you are here only for five minutes and you've already drained me of the little energy I had left."

"Are you alright, Steve?" Rebecca's voice was dripping with worry.

"Yeah, yeah, I just need to get back to my room." He zeroed in on Howlett who fidgeted uncomfortably. "Howlett, help me get back to my room."

"But--"

"Now." He ruffled Andrea's hair. "Talk to you later, sweetie?"

"Yeah, we'll have dinner together if you want."

"Sure, you can tell me about your adventures since we last saw each other." Because Steve was damn curious to find out how in the world Killmonger found out about their operation and managed to flee before he could be brought to justice. He carefully leaned into Howlett's arm and then slowly made it back to his room.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Steve's voice shook with anger when he asked:

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"Don't pretend I'm stupid, Howlett. How long did he stand there and watch me get whipped before
"he intervened?" Man, it took a lot to make a hardened criminal avert his eyes, but Steve had managed to do it with a simple question. The uncomfortable silence in the room was a clear sign that Howlett wished to be anywhere but in that room.

"Around twelve lashes." He muttered, at last, making Steve flinch as he settled on the bed.

"What a fucking bastard!" He seethed trying to swallow the bitterness inside his soul.

"Steve, I--"

"Please, Howlett, if you think even for a second to take his side, then I want you out of this freaking room right now, because I seriously couldn't care less about your sensibilities regarding Barnes."

"Steve, I really am sorry. At the time, I didn't know what the hell he was doing, and I was too busy taking care of Pierce's men. That goddamn warehouse was guarded by a small army, but Rumlow told me that he was supposed to give them a signal and he refused to give it until Alfonso stopped and had that discussion with you."

"He wanted to see what I was going to tell them. He wanted to see whether I would break." Steve spat the words as if they were poison.

"Yes." Howlett shook his head. "I honestly didn't know what he was doing, otherwise I would never have let him watch you and not act. Because trust me when I say that I am more than grateful for you saving Rebecca. Again."

"I believe you, don't worry."

There wasn’t enough air for him in the room, and he would have gladly just walked out of the house in the next moment, had he been in his best shape. The fact that Bucky sat there was proof enough for him that he was far from being established in the clan as he thought a couple of weeks ago. The doubts were still there, and he wondered at this point if there was any chance for him to prove them wrong and gain their undoubted trust.

Howlett must have interpreted the silence wrong because when he finally dared to ask Steve if they were okay, he seemed extremely hesitant. He could feel his smile not quite reaching his eyes, but he wasn’t lying when he replied, "Yes."

Howlett grinned a little at him. They talked about Killmonger and his sudden arrival, but Steve couldn't concentrate. Erik's arrival combined with the truth of what happened in the warehouse shook him and the following days didn't help the matters in the least.

While Andrea was more than happy to talk with Steve, she would avoid talking about the time after Manhattan and she carefully changed the subject each time Steve would manage to bring it up for discussion. In between trying to avoid Bucky at all costs and his mission to find out more about the clan and what happened to Erik that he was there now, Steve barely slept.

It was a few nights later, when Steve just about had enough of tossing and turning in his bed, well, less of tossing and turning, more of him staring in the darkness of his room, unable to close his eyes without hearing the whish sound of the whip, or to feel that breath sending cold shivers down his spine. The nightmares were taking an ugly turn and sooner or later he would have to find a permanent solution for them, or he would have real problems concentrating.

He groaned in frustration and got out of bed, padding quietly towards the kitchen, the dim light of the hallway making his steps surer. The kitchen was quiet, save for the soft sounds that the clock in
the corner was making so he turned on the radio and let the smooth tunes soothe his tired mind. He opened the fridge and took out the milk, almost hearing the whispering voice of his mom telling him how the best cure for insomnia was a glass of warm milk. She would heat one for him and then she would ruffle his hair while he would drink it and scowl at her.

He sat at the table, setting the glass of milk in front of him and let his forehead rest on the cold surface. The wood was almost comfortable for his already tired mind and he almost fell asleep there with the mellow tunes playing in the background and the soft glow of the light, had it not been for the door opening again. He blearily looked up at Bucky, whose grey eyes turned darker upon resting on him. His natural reaction to the man was to simply scowl at him and rest his forehead again on the table.

"Go back to sleep," he mumbled. "I don't want you here."

"Well, it is my kitchen, Rogers. My kitchen, my house, my rules," the other man replied, and Steve heard the door of the fridge being opened again. The clink of the glass and plates as Barnes was indecisive as to why he was there annoyed Steve even more. A quiet moment then, "Are you in pain?"

"What do you care?" He harshly answered, refusing to open his eyes or to change positions. "You like to see people in pain, proving their fucking loyalty to you so might as well enjoy this moment too."

"So, I see you spoke with Howlett." He felt the other man sitting across from him, but he refused to move an inch. Bucky Barnes might be his mortal enemy, a ruthless criminal, but Steve refused to be intimidated by the asshole. He just about had enough of going at it with gloves, he needed something real and at this moment the most real thing was his pain and nightmares and that was enough for him.

"I heard it by chance, but Howlett did tell me that you were at the scene long before you finally intervened."

"I'm confused." The words made Steve raise his head and look at the other man. Man, he really hated Bucky Barnes, seriously, what normal man looked so good at three in the fucking morning? His hair was falling seamlessly to his shoulders, his white t-shirt didn't seem to have a single wrinkle and he betted that the blue sweats were looking exquisitely on him and made his ass look fantastic. Wait, he definitely didn't just think that.

"Confused by what?" Steve scowled for good measure, drinking half of his glass of milk, only then observing that Bucky had a similar one in front of him. What could possibly make this man sleepless? There must have been a golden rule within the psychotic criminal hand guide that one couldn't have a conscience and therefore no nightmares when inflicting evil on other people.

"When I was talking with your aggressor, you seemed inclined to believe I wouldn't negotiate for your life and for that matter you were right. However, I did save you and I believed that this matter was put to rest. Now I'm confused by your anger. Does it matter when exactly I saved you as long as I did it?"

The words flared inside Steve, something akin to righteous fury exploded inside his soul, which was actually a paradox onto itself since it didn't really matter and he shouldn't be offended by what a hardened criminal thought or did, but with Barnes everything was different and for some reason this icy calm ticked off Steve more than anything else.

"It does matter." His knuckles turned white as he grabbed the table. Bucky simply raised his
eyebrow. "It definitely matters to me."

"I’m sorry but I don’t follow you."

"Of course you don't, because you expect people to listen to you, obediently doing whatever you ask them to," Steve seethed. "I thought that the other day, in my room, I saw something honest in you, and when you proclaimed that to some extent that I’m important to you because you see me as yours, I thought that I was to some extent human in your eyes and not a piece of meat that you let other people test until you are satisfied with their level of loyalty or whatever the fuck you were testing in that goddamn warehouse." Steve pinched his nose in an attempt to calm himself.

"While I accepted your offer and while I understood the risks, I never thought that I would be left behind. It never happened to me before, even Killmonger seemed to have more honor than that."

"Did you just call me honorless?" And he must have really pissed the guy off because Bucky was suddenly very much the picture of an offended man. His eyes narrowed to such a degree that Steve thought about looks that kill and the likes of it.

"Well, if the shoe fits--"

Bucky lunged across the table and grabbed a fistful of Steve's t-shirt, pulling him hard across the table until the wood dug painfully in his solar plexus, and his back screamed in reproach. Bucky's ready for murder vibe definitely didn't help the matters.

"You should be grateful that I didn't let you die there like the insignificant worm that you are, that I didn't let those men have their way with you because most certainly this is what they wanted. Had I lacked honor in any way, Steve Rogers, you would have drowned by now in your own piss and blood, most likely a victim in one of Pierce's plays. So yes, I do believe that I did the right thing and your hurt feelings are the least of my concerns."

"Then you can take your fucking gratefulness and shove it where the sun doesn’t shine!" Steve spat. "Take your fucking hand away from me." Bucky stared down at him, but he finally let Steve go and the man could breathe again. He inhaled sharply as his back turned into the right position again, his stretched skin pulling painfully.

"You know nothing about honor then." Steve hissed. "I am a simple foot soldier, but I believe that I did more for your clan than any other has done. I saved your sister's life twice, I helped you with info about Pierce and his men, and I even took care of your men. All I got in return were gunpoint threats, interrogations, and being watched as a goddamn psychotic asshole was whipping off my flesh. And yet, I proved my loyalty to you, to the clan. Where is your fucking loyalty to me?"

Steve didn't wait for Bucky's reply because he wasn't going to get one from this heartless bastard, but he understood at a subliminal level that boundaries had to be pushed in ways they hadn't been pushed before. He got up and put his glass in the sink, all of this under the watchful eyes of Bucky Barnes. And nothing gave more pleasure to Steve than the moment when he turned to Bucky and said the next words:

"Oh, and in case you haven't realized, this was my notice. I fucking quit."

The soft click that he heard when he closed the door to the kitchen had been as loud as slamming it and made Steve feel much better. He was tired of these mind games, but they were his only weapons in this one-man war he had been engaged and he needed to win each battle or by the end of it he would turn up dead or worse.
As he got in his room, he made a valiant attempt to ignore the pounding of his heart because the next part of the plan involved a lot of risks and could backfire spectacularly. On the other hand, if he would win this game of will, he would win so much more than his permanent fixture in the Barnes clan.

Each movement was painful, but he managed to put all his clothes inside the duffel bag, take a shower and change into some comfortable sweats and a t-shirt. He took his comfortable black hoodie; took his duffel and he was out the door before he could change his mind.

"Are you going to walk all the way to the town?" He turned around only to see Andrea, her brown hair making her look like an angel in the soft light of the hallway. She looked as if she hadn't gone to bed at all. She was dressed in a pair of soft blue jeans and a jumper which looked rather large for her frame.

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"I could ask you the same thing," she teased him. "Are you going to walk?"

"If I have to," he replied morosely because he had enough drama for one night and he didn't need any more discussions.

"This is just like that time when I told you what happened to Tony."

"I thought we agreed we were never going to talk about it again and that the subject was dead and buried," Steve said harshly reminding her that there were certain things that he wasn't going to forgive or forget neither for her nor Killmonger. She sadly shook her head.

"Come on, I will drop you where you want to go."

"You don't have to."

"I think I do, or we will find you in a ditch." She took the duffel bag from his hand and made her way towards the garage which gave Steve no other choice but to follow her, a little puzzled as to why she was helping him.

As they made their way back to Brooklyn, Andrea took a cigarette out and started to puff with very much gusto out of it. Steve stared at her for a while. She seemed so much older than the last time he saw her, soft wrinkles of worry spreading unknown and gentle at the corners of her eyes.

"When did you start?" he asked moving his gaze back to the dark road.

"When I was praying for my dad's life as I was cleaning his gunshot wounds. There were three, by the way."

"Sorry I wasn't there for you," he mutters after a while, genuinely sad because he truly cared about her and he desperately thought for a very long time down in Manhattan that he might save her from a life like this.

"It's not your fault. You were in a coma of your own so you couldn't help." She smiled wryly at him, so he returned the smile. "I know you, Steve, and I know that you aren't so much of a drama queen, but I have to ask you if you know what you are doing by getting involved with these people."

"Trust me, it was not a choice that I easily made." Steve blinked a couple of times. "But hey, aren't these your friends?"
"They are friends as long as we stay loyal to the Barnes’ and we mind our own business. And yeah, they might have helped us when we escaped the police, but don't get me wrong when I say that they made sure we pay all our debts." The bitterness was so out of character for Andrea that Steve gaped at her. The girl kept her eyes on the road. "He likes you; you know?"

"Who does? Killmonger?" Steve rolled his eyes at her. "Of course he does. Who else can he beat to a pulp when he feels like it?"

"I didn't mean Dad, Stevie, although he does like you too." She glanced at him. "Bucky."

The harsh sound of laughter resounded in the silent car like a gunshot in the desert. It was abrupt and empty, although it made Steve's insides tremble because never had he heard such devastating words that made him want to hear them again and dread them in equal measure. He locked that information for a time when he wasn't incredibly tired and riding high on adrenaline.

"That man doesn't like anyone, not even himself," he replied back and refused to look in her direction.

"If you say so." She shrugged and threw the butt of the cigarette off the window. "Now tell me where to take you because I will most definitely refuse to drop you to a hotel, and no one is going to rent anything to you at this hour."

"I'll give you the address."

Twenty minutes later he was sitting in front of Rollins and Rumlow’s house, praying that they were at home because otherwise, he was going to spend a night in a hotel. He grabbed his phone and called Rumlow under Andrea's highly amused gaze. His friend answered after four rings.

"I hope you are dying in a ditch somewhere, because otherwise no excuse will save you from waking me up at this ungodly hour."

"If you can say so many words then it means you’re fine, and you can come and open the door for me."

"What?"

"I'm in front of your house. Can I crash at your place for a couple of days?"

"What the hell?" Rumlow exclaimed, then the line was cut. Andrea was laughing at him as he scowled at his phone.

"Well, that went well." She giggled. But a minute later a sleepy Rumlow knocked on the window of the car and Steve opened it quickly.

"I can't believe it. You are actually here. I thought it was a prank."

"I just quit, and I need a place to crash." Steve sighed. "I know it's a lot to ask."

"You quit." It sounded both as an affirmation and a stunned question, but then again Steve thought there were probably not a lot of people in this world who quit from Barnes's employment.

"Yes."

Rumlow shook his head in the same bewildered manner as Andrea.

"It's way too early to deal with such shit. Just get into the house. Where's your bag?"
"In the back. Thanks, Brock."

"Yeah, yeah."

As Rumlow disappeared back into the house, shaking his head in disbelief and most likely murmuring some obscenities that he really didn't need to say out loud, Steve hugged Andrea and then got out of the car.

"I hope you know what you are doing, Steve, because Bucky Barnes is not the man to play games with," Andrea warned him bitterly.

"I know, but I've always had my dignity and I won't stop now, Andrea. Take care and see you later."

"Yeah, see you later."

Rumlow was waiting for him in the hallway. He seemed a little more awake not that it helped Steve as his whole body was still thrumming with the residual adrenaline from his fight with Bucky.

"Do I want to know what the hell happened?"

"I think you pretty much have an idea." Steve leaned against the entrance door more than a little exhausted.

"What do you mean?"

"I’m not the type of person to take well on the fact that he was watched getting whipped because the boss wanted to see how loyal I was. Sorry but it's just not going to happen with me. I don't owe you anything, neither my life nor my blind obedience. So, I quit. Now, I’m tired, I’m sore and I really want to get to bed. Please, can I just crash on your couch until I find something? I promise I will be out of your hair as soon as I can."

"Don't be stupid! Take as much time as you want."

"The guest room is ready," Rollins interrupted them and they both smiled at him.

"Thanks, guys. Seriously, thank you."

"What are friends for?" Rollins shrugged. "At least this time you came to us and you didn't do a disappearing act like the last time."

"Well, those are my strongest point." Steve's lips curved into a tired smile. "But I mean it, guys, seriously, thank you for your help."

"No worries, you will have plenty of time to tell us later on what the hell happened. For now, let me show you to your room."

Half an hour later after much fussing from Rumlow and knowing smiles from Rollins, they finally left him alone in the room and Steve closed his eyes, sighing wearily. He needed to think about his next move, but exhaustion was finally taking a toll on him and before he knew it, he was fast asleep.

Waking up around noon was not exactly a pleasant experience. He felt groggy and disoriented. His back was really painful and although he didn't move much during sleep, the sensation was enough
to make him grab the painkillers bottle and grab one. It would be enough to take the immediate pain away, but not enough to make him sluggish.

He took a shower in the adjacent bathroom, changed into clean clothes and then finally went to the kitchen, knowing it was time to face the music. Rollins and Rumlow were already there preparing lunch. They were laughing over the sounds of the radio and they seemed so comfortable with each other that Steve had to ignore the stab of jealousy that made its presence felt. He never had that with a person.

His flings had always been either unbelievably passionate or disappointingly impersonal. He tried to keep in touch with the men that he shared some passionate nights, but every time they tried to get closer to him, he made it more than clear that he didn't want something more profound. The more impersonal fucks were the kind of which he rarely thought of, for they had made him feel dirty and empty.

"Well, well, well, Sleeping Beauty has finally woken up," Rumlow said as soon as he saw him sitting confused at the table. Luckily Rollins placed a cup of coffee in front of him and he almost inhaled it. The bald man laughed boisterously and then continued to chop the vegetables that Rumlow kept placing in front of him.

"So, care to explain why the hell Howlett keeps calling us to make sure you're okay and to take care of you and Rebecca has been yelling at her brother for the last two hours?" Steve scowled at Rollins, but he told them about his discussion with Bucky and its consequences.

"I would say that you are a crazy bastard, but I guess you already know that," Rollins said when he was done.

"Look, guys, I don't expect you to understand but for me, it was difficult to accept that he could have just watched Alfonso whipping me without doing anything because he was testing me. Yet again." Steve rolled his eyes, drinking the rest of the coffee. "And besides, nobody ever left me behind, not even Erik when it would have been convenient for him. So, I am not going to take any shit from any man, even if that man is Bucky Barnes."

Both men looked at him approvingly, but Steve failed to see whether they both agreed it had been the right thing to do or that he was completely insane, and he deserved to die in a ditch.

"I understand where you're coming from, Steve," Rumlow said. "But you have to remember that while Bucky does admire brave men, he hates to be judged or even worse, defied like you just did. The fact that he hasn't come to our house yet and drag you back to the mansion is a miracle itself. Because believe me, the lesson you would get wouldn't be pleasant for you."

"But hey, mi casa es su casa and all that jazz." Rollins clapped him on the shoulder, mindful of his wounds. "Take as much time as you need and just let us know if there's anything we can help you with."

"Thank you, guys. You don't know how grateful I am to you both for this."

"Please, Brock is just happy to have someone else to test his experimental meals on."

"Shut up, you like them." Rumlow clapped Rollins over the head, making his partner in crime scowl at him.

"Hey, I didn't say I don't like them. But when I say that they are experimental, I really mean it."

"See if I ever cook for you."
"Now don't be like that."

"Any cooked meal is a blessing for me," Steve interrupted them, making Rumlow smile. "I seriously forgot the taste of a home-cooked meal until I met you guys. So, experiment away."

"It's good to know because the food is going to be ready in ten minutes." Just then his stomach chose to grumble making all of them laugh.

The next few weeks were fairly quiet. He went back to work with Doc Banner. He just showed up one morning at the clinic and Doc took one look at him, before rolling his eyes and giving him the first patient. His back was still impeding him from having a full schedule, but even part-time was more rewarding than sitting at home doing nothing, even though both Rumlow and Rollins had made themselves clear that they wouldn't accept any money from him and that he would leave only once his back was completely healed up.

Some days he would meet Rebecca at Red Room and have lunch with her. At times, Howlett would join them, but there would be no word from Bucky as the man remained stubbornly silent. This uncertainty was grating on his nerves.

He was looking at rows and rows of produce, wondering what the hell made him offer to Brock to go and do the shopping this afternoon, when his phone rang. It was like Rumlow would sense his goddamn incertitude and his predisposition to panic in front of far too many choices.

"Hello?" He answered carelessly as he finally chose some salad that looked slightly better than the others. Silence at the other end. "Hello?" He repeated a bit annoyed, realizing that it was definitely not Rumlow calling him. He was about to look at the number when the icy voice finally replied.

"Where are you?" Steve froze. If he wasn't so shocked, he would probably laugh at himself, sitting there with a cucumber in one hand and some radishes in the other, phone stuck between his cheek and his shoulder. He gaped like a fool.

"Why the fuck do you care?" He harshly said putting the vegetables down and gripping tightly his phone.

"Steve." The voice broke, it cracked his name in several shards, inflicting pain onto himself, making Steve answer reluctantly, "At the supermarket. Picking up some stuff for dinner."

"Is anyone suspicious around you?"

"Barnes, what--"

"Just look around." The worry starting to gnaw at his insides made him pliable, so he looked surreptitiously around to see if there was anyone suspicious. A couple of women down the aisle and a man looking just as lost as he did a couple of minutes ago, but none of them looked suspicious. The supermarket was blessedly not crowded yet and it gave him plenty of time to check around carefully.

"Negative, coast is clear." The relief at the other end of the line was almost palpable.

"Alright, this is what you do. You are going to go straight home and wait for Howlett. He is going to come and pick you and Rumlow up."

"Barnes, what is happening?"

"I promise I will explain to you everything." The voice was commanding again, but there was still
something slightly human to it, so Steve chose to listen to him. "Right now, all I ask you is that you follow my orders."

"Okay."

"Steve, whatever you hear, whatever you see, don't do anything stupid."

"How can I? All the stupid is with you." He was just about to hang up when Bucky added hesitantly,

"Take care of yourself and pay attention. Don't let anyone follow you."

"Alright, alright. I'll see you soon."

Steve abandoned his groceries there, getting out of the supermarket like he forgot the stove on and needed to rush home immediately. The worry was an ugly monster eating his soul because Bucky would have never called him like that, unless something really awful had happened. He changed the route a couple of times, just to make sure that no one was following him before finally reaching his current home.

"Rumlow!" He yelled as soon as he got home. But the other man didn't answer, although he was sitting in the living room, on the couch with his head hanging low. "Brock?" Steve stopped shock stilled in front of the man because there was blood everywhere. His hands were covered in blood and his shirt in front was almost completely red. "What the hell?"

"They took him. They took him," he added the second time in utter disbelief. Steve knelt in front of him, gripping tight Rumlow's knee, trying to anchor his friend. He almost winced when Brock finally looked at him, his entire posture a monument of pain. "They tortured and killed Eric and Jasper. They took Rollins."

"Who's they?"

"Pierce's men. Steve, there was so much blood when we got there," Rumlow said, feverishly trying to swallow past the terrible memories. "So much blood everywhere, they took their time and then attacked us. We didn't have time to act. Rollins... he...he..." Rumlow released a heart-wrenching sob and started to cry convulsively. "He covered me, said he's going to be right behind me but he was actually—" Another painful sob. "He was just covering my back so I could escape." Rumlow just burrowed his face in between Steve's shoulder and neck and cried hard. "He's all I got. If he dies, I am dead too."

Steve gripped his nape gently, while the other hand rubbed soothingly his back, not that any of his gestures was going to take the pain away.

"But how did they know? How did they manage to take and Eric?" While he didn't speak with him much, Steve still remembered Eric's silent presence and his dry humor once they finally got to know each other. To think that something awful has happened to them was making him face the reality of his situation.

"I don't know, we didn't even know they took them until we got there. It was supposed to be just a reconnaissance mission."

"And Bucky knows."

"Yes." Rumlow inhaled deeply trying to calm himself. "I gave him a call as soon as I was out of there, but by then, he already received parts of Eric and Jasper."
"Goddamn it!" He soothingly caressed Rumlow’s hair. "Come on, you need to change clothes and take a shower. You have to have a clear mind if we have to go and take him back."

"Steve." Rumlow raised his head, his face streaked with blood and tears was simply too much for Steve. "I need him back. He's everything to me."

"We'll get him back."

"If something happens to him, something like what happened to Eric, I can't--"

"Hey, hey!" Steve frowned. "No way we're taking that option. We are going to bring him back and he's going to annoy us in no time with his stupid jokes."

"They are a bit stupid, aren't they?" Rumlow tried to smile in order not to lose his mind.

"Yes, they are. Now go and take a shower and change. Howlett will come for us any minute now. We have to keep our heads clear if we're going to take that bastard down and bring Rollins back."

Rumlow simply nodded and then went to the bathroom. As soon as he was out of the earshot, Steve pulled his phone out and dialed a number that he knew by heart, but a number that he was never going to save in his phone. Three rings later, he answered.

"Despicable me speaking." Steve smiled ruefully.

"It's the other despicable me talking," he said. He could almost hear him smile that crooked smile and roll his eyes at him at the same time.

"Son, you must be really desperate if you're calling me."

"Yes, I really am. One of my friends is in trouble and I need your help."

Chapter End Notes

oo... new characters? :D
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"Yes, I really am. One of my friends is in trouble and I need your help."

"When you say trouble, you mean that drunk stunt you pulled a couple of years ago trouble or you saving my ass from mortal danger kind of trouble?"

"The latter?" Steve shook his head trying to forget the blood on Rumlow and to keep his focus on the matters at hand. "Look, you know that I wouldn't call you if there wouldn't be any need for it. And I know that I am far from being able to afford your services, but I really need your help."

"Stevie, stop going round in circles. Tell me what you need."

"One of my friends has been taken by Pierce's men and I need to find him, alive if possible."

"Pierce? As in Alexander Pierce, devil reincarnated?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"Shit, son, when you get in trouble, you don't do half measures, do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I am perfectly reasonable," he scoffed.

"Yeah, right. So you say." The other voice laughed sarcastically. "That's the biggest lie of the century." He held his breath. "All right. Give me ten hours." And Steve could breathe again.

"I can give you five. That's all I can afford."

"Coming this way?"

"Yes."

"Steve-" The voice at the other end of the line sighed heavily.

"I know, but you guys are my last hope."

"I'll tell Pep you said that."

"Jeez, thanks."

"All right. Give me five hours," the other voice pressed ironically on the number, "and call me again when you arrive at our usual place."

"Thank you." Steve sounded relieved even to his own ears, as he passed his fingers through his hair. He didn't realize how much he had been afraid of a negative answer until the other man accepted to help him.

"I wasn't going to say no to you, Steve," his friend replied affectionately. "I will never say no to
you."
"I-"

"I know. Send me a picture of your friend and the last known location."

"Okay. Thank you."

"No need to thank me. See you in five hours."

"See you then."

By now Steve had become an expert at packing, so he wasn't surprised at all when he managed to have his bag ready in under ten minutes, so that by the time Rumlow got out of the bathroom, Steve was already good to go.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rumlow snapped at him, a dangerous narrowness of eyes reminding Steve that at the end of the day Rumlow was a killer for hire, ruthless in his ways.

"Look, if you want to see Rollins again, I have to go now. I have some friends that can help me, but I have to go to them on my own."

"Steve-"

"I want you to trust me," Steve interrupted him firmly. "I need you to believe me that I will do my best to bring Rollins back to you, but I have to leave now. These people aren't the type of people that would help if I were to go with someone else."

"Then don't mix with them. You know what this type of people means in our business."

"I know, but I want to help, and I have to go before anyone arrives."

Rumlow pulled him into a sudden hug. It was so unexpected that it took him several seconds to actually relax and hug back. The other man seemed so much more fragile without Rollins's boasting presence invading every corner of his life. Steve hugged him tightly.

"I will be forever grateful if you'd bring him back to me, Steve. My life will be yours." Rumlow breathed harshly making Steve rubbing soothingly his back.

"You guys are my friends so this is a debt of honor to me."

It took them a couple of more minutes to break the hug and straighten up.

"What do you need from me?" Rumlow asked determined.

"I need a picture of Rollins, his last known location, and your car, in that order." As Rumlow was rummaging through his things with the knowledge that there were few precious minutes left before someone from Bucky's side was going to come after them, Steve added hesitantly: "Rumlow, if Bucky says something-"

"Let me worry about Bucky," Rumlow replied as he gave him a picture of Rollins. Steve took a quick photo of it and sent it to the mysterious friend of his. "You just make sure you do your best to bring Rollins back. But Steve," Rumlow put his hand of his shoulder and squeezed gently, "if it means that you need to choose between your life or his, I don't want that kind of sacrifice from you. It pains me to say it because I love Rollins more than I should, but at the end of the day, your life should matter more to you. Your loyalty to me or him for that matter is undisputed."
"You are something else, Rumlow." His friend smiled brokenly at him. "But I am a fucking stubborn man and I promise you I will reunite you. Now I have to go before Bucky Barnes decides to personally murder me."


"You too. See you soon."

Steve winked, took the car keys and walked away knowing full well that what he was about to do was going to put him in a tighter place than he had been before.

He avoided the known routes before going out on the highway and driving as if the devil himself was on his way to come and get him. During his years as an undercover agent, Steve had made a lot of enemies, he sacrificed some people in order to get to the right place and bring the best results. The tight ring that he destroyed in Manhattan or the prostitute ring in Queens were successful missions that gave him nightmares for years to come and he didn't neglect their impact on him.

The nightmares, the self-loathing, the amount of pain that he inflicted upon himself were classical for any good undercover agent. However, each such successful mission had brought a certain taint on his soul, as if Steve had repeatedly given up a tiny bright corner of his heart so that in the end there was nothing left to give and the lines between good and evil had blurred dangerously.

Sometimes, he would ask himself whether he was this good at his missions because he was a good cop or because he was just as bad as the men that he was locking away and he possessed the knowledge of how to draw them out. Each mission that culminated with destroying the livelihoods of these people was dangerously close to convincing Steve that to a certain extent, he enjoyed being the bad guy, he enjoyed the freedom of it, the cutting loose from the morality chains.

There was a strong possibility that he was either going to end up with a bullet through his head or he was going to live enough to see himself become one of these people that he was hunting at the moment. Sooner or later he was going to end at the bottom of the food chain whether he liked it or not.

And five hours later, as he was waiting to be extracted, he thought that he was definitely the pray and not the hunter in this game. He was playing chess with a bunch of people that had all the pieces whereas he was still looking for his missing knight.

"Well, well, well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" The man coming suddenly into his view grinned widely and friendlily at him and Steve could do nothing but smile back at him. Sometimes he was sure that James Rhodes was born purposely to show Steve Rogers how blurred the lines between good and evil truly were. His friend hugged him tightly. "God, it's good to see you, you self-righteous prick."

"Same, you despicable bastard."

"God, I forgot how annoying you two can be when put together." The woman approached them silently and smacked them both over their heads, then kissed Steve on his cheek. It made him take her into his arms and spin her around making her giggle. "How are you, you big softie? You're calling us only when you need us and you're truly desperate."

"What can I say? I do need time away from you guys. Your existence is something that I shouldn't know about."
"Get your hands away from my woman, before I leave you without them!" As soon as his friend clapped him friendly on the back, Steve flinched, which in turn made Tony Stark, ex-colonel and an exquisite shooter to narrow his eyes. "I know for sure that I haven't clapped you that hard, you precious flower, so what gives?"

"I already had a personal meeting with Pierce's men." Steve winced when all three of them tensed. "I survived it," he added quickly, "but my friend might not. I will tell the whole story on the way, if you don't mind."

"Sure thing." Pepper reacted first, smiled soothingly at him. "Did you park the car safely?"

"Yes." She took out a black hood that normally they used when kidnapping people and put it on Steve's head. The darkness was all-consuming.

"I promise it won't take long."

"Don't worry, Tony."

"You always make me worry, Stevie," Tony replied softly as if mostly to himself, but Steve heard him nonetheless. He was lightly pushed towards the direction of their car and once he was seated, most likely Stark began to drive like a maniac. And while all the driving was purposely misleading, Steve was still able to tell that they drove about twenty minutes and that they circled the same streets twice in order to reach their destination without any tail.

Rhodes' arm rested on his shoulders at all times, quiet comfort in the overwhelming darkness of the hood and they remained silent although he promised them the whole story. Rhodes’ presence was reassuring in a way few things were for Steve, and he found himself more than once leaning into his friend. If his friend noticed his predisposition of seeking comfort, he didn't acknowledge it, other than tightening his hold on him.

Once they arrived at the location, he was guided through the entry and then Pepper took the hood off once they crossed the threshold of the secure location. It was a three-bedroom house, situated in the middle of nowhere as he could hear the sounds made by the animals in the forest that surrounded the house and the traffic sounds were far away ghosts.

Steve's shoulders sagged in relief. It was safe for him to be here. It was safe, a word that he hasn't used in relation to his own person for a long time now. He didn't realize how tense he was until he actually felt his shoulders gradually droop, his body a little more relaxed, not waiting for an attack every second of the day.

His hands were shaking slightly, and he couldn't tell if it was from the sheer relief of being here or because of the stress of the last few hours. What added up to his paradoxical situation was the fact that he was feeling safe with these people that were so professional in their activity that a number of international not to mention national security agencies were either looking for them or paid for their services in order not to get their hands dirty.

Steve looked out the window. This house and the people with whom he surrounded himself were creating the perfect environment to keep his mind focused. He growled back at Rhodes as he entered into the room followed by Tony and Pepper. He was always going to have their respect and their support, but it had been a hard one won and the fact that he still had Quill’s blood on his hands didn't help the matter either.

Rhodes smiled at him and winked a little perhaps to make the atmosphere less tensed. They spread their laptops and their spreadsheets on the table, layouts of a building already in front of them.
Steve just shook his head in amazement because they were that good and they fucking knew it, and if they ever decided that their loyalty for Steve was bringing them only bad luck, then he was definitely going to be in a deep pile of shit, because they could kill him effortlessly and nobody would be the wiser about it.

"I would ask you what the hell are you doing involved with these guys, Stevie, but I honestly feel more inclined to slap you rather than asking you stupid questions," Tony said, his eyes narrowed as always hiding his true intentions. He was slouched all over the couch, one of the hands resting on Pepper's shoulder, drawing patterns known only by him.

He was incredibly relaxed for a man with a reward on his head, oozing self-confidence and power. He and Pepper had always been inseparable and the way their bodies communicated, never too far gone from one another, always gravitating around each other, was making everyone aware of their deep bond. Sometimes if he was talking to Pepper, he expected to just turn around and see Tony with his thin smile and narrowed eyes, and almost always, his assumption was correct.

"It's a long story," Steve dared to answer and when three pairs of eyes rolled in unison at him, he huffed and gave them a brief account of what his life had been like in the past few months. All three of them listened carefully and nodded when the appropriate time was demanding it, however none of them said anything. Pepper would sometimes smile ruefully at him as if she would say that he had been a moron but nothing else.

"So basically, you decided to side with Barnes because you think he has more honor and he is less of a monster than the other one is," Rhodes summed up everything in a strangely subdued voice, "when actually both are the same. And we are saving Jack Rollins, who is a professional assassin, because you suddenly discovered that these guys are not that bad."

"I can earn their trust just by doing this," Steve muttered. "I saved Rebecca's life a couple of times, but apparently it doesn't matter. I need to consolidate the position that I have, or this mission will take me years."

"Yes, it will take you years no matter how you handle it, Stevie. Don't fool yourself by thinking that you're going to ruin Alexander fucking Pierce in just six months, because you feel like this helps your mission for it's not going to happen." Rhodes' harsh words were matched by his sudden cold stare. "You lived for so long undercover, do you still have the illusion that this is going to end up well for you? The last time you ended up in a coma because your own people couldn't do their job properly. What do you think is going to happen if these guys are going to discover that you lied to them all this time and that you were an undercover cop? Do you think they'll forgive you? Do you think you'll go back to drink some bourbon with them and share war stories? Fuck, Steve, I thought you were smarter than this."

"They-"

"They are hired assassins, loyal only to each other, their fucking code and Barnes, probably, but not necessarily in that order. But they have no loyalty to you."

"I could say the same thing about you." Steve smiled sadly because he knew that the remark was damn unfair, and he winced when he saw Rhodes almost recoil after hearing the words. The tension in the air increased exponentially.

"It's not the same situation and you know it, Steve," Pepper said pleasantly but there was no warmth in her voice or her eyes.

"It's not?" Steve sighed. "Look, guys, Rhodes here is somehow grateful for saving you. Pepper,
you are probably grateful to me for saving you back then and you Tony, well, you think you owe me for Beck." Steve's voice hardened. "But I also have Quill’s blood on my hands, which means that someday whatever I did to help you guys isn't going to count much and you might decide that keeping this friendship with me is against your interests."

The silence was grating on his nerves because all three of them were looking at him with cold judging stares and it seemed a bit too much for him until Tony suddenly leaned in and just smacked him hard over the head.

"Sometimes I think your IQ is going down the drain with so much undercover work." He rolled his eyes when Steve scowled at him. "Please kindly shove what you just said where the sun doesn’t shine. Stevie, what we went through together is always going to count for something and people like us have only honor left, no matter how unimpressive might seem for any law enforcement personnel."

"Sorry, I know, I know." He pinched his nose. "It's been a tough couple of months and sometimes I forget where I truly stand."

"You should always know where you stand with us," Pepper said. "Now I assume you want to know what we found out so far." When Steve only nodded, she continued. "Based on the image that you sent us and the public cameras that we were able to access, your friend was taken out of Brooklyn almost as soon as he was apprehended. So this is what we found out and what we came up with."

They went straight to business because time was crucial, and it was most definitely not on their side. Although he was sure that Pierce would keep Rollins alive as long as possible for the information that the assassin possessed, his methods of torture were not of the safer kind so the worst could be assumed. The location of the safe house where Rollins was kept at the moment made the plan less ridiculous. It was a simple get in, get out with the adjacent victims aside.

He went to bed with the knowledge that he might just help Rollins survive the imprisonment. The next day, everything was planned to the smallest of details and there was no time for pleasantries, either then a brief phone call from Beck telling him what a moron he was and better keep in touch next time, not going completely underground. They were going to travel by a nondescript van, where some medical supplies had been brought as well because Rollins was definitely going to need them.

Steve didn't dare look at himself in the mirror, but he felt the black t-shirt like a shroud enwrapping around his soul maybe to protect it or to damn the last bright remains of it. The anti-bullet vest, made from the best material and bought illegally from the US military, was a dark shield against his heart. He had a thigh holster, where he kept his Sig and then two close to his chest keeping another two Berettas, .9mm and on his back the fourth one, carefully containing a semi-automatic. A knife was deeply buried in his boot and he was praying not to use it, but the night was a bad omen, perhaps foreboding for what he was about to do.

The house was studiously inconspicuous, a perfect location to keep people in it without drawing attention. It was neither too big, nor too small, and it was painted in a rather dull shade of brown. Its location towards the end of the lane, closer to the river, made it barely visible and any prying eyes that might have been around the area could have never spotted the two men smoking lazily and sitting on its porch, in the pale light of the moon.

Nor could they have spotted the four other men sitting in the shade of the forest around them. From Rhodes’ information, there were around ten people inside the house. Six of them were outside ensuring that the perimeter was not breached, while the other four most likely were in the house
inflicting the necessary pain on Rollins. Most likely they were forming pairs of two, taking turns and it was a sad day when Steve was not at all amazed by the accuracy of the information.

Four against ten people. Not bad considering he had Tony and Rhodes next to him, while Pepper’s silent rifle would provide the perfect cover for them. He took in the moist air of the night, its sweet-salty smell that would soon be tainted with a far greater sweeter smell. It was blood and revenge and something completely different that Steve refused to acknowledge.

Briefly, he wondered whether Barnes was absolutely going ballistic since he didn't know his location and whether this all mattered. Maybe it didn't, but since he heard the story of the cop tortured by the Barnes’ and ever since Quill’s death was on his head, he promised himself that no one would suffer the same fate on his watch and he was going to keep his promise, even if he was going to save right now a professional killer.

He looked at Tony and the other man signaled them to move further. That was it. Steve took another deep breath and then suddenly his mind became completely focused on the mission at hand, all thoughts regarding his own safety or morality were dead as the leaves on which he was walking at the moment.

He was going to approach the house from the east, the sounds of the river carefully shadowing his steps like an uncomfortable accomplice. One of the Berettas was in his hand, the silencer carefully applied before he attempted to move. Rhodes was approaching the house from the west, a deathly shadow who took out the first man without as much as a whisper. Tony would approach the house from the north, taking care of the men covering that perimeter. Pepper with her sniper abilities, as soon as the clearance was going to be offered, was going to silence the men on the porch permanently.

Steve pushed mutely through the trees then abruptly stopped. One of the guards outside was standing with his back turned to him taking a piss. Steve slowly raised his gun and pulled the trigger. No moral question sprang into his mind as he swiftly stepped over the body. He couldn't afford it. On the back porch, there was another man looking around the garden. He could almost see Tony in the darkness, and he wondered whether he should approach him when another man suddenly appeared in his line of vision. He gulped as he tried to make a decision. If he would kill one of them the other would have plenty of time not only to give the alarm but to shoot at them too.

The seconds ticked by in a tensed silence as Steve cursed himself. He was just about to make a move when Rhodes took the decision from him and plunged one of his knives in the throat of the man sitting on the porch while the other was killed effortlessly by Tony. He nodded gratefully to the other two men as they all met in the same spot, then followed them as they made their way silently inside the house.

He knew it was most likely his imagination, but he could have sworn that he heard the swish sound of the bullets as Pepper took care of the men on the porch and let their cigarettes burn out just like their lives. Inside the house the light was dim, mostly coming from the living room where two of them were playing cards in front of a muted TV. Rhodes shook his head and Steve knew that he was the only one able to take a clear shot. The first one was dead before he knew what was going on. The second one fell dead with a silent cry and an astonished face, his hand frozen forever on his holster.

By then, Tony and Rhodes were already on their way down to the basement. The walls have been soundproofed and their steps were muffled as if they were walking on graves upon graves of dead people, all killed in the name of a mobster war, in which most likely they never believed. At the end of a small corridor, the door was opened, and muffled groans of pain could be heard.
"Not so tough now, are you?" A voice hissed cruelly. "Tough professional assassin is not so tough when it comes to pain."

"I think you have to hit me harder." Rollins's gurgled voice made Steve almost wince. "I have an itch right there and nobody is capable to scratch it for me properly."

"What did you say?"

It was sad when Steve thought about it that the thug's last words would be these as Tony not only killed him but his partner too. He found Rollins tied to a chair in the middle of an almost empty room. Beside the chair on which the man was sitting at the moment, there was just another table with an array of torture instruments that literally made Steve sick to his stomach. Rollins's eyes were almost completely shut because of the swelling and it took him some time to recognize Steve as he released him from his bounds gently.

"Steve." Rollins's word sounded like a prayer in the still air of the night.

"We're going to clean the area," Tony whispered in his ear. "Be ready to leave in twenty minutes."

Steve nodded, unable to stop the sudden shake of his hands as he cut the bounds at Rollins's feet. One of his hands came resting on Steve's head as a silent benediction and he was filled with the knowledge that he did well. Whatever this did to his soul, he did well today.

"Is he alright?" Rollins asked as if the entire world rested upon the answer to this question and maybe to a certain extent it did.

"Yes, he's just angry at you for not following him."

"Of course he is. But these fellas hadn't been able to hurt me, even if I would have shown them how."

"You look pretty banged up to me."

"Don't make me laugh." Steve helped the other man settle down on the hard, cold floor.

"How worried should I be?" He asked although by now he was aware of the superficial cuts on the man's torso. Although they were superficial, some of them were bleeding profusely and it made Steve worried by thoughts of infection and internal bleeding, taking into consideration the pounding that Rollins took. At a closer inspection, he realized that the man sported also dislocations at both knees and at the left shoulder. Cracked ribs were the cherry on top of the whole bloody thing and he kind of prayed for Tony and co to finish already so he could take Rollins at a hospital.

"Not as worried as you look right now," Rollins finally replied and tried to grin but sort of grimaced at Steve. "You look like I might just die in your arms."

"You'd better not. Rumlow would most definitely have my balls for that."

"Where are all the others?"

"Well, this is sort of a solo operation." Rollins groaned as soon as he heard the words.

"Friends of yours?"

"Acquaintances, twice-removed cousins from my mother's side or something."
"Or something." Rollins could barely look at him but still made a point of looking into his eyes and saying: "What you did tonight, Steve, it counts for something. Rumlow and I will talk to you about it later."

"I think we should worry about getting out of this hell hole first and then discuss what might happen to us. Getting you to a hospital might be a priority instead of talking about imaginary debts to a friend."

"I knew you were insane, just not that insane."

"Ready to go?" Rhodes stopped their stupid grimacing at each other by smirking when he saw Steve cradling Rollins like he was something precious. Like he was a true friend.

"I am so ready to blow up this joint." Rollins grinned at him, his bloody teeth a rather scary spectacle.

"Well, what do you know? It's exactly what we're going to do."

Steve just shook his head and then in between him and Rhodes, they carried Rollins upstairs where Tony was already pouring gasoline all over the bodies and the house. He refused to look at the men aligned in the living room. They would be faceless and nameless men like so many in their profession, people without families that wouldn't be mourned by anyone. All gone like flies around a body when they were too fattened up to move.

By then the cot in the van was already prepared with everything necessary to give the man first aid, perfusion already dangling from a nail in the roof of the car.

"Well, boys and girl," Rollins amended quickly as he saw Pepper watching him carefully, "I don't want to seem a weak guy, but I'm going to pass out if you don't mind." And he promptly lost consciousness. Steve fussed around with the perfusion and tried a mild pain reliever on him, while the doors were slammed shut and the rest of the party climbed up in front of the van.

