**Thawed Out**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen, M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Captain America (Movies), The Avengers (Marvel Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes &amp; Steve Rogers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Steve Rogers, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Sam Wilson (Marvel), Natasha Romanov, Tony Stark, Clint Barton, Bruce Banner, Sharon Carter (Marvel), Peggy Carter, Original Female Character(s) of Color Original Male Character(s), Original Female Character(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Canon-Typical Violence, Eating Disorder, Vomiting, Past Torture, Semi-Graphic Surgery Descriptions, Friendship, Domestic, Recovery, Cooking, Food, Happy Ending, Post-The Winter Soldier, Natural Death of a Canon Character, Drama, Angst, Team, chosen family, Hurt/Comfort, Action, HYDRA sucks, Not Everything Gets Fixed, First Kiss, Slow Burn, UST, RST, Medical Procedures (consented to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of Thawed Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2014-12-24 Completed: 2015-01-26 Chapters: 19/19 Words: 159341</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Thawed Out**

by [auburnnothenna (auburn)](http://archiveofourown.org/users/auburnnothenna) and [eretria](http://archiveofourown.org/users/eretria)

**Summary**

He's not the Asset. He's not the Winter Soldier. But neither is he Bucky Barnes. With the help of Steve, Sam and the Avengers, James takes the long, slow road to recovery. Nothing is as easy as either of them thought it would be.

**Notes**

**Warnings in case you missed the tags:** Canon-Typical Violence, Eating Disorder, Vomiting, Past Torture, Semi-Graphic Surgery Descriptions, Medical Procedures.

**Authors’ Notes:** We want everyone to enjoy this story, not encounter something upsetting. We have tagged for the obvious, but we don't know what people's individual triggers are, so if you have specific triggers, *please* contact one of us with a comment here or at auburn's [DW post](http://archiveofourown.org/users/auburn/posts) where the comments will be screened and leave us a way to contact you privately and we'll answer your question in e-mail, generally within a couple hours.

**Authors’ Note Two:** This story is finished (we're talking 159 k words finished) and going through a second beta. We will be posting chapters as they come back from our beta,
muron, who is taking time from her PhD thesis to work on it, fantastic person that she is. We have a buffer and hope to post at least once a week, but events may interrupt a regular posting schedule. Never fear, this is not a work in progress, but a work in polish.
Chapter 1

The Asset

You cannot kill the Hydra. Cut off one head and two more will take its place.

So the Asset had been told over and over again. Even without the mindwipes and the torture, the brainwashing had been perfect in that regard – deep down, he'd been hardwired to know that Hydra would always exist, long after the Asset had outlived its usefulness.

They had made it very clear that he was useful to them, though, so the Asset knew his disappearance wouldn't go unnoticed. Nor unpunished. He had a vague memory of returning late after a mission due to unforeseen weather in the Altai Mountains. His handlers had believed he'd run again. The pain from the punishment that followed still reverberated in his bones, even in cryo sleep and after countless clean-slate wipes. After all the tests of endurance, after all the injuries sustained on missions, and the pain that came with the new programming, that pain still stood out.

He wasn't yet aware of a lot of things, but he knew, deep down, that he'd do anything to never, ever experience that kind of pain again. Awareness didn't come easy, awareness hurt, but even the slivers he experienced now made him not want to give up on it again. That meant running from Hydra.

He was outrunning them for the moment, but he didn't know for how much longer. For the first time, the Asset experienced fatigue. On missions, he'd been fresh out of cryo sleep, rested, ready, pumped full of steroids. If his body threatened to fail after all, there had been enough amphetamines and painkillers in a syringe integrated into his metal arm that Hydra could get him back on his feet with the push of one button.

He was out of cryo for three weeks now and his stash of amphetamines was depleted. Despite Zola's serum, he wasn't healing as fast as he had with the chemically induced rest. He was growing tired and slow and it unsettled him. The Asset didn't know how to feel these things, didn't remember experiencing them. After the wipes, it had been drilled into him again and again. No pain, no fatigue, no hunger, no cold, for him, there was nothing but the mission.