As they dove into the darkness of the night, the house burnt quietly taking away all the evidence with it. In the morning it would speak of men that officially didn't exist anymore and their deaths would be blamed on a punitive execution by Hydra or some other clan out there. And the police wouldn't bother much with their deaths since they would find the basement full of burnt pain toys. If one of them would ask more difficult questions, questions to which even their commissioners wouldn't want to answer, well, he would simply be reminded about his place in the hierarchy.

As it stands, as darkness engulfed Steve at last and everything else was silent in the back of the van apart from Rollins's heavy breathing, he took out his phone and switched it on again. Countless missed calls from Howlett and Rebecca, one from Bucky which ended apparently with a message.

There was silence at first and Steve wondered if Bucky had stared at his phone long enough as if he tried to elicit an answer from Steve. Then there was just a question asked almost hesitantly as if the man that asked it couldn't believe that he was interested enough in the answer. Where are you? Steve almost dropped the phone. Those three little words sent cold shivers down his spine. The baritone voice sounded broken, cracked open into a thousand pieces and Steve didn't know which piece to pick.

He took a deep breath and then pressed to dial a completely different number. Two rings later although it was still the middle of the night, Rumlow answered.

"Steve." The silent plea almost broke his heart.
"I got him, Rumlow. I got him alive." Rumlow broke down at the other end of the line making Steve blinking fast a couple of times. "Rumlow?"

"Rumlow can't speak right now Steve," Howlett’s baritone voice answered instead. "I assume you gave him the good news?"

"Yes, I got Rollins alive. A bit banged up but all right, nothing a few small surgeries and a few days on the hospital won't mend."

"Steve, what you did is beyond crazy, but God, it's good to hear your voice. Now you just bring him to our hospital, and we will take care of him from then."

"I'm not in Brooklyn, Howlett."

"What?"

"Pierce's men took Rollins outside of Brooklyn. I assume that they were afraid of the repercussions or they just didn't want to have us finding him too quickly. As it stands, I'm about three hours' drive from Brooklyn. I'll give you the coordinates of the hospital where I'm taking Rollins. There are some discreet people there and they won't ask too many questions." Steve rambled the address and advised them that it would take them another half an hour to get there.

"What about Pierce's men?" James asked once he finished taking the instructions.

"Dead," Steve answered.

"Good. See you later, you crazy son of a bitch."

"See you later."

Steve hung up and switched off the phone again. He opened the bag next to his seat and started to peel the clothes off him and dressed into a pair of black jeans, a blue t-shirt with an army logo on and a black hoodie. They were all part of the disguise that they were going to use. The people they were taking Rollins owed quite a few favors to Tony, but that didn't mean that they were stupid, and they needed to believe whatever story they were about to offer.

When the van stopped, at last, Steve was ready to move Rollins. Tony and Rhodes opened the doors and got in, followed by Pepper who closed the doors after her. They all looked at Steve and after they made sure that Rollins was still unconscious, Tony stared at Steve.

"Rhodes will leave your car along with your belongings tomorrow evening in the parking lot D, next to the trashcan. You know the story, right?"

"Yes."

Tony nodded approvingly.

"Good. One more thing." Rhodes handed a file to Tony. It was pretty thick. "While we were doing the digging, we also found out that Pierce is expecting a shipment. A big shipment of drugs transported by a particular shadowy company. It will arrive in about three weeks, of course, the coordinates are likely to change, and the arrival might be earlier. However, if you really want to hurt Pierce, I think the drugs come accompanied by some money that Pierce was told to launder for a very dangerous person. If this transaction would fail, Pierce would find himself in a tight position."
It took Steve a couple of minutes to process what Rhodes had just handed to him. When he looked up at them, all three were slightly grinning at him.

"Thank you, guys. Not just for the file but for everything. I really appreciate it and-"

"We know you're solid, Steve." Pepper smiled kindly at him, then she became serious again. "But when you find yourself into a tight spot, and you will, just give us a call. We will take you out permanently if this is what it takes. Because these people, Steve, won't stop hunting you down until you will be in a six-foot grave and even then, they might burn you just in case."

"And what we told you at the house still stands," Rhodes continued, "we're a team now, and you are one of us whether you like it or not. And one day we might come to you for help and you will always do it because you are that kind of man. But these men, they have honor only amongst themselves. And I really hope that what you did tonight will garner enough immunity for you to last you a lifetime. But don't turn your back to them just yet."

"One more thing," Tony said and he grabbed Steve by the nape pulling him close enough for their foreheads to touch. "If your instinct tells you you're in danger at any time, no matter how fleeting the feeling might be, you call us, and we take you out. Don't go to your squad, just come directly to us. Understood?"

"Yes, understood." Steve closed his eyes.

"Now swear on your family's grave." A wounded sound flew out of his being before he could stop it, making Tony squeeze him gently.

"I swear."

"And I need to you to swear to me that the Quill matter is dead and buried and that you won't bring it up again. I need you to believe us when we say that this is all water under the bridge, and you won't tarnish his memory again by belittling his gesture."

"I swear."

"Good." Tony kissed him on the forehead. "You take care of yourself Stevie, you hear?"

"Yeah," Steve mumbled and hugged Tony over Rollins's body, hiding his face in the crook of his neck, afraid to show too much emotion. At the end of the day, these people were almost like family for him and what they did for him these past few days was above and beyond a simple call of duty.

"Come here, you big sap," Pepper said and she hugged him too, followed by Rhodes.

"Take care of yourself. See you soon."

"See you guys."

Ten minutes later a nondescript van was swallowed up by the late traffic while Steve was already inside the hospital where he was asking for help for Rollins. While the man was suffering a minor surgery to correct the dislocations and making sure that his legs wouldn't be affected by it, Steve was telling to the outside nurses that his friend had been beaten up by some former army colleagues of his, who didn't appreciate finding out that Rollins was gay and at some point served with them.

As it was a sensitive matter, there was no point in calling the police since he was not going to make a complaint against them. Just to make sure that the local law enforcement was not about to come
upon them with their righteous code of conduct, he made a quick phone call from the public booth to Fury about the whole matter to ensure the full cooperation of the local authorities. After his chief screamed at him for not reporting in ages, he was placated by Steve's news of the massive shipment and advised him that they were going to discuss it later on, when Steve wasn't in danger of being heard by everyone in that particular hospital.

The phone call to Rumlow was short and straight to the point. There was no emotional layer this time other than the gratitude of the young assassin. And then Steve finally crashed into the waiting area after finding out that his friend was out of the commission for the rest of the evening and that any visit to his room would be pointless at this time.

The doctor took one good look at him and gave him information about blood pressure, infection treatment and physical therapy of which Steve forgot almost instantly, too tired by the events in the last few days and by the complete lack of sleep. Either way, he was more than sure that once Rumlow was going to be there, the doctor would find himself giving a much more detailed report of health regarding Rollins.

For now, Steve fell asleep in the uncomfortable chair almost as soon as he sat down, only to be awakened after what seemed only minutes later by a gentle caress on his head. He opened his eyes with much difficulty to Howlett’s concerned face, holding in his hands two coffees, while Rebecca was sitting next to him, smiling softly at him.

"You're an idiot," she muttered and hugged him tightly.

"What else is new?" he mumbled, his eyes still not adjusting to the natural morning light that was flying inside the room with such a gaiety that Steve felt almost instantly grumpy. The events from last night seemed so far away, almost like a nightmare concoction of his heavily traumatized mind.

When Rebecca let him go, Howlett gave him one of the coffees and sat on the small coffee table in front of him, ignoring the evil looks that all the nurses were throwing him.

"Where is Rumlow?"

"Inside Rollins's room. The police?"

"No show." Steve took a sip of the coffee which was bitter and concentrated enough to make any spoon sit straight in it. But it was exactly what Steve needed. He passed his fingers through his hair and told them what story he told to be believed. If it seemed too good to be true to both of them, neither Rebecca nor Howlett said anything about it.

"When do you think we can move him back to Brooklyn?" Steve asked tired of them both staring at him like he was some sort of savior when he was far from it.

"The doctor said in a few days. My brother already arranged transportation. I arranged hotel rooms for us for the next few days assuming that you want to be with us."

"Guys, come on." Steve pulled Rebecca gently to his body. "You know my quarrel is with Bucky, not with you guys."

"Good to know that." Howlett ruffled his hair. "Come on, kid, let me drop you to the hotel. You look like you could use some sleep."

"You think?" Steve rolled his eyes at him as he tried to get up. "You might have to carry me though," he continued as his bones popped loudly.
"Come on, you princess."

"What about Rebecca?" Steve was already leaning heavily on James who all of a sudden was very comfortable.

"I’m going to stay with Rumlow in Rollins's room." She smiled. "Go and sleep and we'll talk later."

Steve nodded and as she disappeared inside the room, he and Howlett stopped by the hotel where he slept soundly for the next ten hours. By the time he went back to the hotel, Rollins was already awake and being a grumpy patient while his car (or more precisely, Rumlow's car) was resting in parking lot D as promised. His friends avoided the topic of the mysterious people that helped him save Rollins, although it was clear to him that the whole debacle had made them reconsider Steve's position within their circle.

Four days later they were driving back to Brooklyn, while Rollins and Rumlow were flying via helicopter. Andrea came the previous day and just annoyed Steve on the way back, admitting that was actually whole all reason for coming. Also, she advised him kindly that he was ever to pull such a major stupid thing again, she was personally taking charge of beating the shit out of him. That was before hugging the air out of him.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of going to work, visiting Rollins at the hospital, coming back home with Rumlow, eat and then sleep. As for Bucky, he kept utterly silent and everyone avoided mentioning his name either because they were afraid of Steve's reaction or because the fucking bastard was preparing something that he was not going to like.

And it was also the case of the new information that he had. As he was hardly ever alone, it was impossible for him to tell his chief what Tony told him, but he could tell Bucky. It was a particularly sensitive issue to him, and he really didn't know how to breach it.

As if summoned by his constant thoughts, one evening, Bucky was waiting for him in the living room and although he had been in deep discussion with Rumlow, it was clear that he wanted to have a word with Steve. As soon as he entered the room, Rumlow smiled ruefully at him before telling him pityingly that he was going to the hospital and that he would keep his phone at hand in case he would be in need of help.

Help for what? Steve wondered confused as he followed Rumlow with his eyes until the other man left the house. He sighed, knowing a trap when he saw one, but Bucky’s presence was definitely a good sign. Still, he sighed as if put upon and scowled at Bucky. The older man looked as attractive as ever in a grey suit, not a wrinkle out of place, his silver tie and white shirt matching to perfection. God, how he would love to ruffle this man's feathers.

"Look," he began, "I'm really tired and if you came here to lecture me, please don't. Not tonight, not that you would have the right to lecture me anyway. I feel gross, I need to take a shower, eat maybe and then go to sleep for a thousand years and I seriously don't need-"

Bucky’s sudden movement caught him by surprise. Two steps and he was all into Steve's breathing space. One hand grabbed his nape, pushing his whole body even closer and please God, this was so not happening. The blue eyes stared at him as if seeking something in Steve's. And whatever he saw, whatever he thought he saw, didn't count at all in Steve's book as plump lips crashed against his, all-consuming.

All thought left his brain entirely, as he pressed against the other man, his hands grabbing fistfuls of his suit, while Bucky’s other hand grabbed him by the hip, and pulled him tight against his. He gasped against their sudden closeness, and Bucky only pushed further. This is how he should have
been kissed. As Bucky worshipped the corner of his lips, his plump bottom lip, his mouth, his whole soul. This is how he should have been kissed. Like he mattered.

Never in his entire life, had Steve experienced such a wild kiss.

But the magnitude of the emotional earthquake that shook his soul was going to be devastating in its consequences.
A kiss is the sweetest poison

A broken sob escaped Steve's lips as Bucky held his body closer still and kept on kissing him. Many people had kissed or tried to kiss Steve over the years, some as if they wanted to devour his very essence, others superficially like they only wanted relief for their desire. However, none had been so consuming and all-encompassing as this one. It was as if nothing could deter Bucky from kissing him.

This was how it must have felt to be addicted to poison: completely helpless in the face of the craving; convinced in the knowledge that the sweet kiss of death was the ultimate gift. Moments before the insides of the body were turning to cosmic dust, there must have been a moment when the heart stopped completely and let one dream even if just for a moment that the sweetest poison was the greatest gift.

Bucky's kiss was that particular poison, his gentle nips, his brushes of the tongue, his kissing as a form of worship. Steve was holding for his dear life. He knew that the antidote for this bitter-sweet poison was to simply step away but alas, Steve had always tipped the border between the good and evil and right now the border was simply erased out of its existence by Bucky Barnes.

He could hear the small moans of pleasure that he was making through the haze that wrapped around his brain, unashamed, unbelievably liberating. It was utterly tempting to give in to such an alluring promise because having Bucky Barnes and feeling his body so close to his was intoxicating. It made Steve dream of impossible things like he could be kissed like this again or have this man wrap himself around him safe and sound like that. This sort of dreams had nothing to do with his mission and what he planned, so regretfully after a long moment in which Bucky nipped his bottom lip and then licked it gently making him almost whimper in pleasure, Steve took a deep breath and settled his open palm over the other man's heart.

"Stop," he whispered tensely, "stop, stop, stop!" He inhaled raggedly, his attempts at composing himself a terrible feat. Bucky sighed but made no attempts to kiss him further and just leaned his forehead against Steve's. Their short breaths filled up the room in an all-encompassing mass of noise, almost deafening Steve with their persistence at reminding him what had just happened.

"You taste different than what I had imagined," the gravelly voice muttered, short puffs of air tickling his nose. "Better. Much better."

"This shouldn't have happened," Steve said decisively and managed to disentangle himself from their embrace with a herculean effort, putting some distance between them. This kiss shouldn't have happened, he repeated to himself. But it did. It did. He passed his fingers through his hair and finally dared to look at Bucky.

The White Wolf's dark look, full of heat was contradicting every little expectation that Steve had had on the man, which was ridiculous in itself because this sort of thing shouldn't happen. His lips were still tingling with the power of their kiss and Barnes was on the same page if Steve took his wanton look as a guide.

"What you did these past few days-" Bucky began but Steve made a gesture of impatience and interrupted him.

"It has nothing to do with you," Steve half-lied through his teeth. "I merely helped a friend."

"May I ask who helped you in your endeavor?"
"That is none of your fucking business."

Bucky's eyes narrowed his face frighteningly blank all of a sudden. "Few people died for a lot less than talking rudely to me, Steve. And while we kissed, I would advise bearing in mind that I rightfully earned the nickname White Wolf."

Steve stared back at him fully aware that this was a confrontation that he should approach in a different way. Saving Rollins was as much about saving a friend as it was about saving face and making Bucky completely convinced that Steve was loyal to him and no one else. He sighed heavily.

"I meant no disrespect, but you have a way of pushing people's buttons and I'm most definitely not a patient person, Bucky. I do understand your position as a revered mobster or whatever you want to call yourself, but I believe that you're confusing me with one of your men. At the end of the day, I'm neither." Steve ran his fingers through his hair again pulling it a little and took another step back, avoiding this time to look at Bucky. "The people that helped me are friends. This is all I'm going to say to you about it."

"I understand."

"I have something else for you," Steve said. "Wait a second." He went to his room to retrieve the file that Tony had given him. Maybe he should have shared it with the chief before this, but it was too late. Being undercover meant sometimes taking the decisions on the spot and listening to your instinct. His hands shook as he opened the drawer and took the file.

And he inhaled deeply because being attracted to Bucky fucking Barnes was so not an option. It was getting increasingly difficult to maintain the distance between him and these people, he didn't need any more complications.

He could feel his lips still tingling with the sensation of being used for the sweetest purpose and goddamn it, what it said about him for wishing he had this man kissing him again, For feeling those strong arms around him, those hands settling on him possessively like Steve meant to be his? He took a deep breath in a vain attempt to get a grip on his emotions. No other undercover mission had felt so taxing and emotional draining as this one.

When he rejoined Bucky in the living room, his hand was steady when he offered him the file. The other man looked a little surprised before settling on the couch again. Steve put a safe distance between the two of them by sitting down on the opposite armchair.

"What's this?"

"While my friends were looking for Rollins's location, they dug pretty deep into Pierce's files as well and came up with this information. Apparently, Pierce is expecting a pretty big shipment of drugs and dirty money in about a couple of weeks. While the location and time of the arrival might change, the information is pretty solid."

Bucky's eyes scrutinized the file and then looked back at Steve. For the first time, his mask of impenetrable determination and pride seemed cracked and there was a certain confusion with this.

"Why are you giving me this? And for that matter, why would you help me? You made your feelings perfectly clear the last time we spoke."

"Look, between you and Pierce, I would always choose you, as long as you remain a fucking asshole with hands into drugs and dirty money. Because Pierce is in a completely different class of
monsters, the kind that uses children for his sick games." Steve steeled himself before continuing, "And because he attacked me and my friends for no other reason than that we are related to you. But at the same time, I’m kind of sick and tired of your lack of trust so..."

"So, what you're saying is that I should trust you." Bucky's eyes narrowed. "It takes more than a file and saving lives."

"Seriously?" Steve laughed sarcastically, his words echoing hollowly in the space between them. "You are a tough son of a bitch you know that right?" Steve grinned maniacally at Bucky whose puzzlement amplified. Steve leaned a little bit forward, staring straight back into his eyes. "The funny thing is, Bucky, is that you haven't realized something yet."

"Which is?"

"I want absolutely nothing from you. There's literally nothing I need from you or that you could possibly give me. I saved your sister; I saved your men and perhaps even your business. I would say the balance is extremely in my favor."

"Are you sure there's nothing you want from me?" A perfect eyebrow raised ironically, the man's blue eyes darkening again, and Steve pulled away faster than one could have said sex.

"Yes, that is out of the question and won't happen again."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yes."

They both stood up at the same time and shook hands. Bucky threw one last look at his lips and Steve bit his cheek inside in an attempt to stop himself from licking them.

"We will see about that." And this threat was more dangerous than anything Steve had experienced before.

Steve watched Bucky leaving and something he definitely refused to name made his stomach twist in knots. While he was ready to admit that he was lying to these people, he didn't want to be more of an asshole. Carefully, he said the other man's name and when the mobster stopped and looked back at him, Steve swallowed hard before finally admitting, "Bucky, look, I'm not the man you clearly think I am."

His muscles tensed with the truth of the statement. He wasn't good for anyone.

"I’m not good for you."

His words echoed his inner turmoil. Bucky’s blue eyes widened at Steve's admission. They stared at each other for a long moment before the older man broke the spell:

"I believe this is the first time I’m told that." His eyes shone dangerously. "But it’s not up to you to decide that, Rogers. We will talk about this when we have more time.""

"Look, there's nothing to discuss." Steve felt frustrated by the whole situation especially because he was trying to do this man justice. "I’m really not someone to get involved with. Too much emotional baggage. Besides, my past, uhm, my past isn't as clear as it seems. Just let it go, please."

It was the final sentence that seemed to spur Bucky into action for into two steps he was by Steve's side, making him gasp as he grabbed him gently by the chin.
"You're not a man to let go easily, Steve." Bucky pecked him softly, a mere brush of gentle lips. "Trust me, I've tried." His eyes softened. "But there's something about you."

He caressed Steve's lips with his thumb almost regretfully, making him catch his breath. "So, like I said, we'll talk about this. Later." And with a final brush of lips, his eyes hardened again, and he walked out of the house without a glance back, leaving Steve a breathless mess.

Steve woke up as if someone has scratched at his soul the whole night and didn't let him sleep. He sat at the table, his head resting on a hand and generally questioning his life choices. Rumlow took a good look at him and then just pushed the cup of coffee in front of him for coffee was the cure-all.

"How's Rollins?" He grumbled not fully awake yet but getting there.

"Grumpy." Rumlow smiled softly. "But the fact that he's moaning like a five-year-old is a blessing in these particular circumstances, so I will put up a brave face and try not to murder him in his sleep."

"When is he scheduled to leave the hospital?"

"They don't know yet." Rumlow drank from his own cup of coffee and grimaced. "They are cautious at the moment and want to keep him under observation for as long as they can. Which is probably why he gets so frustrated with them in the first place."

"Hey, it takes some time." Steve gently grabbed the other man's shoulder and squeezed. "The fact that he can moan and complain is good. That means he will do his best to be right back by your side so just give it a bit more time."

"I know, I'm sorry for being such a sour puss." Rumlow smiled again and Steve took his hand back.

"Nothing to be sorry for." He was about to offer to come with him to the hospital today when a knock on the door interrupted them and Rumlow went to answer. A couple of minutes later, he showed up with Thor in tow, who for all intents and purposes looked like he would rather be anywhere else than there. He was dressed casually in a blue t-shirt and ripped off jeans, more a grunge kid than a mobster's minion.

"Hey, man what's up?"

"Hey, Steve."

"Want a cup of coffee, Thor?" The man in question nodded and took a seat at the table. He squirmed under Steve's gaze as Rumlow just pretended to be busy pouring coffee. Seriously how long did it take a normal person to pour a damn cup of coffee? Steve scowled at Thor.

"I'm not going to like it, am I?" He said resigned.

"Nope."

"Ok, tell me, what does he want?"

"He wants you back. Told me to help you pack up and move back." Thor rubbed at his nape. "Told me not to leave without you."

"Of course he said that." Steve rolled his eyes. "Fine, it won't take me long." When both men stared
at him shocked, Steve rolled his eyes so hard that he almost sprained something. "What? I can be reasonable."

"Steve, I haven’t known you for a long time, but reasonable is most definitely not a word I would use to describe you." Rumlow smiled sarcastically at him as he settled the cup of coffee in front of Thor’s grateful eyes and proceeded to smirk at Steve's obvious annoyance some more.

"I have no idea what you are talking about." He scowled harder. "I’m pretty damn reasonable."

"This comes from the man that almost got into a fight with a mobster's right hand, had brunch with a pair of assassins and fled dramatically in the middle of the night from the said mobster's house. Oh, yes, being reasonable is definitely a character trait for you."

"Fine, so maybe you got a point but-"

"If you go back," Rumlow interrupted him, his tone changing slightly more serious, all humorous sparkle gone from his eyes, "and I don't say you shouldn't, you should be totally committed. I know that you don't want anything from Bucky, and I think you went way above duty with saving Rollins. But I also do believe that Bucky won't give you a second chance at fleeing in the middle of the night like you did the last time. We can offer you some protection but even our power is limited."

"I rarely saw Bucky so mad in his life," Thor hesitated and drank a bit of coffee before adding, "There are very few people in his life that defied him the same way you did. Only you lived to tell the tale if you catch my drift."

"I’m not afraid of him." Steve felt the truth of this statement at the core of his heart. There was something about Bucky that made him push and prod and his instinct never got him wrong.

"Maybe this is your problem." Rumlow's eyes were hard cold steel. "I saw him do some stuff - well, his nickname as the White Wolf is one gained on merit alone. There are times when defying him might get you somewhere, but there are times when being silent would be better for you."

"If you come back," Thor looked straight back at him, "and I'm not saying you should because I know how much Bruce appreciates your help at the clinic, it has to be a decision, which you will have to respect even the things will get tough. And they will. Sooner or later they will because Barnes is not an easy man. Blood will follow."

"I understand." Steve squared his shoulders. "I’ve made my decision and I’ll abide by it. No more dramatic exists, but don’t expect me to hold my tongue because this is not a habit of mine and sooner or later this man will say or do something to piss me off. Because it's in his fucking nature, that's why."

"Yes, you're the father of reason. I can see that now."

"Shut up." Steve pushed slightly at Rumlow and smiled.

Thor waited patiently as Steve packed up his stuff again, though it wasn't much as most of his things had stayed in his luggage. Then he hugged Rumlow and let Thor help him out with stuff to put in the back of his car.

He was in.

All the drive back to the manor was dominated by this thought alone. He managed what other agents before him had failed. He was going to make sure that he would destroy in the process
Pierce as well, but at the moment, his greatest victory was this very moment. Then why do you feel guilty? A perverted voice in his head asked him and Steve scrunched his eyes shut, blocking that voice completely. No time for hesitation. No more time for questions. Now he was in, there were just two more things to do on the list. And he would have to act quickly on them soon as well.

Getting back to the Barnes manor was really easy, almost unnaturally so. It was as if he never left and unpacking in his room again was so natural, he almost puked with the normalcy of it.

"Well, well, well, look who's back." Andrea leaned against the door frame just as Steve was pushing his empty bags under the bed. He looked up at her just in time to catch a glimpse of something in her eyes, something suspiciously similar to regret. She covered everything under a smile fast, but not fast enough.

"Shut up, you missed me."

"Yes, but not in this house," Andrea smirked. "But then again you were always a bit insane, so this really doesn't surprise me. I just hope you know what you're doing."

"I know what I'm doing." He scowled back at her. Her smirk became even broader.

"Ah, the infamous Rogers scowl. How your enemies must have trembled. But," she paused tapping her finger against her cherry lips, "if I remember the last time you said that, a person whom you thought of as a friend ended up dead. I hope for your bourbon that this time you won't be the target." His knuckles turned white as he gripped tightly at the cover on his bed, trying to hide the slight tremble.

"I don't want to talk about it." He frowned harder. "I thought we agreed not to talk about it again." There was something almost cruel in Andrea's eyes as she looked at him appraising.

"It's very convenient not to talk about something when his blood is not on your hands. How convenient it must be for you not to think about it and put everything about him behind as if he didn't exist in the first place. Blame everything on me and my dad."

"Convenient?" Steve stood up anger clouding his mind. "What is convenient about his death? You killed him, you killed him," a sob almost escaped his lips even now almost unable to comprehend the extent of the damage that these operations were causing him, "and he was my friend."

"He was a traitor. A liar. Even now you refuse to see the truth about him!" Andrea shouted back. "You're a blind fool and one day when everything falls apart around you and it will because you think you're above us, I'm going to buy a front seat ticket and watch you burn along with it. Because your self-righteousness will get you in trouble. It always does. You think you're better than me, than dad, than Bucky or Howlett. But you're fucking not, so don't stay here and pretend that I'm the only one with his blood on my hands. Because if I remember it correctly, you fucking brought him to us."

Steve flinched so hard that it made Andrea's eyes widen in unhappiness and horror at what she had just said. And maybe she believed it was the truth and maybe it wasn't, but Steve felt sick at hearing the words for it was the truth from which he had been running away from this entire time.

There was blood on his hands, innocent blood, which perhaps helped him blend in with these people and be so good at his job. Nonetheless, their exchange stung more than anything else, and he found himself shaking with unwanted anger and grief.

"Get out!" He hissed when Andrea made an attempt to enter and maybe comfort him. She looked
at him like he might slap her, but he never hit a woman and he wasn't about to. "Get out, get out," he repeated as his voice rose steadily, "get the fuck out!" Andrea sensed that it was a losing battle and she hesitantly closed the door behind her, leaving Steve to wallow in his doubts and self-pity. He was good at that.

He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, the added pressure easing up his need to cry. Yes, Quill’s blood was on his hands and in spite of what he had promised to his friends, he had trouble forgiving himself for it. He took shaky breath after shaky breath. He needed to keep his cool. Andrea was right about many things except for one: Steve never considered himself above them. Maybe for all intents and purposes, he was underneath them for at least they didn’t pretend something they weren’t. In all their cruel honesty, they were what they said they were. While Steve had no idea whatsoever who he was anymore.

He carefully avoided Andrea for the following days while he barely caught glimpses of Bucky. Mostly it was just him and Rebecca, while Howlett would join them for dinner or would come to take Rebecca places where they thought were safe. Steve stopped fighting against the friendliness and companionship he was feeling for these people and started to get involved. With Howlett, it was constant goading and jokes, friendly slaps on the back and casual dinners. Even Erik seemed to ease back into the aggressive banter he had always had with Steve.

Case in point, one afternoon about two weeks after coming back to Casa del Barnes, Erik showed up in the living room while Steve was watching listlessly a show about fishing. Rebecca was at a romantic dinner with her Howlett and Steve enjoyed his alone time. The half-blind man grinned maniacally at him and Steve became unsettled.

"What?"

"I think it's time you and I get back in the gym and hit that mattress."

"You just want to kick the shit out of me," he grumbled, though he made no attempt of getting up.

"Well, I was going to say that you need to gain your muscle mobility back, but yes, that too."

"You scare me sometimes, you know that right?" He said mockingly, even though deep down he knew that the phrase wasn't half the lie he pretended it was.

"Sure, kid, that's why I live for. Now let's go."

And while he hated each session with Killmonger with a passion of a thousand burning suns, he saw the improvement almost immediately. The pull on his back lessened and the range of mobility ameliorated.

It was in his third week back when one night he was called in Bucky's office, only to see Howlett and all the others around the room, even Rebecca had joined them. She was wearing a grim expression and he knew what was going on almost immediately. Rollins and Rumlow had joined them too, the former looking much better after he was released from the hospital, while the latter bit his lips almost nervously.

"We found out the exact date of the shipment," Bucky said as soon as he settled down, thus confirming his suspicions. Bile rose in his throat, but he refused to show anything. He was caught in the middle of a full-blown war now, a war that was partially of his own devising. "It's going to happen tomorrow night and I want us to hit him with all we have. If we succeed in this endeavor, it will cause massive grievances to Pierce with the Russians and perhaps prepare the ground to hit him again." He looked directly at Steve. "Before I continue, I need to ask: are you in or do you
want to remain only Rebecca's bodyguard? If it's the former remain for the planning; if it's the latter, go back to your room. All of us will respect the decision you will take."

Steve was at the tipping point and he could only do one thing. He was falling hard and fast through the rabbit hole and it was going to swallow him alive.

"I'm in," he said clearly, and Erik grinned in surprise. Bucky just nodded, accepting the implications of what that phrase entitled and then continued.

"Then we will proceed like this. From what my sources told me, everything will happen at dock number seventeen the furthest and easiest to control. The whole operation must last no more than twenty minutes. I don't want to take his merchandise though, so you had the order to blow it up. I want him to know it was us, a clear message for the Russians that Pierce is over his head."

"Won't we have any issue with them?"

"Not yet. It would take them too many days to find the necessary force to hit us back with and by then we should be able to counter-attack. We would be at a clear advantage and they would know that. They can't afford a war right now, and I am almost sure that they will take their grievances with Pierce and not with us."

"Why is that?" Erik asked.

"Because at the end of the day, he was the one that couldn't guarantee the protection of the shipment and, on top of that, he decided that it was time to engage us in a war. If Pierce wants this war, he shall have it."

"Are you sure we can afford that, brother?"

"Now more than ever. If I am right, and I am usually, then the Russians will be the ones to help us end Pierce." Everyone else in the room nodded and then carefully listened to the plan, which employed a careful strategy of divide and conquer; it was almost brilliant in its simplicity, and Steve couldn't help but feel admiration. He listened carefully to Bucky's instructions, amazed by their precision.

All the while though, he became increasingly aware that his participation in this mission was crucial in gaining further ground in his investigation, but that simultaneously, he would be responsible for taking lives. Lives of men guilty as charged, but still Steve was far from being a worthy judge. This mission was going to leave unshakeable stains onto his soul, and he had no choice but to let it happen.

The following evening found him dressed in black jeans and a dark blue sweater, a black anti-bullet vest protectively covering his chest. There was a holster on his right thigh, a .9 mm gun already ready to fire. His choice of guns was already resting against his ribs. Several back up cartridge cases already around his middle. He was waiting patiently in a black SUV behind a huge container. Rollins and Rumlow were going to offer cover from vantage points, their experience as snipers proving invaluable for this mission.

They were divided into two squads: the first was led by Howlett, in charge with attacking them from the east, along the docks where they least expected; the second squad was led by Erik and they were going to attack from the west in an attempt to cut off all the communication lines between them and mainland, as the south was guarded by the massive mass of the river, and the north was covered by the shipment yard, a graveyard of abandoned ships and rotting merchandise that never made past the customs controls. Or they were never reclaimed by their owners and thus
cursed to build up the skeletons of a half-abandoned town, which was merely occupied by smugglers and mobsters from time to time.

Steve was part of Erik's squad. Bucky was personally going to supervise the entire operation from the vantage point and offer additional back up in case the operation was going to go haywire, which it wasn't because he made perfectly clear to all those involved that he was going to punish severely anyone guilty of failing to do their part in this operation. About twenty-five on foot soldiers were divided among them, in an attempt to cover as much ground as possible and when the door of the SUV finally opened and Erik made a sign to go undercover, Steve swallowed hard and pushed all thoughts behind.

During the most stressful operations, Steve managed to empty his mind so much so that his sole focus was on the mission. And as he and Erik's men occupied their positions, he observed his surroundings as a mere way of taking back as much information as possible that could help him survive this night, for Steve had no doubt that his life was going to be in danger.

The night was stifling hot and it was oddly quiet though the docks were at the moment filled up with Russians, Pierce's men and in the shadows, Bucky's men as well. He took a good look at the ship anchored next to the decaying wharf. It smelled of salted air and decay and for a brief moment, Steve wondered if they were all going to be swallowed by the waters of the river together with the entire dock.

Then, the alarm sounded, and gunfire blazed through the air and there was no more time to think. He hit the first man in the head, a clean shot before running up behind another abandoned container where he shot at two more goons. A third one managed to escape and kept firing at him and another guy, whose name he didn't know, but whose face was familiar from the debriefing that happened earlier that evening.

The enemy was quite clearly taken by surprise, Pierce confident not only in the fact that his reputation was going to keep at bay any potential attempts at his merchandise but also in the fact that attacking the Russians and their merchandise was a suicidal endeavor and nobody was quite as insane as that. Plus, the whole secrecy of the transport was enough of a guarantee of safety and success. Thus, everybody was running in all directions, not knowing whether to secure the containers, or protect their lives.

For Rollins and Rumlow were ruthless when it came to offering cover and would kill anyone close to the Barnes men, including one who almost took Steve's neck, silent in his approach. He managed only to nick him a little before one of the two assassins shot him clear in the head. Steve ignored the blood sipping into his t-shirt and proceeded to clean up the west side as instructed.

It was over before he knew it. The surprise mixed with the deceitful terrain which trapped the enemy like rats in a cage had added to their ambush and they managed to grin at each other among dead bodies and fire. The crew of the Russian ship alerted by the exchange had left a while ago, generously ignored by the land killers, who were too caught up in their way against Pierce to care about much else. On top of that, their quarrel was not with the Russians, and Bucky had specifically instructed them on trying to avoid making any Russian victims.

Steve looked around him and he ignored the carnage, thinking only of the drugs that he managed to take off the streets if only for a little while.

"You're okay?" Howlett put his hand on his right shoulder and squeezed. At Steve's puzzled look, Howlett shook his head with an amused expression and touched carefully his neck wound.

"Oh, yeah, nothing but a graze. The boys took care of the guy before he could do much harm."
"Glad to hear it. We would have missed your ugly mug." Howlett grinned and in spite of the fact that he frankly doubted that he would be missed by the this thirsty for blood men, Steve appreciated the lie nonetheless, so he grinned back in acknowledgment of what had happened tonight.

"Come on boys, let's blow this joint up and let's go. Authorities are bound to show up soon," Thor said and before long they were back in their SUVs, the fire glittering in the dark like a menacing ghost threatening to swallow them whole. Steve felt a cold shiver down his spine and wondered if he was going to end up like those men did tonight or much worse. The first thing on the list was done. Now he was officially one of Barnes's men and his mission could unofficially start for real.

There was one more thing to do.

A couple of days later, as he was waiting for Rebecca to come out from a woman's lingerie shop, he managed to take his burner phone earlier that day and while keeping an eye on the shop, making sure that he could still see Rebecca throughout the colored glass of the window shop, he proceeded in making the phone call that he dreaded but considered absolutely necessary.

"TMPL Gym! How may I help?" His chief's annoying voice answered.

"I want to renew my membership."

"Steve, what the hell happened last night?"

"Look, I don't have much time at disposition," Steve grumbled the main gist and offered some details. He answered quickly at his chief's questions, all the while keeping an eye on his surroundings and on Rebecca. When he finished, he sighed heavily and added. "One more thing."

"What is it?"

"I'm going deep, chief."

"What?" The horror poured into the voice as if the end of the world was coming. And Steve knew that deep down inside, it was true at least for him.

"I'm going deep underground and I'll call you when I have useful information or to handle someone to you. But in the meantime, for all intents and purposes, I need to be Steve Rogers, and this means no more reports to you until I am done."

"Steve, this is insane!" His chief howled on the other line. "You can't do that! You'll be dead before-"

"Goodbye, chief!"

"Steve! Ste-"

He hung up and inhaled deeply. He knew now which path to take and as long as he could ignore his growing attraction to Bucky, he was going to end this. He threw the burner phone into a sewer and crossed the street, scratching absently at his bandage and waiting patiently for Rebecca outside the shop.

He was now Steve Rogers and he could finally start taking down these people. If it was the last thing he would do in this life.
Steve let the night light of the city soothe his fraying nerves as he tried to ignore the fact that he was accompanying Bucky to a meeting with Pierce. He was sitting in front of the car with Thor, who was driving, while Howlett and Barnes were sitting in the back. Barnes seemed to ignore the tension in the car as he was carefully studying a file, perhaps one of the many that Steve hadn't managed to copy yet.

Ever since they had acted against Pierce, they had expected retribution from the other mobster, but he had been suspiciously silent. Which in turn made Steve even more careful when he was going out with Rebecca. Although Barnes' sister was usually reticent in letting anybody limit her freedom, for once she accepted her brother's advice and she didn't get out of the Barnes mansion unless it was truly necessary. While this, in turn, made Steve's life easier, he still didn't like the fact that Barnes accepted to meet with Pierce on neutral territory such as the house of Chester Phillips.

Howlett explained to him earlier that day that any attack while on the premises of the Phillips’ mansion would be interpreted as a full-on war on the whole family, Steve wasn't sure that this move was beyond Pierce. The man was desperate, even now two weeks later after the attack, the repercussions of it were still coming like tidal waves and he wasn't sure whether to enjoy it or not. The Russians had not been happy about the heavy loss and Pierce's operations had ceased for about a week while he had to explain to them what had happened. Several people lost their lives in the process and some of the operations had ceased to exist permanently.

Steve glanced in the door mirror, the blue car following them always discreetly was still there. Rollins and Rumlow had decided to offer them backup just in case Pierce was crazy enough to do something while on Phillips’ territory. Although Rollins was still not fully healed, he preferred to tag along with his partner rather than stay at home. He was probably going stir crazy.

Phillips’ mansion was built on one of the hills at the outskirts of Brooklyn, encircled by forest and hiding behind a big wooden gate. It was by far the most traditionalist setting that Steve had seen and when he got out of the car, he made sure to check the premises as he opened the door for Barnes. The man didn't even glance at him as he got off the car like he owned the place. Pierce's car was already there. Phillips himself was not present, but he had offered his mansion for the meeting and in charged his right hand to make sure there would be no shed of blood on his territory. Phillips’ men were looking like black ops that would give Tony and his men a run for their money.

"Welcome, Barnes!" Drax, a giant among men but with a very clear head for business bowed slightly and Barnes followed his example.

"Thank you, Drax. I apologize for bothering you with this meeting."

"It’s no bother. Mr. Phillips was more than happy to lend a hand in solving this situation and I’m his humble servant." The man looked scrutinizing at them. "I’m afraid that in the best interest of this meeting, you’re allowed to take only one person with you inside the house. The same conditions for Pierce."

"I understand. Rogers, follow me." Steve hid his surprise well enough for Drax not to spot, it but it did make him do a double take at Howlett who just shrugged and didn't seem bothered by the
choice. He bowed slowly and then followed silently Barnes on the well-lit corridor that led them into a beautiful room with a small table on which tea rested already.

Pierce was sitting on one side slightly bored, while one of his men, that attacked Steve and Rebecca some time ago, was respectfully sitting behind his back. His dead eyes looked up at Steve but betrayed nothing. A cold shiver pressed against his spine, deciding that he never wanted to cross against this man on a back alley.

When Barnes sat on the opposite side, with Steve settling behind him, Pierce smirked at both of them, making Steve tense even more. Their host looked at both of them and then said very slowly:

"In the interest of the best outcome of this meeting, I will supervise the discussion, but I shall not interfere. I will make sure to relay what has happened today to Mr. Phillips to the best of my capabilities. Please, understand that this is neutral territory and movement against each other will be considered an act of treason and it will be dealt with swiftly. Also, Please, gentlemen, do understand that this discussion is quite vital for the future of your clans as they stand now." Drax sat quietly in a corner of the room. "Please proceed."

"If you think even for a second that the move you made against me will be forgiven and forgotten, you have another thing coming, Barnes," Pierce began smirking as if he was mostly amused by this turn of events.

"I do not wish that either, Pierce. But do not believe that you can attack my clan without repercussions."

"Oh?" Pierce raised an eyebrow at him and Steve did his best to keep his mask of cool calm as the other man was staring at him now. "I see. So you managed to convince him to get into your service. Well, no matter. Your attack on my merchandise was unwarranted and I will make sure that you pay for it."

"Unwarranted?" It was Bucky's turn to raise an eyebrow at Pierce's choice of words. "Your attack against my sister warranted everything that has befallen you and while I didn't enjoy it, I certainly considered you deserving of it. However, I am confused. I thought we are here to discuss a cease-fire if you'd like to call it so."

"A cease-fire? On the contrary, my friend." Pierce's suddenly steeled eyes surprised nobody in the room but his following words did. "I didn't come here to negotiate peace with the likes of you. I just came here to ensure that you are aware of your serious tactical mistake. Do you believe I will let this go without any repercussions on your clan? Do you think any of your operations will run smoothly from now on? I will destroy every layer of your business bit by bit, and when I am sure you have nothing left, I will ensure you receive pieces of your men as presents until you will choke in their blood. Maybe then, as I will end your miserable life, you will finally understand the importance of never crossing me."

Barnes listened to Pierce impassively as if his enemy was just relaying upon news of dead and long-gone relatives. But as he finished his little hateful speech, of which Steve had no doubt that he would make happen, Barnes replied, "You are like a spoiled child that lost his favorite toy and I do not deal with children. Come to me with all you possess, and I will make sure that you will live to regret this decision. I don't care about your threats, nor do I desire to carry on with these silly battles, but if you want war, then you shall have it. Just one thing: please remember that the last time somebody dared to make a move against me, they ended up worse than they expected. I came here seeking a peaceful solution, although you have been the one making moves against me. I see you have no further interest in finding a solution to our disagreement, so I shall take my leave."
He rose to his feet followed by a baffled Steve. Barnes bowed respectfully at Drax.

"Please, Drax, accept my apologies for any inconvenience caused." Phillips' right hand bowed back, clearly not happy with the outcome of the meeting.

"You're the one acting like a spoilt brat right now," Pierce replied as he stood up.

Bucky glanced in his direction for a moment before looking back at Steve. "We're leaving."

"Hey, Rogers." Pierce stopped him. "You chose the wrong side, my friend. Join my side before it's too late." The dig had the desired effect when Barnes tensed next to him. The White Wolf looked at Pierce like he was a sniveling worm and it was quite a funny sight, especially since they were both about the same stature and somehow Barnes still managed to stare down at Pierce.

"I believe I made the right choice," Steve answered blandly. He was about to follow Barnes when the man stopped and looked back at Pierce, his posture that of a king among common men. So distinctive was the air around him that even Drax seem to cower a little. The man with the dead eyes looked a bit impressed and decided to further retreat in the shadow of Alexander Pierce.

"One more thing before leaving." His gruff voice betrayed nothing but utter contempt for the opposition and although even Pierce seemed to square his shoulders in attempt to gain some ground, it was more than impossible for him to do so. "I think this meeting deserves one more reveal. Pierce. Do you know by any chance how I came to be called the White Wolf? No? It was some years ago, I cannot recall exactly the period, but it was after I had another war with someone the likes of you who dared to cross me. You see, the fact that I am called the White Wolf is not just a metaphoric nickname that my enemies regaled me with because I’m heartless." Bucky faced Pierce dead on.

"It's because I kept the bodies of over thirty of his men on ice while I carved and cut into them and made sure that they felt everything, while I filmed it and sent the videos to their families. It’s the same thing I did to a cop that dared to think he was smarter than me."

Cold shivers ran down Steve's spine as these two monsters stared at each other, spewing these horrible truths. Both of them are the same, he realized at that moment. There was no difference between Alexander Pierce and Bucky Barnes other than the manner in which they were conducting their business and Steve feared for his life. The silence was deafening as these two heartless bastards measured their egos in stares and Steve just wanted to get out of this room and run away as far as humanly possible from such people.

But the reality was that he stood there until Barnes seemed satisfied and walked away. Steve dared to glance back on their way out and he was not surprised to see the pure hatred that swallowed Pierce's eyes blackening them with its tainted desire to harm the enemy. There was no doubt in Steve's mind that these men would annihilate each other. Maybe that was for the better. Maybe it would be enough.

On their way back, Bucky filled in Howlett on what happened in the room and his right hand wasn't surprised by the turn of events.

"Call up the men," Barnes ordered as he entered his own mansion, the meeting just a distant nightmare in the dead of the night. "There has to be an emergency council. I’m sure that by tomorrow evening, everyone will be able to arrive here."

"I’ll make it happen."
"And Howlett?" Barnes looked back at his friend. "Summon him too."

"Are you sure?" Steve listened to them, confused about the conversation.

"Positive."

"Very well then. But don't be surprised when this will come to bite you in the ass."

"As always, your language is repugnant."

"Steve here has nothing against it." Howlett clapped him on the shoulder and he simply rolled his eyes at him.

"That is because he doesn't know any better." Bucky sighed as he loosened his tie. "Tell Rebecca what happened too. We need to prepare."

"Will do."

With a wave of his hand, Bucky dismissed them and entered his office. Steve shrugged and followed Thor in the kitchen for a glass of something strong, while Howlett went upstairs to probably tell Rebecca what had happened. His hands shook that night in the shower, trying to forget the story that Bucky told, trying to ignore the alarm bells. But even after his soothing shower, even after falling in the bed and trying to get some sleep, he still couldn't forget Bucky's threatening posture, his icy demeanor, and his real threats.

A knock on the door startled him. Upon opening the door, he was more than astonished to see Barnes standing in the door frame, looking intensely at him. Silently, he reached for Steve's blond hair and carded his fingers through.

"You did well today," he mumbled and Steve wanted to be sarcastic and say *I live only to please you* or be even crazier and add *Is that what's going to happen to me once you find out that I'm a cop?* But none came out. He opened his mouth a few times, but literally, no sound passed his lips.

Barnes seemed to sense his predicament and pulled him closer to him until he could rest his head at the junction between Steve's neck and shoulder. He took a deep breath while Steve froze completely, barely daring to breathe.

This murderer was going to be the death of him and yet Steve found himself embracing his shoulders, bringing him closer to him, enjoying the intimacy. There was nothing sexual about it. It was pure comfort. He felt like laughing maniacally. He would have if Barnes hadn't chosen that moment to reciprocate the hug. They stood like that for what seemed like ages.

Steve lost himself in the moment. He must have been mad. He must have lost his mind.

"Thank you," Barnes whispered into his ear and let him go. "See you tomorrow." He caressed Steve's face one more time before leaving, making Steve close the door, sink down the floor and wonder what the fuck he was doing.

The next morning found him in Rebecca's office, the woman dressed in a smart suit, not a string of hair misplaced. But the bags under her eyes betrayed her worries and Steve felt the sudden impulse of reassuring her like it always seemed to happen when she seemed in distress. She made him tell the whole story all over again and once he finished, she made him sit at her desk.

"Because my brother showed you such trust, Steve, you must understand the importance of your actions now that you are part of the clan."
"Yeah, well, I’m a little bit disappointed with the lack of any ritual. I was expecting pledges in blood and maybe even one or more parts of the body."

"Well, I'm sure that my brother will think of something." She smirked. "But innuendos aside, I must warn you of the meeting tonight. While you will not participate at it, these are people that pay very much attention to the ritual and the customs of the clan. I wish you could be on your best behavior tonight."

"Of course, Rebecca." Steve sighed. "Look, I know I seem like a moron with zero control, but I do know when to keep my mouth shut."

"I know. That is why I ask you to be extra vigilant of these people and tell me which of them might be the most likely candidate to betray Bucky."

"What?" Steve's surprise made Rebecca smile sadly.

"In spite of the terrible things that my brother had to do sometimes to secure the stability of the clan, there are still people that would jump at the possibility of betraying my brother and secure a stronger position in the clan and the entire family." Rebecca pulled out a couple of photos and laid them on the table. There were four of them, one of which was that of Erik.

"I believe Killmonger is already known to you, so I won't speak about him." Rebecca pointed at a photo showing a lady late-twenties with a mild smile on her lips but stony eyes.

"This is Natasha Romanoff. Don't be fooled by her mild manners as she has perfected her throwing knives and one never knows when she stabs you in the back if she sees fit. She has been in the service of my brother since the beginning and although she might appear to be the least inclined to betray my brother, I wouldn't put it behind her."

She looked up at Steve and when she saw that she still had his attention, she went to the next photo. It featured a young man in mid-thirties who held a striking resemblance with Bucky.

"This is my cousin, Jacob Barnes." Rebecca sighed as she added, "Out of all of them, I consider him the best candidate to ally himself with Pierce. He is responsible for the drug trade in the north, but he resents my brother for this and considers himself to be the rightful ruler of the clan." She pointed to a fourth photo that showed an old man with battle scars on his face dressed in a smart suit. "And this is Yondu Udonta. You should fear him the most for the traditions are all that's left for him. He is a very important part of this clan and your behavior must rise to his standard."

"And you think any of them could betray your brother to Pierce or ally themselves with him."

"Yes."

"Why? Wouldn't it be in their best interest to keep Barnes as the head of the clan? Even if I don't know much about Pierce, I still find him an incredible volatile man, incapable of making the right decision under pressure as his threats and refusal to speak with your brother about peace show that."

"Yes, but each of these people wants power. Romanoff dominates the prostitution rings, Erik the illegal fights which he built them from scratch. Udonta came with his connections and his ships that offer the perfect infrastructure for our business and our dear cousin who sometimes enjoys the merchandise a little too much. Each of them could be the head of the clan and each of them has a chance at claiming it. It's just a matter of time."

"And you ask me to keep an eye on these guys?" His incredulity reached new heights. "Rebecca, I
know nothing of them. How would I know which of them would be the one to betray Barnes?"

"Use your eyes, Steve. You come in as new and these people are unknown to you. You will be able
to study their behavior and always trust your instinct. I am sure that in time you will spot the
puppet from the dark."

"And when that happens?"

"My brother will deal with it accordingly."

"I don't want dead bodies in the ice on my conscious, Rebecca."

"That is not up to you to decide." Her eyes betrayed the same steely heart as that of her brother and
lately, Steve started to wonder how she would react if she would find out that he was taking photos
of her files. Rebecca was not a woman to forgive easily a betrayal. Especially of her brother.

He found out more about the workings of the clan than any other cop and he was going to die for it,
of that he had no doubt. His instinct screamed in alarm when the night brought the first guests.
None of them were going to stay over the night, for which Steve was grateful. He could barely
sleep as it was, he didn't need additional stress. While he was politely waiting behind Barnes, while
the man himself was greeting them, Steve couldn't suppress a shudder.

These people came on by one and greeted Barnes with respect albeit reluctant to show it. The
meeting lasted long into the night and Steve was glad to see them gone when they left, barely
spearing a glance in his direction. He was sure that soon he was going to find out the outcome of
this meeting. He would have to find another way to gain information about them. In the meantime,
he could take as many photocopies as he could of the files he would find in Rebecca's office.

The first time he did it, his hands shook terribly, although he knew that there was almost no one at
home. He made sure to be aware of everyone's schedule that evening and the fact that almost
everyone was out definitely helped. Not that it mattered since his hands continued to shake as he
opened one of Rebecca's files and took a copy of it.

He always had access to her office, and nothing was locked up. At the end of the day, who would
have dared to make a move against the Barnes'? Who in their right mind would have presumed to
betray them? However, since Steve's last fateful phone call to his chief, an awareness of his
mission started to creep along with his thoughts. And while he was helping Barnes defeat Pierce
and perhaps annihilate him, he understood that it was just a question of time before he was asked to
provide something for the authorities.

The unrestricted access in Rebecca's office was the first circumstance to set in motion a careful
plan of gathering evidence. And what best method if not to capture all the subtleties of their
transactions? So, he started to copy the relevant files, or the ones that seemed relevant to him, then
hide them in the floor of his room under his bed.

Weekly, he would then store them in a safe at the bus station close to the practice range, knowing
fully well that nobody would follow him. The sensation was almost surreal, and he was doubting
that he was getting alive out of this. Perhaps this constant surge of adrenaline in his system
combined with the sensation of insecurity contributed to his severe lack of sleep.

He wasn't sleeping well even before, but since moving back in the Barnes mansion, his hours of
sleep were cut off dramatically. He was either trying to fall asleep and simply couldn't do it, or he
would fall asleep mostly due to the exhaustion, but he would wake up screaming or breathing
harshly in the stone-cold silence of the house, Quill's blood pouring over him over and over again,
drowning him as the hands of other people that he had helped to convict were drawing him deeper and deeper into the abyssal red tide.

Different night, same nightmare. Time and time again, he would wake up in terror, plagued by the sense of guilt that would wash over him as Quill's shadow would follow him well into the morning light. His sense of guilt wasn't helping and the fact that Andrea reminded him of what happened to his friend, kind of made him wish that Barnes would just find out who he really was and just kill him. If Barnes would ever prove that merciful. Other times, he would dream of an army of carved up men, saved in ice and asking him to save them. And he would try to reach them, but he couldn't do it and, in the end, he was buried too under mountains of ice, waiting for the merciful death that would never come.

These reoccurring nightmares would make him seek other people's company, though quite often, there was no one to keep him company in the dead of the night. Sometimes though, Andrea would show up in the living room with an apologetic face and some hot chocolate, and they would drink it in silence while refusing to speak about the elephant in the room. Most of the time though, Steve found himself alone in the room, watching listlessly different TV shows, not settling on any.

In spite of his reticence over Barnes' wealth, if there was one room that Steve appreciated in the whole house, apart from the kitchen, of course, it was the living room. There were several couches, one more comfortable than the others, covered by fluffy blankets and comforters and pillows of all shapes and sizes. The giant flat screen dominated the room, with modern dark wooden shelves in the back for the various games and movies that they housed.

The couches were arranged in such a way as to offer to the person that sat on them total view of the screen but also access to the dark mahogany coffee table, which was low to the ground and always covered with different magazines of all interests (both girly and manly) and different holders for coffee cups or glasses.

Steve smiled weakly as he snuggled under one of the comforters in the dim glow of the screen. Yeah, he was definitely enjoying this room. It was two in the morning and after only a couple of hours of sleep, he had enough and decided that maybe he could fall asleep in front of the screen.

"I hope you realize that one can barely see you." The gruff voice startled him, and Steve raised his head in time to see Barnes holding a cup of something smelling deliciously in his hand. He was dressed in a blue t-shirt and some worn grey sweatpants and Steve winced because he was really exhausted and there was no time to pretend, he was mature anymore.

"Please tell me you brought it for me," he moaned, making grabby hands for the cup. Barnes raised a perfect eyebrow at him, his icy eyes carefully masked by the dim TV light. But whatever he saw on Steve's face must have made him relent because he just gave him the cup and settled on the couch at his feet, another cup which Steve didn't see before appearing in his other hand. The realization that Bucky Barnes must have made hot chocolate for him made him slightly blush and he had to hide in his comforter so that the other man wouldn't see his reaction.

"Can't sleep again?"

"Yeah," he admitted reluctantly as he changed to another show on Netflix. He sensed Barnes' eyes on him but decided to ignore him.

"I want to watch this show." Barnes pointed at the detective show that Steve secretly loved. However, he still made a show of looking back at Barnes incredulously.

"Seriously, a cop show?"
"Why not?" Barnes took a sip from his cup and made himself more comfortable. "I watched the first two episodes and I want to see the rest."

"You, Barnes, are a very strange man indeed."

"It's Bucky," the older man whispered in the faint light of the room, making Steve's heart beat a little faster. Barnes refused to look at him as he took a part of the comforter and wrapped it around his legs, drinking every now and then from his cup as Steve didn't say anything and started the show.

They watched the next two episodes in comfortable silence, none of them too keen to broach a subject that might make them feel uncomfortable. Perhaps because of the hot chocolate or the warm presence of the man at his feet, Steve felt his eyes grow heavier and heavier until he finally fell into a blessedly deep sleep without any dreams whatsoever.

Safety.

This was the first feeling that infiltrated in his subconscious as he started to wake up. He felt safe, a warm presence at his back, shielding him from the real world or the nightmares. He was comfortably trapped between the back of the couch and this presence, a heavy arm on his waist, the hand dangerously settled on his stomach.

The other arm was offering support for his neck, soft fingers carded through his hair, softly caressing him every now and then. The chest of that person was against his back and Steve sighed heavily feeling relaxed like he hasn't felt in ages. He snuggled closely to that person, not fully awake and was surprised to feel that arm around his waist curling a little bit possessively around him.

"Are you awake?" The question made him tense in two seconds flat. And he opened his eyes in surprise, staring at the beige pillow under him. Bucky made no attempt at getting away from him. On the contrary, he moved closer and closer until Steve could feel nothing but the man and his desire for him and oh, how he wanted to surrender to that desire, if only for a few moments.

"Yes", he mumbled unable to resist. Soft lips breathed his name against the skin of his neck, raising goosebumps in their wake.

"Did you sleep well?" Barnes certainly loved to torment Steve. He swallowed hard, his breath quickening as he simply nodded, knowing that the other man would feel his answer. For a second, it seemed like Barnes was going to say something else, but nothing got out. Steve closed his eyes, trying to even his breath. Then he moved suddenly closer to the older man, surprising him. The fingers tightened slightly through his hair.

"Thank you," Steve mumbled, suddenly drained of any power he might have over himself. The cold reality was that the comfort he had been seeking was offered by a man that wouldn't have hesitated to kill him if he knew the truth. And yet... and yet...

"You have nothing to thank me for, Steve," Bucky replied and his lips touched him with each word and Steve was falling rapidly through the rabbit hole and he didn't want it to end. If only he could keep on falling. The next words made him shudder.

"I want you to stop running. We've been going in circles for the past month and you constantly run away from me." Bucky pressed himself against Steve, a hot line of muscles, his hips slightly moving, making Steve swallow hard, heartbeat increasing exponentially. He kissed him just behind his ear, turning Steve's legs into mush.
"I want you to let go," Bucky growled softly as his hips kept on moving and his hand slowly traveled under Steve's t-shirt, mapping sweet-tasting skin, making muscles jump in pleasure and hair rise as the hand finally cupped him, slowly moving, agonizingly so.

"I can't," Steve whispered harshly, scrunching his eyes, as he was losing grip on reality, abandoning himself to this man, this man that held his heart and life in his hands and didn't even know it.

"Yes, you can," Bucky muttered back, nipping at Steve's shoulder and neck, bruising kiss after bruising kiss. His hand moved steadily and the barrier of the clothes between them was an unbearable torment at this point. If only he would have the courage of turning around, of taking hands over that exquisite skin, of having the courage to taste Bucky's lips and bruise them, own them, only for him. Just for him. If only he could be that selfish.

"Please." His broken sob made the other man stop for a second. Because if you asked Steve what he was begging for, he couldn't say whether it was for Bucky to stop or for him to continue and make him forget. Bucky though seemed to understand his dilemma. He was turning him around and no, no, no, Steve didn't want to - he opened his eyes as he was laid on his back, and gorgeous black tresses covering his surroundings like there was no one else on this earth but him and Bucky and their bodies as they kept moving, almost unconsciously. Hips against hips. Bucky's arms were bracketing his face, making him stare back at shrewd blue eyes.

Steve groaned in pleasure unable to take his eyes from Bucky, as the older man stared back at him, desire and hunger building behind those shades of blue. Steve wanted, oh how he wanted, no, craved for those lips on him again. He could forget. Just for an instant who this man could be for him. He could.

Suddenly, having taken this decision, his hands traveled down the other man's back until he reached the string of his sweats and then pushed them down together with the underwear and Bucky mirrored his action. And when they touched again skin on skin, Steve moaned in pleasure and Bucky kissed him at last.

He pressed him into the couch and kissed him like he wanted to take everything from Steve, his tongue almost fucking him in the same way. Steve closed his eyes as his head felt light and fuzzy. He ran his fingers through Bucky's hair and pulled a little as the older man made a choked-off gasp, the pleasure of it making Steve moan in turn. He was skimming his hands over Bucky's neck and shoulders settling on his ass as he cupped him and made him move harder, faster.

The older man nipped and licked at Steve's neck and collarbone like he wanted to leave his mark permanently. And Steve let him, allowed him to do everything because Bucky's taste on his lips was like a drug that made Steve hooked up straight away. Steve just moaned in pleasure, tilting his head back to give him better access.

"Look at me." Bucky's gravelly voice made him obey the command almost instantly and he found himself drowning in a sea of blue desire, as Bucky made the sinful little sounds of pleasure. He began to thrust in earnest; Steve was unable to hide his pleasure as it kept gathering behind every molecule of his body, as each muscle and bone wishing for Bucky's caresses, his fingers, his lips.

The man on top of him was flushed, breathing hard, his composure cracked. Bucky stared back at him as he pushed just so and Steve was gone. His pleasure was instant and overwhelming in a way nothing had been for a very long time. Bucky thrusted a few more times until he was gone as well. And Steve held his shoulders like he was drowning and pushed so he could feel everything.

There were tears in his eyes, threatening to fall as he scrunched his eyes, hiding away the
overwhelming sensation that this man that could so easily kill him and make it so painful, was the only person to feel so intense, so safe. Again, and again, Barnes's hands were caressing his sides, even as their breaths were quietening down and they were becoming a little gross.

Bucky let his head down again, peppering him with butterfly kisses over his closed eyes, his forehead, his jaw. The air around them was tainted with the smell of sex and their pleasure and he couldn't get enough of it. His fingers laid spread on Bucky's strong shoulders still covered by his t-shirt.

"When you can’t sleep and you seek comfort, you take your pillow and your comforter, and you come to me." Bucky slowly bit at his earlobe, making Steve's fingers grab fistsfuls of the material. Bucky made him open his eyes again and looked down at him demanding, "You’ll have to come to me next time, Steve."

The name was like a bucket of icy water for Steve, making him tense all over. It shattered the intimacy between them like an ugly mirror. Bucky sensed it and confused looked at Steve as the younger man pushed and pushed hard.

"Get off me." Steve pushed Bucky so hard that the man had little choice. "Get off, get off!" Once he was free, he pulled his sweats up ignoring the gross factor, turning his back at Bucky as if that would erase the past few hours.

"Running again I see." Bucky's harshness came as no surprise. "I didn't peg you for a coward, but then again I was wrong about you before."

"I’m no coward. Don't you see?" Steve harsh breaths exploded in the dim light of the room, now offered by the first rays of the sun. He looked back at the man seated on the couch, a monument of cold and harsh beauty. And no, this attraction, this feeling needed to go away. Now.

"See what, Steve?"

*You shatter me, you bring something in my life that should never exist. You'll shatter me and you'll take whatever piece you will find and then you'll ruin me. And I, oh, God help me, I will let you do that to me.*

He was gasping for air, suddenly the walls closing in on him, because no, how could he admit now, at dawn, as the first undercover cop on the brink of taking down two of the most important faces in the illegal world, that he was attracted to Bucky Barnes, that he wanted those hands again on him? That he wanted those lips bruising him again and his name whispered like a prayer. A broken sob freed itself as he took a step back. This was...

"Bucky!" Howlett’s shout broke whatever spell existed between them as he entered the living room, not surprised at all to see them together, but choosing carefully to ignore the shattered look on Steve's face. "Pierce made the first move! And you won't be happy about it".

Chapter End Notes

:)
should the odds be in your favor

Steve pushed a broken vial with his foot and took an encompassing look at the charred remains of what was once a hidden methamphetamine laboratory, which seemed to be responsible for a lot of Barnes' merchandise and production. It had been secluded in the industrial part of Brooklyn, in what must have appeared an abandoned warehouse. Pierce not only destroyed the whole lab but made sure to kill everyone in it, whether it meant burning them alive or shoot them if they had enough power to get out of it.

The smell was the worst. The burnt flesh combined with the chemical remains that in some parts were still burning made Steve gag several times. The firefighters had everything under control and knew better than to ask questions. One of the fire inspectors that were already on the scene shook his head bewildered by the findings and dared to approach Barnes. His beady eyes analyzed shrewdly the odds before deciding that it was worth taking the risk.

"C4, sir," he concluded, respectfully keeping the distance between him and Barnes, while his colleagues watched the show with a sort of terrified admiration. Barnes nodded slightly cueing the inspector to continue, "Enough C4 to throw a goddamn crater in Brooklyn town if needed. It was placed mostly next to the resistance pillars of the building to make sure that it would collapse over whoever was trying to salvage something or themselves."

"Do you know how was detonated?"

"Most likely through an electronic device." The inspector gulped suddenly aware that he had just begun to speculate, and Barnes might not like that. "I can't say for sure, sir, until we have more conclusive evidence, but I can tell you that whoever did this had done it from a quite short distance."

"Thank you." Barnes dismissed him with just those two words, but they were enough for the fire inspector, who returned to his colleagues and received clumsily hidden pats on his back. He must have drawn the short stick.

Steve glanced at Barnes, who perused his surroundings. The war was in the open now and everyone would be aware of this. The authorities certainly knew that this was an illegal operation, though Bucky had hidden everything under the guise of making homeopathic medicines. Some of them must have been bought, some of them must have been threatened. But despite all of this, there was only one conclusion: Bucky Barnes owned more men than Steve had imagined at first look.

The empire of the White Wolf was far-reaching, and he began to have his doubts about his efforts to bring down this empire. Especially in the light of what had happened that morning. He watched as Bucky gave them instructions and ordered them around, dealt professionally with the firefighters and the fire inspectors and then sent all of them at home. That day was mostly spent making an inventory of what could be salvaged, how many people died, and how many bribes were going to be offered. That night Bucky locked himself into his office and didn't come out.

The following day, it was Steve's day off and he made sure to leave the house early in the morning, going first to hide whatever files he had managed to copy during that week. Then he walked towards the river, changing the spot of where he usually settled but not before buying a burner phone.

The recent events in his life had thrown him off, the fragile balance that he had managed to achieve now torn to pieces. He pinched his nose in an attempt to forget about that particular cursed
morning. If only he could stop thinking about it, everything would be so much easier. Being an undercover cop meant that at times, he was supposed to rely a lot on instinct.

Steve didn't have a lot of years under his belt as an undercover agent, but he had enough to know that sometimes taking certain decisions could either condemn him or save him. Destroying the Barnes' was his ultimate goal but in order to do that, he would first need to get rid of Pierce as fast as he could, maybe even permanently, for the certainty of his own death now loomed dangerously close. With how much closer he became to the others in the Barnes clan, there was no doubt in his mind that once his loyalty would be proven lacking and faulty, they would have no qualms into ending him.

He looked up at the passing clouds and wondered briefly when was the last time that he could breathe freely without the doubts and the reifications. He was constantly betraying people, some of which became quite dear to him, like Andrea on his previous mission. So many decisions that would break him or make him. He made the phone call five minutes later.

"Hey, brother." Tony answered concern pouring in his voice. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah, everything's fine." He raked his fingers through his hair, making it wilder. "I need your help."

"Shouldn't you call Rhodes for this?"

"No, I really don't need a sermon right now and actually it is only you that can help me."

"Uh hu, so I'm your only hope." He could almost hear Tony’s grin. "Well, well, well, he’ll be disappointed."

"Haha, like that joke hasn't become old very fast." Steve rolled his eyes.

"Allow an old man his simple pleasures."

"Does Pepper know that you're old?"

"Yeah, like that's funny."

"I know." Steve sighed. "I'm sorry. This mission is taking a toll on me and before you tell me I told you so, can we just move to the part where you agree to help me?"

"Like I was ever able to say no to you, even when I should have, stupid stubborn ass."

"Well, that's a new one."

"I try to keep you on your toes." Tony’s voice became serious. "What can I do for you?"

"Two things. The first one is a more general one and you will probably need Ronan’s help. I need the locations of some of Pierce's labs and general business places. Though, I want them as fast as you can get them."

"Can I ask why?" Steve gave him a short account of the past few weeks. Tony listened to him carefully. "So, the million-dollar question is why Pierce is so keen on ruining Barnes," he said after a while.

"Yeah, but I honestly don't have the time to investigate his motivations. At this point, it is a question of who is going to annihilate whom. Hopefully, Pierce would go down first and then little
by little, I will be able to do the same with Barnes."

"Are you sure about that?" The doubt was loud and clear making him wince upon hearing it.

"I know, this is the most impossible mission of the impossible missions. But there's no guarantee in what I do. Even if I can take some people down before this, it is still better than nothing."

"I guess you don't want me to tell you at this point that this is beyond reckless."

"Let's skip that part. I've been telling this to myself a thousand times a day."

"Good to know. Well, getting the information shouldn't be a problem. What's the second request?"

"This is a bit awkward, but you know at the time when you worked a bit for Pierce before you realized what an asshole he truly was?"

"Ah, yes, once when I chose to be the bad and scary guy, that's when you have to mess up my plans. You were lucky that car didn't explode with you in it. By the way, next time you should let us know in advance about your missions, at least we would know which ones to refuse."

"Please, you always loved to play the bad guy and you really liked to be the muscles for Pierce."

"Steve, you do realize that for many people, perhaps even for you, I am the bad guy."

"Not for me." A moment of silence. "Never for me, Tony. I thought you knew that."

"Yeah, well, I had my doubts." The relief was still palpable in the air. "So okay, I was working for like five hot seconds for him, what do you need?"

"In those five hot seconds that you worked for him, did you manage to come across a guy about the same height as me, brown hair, and brown eyes? Kind of emo-looking with some really freaky eyes?"

"I know the man. Yeah, name's Zemo. Not the type of man to meet in a dark alley. Or well-lit one either, for that matter. Can't say much though. The guy never spoke while I was in his presence and he made abundantly clear he's not interested in socializing. Why?"

"I think he's behind most of the attacks against Barnes' in the last few days. I managed to spot him around one of the places where an attack took place." Steve pinched his nose. "I think he might be on to me. I'm not sure but I really want to know more about this guy."

"I can't promise you anything. But I can tell you for sure one thing which is the guy is definitely quite important in the hierarchy of the Pierce's clan because a lot of them deferred to him."

"Wonderful, just what I wanted to hear."

"Listen, Steve, I know that you are all for being a badass guy and you got involved in this war knowing full well what you were getting yourself into, but I believe at this time this is beyond your control. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Too late to pull out of it now. Could you please just let me know once you find out anything?"

"Sure thing."

"Thank you, old man. I owe you one."
"How about you just get out of this alive and owe me later?"

"I could do that. Talk to you soon."

"You too. Take care."

He switched off the burner phone and then threw it in the river with all the frustration accumulated in recent days. He wiped his face and tried to think of everything else apart from his mission, but he was failing miserably. A perverted voice inside of him reminded him that the tension building up behind his eyelids was only partly due to the mission.

Bucky Barnes was the main responsible one and he really tried to divert his thoughts from that, thank you very much. But his body ached for the closeness that they shared, for Bucky's arms to hold him still and take his thoughts away if only for a few moments at a time. And that was so wrong on so many levels, he didn't even want to think about it.

He stayed on the bank of that river well into the night, spinning his mission back and forth, trying to come up with some reasonable solutions to the current Pierce predicament but until he knew more about the mobster's operations, there was not much he could do. He completely ignored his problem with Bucky. That headache resolutely could be solved at another time, or maybe not solved at all. Steve was good at ignoring a problem until it would either disappear or just hit him straight in the face.

Fate seemed to prefer the latter version as Steve entered the mansion and silently stepped into the semi-darkness of the hallway just to freeze as Bucky came out of the living room staring at him.

"Where have you been?" The man hissed, crossing his arms in front of his chest like an angry puppy and seriously, Steve wanted to laugh so badly. But the question bothered Steve, especially in the light of the recent events. So, he made the big mistake of passing the man and answering him sarcastically.

"Last time I checked this was my day off and I don't have to answer to you."

The fingers that gripped his shoulders came as a shock as he was pushed hard against the wall, Bucky's hands tightening against his wrists like a vice. His eyes were burning, and Steve thought he never saw someone as beautiful as him in that particular moment. His body answered the closeness almost immediately and he craved the intimacy of it so much he trembled with the desire to touch this man and ravish him, although just seconds ago he was fairly convinced by the despair and futility of his situation.

"You belong to me, whether you like it or not, Steve. And you do answer to me, so I want to know where you have been."

"It's not any of your fucking business," Steve snarled, fighting hard against the fog of pleasure that blinded him.

In response, Bucky just kissed him hard, hands moving to Steve's face to trap him completely. He jerked in surprise, trying to deny them this moment, but Bucky's lips were persistent and before realizing, time was slowing down. The world was burning down to the two of them and Steve's arms engulfed Bucky's shoulders drawing him closer to him. The kiss became a demonstration in hunger and desire, pressing against each other as if there was nothing left into the charred remains of the world but them.

Then Bucky kissed his eyes, his nose, his forehead, his jaw and finally whispered, "Come to me.
Goddamn it, come to me!' And those heavenly hands left him leaning heavily against the wall, all alone. He closed his eyes, a poor attempt to ignore the empty pit in his stomach, trying not to stare after Bucky. He was hard and craving for that man's touch and his last words rang into his mind. Steve made his way to his room, still thinking about it. Thoughts swirled around, though all of them came to the same conclusion. He took a shower, changed into clean clothes and then took his pillow. He opened the door. He inhaled deeply. He closed the door, then shook his head and opened it again.

The morning found him sleeping in front of the door, still closed, still dreaming of caresses and whispers.

The door that banged him in the head was so not part of the dream.

"What the hell?!" Howlett shouted as Steve laid on the floor clutching his head.

"What the hell? Can't you just knock?!

"Look fucker, your day off is over. And it's ten. How long were you planning on sleeping?"

Howlett froze on the floor. "For that matter, why are you sleeping on the goddamn floor?"

"Don't want to talk about it." Steve scowled at him. "I'll come down in ten minutes."

"Better hurry up. A mysterious package came in your name."

"A package?" He frowned and then blessed Tony in his mind. He got up in a flurry. "I'll be down in five. And I need to speak with you and Bucky about it."

"About what?"

"Just meet me in Rebecca's office, bring me a cup of coffee, and stop asking so many questions."

"One of these days I will kick your ass but see you in a bit."

"You love my ass."

"Yeah, in your dreams." Howlett clapped him on the shoulder, squeezing a little. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm-" Steve shook his head smiling sadly at him. "I don't know what to do, Howlett."

"Wanna go out tonight and talk about it?" Howlett looked genuinely concerned and Steve thought for a moment whether he should confide him. He could - what? He could what? Ask Howlett to give him tips on how to date a mobster? Ludicrous as it might have sounded though, Howlett was the only one who could offer him a clear insight in what this might mean; he'd be the only one, to be honest with Steve, no matter how ridiculous that sounded.

"I'd like that."

"All right." Howlett grinned delighted and a bit surprised.

Ten minutes later, as promised, Steve entered in Rebecca's office, where Howlett and Bucky were waiting for him together with her. All three pairs of eyes stared at him, but Bucky's seemed devoid of any emotion and Steve swallowed hard before entering the room.

"Morning, Steve? What is this all about?"
"Morning, Rebecca. Sorry for being late." He took the package that was waiting for him on her desk and opened it carefully. A quite heavy plastic bag was inside, attached to it a sticky note in Tony’s handwriting: *You owe me, stupid butthead.* Steve rolled his eyes and then steadily spread the files and the adjacent maps on Rebecca's desk.

"Yesterday I managed to get in contact with my friends that helped me free Rollins," he began, avoiding stubbornly Bucky's gaze. "They have a way of getting into other people's files and info in general. I asked whether they could give us any information on Pierce's locations or at least some important targets."

"Who are these people?" Howlett asked suspiciously.

"If I'd tell you, I'd have to kill you." Steve smirked. "Let's just say that they are very dangerous people and they would get very upset if anything happened to me. So, you might get some really angry people up your ass if you ever decide to get rid of me."

"Okay, chuckleheads, no time for your stupidity. What are these?" Rebecca interrupted them.

"These are apparently four important locations for Pierce." Steve went straight to business. "This is the most important one and I would say keep it for last. This is the one where he manages to launder money for the Russians. I believe that we might hit Pierce really hard on this one with a bit of help from the old Yondu."

"If I read this correctly," Bucky finally looked at him and Steve ignored the pang in his heart, "these two are drug labs, and the other two are related to the Russians and their merchandise."

"Yes, each of them has its own importance and although ruining his heroin supplies would hinder some of his business here in Brooklyn, it would hardly put a chink in the entire operation. But these two related to the Russians could definitely help us show that Pierce is not only losing the grip of his business but also that he can't guarantee its safety, which is probably the more important thing."

"If we succeed in this, we can steal something far more precious than he would expect." Howlett grinned maniacally at them and Steve smirked back. One evil son of a bitch would soon go down if his plans would play well.

"Howlett, call everyone. We will have to proceed efficiently and with expediency, if we want to hit Pierce where it will hurt him the most." Bucky stood up and took the files as Howlett already began to call people.

"Brother," Rebecca's voice sounded quite harsh, "you haven't thanked Steve yet for what he did for us." Bucky stared straight at Steve as if daring him to say something or act in some way, which confused him because Steve was not sure what exactly he was supposed to do here.

"Steve did what any good soldier would do," Bucky finally admitted and then left them staring after him. Steve's heart stuttered in his chest and when he turned back towards Rebecca, she must have seen something in his eyes because her eyes turned softer.

"Are you all right? It's not in your nature to be late."

"Sorry, I've overslept. It won't happen again."

"All right," she said after a small hesitation. "Let's get down to business then."

The rest of the day was spent in meetings and analyzing the contents of the files trying to grasp any detail and any weaknesses in the security systems. They spent the following night celebrating their
first success in the operation Stick it to Pierce (this was how Steve was going to call it and nobody would make him change his mind, okay? Thank you very much.)

Midnight found Steve and Howlett in the back-garden exchanging stories over a bottle of bourbon in between them. Well, Howlett was very talkative with a bit of alcohol in him and Steve found out some interesting facts that he filed for later.

"Okay," the man said at some point, slumping in the comfortable chair, "I'm drunk enough to listen to you moaning about your gay adventures, so spill it up. What is it with you and Bucky?"

"Man, you have no tact whatsoever."

"Please, as if. That's for Rebecca and occasionally Bucky. But don't you dare change the subject."

"I think that Bucky wants something that I can't give him." Steve leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees. "He's just- And I'm so-"

"Oh, my God! Please stop! You sound like a fucking girl. Man up, for fuck's bourbon." Howlett laughed sardonically at him. "Let me tell you something about Bucky. He came out at a very young age and in a medium where being gay isn't exactly a walk in the park. Probably that is why sometimes he has been a bit crueler than the situation required. But in all these years since I've known him, I've never seen him use his position in keeping someone next to him. If you're afraid that he's going to kill you or worse, don't. He's not the type and you can actually speak with exes if that's what you want."

"It's not that I don't believe you but-" Steve took another sip of bourbon, let it travel through his body.

"You're not afraid of that." Howlett was unusually perceptive. "You are actually scared of your feelings for Bucky. Oh, man, you do have feelings for him."

Something must have shattered in him because there was no other explanation for the broken chocked up sound that left his lips. He buried his head in his hands closing his eyes and ignoring the rapid beating of his heart. A fucking undercover cop attracted to a goddamn mobster, a horrible one at that. Shit, he was going to burn in hell. Or whatever passed for hell these days.

Howlett brought his chair closer to his and squeezed his shoulder. "You shouldn't be afraid of it, Steve. You should let it happen for we live just one life."

"But I'm not what he thinks I am. I am so much more and less at the same time. I can't explain it."

"Listen, are you going to cheat him?"

"No."

"Are you going to lie to him about your feelings?"

"No, of course not."

"I didn't even think that would possible. At the end of the day, and I can't believe you're making me say this, that's all you can expect. It's not like you're getting married. What do you have to lose? Try it, see how it is. If it's working, good for you. And if it's not working, you can go back at being an employer and employee. You're technically working for his sister anyway."

"I know. But-"
"Listen, at the end of the day we only have one life. For fuck's bourbon, when was the last time you had sex with someone?" Steve looked so lost at him that it made Howlett laugh. "See? Exactly! Just enjoy life. That's all you should want for yourself. Have a bit of courage!"

Steve nodded but didn't say anything and sensing his torment, Howlett changed the subject. He was a good man, but he didn't know the whole variables in the equation. When they split up later, he clapped him once and repeated the same thing to have a bit of courage, so Steve went back to his room to repeat the same routine of the previous night. He took a shower, changed into a clean t-shirt and a well-worn pair of sweats, grabbed his pillow and he actually made it out of his room this time.

He crossed several hallways with his pillow in his arms as if he was a lost child and he had a nightmare that only one person could soothe. Then he froze in front of Bucky's door. He paced several minutes, trying to convince himself out of it, the arguments being mostly against it because seriously, he was an undercover agent and sooner or later he would be put in the position of betraying this man. And that was only in case this man wasn't going to kill him first.

Screw this.

He opened the door, got in the room and closed it, without even knocking or asking for permission. He looked lost in the darkness of the room like maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all but then the rustle of the sheets drew his attention and saw how Bucky made room for him on the left-hand side of the bed. Even in the darkness, he could feel those blue eyes bore into him. He went and settled down, arranged his pillow and laid on his back, pulling the sheets to cover him. He closed his eyes. Something wasn't right.

He opened his eyes, settled on his side, tucked his face in between Bucky's shoulder and neck and took a deep breath. The older man stayed still for a very long time before he turned towards Steve, gathering him in his arms like he was being handed a precious gift.

Steve smiled. There was such tenderness to every gesture, the way one of the arms wrapped around his waist while the other was offered as a pillow, which Steve accepted gladly. One of Steve's hands settled on Bucky's hip while the other covered his heart. It beat steadily. It beat like hope. He burrowed himself into that man until he forgot about reality and fell asleep like that, not knowing where he ended, and Bucky began.

It felt like the sweetest surrender to wake up the following morning still in those arms, as if he barely moved during the night. He took one look at Bucky and smiled. Fuck his morals, they were not going to keep him warm at night or help him through a nightmare. If only for the shortest of time, maybe he could have this man. And he could be his.

For as long as he could lie to him or pretend that his other life didn't exist. The gentleness with which they watched each other, the simple way in which Bucky ran his fingers through his hair, the tender way in which they traded kisses made Steve's heart tremble like a thirsty man seeing an oasis for the first time in many years. Coming to the realization that they were being tender with each other just for the bourbon of it, just to be closer, without any end in sight made something warm bloom inside of his chest, soaring high, even when Bucky sent him back to his room with another closed-mouthed kiss and a soft caress on his cheek.

Despite the tender start of the day, the afternoon found Steve, Howlett and Thor scouting the second location. It was another big warehouse settled in between many others, in the blooming industrial site of the city. Rollins was getting really bored at home as Rumlow was on a mission and decided to tag along with them, promising to offer them full back up from one of the adjacent buildings and Steve asked himself amused if Rollins just missed the heights and the way they
made him feel.

They were making their observations from the roof of one of the closest warehouses, a bit higher than the one that Pierce owned. They studied the movements for hours, trying to notice a pattern in their schedule and in the changing of the guards. While it was boring to sit and wait for any movements and count as many people while studying the comings and goings of the trucks and various cars, Steve imagined it like a normal police stakeout mission and thus making it so much easier to deal with Howlett, who was getting bored really fast and at some point sent Thor for sandwiches.

"Seriously, how much longer do we need to be here?" Howlett whined. Like a three-year-old. For the billionth time.

"Howlett, my patience is running really low now. Could you just fucking calm down? We need to gather as much intel as we can, and it is not going to happen if you continue to whine like this."

"But I'm bored. Pierce is planning on killing us with his boring activities."

"Gentlemen." The third voice had been so inconspicuous in its approach that Steve wouldn't remember until later on that he almost gave himself whiplash as he turned around in time to see Zemo holding a gun to Thor's head, the perfect picture of calm. His brown eyes seemed to assess both of them as they rose to their feet, their guns pointed at him before he could blink. Steve had the vague feeling that Zemo had actually let them draw their guns out.

Thor was taller than Zemo, giving their opponent an advantage that they surely didn't want to give, especially to a man like that. The driver was composed and other than the beads of sweat falling slowly down on his temple, there was no sign of distress. How many times he must have been under such pressure?

"Drop the gun, Rogers," Zemo said in that blank tone of voice as if nothing could touch him. And staring back at those dead eyes, Steve had no doubt that nothing could really touch this man, whether it was love or hate. This, in turn, made him a very dangerous person. Steve and Howlett had surrounded him, Rollins aiming at him from the rooftop, and yet Zemo's hand didn't tremble as he kept Thor close to his body, the gun pointed at the head of Steve's friend.

"I think you should drop the gun, Zemo." Negotiation was a good idea at this point. "I would say that the odds are definitely not in your favor. So how about you stop threatening my friend and just drop the gun so we can have a nice and friendly conversation?"

"Friendly conversation?" If he had been capable of it, Zemo might have laughed sarcastically. Unfortunately, as one of the most repressed people Steve had ever met, he just raised an eyebrow, but not even this gesture changed his blank expression. "I don't believe Barnes' men are capable of friendly conversations, as you put it."

"Listen, you have my word that nothing will happen to you," Steve ignored Howlett’s cry of protest, "if you just let my friend go." They contemplated each other while the tension in the air suffocated everyone present there. Steve tightened his finger on the trigger, although it was a pointless action. Zemo was a professional killer and he used Thor perfectly as a shield. It was impossible to take a shot at him without hurting their friend. Steve tried to calm his heartbeats, by taking deep breaths, his brain scanning desperately for solutions.

"Well, Rogers, this is what we're going to do." Zemo's monotone voice splintered the silence. "You and your friend here are going to drop your guns and push them towards me. Once this is done, I'll let your friend go without harming him."
"No, Steve, this is insane. This guy will kill us all!" Howlett’s grip on the gun had turned white-knuckled.

"Howlett, do bear in mind that you still have a sniper on the rooftop that I’m allowing to provide cover for you."

Steve didn't say anything pondering on the situation. While it was true that killing them would have been extremely easy for Zemo in the current situation, Rollins would still get the chance to kill him and the cop sensed that this was an outcome that suicidal as it might appear, was not something their attacker desired. It was worth taking the risk as the minutes were ticking by and there was no resolution in sight.

"Fine," he sighed, suddenly relaxing his arms and putting slowly the gun down, under his opponent's careful eyes.

"Steve, have you lost your mind?" Howlett shouted, his fury palpable in the thin air. "You can’t trust this guy."

"He's right, Steve," Thor mumbled dejectedly. "Just shoot us both and be done with it."

"How about you both shut the fuck up and do as I say!" Steve snapped scowling at both of them for good measure. "You drop the gun and trust me," he ordered pointing at Howlett, "and you", he scowled for good measure at Thor, "shut your trap because I will tell Doc what you said and he won't be happy about it."

With great hesitation, Howlett dropped the gun to the floor and pushed it with his left foot to Zemo, who didn't even seem to care, his whole attention focused on Steve.

"All right," the cop finally said, "we've done what you asked from us. Now it's your turn. Let my friend go and leave. Now."

"Rogers, I lied." The vacant eyes took in his whole being and Steve couldn't suppress a cold shiver, goosebumps rising as if Zemo was physically touching him. "I will let your friend go as promised, but you…"

He didn't finish the sentence. The gun was suddenly pointed at him, exploding deafeningly in the silence that surrounded them, ignoring completely Howlett’s horrified cries.

The bullet hit Steve straight in his chest as he crashed to the pavement in agony.
Steve woke up to a sudden wave of pain as if someone was trying to open his chest apart from the outside and chose as soundtrack Howlett's frantic calls. He scrunched his eyes and tried to breathe but the ache in his chest intensified, so he tried to avoid this vital process. If breathing was so painful, then he was having none of it.

"Steve! Steve! Answer me, goddamn you!"

"Stop shouting and maybe I will," he mumbled, short bursts of breath easing the whole process for him, though the pain was still unbearable. It was as if he had been hit with the hammer in the solar plexus. Repeatedly.

"Goddamn you, you son of a bitch!" Howlett's worried face came into Steve's view. The broken sound at the end of the sentence was definitely accompanied by a wince, which Steve would have found rather funny if it weren't for his state. "You have more lives than a cat."

"You people are really dangerous for my health," he slurred the words, making Howlett frown.

"Whatever, man. The fact that we can still talk about it is a good thing. Maybe next time when I suggest wearing bulletproof vests even to a fucking stint, you won't whine as much."

"Nope, you kind of saved my life." He groaned in pain as he tried to get up. A sudden wave of nausea hit him, and he turned his head just before puking on one of the guys.