The mission had become blurred, though, images of previous missions superimposing, the original mission directive weakening with the cracks in his armor Captain America had caused.

Captain America.

The Asset had read the file on him. He'd been to the exhibit at the Smithsonian. He'd seen the pictures of the man Captain America had once called his best friend. Captain America had called him by that name and it had opened a floodgate that had washed away parts of his programming, washed away the simplicity of following orders and left behind a mess of disjointed flashes of memory and feelings that the Asset hadn't experienced in 70 years.

James Buchanan Barnes. Bucky.

The nickname tasted wrong when he tried it in the dark Washington alley where he finally collapsed.
It still tasted wrong weeks later.

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Steve

They hadn't even left his books alone.

It was that which hurt the most, though he could trace the hurt easily enough, since the books were among the first things he'd bought for himself after he was given his own place by SHIELD. Most everything else was provided.

Steve ran his gaze over the wreckage of his apartment, taking in overturned furniture, smashed mugs and his torn apart record player. Books with their spines cut open, torn out leaves fluttering in the light draft coming in through the open door. A hole in the wall behind his reading chair. The now brown and dried stains of Nick's blood on the beige carpet. Three slugs, but just one hole. Bucky had always been a precise shooter.

"Looks like somebody had a party here," a familiar voice behind him said.

Steve flinched and looked over his shoulder to find Sam standing in the doorway. He seemed a little wide-eyed at the amount of damage done to Steve's place.

"About the only thing that annoys me is that the letters I received from kids after the exhibit opened are gone." When Sam started to smile, no doubt thinking that the kid's fanmail must be stroking his ego, Steve added, "I hadn't got around to answering them. The rest," he shrugged and indicated the apartment. "Most of it was provided by SHIELD anyway." He'd bought enough things on his own as well, but none of them held any real sentimental value except for a picture of him and Natasha and a postcard from Bruce that he'd miss, but he wasn't ready to tell Sam about them.

Sam clapped a hand on his shoulder, squeezing, hard and sympathetic, just once. "Well, in that case you can come and help me pack."

Steve frowned and turned to him. "What?"

"Think you're moving alone?" Sam said, narrowing his eyes at Steve.

"Sam – "

"Don't give me that look. I told you I'm in this with you, man. I know you haven't known me all that long, but I tend to mean what I say."

Steve shifted, feeling uncomfortable in the face of what Sam was giving up for him. "But your work here – "

"There are VA groups in New York as well. Besides," he shrugged. "I've been in DC too long. And let's not forget that it'll make my Mama happy."

"You have family in New York?"

"Yeah," Sam answered. He clapped a hand to Steve's shoulder. "Come on. We've got phone calls to make. Plus, we're going to need boxes. Grab what you want and we'll head back to my place."
The Asset

Three weeks after failing his last mission, the Asset hit a Hydra safehouse. It garnered him clothes that would blend in, but everything else had been cleared out. He could guess Hydra was in disarray, but sooner or later someone would try to reclaim and wipe him again. Pierce was gone, but someone else would take over, and they would want their weapon back. Either to punish and kill him for failing a mission or to continue to use. They would not allow the Winter Soldier to remember.

He needed to remember.

Programming insisted the Asset return to Hydra for new orders, but his programming had broken down as the helicarriers plunged into the Potomac and he'd dived into the dirty water to drag out the man from the bridge. Captain America.

Captain America had been his target. His mission. An enemy of Hydra. The Asset had shot him, but then stopped short of killing him. He didn't know why he hadn't let him die. He hadn't wanted to do that, though. He'd never wanted anything before. Want wasn't allowed; need only applied to missions. He'd broken protocol. He kept breaking protocol once he reached the first safehouse and learned Pierce was dead and Hydra in chaos.