"Hang on in there." Howlett ran his fingers through Steve's hair and caressed him soothingly. "Rollins is bringing the car, we'll get you to the doctor in no time. The bullet didn't touch you, but I think the impact was quite hard for your ribs."

"No shit." Steve spat the horrible taste in his mouth and leaned back, his whole upper body screaming in pain. "You guys are okay?"

"Yes." Howlett glowered, while Thor kept his distance. "And you and I will have a discussion later about taking fucking risks. You were lucky that the guy shot you in the chest. What if he shot you in the head?"

"But he didn't." Steve's head was spinning with him. "What happened after-?"

"He disappeared. It was like he had not been there," Thor finally answered. "Steve, I'm so sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." Steve closed his eyes again. "Guys, not feeling so good. Think I will-"

He passed out again before he would finish the sentence, letting the unconsciousness fill up the void between his heart and soul, the pain just a blessedly past memory. And it would have probably stayed like that if his body hadn't betrayed him and had made him wake up later with a
jolt.

Steve opened his eyes groggily as a cool hand was caressing his blond hair, making him lean into the touch. It was rather soothing, and it hit him again how much he starved for this sort of reassuring touches. His whole life had been rather filled with violence and now he could have this. He knew who the person was before he could even open his eyes.

"You shouldn't be here. It's not safe," he murmured, his throat scratchy from disuse and the remains of the vomit. Bucky's eyes softened even more, and he gently pressed his lips against Steve's forehead, making the younger man close his eyes in pleasure briefly. Then he took a glass of water and helped Steve take small sips from it.

"If you'd stop being a reckless bastard, I wouldn't be here," Bucky replied, keeping the light tone, but he couldn't lie to Steve. For such a closed-off person, Bucky sometimes was so easy to read it wasn't even funny. His shoulders were so tensed they were forming a straight line of repressed anger and menace. His shirt was opened two buttons and there was no tie. His hair was a beautiful mess of chestnut soft tresses and Steve swallowed hard because he really liked this man.

"What's the damage?"

"You have two cracked ribs so it will hurt laughing for the next week. A pretty bad bruise and a nice concussion caused by your impact to the ground when you fell." Bucky continued the soothing movements and Steve sighed happily.

"Will the Doc let me go home tonight?"

"Yes, if you behave." Bucky smiled briefly, a small shadow of what it could have been. "Care to explain to me what you were thinking?"

"Well, mostly it was just trying to get Thor alive." Steve rolled his eyes at Bucky's sarcastic tone. "But I just don't understand how that guy knew we were there. There was no suspicious movement against us and it seemed as if we went unnoticed. And then this Zemo just suddenly shows up. What happened after?"

"Howlett's attention was focused on you when you got shot and apparently, all happened so fast that not even Rollins was able to get the guy. He is still alive. For now." The sudden harshness in Bucky's tone made Steve shudder.

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"What did you do?"

"I made sure Pierce learned his lesson today." It was the White Wolf that answered the question, no trace of Bucky left. "If you think that I will let this petty useless idiot believe that he can come after what’s mine and threaten you and Howlett and get away with it, you have another thing coming."

"Bucky, I don't want a war because of me."

"The war had already started but-" Bucky blinked and seemed to be caught up in some sort of horrifying dream for he looked at Steve as if he was rather talking with his ghost rather than him. Gently Steve took his other hand and settled it on his heart. Silently, the gesture seemed to crack Bucky open for his face crumbled and he leaned forehead against Steve's. "Howlett and Thor told me what you did. You can't keep putting yourself in danger, Steve." His right hand pulled a little at his hair, his breath a sweet caress on Steve's face. "When I heard what happened, I think I may have lost my head a little."
"How much is a little?" Steve asked reluctantly because he was not sure he wanted to hear the answer. Bucky pulled back a little and looked at Steve, his left palm still encompassing the entire heart, almost like he wanted to take it out of his chest and maybe guarded safely somewhere on a deserted island.

"I destroyed all the places left," he seethed with righteous anger, shocking Steve into silence. "I will kill for you, Steve Rogers, and I promise you that when I find this Zemo person, I will tear him apart piece by piece and I won't let anyone hurt you anymore."

A cold sweat washed Steve's body in a wave. Such promises and threats coming from the White Wolf himself reminded him that he went to this man willing to be held, he came to this man for comfort and touches and maybe something deeper that he was not going to mention even into his own mind. But the monster part of Bucky was never going to leave. It was an intrinsic part of him. And if he ever found out the truth about Steve, he was not sure that the monster part was not going to win.

"How long was I out?"

"Half a day. It's evening now."

"You're telling me that in half a day, you ruined mine and Howlett's work by destroying those places without thinking about consequences?" Steve's voice steadily rose. "What about the Russians? What were you thinking? Now you will have both Pierce and the Russians on your tail. Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"Yes, yes I was!" Bucky raised his voice stunning Steve and making him keep his mouth shut. His blue eyes burned brightly. "I will burn them down, tear them apart because goddamn you, you make me feel. Don't you see, Steve? You make me fucking feel!"

Steve was floored. He opened his mouth a few times, gaping like a fish but no sound left his lips for he was caught up by Bucky's eyes, by the conviction of his words, by the fire that burnt brightly into his eyes, consuming Steve with the conviction of his words.

"I don't matter, Bucky," he muttered, avoiding that blue light. It was all too much. "You have to protect yourself and this means that you can't let yourself be affected by what happens to me. Pierce is not going to have any mercy and he will strike where it hurts you the most."

"He already did." Bucky took his hand from his hair and grabbed his chin tenderly, making Steve look back into his eyes. "He already did, Steve. And you are important to me, I'm the one that cares about what happens to you. But not only me. Howlett, Thor, my sister, everyone at home. We all care about you, Steve. Get this through your thick skull because the next time you pull out such a stunt, I will personally throttle you."

"You sound so menacing." Steve grinned at him, ignoring the pang in his heart because the truth of Bucky's words was drowning him, settling around his ankles like stones.

"I'm not kidding." He gently pecked Steve.

"I stink," Steve mumbled flushing slightly.

"That you do." That still didn't stop Bucky from kissing him closed mouth. "I'll call doctor Banner to have a look at you and then I'll take you home, all right?" Steve nodded and he didn't analyze too much the emptiness that suddenly caught up with him when Bucky retrieved his hands and went out to call the doc.
Doc Banner came into the room unaccompanied and tsked at Steve before he took another look at his wounds. The bruise was indeed looking horrible. Shades of blue and purple swirled massively in the middle of his chest and Steve didn't know whether to be thankful he survived this. Another wound, another scar to add to his collection. His cracked ribs were impeding him to breathe deeply but the pain could have been so much worse. The doctor gave him some pain killers and asked him to take it easy. Steve smiled at him wobbly because by now, the Doc treated him far more often than he would have liked.

Doc helped him put a clean shirt that Bucky brought with him and Steve mumbled his thanks. Upon hearing the words, Doc's hand slightly trembled and squeezed hard on Steve's shoulder making the younger man gazed at him properly since he came into the room. The Doc's eyes were filled with gratitude and it was almost unbearable to look into them.

"Thank you, Steve." Bruce's voice cracked the pressure by now intolerable. "Without him-" The chocked off sound pulled at Steve's heart like a cat scratching at a door. He smiled softly.

"I know, Doc. Don't worry."

"Anything you want... Anything you need..."

"There's no need. Thank you Doc." Steve knew there would come a time when he would have to ask for the Doc's help when Bucky probably would hunt him down. But it wouldn't be fair to have Bruce involved in this mess so he promised to himself at that moment that he would not ask for help from the Doc. It would have been too much even in exchange for a saved life.

Bucky was waiting for him outside the room, making Steve smile again, and the older man helped him get to the car. Sudden tiredness caught up with Steve and he slowly let his head fell on Bucky's shoulder. Who would have guessed that a mobster's shoulder could be so comfortable? He woke up only once they arrived at the mansion, though he didn't remember much as he was taken to Bucky's room and settled between cool sheets.

Someone was making him change into some pants and made him take his shirt off. He might or might have not whined like a two-year-old for all he wanted was to sleep. Was this too much to ask?

"Tell Bucky I'll be fine," he mumbled, his eyes already closed. The cooing sounds froze in the air, but he was too far gone to care. "He'll worry. And I need to be strong. I need to be so strong." He sobbed into the pillow and the cooing sounds resumed. Someone was holding him, strong arms around him, his chest still on fire.

"Why do you need to be strong, Steve?" The kind voice asked him.

"I can't tell you. But this secret is crushing me." He sighed deeply. "I'll be dead because of it. It will literally crush me. But tell Bucky not to worry."

"I'll tell him."

"Thank you."

He and unconsciousness were beginning to be really good friends as he fell asleep and it was blessedly without any dreams. He thanked the deities for small miracles.

He woke up the following day around noon in Bucky's room but alone. The bed was immense, and he closed his eyes again, trying to remember how he ended up in the room. He opened his eyes again taking in his surroundings. It was quite big with walls painted in soft tones of blue, with
furniture pressed neatly against them. The thick carpet was from end to another and a rather big window dominated the eastern wall. In front of it, there was a small desk with a laptop and some papers on it. It was quite small but very elegant in design. Everything was elegant but masculine at the same time, from the dark green curtains to the brown furniture to the books left array on one of the nightstands. He liked it. It felt lived in, which was rather shocking because he had always expected that Bucky's room would be rather Spartan in its designed and furnished scarcely.

This room was rather cozy and dominated by the king-sized bed. It was personalized. He got up and felt the familiar pull of his ribs. He looked down at his chest and tried not to shudder. The blue hues were much deeper today and it looked like someone took a baseball bat at his chest. He ignored the fact that he was dressed in Bucky's sweats and opened one of the drawers to spot an array of t-shirts, which looked comfortable and worn and Steve chose a blue one. He went to the adjacent bathroom and washed his face, brushed his teeth with his fingers, trying to chase away the stale taste. He went back to the room just in time to see Bucky entering with a tray in his hand, appearing surprised to see the bed empty. He was comfortably dressed into a pair of jeans and a green t-shirt and seriously, Bucky Barnes needed to stop breaking his heart a little every time he showed up like this.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

"Well, I was taking a piss, unless you wanted me ruining your bed." Steve raised an eyebrow at him. "What's that?"

"Breakfast." Bucky settled it on the bed in front of Steve. "Or brunch."

"What's the time?"

"It's around two in the afternoon." Bucky kissed him softly. "Hmm, you brushed your teeth."

"I wanted to be ready." Steve flushed and then avoided Bucky's gaze by taking in what was on the tray. "Seriously, I'm not an army."

"You need to take some pills and Doctor Banner mentioned that you should eat well before doing anything else."

"Fine." Steve scowled but settled against the pillows and began to eat. He was actually quite hungry. Bucky settled next to him reading some files. "What do you have there?"

"Rumlow managed to retrieve some files from one of Pierce's men. And I am trying to make sense of them."

"Do you need any help?" Steve asked half of the curiosity as the cop he was, half because he was genuinely wanted to offer his help. Wow, this was so not going as he planned.

"No, thank you." Bucky dismissed his offer, his smile sweetening the sting. "But I might ask for it later." Steve nodded and finished eating, then settling back against his pillows, dozing against Bucky's shoulder.

"Hey, are you asleep?" Bucky murmured, his lips brushing against Steve's temple.

"Nope, I'm just comfy." Steve nuzzled his face into Bucky's shoulder and the older man just leaned and kissed him. It was as if Bucky was kissing him with all he had, draping himself over Steve, careful of his wounds. Steve moaned in pleasure as his hands traveled to Bucky's back up and down as if he was trying to soothe him.
When Bucky began kissing him along his jaw and then neck roughly with teeth, as if leaving marks in his trail, Steve closed his eyes in pleasure as his fingers tightened on the other man's hips, breathy moans escaping from his lips. It sounded so much as pleasure. It sounded so much as surrender. Bucky pulled away from him, enough so he could carefully take off his t-shirt, letting it fall next to the bed. Then carefully without speaking another word, he helped Steve taking off his, his breath hitching when he saw the terrible bruise in the middle of his chest.

"I'm fine," Steve whispered as he reached for Bucky and ran his fingers through silky tresses. The older man just huffed a breath like Steve was most definitely not fine and there was so much more than this. He leaned forward again to kiss him deeply, tongues brushing together as hands wondered gently. There was a fire burning in Steve's stomach that could be dampened only by Bucky's touches. Barnes trailed a blaze of hot kisses till he reached his wound and then so softly pressed his lips against it and gently circled it with the tongue.

"Can I?" Bucky asked as his hands moved lower towards the waistband of his sweats. His voice was rough as if he hadn't spoken in a long time. Steve couldn't speak anymore so he simply nodded. Although it hurt to prop himself up on his elbows, he very much wanted to see Bucky, he didn't want to miss another second of this. The older man's face was a little flushed, his lips slightly swollen and he looked at Steve as he pulled his sweats down in a way that it was making the cop wished he could have looked away, but he couldn't.

By the time both were naked, Steve was mindless with desire and his hips were rolling against Bucky, who was holding him in his arms, their bodies flushed, the heat between them was so precious, it made Steve moan in pleasure time and time again. Their hard-ons were pressed against each other, but it seemed like their sweat and pre-come were creating enough freedom of movement and both of them looked reluctant to take their hands off each other to do more.

Bucky was propped on his elbows, trying not to put any weight on Steve but somehow still managing to move his hips in such a delicious way that Steve simply dug his fingers deeply into Bucky's back. But as the pleasure started to build deep into his belly, Bucky pressed even closer to him, kissing his jaw again, biting his neck and then whispering.

"When you get better, I won't let you get out this bed." He breathed heavily in his ear. "I will kiss you and taste you until you can't take it anymore and then I will start all over again. Make you come apart. Make you mine."

Steve's heart stuttered in his chest upon hearing the words and his whole body ignited as Bucky kissed him. Seconds later he felt Bucky's release on his hip and it made him feel proud that he could take this man apart as well. The breaths resounded harshly in the silence of the room, but Steve couldn't care less. It was a feeling of contentment that had escaped him for so long that he could barely breathe with its weight on him.

Bucky took his shirt and cleaned them both and then settled next to Steve, his hands wondering soothingly over his body, whispering sweet nothings into his ear and Steve closed his eyes and let himself fall and fall.

The next few days were spent in blessed quietness with Steve rarely leaving Bucky's room, mostly reading or napping or simply be with Bucky, ignoring the reality and what happened and generally trying to heal. Steve was good at ignoring a problem or at lying to himself. And he needed to lie to himself a lot, to perfect the art of pretending that this episode was not going to matter, that the words exchanged between them wouldn't affect him into accomplishing his mission.

"Well, well, well," Andrea's voice brought him back to reality as he took his eyes from the TV. "He let you out of his room?"
"Now, now, I thought we were going to behave nicely."

"I was until you decided to risk your life stupidly." She pouted and then sat next to him on the couch, getting her feet under his thighs.

"You know everyone calls me stupid, but you all seem to forget I saved Thor's life."

"Getting shot in the process." She rolled his eyes at him. "Seriously, how do you feel?"

"I feel better and probably tomorrow I'll be back to work. You know I wasn't actually shot."

"You moron, you were actually shot! You just didn't have a bullet hole in your chest." Andrea peeked at him from under her fringe. "I've never seen Bucky so furious, not even when police raided papa's business in Manhattan. It was as if he would personally go and kill Pierce."

"I'm sure he would have been just as furious if it would have been Howlett."

"You do like to lie to yourself." Andrea shook her head. "I told you that he is dangerous and that he will not take lightly to you defying him each time. And still, you went and got involved with him."

"This is so not a subject of discussion with you."

"I warned you once, I am not going to do it again. It's up to you from now on. I just want to be friends again." She rested her back against the couch and gazed sadly at him. "Can we be friends again?"

"I thought we were friends." He gave her the bowl of popcorn and she took some smiling at him. They watched in silence the show about sharks and afterward, they changed to Discovery watching some crime-inspired documentaries. They were so engrossed in the drama on the screen that they were taken aback by Howlett's arrival.

"Hey, guys. What you're up to?"

"Just watching TV. You?"

"Not much." His face closed off completely and looked at Steve. "I need you outside. Can you come?"

"Yeah, sure." Steve made an effort of getting up and covered Andrea in the comforter. "You better watch it until the end. I want to know who the murderer is."

"Yeah, yeah." She rolled her beautiful eyes at him but smiled gently so he just winked at her and left the living room accompanied by Howlett. He was dressed in some black slacks and a white shirt with its sleeves up. His holsters were making his back looking even more threatening and Steve swallowed hard as he saw that Howlett was taking him in the back of the house where he was last time taken when they threatened him when they thought he was a cop. He felt really undressed in his sweats and a grey t-shirt.

"Howlett, is everything all right?" His friend peered at him over his shoulder and then his shoulders seemed to sag.

"A couple of days ago, Rumlow and Rollins helped us retrieve some files from Pierce's men."

"Yes, Bucky told me that. He also told me how he ruined our stakeout by attacking all those places without a backup plan."
"Let's say that he might have lost his mind a little bit. Which I am not exactly sure if it's a good thing or not." Howlett sighed, tiredness marking his face and Steve wondered what exactly he missed in the last few days. "Phillips asked Pierce and Bucky to meet again and reach a truce because too much blood was shed and the Russians were getting really angsty. If the Russians get involved, this whole war will blow out of proportions."

"Howlett, you know more about this than I will ever do. Is it really impossible to find a common ground between them?"

"Nope. For some reason, Pierce is really determined to end Bucky and the boss wouldn't accept a truce now, after everything that happened." Howlett pinched his nose. "This is more than a turf war. Egos are involved and when this happens, recklessness is not a good thing."

"Is anything I can do to help?" Steve asked, resolute in his wish to end with Pierce and his clan.

"Not at the moment," Howlett smirked at him. "But I want to show you how determined we are to protect our own."

They entered the accursed building. A couple of the Barnes' men were watching the hallway standing guard and they nodded briefly to Steve as a sign of respect. Thor was waiting for them at the end of the hallway. He was just as crumpled as Howlett, but he seemed happy enough to see Steve.

"Hey, man." He shook hands with Thor, then raised an eyebrow. "Now guys, you do understand that this is making me nervous. The last time you guys brought me here was to threaten me with death and disembowelment. So, what's this about?"

"Relax, Super Soldier," Howlett said, using his old nickname and thus making Steve scowl at him. "This time is about showing you what we do with people that threaten one of our own."

They opened the door to the room and let him enter first. The room was large enough with bare walls and no furniture. It would have looked normal if it hadn't been for six chairs arranged in the middle of the room. On one end Bucky had his arms crossed in front of him and watched impassively as Erik was working on one of the men. Steve froze. On the six chairs, there were tied up five men and one woman. All of them were bloodied, various parts of their bodies swollen or bleeding. There were clear signs of torture.

Erik was punching the guy in his liver with precision and a determination that made Steve want to vomit. It was as if the man was simply a slab of meat used to instigate pain. Constant pain by the grunts that the man was making. Steve took a few steps in the room and the sudden realization that the man Erik was working on had no tongue left made him want to just simply turn around and just walk and walk and never leave. The woman's eyes were filled with such a horror that Steve almost took a step back. Two others were unconscious, but the cop had no doubt that it wouldn't be for long.

Erik stopped when he saw him and nodded at Steve. Bucky, on the other hand, didn't acknowledge his presence. Not that there was any trace of Bucky in the room. The White Wolf was ruling over an empire of blood and sweat, and broken limbs and weaknesses had no place in such an empire.

"Hey, Killmonger." He kept his tone level. "What's up?"

"Nothing much, Steve. This poor son of a bitch was one of the few that had information about Zemo and we wanted to find out as much as possible."
"He doesn't look to me like he has much left to say."

"Well, he sang a lot before we cut his tongue. He was becoming too noisy."

The whole experience was so surreal in its absurdity and cruelty that Steve couldn't believe that this was his life now.

"I don't think there's any need to punch him at this point. He ain't going to say anything else."

"Yeah, but it feels good."

"I got that." Ice ran through his veins, filling him up with enough cold to make him able to breathe the same air as these monsters and keep his tone as unwavering as possible. He looked at the other victims and he tried to keep his disgust to himself as he asked:

"Did you find out anything interesting?"

"Yes, we actually did." It was Howlett’s turn to reply as he made his way to one of the men dressed in some worn jeans and a t-shirt that used to be blue. "This one knew the most and he sang like a canary because apparently Bucky is a fucking demon. Or because he didn't want to hurt his girlfriend over there." Steve glanced at the blonde woman whose eyes were filled up with pure hatred and horror. If he gave her a gun at that moment, no doubt that this woman would have killed them all for what they did to her man.

Howlett grabbed the man by his hair and pulled up sharply, making the man groan in pain. His face was almost entirely swollen, he could barely open one of his eyes and he was bleeding profusely from a wound at the right of his abdomen. Enough to cause massive pain, not enough to kill. The woman's arms spasmed against the duct tape that had pulled her arms so far off her back it must have been painful for her to sit there and take it all in. Although she was bruised as well, her wounds couldn't be compared to those of her boyfriend.

"They were in charge of the Russian side of the operations. How they must regret getting employed by Pierce," Thor said as a matter of fact, but Steve continued to stare at the woman as she kept on trying to catch her boyfriend's eyes in an attempt to show her support. It was a vain attempt. There was no chance of them getting alive out of this.

"I wonder how he will feel when he finds out what we had planned for his girlfriend. I am sure that Romanoff has some demands for sick as fuck scenarios and this stupid bitch could fulfill every one of them," Erik chimed in. "This bitch will make all those scenarios very pleasurable for some sick fucks."

"You promised," the man gasped in pain. His only working eyes looked pleadingly around the room.

"And we keep our promise," Howlett growled. "We won't hurt her. We'll make sure others will. Now I just wonder what to do with you. Keep you alive enough to see what happens to your girl or simply kill you and put an end to your-"

The sudden gunshot exploded in the room with such a force that they pulled up the guns, pointing them at Steve. The undercover cop had managed to take one of Thor's guns and had pulled the trigger, spraying the brains of the woman all over the chair, herself and her neighbor, who screamed silently under the duct tape that covered his mouth.

Her boyfriend made a keening sound as if in so much pain that he seemed to damn Steve to an eternity of pain and torture. But his only working eye was filled up with such fierce gratitude that
made Steve sick to his stomach.

"What the fuck, Steve?" Erik shouted and even Howlett watched him in apprehension. The only one who didn't seem to react was Bucky.

"If we torture women, we are not better than fucking Pierce. And I ain't going to sit around here listening to you talking about how you are going to hurt a woman. I don't care about what the fucking bastard comes at us."

"He would do the same to any of us. Andrea, Rebecca! Everyone that he would catch!" Steve's hand trembled on the gun as he listened to Erik's furious shouts. "We don't need your fucking holier-than-thou attitude, Rogers! It has happened before and we had to do your dirty work."

"Quill was my fucking friend, Erik! And you fucking killed him." Steve's icy voice made even Bucky step away from the wall.

"He was a fucking undercover cop and he wouldn't have hesitated to betray you. Do you think your friendship would have mattered in the long run? When he was going to turn you to the police? If that fucking bitch of Peggy Carter wouldn't have shot you, thanks to his work, you would have been behind the bars by now."

"You had no fucking proof other than what that fucking bitch said."

"Maybe, but it was enough for me." Erik kept approaching him menacingly. "And I wasn't wrong. Just two weeks later, police raided up all our operations, destroying it in the process and having enough proof to keep me in jail for the rest of my life. After all this time, you're telling me that you still believe in his innocence?"

"Maybe he wasn't innocent and maybe he was going to betray us all, but people are more than just pawns to be used in a war and torturing them isn't making us better than Pierce."

"I don't want to better than fucking Pierce, I just want to end that son of a bitch." Erik's eyes glinted in true psycho fashion.

"If you want to have a go at him, that's fine by me. Kill the son of a bitch, kill them all but stop torturing people, even after they offered you their information because guess what? Tortured people want to get rid of the pain, so they'll just tell you what you want to hear."

"Interesting. Now you defend these people," Erik growled. "If Quill was your friend, and you care so much about these people, then maybe we should question your loyalty, Steve."

"My loyalty?" The cop bristled, even more, when he saw that Bucky wasn't saying anything to protect him. He just stood there and watched the whole exchange in between them as if it was a mere show. "I just killed a woman in front of you, I got shot and whipped in the name of your fucking clan, and maybe Quill was a fucking undercover cop, but I never betrayed you, Killmonger. Be careful friend, with what you're saying or next time I won't be as friendly with a gun in my hand and it won't be as easy to forget where my true loyalty stays. Which is most definitely not with you."

Steve raised his gun and pulled the trigger again, killing the woman's boyfriend as well, trying to ignore the gratefulness in that eye. He wasn't going to allow anyone to be tortured as such by these guys as long as he could breathe. Just one brief moment had been enough to realize that he'd be in no position to help these people escape. He'd be in no position to stop their torture other than killing them and have blood on his hands. However, he would rather wash his hands in their blood
than having them tortured and mutilated. If he had let that woman under Romanoff’s protection, she would have wished to die on her own hand.

He gave the gun back to Thor and glanced at the whole room with the remaining four victims in the chairs. There was no way to save them all or put an end to their misery. He could try and save as many as he could but there was going to be blood on his hands by the time this operation ended. He stared back at Erik defyingly.

"This isn't over," Steve threatened, making Killmonger grin back maniacally because apparently the man had a kink at being threatened.

"Be sure of that."

"I'll let you to it then." Steve nodded in Bucky's direction because he knew what was best for him. This was as much of a test as it was about getting revenge for what happened on that blasted roof. As soon as the cool air of the night hit his face, he went towards the side of the building and threw up. Then spit the bile that continued to rise.

"Your first kill at close range?" The level tone didn't surprise him. Steve straightened himself and looked back at Bucky.

"No." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Probably won't be the last either. Look, I didn't want to say this in there but seriously, do you need to shed so much blood?"

"Some extreme measures are necessary at times."

"You didn't make Howlett call me there if you didn't have an alternative reason," Steve replied scowling. "You know how much I hate seeing blood spilled even if it is for the right cause."

"When I brought you back from the Doc, you told me that you have a secret that it is crushing you and it will ultimately kill you." The revelation caught Steve by surprise, and it took him all the restraint in the world not to flinch for the White Wolf was studying him like an insect under the microscope and any weakness would be judged and found lacking.

"And you think that I would tell you the secret now?" Steve seethed. "Really? After the blood bath that's in there?"

The White Wolf took a few steps towards him and then stopped when he saw that Steve matched his movements by trying to get away from him. Steve wanted, oh how he wanted to trust this man, but in spite of the good moments that passed between them, there was something utterly terrifying about Bucky.

"Was your secret about this Quill?"

"Don't say his name!" Steve hissed. "You know nothing about him. And of course, it was about him. How do you think it would have looked if I had told you that during my stint in Manhattan, I had been friends with an undercover cop? You guys suspected me since the beginning, I wasn't insane enough to tell you about it."

"Then if it is over, why did you say that it was going to kill you?"

"Does it look to you like everything is water under the bridge between me and Erik?" Steve rolled his eyes. "Maybe you can repress your feelings and not show your emotions, but even if Tony was an undercover cop, he was still my friend and we did share blood together and the way he was killed... There was no dignity to it."
"But he betrayed you," The White Wolf pushed further. "Are you a traitor, Steve Rogers?"

The heaviness of the question made a new wave of bile surge at the back of his throat. This was the million-dollar question. He thought about the tens of files copied and put aside in that small locker room in the bus station, he thought about the conversations he managed to record in between, about the whole information he gathered, about the fact that he knew more about the workings of the Barnes clan than any other agency or cop ever alive. And that in spite of all this work, betraying these people was inconceivable at the moment, so he answered to the best of his capabilities, staring straight back to the White Wolf's eyes without flinching.

"No. I am not, Barnes, but I am not a killer either. And I will not kill mindlessly just because you ordered me too."

"Then why did you shoot these two people tonight?"

"It was an act of mercy." He passed his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Wouldn't you have liked for the same act of mercy if instead of that couple there would have been Howlett and Rebecca?"

The White Wolf actually flinched upon hearing the words. "You're perplexing."

"And you are not." Steve finally dared to approach Bucky and cupped his face between his hands, although they still shook and showing a small sign of weakness in front of this man was pure suicide. "I want you to win this war, but I don't want you to stoop to Pierce's level. You have to be better than this. You have to keep making me believe in you."

"Do you believe in me?"

"Till the end of the line."

Bucky wanted to reply but Howlett cleared his throat and made them both step away from each other. He looked a little bit chagrined that he interrupted them.

"Sorry," he said seeing something on Bucky's face, "but the Russians are here." Steve looked surprised at Bucky who simply nodded.

"Send them to my library. It's time we settle some scores with them."

"Yes."

"Do you want to come?" Steve simply nodded. "Then go and change and accompany Rebecca in the office. We will wait for you. My sister needs to hear this too. She's a hell of a negotiator."

Steve wondered how many more times he could dodge death as he went to his room and changed into a dark suit and then went to Rebecca's office. She had already dressed accordingly in black slacks and a white shirt with a vest on top. She looked extremely intimidating. And he realized that he lived in his own bubble since he was hurt, having forgotten to pay attention around him. Rebecca had been aware of the Russians visit and about their demands, that much was clear.

"You ready?" She asked in her throaty voice. She definitely embodied the role of a very shrewd businesswoman, who would probably have the Russians by their balls by the end of the night.

"I will remain silent and keep the observations to myself."

"Atta boy." She patted his cheek smiling. Then Steve opened the door and let Rebecca settled on
one of the armchairs brought especially in the room for this meeting. Howlett was on the right-hand side as well. On the other side, sitting comfortably in armchairs as well, two Russians were quietly conversing, while the other three were standing behind them, most likely bodyguards with no importance in the procedure. At the center of it all, Bucky presided the whole meeting from his desk, very much composed as the White Wolf.

One of the Russians took a brief look at them as they made their way into the room. His blue eyes did a double take when he spotted Steve. The man was really tall and even sitting down, he seemed to dwarf his colleague.

Seriously? Steve thought as one of the men stood up suddenly and looked blazingly at Steve, a grin settling on his full lips, lips that Steve knew all too well.

"Steve fucking Rogers! I can't believe it!"

"Deke Shaw." He nodded respectfully. "Are you still fucking alive?"

"Yes, you damn asshole!" Deke came and hugged him hard, making Steve wince in pain.

"Do you know each other?" Bucky asked politely but there was no kindness in his eyes.

"Yes, Steve and I go way back!" And before anyone in the room could react, Deke pressed his lips against Steve's into a sudden kiss, as explosive as the eruption of a volcano.

Chapter End Notes

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The cold pressure of the foreign lips lasted for less than five seconds, but the eternity of it seemed unbearable to Steve, who pushed at Deke and pushed hard. In spite of the wound that still affected his solar plexus, he somehow managed to brace his forearm on the other man's chest and shove him challengingly. He stared back at Shaw breathing harshly:

"What the fuck, Shaw?"

The man’s eyes sparkled with mischief and he was just about to answer when a knife literally flew past him, nicked his left ear and the black blade fastened itself in the opposite wall with a muted sound. Bewildered, Steve glimpsed behind him to look at the knife. The blade itself was black, clearly a very high-tech knife with an M-2 Tool Steel and a G-10 handle by the looks of it. Thanks to Tony, Steve was very much up to date with the types of combat knives and he was all too aware that this sort of knives was very hard to find and very expansive. The attack had been carried out so swiftly that Shaw's men didn't have time to react.

Turning away from Shaw and ignoring his stunned look, Steve focused on Bucky, who had pulled out another knife as his icy eyes screamed murder. A new obsidian blade was dancing through deft fingers, in a sort of fascinating macabre dance. If he had been in his right mind, Steve would have even laughed at the stunned looks on the Russian side.

"You are a guest in my house, Mr. Shaw," Bucky seethed, "and I forgive this indiscretion, but touch him again and I swear the next blade will not be used as a warning."

Shaw straightened to all his six foot as if through his stature he might regain his dignity, but he was no match to Bucky in the subsequent staring match and he conceded the point to his rival by grinning suddenly:

"I apologize, Mr. Barnes. I was so happy to see Steve that I didn't think clearly. It won't happen again."

"Make sure that it won't."

Shaw grinned wolfishly at Bucky before winking at Steve and returning to his seat. The nick was bleeding quite profusely but it seemed that it didn't bother Shaw much that his suit was being stained so he simply pulled out a handkerchief and pressed it against the wound. He regarded Bucky for a moment as if he was missing something meaningful, his blue eyes assessing him, but his counterpart seemed less than inclined to reveal anything. In fact, Barnes put aside the blade and turned his attention to Steve.

"Steve, if you don't mind, could you please check on Andrea? I believe she was looking for you not long ago."
He was fucking dismissed. Steve couldn't believe it, so he scowled for good measure, conveying all his murderous thoughts. The blue eyes remained insensitive to his mute appeal so much so that he realized that there was no point in staying. Not mention that defying a direct order from Barnes would look really bad, especially with Shaw. He glared for good measure once more though, before bowing slightly. He didn't dignify the order with a goddamn answer as he left the room in complete silence.

He went to his room, took a shower and changed into some comfortable clothes, all the time boiling and thinking of painful ways to murder Bucky. It was bad enough that the opportunity of finding further information about their treaty with the Russians slipped through his fingers, it was worse because Bucky had treated him like a naughty child dismissing him.

It had not been his goddamn fault that Shaw decided that the best course of action was kissing him in front of God and country. Well, Bucky and country, because it was exactly the same. And for that matter why Shaw had to be there? Seriously, whoever controlled his fate had a really twisted sense of humor. There was no other way to put it because what were the chances for an ex-lover of his be present at this meeting, and have such leverage too? Maybe he was being punished for all the lies that he had to say throughout this mission particularly.

He morosely walked to the living room where Andrea was sketching something, while Hannibal was playing the background. She was dressed in a flowery dress with leggings and she looked incredibly comfortable. Her pink dyed hair gave her an odd air of vulnerability. Her pinched expression though was a bit concerning. On the other hand, she took one look at him and then patted the space next to her.

"Come one, tell me what he did this time."

"Nothing." He sulked as he took a seat next to her.

"Sure, nothing, that's why you're pouting."

"I don't pout."

"Yes, you do." She winked at him. "It is actually quite adorable. You look like an angry kitten."

"I am not adorable."

"Are you going to keep denying the obvious facts or just tell me what happened? You have that look again."

"Which look?"

"The one when you pack your bags and run for the hills. Was it that bad?"

"Maybe it was partially my fault," he mumbled, making her eyebrows rise in a perfect sarcastic response. She was unimpressed with his antiques and seriously, she was so much younger than him, how he was going to confess everything to her? On the other hand, she was far more realistic than him. "So maybe one of the Russians that came tonight to close the deal is one of my ex-lovers and he might or might not have kissed me as a hello, which I assure you will get him a broken Russian bone soon enough."

Andrea's laugh startled him. She closed the sketchbook and put it aside while continuing to laugh at him.

"Oh my gosh, Steve! Only you can have such luck." She wiped her eyes. "You have to tell me who
it was. I haven't seen the delegates when they arrived."

"It was Shaw. Deke Shaw."

Andrea eyeballed him before laughing even harder. "The six feet something hunk Shaw that one
time paid my dad to spend the night with you? No way! This is so much better than any show I've
ever seen in my entire life."

"I am glad my misery causes you such joy."

"Oh, come on, you big baby!" She hugged him while still trying to wipe her eyes. "Wow, I needed
that. Seriously, Steve, your life is like a comedy of errors."

"Tell me about it."

"How did Bucky react?"

"Well, he threatened him with disembowelment after throwing a knife at him. You know, the
usual."

"Yeah, not bad. It could have been worse. And then what happened?"

"Apparently, he was a little 'concerned'," yeah, Steve was mature enough he could use the air
quotation marks if it so pleased him, "and that I should check on you."

"Subtle and effective," Andrea rolled her pretty eyes at his scowling. "Stop it, or your face will
freeze like that."

"Maybe your face will freeze like that," he mumbled.

"Wow, such a mature come back. I bow at your lameness. I’ve never encountered anyone as lame
as you."

"You're supposed to help me feel better not mock me mercilessly."

"Yeah, but where would be the fun on that?" She ruffled his hair. "Alright, while I really don't want
to get involved in the drama, I would say ask for Bucky's reasoning in this situation. In the
meantime, all I can do is offer you candy, popcorn, and some really twisted shows."

"I'll take them, please."

She smiled fondly at him and Steve just breathed a little bit better seeing that pinched expression
off her face. They had a good laugh at some shows while eating popcorn, and later some fruity
flavored candies. All in all, it wasn't a bad night, as Steve managed to forget at least for a while all
his misgivings.

However, when they went back to their rooms, well, Andrea back to her room, Steve back to
Bucky's, the peace that he had managed to find by then dissolved all over again. And the more he
waited for Bucky, making up scenarios in his mind, the more frantic he became in his behavior.

Therefore, by the time his lover got into his room around one o'clock in the morning, probably
exhausted, all could Steve think was how humiliated he had felt, while at the same time failing
completely to see that his mask was slipping over.

"The Russians are staying here tonight," Bucky said as he took his jacket off. "I made a deal with
them, which is going to take a massive toll on Pierce and-"
"I am not your fucking property!" Steve snapped getting out of bed scowling at the other man. "You don't get to treat me like a dumb kid because you don't reign in your caveman impulses."

"Another man dared to kiss you in front of me," Bucky sneered back. "How exactly was I supposed to act?"

"Not like that, that's for sure. You looked like you were about to piss on my leg to mark your fucking territory then send me away." The hurt was real. What the fuck was he doing? "You sent me away and everybody in the room knew why. Hell, I think even a person on the goddamn moon could have seen through your tactics. You humiliated me. In front of none other than fucking Shaw. Out of all the people in this world, why did you have to do it in front of him?"

"Well, maybe you can explain to me how the fuck you two got involved?"

"It's not your fucking business. I don't ask you about your former lovers, you don't get to ask about mine. I might have been tempted to tell you something before you pulled that fucking stupid stunt with me." He jabbed a finger in his chest. "We may be fucking, but that doesn't give you any rights over me, Barnes."

"You forget your place," Bucky seethed, fueling Steve's fury even more.

Almost livid he spat, "Which one is that exactly? On my knees in front of you? Like a common whore?"

"I didn't say that." Bucky's sharp eyes glinted dangerously. "But you need to understand you can't speak to me like that."

"I will speak to you however I want, Bucky," Steve explained exasperatedly. "For fuck's bourbon, I'm firstly your lover. I should be equal in your eyes. Yet you treat me like I am some goddamn whore that you get the fuck when you want, then dispose of when you no longer require it."

"You exaggerate too much. I noticed this is your favorite sport."

Steve stared into his eyes. There was no fear in him, not one ounce. This was not an argument between an undercover cop and his target. Nope, it was a proper argument between lovers and the whole feeling about it almost knocked down Steve in its sincerity.

"I'll sleep in my room tonight or so help me; I will goddamn strangle you in your sleep."

"Really?" Bucky's mocking voice grated him on the last of his nerves. "Or are you going to look for consolation in Shaw's arms?"

"Are you trying to make me leave, Bucky?" Ice poured through each of Steve's words. "Because at the moment, you're doing a wonderful job. Sort out your fucking trust issues, or you and your right hand are going to get acquainted really well."

Steve left the room, the only reason not slamming the door being the fact that there were some Russians in the house and they really didn't need to hear that. He went down to the kitchen where he found Howlett grabbing a couple of water bottles. His friend glanced at him.

"Nope, I'm not doing it. I had a hard day today. I'm just going to go make love with my wife and sleep, not necessarily in this order. I'm not playing the relationship counselor for you and Bucky."

"Fine, then don't. I didn't ask you anyway." But he pouted anyway, making his friend roll his eyes in response. Hmm, a lot of people were reacting like that lately.
Howlett made a quick retreat, while Steve just turned on the coffee maker, knowing fully well he wasn't going to sleep any time soon. Reflecting on the reason why though was a monumentally bad idea and he just practiced some of the breathing techniques that Tony had taught him a long time ago. When the coffee finished brewing, he grabbed his cup and went outside, ignoring the chilly wind. Clearing his thoughts appeared to be an impossible mission.

"You know," Shaw's voice startled Steve so bad that he almost spilled his entire coffee on him, "very few people managed to surprise me in this life, but you Steve, definitely pulled a whole new thing with this." The man lit up a cigarette, the small light glittering dangerously in his eyes. "I mean, from a well-respected fighter to some mobster's whore, that's a new low for you. I had a better opinion about you."

"Be careful, Shaw, you sound terribly close to a jealous child, who didn't get his favorite toy." Steve took a sip of his now lukewarm coffee and looked back towards the garden. "And please don't forget I still know how to break your damn windpipe in three moves. Call me a whore again and I might just show you how one can still persevere using that move."

"As stubborn as ever." Deke took another few steps towards him, enough to come into the light, and Steve tilted his head just in time to catch a glimpse of something raw and honest in the man’s eyes, something close to fondness. "I thought you don't deal with mobsters. Wasn't this one of the reasons why you decided to cut ties with me and threatened me with disembowelment when at the time I paid Erik for that night with you?"

"He is very persuasive." Steve shrugged. "And need I remind you that I only threatened you because you wouldn't take no for an answer?"

"Steve, I went on a business trip in Russia for two weeks and when I came back, instead of a welcome back fuck, I got a goodbye and good luck from you." Shaw took a deep breath. "You said that it was because I was part of the mob, that I endangered you by simply being close to you. You-

"I know exactly what I said, Deke." Steve scowled at his former lover. "I was there, I remember. But Bucky is different."

"Different?" Incredulity sipped through Deke's words. "Out of all the monsters out there, why did you have to pick the meanest and the toughest one?"

"We are all monsters and he is definitely not the biggest in the pond."

"Please, his reputation precedes him even in Russia. In certain circles in Moscow, words of his cruelty are used as horror stories for those that want to dip their fingers in the blood money that circulates at the moment around here."

"It doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

"I guess it doesn't." Deke cupped his left cheek in his hand, his thumb caressing him gently. "I wish you took a chance with me. Would it have been that bad?"

"Trust me, Deke, I'm not good for you. I wasn't then and I am not now," Steve replied softly and took Deke's hand, kissed it tenderly and then let it go.

"You always say that." The gesture had ruptured something inside of Shaw for his eyes were a raw wound, making Steve swallow around the sudden lump in his throat. "But you never give me a good enough reason for it." He stubbed his cigarette and threw it away. "It doesn't matter. We
decided to accept your boyfriend's offer. We will see each other soon enough I believe. But I'll make sure to keep my distance." Shaw blinked and all his emotions disappeared, leaving room to the underground shark that he was. "I'll try not to kiss you next time. I really don't want a guy with professional knowledge of Krav Maga to come after my ass."

"You'd better do more than trying then." Steve smiled back. Shaw simply nodded then waved goodbye. He turned and was about to leave when he changed his mind and glanced back at Steve.

"When this is going to end badly, and you know it will, my door will always be open to you."

"Thank you."

Deke nodded once and then left Steve alone with his thoughts. Sure, Shaw's feelings were admirable, but Steve honestly doubted that the Russian was going to react well upon finding out that Steve Rogers had never existed in the first place. He sighed. Andrea was right: his life had become a comedy of errors.

He went back to his room only to toss and turn in his bed. He looked at the bedside clock. Half-past two in the morning and he didn't seem capable anymore of sleeping without Bucky's warmth beside him. He scowled at the ceiling. He was not going to go to his fucking room. He had some dignity. And he had not been in the wrong earlier.

A soft knock at his door startled him from his thoughts. He hoped that Shaw didn't have the wonderful idea of coming to him. He ignored it, but then the door opened without another knock to reveal Bucky. His lover's hesitancy made Steve get up and watch him wearily. He really wasn't in the mood for another confrontation; he was emotionally drained. Bucky closed the door but made no attempt to approach the bed.

"When I was seventeen, one of my father's friends took me under his wing." Bucky's voice trembled in the dark of the room. "He had lived a few years in Europe before coming back and he was really sophisticated. My father admired him for his iron fist with which he conducted his side of the business. His name was... his name was Andrew Garner. He was everything I wanted to be when I would be older. Anyway, we had an affair. He was the first guy with whom I went all the way and he was very gentle. He taught me everything I needed to know about sex and told me he would kill me himself if he ever found out that I didn't use a condom. He was the first man that I ever loved."

Steve was hypnotized by Bucky's voice and the impersonal way he was telling this particular story, especially when it sounded so personal. His breath caught when he heard the following:

"This went on for almost three years. Until we found out that all this time, he had been feeding police information about my father and using me to get to him. Well, he seemed to really care for me, but it didn't stop him from betraying me."

Steve swallowed hard. "What happened to him?"

"My father tortured him to find out what exactly he said to the police and then handed him to me to kill him. I shot him point-blank. He smiled at me. He didn't have a tongue by then, but I always wondered what he tried to whisper back then." Bucky shook his head. "The reason why I'm telling you this story is because I want you to know that I come from a background of betrayal. Nobody has been so honest with me as you have been."

The words felt like a physical blow, something really ugly twisting its head inside of him. He reached for Bucky and the older man obliged his silent request. He wordlessly sat down next to
Steve and hugged him really tightly.

"I want to go with you on a date," Bucky whispered into his shoulder. "Tomorrow night."

"You got yourself a deal." Steve kissed his cheek. "Now let's go to sleep. I'm fucking exhausted and I couldn't sleep without you by my side."

"Really?"

"Don't sound so smug about it." Steve let Bucky spoon him. "Thank you for telling me the story."

"Don't mention it."

Sleep shouldn't have found him so easily but five minutes later Steve fell soundly asleep and he didn't wake until seven o'clock the next day when he felt Bucky move next to him. It was time to prepare for work too anyway. However, the exhaustion couldn't tamper the excitement that he felt at the thought of spending the night with Bucky. Sometimes during lunch, Bucky transmitted him that he should dress sharply, and Rebecca wanted to know all the details. For some reason, Steve spilled all the beans to her, and she rolled her pretty eyes at their stupidity but ended up being very happy about the final outcome of the whole thing.

So, the evening found Steve dressed into a white shirt and black jeans with a beautiful leather jacket to keep the chill of the evening away from him. His hair was just as messy as usual but when he opened the door to Bucky, he gaped in a very unattractive way. Barnes was dressed in black slacks, a black shirt, and navy jacket and seriously, Steve would have gladly forgotten about the date and just spend the night tearing the clothes of Bucky with his teeth.

"Ready? "Bucky smiled knowingly at him and it took several tries for Steve to nod his approval.

They were driven to a really nice restaurant situated in a skyscraper around the thirty-first floor with a beautiful view of Brooklyn. The music was exquisite, the food even more so, and their conversation ran smoothly without interruptions. They were also treated normally, as Bucky's reputation didn't precede him here. They were situated next to the windows in a rather intimate corner and Steve enjoyed it.

They spoke about a lot of things and Bucky proved entertaining when he wanted to be, but mostly Steve enjoyed the feeling of being normal. If he could pretend hard enough, he would just think he was this normal guy, hoping to have a nice time with another guy, no complications, no entanglements. The heaviness that had settled permanently into his heart was as light as a balloon at that moment. Steve promised himself that he would think about his mission the following day. Tonight, he would be selfish.

The atmosphere between Bucky and he had boiled low all night. Their knees touched and on more than one occasion, Bucky kissed his hands or held them tenderly in his, so it was no surprise to him when once back at the mansion, Bucky invited him in his room. It was an odd and new feeling, and Steve ignored all the alarm bells inside his mind as Bucky was suddenly very close to him, and Steve looked up.

"Stay the night," Bucky whispered his voice gruff and Steve felt hot and cold at the implications of his suggestion, his heart racing. The older man reached out and cupped his cheeks pulling him closer still and then kissing him firmly. There was a sort of finality in those fiery kisses that lacked before. Steve opened to them wrapping his arms around Bucky's shoulders and letting himself be kissed within an inch of his life.
Bucky pushed the leather jacket off his shoulders and Steve tilted his head to get a better angle, making Bucky moan in pleasure in response. He was being teased and tasted as if Bucky was tasting something exotic and unique and he loved the sensation of being thus appreciated. He felt himself growing harder just from those kisses and when his lover pulled him close again after getting rid of his own jacket, he felt the same response in the other man.

There were closed kisses and open-mouthed kisses, breaks and new beginnings and Steve would have spent an eternity kissing Bucky Barnes, carding his fingers through the silky tresses and pull gently when Bucky's tongue did something particularly wonderful. The passion was building up making Steve's spine tingle in pleasure.

Bucky pushed him backward until they reached the bed, and both fell down on it, Bucky careful not to hurt Steve, who was too lost in the pleasure of those kisses to pay attention. His hips stuttered when Bucky opened his shirt with deft fingers while gently scraping his teeth over Steve's jaw and then neck. The sensation was overwhelming, and he could only enjoy the ride. He gasped in pure pleasure when he felt Bucky's hands on him, the light callouses, the gentleness with which they mapped each rib, each scar. He felt on fire and he just wanted to feel more. He pressed an open-mouthed kiss before helping Bucky get rid of his own shirt.

The pleasure of skin on skin left Steve breathless and honestly excruciatingly turned on. Bucky rocked his hips a little harder, making him gasp for air and the older man started applying small kisses on his neck, leaving behind small bites soothed with kisses and tongue, while Steve's hands were roaming on his back, mapping the safety of those muscles, their lithe elegance.

Bucky was kissing his chest and stomach when Steve felt one of his hands opening his fly and simply cupping him through the underwear, making Steve buck in pleasure and whispering nonsense. His lover moved his hand in a casual rhythm, excruciatingly slow while pressing small bites and kisses on Steve's skin, leaving a trail of love that would stay with him.

"Bucky," Steve moaned, forgetting completely the realities of his situation.

"Shhh, it's alright, I'll take care of you." The older man breathed against his stomach and Steve was lost to a new wave of biting kisses, soothed in the most pleasurable way. He didn't realize how worked up he was until all of a sudden Bucky was pushing up on the bed again, now both of them naked and with his right hand back on Steve's hard on. Both of them looked down at the motion and they groaned in pleasure before Bucky ravaged him with a new kiss and turning him on his stomach.

Bucky pressed his body against Steve's back and pressed kisses on his shoulders, tasting each vertebra as if Steve was a unique creation and he had to have him completely. Steve shuddered in pleasure and kept making small sounds that seemed to drive his lover mad. He was so lost in the sensations that he barely heard the cap of the lube opening, the sound making him lift his hips and pressed hard against Bucky's groin. Bucky moaned in response and gently leaned into Steve, wrapping a hand around his shoulder in something like a hug and kissing his neck.

As Bucky began to prepare him, Steve lost himself to the new sensations, his toes curling in pleasure as his lover pressed against his magic spot effortlessly. Bucky kissed along his spine and shoulders, drawing blood towards the surface, biting and tasting driving Steve completely mad as he slowly worked Steve opened with his fingers. Bucky sucked a bruise on Steve's neck, leaving small scratches and bruises in his wake.

Steve was so worked up that he hadn't even realized when Bucky pushed in in the most agonizingly tender and slow way possible so that by the time he bottomed down, Steve was out of mind with pleasure, but still aware of the gut-wrenching noise that his partner had made. Bucky
trembled inside of him as he made the effort of not moving and let Steve get used to the sensation but bending over his younger lover and pressing reverent kisses on his spine, breath shallow and hands curled along his sides.

Steve could barely think with Bucky pressed so close, in and against him, taking all the air around him, making Steve forget about the world around them and be aware just of Bucky, his hands, the spot where they were connected so intimately, his thrusts, slow, gradually becoming stronger, deeper, harder. He was drowning in a sea of sensations and the only one that could rescue him was Bucky. With each thrust, Bucky began to whisper nonsense, about how gorgeous Steve was, how wonderfully he was reacting to his thrusts, how good he was going to make him feel. Steve grabbed the pillow with his fingers and pushed back, the pleasure by now mounting.

He could hardly hear him over the pounding of his heart, his skin on fire, all his nerves alight and when Bucky cupped him again, it took only a couple of strokes for him to drop his head on the pillow and come with Bucky's name on his lips. A few more thrusts and Bucky followed him over the edge, leaving both of them trying to catch their breath. Bucky continued to move his hands across Steve's body, and it took a while for both of them to calm down enough to take a quick shower and grab some sweats in which to sleep.

In the following days, Steve lived in some sort of haze and complete and utter denial. Every time he saw Bucky, his heart started to beat a bit faster, as if trying to scream something powerful enough for Steve to understand. But the denial was doing its job properly, his mission at the back of his mind, no longer a priority. Especially since every night now he was ending up in Bucky’s bed, being constantly pleasured and caressed, making him insatiable. Bucky was like a drug and he was the addict and all he cared about was when he was going to have the next hit.

The world came crashing down about a week later.

It was movie night, or so Andrea had called it when the coincidence was powerful enough to make them all be available at the same time. That night Rumlow and Rollins joined them, and they were all in the living room, watching what could have been the funniest horror movie. They were sprawled all over the floor and couch, Steve pressing into Bucky's side and laughing at the running commentary that Howlett was offering.

He should have seen it coming. But he didn't. They heard the gunshots before the power was cut, leaving them in stunned darkness. The reprieve was over. Pierce had sent after them and there was no choice but to try and defend themselves. Howlett divided them into three groups, each taking one side of the house: Rumlow and Rollins were going to cover the north side, Erik, Andrea and Steve were protecting the west and Killmonger seemed fixated with this side and Rebecca and Howlett together with Bucky were securing the south side. No one mentioned that it was the safest perimeter possible. And even in the darkness, Bucky still managed to squeeze Steve's hand and kiss him softly, before leaving.

For Steve, it was a rude and violent awakening to reality.
the sound of righteous fury

Chapter Notes

this chapter contains graphic depictions of violence.

A couple of things could be said about Rumlow, Rollins thought as both of them ducked behind the wall and their eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the hallway. Rumlow's movements oozed elegance even when they flickered with spent life and blood. His fingers were those of a pianist of death, swift with careful precision, capable of the greatest caresses, but also of the greatest slash that could make blood spill swiftly. Rumlow's built body was a weapon in disguise, for few enemies (few, because very few managed to get an inkling that Rumlow was after them) have underestimated him, based on that. Rumlow was deadly grace, wrapped in a man that for some reason loved him.

Rumlow slowly crawled behind an overturned table and quickly silenced the man hiding behind it. The poor chap hadn't stood a chance to even sense Rumlow. There was no sound and it hit Rollins again how sad that all the people lived their lives like a noisy circus only to die sometimes without even a spark. Rumlow crouched and looked back at him, grinning wildly.

Fifteen years. Fifteen fucking years of blood and bruises and death, so much death and yet he still loved this man more than anything, more than the life itself and he sincerely doubted that death was going to put an end to either of them. He would have to just crawl through hell and find him. Rollins smirked back. Oh, yeah, in case their souls didn't cease to exist after death, (Rollins kind of hoped they did, seriously, one life had been more than enough for him; eternity held no temptation for him other than spending it with Rumlow), then they most certainly would pass into hell or get reincarnated as bugs or worse, skunks. Yes, Rollins had an irrational fear of skunks, so sue him. No, thanks, disappearing into the great beyond sounded so much better.

Rumlow took the guns from the dead goon and passed one to Rollins who joined him next to the table. The mansion was eerily quiet in between bouts of gunfire, screams, and shouts of pain. He couldn't help himself. He grinned deadly at Rumlow, who just rolled his eyes at him. Rollins would have mentioned to him that this whole thing reminded him of the first time they had met, both professional assassins hired to kill the same target and then each other, because apparently their employer had been paranoid, and he hadn't believed in professional courtesy and honor. Rumlow and Rollins had understood quickly what their issue had been and they both ended up killing the target, before taking the money from their employer and kill him too as a warning. His stupid face had been so shocked, it made Rollins snort even now.

Rollins crackled wildly when he saw the silencer that Rumlow gave him and he used it instantly as one of the other goons started to move against them. Rumlow winked at him, then he just signaled that he was going to check the corner towards the other side of the room.

Why Bucky couldn't live in a goddamn normal house with four rooms and a kitchen? Seriously, this whole thing could have been so much simpler, if the man had just not lived in this fucking huge house. Rumlow signaled a clear pathway after shooting two other targets. They both fell to the floor without a single moan. It was like shooting sitting ducks, dissatisfaction curling tightly in his stomach. He hadn't horned his instincts and his whole body to become a weapon in order to
play with children this game of attack the mansion of a crazy mobster. Thus, it was all the sweeter when he broke the neck of his unsuspecting victim as the guy tried to approach Rumlow from behind. Attacking behind someone's back. Another thing that he could add to his list of pet-peeves.

He liked hiding in the darkness though, following Rumlow's competent shadow and getting rid of these stupid goons. Their communication was flawless now, but it hadn't been so at the beginning. The things had been so much complicated after that because he was never good at relationships. Also, his professional field was most definitely not the type to make trusting a person a natural process.

They had been fucking for a couple of years without making any commitments. Well, not precisely, because while Rumlow gave him more than enough reassurances that he wanted something serious with him, Rollins had not been prepared for that. Rollins had known for a while that his issues spun from the fact that he had been abandoned as a child and his childhood had not been a good one either. Rumlow had been an orphan as well, but he had been in luck of having several foster houses before magically disappearing from the system and becoming an unknown entity. But most of all, Rollins hated how Rumlow made his heart spin out of control, how his fingers made him wish they would map his body, how his eyes could see through him.

In his state of mind at the time, there was only one thing dominating all the others: this stupid love had to go away. But by what means? Well, that had been the million-dollar question. Naturally, the best course of action at the time was pulling a disappearing act: he had a safe house in a small fishing village, deep into the woods by the seaside. Rollins had thought himself safe. He, like others, had underestimated Rumlow.

_The morning when he woke up with the said man in the kitchen, pure anger crashing over both of them, well, that had been a morning to remember._

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Rumlow seethed at his kitchen table, sitting so naturally with a coffee cup in front of him, that Rollins just had to take a seat in front of him, looking longingly at the swirling black ambrosia. "You are such a fucking coward!"

"Rumlow, what are you doing here?" Rollins asked because he was caffeine-deprived, and it was way too early and Rumlow was looking utterly gorgeous in that white shirt with those blue jeans that hugged his thighs in a very indecent way. And you know, he was only human, there were only so many temptations that Jack Rollins could resist in this life and Brock Rumlow was so not on that list.

"Well, since I discovered you are a fucking coward," Rumlow continued quite blandly (Rumlow never swore, that alone should have clued in Rollins how serious the situation was), "I came here for you to tell me to my damn face that you don't want to be with me, damn you."

"Look-"

"Oh, don't you even bother." Rumlow cut his bullshit before it even started, "I will fucking stab you with a rusty knife if you continue that phrase with _it's not you, it's me_ crap. You know very well that you have no excuse for running like that. You could have manned up and just tell me the fucking truth to my face. You know," his eyes turned a complex mix of hurt and frustration, "I pegged you an asshole, but never a coward."

They stood in silence staring at each other. It might have been minutes, years, eons. Rollins cracked. He sighed heavily but didn't take his eyes away from Rumlow.

"I love the hell out of you. I love you the hell out of you, goddamn you! But this means that there
are only two possible outcomes." He ignored Rumlow's startled eyes, a slow fondness drowning everything else. "One, you betray me because our profession is neither the safest nor the most honorable one. Two, we get to live happily ever after until one of us drops dead, specifically you and I get to live in this hell for the rest of my life, dreaming of your taste on my lips and wishing I could just kill myself."

Rumlow remained silent for several moments and then put the cup of coffee on the table, stood up and circled the said table to sit on Rollins's lap and just let his hands rest on Rollins's shoulder. His weight against his thighs was divine. Rumlow looked back into his eyes.

"And I love the hell out of you, and I would rather shoot myself than betray you. But we could also have a mundane existence and have the same issues, because a car might hit me on my way to work. Yet, I wouldn't live another second of this existence without you in it. So, you're stuck with me and you will work to make this relationship last for as long as we want."

"It might be longer than you think," he mumbled still a little dizzy with the sweetness of Rumlow's aftershave.

"What do you mean?"

"If we take this seriously, that's it for me." Rollins kissed his jaw, breathing in, moaning slightly. He had missed him so desperately. "You're it for me, Rumlow, I won't want anyone else, and I don't want to share you with anyone."

"I haven't fucked anyone since the day we met, your stupid empty-headed man," Rumlow replied, his hips moving slightly as Rollins's hands slipped under the shirt.

"Ah, you say the sweetest things to me," Rollins mocked, but the following scorching kiss shut him up for good. And the way Rumlow had whispered the sweetest nothings into his ear as they made love long and good that day convinced Rollins to risk his heart.

Their honeymoon lasted a little over a week and as they had headed back to Brooklyn, Rollins asked Rumlow how he had found out about his safe house. His lover laughed straight to his face and refused to answer.

Yes, Rollins had been lucky to meet this man and have him in his life. Had he been a believer, he would have said that it had been fate. As it was, he thought it was definitely just two men taking a chance on each other and work for a relationship that had had its ups and downs. True love didn't make suddenly everything perfect.

"Something is wrong," Rumlow whispered as they turned around another wall.

"Yes, too few people here and all of them suspiciously incompetent." Rollins clipped a moron with his gun, rendering him unconscious but not dead, a mistake he remedied fast enough.

"This smells like a trap." Rumlow checked the perimeter. Not one enemy was left standing.

"For Bucky?" Rollins asked as he made his way behind his boyfriend, covering both their backs.

"Or for Rebecca? Or even Steve?" Rumlow wondered. "No matter. All these goons offer an amusing distraction, not very lethal one at that. So my assumption is that one: they were brought here to be exact that, divide and distract us while the real attack was being conducted somewhere else in the house."

"And two, they had inside intel." Rollins finished Rumlow's thoughts as they secured the north
perimeter of the mansion. They both looked at each other, their steel walls coming around their hearts again.

"Bucky Barnes has a snitch inside his family who wants to take us all to hell." Rumlow had always been the dramatic one between the two of them. "Let's show these guys a little hell in return."

Rollins nodded carefully, his eyes looking back to the hallway that made the connection to the west side of the mansion. It had been the quietest so far. The snitch was there, and they were going to rat him out like the sniveling traitor that he was. No matter who that was.

Andrea's breath was the only reassurance he was still alive in the horrifying darkness of the house. They had not encountered any enemies on their way here, but he supposed that if this were a trap, then it was sure as hell that they were falling for it. The west side of the house contained predominately a few rooms, all of them converging into a massive room which could probably be used as a conference one or a council meeting room. However, it was very little used and none at all since Steve moved in with the Barnes’. Bucky always preferred the library while Rebecca was using her office.

The connection between the west side of the mansion and the rest was made through a T shaped corridor with a few potted flowers on each side. After securing the perimeter, Steve and Erik had decided silently to each secure a part of the room, just in case. Killmonger was nervous, his calculating eyes weighing the chances of coming out of this one alive, no doubt while protecting Andrea too. Steve had no illusion that he would be sacrificed if worst came to worst. He took the opposite side, and for some unfathomable reason, Andrea decided at the last moment to cover his back. He could still feel Erik's sharp eyes on him, assessing not doubt how much effort he would out into saving his daughter.

By his calculations, more than half an hour had passed and still, no one showed up. Instinct was screaming at him that something was wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on it. The lack of action on this site was confusing, and why Erik insisted they came here was even more astounding. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, trying to ignore the nagging feeling that something was completely off and that Pierce's men hadn't managed to reach Bucky yet. His instinct was telling him to move, grab his gun, and go down in a blaze of glory if only to ensure that the man he lo- Oh no no no no. His entire body shook, his stomach tied into knots. No no no.

"I'm scared," Andrea whispered in his ear, and he gratefully took that like the lifeline that it was, unable to comprehend what his realization would mean in the long run. He reached for her hand and squeezed reassuringly. Twenty-two and she was still just a kid in his eyes, albeit too grown up for her own good, not something that she had control over.

"I'll protect you. They will have to go through me to reach you," he replied, keeping his eyes on the entrance in vain. The darkness might have just swallowed them whole and spat them back with their souls hanging open for the world to see.

"You were always too kind for your own good," she mumbled, and he could almost hear her sad smile. "I think this is why Bucky loves you." Blood rushed to his ears and his heart threatened to explode in his chest, a mess of feelings and emotions he didn't recognize. Fuck, he had avoided this word in relation to Bucky like the plague, and Andrea just had to mention both of them within the same sentence. Steve glanced back at her, and her big eyes shone inside those stifling walls.

"This is so not a good time to speak about this," he finally croaked and turned his head again, but still keeping her hand in his.

"Trust me, this is the best time to talk about it," she murmured directly in his ear, her nose tickling
his skin. "I've known Bucky Barnes since I was quite young and nobody made him feel like you did. Oh, and you're going to break his heart." Her voice was mesmerizing cracking him open with his ugly festering wounds for all to see. "Your heart is not for him to have."

How do you know that? He wanted to ask but his mind seemed stuck on the fact that she was so sure that Bucky Barnes loved him. His words were scattered in a storm of half-forgotten thoughts and braver truths.

"You know why we all love you, Steve?" She asked cruelly. "Because you don't. Oh, you would do anything for us, except for one thing, which is to open your heart to us. And yet, we would still follow you to the ends of hell and back."

"It's not true and please, stop talking." Steve wanted to turn to her, perhaps glare at her or scowl, but she was still holding his hand, and his arm was resting against her chest, her whole body leaning into him, her heart a trapped hummingbird, beating so fast with her strange need of being loved and approved by Steve. Steve tried to catch Erik's eyes, letting him know that was something wrong with his daughter, but the awful lunatic was taking his role as the guardian of the entrance with too much seriousness and seemed to refuse to look at either of them, although by now he should have heard the murmurings.

Her other hand cupped his opposite cheek, making their weird symbiosis a very strange picture. Her almost entire body was covering his now, a stray tear blessing him silently. His gun stuttered in his hand, her behavior beginning to concern him.

"Andrea, what's wrong?" He dared to ask at last, by now realizing that it was not the darkness that made her so unstable, nor was the imminent threat on being wounded or worse.

"Remember when you bought me those sketchbooks?" She refused to answer, her other hand coming up to his shoulder, her fingers digging in his flesh bruising. "It was the first time ever someone other than my father was kind to me. And you had no obligation because you were keeping yourself away from the others and you barely talked." She nuzzled in between the shoulder and his neck. "I'm sorry I shot Quill in front of you. I'm so sorry."

"I thought we weren't going to mention this anymore." He inhaled sharply. "What's wrong, baby? Are you afraid? Because I promise you no one will hurt you, no one will lay a finger on you. And you know I keep my promises."

"I can live with the blood of a lot of people on my hands, I can live with the fact that I'll never be an artist, I can even live with the fact that my father is a goddamn traitor and a snitch, but I can't live within a world where I would be responsible for your death." She sobbed. "I will save you, Steve. I will save you." Before the implication of her words could really sink with Steve, Andrea pressed her body tight against his, her arm hugging his shoulder and she made a curious sound. It sounded like a signal for her body was crushed almost instantly by invisible blows before finally sagging against his.

An undercover agent would have recognized the sound anywhere, however, it still took Steve several seconds to comprehend that someone had just shot at him multiple times, the silencer killing effectively any sound.

The light came on just as suddenly as it had disappeared, blinding and excruciating. Steve's bulging eyes refused to look down, refused to believe his hand now was clasping limp fingers. Her entire body had covered him like a shield of muscle and bones, and yet if he couldn't see that, it meant it didn't happen. His mind was screaming at him, and yet all he could do was look back at Erik's horrified eyes as he stood in front of them, his silenced pointed at them both, a murderer through
It wasn't even that big of a deal. He saw the little artsy shop on his way back in the dump that he was living. Erik kept his fighters on a tight leash and their freedom was restricted but still, he offered them two hours a day outside for their own entertainment. Modern slaves a lot of them. But he'd seen how Andrea was sketching all the time on napkins, bills, and receipts. One time she was even drawing a complicated flower in the dust that had settled in the kitchen.

The man at the counter looked up from his book, took a good look at his ratty t-shirt and his baggy jeans and sighed.

"No, I don't donate anything for starving artists, no you can't open a tab here and no, I'm not going to change my mind so don't leave your-"

"I have a friend." Steve cleared his voice. He didn't sound like himself anymore. He gradually forgot who he was really, the mission was taking a toll on him. "I have a friend that loves to sketch. I need... I mean I have money."

The guy sighed put upon and got up.

"Have you bought anything like this before?" Steve just shook his head and the guy frowned but went on to recommend him some sketchbooks, babbling about the texture of paper and different styles. Steve didn't understand a word of what he was saying, but it was grateful for it. The flood of words was washing over him, covering his wounds, making him feel normal and, most importantly, forgetting about broken bones and tore muscles, if only for a while. He left with a couple of sketchbooks, different in size, several pencils, and even charcoal.

He went back to the building where he and several other fighters were living. It was entirely owned by Erik Killmonger and the entire neighborhood made sure to stay clear of it. He had a fight coming that evening and everyone was expecting to win and yet here he was, more excited about how Andrea was going to receive his gift. The guy at the shop wrapped everything nicely, and Steve held on to it like precious cargo. It was so important to make someone happy at the time. The mission had already broken him into several pieces - each time he was putting pieces of him back, someone would come and steal one or break him apart again. He was not a war machine, but people had started to treat him as one and even the other fighters were staying the hell away from him.

When the car came to pick him, he got in it with a little excitement. Andrea had glanced at him and didn't notice his package until he literally shoved it in her face. She was eighteen going on a hundred and her unimpressed air about the whole affair was making him laugh. Bitterly.

"It's not my birthday, Rogers."

"I didn't say it was. I just saw that shop and thought of you."

"Are you trying to butter me up?"

Steve shrugged. He had never been a talker, so he just waited patiently for her to open the present. The reverence with which she touched those sketchbooks was imprinted in his mind forever, but the hug had been so much better. He would remember forever her flowery smell, her small arms coming around him. Her gratitude, and her spark with which she gave him that night a sketch of him, scowling at the world, a menace through and through.

"Why?" He croaked supporting her body. Her body, his mind screamed hysterically. His arm
wrapped around her waist on its own volition, still keeping her close to his own body. If they could share the same heartbeat, maybe, just maybe a miracle would happen. There was something warm and sticky covering him, baptizing him in red and guts and Steve truly wished at that moment he were dead.

"She wasn't supposed to do this," Erik mumbled, his crazy eyes spewing hate. "She was supposed to just give me the fucking signal and just let me kill you. I was supposed to kill you."

"You betrayed Bucky and killed your daughter!" Steve seethed. "You are a fucking monster."

"The era of the mighty Bucky Barnes is coming to an end!" Erik roared, his gun shaking wildly. "You think Pierce is the only one to want his death? You are so fucking naïve, even now after so long. Barnes won't last long. Half of the family is against him. Or at least that what Robert told me. And when the fucking stuck up prick dies, at last, I can expand again."

"You won't get a chance to kill him."

"Well, sorry to disappoint, Rogers, but your fuck buddy is dead. Pierce's best man went for him and his signal that he succeeded was bringing the power back." Erik laughed like a mad man, unable to contain the insanity of the crime he had just committed. "I wish I could have seen that smug bastard's face but no matter. I will-"

"Pierce's best man?! Don't make me laugh!" A sudden voice interrupted them, and something thumped between them. With a horrifying sound, Steve acknowledged that it was the decapitated head of Zemo and by the terrifying face that Killmonger made, it was clear that the mission had failed entirely. There was a whoosh of a sound and then both Erik's kneecaps exploded into a mass of shattered bone and blood. The man crashed to the floor in agony letting him catch a glimpse of Rollins and Rumlow, frightening in their cold blood.

Erik roared in agony but still tried to pull the trigger on Bucky. However, another bullet and his right hand dropped the gun with the same splat of red matter. Howlett winked at him as he put the gun back in his holster, Erik completely incapacitated now. Barnes pushed the gun away with his foot and crouched in front of him.

"I wish I could say I am astonished by this turn of events, but I'm not." Bucky's eyes appraised Killmonger's wounds as the man continued to groan in pain. "I wish I could say I have an interest to keep you alive, but I don't."

"I'll see you in hell, you fucking prick!" Erik spat.

"I'm afraid you won't. I don't make plans with traitors like you." Bucky signaled Rumlow and Rollins and both approached them immediately. Rollins grabbed Erik's head and held him still, while Rumlow took out a blade. A bench made Presidio folder, his traitorous mind supplied, unable to cope at the moment with everything that was happening. It was US military top choice for combat folders and of course a professional assassin should have that in his arsenal.

"Now this is how the plan is going to unravel." Bucky's voice sounded almost bored. "I am going to gauge your eyes out, which I assume is pretty self-explanatory. Then I am going to write 'traitor' on your damn forehead and shoot you dead. After all, I need to send Pierce a farewell gift."

And Rumlow proceeded to just that. Steve averted his eyes only to see Rebecca looking horrified at Andrea's body, her hand still frozen around her mouth. He continued to ignore the agonizing screams and dropped the gun, so he could grab Andrea's body. He ignored completely the filth that her father was spewing and just held her close, like the precious burden that she was. And when
everything was over, when Bucky finally made good on his promise, Steve just looked up, back into those blue eyes and he knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was damned.

"Now we go after Pierce." The angel of death ordered and all in the room were going to listen to his words and carry his commands.
i set the world on fire

Chapter Notes

hello lovely people, I am back from my excruciating exam. I think it went alright.... but in the heat I forgot I had a job interview.... let's all cross our fingers and wish that they'll still see me! <3

The stiffness of the dried blood on his t-shirt had become uncomfortable a while back, but Steve could not bear to move from Andrea's room. He sat on her bed, an open sketchbook in his hand, an unopened diary resting next to his leg. It had taken several attempts from Rebecca to convince him to hand over her body as he kept her head still resting on his shoulder. He had hoped till the last moment that she would suddenly open her eyes and laugh hard at him for falling for such an obvious prank. But it had not been the case and they had taken her away from him as gently as they could.

As he got up to his feet, he glanced at Erik's headless body and hit it with his foot. Once. Hard. And then spit on it. Nobody said anything, nobody questioned his action, this, in turn, making Steve even more hysterical because seriously, these fucking damaged people would probably have the same reaction as his. Such gestures could be common traditions among them.

"Did she talk to you before she died?" Bucky's voice held no power over him at the moment. "Did she say anything useful?"

"Other than the fact that she didn't want to live in a world where she would be responsible for my death, no, she didn't say anything goddamn useful," he spat back still staring at the body, hating with every fiber of his body the fact that he was not squeamish at all, that all he felt was hatred, and a visceral need to resurrect Erik and kill him with his bare hands.

"You should show some respect," Howlett growled and Steve finally raised his eyes. "We saved your fucking life, pal."

"James!" Rebecca admonished him, but the man stared back at him completely unapologetic.

"Right," he mumbled. "Tell me again for how long you people thought I was the mole? That I was the traitor while this piece of shit," Steve hit the body again, "was selling your secrets to the highest bidder? Oh, wait, to your fucking cousin no less."

"Steve, enough!" The angel of death spoke again, and Steve's anger simmered, threatening to drown everything. Right then, he fucking hated them all, even Rebecca and Bucky. Each fiber of his soul sang with the need to do the right thing, take the gun out, and fucking kill these fucking bastards. He scowled at his lover, anger, betrayal and hurt mixing in a dangerous cocktail.

He had to get out of the room before he jeopardized the entire mission and went out in a blaze of glory, taking as many assholes with him as possible. So, he chose to just push past Rebecca and leave the room, his legs carrying him as far as possible. He had not realized when he made it to Andrea's room.

He sat on the bed and looked at the nightstand. A small sketchbook and a pencil next to it, one of
the ones that Steve had bought her a lifetime ago. Underneath it, there was another notebook, which resembled a diary.

This is how Rebecca found him hours later. She silently stood next to him and clasped his hand in her own. Something ugly uncoiled and dissipated within Steve. They both breathed a little easier after that.

"Now this explains so much why we were attacked back then on our way to Robert," Rebecca acknowledged at last. "My cousin must have told Pierce about our meeting and decided to act then. It could have been a great coop."

"While your cousin had no problem betraying you lot, she died for me. She died for me and I couldn't do anything to prevent it."

"It was her choice, Steve." Rebecca squeezed his hand. "She thought you were worthy of her sacrifice, do not belittle her decision. You should be angry at her father, but not at her. Never at her."

"People keep dying around me, Rebecca." The wall had broken at last. "I try my best time and time again, but sooner or later, people die around me," he mumbled in the semi-darkness of the room. "When my family had been whipped out in the accident, I thought I was cursed. It took years to convince myself that I was not responsible in any way for their untimely death. But people continue to die around me."

"Steve, you listen to me and you listen good," Rebecca's strong voice seemed to pierce the veil of pain with which he surrounded himself, "you are not responsible for the decisions that Erik and Robert made, no matter how harsh and difficult the consequences have been. Unfortunately, in our world betrayal is in the order of the business each day. However, this time it cost us losing Andrea, but I am grateful that you were spared."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me." Rebecca sighed heavily, her voice suddenly clogged with unuttered emotion. "This had been a very vexing night and I’m not above saying that I fucking hated it."

"I think it's the first time I hear you swearing." He laughed wetly."

"Well, it's fucking worth it, isn't it?" Rebecca's wobbly voice made him tilt his head and have a look at her. She stared back with eyes in tears. "I fucking hate this life sometimes, you know?"

Her admittance brought the truth out of him before he realized what he was saying.

"I’m afraid of what Bucky might do next."

"But not of him?"

"I think I was never afraid of your brother," he admitted. "But I’m afraid of what he is capable of."

"I think all of us are." Her sincerity startled him. She smirked. "You think just because I’m his sister, that I’m not occasionally afraid of his actions? I’ll be the first to acknowledge the fact that my brother is completely ruthless. But he had to be. His life was shaped and bent to fit his role as the head of the clan and too much betrayal had happened along time. It shouldn't justify his cruelty, but I think at times, he’s tired of this life too."

"Perhaps." Steve closed his eyes and leaned his head over hers in a soothing gesture. "Or, he's been
doing this for so long that he started to genuinely enjoy it. It makes me wonder what will happen if he finds me lacking one day."

"If you two are done philosophizing over my lack of soul, you need to shower and change, and you, Rebecca, need to go find your husband. We need to move soon." Bucky startled both of them and Steve turned around, still holding Rebecca's hand. "And just for the record, Steve Rogers, I will never find you lacking. In case you haven't noticed so far, I've never found you lacking."

Bucky left them alone again and Steve gazed at Rebecca utterly dumbfounded.

"Did your brother just compliment me?"

"That he did, Steve. That he did." She smirked at him knowingly and patted his knee before letting his hand go. "You heard him; we need to move."

Steve reluctantly stood up and took Andrea's sketchbook and diary with him. He didn't know what he would do with them, but something deep within him was telling him he should take them both. He accompanied Rebecca to her room, noticing in the hallway what could probably be described as an army of hired guns. The entrances were protected by at least one person, with two or three standing guard at all the main entrances. The magnitude of the Barnes empire was far worse than Steve had imagined if so many armed men could be summoned in such a short time.

A sudden exhaustion crept inside every bone and muscle of his body, the realization that terminating the entire clan's operations would be far less likely than it had been to destroy most of Pierce's. Realistically speaking, while his plan has been all along to terminate Pierce and only then Bucky, now he wondered whether it had been a good move in this very dangerous chess game that he was playing.

The war was not over yet as Pierce and Robert were still very much alive, but then again destroying those snakes could only cement Bucky's reputation. A bunch of copied files and photos were not going to help much. Nobody would have the courage to testify against the Barnes' now more than ever. And if the war was won, then this could only get worse.

Steve sighed heavily as he gently put the sketchbook and diary down on his nightstand. Most of his clothes were in Bucky's bedroom, so he glanced around the room, his shoulders sagged, the clothes still bathed in blood. He went out again and entered Bucky's room without knocking.

He went to the bathroom, closed the door behind him and sagged to the floor. His whole mission seemed pointless and hopeless. And his morality was heavily questioned because deep down inside of him, Steve Rogers had the guts to recognize that more time spent with Bucky would only give him pleasure, his feelings having blossomed a long time ago now. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The relief of seeing Bucky alive and well, with only minor cuts and bruises, had been visceral, if short. It was impossible for Steve to deny the pleasure of seeing Bucky so confidently handling the situation. So competent in his destruction, so overconfident in the righteousness of his actions.

He stood up and made his way to the shower, took his clothes off and stepped under the spray, praying for the water to drown his thoughts and leave him completely blank. He needed to rethink this whole mission, to reorganize and regroup because the war was far from over and Steve was now perfectly caught in the middle of it.

A body embraced him from behind, hard muscles covering his back like a shield, arms coming around him in a protective stance, a head resting on his shoulder. Steve shuddered and leaned forward, his arms reaching for the tiles in front of him, his palms wide open on the cold wall. An
Atlas carrying the burden of his lover, so much heavier than the world, so much more precious, so much more fragile.

"You have walls," Bucky muttered against his ear, nipping it gently. "You don't fear me, but I see you at times with this shattered look and I wonder who put that look on your face. Sometimes I believe it’s me." He bit gently on his shoulder then soothed it with his tongue. "Is it me?"

"Sometimes," Steve mumbled lost to the sensations. "Sometimes it's the lack of hope for you and me."

All movement stopped. The silence spread over them with its black wings in spite of the spattering of water. Bucky took his arms away and stood tall. Reluctantly, Steve turned and confronted him. It was such a stupid place to hold that conversation, both naked, both suffocating in the steam of what felt like a glass coffin. Blue eyes looked back at him, the face unreadable again.

"There is a lack of hope in us?"

Steve nodded ignoring Bucky's flinch. "Not so long ago, I asked you to give me a reason to believe in us, to believe in you and for you to show me a different side of this. You failed." Determination poured over him like a blanket, remembering Andrea's warnings. "Tonight proved me once again that this – whatever this is, whatever your mean of life actually entails for you – is more important than everything else. Than anyone else."

"You knew this already, Rogers. From the very beginning." Bucky's words fell like stones in deep dark water. "I have never pretended to be someone else. You have experienced my cruelty from the very beginning, my suspicions, my wrath. You know very well that I don't take kindly to betrayal. You know who I am."

"I know excessively who you are, Bucky Barnes. And up until now, I was afraid that you would be the one to find me lacking, I firmly believe now that all along it should have been the other way around." In spite of the nakedness, Steve stood taller than ever. Maybe since this mission has started. Regroup. Be stronger. Andrea's sacrifice was not going to be in vain. "And tonight, I found you lacking, Bucky Barnes, and I'm not afraid to say it."

"How am I lacking?" Anger fell like a whip between them. "Because I saved you?"

"You didn't save me. Andrea did." Steve pushed past him and got out of the shower, grabbing the towel with enough force to make the towel bar shake under pressure. He turned to Bucky, who looked at him with eyes narrowed, jaws clenched. "You just came into the room, killed Erik and then demanded to know if she said anything useful. You weren't in the slightest concerned with my well-being. Only with your reputation. God forbid, the mighty Bucky Barnes, the famous White Wolf feels anything! You don't get to say you fucking saved me when you didn't even care about my safety in the first place. Andrea saved me and her corpse stands as proof of that. Don't you fucking dare minimize her actions tonight because I swear, I will stab you in your fucking face!"

"Be careful what you're saying-"

"Finish that sentence!" Steve's fury reached new heights. "Finish that fucking sentence and I'll be absolutely done! You don't get a second chance, because you've had plenty enough. I'm done with you if you finish that sentence. I dare you!"

They stood in an angry confrontation, his whole body trembling. He stared straight into Bucky's eyes and dared him to say anything. Within his very bones, he had the certainty that if Bucky finished that sentence, he would walk out of this goddamn mission without any regret and finish it
on the other side. In that particular moment, he was no longer Steve Rogers, but Steve Rogers, special agent, who after months of torture and second-guessing, was coming up to the surface, saved by a girl when he least expected it. He could separate these two. He could make it work. Despite feeling sorry for himself for most of the night, drowning in remorse and self-blaming, Steve's ego was not dead yet, his will had not withered away.

Bucky chose not to utter any word, and Steve nodded once.

"Where are you going?" Bucky broke the silence in a move uncharacteristic to him. Steve was less than impressed.

"In my room. I think you and your ego can keep each other warm tonight. Let me know when we go after Robert."

Steve got out of the room, and ignoring the looks of the guards, went back to his room. He glanced at the diary and the sketchbook still resting on his nightstand and felt he made the right decision. Andrea wouldn't die in vain. He would make sure that all those responsible will meet their maker and went back to whatever hell they crawled out of. He changed into fresh clothes and didn't bother to make the bed. He laid above the duvet and then looked up at the ceiling. Shaking with adrenaline still, he couldn't mute Andrea's voice inside his head. However, for the first time in his life, he didn't want to. He listened carefully to it and planned.

The following morning, a clean-up team had been called to make sure the mansion held no proof of what had happened the previous night. Steve made a point of remembering the face of all that came inside the house and the logo of the firm. He was sure this would be very useful in the future. He ate the breakfast stone faced and nobody bothered him. Rebecca was a no show and Bucky seemed unbelievably absent as well. The only person brave enough to speak with him was Thor, who ignoring the pointed looks of the other people, stayed silently by Steve's side and ate breakfast with a careful demeanor.

When they both finished, they picked up the plates and cups, washed them and were about to go find Howlett, when Bucky entered the kitchen. He was dressed in a blue suit and absolutely nothing betrayed what had happened the night before, he didn't even have shadows underneath his eyes, the fucker. Steve felt a new surge of anger wash over him. Nobody should look that flawless after a night of betrayal and blood. Nobody had the right to stand tall and righteous as if the world owed them something and not the other way around.

"Rogers, I need you to come with me." Steve rolled his eyes but nodded and followed Bucky outside the kitchen. They left the house and Bucky headed towards the garage. He chose a nondescript black vehicle and motioned Steve to take the passenger seat.

Twenty minutes into the drive and both had not uttered a single word. Steve was sure that at this point Barnes was just about ready to murder him, lovers or not. The radio filled up the gaps of silence between them, but all those songs were just fleeting sounds that would leave their ghosts behind, breaking against the walls of their hearts. There was nothing there. Steve found in that particular moment hard to believe that anything had ever been between the two of them. Maybe they had just been fuck buddies, maybe the mobster needed some action and it had seemed to him that Steve would be the best bet. And now they were going to drive to a secluded place and Bucky would put a bullet into his head and dump his body there. The undercover agent found that quite soothing, which was so fucked up, he felt it was better not to analyze that too in-depth.

When another ten minutes passed with no clear sign of where they were going, Steve finally broke, "Where are we going?"
"You said you wanted a reason to hope. To believe in us." Bucky didn't take his eyes off the road. "I want to give you one."

"How? By driving around like a lunatic, making me think that you're about to kill me?"

Bucky's hands whitened on the steering wheel but still refused to glanced towards Steve.

"I would never hurt you."

"Yeah, I bet you actually believe that." This aggressiveness was so unlike him, and yet he wanted to goad Bucky, he wanted to get a reaction of him,

"Please, have patience. It won't be long now. Maybe another 15 minutes."

"Okay."

Steve sulked in his seat and pressed his face against the window. They had exited Brooklyn about ten minutes ago, pressing alongside the hills in a quiet picturesque landscape, and Steve watched the sun hiding behind the trees, the rays carefully playing hide and seek, catching each other on the windscreen and mirrors, sometimes even in Bucky's hair. If only he wasn't so goddamn attractive.

As promised, the car stopped almost twenty minutes later in front of a black gate, hiding away from the people's view of a very beautiful garden. The porter's face visibly lightened up when he saw Bucky and was more than happy to open the gate for them and let them in. The wheels squashed the white gravel underneath and they followed a wooden road towards a very beautiful house, covered in thick ivy. The car stopped in front of the black door on which a very happy sign stood. Andrea's Safe Heaven For Children.

As soon as he read the sign, Steve felt physically ill. His tongue felt like a lump of meat suddenly unable to moisturize his insides, unable to move. A useless muscle against the lump in his throat.

"What is this place?" He asked clearing his voice, trying not to sound too hoarse. It felt like dying a little.

"About a year and a half ago, Andrea came to me, risking her safety and told me that she wanted to open a sanctuary for abused children. She wanted help because nobody would listen to her, not even her father. I asked her why she wanted this. She said that a special person inspired her, that the person had been shot and left for dead in a hospital, but that while working for her father, this person had always cared for her and other children, which he encountered on the streets. She said she knew it was not my style but that we could give something back to the community, that we could atone for our sins in a way. Only recently, I realized that the person she mentioned was you."

"She never said anything. I didn't know." His hands were shaking as he pressed the button and opened the window to have a better look at the sign. He still couldn't believe what he was reading.

"We built this in four months." Bucky's carried on. "She had some money on the side, but it wasn't merely enough to fund such an important and valuable project. I gave her the money; she personally painted the children's rooms. In the first six months, we had more than 50 children come here. They have special art classes to support them in expressing themselves, therapy sessions for those who need it. More often than not, they all do. Riding, taking care of a vegetable garden, taking care of the horses. This land is vast. It belonged to Andrea's mother."