The Asset had no real memories of being the man Captain America called him, though he had James Buchanan Barnes' face. It had been enough to keep Captain America from fighting him, though, once the man had completed his mission.

Maybe it would be enough to persuade Captain America to help the Winter Soldier stay free of Hydra.

The man in the newsreels with Captain America had smiled and laughed and been at ease in his skin. The Asset didn't think he could be that man. He half wondered if this wasn't some new training, some new way for his handlers to twist his mind, but dismissed the thought. They weren't that subtle with him. They no longer tried to convince him to think their way; they simply took away any part of him that thought rather than obeyed. He'd given in to the inevitability of it eventually. There was no escape, no defeating them.

The man from the bridge had at least stopped them for a time and as a result the Asset had a window of opportunity.

Something had sparked in him when the man had fallen. He'd fallen once.

Diving in after Captain America hadn't been a conscious choice, but leaving his mission target alive and walking away had been. It had been the first choice the Asset had made in his memory.

He'd disobeyed his handlers and the programming and gotten away with it. He'd decided he wouldn't go back to them, to the pain and the wipes and the cold cryo sleep that had settled in his bones and left him shivering even in the bright sunlight. If he wanted to stay free, though, he would need a plan. Hydra's tentacles were everywhere.

The Asset was unsure, something new to him, though with as little memory as he retained, everything was new. Or should have seemed that way. But while the Asset could not remember specifics or himself, he knew a wealth of things. He spoke a dozen languages flawlessly. Could read and write in them as well. He could drive a car or a truck or a motorcycle, he knew he could
pilot a boat or a plane. He was intimately acquainted with current and past military hardware, able to use and maintain it. He knew how to use a computer and how to hack one as part of a mission. He could dance, seduce and suborn when necessary to infiltrate as part of a mission. He could perform advanced first aid in order to maintain his body at mission performance levels. He knew how to stay off the grid and under the radar, to become one of the nameless, faceless underclass that average people don't let themselves register. All of those things, he understood he could do, but he had not one memory of himself doing so.

All of him had been wiped away and what was left were smears of color, scents that prompted sudden and nearly overwhelming reactions, noises that were too loud, too close inside his head. Emotions, he thought, like the baffled anger that had threatened to explode through him when he found the Smithsonian exhibition on Captain America and the pictures of the man whose face he wore. The Asset thought it was that way: he had James Buchanan Barnes' face, for Barnes had lived and died before the Asset was created. Each time the Asset tried to tell himself he was Bucky Barnes, his programming rebelled, but more than that so did some part of himself.

He didn't know how much of SHIELD's infrastructure had been left in the wake of the fall of the Triskelion. The organization had spread across international borders as perniciously as Hydra did. The Hub might be functional, there were bases and secret bases and safehouses and the original helicarrier somewhere over the Atlantic. All of those remained and whether they were in SHIELD control, Hydra or some other organizations, they possessed technology to hunt a rogue asset.

Rogue.

The Asset considered whether he liked that designation. It certainly fit. He was out of control. What was left of Hydra would be hunting him by now, as would every intelligence and police agency in the Western world, with the Third World and the Asias no doubt wanting their chance at making the Winter Soldier their weapon or just exacting revenge for whatever damage he'd inflicted on them in the past. He had no allies and no covers. He couldn't be sure his face hadn't been recorded at some point in the last week and spread far and wide as an enemy of the state. No, even if his arm hadn't made passing security for air or train travel difficult, he couldn't afford to show his face. Facial recognition algorithms and tracking would result in him walking off any fast transport straight into an ambush.

That left the road, either in a vehicle or on foot. He could steal a vehicle, but he'd need to abandon it relatively swiftly and obtain another and that would leave behind a pattern easily analyzed to point toward his objective. Hydra had contacts in most police forces, where they hadn't infiltrated and taken over entirely.

He would stay on foot and continue keeping as low a profile as possible. It would take longer to get away from DC, but he needed to figure out where he was going anyway. Blind running would eventually run him right into a Hydra trap.