"What are you trying to say?"

"While we hold special shows and art exhibitions, this place can't be supported merely through
donations. Who do you think pays for all of this?" Bucky finally stared at him openly. "You think that I’m a monster. And rightly so. Most of the time I am. I will not hide. This is what life made me, this is what I have become."

"And you think that by paying for this place, while it is undeniably a very kind initiative, will substitute for everything else?"

"No, but things are not always black and white with people, Steve. Yes, I kill and I torture and I’m completely unforgiving when it comes to betrayal. In my heart, there is mostly darkness, but there is also light. A tiny speck of light, but it is there. Shouldn't that count for something, Steve Rogers? Shouldn't that be enough for now?"

Steve swallowed hard, his heart racing in his chest. There were a million words fighting for supremacy on his lips and yet he said none. It was a question with a very difficult answer, and he couldn't find it in him yet.

"Can you show me inside? Can you show me the grounds, please?" He asked and he expected for Bucky to close off again, unsatisfied that his moment of sincerity had been met with such avoidance, but his lover surprised him again by nodding gently, remaining open. Maybe there was hope.

"We need to break the news of Andrea's death as well," Bucky murmured as they stood in front of the door. He took a deep breath and Steve impulsively grabbed his hand in a show of support. The other man squeezed tight and then knocked on the door.

It was the strangest day ever. Andrea's death had been met with tears from the staff and they kindly asked for details for the funeral service. Steve was stunned when Bucky not only provided them, but he also proved that he had a heart by speaking gently about her. He refused to give too many details and told them that Andrea succumbed to her death after a short illness. He reassured everyone that the institution would continue its activity.

Steve stood aside and listen to everything but adding nothing. It was almost soothing being among these people who clearly cared about Andrea and he wondered why she hadn't mentioned anything to him. He probably would find out if he read her diary, but it would feel almost like a violation of her intimacy and he wasn't prepared to do so yet.

The main manager decided to play the guide for them, and although it was obvious that Bucky knew everything by heart, he seemed to enjoy the fresh enthusiasm with which Steve was taking everything in. He marveled at the therapy rooms with their comfortable furniture and their cozy light, the art rooms full of children aged between eight and fourteen. By the time the tour finished, Steve wondered why he didn't know any of this or if his chief had purposely left this out, thinking that it might have clouded his judgment.

The soft glow of the afternoon sun spilled in the car as they drove back Brooklyn. During the time there, not once Steve let go of Bucky's hand. He looked now at their hands, side by side comfortable in the silence surrounding them. Steve felt a strong need to mess this man up, to leave creases on his clothes and hickeys on his unblemished skin. To mess up his hair and mark him up. To find that tiny speck of light and make it grow, grow so much that it would overcome the darkness and pull them towards a future that maybe wouldn't end up with the death of either of them. Such impossible dreams. Such a bleak future.

"What about Robert?"

"He's dealt with. Howlett took care of him." Steve nodded.
"What do you plan on doing now?"

"Go after Pierce. I think it is time to get rid of that snake."

Steve looked out on the window again. He couldn't hide a vicious little smile. It would mean that the first plan of his mission would be over, Andrea would be avenged. It would mean a new hell for him, but he would keep it together. This time it was going to be different.

The rest of the drive was spent in silence, but they were welcomed back at the mansion with the nervous energy of a thunderstorm. Two SUVs were parked outside the house and Howlett looked like the god of thunder himself, ready to break bones and chew muscles.

"What is the matter, Howlett?" Bucky asked as they both got off the car.

"We have goddamn agents from FBI in the living room," Howlett spat the words as he nodded at Steve. "They want to talk to you about the apparent disappearance of Pierce's men. Fifteen in total. Seemingly last seen on their way here to discuss a truce."

"Do you think that bastard directed them here?" Steve asked surprised by the new turn of events.

"I think he's getting really desperate and he would die of his own venom if this would mean taking us with him." Howlett added, "They spoke with us and most of the staff. Of course everyone pretty much said the same story: nothing happened, we don't know what they're talking about. Fucking cops!"

"Relax, Howlett!" Bucky ordered. "They are unable to prove anything. I think this is a desperate attempt from Pierce's part to divert our attention from him. He must know that with this open declaration of war, he is bound to go under."

The infuriated man nodded. Together, they walked in silence towards the living room where the two agents waited for them while drinking tea and having a seemingly pleasant conversation with Rebecca.

"Ah, brother, there you are!" Rebecca exclaimed as soon as they entered the room, Steve one step behind Bucky, his head slightly bowed but observing the two cops. Oh, how evident on their faces that they wanted blood and they wanted to get it as soon as possible.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes," The older cop, dressed in a very neat black suit, said obviously trying to pretend this was nothing but a friendly visit. "I'm Agent Rafael Hernandez, and this is my partner, Agent Spencer. I apologize to disturb the routine of your house in such a manner, but a formal complaint has been addressed to the office with enough claims to make us want to visit you as soon as possible." His tone was not apologetic at all, and his whole stance oozed defiance. The younger one seemed aware of the lack of respect showed by his partner, but not inclined to make things right.

"Good afternoon, Agent Hernandez, Agent Spencer. Nice to make your acquaintance." Bucky took a seat on one of the central armchairs of the room, both Howlett and Steve standing on each side of him. "I hope my sister took good care of you."

"Yes, thank you," Agent Spencer answered and Steve didn't like glint in his eyes. He was by far more astute than his partner and he was definitely sending the wrong kind of vibe.

"That is good. And what is this formal complaint that you are talking about?"

"While we can't name the source of the complaint about their safety, apparently fifteen men were
seen driving towards your mansion last night. This was the last place they were seen, and we were advised that they were planning the discussion of a truce, the reasons for it unknown. We started to investigate, treating this as a disappearance case," Hernandez explained, while his partner fidgeted. Everyone in the room knew that this excuse was thinner than a spider's web.

"How admirable of you!" Bucky's detachment seemed to annoy both cops. "One must wonder why no less than fifteen men were driving last night towards my home and what sort of truce they were plotting. Nevertheless, we're unable to help you, I'm afraid. For no one has visited us last night, least of all fifteen men."

"Of course. However, we would like to eliminate all possibilities." Agent Hernandez was definitely not the patient type. Steve smirked: this guy would have been the worst undercover cop ever. "As I explained to your sister, the number is quite big and maybe one of your men saw something. We spoke with most of your staff, but if you don't mind, we would like to have a word with you and your bodyguard." Agent Hernandez's eyes zeroed on Steve. "I believe your name is Steve Rogers, is that correct?"
"I believe your name is Steve Rogers, is that correct?"

This was not a random choice. While he was having a mental breakdown, someone painted a target on his back. Steve's fists tightened: he was losing his grip of this case, he was spiraling out of control, but he had sworn the night before that he was winning this back over. And no two damn FBI agents would interfere with that. This was his fucking case; his fucking life and he was going to fight this.

"Yes, that is correct."

"Mr. Barnes, if you don't mind, we would like to discuss with your bodyguard first and then with you." Spencer's tone heavily implied that this was not a request. And not a random one at that.

"By all means, agents. Please discuss with my staff all you want." Bucky remained seated and his stance as casual as it could be. "As you might have noticed by now, we have little to hide and we want to fully cooperate with the authorities. However, in the unfortunate event that let us assume FBI listened to a formal complaint against me without evidence and further legal support, please rest assured that I would not be pleased in such circumstances of my time being wasted."

"You consider the disappearance of fifteen men 'a time being wasted'?" Agent Hernandez couldn't restrain his anger, but Barnes was a skilled player, not to mention astute as well. And by now, he had come to realize that the two agents were on a wild goose chase and whatever Pierce or one of his extensions had offered, well, it didn't amount to much.

"No, gentlemen, but I do not see you prioritizing this case." Bucky leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees. "You come into my house, you tell me that someone had made a complaint against me, fifteen men had disappeared the previous night. No reason was given for your visit and this discussion that we are currently having other than that somehow someone witnessed them coming into the direction of my mansion. How convenient! Nonetheless, I make my staff available to you, everyone cooperates, and rest assured that I and my bodyguard will discuss with you as well. But you have to look from my perspective: it is very suspicious that FBI allocates only two men to investigate the disappearance of fifteen men, in less than 24 hours since their disappearance, with 'someone saw them coming in this direction' as their only substantial proof. So let me put it bluntly to you, agents: one sniff that you put any pressure on my bodyguard or any other person part of my staff, any harassment from your part, and I will sue the FBI so fast, you won't know what hit you until you're serving miso soup at three in the morning in the southern part of Brooklyn. Do I make myself clear?"

A pin could have been heard falling following Bucky's tirade. And Steve secretly admired the man for his cool blood. The two agents were most definitely not pleased with the way situation reversed their roles but there was little they could do, therefore they both grunted unwillingly just to get rid of Barnes' menacing eyes. The torture and subsequent death of the undercover agent at the hands of Bucky Barnes was well known among the police force and Steve was more than convinced that
the two agents had not taken the threat lightly, especially since it was made against their careers.

"Very well then, gentlemen. I will leave you with Rogers. Please let me know when you need me. I will be in my office."

"Thank you, Mr. Barnes," Agent Spencer replied, aware that he needed to gain back the control over the situation and fast.

The trio from hell left the living room leaving Steve with the two agents staring back at him. He silently took Bucky's place and waited.

"Listen, kid." Oh, condescension. They were up for a great start. "We know that you started working for Barnes only several months ago, yet he keeps you in high regard," Hernandez said and Spencer rolled his eyes.

"What he means to say is that we know that you are his whore." Hernandez tsked disapprovingly and Spencer rolled his eyes but seemed contrite.

"I don't see how sucking his dick would make me a whore," Steve replied nonchalantly. "Not that this is what I’m doing, but I fail to see your reasoning behind this. I’m simply employed here as Ms. Barnes' bodyguard."

"Oh, the kid's got balls."

"I haven't been a kid in a very long time, agents. So, unless you start with the questions, I’ll let my employer know what sort of comments I hear and let him decide how to act next."

Steve almost smirked seeing the crestfallen expression on both agents' faces. Perhaps, based on what Pierce most definitely told them, they came here convinced that he was simply a stupid kid who merely liked to suck cock a lot. They were in for a surprise. He was not going to let Pierce and some fucking FBI agents ruin his whole hard work.

"Mr. Rogers," Agent Spencer resumed after clearing his voice, "where were you last night?"

"I was here at the mansion." Steve forced himself to control his emotions and to keep his face as blank as possible. "We watched a movie, it was movie night, then we said good night and we all went to our various rooms or houses."

"Who were the people present at the time?" Steve told them, avoiding mentioning Erik and Andrea who were technically still on the run from the police. "Did you hear any cars coming to the mansion later in the evening? Were any particular sounds during that night that attracted your attention?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I was sound asleep and didn't hear anything."

"How convenient for you, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, Agent Spencer, or perhaps, unlike you, I don't have anything to trouble me at night."

"You don't have anything?" Hernandez's incredulity reached new heights as Agent Spencer narrowed his eyes even more. "You are telling me you don't know that you are employed by one of the most ruthless men in the country and that you didn't see anything suspicious? The very thought alone that you are employed by Bucky Barnes should be more than enough reason for you to suffer from insomnia. But I guess you must be really just like him not to be bothered by the things happening under this roof."
"Let me tell you what my life taught me, agents." Steve played his Rogers act to perfection. "I know that when I needed the most the authorities, they failed to do their jobs. I learned that police work only as far as they want to and when they want to, and they don't care about people like me much. I personally don't give a crap about what is happening under this roof, because it is not my job. I work for Ms. Barnes; I guard her, and the rest is indifferent to me. But let me flat out say it for you: if you're looking for a snitch, you can forget about me because that ain't happening."

"We'll see if you hold the same opinion once Barnes gets bored with you." Spencer's words rang too close to Steve's doubts. "See how the mighty Bucky Barnes disposes of you then." Both agents smirked at his discomfort, unaware that Steve's dark thoughts were fueled by far worse doubts. "Now go and call your boss like the good dog that you are."

Steve scowled at both of them but remained silent, got up and went to call Bucky. His insides were twisted in a mess of determination and self-doubt. He went to his room, avoiding Rebecca and Howlett and trying to figure a few things out. He looked out the window at the blue sky and wished to be in a completely different place under completely different circumstances. He missed his dad something fiercely, as he had always been the only person to get through Steve and see him on the other side. He needed clarity and what had happened for the past two days had put a dent to his whole plans.

If Pierce was desperate enough to go the police, a major no-no in their circles, then surely the man was at his wits' end. This meant in turn that his end was closer than ever and with Robert's demise at Howlett's hand, Pierce was a sitting target. If he had been smart, he would have hidden by now, but something told Steve that Pierce was an astute player and he still had something up his sleeves.

While Pierce's death or disappearance would help Steve greatly, it also meant that he was out of excuses and that sooner or later he had to make a move against the Barnes clan. Against Bucky. He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes plunging into darkness. If he were to take down Bucky, all the others would be affected.

Rollins and Rumlow would be the only ones able to flee as quickly as they could. He doubted that Thor would try and leave Doc behind, which would, in turn, make him a very easy target for FBI. Rebecca would never forgive Steve and she too would have to go down because Howlett would follow Bucky to the pits of hell and beyond. He didn't care much about the other associates and he recognized that realistically speaking, he was breaking these people apart.

What Bucky showed him in the morning had been a never before seen glimpse into a life that he actually knew little off. He had been focusing so much on not getting caught and tortured that he failed to examine Rebecca's paperwork clearly and thus missing important information. But in the long run, nothing much mattered. The Barnes clan had to fall after Pierce and he knew that in order to do so, he was compelled to take down the mighty trio.

"Are you all right?" Bucky's voice startled him, and he took his hands from his eyes and turned.

"Yes, just a headache. The agents are gone?"

"Yes." Bucky stood at the entrance hesitant to enter. "What did they say to you?"

"Other than calling me your whore and trying to see whether they can goad me into spilling out something, not much." Steve sighed. "Just so you know I didn't mention Andrea and Erik."

"You did well." Bucky's frowned. "They called you a whore?"

"Apparently, Pierce gave them the information that we two were sleeping together." Steve rolled
his eyes. "As if that was the worst thing they could say about me. I didn't care much about it and you shouldn't either."

"It doesn't bother you at all?"

"Nope. You don't pay me to have sex with you, you pay me to take care of your sister, which sometimes I fail to do, but sill... And besides, I do believe that in your own cold-hearted way, you do care about me. So definitely not a whore. Perhaps a little bit more than friends with benefits, I would assume."

Those words seemed to spur Barnes into action as he finally crossed the threshold and approached Steve with a mysterious glint in his eyes. He cupped the young man's face and pressed a gentle kiss on his forehead making Steve closing his eyes in delight. Feather-like kisses sent a silent benediction over his face and when Bucky kissed him at last, Steve melted against him. It felt as if he hadn't been kissed in ages and it always surprised him the tenderness with which sometimes Bucky treated him.

"So definitely more than friends with benefits," Steve mumbled against Bucky's shoulder as the other man pushed him against the bed, effectively making him forget about his worries and plans.

"So much more," Bucky replied back reverently against his ear and then nipping it carefully. Steve closed his eyes in pleasure and let the other man cover him like a blanket cutting him out from the rest of the world, the worries, the plans and the never-ending pain of feeling on the edge of a very dangerous black hole.

It was Howlett that woke them up several hours later when he knocked softly at the door before opening. Steve stirred just in time to see that Bucky had been awake a while and was looking over some papers, while the smell of coffee lingered in the room.

"Just received a phone call from Drax," Howlett muttered. He was definitely a little bit peeved by the situation, especially because Bucky made him speak to him whilst they were both lying there naked under the covers. "Phillips has summoned both you and Pierce to his mansion. He specifically said to bring your Gerber."

"What does that mean?" Steve asked groggily, but both men ignored him.

"When?"

"In three days' time. They are giving us time to bury Andrea but said that they are expecting us on Friday at noon and not to miss the appointment. Failure to attend it means they will come after us."

"How was Drax's tone?"

"Not very friendly, which isn't saying much because he's never been friendly to me. However, he did imply and quite heavily that the family is not happy with the fact that Pierce went to the police and tried to cross you like that. I'd say that they want to take your side, but you have to prove yourself worthy. Not to mention that your obligation to bring your Gerber means most certainly that they want to organize a duel."

"Yes, that is a strong probability." Bucky looked pensively at Howlett. "How many witnesses?"

"Only two on both sides. Drax has named them as well. He advised that nobody else besides these people should attend the meeting." Howlett shrugged. "From our side me and Steve, from Pierce's side two of whom I've never heard before. His inner circle must have shrunk considerably these days." Howlett couldn't be bothered holding back his satisfied smirk.
"That is good. Alright then. Tell him we accept."

"Already done so. Get some rest. You will both need it. And open a goddamn window, it stinks of sweat and balls in here." Howlett slammed the door shut while Steve looked back at Bucky. The man was tensed and lost in his thoughts and Steve couldn't help himself: he reached across from him and tucked one of those chestnut strands behind his ear. Bucky looked back at him and smiled gently.

"What is a Gerber?" Steve asked settling a little bit better on the pillows. Bucky left the papers on the nightstand and mirrored Steve's position, seemingly more relaxed despite the gloomy future.

"When I took over my family's business, I was given a knife with the family seal and aphorism on the handle. It's a very beautiful knife. It was a sign of acceptance, a sign of obeying and being obeyed. It is the recognition of being part of the family."

"And why do you think they asked you to bring that? Are you in trouble?"

"No." Bucky caressed Steve's face with his thumb. "In very exceptional circumstances, it was decided that if ever two heads of clans had really strong cases against each other, that they would bring their Gerbers on a neutral territory and they would fight against each other to the death."

"What? But that means that Pierce can kill you! Can hurt you!"

"One, Pierce is most definitely not going to kill me. I'm one of the most skilled users of a Gerber. Have a little faith in me! Two, this is based on a long-lost tradition that says that the winner of such a duel would be the one who was in the right and thus chosen by fate. It would also mean that if I were to win, everything that belonged to Pierce would belong to me after his death and vice-versa."

"What?" The preposterous thought had never crossed his mind and it terrified him at the prospect of being owned by Pierce. "This means that in case of your death, Pierce would become the rightful owner of this house, your sister, Howlett, me, everyone?"

"Yes. However, I won't let that happen."

"How do you know that? How can you be sure? You are just a human being, Bucky! You're not invincible."

Bucky rolled just once over Steve holding him prisoner in a sudden move. He trapped the younger man's arms above his head, his hair touching softly Steve's cheeks. The sensation of skin on skin was delicious, the scent of their lovemaking still in the air. Even now, their mutual attraction was almost palpable in the air. Months ago, this man was just a stranger on a piece of paper. Now he was so much more. Blue eyes stared back with determination and an odd promise in them.

"I will never let that man win, Steve Rogers. For you are mine and mine alone. And my sister is mine. And Howlett and everyone else here. But you above all are precious to me. And I would never ever let him overwhelm me."

"But you can't be sure, can you?"

"No, I can't. But Steve, you have to trust me. You have to trust in me. For there is no alternative out of this. Refusing to go there would mean that I forfeit my place in the family and they would hunt us down. They wouldn't send fifteen men after us, they would send an army. I'm doing this to protect you too, not just my pride."

Steve kissed him. He craned his neck and kissed the hell out of this man. He had never seen such
openness from this man and the fact that Bucky would do anything to protect him aroused him. Lost himself to the sensations, forgetting yet again that Pierce's death would also mean the start of a ticking clock for him too. And that this very man would not easily forgive his betrayal.

Andrea's funeral was a sad affair. There were not a lot of guests and it had been difficult for Bucky to keep the police away from this event, but somehow, he managed by paying the right people. Apart from the usual gang, there were just a few teachers and representatives from the institute. Steve could barely breathe throughout the entire ceremony but Bucky, in a fit of spontaneity, had held his hand and hadn't let go the entire day. It hurt Steve that he hadn't done right by Andrea, but at this point, it had become just another deep regret in a sea of regrets that he had. He only hoped that one day he would be able to avenge her.

A day later, James drove them to Phillips' house. The entire ride had been tainted with a foreboding silence. Steve looked in the mirror at Bucky. The man was dressed in a black suit, not a wrinkle on it, his hair carefully tied behind his head. In his hand, his Gerber was resting, the only sign that they were not going to an ordinary appointment and that few were going to leave unscathed from there. Steve looked back out on the window. He didn't believe much in God these days, but he still sent a prayer up there to whoever was listening.

As per usual, it was Drax that welcomed them. The house seemed even more protected than the last time, a sign that the war between Barnes and Pierce had put fear in the rest of the family as well.

"Good afternoon, Barnes." Drax bowed slightly, courteous as ever. "It is a pleasure to see you again, though I wished it were under better circumstances."

"Good afternoon, Drax. Thank you for having us."

"Please follow me. Master Phillips is expecting you. Pierce is already here."

The three men followed Drax, his giant stature a little intimidating. Steve felt like being led in a labyrinth, unable to suppress his anxiety. Not only was he worried about what might happen to Bucky but also what might happen to them in case of Pierce's victory.

Upon entering a relatively small room, they were motioned to take a seat at a table presided by an elderly gentleman who couldn't be any other than the mysterious Chester Phillips. On his left side, Pierce was sitting, ignoring their arrival completely, two of his sidekicks just behind him. Bucky took a seat on his right with Howlett and Steve at a respectful distance.

"Ah, Barnes, such a pleasure to see you," the older man said and took a sip of his tea. "Please, taste this tea, Drax has surpassed himself this time."

"Thank you for your invitation, Phillips. I will gladly taste for Drax's skills in preparing the tea are very well-known."

"There's a good boy."

Phillips was definitely a man of great taste despite his less than savory business. Dressed in a blue suit, with his grey hair cut short and to the side, Chester Phillips almost seemed like the grandfather, who came to have a word with his naughty grandsons. Only the thought of how much blood these people had on their hands sickened Steve, and it crossed his mind that whoever would get to kill these bastards would do a service to humankind in general and the population in New York in particular.
After they made small chat while drinking their tea, Phillips folded his hands in front of him and his demeanor suddenly changed dramatically. No wonder that his house had become the neutral ground for these bloody people.

"Listen, gentlemen, we all know why we are here. At the moment I firmly entertain the possibility the entire Brooklyn town and FBI know why you are here. This war has gone too far and too long and it is time for you to settle the affair permanently. I don’t care who will be the victor, but I don’t condone going to FBI to further mess the other one up."

"I only-" Pierce tried to intervene but one look from Phillips and he shut up, making Steve almost smirk.

"I don’t care what your reason was, Pierce, nor do I want to find out. I’m not in the game of schooling some boys into becoming men and just mind their own business. Your squabble has put the entire family in danger, and I personally don’t care who is at fault. I’ve been assigned by the council just to ensure that that this ends today. Enough is enough, gentlemen." Phillips scowled at both of them before continuing: "Now the rules of the Gerber duel stand as usual: there are no rules. The winner of the duel is chosen upon the death of his opponent. No use of any other weapons. Any glint of one and I will shoot the bastard myself. Winner takes it all. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Bucky said looking Phillips straight into his eyes.

"Yes," Pierce replied as well, clearly uncomfortable but ready to spill some blood.

"Very well, gentlemen, then let us proceed. Please follow me."

They stood up and followed the old man into the adjacent room, which was impressively larger and utterly empty. Bucky and Pierce were assigned opposite corners of the rooms with three chairs. The witnesses would occupy the first two chairs, on the third, there was a first aid kit and they were allowed to leave their jackets and whatever else they wanted. There were two other chairs for Drax and Phillips in the middle of the room. At the entrance, a contingent of Phillips’ men was waiting for any sign to intervene if necessary. There was plenty of room for Pierce and Bucky to chop each other however they saw it fit and it scared Steve how much he wanted to protect Bucky.

The duelists left their jackets and ties on the chair assigned to them. Bucky carefully took out his Gerber and then opened two buttons leaving his neck oddly exposed. Steve swallowed hard and ignored the anxiety in the pit of his stomach. The night before they had ferocious sex, with Bucky leaving bitten marks all over his back. He concentrated on the slight pain as they stared at each other.

*You are going to win this. You are going to win this, goddamn you.*

"Gentlemen, please in the center of the room!" Phillips ordered and with a final wink, Bucky left Steve to occupy his assigned position. The old man looked at both of them as Drax checked that they didn't have any concealed weapons. After ensuring that their Gerber’s are fit for battle as well, Drax nodded to Phillips and the old man smiled ruefully. "I can't believe you two put me in the position of saying this, but gentlemen, the floor is yours. May the best man win!"

The sound of the knives clashing made Steve flinch, but he controlled himself when Howlett scowled at him. From the very first minutes of the combat, it was clear that the fight would be more than equal and that both opponents were very skilled in yielding the knives. But also, that Pierce had become hopeless and a desperate man was a frightful opponent.
Steve couldn't read his face, but his stance was one of pure hatred against Bucky and the cop had to assume that the several blows that Pierce had suffered in the last few weeks brought him to the current mood. He was yielding the knife as if thirsty for every drop of blood that Bucky was unwilling to give. Maybe even give him the so-called *death of a thousand cuts*, whereupon the adversary inflicts as many cuts as possible, which while not deadly, could make the victim bleed to death. If Pierce was going to win, Steve was dead. With Bucky, he still had a shot.

While already sporting various cuts, Bucky wore his blank face with pride. It seemed nothing could budge him from focusing on the fight. He existed in a complete world all of his own and yet at the same time he was keenly aware of what was going on around him. It almost looked as if the entire duel was a boring affair for him, though he too could lose everything. Yet Steve couldn't help admiring his grace and the careful way with which he moved. It reminded Steve of a documentary that he saw once. A tiger had been like that: carefully stalking its prey assessing and changing tactics again and again until the poor victim didn't know what was happening anymore. Bucky was that tiger. Both in elegance and strength, but especially in patience.

Steve also expected Pierce would talk more, trying to take Bucky's focus away from the fight but he too was stalking his prey and he needed his entire concentration. At the end of the day, they were fighting for their lives primarily. If Steve didn't care about Bucky, then perhaps such a fight might have been more interesting than normal. In the interest of his investigation and not only though, he really wanted to see Pierce go down.

Steve was so lost in his thoughts that it took him several seconds to register Pierce's cry of pain. Bucky had managed to cut Pierce's forearm, making him drop his knife and thus giving an opening for Bucky to pierce his left shoulder, so very close to his heart, although Steve doubted that Pierce ever had one.

"You piece of shit!" Pierce shouted trying to reach for his knife though he was still pinned by Bucky's knife and was kneeling by now. "You absolute piece of shit!" Pierce's face was a masque of pure hatred and perhaps if looks could kill, then Bucky should have dropped dead.

As it were though, he merely glimpsed at Pierce and replied, "I have no desire of talking to the likes of you." He pulled his knife back and effectively cut the other man's throat, splattering his horrified sidekicks and himself with blood.

The silence was deafening. Both Steve and Howlett stood up, not knowing what was expected of them next. They wanted to go and reach Bucky's bloody form and maybe give him a hug, but it was not appropriate, and Phillips’ next words mirrored their thoughts.

"I pronounce Bucky Barnes winner of the Gerber duel and rightful heir of all Pierce's fortune. You may do as you please with it." The older man glanced at Pierce with disdain. "I'm very happy indeed that we got rid of this idiot. Take this piece of trash from here and bury him somewhere nobody will find him. He caused enough issues." Drax bowed slightly and hurried to get rid of what was left of Pierce.

"You two," and the sidekicks flinched, "go back home, inform the other men of what happened and await new orders from your new master." The two men nodded and left quickly.

Howlett and Steve approached Bucky carrying his clothes. While Howlett took the Gerber and put it back in its case, Steve helped Bucky put on his jacket. Phillips watched them both with a knowing eye.

"Bucky, I’m happy to see you a winner. As always, your father raised you well."
"Thank you, Phillips."

"No need to thank me, boy. But I will tell you this: the family won't tolerate such a situation next time. While I understand that your actions have been provoked by Pierce attacking you and your family, the family has had enough issues so as to tolerate the repetition of such a situation. Rest assured that next time we will be the ones coming after you. And we won't be sending fifteen men, hoping that one of yours will betray you. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"Very well then." Phillips' face lit up. "Then go and celebrate, my boy. Because tomorrow you will be very busy indeed."

They left the premises in silence and during the car ride back, other than a quick phone call with Rebecca to announce the winner, nothing much was talked. Bucky and Steve had got into the back of the car this time and they were holding hands quietly looking out of the window. Every once in a while, Steve glanced back at Bucky finding his profile now more regal than ever. And for some reason, his display of knife abilities had been much arousing today.

Rebecca and Thor, Rollins and Rumlow and a few others were waiting outside the mansion when the car pulled over and the sister quickly ran to embrace her brother in a very rare display of affection between them. Steve was grateful to see that. The others, of course, did not dare to do that. They bowed slightly and congratulated Bucky. A few, namely Rollins, dared to pat him on the shoulder. They all entered the living room where a few snacks and drinks had been arranged.

Steve's anxiety had reached new levels although he was doing his best to ignore it. These people were now officially his targets. The first plan of the investigation was done, and he was bound to betray them sooner or later. Unless... he changed his mind.

"Instead of just scowling out the window like a lunatic," Rumlow interrupted his daydreaming, making him almost flinch, "go lick Bucky's wounds. I'm sure it will make both feel better.

"Seriously inappropriate, man," Steve replied, changing the target of his scowl, thought a faint blush painted now his cheeks. Rumlow smirked all knowingly.

"Sure, whatever you say, pretty boy." Steve rolled his eyes, but now that Rumlow mentioned, Bucky indeed seemed to have disappeared and he made sure that nobody noticed his leaving. Rumlow helped a great deal.

Upon entering the bedroom, he observed that it was empty, but the faint sound of the shower made Steve smile faintly and undress quickly. Opening the door, he was welcomed with a very nice view. The glass of the shower revealed the built and beautiful body of Bucky Barnes in all its glory. The black tiles of the shower made the contrast even stronger suggesting that his skin was paler than usual, in deep contrast with his chestnut hair. The afternoon sun made everything glow softly, inviting. Steve's fingers twitched as he wanted to grab the older man and just possess him until there was nothing left apart from their scent together. Could he make such a claim onto a man whom he would come to betray sooner or later?

"Are you going to keep staring at me or you want to join me?" The deep voice startled him from his revelry.

"Can I?" Steve asked suddenly shy and those blue powerful eyes looked at him almost fondly.

"Stop asking silly questions."
They fit. Over and over again, this was a constant reminder of the unfairness of their situation. How come they fit so well? Their bodies sang to each other, hands and lips tasting, caressing, constantly chasing pleasure. Their bodies fit so well it made Steve almost sob.

"Too much?" Bucky muttered softly in his ear, as his hands continued to caress Steve down further and further till it seemed to him that Bucky was everywhere around him.

"Never," he replied back licking a small cut just above Bucky's shoulder.

*With my body I thee worship.*

It echoed inside Steve's mind for Bucky's kisses and caresses felt like a form of worship. The haze of the pleasure didn't stop him from wondering if the mobster would have felt the same way, had he known Steve's true nature. But it was stupid of him to think so.

*Carpe diem.*

How he craved to be lost forever in those delicious sensations and to be … loved? Cared for? He licked and nipped and let himself explore with a new form of certainty that somehow, with this stupid duel, Bucky had won something irrevocable in Steve's heart.

"I would never have let him leave from there alive," Bucky whispered as he finally took both in his hand, making Steve sob deliciously into his shoulder. "I would have taken him with me to hell rather than let him touch you. Steve, Steve! Do you know what you do to me?" Bucky's voice broke as they both got closer to their release.

"Bucky," Steve sobbed, unable to do anything else other than hold on to his lover's shoulders.

"No one has ever made me feel like you do. No one!" Bucky's rhythm changed, making them both moan in pleasure. "You are it for me, Steve- I'll make you believe. In me. *In us.*"

It was enough to make Steve sob his release followed shortly by the other man. After a while, as they climbed down from their high, both held on to each other, their breaths still ragged in the steam of the shower, and Steve guessed they made a very nice picture in the afternoon sun. If he could stay like that forever. His hold on Bucky's shoulders tightened and he hid his face in the grove between shoulder and neck.

"It wasn't sex just talking now." Bucky's lips caressed his ear. "I wasn't lying."

"I know."

"Do I scare you?"

"Yes. Sometimes."

"As long as you remain loyal to me, as long as you never betray me, and as long as I have your affection, it is enough for me." Bucky cupped his cheek and made their eyes meet. "You don't have to love me now. I know I made you go through a lot, but I hope in time, you might feel something deeper for me, like I feel for you."

"What are you talking about?" Steve frowned. How can this man break his heart? How did he arrive at this point? "Bucky, you deserve everything." The fierceness took both by surprise.

"Then I deserve you."
Steve shattered into a million pieces in an instant and he hoped never to be put back together ever again. He smashed his lips against Bucky's, savoring the kiss, taking everything and maybe if some tears mixed with the water of the shower, then no one would know. Not even the man in his arms. He would live forever in this moment. And it was this particular moment that will come later on and define the rest of this investigation.

When they both got out of the shower and changed (Steve tending to Bucky's wounds, making sure he wouldn't bleed to death), they sat across each other in bed, Indian style.

"There is something that I've been meaning to say to you," Steve began hesitantly. "I thought about a way for you to give me a reason to believe in you. In us."

"Tell me."

"I want you to listen carefully first, without interrupting me and then decide what you want to do." When Bucky nodded, Steve continued, "I want you to let me contact the FBI agents and let me give them most of Pierce's business. Here's the deal: we know very well that Alexander Pierce dealt with human trafficking, something which you said you abhor. Most of his business has been ruined because of us and because of our deal with the Russians. So, let's take the minds of the FBI agents from the fifteen missing men and from Pierce's sudden disappearance and give them as much work as possible. These people wouldn't be loyal to you anyway."

"You want me to let you go to the police?"

"It doesn't necessarily have to be me. It can anyone else. I don't care. Just please don't get involved in this. There's really no point and if you help Pierce's victims, if you do this, and help the police as well, not only will you have even less people willing to betray you, but you will also have the police off your back for a while."

"You gave me the reasons why this could turn beneficial for me. What is your true reason?"

"I find human trafficking abhorring as well. You said you don't enjoy violence, you said you don't like your hands being tainted with blood. Prove this to me."

Bucky pondered on the issue. It was a test. At that moment, Steve recognized that this was a test and depending on the answer he would be able to choose the next course of action.

Please please please.

After a few minutes of silence, Bucky looked straight into his eyes when he answered, "You have my permission to contact the FBI agents. Give them whatever we find useful tomorrow between Pierce's paperwork and his men."

"Thank you," Steve mumbled, humbled by Bucky's trust, consequences be damned.

"Now let us get back to our small party. We have much to celebrate."

Steve nodded and followed his lover downstairs where everyone looked knowingly at both of them but didn't say anything. There were drinks and laughter and fun and Steve took everything in. For now, he knew what he was meant to do all along. He knew what the correct course of action was.

When he noticed that Bucky was engaged in talking with his sister privately and Howlett was having fun with Rollins and Rumlows, Steve slipped outside into the garden and did what he never thought he would.
"Well, well, well, if it isn't mini-me all over again!" Tony's voice made him smile.

"You're as annoying as ever, you bastard!"

"Admit it that you just love me and let's move on."

"Never."

"Fine. What happened?!

Steve looked around him to check one more time that nobody had followed him outside the garden, before he replied:

"I want you to help me with something. I want you to help me steal money from Bucky Barnes."
things are spiraling out of control..... we're nearing the end..

"I want you to help me with something. I want you to help me steal money from Bucky Barnes."

Tony remained entirely frozen at the other end of the line. The crisp air of the afternoon made Steve very much aware of his surroundings. It was imperative that nobody would listen to his conversation. He was risking enough making the phone call from his usual phone instead of a burner. The silence at the other end of the line grounded his frail nerves.

"Are you still there?" he asked quietly.

"Are you fucking kidding me with this, Steve?" Tony growled. "Did this mission suck up all your brain or was just Bucky Barnes?"

"Tony-"

"Don't you fucking dare finish that! Don't think I didn't notice what was going on, not to mention that Rhodes pulled some really interesting footage with you and Barnes, footage which clearly looked like you went out on a date. Please tell me that you haven't started fucking Bucky Barnes."

Steve pinched his nose. He really didn't have time for this. He was running out of time so fast it wasn't even funny.

"Look, this is not the moment to discuss this." Steve's controlled tone startled him as well. It didn't sound like him anymore. Nothing sounded like him anymore.

"You're right. You can't just give me a damn phone call; tell me you want to steal Barnes's money and then expect me to just follow through with whatever crazy plan you had in mind. Are you fucking insane?" Tony took a deep breath. "I'm flying to Brooklyn and you're going to fucking meet me. You'd better be at the place and time I specify, Steve, or so help me God, I will knock on the door of the Barnes mansion so that I can kill you with my bare hands. Am I making myself clear enough?"

"Yes." Steve gritted his teeth.

"This mission should have never been yours," Tony shouted still angry. "Your chief knew very well about your fucked-up death wish and I'm sure he gave you this mission only because you were the only crazy fucker to accept it."

"Tony, enough."

"You shouldn't be there."

"Well, tough luck because I am." Steve scowled around his surroundings. He passed his fingers through his hair and he wished for a goddamn cigarette; his lips dried just at the thought. "It is me and I've taken one monster down. I sure as hell won't stop now. And the longer this conversation
takes the more chances for someone to listen to it. So, you come to Brooklyn and you let me know when you want us to meet."

"Fine, you prick." The dial tone sounded like a blessing in his ear, the anger simmering below the surface. He pinched his nose again, very much aware of the fact that Tony was worried for him. Steve was worried about himself as well. But he wasn't able to stop, even if he wanted. Because Bucky was involved, because he truly had a death wish and because he acknowledged from the very beginning that this was going to end up with him being dead down the line.

Getting back to the small party was easier than he thought. Of course, no one looked suspicious at him anymore. He had proved his worth to Bucky and to the others, not to mention the fact that he was sleeping with the said mobster was definitely an improvement of his status. He smiled softly at Bucky, who was discussing something with Rebecca on the couch.

"Hey, where did you disappear?" Howlett’s arm around his shoulders didn't make him tense like it would have happened some time ago. Steve turned to his friend and took the glass that he was offered.

"Just outside taking a phone call. A friend of mine might be visiting Brooklyn the following days and wanted to reconnect for a few hours."

"That's nice. Is he an ex-fighter like you?"

"Nope, ex-military actually." Steve took a sip of his drink. One of the best methods of lying was to tell as much truth as you could get away with.

"Is he one of the friends that helped you save Rollins?"

"Yes."

"Then, by all means, reconnect with the man!" Howlett exclaimed. "You need friends like him."

"I know, right?" Steve grinned at him happy that Howlett didn't ask more questions than he should have.

"So," Howlett said looking conspiratorially around him, "I need your help."

"With what? Burying a body?"

"Nope, with choosing a ring." Howlett blushed something fierce. Steve looked at him for a few more seconds comprehending. Then the pin dropped. 

"Are you telling me...?"

"Shush, yes, I am." Steve thought it wasn't possible for Howlett to get even redder. He was wrong. "I've loved this woman since we were both ten and she loves me back in spite of my shortcomings, so might as well put a ring on it."

"That's great, man!" Steve clapped him on the shoulder. "So how come you need my help with the ring? You know Rebecca better than I do."

"Yes, true, but I tend to go over the top and pick something that I like, not what she likes. I need you to reign me in." Something ugly twisted Steve's insides when he stared back into Howlett’s trustful eyes. This was his friend now. How was he going to betray someone like that?
"I'd love to, Howlett," he answered his voice suddenly hoarse. "I'd be honored."

"Great. Thanks, man. I truly appreciate it."

Steve just nodded and finished his drink in a daze. This whole day was becoming too much. And paradoxically as it sounded, the only person that could have anchored him was sitting there next to his sister. It hit him all of a sudden that he could have lost Bucky today, that Pierce could have taken him down for the fight had been made on equal terms and both had stood their grounds. Before realizing what he was doing, Steve made his way to Bucky, sat on the couch next to him and just leaned his head over his shoulder. A strong arm wrapped around his waist making him close his eyes in defeat.

"What is it?" Bucky said to his ear and Steve scrunched his nose.

"Nothing. Just tired," he replied. "It's been a few emotional days and I'm drained."

"Naturally." Bucky rested his cheek upon Steve's soft hair. "But it's all over now. Once you go to the police, we can concentrate on our business with the Russians. It's going to be peaceful for a while."

"It's not that. This morning I thought I-"

"Well, aren't they just too cute for words?" Rumlow interrupted him and Steve opened his eyes thankfully looking at his friend. What the hell was he going to blurt just now? Was he insane? He couldn't be that open. He noticed that Bucky gazed at him fondly. Something so different and monumental that it made Steve queasy.

"I hope, Rumlow, that you didn't expect for you and Rollins to be forever the cute couple," Bucky replied when he noticed Steve was unable to speak.

"Wait, I thought that was reserved for James and Rebecca," Rollins remarked nonchalantly, winking at Steve.

"Excuse me, who are you calling cute, you asshole?" Howlett boomed and launched himself in a debate with Rollins that made Rebecca roll her eyes at them. Steve leered at Howlett because he enjoyed the argument tremendously. This in turn only made the man be even more heated in his defense.

"Come with me," Bucky whispered in his ear and Steve nodded before getting up from the couch. Nobody noticed them leaving and if they did, they did their best not to bring attention to it, for which Steve was immensely grateful.

As soon as the door of the bedroom closed behind them, Bucky slammed Steve against it and kissed the hell out of him. He covered Steve like a human shield, protective. A loving shield and Steve basked at the affection that he was receiving.

"Finish what you were about to tell me in the living room," Bucky spoke softly against his lips. Steve reeled against the movement, but his lover was stubborn. Cupping his cheeks, Bucky stared back into his eyes with the most open expression that Steve had ever seen. He closed his eyes against the onslaught of emotions bubbling to the surface, threatening to spill in the most uncontrollable way from his lips like a sweet, sweet poison.

"I thought I'd lose you today," he admitted, voice so gravelly he could barely speak. "I thought I was never going to see you again, that Pierce was going to take you away from me. And yet, I only had this revelation while you were sitting there on the couch with Rebecca, speaking with her as if
"Open your eyes," Bucky ordered softly and Steve complied because this man had a strange power over him. His lover's eyes radiated warmth and such affection that it suffocated Steve. "Death is like a long lost sister for men like us, Steve. But I wasn't prepared to meet her today because of you. I know that things have been difficult for us and unfortunately, I can't promise you that they will change quickly. However, I can make another promise to you. I promise you to cherish and respect you and most importantly to trust you and to meet you halfway. I know that you don't like the things I had done, some of them had been despicable in my eyes too, but they had been necessary. Still, I will try to change my way to approach them. Just give me the one thing I need the most."

"Which is?" Steve asked breathlessly.

"Give me your trust as well." Bucky stunned him with such a declaration. "I know that some of the things I did to you have been the worst and I have gone sometimes too far with my distrust to you. But sometimes you look at me like I'm capable to harm you at the drop of a hat and it's not true, Steve. Never again will I take you for granted, like simple possession."

Steve stared back at his lover with liquid eyes, unable to grasp what had just happened. How come a man that was supposed to be his mortal enemy could say such words to him? Luckily, Bucky was still holding him, because otherwise, Steve would have fallen to the floor, shattered and broken, a shell of his former self, whatever that meant. There had been people in his life that looked at him the way Bucky stared back now, but they were long dead. Asunder, there was nothing left for him but to relinquish everything and accept that this man was everything for him and that in spite of the future in store for them, he would be able to save him.

"I give you my trust," he said firmly. "And I promise to protect and cherish you too." The fierceness of the statement didn't escape Bucky, who smiled softly and then leaned again to kiss away the promise. Bucky cradled his face so gently and kissed him gently, all the pent-up emotions of the day bubbling to surface in between their lips. Steve made a small choked off sound before clutching Bucky's shirt with his fingers digging deep into the material. Although it was the prelude of something more, the kiss lacked the impersonal touches that sometimes had tainted their kisses before. This was personal, so much truth and affection in it as if Bucky simply wanted to memorize the curve of Steve's lips, the tenderness with which they seemed to spell out the feeling that they both had avoided mentioning.

"I want to take you to bed," Bucky breathed, his voice strangled. "May I?"

Steve nodded, incapable of forming sentences, that small question changing yet again the parameters of what his thoughts were. Bucky smiled tenderly at him before hooking up his hands under Steve's thighs and took him to their bed. Their clothes disappeared in a sea of caresses and careful slow kisses that dragged him away from the doubts and the worry. The skin on skin, they kissed and bit and worshipped, the tenderness of their lovemaking different from all the times before. It made Steve dizzy with it, whispering Bucky's name over and over again like a prayer. He hoped someone was listening. He hoped it would be enough.

The following days were filled with organizational matters, trying to make clear of Pierce's affairs. Romanoff had contacted Bucky in an attempt to take over some of Pierce's human business but as promised to Steve, Bucky had refused. They had enough on their plate to complicate themselves with further issues and Romanoff had reluctantly accepted his answer.

Rebecca poured day and night over some of the accounts, some of them making sense, some of them far from being logical. There was little time for purchasing a ring or making love, as most
nights both Bucky and Steve fell into bed completely exhausted. The magnitude of Pierce's business was at times daunting and they were confused as to what they should surrender to the police and what they should hold for themselves.

It was more than a week later when Steve, with the family's approval, contacted the FBI agents, documents and story ready. Agent Hernandez was more than happy to meet with him but was a little astonished when Steve accepted to come to the precinct where they were staying for the time being.

"You do realize that anything you say today can and will be used against you in a court of law, right?" Agent Spencer told him reluctantly but eyeing curiously the boxes that Steve brought with him.

"Yes, I am aware of that, agents."

"So then state the purpose of this meeting," Agent Hernandez demanded. Steve looked around him at the other agents in the precinct. The office had glass windows and doors and they were able to see inside, yet no one seemed interested in what was going on. Steve knew that some of them were on Bucky's payroll, others had become disenchanted with the job and lost all interest in doing it properly. While a very small category was burning out, still trying to bring some justice into the world. It was futile in the end, Steve now acknowledged sitting on the other side of the invisible border. They brought down Pierce, they were going to do the same with Barnes maybe, but others were bound to rise. It was the way of the world.

"I brought with me sufficient evidence to nail Mr. Pierce and his lot."

"Interesting you say that taking into consideration Alexander Pierce disappeared a few days ago and nobody knows his whereabouts." Agent Spencer peered at him with hard eyes.

"Believe me, gentlemen, that I know nothing about his whereabouts. I’m not that important in the food chain. But I think that what I have inside those boxes can destroy quite a bit from his empire and I think you should be happy to have them."

"Is your employer aware of this?"

"It is, in fact, he who sent me to you with these boxes. My employer wants to help you. Although he doesn't know much about the disappearance of those men, he can still help you in other cases."

"Are you going to stand there and tell me that Bucky Barnes, out of the goodness of his heart, sent us damning evidence against one of his worst enemies?" Agent Hernandez seethed as his partner was just as reluctant to believe in Steve's stance on the matter. But this was a game that he had played often so he simply leaned forward and entwining his fingers on the table said with the utmost seriousness:

"Of course I don’t imply that Mr. Barnes would do such a thing out of the goodness of his heart. Indeed Mr. Pierce has always been known as an enemy of my employer and I don’t think this will stop any time soon. But let’s set the record straight here: you’re chasing a cold case with no evidence whatsoever that Mr. Barnes was involved in the disappearance of those men. In the meantime, I offer you the possibility to nail to the cross one of the worst people I've met in my life. No, we aren't doing it out of the goodness of our hearts. We are playing a chess game here, agents. If you don't want to get involved in it, then, by all means, tell me and I will make sure to contact other FBI agents, who will be willing to collaborate."

"You mean nailing a man to the cross that might as well be dead." Agent Spencer spat the words
but when Steve pushed the box, he accepted it.

"As I said, I don't know anything about Mr. Pierce's whereabouts," Steve continued for it was mostly true. What happened with the body was Drax's business and his alone. The undercover cop acknowledged that trying to find out where it had been buried would have been too much and had decided that it was none of his business. "I would be happy to take a polygraph test if this would dissuade your doubts."

"We will keep this in mind," Agent Hernandez said, put off by Steve's willingness to do so.

"I would advise you to look through the blue box on an empty stomach." Steve nodded towards the one box set apart from the others. It made him sick just thinking about what he had seen. The pictures and videos found in one of Pierce's safes had ranged from disturbing to downright despicable and unnaturally evil. "It is not exactly for the faint-hearted." Steve's paleness seemed to convince both agents for reluctantly they set it aside as well.

"You know that this won't be considered as collaboration from your part." Agent Spencer eyeballed Steve as if trying to read his mind. "This is a mere ruse to protect your boss and divert our attention from his involvement in the disappearance of those fifteen men."

"I would take it as a genuine helping hand."

"Of course you would. And how come your master came in possession of these boxes?"

"Let's just say that some of Mr. Pierce's employees are not as loyal as they should be."

"Would they be willing to testify against their master?"

"That is for you to determine, agents. Our involvement stops at handing this evidence over to you. The rest is up to you." Steve stood up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to."

"You know, Rogers," Agent Spencer said, standing up as well, "you should hand over Barnes as well. We can protect you and offer you a new identity, a new life."

"Gentlemen, there is nothing in this world that can persuade me to betray Mr. Barnes, not that there would be anything to say anyway. I hope this will help you. Have a good day!"

Steve didn't wait for them to acknowledge him and left the room, not looking back. Bucky Barnes was his mission and he would be damned if he would let these two chuckleheads take over. However, he did wait to be two blocks away from the precinct, before he pulled up his phone to call Bucky. Noting that there was a message from Tony, he read that first and then called Bucky.

"All done?" His lover answered the phone.

"Yes. They wanted to know how come we managed to get those boxes. I implied that Pierce's men betrayed him."

"Good. Did they say anything about me?"

"Oh, the usual: you're evil, I should betray you, offered me a new life and protection."

"And what did you tell them?"

"Of course I accepted. Do you know how rarely police offer paid vacation to the seaside?"
"I wouldn't know." Bucky laughed, making Steve smile in turn. "Are you coming home now?"

"I have to meet a friend first. I think I'll be home within two hours," Steve said looking at his watch. "Howlett knows who I'm talking about."

"I trust you," Bucky emphasized. "Talk to you later then."

"Yes, see you soon."

Twenty minutes later, Steve was shaking hands with Tony outside of a small restaurant by the river. It was a mostly family one with cozy tables set outside the terrace as well and surrounded by nature. They both sat at the table closest to the river. Steve kept his shades whereas Tony took off his. The table was isolated enough for the discussion they were going to have but it made Steve jittery.

Tony was so much like him in more ways than the physical resemblance. As an ex-military, Tony started his business only after he had met James Rhodes. Maybe the young man had been the catalyst, but it was sure as hell that Tony Stark had never been the same after his first wife's death. The missions that they accepted had always been dark, bordering on violent take-overs, the likes of which both the New York government and other paramilitary organizations would not condone officially, but definitely supported financially when they needed it.

And boy did they needed it, especially when the team was joined by Tony's adoptive brother, Quill, and Victor, later on, completed by Pepper. They were a team that sent fear to some very secret and not so secret agencies across the world. However, they loved to get their hands dirty every now and then and their loyalty for Steve had been hard-won, almost costing him his life.

Steve shook his head and took his sunglasses off. Their food and drinks were brought leaving them to enjoy it. The day was exceptionally beautiful and normally Steve would enjoy it, but Tony's surprisingly unreadable face made him nervous.

"Why did you accept this mission?" Tony began talking not even glancing at his food. "Tell me the truth."

"You know the truth."

"I thought I did but lately, you seem preoccupied with other than catching the bad guy."

"That's unfair."

"No, what is unfair is for you to use our friendship whenever it fucking suits you with you putting yourself constantly in danger," Tony seethed. "Don't you think I didn't see the scars on your back? Your body can't take much of this abuse. You are short of pulling yourself the trigger but other than that, Steve, you are most definitely on a suicidal mission."

"If you don't want to help me-" His voice sounded rough, impossible to grasp its depth, but Tony had little patience for it.

"Don't you dare pull this trick on me! I think we spilled enough blood for each other to stop us from playing this sort of mind games." Steve had enough reason left to look embarrassed. "Rhodey mentioned the research he pulled for you because he realized that this was not going to end pretty for you. So you got to be honest with me and tell me what the fuck you were thinking when you accepted this mission."

"I thought I might fucking die, okay?" Steve snapped and had to look around just to make sure that
no one was snooping around. "I thought that at least I would bring an end to some monsters and die trying in the process. I didn't think I would last that long. I didn't think that I would fall-" He abruptly stopped horrified by what he might have spilled, but apparently Tony had no qualms with that.

"That you might have fallen in love with Bucky Barnes." The words sounded like a death sentence.

"It's not that," Steve denied. He bit his bottom lip. Hard. "It's not love. I would never-

"You would never what? Fall in love with a fucking monster? You would never fall in love?"

"Stop saying that!" Steve took a sip from his lemonade and shook his head in obvious denial. "This isn't love. It's never been love," he spat the word like it was a curse.

"I didn't think that you would fall so low as to lie to yourself." Tony leaned forward. "It doesn't help anyone, and it most definitely doesn't help you. You think that because he fucked you a few times, showed maybe mercy to some pitiful excuse of human beings, you think that all this proves that he loves you? Or that he cares about you? Open your fucking eyes! This man is a cold stoned killer and he wouldn't hesitate half a second before ordering your death if it were to find out that you are an undercover cop. That you fucking betrayed him."

"Don't you think I know that?" Steve seethed. "I repeat these things in my mind time and time again because I know what kind of man Barnes is, better than anyone else in this cursed world. But..."

"There's no but in this, Steve." Tony slammed his hand over the table, the plates and drinks dangerously trembling their frustration away. "He wouldn't have mercy for you. Your lo- affection for this man is dangerous for your sanity and for your mission. Are you still bringing him down?"

"Yes," Steve muttered suddenly exhausted with all of this. "I've been gathering enough evidence to put him in jail for good."

"Really?" Tony leaned back again. "Then tell me you don't want to steal his money for whatever reason I think you want to do that."

"I don't want you to steal his money for that."

"This is absolute bullshit!" Tony frowned even more. "Tell me about your plan." Steve stumbled over the first explanations, however, his words gained pace and before he knew it, they were spilling out like birds out of cages long-held closed. The more he told Tony, the more his friend frowned to the point of just plainly scowling at the undercover cop. The plan was stupid and pointless if, in the meantime, Steve was discovered, but on the other hand, it was the only chance he got, and the certainty of failure evaded him.

"Supposedly this insane thing you want to call plan actually works, what are you planning on doing afterward? Put a bullet to that stubborn head of yours?"

"I'll see if I get there first."

"And if I don't agree with your plan?"

Steve paled only at the thought of it. "Then I am dead for sure and I won't be able to save anyone anyway."

"So you admit that it is saving what you are trying to do here?"
"I think that there are going to be some innocent people caught in the crossfire and I really don't want anyone to get hurt because of me." Tony shook his head as if he wouldn't believe a word of what Steve said so the undercover agent pushed further,

"You want to know how I feel for real? I feel as if I constantly burn in a hell of my own making and neither you nor Bucky can save me from it. I think my hands are tainted with the innocent blood of the people that tried to save me and the people that wanted to be saved by me. You asked me if I have a death wish. Yes, every day, every minute and the only reason that I still wake up in the morning is because of the man you call a monster. He might be my death angel, he might not be. He might spare me or might kill me. I honestly don't know, nor do I care that much. But all these troubling feelings I have for him have not clouded my judgment. I know what I’m supposed to do. And I will bring Bucky Barnes down, with or without your help."

"You sure you want to do this? There will be no turning back after this."

"Yes, I’m sure."

"Promise me one thing." Tony's eyes filled with warmth and tenderness for the first time that day. "That you will let me help you when the time comes."

"I promise," Steve said relieved.

"Alright. Then tell me again your crazy plan. My mind hurts only listening to it. Rhodey would have been so much better at this." Steve smirked but didn't comment upon it and explained his plan one more time, this time with Tony listening very carefully to his instructions.

"Do you think it can be done?"

"Yes. It's going to be difficult and risky, but it can be done."

"So I shouldn't call Rhodes and explain this?"

"No, you fucker." Tony shoved him playfully. "Just give me a few days to set up everything and then we will follow the plan."

"One more thing."

"Seriously?" Tony gaped, but a sudden shyness made Steve aware as he pushed the small bag with his foot towards Tony. "The bag contains Andrea's diary and sketchbook and some other personal things that I gathered here. I want you to guard them and keep them safe until this mission is over."

"Oh man, this sounds like such a goodbye."

"I promise you it is not, but I want to make sure that nobody will touch them. If... you know."

"Fine." Tony scowled at him in such a clear Steve move that the undercover cop could do nothing but smile. Maybe they had been brothers in a past life. "Now let's eat. I'm starving. I think my stomach has already started eating itself with all your stupid plans."

"Yeah, yeah, stop complaining, old man!"

"Old man?" Tony sputtered. "I'll let you know that I'm only a few years older than you, Stevie."

"Wow, such a witty comeback!"

The rest of the lunch was spent in playful banter, but when Steve drove his friend to the airport, he
received a hard hug and a mumbled *keep safe* in his shoulder. It wasn't like Tony to be so sentimental, which proved that Steve's situation worried him greatly. Still, there wasn't much to do other than carry out the plan and hope for the best. Also, it was time to contact back his chief. Fury was an instrumental part of his plan and he would be able to help Steve think clear.

The opportunity arose a few days later when Howlett asked Steve to meet before lunch to go ring hunting. It was the perfect occasion to buy a burner phone and try to fit the conversation before or after the buying of the ring. As it were, Howlett was definitely more jittery than he expected, and they met way before the suggested time.

"I just don't want to screw it up, man," Howlett admitted when they got inside the shop, known for expensive jewelry. "This is really important. She will wear this ring for the rest of her life. I don't want to buy something she doesn't like," he added, working himself into some sort of frenzy. Steve held him by the shoulder and squeezed reassuringly.

"Calm down. I'll help you sort it out, but Howlett, I think she will love whatever ring you will choose for her because it came from you and expresses your commitment to her."

"Jesus, I knew I brought you with a reason." Howlett grinned at him before greeting the sale person in charge of offering various models and advice. In the beginning, Howlett was all ready to buy a quite flashy model, big and absurdly heavy, but Steve steered him clear to the disappointment of the sale person.

"She doesn't like flashy things," Steve argued. "She wants something simpler. Something that says her, not your crazy tendency to overspend." In the end, they settled over a silver ring with two bands entwining, one of them carved beautifully with small diamonds. The two bands united to hold the bigger diamond which was carved to resemble a half-risen moon. It was elegant, not flashy and absolutely gorgeous. Howlett grinned happily, the sale person looked absolutely proud at selling a quite expensive piece of jewelry, and Steve was just happy to help his friend.

"Now you only have to prepare the perfect occasion to ask," Steve smirked as soon as they got out of the store, making Howlett pale.

"You bastard!" Howlett exclaimed. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"You have no idea how much pleasure this gives me." Steve laughed. "Your squirming is immensely gratifying. Like who knew you could be such a wuss when it came to Rebecca?!

"Thanks for that. You're a true pal."

"Happy to oblige." Steve looked at his watch. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have some shopping to do on my own."

"Hey, don't you want me to come with you?"

"Unless you want to find out what kind of lube Bucky likes, I would suggest going home."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that." Howlett clapped him on the shoulder amiably. "Thanks, Steve. I really appreciate it."

"Don't worry. It was my pleasure."

To make sure that he wasn't caught lying, Steve bought together with the burner phone, some lube and condoms as well. Then he set out for his usual place by the river. His hands trembled as he dialed the well-known phone number.
"TMPL Gym!"

"I would like to renew my membership."

"Steve!" Fury exclaimed as soon as he heard his voice. "What the fuck? What the actual fuck? Have you gone insane?" This apparently seemed to be a constant worry for his friends. Was he losing his mind because of this mission? Possibly.

"Chief, calm down."

"Calm down?! Calm down, he says!" Fury's incredulity was almost palpable. "You disappeared from the face of the earth, the Russians suddenly side with Barnes, Pierce disappears, and you want me to calm down?!"

"Listen, I really don't have the time now!" Steve snapped and looked around just to make sure the other strollers didn't mind him. "It was very difficult as it was to try and find a bit of time to contact you, so I'll tell you quickly everything that happened, but I don't need any interruptions right now, understood?"

"Tell me what the hell happened."

Steve told him quickly about the events in recent months, completely ignoring the part where he slept with Bucky Barnes. There was no need to mention that to his chief and it wouldn't help anyone. He told him about the evidence he has gathered and where he hid it to make sure that the Sam and Maria would have plenty of time to pour over them while he carried on with his plan.

"FBI's involvement in this means nothing to us." The chief approved of his methods. "You did well by giving them Pierce. I'm glad we got rid of this bastard. This, however, complicates the matter with the Russians. They're known for being far more vigilant than their New York counterparts."

"I'm aware of that, but I think for now the Russians will keep it to themselves until the matter is settled completely. And besides, Shaw trusts me. I don't think he has suspicions at the moment. The way things are going and if we carry on the plan I put in place, we might have Barnes arrested by the end of this week."

"What the fuck did you just say?" Bruce's voice made Steve turn horrified at the new turn of events. He stood frozen to the ground as the Doc's face showed murder. "Care to repeat that, Steve? Or whoever the fuck you are?"

His chief was screaming his name on the phone while Bruce slammed his bike to the ground and lunged for Steve.
if i were to make that decision again

Chapter Notes

it's time my dudes....

_His chief was screaming his name on the phone while Bruce slammed his bike to the ground and lunged for Steve._

The fist caught him straight in the jaw making him grunt in pain. Bruce ignored the sound and kept punching him with rapid shots that Steve barely had the strength to dodge, therefore most of them he simply took them in, ignoring the pain as much as he could. His mind was frantic with all the horrifying perspectives that now existed in his life. At last, he managed to push Bruce off him sending him down on his ass.

"Enough!" He growled, blood streaming from his bottom lip, his left eye already an angry bruise. His jaw pulsed with pain, but if he didn't think fast, he could hurt a lot more.

"Enough?!" Bruce spat on the ground. "You are the worst person ever! All the rumors that surrounded you at the beginning, all your denials! I can't believe it!"

"Well, believe it!" Steve snapped and sighed. "I'm sorry but I can't let you say anything."

"What? Are you going to kill me?" Bruce's incredulity angered Steve somehow even more.

"No, you moron! You owe me!" Steve scowled and ignored Bruce's fury that seemed to electrify everything around them. "You owe me Thor's life! I saved him. A life for a life. You know that if you say anything, they will kill me, even if you give me a head start. And I won't let you ruin everything I built. Barnes is going down."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Bruce shouted back and got up. "Do you even hear the poison that you spew? You were supposed to be our friend! You were supposed to be loyal to us and not to some badge and some stupid code of honor that never helped anyone! What do you think will happen when you take Bucky down? Others will rise in his place. More and more monsters each day. At least he keeps the streets clean enough, his people disciplined. Did you or any of your stupid colleagues thought about that?"

"We won't let it happen."

"You are either naïve or incredibly stupid!" Bruce's face was a mask of pure right then. "I will tell them the truth. I can't let you betray my friends. I can let you leave now, but that's it."

"So Thor's life means nothing to you? You lied to me when you told me you owe me? Well, let's put it like this then: tell anyone and I will tell them you were on it. You sent me to Rebecca first when she had that cut, you encouraged me to be friendly with them. Maybe they won't believe me, but they will sure as hell be doubtful. Of you and of Thor. You know what will happen."

"You wouldn't!" Bruce was livid, making Steve wonder in what he had been transformed by this entire mission. The scope of it buried him into a pile of dishonor to an extent that he craved for a release.
"I would. A desperate man will do anything to save his own skin."

"I don't think I have ever hated someone as much as I hate you right now. You would sacrifice two innocent people just to save your own skin? You disgust me."

_You disgust me_. Steve shook his head in an attempt to make this easier on him. But there was no means by which he could save his skin, save this mission, carry on with his plan and be all honorable. There was simply no way.

"Thor is no innocent. You know very well what he does for Bucky. I may disgust you, but at least I'm offering you an opportunity to save yourself and Thor. It will all go down at the end of next week if everything goes as planned."

"What about me?" Bruce glowered at him. "What about the people I helped? The people that still need me? Saving Thor means leaving this place, start a new life somewhere else, have an identity change. He's going to hate me that I hid all of this from him."

Steve remained unemotional. "You do what you have to do."

"I can't believe that you out of all people would be capable of saying this. These are _people_! When you started all this, did you ever think that you were going to destroy innocent lives? Your effect will ripple throughout the entire community. You can't be that blind as not to see how much harm you are going to cause. Steve, listen to reason! I know that as a cop, there is nothing much you could do and possibly staying in Barnes' service would mean that you'd be dead for the police force. But you know better than your superiors the reality we're living in, you know what it truly means if you take Bucky out. He keeps order here, much more than you could possibly imagine. You can't simply expect me to congratulate you on taking him down. You are ruining innocent lives!"

"Do you think I do this with an open heart? Don't you think I'm affected too? For fuck's bourbon, I've been living amongst you for so many months. Don't you think I feel guilty? We are talking about the man I lo-" Steve clamped so hard that his teeth literally bit into his tongue, making it bleed. Never. He would never recognize those feelings, especially in front of someone else. Bruce's reaction of pure horror was a telling sign.

"You can't possibly be serious."

"You can keep thinking about Bucky's control over things, but all I know is that I'm a cop and he's a mobster and there isn't much I can do. He needs to be stopped. But I have a plan. I might just... I just need a bit of time. And you are going to give it to me."

They stood opposite each other, confronting all the other mixed feelings that kept bubbling to surface. The idea that he was going to affect so many innocent people was preposterous to Steve. However, there was little he could do to influence things at this stage. Bruce turned his back on him and walked towards his bike. He was on it again, almost ready to cycle away when he looked in the distance and said,

"I will take Thor next weekend away from here and I will tell him the truth at the end of next Sunday. I won't give you more than this." He pinched his nose and finally glanced towards Steve; shoulders slumped as if he suddenly carried the entire weight of the world on his shoulders. "That man means everything to me. _Everything_. Not that you would know what loyalty and love mean. So I tell you this: I'm a doctor, I've never killed anyone, but if something happens to Thor, anything at all, I will hunt you down. And I won't rest until I find you. And I will inflict pain the likes of which you couldn't possibly imagine."
"Thank you."

"Don't thank me! Don't look at me or talk to me ever again!" Bruce's hands shook as he grabbed the handles. "You know what's worse than even putting Thor in danger? It's the fact that I thought you were truly my friend. Our friend. Our protector. You saved so many lives: Rebecca's. Thor's. Rollins's. Even Bucky's to some extent. And yet all this meant just serving a purpose. You were never real."

Bruce didn't look back at him for there was no other thing to be said between them. Steve watched the older man as he cycled away from him, further and further until there was just a simple dot in the horizon and Steve felt so bad that he just turned around and threw up. Bruce's words had clawed raw the wounds that he had already inflicted upon himself. He lost himself so long ago, but Bucky... It was true. He had been so focused on taking the mobster out that he didn't think about the others: about Andrea's place for the children, about the fact that Bruce would have to abandon everything to be with Thor, all those people that needed his care and wouldn't benefit from it anymore. All the other people on the streets, the order created.

Everything faded in the background because when he was with Bucky, all he could do was focus on the man and be absorbed by his presence, and when he wasn't with him, all he could think about was how to take him down. And how could such a paradox live within the soul of a simple man? Steve looked towards the river. He was going to be the cause of so much misery and pain that he could as simply just jump in the water and forget everything. He didn't know how to swim. It would have been so easy. How was he going to live with himself after this? Even if his plan was going to work? For his plan, even if it meant salvation partially, still destroyed so many innocent collateral lives.

Steve gazed around for his phone seemingly lost. He spotted it and was about to grab it when he just doubled over and threw up. Bile and blood from his chewed tongue mixed together into an atrocious combination. He retched and retched, disgust for himself and for his actions pouring outside of him like a cleansing of sorts. Steve had carried many missions throughout his life but none as emotionally exhausting as this one. None as agonizing as this.

When he calmed down enough to speak, he spat the mix of blood and bile left in his mouth and then dialed his chief's number again.

Fury had no qualms in making his worry loud and clear. "Steve! Steve! Is everything all right?"

"My cover has been blown. Doc knows that I'm an undercover agent."

"Fuck! Fuck!" Steve could almost picture Fury pacing around his office like a feline in a cage: sublime in its moves, deadly in its sudden attacks. "What happened?"

"He heard our conversation. There was no point hiding the truth from him. But I saved Thor's life and threatened to expose him as an accomplice, so he gave me until next Sunday. Sunday night, he will tell Thor the truth."

"Fuck! Will you have the time to prepare the trap for them?"

"I'm not sure. I need to draw them in a place public enough not to draw out their suspicions, but not public enough if everything goes wrong." Steve broke down. "There isn't enough time for this. Maria and Sam will have to make this quick. I won't be able to hold the fort after next Sunday."

"Do you need an extraction? It seems to be a decent thing to offer you."
"No! Not yet. We need to do this properly or all this sacrifice will have been for nothing."

"I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"Chief, let me worry about the plan! I'll make sure it works. In the meantime, just put everyone on standby and wait for my contact. I'll make sure to bring them where we want them."

"Steve, you know I've never said those sorts of things, but I'm really proud of you and how you conducted this investigation. You're the best detective I've ever had. Please, let me organize an extraction. With your testimony and your evidence - well, we have a chance of keeping Barnes locked up for years to come."

"Let's face it, chief. It might not work. We need to arrange permanent termination."

"We'll do it as you want then." Fury's reluctance remained unspoken. "But if you sense that Banner didn't keep his mouth shut and betrayed you, you get the hell out of there. In two days, tops, I'll be there together with the rest of the team to contribute to your plan. Let me know what you decide."

"Thank you."

"Good luck!"

The line caught off and Steve dialed another number.

"It's me," he said as soon as the other person answered the phone. A moment of tensed silence.

"It's done, mini-me," the voice replied at last. "I just stole the first million. Are you sure you're doing the correct thing?"

"No." Steve covered his eyes with the palm of his left hand. "I'm not sure of anything anymore."

"But you still want to carry on with the plan?"

"Now more than ever."

"Alright then. The package will arrive in three days."

"Thank you."

"Let me know when you want me to stop."

"Just make sure that you steal as much as you can in the following week."

"Alright. You know where to find me if you need me."

"I know." Steve paused. "Thank you, Tony, this really means a lot to me."

"I thought it might."

Once their conversation ended, there wasn't much left for him to do but trudge home in the state that he was.

Bruce's words kept echoing in his mind, but even the fact that he had been found out wasn't as horrifying as what he had been about to blurt out to Bruce. Was it real this feeling that bloomed inside of him even when he hadn't wanted it? Even if the man that he cared about was a terrible man? He had been awful with him at the beginning but showed so many signs that he would be
able to redeem himself. Nonetheless, it was ridiculous of him to keep dreaming of the moment when Bucky might leave his business and be more merciful. There was no such thing. He had been raised for this. He had been made for this. He had been betrayed over and over again and yet he still managed to trust in Steve and now...

Steve's hand clenched on the steering wheel. Why didn't he resist? Why didn't he just tell Bucky to take a hike, keep it to himself and never give course to an attraction that was going to condemn them both? Why couldn't he just keep a professional distance? Separate the undercover agent to the Steve Rogers persona? Why?

And when did this feeling take over him? When did it become so embedded into his own core? So many questions and so little time to answer them. Would he truly want to answer those questions? One thing remained a certainty in all this torment.

He was going to die at the end of next week.

He pulled the car in the garage and trudged into the house. He almost laughed when he was welcomed by Bucky's worried face. He gently cupped Steve's face and studied his wounds as if those were his own. The truthfulness of all that affection that he could read in Bucky's eyes made Steve avert his eyes.

"What happened?"

"I don't deserve your worry. It's fine. It will heal." Steve made an attempt to move but Bucky forced him to stay put. His eyes narrowed when focused intently at Steve.

"You do deserve my worry. Tell me who hurt you."

"I don't know," Steve rasped. "They might have been what was left of Pierce's rogue men. They ran when I started to throw punches left and right. They were only two."

"Could you describe them? I can ensure that Howlett finds them and puts an end to their misery."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take a look first and see how I look. Then I'll mope around a little and then when my manhood is less threatened, I'll get back to you."

"Fine," Bucky replied reluctantly, his thumbs gently caressing Steve's face. "Come to our room. I think I have a first aid kit there."

He took Steve's hand and guided him towards the bedroom, and good thing that he had acted like that for Steve was lost to the fact that Bucky said our room. That space was theirs only and it kind of broke Steve's heart a little more.

Bucky motioned him to sit on the bed while he went to the bathroom to retrieve the first aid kit. When he came back, he gently cleaned and bandaged Steve's wounds. Then he forced him to take a shower so as by the time he came back dressed in some grey sweat pants (that Steve wasn't sure they belonged to him) and a blue t-shirt, he would find Bucky in the bed, reading some paperwork and dressed pretty much the same as Steve.

As soon as he settled in bed, reading loud and clear the message that Bucky sent him, his lover gathered him into his arms so that Steve could rest his weary head upon his shoulder, easy to hide his face in the groove between the neck and the shoulder. They stayed like this for a while longer, just breathing each other in, Steve measuring Bucky's heartbeats while the older man passed his fingers through the blond locks gently, in a soothing rhythm.
"I said before that I only loved once," Bucky's voice rumbled, enveloping Steve in a soothing embrace. "That after the betrayal of my first lover, it was impossible for me to love again, although I had other relationships. I cared about the men with whom I have been, but never to the point that I care about you." Steve caught his breath as Bucky continued unaware.

"It is odd really how we come to care about a stranger so much, how this mysterious process really works. I wonder perhaps if we aren't meant to know the selfishness of it, only its generosity and that deep desire to protect the one you love." Bucky pulled him by the hair gently, more of a gesture of making Steve look back at him than anything else. "Why do you keep pulling back?"

"I'm scared," Steve confessed as the worst sinner of them all.

"Of what?" Bucky's eyes were glimmering with the unsaid truth that floated above them at that moment.

"Of me hurting you. I always hurt people. All the ones I care about die sooner or later or they leave me alone. I'm scared of you hurting me as well."

"I wish I could promise that I won't hurt you, Steve, but this isn’t a promise I could keep. At times we’re the meanest with the people we love the most. And in spite of the profundity of the emotions I have for you, there have been times in the past when I let you get hurt to test you, though by then I was convinced that you were the one that whispered to my heart. And you will hurt me too, for you are only human and there is nothing much you could to prevent that."

"But what if I would hurt you really bad?"

"Then we will try and find a solution. I think I can get past everything with you, except perhaps cheating and betrayal." Steve gulped but Bucky didn't relent. "In case you didn't realize what I’m trying, admittedly very clumsily, to say is that I really do love you, Steve. And you are absolutely worth everything in this world."

The ardent words shattered the flimsy walls that remained around Steve's heart and perhaps due to the despair born from the earlier events, or perhaps out of the hopelessness of the entire situation, Steve found himself staring back at the man next to him and admitting in an all-consuming phrase the truth that had burnt inside of him for some time now.

"I love you too." Bucky smiled and the serenity of it was too much for Steve. Their lips crashed into a most fervent kiss and it soon became so much more. If Steve asked later for harder and more, it was nobody's business. It was his funeral anyway.

Steve lay awake in the aftermath of all that had happened earlier that day and evening. It had been an eventful day, a roller-coaster of emotions and right now Steve wanted to be lost in Bucky's arms forever. Would it be that bad if he would just leave and never look back? Walk away from everything and just take Bucky away from all of this. Protect him. Giving him all the love that he needed.

There was an entire world inside of Steve, which was collapsing, years upon years of building walls around his heart melted away in the force of his emotions. He loved this man. He loved Bucky Barnes in spite of all his flaws. He loved him for all the times he smiled to him and the times he listened to Steve, for all the times he kissed Steve as if nothing more precious could be found on this earth. Was this love cursed just because Bucky was considered by all standards a bad man? Was it cursed because he was bound to betray him in the most abhorrent way?

Steve kept going around in circles until not even Bucky's arms could offer comfort, so he searched
for it in the one place that appeared to calm his nerves. In the garden he was stunned to find Howlett enjoying a cigarette, looking for all intents and purposes lost to the world as well. Something made him weary disturb the peace that settled between them in the pale light coming from the terrace and so he just took a seat next to him and when the red-haired offered him a cigarette, Steve didn't refuse. The smoke choked him and made him cough for the first few minutes, but soon he settled into a pleasant haze of just inhaling the nauseous vapor.

"You know," Howlett spoke after a while, "I thought I was ready when it came to betrayal. It turns out one never is."

Steve choked again his eyes almost stinging with so much left unsaid.

"What do you mean?"

"Erik, Robert... even Andrea to some extent. We were living with snakes in our own house and we never knew. I know I was harsh back then when Andrea's blood was still fresh on all our hands, but I was angry. I still am so angry."

"If it's any consolation, so am I. All the bloody time."

"I don't know, man. I've never been the type of person to think about this sort of thing. Out of the two of us, Rebecca is the more prone to ponder over my lack of faith in people. But you know," James glanced at Steve, his eyes surprisingly fiery in the dead of the night, "I've been raised in by a hell of a family. I've been raised with a code and following that code was always a question of honor. Honor, loyalty to a fault, duty – these sorts of values have been brought up in me. And yet, more and more often I see that people involved in the business have less and less any of these. What's so fucking bad about them? Why in the hell's name people keep getting greedy and betraying us?"

The words involuntarily ripped a new one in Steve.

"I wish I could have the answer to this question. But I don't."

"You know what's worse? I can't protect Rebecca, man. I'm going to marry that woman, I'm going to swear to protect her. And yet I fail to do that time and time again. What kind of husband does that make me? What kind of man does that make me?"

"I don't think you are responsible for the actions of other people."

"Yeah, but I sure as hell am responsible for their loyalty. What does it say about us when so many betray us?"

"I don't think your actions speak for others. People that have always been good to the core were betrayed in the end. No matter how many times you fight to win people's loyalty, sooner or later they betray you for their own selfish reasons. Because in the end we love ourselves more and we put the ones we love above anyone else. And for them, we would walk through hell and fire and death to save them." Steve closed his eyes against the onslaught of emotions. He was light-headed from the whole conversation and the smoke of the cigarette.

"Oh man, we are too bleak for this sort of conversation." Howlett sighed next to him and Steve opened his eyes to see him settle more comfortably in the lounge chair.

"Okay, then let me ask you this: when are you going to propose to Rebecca?" It was Howlett’s time to cough. Howlett scowled in the dark but Steve kept the smirk firmly on his lips.
"I just bought the ring, goddamn it."

"Yeah, whatever. Plan it soon before she decides that she can definitely do better in life than you."

"Hahahaha. You're so fucking funny."

"I'm hilarious and a treasure to this household in particular and to the world at large."

"You're a fucking pain in the ass is what you are." Howlett smiled. "It's good to have you as a friend though."

"Good to have you too." Steve swallowed hard and ignored the fluttering in his stomach. He prayed he would make right by his friend.

They continued to talk throughout the night, and this is how Bucky and Rebecca found them in the morning. Stiff with the uncomfortable position offered by the lounge chairs, drool over their faces and more than a pack of cigarettes smoked between the two of them. Rebecca couldn't roll her eyes any harder, while Bucky continued to judge Steve silently.

The following days passed in a blur of activity with Rebecca becoming increasingly suspicious that someone was draining money from their accounts. In the beginning, she missed it for the simple fact that they too opened various waterfront companies that would perform all sorts of inconspicuous activities the likes of which had complicated and often invented financial names.

The accounts were many just in case the police would try to trace back to them, although it had not been the case. However, on the other hand, this made the constant supervision an impossible task for only a person, especially when new money was pouring in every single day.

Her suspicions became a reality to them a few days later, when the extracts from all the others showed that someone was draining money from the Barnes accounts.

"Could you be mistaken?" Bucky asked upon looking at the paperwork that meant nothing to him.

"I'm most certainly not," Rebecca replied offended. "I know what I'm doing, and I most certainly did not misplace this money. It's most definitely stolen. Someone had managed in just five days to steal more than fifteen million dollars from us. While it still doesn't affect us severely because apparently, they don't know about the Cayman account, they most certainly do their job well. They steal it piece by piece; they don't take the whole in one chunk."

"Who the fuck could they be?" Howlett burst, quick in showing his rage as he was fed up with all these issues crashing over them. "The Russians?"

"No, they would never stoop so low," Bucky answered. "They tend to be the type ofdestroying your business first and then take the rest of your money just to make sure that you are left with nothing. They aren't made for such cunning plans. You've seen Shaw."

"Yes, you are right but then who? I don't think it could be any of Pierce's men. They wouldn't dare pull such a bold move after just losing their boss." Howlett turned to Steve. "Do you have any thoughts?"

"Not yet, but I honestly don't think it's one of Pierce's men either. To me, it looks more like a random attack. It might even come from abroad and with no previous knowledge of Bucky's name or fame for that matter."

"You might be right." Barnes nodded and then looked at Rebecca who seemed quite distressed.
"Don't worry yourself too much. I'll ask one of our contacts to see whether they could trace down the thief or at least the program through which they managed to steal such a huge amount in such a short span. I hate to admit it but they're really good."

"I would say contact him as soon as possible before this gets out of our hands. I honestly don't know how he does it because I called the banks and they advised that all the transactions in their eyes look legitimate and didn't pose any questions for them. They are used to us moving these large sums of money."

"It might be our fault too with this, thinking that my reputation would keep at bay this sort of attack. Have you spoken with Rumlow? He’s also good at this."

"Sorry, he and Rollins are in Malaysia," Howlett replied, startling Steve. This was new information. "They received quite a good contract apparently and they don't know exactly how long it might take. The latest they'll be back by the end of next week."

"Too late for us. Very well. I'll speak with our contact then and see what can be done about this."

Steve discreetly looked at the calendar. It was Thursday. Two and a half days and he would be out of time. But he knew now how to act. That afternoon he made another phone call to Tony, who was almost gleeful at the amount of money that he had managed to steal from the mighty Barnes clan. Steve was just tired and wanting to be over with. Then he placed another dangerous call to his chief and told him where he could come and arrest the scary trio. His chief had been very reluctant in accepting the plan, but by then the undercover had few choices to offer. If all was going according to the plan, he would soon be dead, so he didn't matter much anyway.

Nothing prepared him from seeing Thor with a small bag that evening ready to head out. Bruce's words were burned into his heart. You disgust me. He almost grimaced when he greeted Thor.

"What's up, Thor? Where are you going? Had enough of this mansion?" The words felt stale and unbearable in their falsity.

"Very funny, Rogers." Thor grinned at him. "Bruce is going to take me to my favorite spot. He decided we needed a short holiday. He had been incredibly tired lately, so I thought it might be a good idea to accept. Barnes said it's fine. So good luck moping around, because I'm out of here."

"Such a good friend." Thor laughed and pulled Steve in a one-arm hug before leaving. It unsettled more than anything else for in a few days Thor Odinson would wish him dead. And none of the friendly banter would remain. He only hoped he didn't ruin his relationship in the process as well.

Steve was demanding in bed that night, wanting Bucky to leave as many marks as possible on his body. He wanted proof of what was about to end. He could have ignored what was waiting for them had it not been for the mysterious call that Bucky received Saturday morning. The man declared himself as the thief that stole his money and suggested that they meet because he actually thought that he would be employed by the Barnes’. As a gesture of goodwill, he was going to return one million dollars back. When Rebecca confirmed the transaction, Barnes was intrigued so he accepted the meeting. Rebecca had to come to make sure that her brother would be able to understand all the financial mambo jumbo, Howlett wouldn't leave without them and it was decided that Steve would come too. The rest of them would be sent beforehand to ensure that there was no sign of foul play and that the place was safe.

On Saturday night he held Bucky in his arms and listened to his light snores. He stayed up as much as he could, and only sheer exhaustion finally made him close his eyes. It was the last time he was going to fall asleep next to Bucky. It would be the last time he would awake next to him.
Sunday afternoon found them in a warehouse close to the marina, not quite isolated as others and therefore less suspicious. The place had been thoroughly checked as per Rollins’s instructions over the phone, who was really unhappy about the whole situation and had a really bad feeling, *I'm telling you, Steve*. Too bad all his bad feelings were mentioned only to the one person that he shouldn't have.

There was a dead calm inside of him as they approached the place. The few shivers that racked his body every now and then were simply ignored and he sat tensed next to Bucky. As they entered the building, they were advised that their mysterious guest had not arrived yet but one of the men placed inconspicuously on the adjacent buildings. And they spent the first ten minutes making small talk as they waited for the stranger to arrive.

By then, Steve's hands were shaking, bruised with pent up emotion and despair. He looked around the warehouse, he cursed his cowardice. Or his sense of duty. He had always wanted to protect people. He had wanted so much to protect his family and then his friends and then there was no one much left to protect. And now was the time to protect someone far more important than anything else in the world. For once he would try not to fail.

His eyes were liquid when he turned to Bucky who always looked back at him.

"I'm an undercover agent and you are about to be arrested if you don't leave in the next five minutes."

A moment of frozen dead quietness followed by a muffled what. It could have been Howlett or Rebecca. He didn't know because Rebecca covered her mouth stifling a gasp of utter horror. He only focused on Bucky; whose face was drained of color. He was frozen in that very spot, staring back at Steve with wide eyes and eyebrows raised as if to say what nonsense are you talking about?

"I lied," he admitted, tears falling down on his cheeks, shoulders hunched and waiting for the divine justice. "I lied about my identity. My true name is in fact Steve Rogers and I’m an undercover agent working under the authority of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The agents helping me will be here in the next twenty minutes and you need to leave now."

"What the fuck did you just say?" Howlett growled as Rebecca began to sob openly, her beautiful eyes scrunched shut as if she couldn't face the atrocity of Steve's betrayal. Stoned face, Bucky pulled out his gun and turned it against Steve. It was not a surprising move for Steve. The first bullet pierced his left shoulder with so much force that the recoil effect spun Steve towards left like a doll without its strings. The sounds of the gun echoed menacingly inside the warehouse. The god of death had been summoned to take Steve and he had been prepared for a very long time for this to happen.

"I'm a traitor," he gasped in pain. It was very important to offer vital information while there was still time. "Two blocks from here there is a grey Toyota Prius. Inside you will find new documents and passports and bank accounts opened on behalf of you. Those accounts contain most of the money that I have been stealing from you for the past two weeks with the help of a friend. There are other things too that can help you change your appearance quickly and go unnoticed. There are three flight tickets with Australia set as the destination. From there you can go wherever you like."

A second bullet pierced his right arm and Steve sobbed in pain. Rebecca was crying with huge gasps and Howlett had an arm around her shoulders while looking between Bucky and Steve. His bottom lip jutted out, a clear sign that he was cursed to ask all the questions that Bucky wouldn't. Because the man that he loved, fallen prey to the betrayal yet again, would never acknowledge Steve's presence. Perhaps Steve had died the moment he said *I'm an undercover agent*. Nevertheless, this was the outcome that Steve had expected, and he stood there bleeding, refusing
to beg for his life because honestly, there was no life after this.

"How do you expect us to believe you?" It sounded as if Howlett had taken a shot of broken glass, a fleeting sign of his own heartache.

"You have no reason to, but," Steve stared back at Bucky, his raw pain almost palpable in the air, "I've never lied when I said I love you." The third bullet pierced his left leg with a sickening crunch, making Steve crash to the floor in a bloody and agonizing mess. "I didn't lie. You have to leave," he kept on insisting, even as Bucky walked towards him as Rebecca hid her face into Howlett’s chest.

There was a dreadful blankness on Bucky's face as if his spirit had vacated the body as soon as it heard of Steve's unbearable treachery. Oh, how it hurt to be on the receiving end of it! Not even in a million years, would Steve have imagined that it would have been far more excruciating to see this rather than experience this slow death. The physical pain kept him in a haze of want and need to be over with all of it.

Bucky knelt beside him and grabbed him by the bloody shirt as if daring Steve to look into his eyes, daring him to deny everything that had been said not even five minutes ago. But Steve smiled, even as Bucky stroke him with the gun twice with a strength that only such a betrayed man could possess.

"It's okay. It's okay. It's okay," Steve mumbled as Bucky finally pointed the gun at his head. The undercover cop put his right hand on it. "I'm glad that you are going to do it. I'm glad that it's you. But I didn't lie. I do love you and I really hope that one day you might find yourself less inclined to hate me as much."