The Asset wasn't in optimum condition. The fight with Captain America (he knew him) had left him with a dislocated shoulder, deep bruising, and broken ribs. The dive into the Potomac had left him dirty and chilled, with enough water in his lungs that he'd spent two days coughing before his enhanced metabolism had beaten off whatever he'd picked up from the water. He'd reset the shoulder once he'd gotten rid of the Hydra agent at the safehouse and ignored the flare of pain from his ribs with each cough. All the obvious wounds were healed enough he was operational, but he felt weak.

Before, he'd either performed his mission and returned to cryo before his body burned enough fuel to require nourishment. On the occasions he remained out longer, his handlers would provide a
tasteless nutrition mush according to a schedule. There had been missions in which he operated outside direct control and had to sustain himself on sustenance gathered in the field. He knew he had to eat. He couldn't remember doing it though and was so used to ignoring the messages from his body that it had been easy to forego for too long.

His legs were tired as he walked along the road. The Asset reflected that he would need to sleep sometime within the next forty-eight hours or suffer mental and physiological degradation due to deprivation. He'd already resorted to the amphetamine boosters stored within the Arm. Any further use was contraindicated until his body recovered. He wasn't sure if he could become physically addicted to any drugs, but he could suffer the side effects and consequences of over use.

Further impairment of his already sub-optimum logical processing went against his instincts and his programming.

He still wore the combat boots he'd gone into the river with and the leather had dried stiff and too tight. He'd need to replace them, because if he went much longer, boot rot would set in, and one of the blisters forming on his feet would become infected. A flicker of something, of clumsily trying to unknot swollen laces and pry frozen feet from muddy boots made the Asset stumble. There had been a small fire and he tried to warm his feet and dry the only socks he had. The weak flames hadn't offered more than a tease of heat, promising warmth if he only pressed closer, until the stinking wool of his socks hissed and started to burn. Cold rain ran down the back of his neck and under his uniform.

The Asset shook his head. The memory could have come from any mission in his past. He didn't know. It didn't mean anything.

He pushed his strides longer. He needed to cover enough ground to reach another urban center big enough he could spend the night in one of its gritty, abandoned spaces. Gravel turned under his ankle, but he ignored the quick stab of pain. He didn't like the exposure of walking beside the road, though he'd disguised himself enough he knew no one would see anything memorable about it.

The traffic flowing by inundated in warm waves of exhaust fumes and grit that stuck on his skin and in his already greasy hair. If he didn't want to cross the line from ignorable to unpleasantly odorous enough to notice, he would have to obtain fresh clothes and wash. He remembered being hosed down with cold water and industrial grade soap after coming out of cryo. It wasn't pleasant. The vague consideration that most human beings maintained their hygiene without handlers occurred to him and with it came the idea of baths and showers. His face itched and he added shaving to his list of necessities. In some countries, beards were common enough he could have gone with letting his grow and blur out some of his facial features, but the Asset had observed most American men shaved or at least maintained their facial hair.

He could always shave with one of his knives. The Asset had no intention of allowing anyone close to his throat with a razor blade.

He kept his head up, despite the desire to hunch his shoulders and duck his head, as he walked. Maintaining situational awareness remained a priority.

Because of that, he noted the sound of a semi truck slowing speed even before it pulled off the pavement ahead of him with a chuff of its air brakes.

The Asset paused and calculated how fast he could make it off the road shoulder, over the wire fence and into the field paralleling the road. Cover was minimal. Engaging any attack at close quarters would provide better odds and a retreat across the lanes of traffic would slow pursuit, though he knew any Hydra agents would not hesitate over inflicting collateral casualties, whether
they had come to kill or retrieve him.

The truck's driver leaned out his open window. "C'mon, then, unless you like walking."

The Asset re-evaluated. The container trailer was secured by a padlock on the outside and he could hear nothing from within it as he approached. The driver displayed none of the tells of a spec ops veteran or the nerves of a coerced civilian. Apparently, he had assumed the Asset was hitchhiking.