"You ruined me," Bucky spoke, at last, the utter bewilderment in his voice breaking Steve's heart yet again. "How could you do this to me? How? How can you possibly think that it is all right for me to kill the one person I love above all else on this earth because he ultimately betrayed me? Because I have done it before, you thought it would be easier for me? How can you be so monstrously selfish?"

"I'm sorry," Steve muttered, the pain by now finally acting against him. He was losing blood and fast and soon he would lose consciousness. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I am so sorry."

Bucky held his eyes for a moment longer as if to gauge the truth beyond those words. At that particular moment, it all seemed an exercise in futility.

"You are far more monstrous than I'll ever be." The final verdict came and the nozzle of the gun was pointed directly across the selfish heart that was found lacking. Bucky closed his eyes, his face a mask of agony, but at the final moment he didn't pull the trigger.

The choked gasp came mostly as an afterthought and then all anyone could hear were Rebecca's sobs as she was taken away in Howlett’s arms, followed by a dead man walking that once had been named Bucky Barnes, the White Wolf.

The life was slipping away from Steve as if he were in a mere dream where reality could still be denied. The severe pain made him aware of the cars pulled at the front of the warehouse, which made him aware of the threats that his team made, his chief's alarmed voice.

They all faded to black.

The last thing that Steve Rogers thought about was the agony into the eyes of his angel of death
and the savage howl broke through his lips as the last call for something lost forever.
The sea was infinite and raging around him and Steve wished with all his might to drown in it. He pictured the grey waves closing in above him and the weight of his soul pulling him down, down, down deep into the heart of the sea, his body a church for the fish and seashells. Or the wind that was blowing hard around him could shatter him into thousands upon thousands of particles and spread them across the sea, maybe just maybe one of them reaching Bucky.

He took a deep breath, pushing his feet deeper in the sand. How long was he planning to live in this lethargic state? There were days when he couldn't get out of bed, when the simple notion of moving was abhorrent for him. He let the daylight cover his body and paint him in different nuances until dusk. The darkness of the night would find him in the same position, barely breathing but still there.

It has been thirteen months, four days and three hours since he last saw Bucky Barnes, his shattered eyes still waking him from nightmares, his hand not wavering this time, not missing this time. God, how Steve wished Bucky Barnes had pulled that trigger! He wanted to be dead. Anything would have been better than this perpetual hell in which he had constantly lived since then.

It had been thirteen months, four days and three hours since Steve Rogers was dead in front of God and people. Oh yeah, he was still breathing, and he could perform various functions, but that was about it. There was nothing left for him. Of _him_.

It had been impossible for him to return to his former life once the Barnes clan was destroyed. In the aftermath of his shooting, his chief had brought him to a private hospital where he was treated for his wounds. Every day, Steve wished he were dead. Every day he wasn't. The cowardice of this involuntary choice suffocated him at the time, but he lived with the knowledge that sooner or later, Bucky Barnes would find him and finish what he had started in that warehouse that day.

His judgment would not be swayed, and it would be carried out extremely professionally. Maybe he would send Rumlhow and Rollins to end it. Perhaps it would be Howlett or Rebecca, both as affected by his betrayal as him, but deep down Steve knew that it would have been impossible. This was a personal vendetta and fortunately, Barnes would carry it personally.

Apparently, he had not been the only person to think that, therefore the authorities were in a hurry to record his testimony. The film was 37 hours and 54 minutes long and it accounted for the entire stint and whatever he had found out. Steve had been a man in love, but his morals hadn't died, and he had still wanted to do the right thing. What that was, well that was an entirely different question altogether. Almost 38 hours of torture, killing, commerce negotiation and of course the confrontation with Pierce as its climax. Bodies were dug out, DNA matches were carried out, some were identified, some weren't. Poor slobs, they had it coming anyway for interfering in the Barnes business.

Steve Rogers was the epitome of a hero. He was thanked for a job well done various times, decorated; he shook hands with strangers, thanked again, the family of the tortured policeman before him sent him a letter of genuine gratitude. In all of this, Steve wanted to paint the walls of the little room in which he was kept with the residues of his brain.

Three months later, after physiotherapy, after accounting for everything that he had done during the operation, after shaking hands upon hands, and being kept as the best secret in the history of ever, they became a little baffled about what they should do with him. But by then, Steve knew perfectly
what would happen. If he had let them, they would have created a special witness protection program, especially for him. After all, the Barnes’ were still out there and they would be thirsty for blood. In time they would even come out of whatever hole they had dug for themselves and hunt Rogers down. Eventually, they'd come back to him and use his knowledge to try and capture the most wanted man. Steve would have rather burnt in hell than do that.

Therefore, one morning he made a phone call. Later the investigations led by Chief Nicholas Fury would establish that it had been under a minute to another phone number that couldn't be traced. After that particular conversation, Steve Rogers managed to escape the protection detail by creating a false alarm. He ran away just with the clothes on him.

In his bedroom, nothing personal was found. It was as if he had never stayed there in the first place. There was a simple note under the lamp with a simple scrawled line, almost illegible. It is better this way, Chief. Don't blame yourself. It was established by the forensic team that yes, Steve Rogers had written that note and no, it had not been done so under duress.

Fury had been shocked to find out later on from Sharon that Steve's apartment had been sold a couple of months prior to his disappearance and that the entire obtained sum had gone to a charity called Andrea's Safe Heaven for Children. Fury thought he didn't have the heart to break anymore. He had been wrong. All these actions pointed out that most likely, Steve Rogers, suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder combined with unhealthy ideation of suicide, had gone and taken his own life.

Steve found out all this only later, while he was on board of a small ship owned by a nice lady called Pepper Potts. Officially, she and her husband Tony had decided to take a trip to New Zealand, and their friend, Stephen Strange was kind to accompany and help them as a more mature and skilled navigator. Unofficially, they were taking Steve to a new place, a remote fishermen village where most of the people didn't care that much about new arrivals. It was an unspoken rule of the place to mind their own business. The backgrounds of some of them were as mysterious and as tragic as that of this one Stephen Strange, perhaps even more so. Tony told him once that the world was big enough to have a few places for the damaged and the destitute, the suffering and the stained. Steve was perhaps all at once.

He knew that he was damaged, his constant desire of dying, that life was not worth living, it was truly a problem. The village had a doctor and a center, similar to a veteran center, where sometimes some of the most isolated members of their community would go and share their story in an attempt to find peace. For people like them and Steve, there was no peace to be found, no blessing to be offered. And Steve thought he didn't deserve either anyway.

Tony was the one that bought him new clothes, furniture, and food. Tony was the one that held his head while Pepper would dye his hair, choosing the sort of brown that made him resemble Tony more than ever, along with brown contacts to hide his blue orbs. The blond was buried like a treasure underneath all the brown, but all he could feel was an emptiness gawking at him, chewing his insides more and more. The last part of his identity had been thoroughly stolen from him.

Strange kept quiet as a grave when he bought him about a thousand books in English, German and Russian, the languages that Steve spoke. They made that small bungalow like a home. They knew all their efforts were fruitless.

Pepper was the only one allowed to speak about what had happened to him during his stint in the Barnes clan. She was the one that took one of Andrea's sketches, a firebird striving to reach the skies, and enlarged it, then framed it and hang it on the wall. Her sketchbook and diary were still by his bedside each night. Pepper and Steve would speak about her in hushed tones as Tony would prepare breakfast and Rhodes would stay out on the terrace watching the seaside together with
Strange. She would be gentle, but firm and she would caress Steve's hair, while he laid there with his head on her lap and listening to her gentle tone as if it was the last straw between him and eternal darkness.

When they finally had to leave about a month later, Steve wept like a child in Tony's arms and they stood hugged on the boat bridge as if they would never see each other again.

"I'll always be here for you, but I accepted this mission months before all this went down," Tony grumbled. "As soon as we finish it, we'll be back. Maybe take a break for a while from all of this as well. We bought the house next to you, so you won't get rid of us as easy as you think."

"Thank you," Steve said and he let go because this was what he'd been taught all his life. To let go. He wiped his tears away and they pretended they didn't notice. He hugged all the rest, Pepper the last.

"Her memory should be cherished by learning to live again," she whispered. He soaked in her kindness. "She would hate to see you like this as much as we do. Please, live, Steve! I don't want to come back here and find out that you took your own life." She sobbed then and they hugged harder and Steve made a silent promise too. He wouldn't take his own life. He couldn't because he was waiting anyway.

So there he was. Thirteen months later still waiting. A couple of months ago, he had received a letter through his friends from Deke, asking whether he was all right and whether he would need some money to help him along. There was so little that he needed that Steve had no problem still living from his own paychecks that he earned during his time as an undercover cop. Deke's gesture had been kind, but Steve couldn't bear to be the recipient of such kindness and he didn't understand why Shaw made that gesture. He replied with two lines: Thank you, you're kind, but I don't need anything. Please forgive me. Deke didn't write him back.

Thirteen months. It seemed so long and so short at the same time. Steve sighed and got up, brushing the sand from his shorts and turned towards the house. The chill of the wind painted goosebumps on his skin, ruffling his hair, where specks of blond could be seen at the roots. It would soon be the time to dye it again. He was about to walk back in the house when the strange figure walking towards him took his breath away.

There have been times during his operations when Steve thought that he might end up losing his mind with the dissociation that such a job required from him. But none had been so intense than in that moment when he thought that the curious figure walking towards him belonged to Bucky Barnes. His hair was so much shorter. Dressed in a white shirt and some blue shorts, he looked more as a guest of his than as a trespasser.

He had lost a lot of weight to the point of being gaunt, probably as much as Steve, whose clothes sometimes hang on him as if ten sizes too large. The man kept his hands in his pockets and the wind seemed to love to play with his hair. Steve stood frozen on the spot, the answer to all of his desperate prayers walking towards him took his breath away.

He most definitely was not a product of his own imagination. Bucky stopped a few feet away from him and Steve smiled painfully.

"You came," he said past the lump in his throat, the words sounding almost breathless. Bucky nodded but remained silent, somehow assessing what he was seeing. He seemed displeased with the way Steve looked for he said at last:

"You need to eat. You're too thin."
"There's no need for that now," he replied eagerly.

"Let me guess. You think I came here to kill you." Bucky rolled his eyes. It was such an unusual gesture in him that it made Steve smile again. "If I truly wanted you dead, Steven Grant Rogers, I would have done it back at the warehouse. You have a serious problem and we will deal with it in time."

The sound of his real name on Bucky's lips was exquisite. It conferred him a small piece of his true self back. Still, his words confused Steve. "What do you mean?"

"How do you think I found out where you live, Steve? Your friends gave me your location. They said that we would either kill each other and thus put an end to our shared misery, or we would find a way to forgive each other and move on from there."

"And could we? Forgive each other?"

Bucky pondered over the answer for a few moments.

"I think what hurt me more than your betrayal was that you actually thought I was going to kill you. And while I sure did nothing before to assuage this type of thought, I still believed that you would give me enough credit not to do that. You lied to me. That hurt even more."

"I'm sorry." Steve hung his head in shame. "For what it's worth, I wasn't proud of it and it wasn't easy for me either. But I tried to remain as truthful to you as I could."

"I suppose I didn't give you enough reasons to believe in me or in my love for you. Terrible men commit terrible deeds. This has always been the case, and I'm an awful man. I was raised in a powerful family and when you betrayed me, you didn't just destroy me and the clan, you destroyed anyone associated with me." Bucky pinched his nose. "Am I still angry? I guess I am. Did I regret not killing you in the warehouse?" He stared at Steve. "Never."

Steve nodded as if in understanding but in reality, it baffled him even more. His brain refused to process the meaning of the words, their impact over him spreading like wildfire still.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I'm angry at you, Steve. So angry! For all the lies and lives ruined, for all the betrayal and the hurt. I'm furious about you ruining my life, taking everything away from me, forcing me to run and hide like a simpleton, when I'm most certainly not. You took my sister's happiness from her for it took her several months to reconcile the image of Steve Rogers with the traitor undercover cop. Not to mention Howlett, who wanted so much to come back for you. They married; you know?"

"They did?" Steve shook his head. "Yes, I'm glad Howlett managed to find the perfect occasion to propose."

"Rollins and Rumlow had not come for you for the simple fact that you saved Rollins's life. They don't forget a debt so easily, not even if I had asked them, which I didn't." Bucky shrugged. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that in spite of being a terrible man and in spite of being associated with other terrible men, I think in some way I deserve a person like you, Steve. That somehow, I am worthy of your love if it was real and something tells me it was. I'm ready now to start the new life that you offered me, but only if it is with you. And I really want to know the real you."

"You know the real me. Other than what I did for a living, you knew the real me even back then," Steve insisted, this time taking a few steps towards Bucky. "I will always confront you and tell you
things that I mind, I will always hold my own before you. I'll always..." Steve shook his head and
the gesture gave him such an air of despondency that Bucky gathered him in his arms before he
was even aware of his actions.

Steve clung to him with all his strength. Bucky's scent was marvelous. A few weeks ago, he had
dreamed that he was reading in bed next to Bucky, who was watching something on TV. He
remembered leaning forward and just inhaling his scent, smiling in pleasure as his lover had turned
to him and smiled back. Even after he had woken up, the scent seemed to linger in his nostrils like
a vestige of something lost forever. "It's been so hard without you. So hard." His voice broke under
the onslaught of the emotions.

"But I'm here now." Bucky's voice sounded just as wrecked. "I'll never leave you again if this is
what you want."

"Forever then?"

"Forever."

They grasped at each other with all the intents and purposes of never letting each other go. There
was so much to talk about, so much need to reacquaint with each other and mostly they just needed
to learn how to truly trust each other and start over. People had always been capable of horrible
things but also of wondrous ones for love. Perhaps this was their miracle. Maybe love could bring
together a mobster and a cop, or maybe it would break them.

Steve clutched Bucky's hand as they made their way to the house, unable to look anywhere else.

"I hope you don't mind if I borrow something from you," Bucky said. "I was in a hurry and I
traveled light."

"Don't worry. We'll sort it out."

"Be prepared! Howlett will want to punch you in the face before he will hug you. With Rebecca,
things might be more complicated, but she wishes to see you."

"They're here?"

"No, but they want to come. I didn't tell them the location because I wanted to check up with you
first." Bucky's grave air seemed to have disappeared altogether. "We will need some time on our
own before they could intrude. But thanks to someone I know, we have plenty of money to afford
that."

"What do you plan on doing?"

"I don't know, but... isn't it exciting?" Bucky smiled really beautifully. "I have never had such
freedom, but I think it is going to be a very interesting journey and I plan on taking it with you."

Maybe it was an impossible journey and it would end up in tears, but maybe, just maybe it was all
going to be all right. But at that moment in time, as they walked now towards the house, with the
sun on their backs and smiles on their lips, everything was fine and for once, they were both finally
at peace.
The sun seemed to take a deep breath as it finally pushed past the horizon into a glorious fireball, and in few more seconds, a veil of playful rays spilled over Steve's prone figure. Bucky took a sharp breath in. His lover was stunning laying like that, among those blue sheets, his tanned skin deliciously spreading, his arms around him like a shield. His dark hair glowed with a thousand more particles of light and the first peaks of blond could be seen. Like a buried treasure. His buried treasure. During the night, Steve had kicked his part of the sheet aside and slept bare into the light, dressed in his black shorts and a tank top because even when it was so warm, he couldn't be persuaded to sleep naked, despite a most thorough attempt from Bucky's part to convince him.

The tank top was white and made the contrast of the tan all the more prominent. Bucky's brows furrowed as he gently touched a pink slashing on what could have been otherwise untarnished skin, the taste of which Bucky was completely addicted to. The finger sensed the ridges, the pink skin that would never heal, a sign of its own humanity.

Bucky pushed the material further up so that he could admire those slashes more. The word *admire* was so wrong in this context, but so perversely good to describe what Bucky saw in them. The unwavering loyalty that Steve had for him. It was paradoxical even now to think in these terms since Steve had picked up his entire empire and broken it into pieces. How could a man hold so much power? How could such a simple man push the boundaries, push their lack of faith and destroy each and every one of them? His fingers carded through Steve's hair, the peeking blond making him almost ill at ease. Because Steve was still buried, parts of him still hidden and for some reason, at times Bucky still felt like part of a scavenger hunt trying to fit pieces of Steve and put them back together. The sin of loving a broken man.

Cold lips touched that beautiful skin. The man stirred and Bucky pushed the boundaries again by tracing each scar with his tongue, brandishing them for the millionth time as if a hidden blessing. The skin rippled, the breath stuttered. Bucky shuddered with the simple pleasure of having the freedom to taste this man. Tiny sounds encouraged him, small puffs of air and half choked moans, the body moving almost without knowledge. His right hand came to rest on the swell of that delicious bottom and pushed easily the offending cloth, revealing the skin, whiter, just as smooth. The left hand pushed further until the prone figure just helped him take it out and then giving permission to his fingers to get lost through strands of soft brown locks.

So much skin. So much power befell into his hands. He didn't let Steve move other than finding a more comfortable position, still on his stomach. Steve scrunched his eyes but didn't open them, his face a mask of pleasure as Bucky took a long moment to just admire the body laid before him. Legs strong, fine hair covering the thighs, much more pronounced towards the calves. The ratio between the width of the shoulders and the narrowness of the waist made Bucky lightheaded with its perfection. If only he hadn't allowed that animal to mar such an amazing back: round shoulders great for biting, lithe muscles playing under that blemished skin, arms ready always to spread wide and give. Always give, never take.

Bucky took his hands away to push his own shorts away as well, before turning Steve on his back, his action compelling the younger man to open his eyes and stare in amazement at him. Always with that tinge that he might lose everything within a moment. Tanned arms, with small scars from cuts and fights, a chest well defined. The abs moved more rapidly under his stare and the dark blond trail leading further down made Bucky dizzy with the possibilities.

He focused back on Steve, who still kept his arms wide open as if waiting for an embrace that
would never come. His throat bobbed down and Bucky just leaned over, his hair caressing his lover as his teeth scraped over the fragile skin.

Once. Twice and then he nipped, before soothing again. He moved again, covering Steve like a blanket. They fit. It always amazed Bucky how well they fit, two particles so different and yet so capable of fitting in the most intimate way. Steve's hands came resting over the small of his back, fingers digging slightly as if capable of holding Bucky there, in between his legs forever.

Bucky looked down at Steve and smiled before kissing him on the lips. He couldn't care less about morning breath. Steve moaned this time louder and Bucky rewarded him with a thrust of his hips. The hands moved from his back to his bottom possessive, greedy. And he thrust again. It was far easier than he thought, both already hard enough to cut diamonds because Bucky was always excited to touch Steve everywhere and Steve starved for touch.

He bracketed his head with his forearms and their bodies moved so gloriously astonishing together. It was rare for this to happen. Sex was by definition something undefinable: full of funny noises, awkward moves, false starts and one needed to possess a fine sense of humor to get past the daily mishaps. However, every once in a while, everything ran so smoothly between them, moments like this lacking the urgency.

Bucky pressed harder, making Steve gasp and bite his bottom lip in an attempt to prolong the pleasure because his partner was so close, and Bucky wanted to give all the pleasure of the world. He leaned forward and bit that delicious lip before kissing him deeply, sweetly. True. Steve moaned in his mouth, his body stuttering in its moves just as Bucky climaxed as well. The aftershocks kept them close to each other, Steve's arms sliding over Bucky's shoulders and keeping him close.

"Good morning," Bucky muttered and Steve smiled at him as the older man settled next to him, both still trying to catch their breaths, a mess of sweat, morning breath and come.

"Good morning to you too," the reply came softly, but the smile gained strength. It was impossible to define Steve's eyes, sometimes deep as a glass of dark wine, other times warm as the sweetest chocolate. "I should be awoken more often like this."

"You would get spoiled." Bucky turned towards him on his side. The younger man grinned and mirrored his movement.

"Shouldn't you spoil me more often? You know, I'm younger than you and if routine settles between us, then that's it. I'm going to look for someone else."

"Nah, you love me too much," Bucky declared.

"That's true." The hand sat gently over his own heart, and it stuttered. It was painful at times to love a man like Steve so much.

"And you know I love you too, right?" Steve nodded and there was no doubt in his eyes like it had been in the very first months after Bucky came here for him. "So since you are so young, I think it should be you who prepares breakfast this morning."

"Oh, man, I knew this was a ruse to give me a false sense of security before hitting me with outrageous demands." Steve pulled himself up and went to the bathroom, leaving the door wide open. Bucky shook his head in amusement. "You're lucky I love you!" the younger man shouted just before the spray of the shower hit him.
"Yeah, yeah."

This too was not a common occurrence between them. These words so precious had disappeared between them by the time they got reunited. Steve felt that he had no right to tell them as if saying them out loud would bound Bucky into an unbreakable contract. On the other hand, Bucky had been hesitant in declaring his love when there was still so much anger and hurt between them. And he was certain that his words would have produced much greater harm than good. He had been wrong. Steve longed to hear them. Longed to make them a reality and when three months in, he yelled at Bucky and told him to fuck off back to his sister, Bucky had forced him to listen to them time and time again. They made love roughly, leaving marks, but their words had flown between them.

He could listen to the shower and Steve humming underneath it for an eternity. It had not been easy to arrive here, in this very moment, almost two years of being here. Steve had not believed in his forgiveness; Bucky had not given credence to Steve's inner strength. They both had inflicted pain onto the other and their feelings had been convoluted. It had taken them almost a year to make peace with all that had still separated them. Just because they loved each other, it didn't mean that everything came easy to them. No matter how much love and communication they were throwing at each other, there were things still pulsating with puss and fury and suffering between them.

There were also the other people that Steve had hurt in his betrayal that would not forgive so easily. Rollins and Rumlow had a duty of honor towards Steve, and Rollins had been suspiciously forgiving. But the others not so much. He didn't have news of Doc Banner and Thor Odinson, though he was sure that Steve's friends would be more than capable of finding out what had happened to them. Rebecca had cried herself to sleep more often than not in the first few months and then refused to speak about it later.

However, Howlett... well, his best friend had ideas of his own. From the very beginning, he had been very angry. Useless questions like why didn't he come to us? or we didn't mean anything to him, did we? kept being repeated ad nauseam, until he too remained silent on the matter. But then one night, as Bucky stood on the terrace, watching the nightlife in the dark, Howlett joined him and filled the silence with so much anger. Anger at Steve's betrayal, at his desire to self-sacrifice, at all those times that he seemed to care about them and what if he didn't, what if all had been a theatrical display, but then why would he save us like that.

Bucky had listened for there was not much he could do for he had asked himself the same questions.

"Doesn't it hurt you?" His best friend asked, his voice gravelly with fury, punched opened and hallowed. "Doesn't it bother you that he betrayed you like this? That all his love had been for show and that he didn't care about us at all?"

"Howlett, if you believe it to be so, then we don't have anything to talk about." Bucky sighed; he remembered even now that incredible weight that pushed on his chest, leaving him breathless a lot of times. "I can't forgive him for one thing and one thing only: he expected me to kill him. He wanted to die at my hand, he really did. How much cruelty can a person hide in their heart to desire such a thing for their loved one?"

"What about our lives?"

"What about them?" He shrugged in a fit of despondency and clarity. "Sooner or later, one of us would have died or worse." He turned towards Howlett and muttered, "We wouldn't have turned forty, no matter how many times we would have surrounded ourselves with brave and true men. Rebecca would have been dead sooner or later too. Just think about how many turf wars we were
exposed to only in the last year alone before Steve joined us." He turned again towards the balcony, unable to look at Howlett's twisted face. "He gave us a new life. I choose to see where it takes me. You can go back to New York or try joining forces with Shaw, but I won't allow my sister to join you, that's for sure."

"He changed you. You wouldn't have been so merciful a year ago."

"There are times when I don't want to get out of bed, James. Do not mistake my stoicism for strength. That man took everything from me, literally everything, and yet chose to give me something back. Steve, even at his highest pretending, had always given something back. I let him get whipped, I let him get hurt and shot and threatened, and I chose to impose my terms though he pushed back. Time and time again, this man saved us, pushed so hard and suffered and stayed true to himself to an extent that I can't comprehend. I hate him and love him in equal measure. I honestly don't know which side will win."

"I want to kill him." Rebecca startled them both as she settled next to Howlett on the terrace. "And then I want to resurrect him and wrap him in a warm blanket and give him a hot chocolate." Her fingers twitched helplessly on her lap. "That man had been gentle with me, but how much was real?"

"All of it," Bucky replied.

"How can I care about a man so much and still wish he were dead?" Rebecca asked appalled at herself and Howlett pulled her into a hug. "Why did he have to leave so many shades of grey between us? He cared about us, but not enough to stop him from doing his duty as a cop. He betrayed us, but not enough to leave us victims to the police. Just enough to give us a chance at a completely different life, with enough money to keep us going a long time from now, risking his friends and himself. What he did is unforgivable and yet..."

"And yet you want to forgive him," Bucky filled in the silence.

"So much. And I hate him for that." Her voice broke.

"Well, I don't forgive. And I certainly don't forget." Howlett seemed almost ready to go after Steve and hunt him down like an animal.

And yet his best friend had been the one to encourage Bucky to leave them a year later when Steve's friends came after him, worried sick.

"Stop dreaming with eyes wide open and go take a shower," Steve grumbled as he pushed at Bucky. He was dressed in a white shirt and some new black shorts. His hair was kept short and his eyes were filled with contentment.

"I'm going, I'm going." Bucky kissed him on his forehead and then went in the shower stall.

Two years had passed since that moment, when Howlett just nodded, refusing to show his worry, although it poured through every pore. Two years during which Bucky managed to visit them three times, never accompanied by Steve. But his choice had been made the moment he saw Steve on the shore, hopeless, utterly broken - right then and there, Bucky had only wanted to mend and piece back together everything. It had been the right answer.

It had not been an easy road, but it seemed like they made it. Steve was working as a mechanic, repairing boats and trucks alike with a strange passion, whereas Bucky seemed to be quite a good carpenter, producing chairs and tables, sometimes a cupboard for a small shop mainland. They
didn't need the money, but they craved the work.

They argued over who should cook or do laundry or clean after themselves. They would get into heated debates over politics and religion and football and the past and the future. They made love and kissed and called each other so often that Steve's colleagues made kissing noises each time they saw Bucky.

They slept together in the same bed that smelled of them so much and woke each other from nightmaraes, from naps, from sleep with kisses and caresses. And it was far from perfect, with so many wounds and gaps still persisting between them, and yet Bucky had never been happier. And he would never allow anyone to take this from him.

He dumped his towel in the laundry basket, grabbed some shorts and a t-shirt with a crude message (Steve's idea of a joke) and entered the kitchen in time to smell the bacon. A breakfast fit for a king.

"There are plates missing," he noticed, taking a sip of milk directly from the carton because he could perfectly be an ass, as Steve loved to remind him.

"What do you mean?" Steve glanced at the table settled for two. "Oh man, did you invite Kay and Terrence again?" A knock at the door made Bucky smirk as Steve scowled at him. "I knew you were planning something like this. Sure, let's invite the maniacs of the island for breakfast because Steve sure as hell can cook for them. Though you are the one that needs their business providing you with the wood that you need," Steve continued to grumble as he went to open the door and Bucky followed him.

Steve froze with his hand still on the doorknob as he looked at Howlett and Rebecca staring back at him with just as much shock as they could muster, though they had agreed with Bucky's plan. Rebecca was dressed into a nice flowery dress that showed off her growing belly and Howlett stood next to her protectively, his body slightly turned towards her, sweating in a blue shirt and black jeans. A small carrier bag rested next to them.

And then all hell broke loose because Howlett hadn't lied. He took just a little bit of an effort to punch the former cop twice in short succession, but even the hits had no effect over Steve as he continued to stare at them stricken.

"You better get a black eye, asshole!" Howlett seethed. "And you'd better have a guest room on the opposite side of the house because I sure as hell don't want to listen to you having sex with Bucky."

And then the unimaginable happened and Steve shook himself from the stupor and began to cry like a child. He was not a beautiful crier, sobs shaking him as he looked at Rebecca's belly and then at both of them again. So loving arms came around him as his sister hugged him tightly. Bucky couldn't hear what she whispered in his ear, but it made Steve cry harder and made Howlett look away embarrassed. Those words sounded a lot like forgiveness.

Bucky smiled at Howlett, who shrugged in reply embarrassed at the blatant display of emotions and went to join the hug. Steve hid his face into Howlett's neck as the other man wrapped his arms around both Steve and Rebecca. Bucky leaned against the door frame and smiled and smiled and smiled, his heart full of love and joy. And love. So much love for that man that even now, within that hug, resembled a buried treasure. And he was Bucky's and Bucky was his.

There was a long road ahead of them. And as he went to join the group hug, Bucky had the certainty that they were going to make it.
The rain had been knocking on their bedroom windows for the past two hours.

Bucky was sorely tempted to let it in.

It had been seven years.

Seven.

Looking back, it felt nothing short of a miracle: the obstacles they had overcome, the pain and the suffering they had been forced to deal with, the friendships that had died and been buried in the cemetery of life. Friends they had lost and friends they had won. Or kept. Or asked to leave, but they had come back anyway. The sins that would never wash away. The blood that even now still liked to drown Bucky in its sticky and gagging embrace in nightmares that appeared to be endless.

Bucky had been aware from the very beginning when he lay his eyes over one Steve Rogers that he didn't deserve such a miracle. There was something almost abject in the way he wanted to stifle that miracle, to see it perish to other people's bullets and wounds and slashes and beatings. It was abhorrent to remember the way he had felt.

Undeserving.

Stained.

Tainted with the knowledge that such a miracle shouldn't be his, that such a man shouldn't love him. As time had passed by, it had been disarming how much he had wanted to grasp this miracle and protect it against the despair that sometimes lingered in those beautiful blue eyes hidden by brown contacts against insecurities and betrayal and anger and self-doubt.

In those first days, with Steve under his roof, Bucky had terrible dreams. Wicked testimonies of his unworthiness for in those dreams Andrew Garner had kindly reminded him how much sufferance he had endured before Bucky had shot him. Only this time instead of staying completely silent, instead of him missing his tongue, Bucky had heard loud and clear the words: I loved you so much. How could you betray me so? Then those mature hands that at one point in his life had been the only source of lovely caresses and the source of bone-melting pleasure would grab his throat and squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until Bucky would turn to be the voiceless one.

Yes, Bucky Barnes had loved Andrew Garner. Yes, he loved his sister and nephews and Howlett and even Lara, the owner of the shop that even after so many years still showcased his furniture. But none of them could compare to Steve Rogers.

Bucky pushed the soft blanket to his hips and turned to have a look at the man in question: his blond hair almost glowed in the dark, this out-worldly light surrounding his head like a halo even in Bucky's earliest memories. His matured features relaxed in slumber, one hand covering his heart in a helpless gesture, while the other would seek Bucky's warmth. His hair was as soft as usual and his skin was more tanned than it was necessarily healthy, hundreds of tiny freckles blanketing his wide shoulders and chest, angel kisses pressed into beloved skin time and time again.

Bucky silently moved his head a little closer to the source of his grievance and inhaled sharply.
Wilderness and love and safety and dreams collapsed and put back together. Anger and reproaches and meaningless words floating and disappearing like the foam of the sea. Earthly. Salt and musk and for some reason, cedar. Purely Steve. Bucky Barnes wanted to be drowned in it.

Where had this love come from? What kind of god had laughed at Bucky Barnes and punished him with such a gift? How could Bucky even begin to explain it?

*Bucky Barnes loved Steve Rogers.*

No.

More complex.

Bucky Barnes loved Steve Rogers, not in spite of but because of.

Bucky loved Steve when he pressed his body against Bucky's and took whatever he needed. He loved him for his hurried kisses and complacent kisses, for hugs given in a hurry and pecks on the lips sealed in cruelty. He loved him for hot embraces and tangled up legs, for sweaty skin and curious fingers, for the generosity of his body and the selfishness of his words. He loved the blemishes on his back and the angel kisses on his chest. The surrender of his body, each time so new, each time so loving and so true.

Bucky loved Steve when he snored loudly and when he made delicious noises during their lovemaking. He loved the screaming matches and the temper tantrums, the selfishness of his guilt and the romantic gestures, the way Steve always forgot the keys in the door and left different mechanical parts just about anywhere in the house. Bucky loved Steve's smelly shoes and the acrid smell of his sweat when he had spent too much time in his workshop. He loved the dog-eared books strewn everywhere and Steve's inability to simply keep his things in order, even now, seven years later, when they owned a larger house surrounded by forest and sea.

Bucky loved Steve because he was a perfect accumulation of qualities and flaws and they all sang to Bucky. Bucky Barnes also knew that Steve Rogers loved him in return for the same reason.

Therefore, he couldn't explain for the life of him why they just couldn't get along anymore.

Bucky sighed, then carefully disentangled himself from Steve and went to the bathroom. After relieving himself, he washed his face and went to the kitchen sparing just one brief look towards Steve, just to make sure that he was still asleep. He made himself a cup of tea, then settled himself comfortably on their couch, watching the rain knocking desperately against their windows, asking to be let in.

The hot liquid burned his tongue a little, but he still took several sips and closed his eyes in the sea of soft sounds that surrounded him. He wished he could turn off his mind and stop spinning around the same issue but it was impossible, for he and Steve have been arguing for the past half a year like they were enemies discovering a new grudge, neither of them winning the war, but each battle fought to extremes without any mercy.

There had been very few moments in Bucky's life when he had doubted himself but this moment right now? It pretty much had despair written all over it.

What were they doing? After so long, what the fuck were they doing?

They had fought so hard for a life together, to build something solid and new between them. The business prospered to the point of being able to buy a new house towards the better side of the island, the house – white with a porch and a swing on it, with large windows – a dream come true
for both of them. Their little sanctuary, at the end of a dirt road, hidden by trees on two sides and protected by the sea on another side, a little speed boat always ready with an emergency stash of clothes and money on the go just in case. In case someone would find them, and they'd need to run. Hide. Give up their life. They had a gateway hydroplane as well with the same amount of clothes and cash hidden, plus new passports and identities.

The house was a mix of their personalities and Bucky couldn't be happier about it. The master bedroom contained a California king-sized bed with a soft comforter that would change colors. Steve loved his comfort so each time the comforter would be with different patterns or colors, but always soft. Bucky had made a small bookcase for him to keep in the bedroom for Steve's latest readings, although the bookshelves in the living room would bulge with new books every day. Steve was an avid reader and so was Bucky and their common passion for books had been a pleasant surprise indeed.

They had a walk-in closet and a large bathroom attached to it. The two other spare bedrooms had been furnished to be always welcoming to Howlett and Rebecca and their children. Bucky loved their house, but he would have been able to leave it at the drop of a hat if it meant that he would keep Steve safe and their common life still a possibility.

Bucky sighed as he settled the cup of tea on his chest, still holding it. The seven-year itch. Could that be it? Could this exist even between them, after having fought for a chance of being together so hard? Maybe this is what he deserved after all.

His past, drowned in blood and torture and ruthlessness, couldn't be denied. It was his to carry, his burden to press on his shoulders. He had been raised to become the head of a clan that had had ties all over New York. He had been taught to be merciless and cold and hard. Ice in his judgment and fire in his punishment. There was no atonement for a man such as him. He would always be part of the underbelly of the world, of the castaways and the blood-spilling, of the forgotten and the ruthless. There would never be peace for him.

Yet...

He took one final sip of his tea then put it on the coffee table. He wanted to hold on to Steve for as much as he could.

Steve who would be prickly and seek a reason to fight with Bucky every step of the way. Steve who didn't care about the blood on Bucky's hands, who had sacrificed everything and everyone for Bucky, including himself. But who now seemed to have forgotten all about it. And Bucky gave back as much as he could, he fought as hard as he could. He had not let his anger control him and he had slipped just once or twice into raising his voice at Steve. But still, they couldn't go on like this forever.

Suddenly Bucky stood up hit by inspiration. Sitting morosely on the couch and waiting for an answer to come was not in his nature. He smiled in the dark. The feeble contours of a plan were being born in his mind. He grabbed his keys and a hoodie and got out of the house.

"Where were you?" Steve asked him as soon as Bucky entered the kitchen, the coffee luring him with its delicious smell. Steve was drinking his own cup of coffee leaning against the cupboards, still dressed in his sleep attire, white t-shirt, and grey sweats. His blond hair was sticking all over the place and in spite of talking about a man who would turn forty soon enough, Bucky couldn't help but liken Steve to a cute hedgehog. Except that hedgehogs would never narrow their eyes so suspiciously and they wouldn't tense as if ready for a battle.
Bucky ignored the question and threw the keys over the counter. He took out his mug from the cupboard and poured his own coffee. Black, no sugar or milk. He drank half of it as he sensed the tension building in the kitchen. Maybe Steve wasn't ready for what Bucky had in mind and maybe he was, but the discussion that they were about to have would make them or break them. And by all things holy (though they were very few in Bucky's life), Bucky hoped that it would be the former. He wasn't sure how he was going to survive if it would be the latter.

"Have a seat," Bucky said and he took his own seat at the table. Steve floundered. But Bucky's demeanor was serious enough and Steve knew that there was nothing much he could do. His disguised brown eyes though betrayed the sudden fear that had gripped his soul and Bucky hated it to see it, but this had to be done.

"Are you trying to drive me away?" Bucky asked at last. "Because you're succeeding, you know?" The rather cruel remark hit Steve hard for he paled and settled his hands on the table as if in supplication. "Are you done with me? You don't love me anymore? Is that it?"

"No, of course not!" Steve said quickly, almost tripping in his haste to pick up the right words.

"Then what is it?" Bucky kept his tone level. "Because, for the past six months, you have been unbearable, and we can't go on like this. I thought that we made a bargain when I moved here: you were always going to tell me what upset you and I was going to do the same. We said that we were going to always try and sort out our differences because of the baggage that our relationship had. But now it feels like we are back at square one, Steve."

"I'm sorry," Steve murmured, his voice cracked, his eyes almost liquid. He took a deep breath before asking, "Are you breaking up with me?"

"No, I'll let you have the honor." Steve flinched, but Bucky pushed on, "That's what you wanted, isn't it? You wanted to push me away so I can leave or break up with you. You're a coward if you don't even have the guts to tell me to my face that you don't love me anymore. That I'm such a monster that you would rather run away again or push me away than give me the honor of sending me to hell. I will not-"

"Stop!" Steve hitched a breath and in one quick move, he was up and around the table, kneeling in front of Bucky and grabbing his hands in supplication. "I got scared. I got so scared. Please don't leave!" He pushed his forehead against their intertwined hands, breathless, bent in pain and sorrow.

Bucky hadn't seen this one coming. Gently, he extricated one of his hands and caressed his lover's blond hair, just as soft as ever. However, Steve still didn't dare to raise his head.

"Why did you get scared?"

"Rumlow sent me an email," Steve mumbled. "Deke is dead. He was shot while running away from his enemies. Apparently, he was on his way to say goodbye to his lover, who was moving to another country. There had been several attempts at taking his life and Deke had made all the arrangements to move him. But someone betrayed him and tipped off the opposing clan." Steve's breath hitched again, and this time Bucky did feel a tear, hot as a brand on his skin. "He led them away from the meeting point and tried to escape them, but they still managed to catch him and shoot him. They shot him twelve times, Bucky, just to make sure he's dead."

"I'm sorry," Bucky whispered for, although there wasn't much love lost between him and Shaw, they both had had Steve's best interests at heart. Steve raised his eyes at last and stared back at Bucky.
"All I thought at that moment was what if one day I will be the reason you die? I would be the one to bring death to our door for refusing to move from this island, for keeping in touch with our friends. What if I would be the cause of your death? Because I wouldn't be able to bear it." Steve's voice was cracked with all the torment and the dizzying thoughts of the past six months. "I'd rather die or see you leave than you suffer the same fate as Deke."

"Come here," Bucky gently ordered and Steve obeyed almost instantly. The chair groaned under their combined weight, but it still held. Bucky had made sure to build specifically strong and resilient chairs for they had used them before for such activities and more. Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky's torso and buried his face into his neck. Bucky tightened his own embrace and they breathed in unison for what seemed like forever.

At times Bucky Barnes didn't know whether he was cursed or blessed to love and be loved in such a powerful way. So completely and utterly unbidden.

"I won't lie to you," Bucky murmured softly after a while, his hands still moving gently over Steve's back. "The possibility of someone coming after me did cross my mind. While you are considered dead, I'm still a wanted man and I've spilled enough blood to still be looked for." Steve's hitched breath was the only sign that he was listening to Bucky. "Maybe someone will betray us or maybe it will be just a happy coincidence for the investigators to find us. But I would rather die than be apart from you." Bucky grabbed Steve's chin gently and made him look at him. They stared at each other for a while.

Love was an odd thing. It could wash away blood and sins and horror. It could turn strong men into stupid sacrificial lambs. It could power or ruin their own little world. Bucky Barnes had lost life but gained another when Steve Rogers had entered his life. But love was an odd thing to make a mobster fall in love with a cop and make him unable to see a life without the said cop.

"But just as well we might die of disease or in a car accident," Bucky said after a while. "Our plane might crash, or we might drown at sea. These can happen just as well, but they don't stop us from living our lives. When you received Rumlow's email, you should have come to me, you should have placed your faith in me that I would understand your concerns. You aren't the only one who would rather die than having something happen to us."

"I know, I'm sorry," Steve said and cupped Bucky's face, pressing butterfly kisses on his eyes and nose, forehead and lips. "I let my fear ruin what we have. I keep repeating the same mistake time and time again, but though I wanted you to leave, I don't think I could bear it. Maybe we are too codependent and maybe we are just in love. But I love you, Bucky. I really do love you."

"I love you too." Bucky's lips twitched. "So, no more fear?"

"There might always be some fear, but I promise that if it gets worse, I will come and talk it out with you." Steve kissed him softly. "I promise to always cherish you, even if you are a grumpy son of a bitch in the morning and you drink your coffee black so I can't take a sip from it."

"Oh, I'm sorry that I don't want to die of diabetes in the future," Bucky pouted just so that Steve could kiss him again. And if he died today or tomorrow, he would still be happy and content that he lived at least enough to have this wonderful man come into his life. "Speaking of which, I have just the perfect thing to ensure that you will keep your promise." Bucky wriggled a little, trying not to dislodge Steve too much before taking out of his pocket a small black box. The other man's fingers tightened around Bucky's hoodie, pressing against his chest as he couldn't take his eyes away from it.

Bucky opened the box to reveal two platinum bands with their names engraved on their backs.
Nothing else. Plain and simple but so heavy in meaning.

"Although it's legal to marry here, I don't want to do it using our false identities. And using our real names might make the wrong people come and ask questions. But I would still love to make you my husband. I would still love to exchange some vows with you. I would still love you and cherish you for as long as we both shall live. In sickness and in health, until death do us part. And even beyond it. For you are everything to me, Steve Rogers, and you have me completely. So will you have me as your husband as well?"

"I promise to be your lawfully wedded husband," Steve said, love breaking the boundaries of words and sound and spilling through his eyes and voice. "In sickness and in health, for as long as we both shall live. And even beyond this, for there is no alternative universe in which I wouldn't love you, Bucky Barnes."

They exchanged rings, Bucky's name a hidden brand on Steve's finger, Steve's name a silent blessing on Bucky's finger.

They kiss and they kiss, and they kiss, their love for each other a benediction onto itself.

They exchanged vows on a beautiful Saturday afternoon, on the beach, in front of their house. Rhodes played the role of the priest, reading his favorite fragment from a novel, a beautiful quote about love and faithfulness and kindness. None of them were romantics. none of them believed in a particular god or creed or any of the sort. But there was a certain optimistic appeal to it.

Love is patient, love is kind and maybe love was enough to save them both in the long run.

Tony and Pepper had come together with Strange, who kept a laptop in his lap connected to Skype so Rumlow and Rollins could see too. Howlett had a child on each leg as Rebecca kept sniffling and being overly emotional. The children, a girl and a boy, were too little to understand the significance of the event, therefore they were happy to munch on their biscuits and whisper to their dad about building sandcastles later. Doc Banner and Thor had sent a letter with their congratulations and a small gift. The relations were still strained, but they were trying to mend them ever since Thor made contact with Howlett a couple of years ago.

Afterward, they lounged on the beach with drinks and food, trading stories and making plans, hoping for a bright future. But eager to live each day as it was their last because one day the past was bound to catch up with them and each decision would bring that future closer or, on the contrary, keep it apart for as much as fate would allow it.

For, in the end, this was all they ever hoped for.

To be with family. To be with friends.

To have small moments of infinite happiness and gratefulness.

To be loved.

The End
That's it folks.
Thank you so much for leaving all your lovely comments. Thank you for reading, thank you for supporting and thank you for your kudos.

End Notes

your feedback keeps me alive! <3

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