Once the Asset had climbed into the passenger seat of the big rig, the driver gave him a curious look before smoothly merging the truck back into traffic. "Going far as Philly. That good for you?"

"Yes," the Asset replied after an awkward pause made him realize the driver expected an answer. He'd been used for overt assassinations for so many missions his covert training had slipped. He had no briefing background to use as a base for his responses in a conversation.

Luckily the driver seemed unbothered by his laconic answer.

He studied the driver quietly after that, taking in the beer gut lapping over his belt, the flannel shirt worn over a white singlet, the dogtags hanging tangled in a tuft of graying chest hair that matched the thinning buzzcut and salt-and-pepper brows and beard. A wedding ring, plain and worn, adorned one hand, sunk deep enough the Asset wondered if the man could even get it off over the enlarged joints of his finger. He placed the man in his mid to late sixties and his war as Vietnam. A pair of yellow tinted sunglasses sat on the truck's dash. An insulated cup filled with coffee from the scent wafting from it sat in a holder next to the CB.

Satisfied the man was what he seemed and not a threat in disguise, the Asset let himself sink into the seat and shifted his attention to the side mirror to check they weren't being tailed.

"You decided what you see is what you get yet, son?"

The Asset considered and nodded.

"Good enough." The driver put the sunglasses on and shifted the truck with the ease of decades’ experience, keeping a cautious distance behind the vehicles ahead of them without resorting to the brakes.

"My name's Lonnie." He waited a beat then shrugged when the Asset didn't respond. "Coffee in the thermos there. Make it myself. Sandwiches too. Saves money and it isn't like I can swing this thing through a drive thru." He patted the dashboard. "Been giving folks rides for thirty years. Screw my insurance carrier. Only time I ever been mugged was when I parked to go in and get a meal outside Baltimore."

The Asset considered the coffee, since it was a stimulant, but the uneasy twist to his stomach warned him away from trying it. This Samaritan wouldn't appreciate him vomiting in his truck cab.

"Sure you're not hungry? 'Cause, son, you sure look like you could use something to eat."

The Asset ducked his head so his hair fell forward. He shook his head.

"Okay. You mind handing me one of those sandwiches?"

The Asset opened the insulated cooler bag the driver indicated and handed him a random sandwich from the stack inside.

"You change your mind, help yourself."
He nodded and found the response expected. "Thanks."

"Well, go on, lean back, close your eyes if you feel like it, I know sometimes a man just don't feel like talking."

Lonnie proved true to his word, steering the big rig north without saying much of anything beyond a muttered sonovabitch when a Mercedes stitching through traffic cut him off sharp enough he had to hit the brakes. The Asset slumped down in the seat and sank into a half-sleep that conserved energy while remaining aware enough to protect himself. Any change in Lonnie's breathing would have snapped him fully awake, but the miles passed until Lonnie steered onto an off-ramp.

He explained as the Asset sat up, looking around warily for a reason they were leaving the freeway. "Gonna shift over to the old highway. Takes me straight into where I'm delivering this load. Easier than dealing with the big exchange and backtracking on surface streets." He tapped his nose. "I know every route between Portland and Pensacola."

The Asset relaxed a fraction.

"Listen, son, I don't know what you're running from, maybe you ain't even running, just ain't got no place to go – "

He tensed and contemplated throwing open the door and leaping from the truck. At it's present rate of speed, if he used the Arm to absorb most of force, he could exit without breaking any bones. He would need to do so in the next forty-six seconds, before Lonnie brought the big rig back up to the speed limit.

"Easy there," Lonnie said. The speed of the truck didn't vary and his eyes stayed on the road. The Asset was impressed by his situational awareness, considering. "Was just gonna say, there's a decent shelter along here. Good place to stay the night, got security so you don't get mugged going in or out. They know me there; I bring a load of donations by once a month. You tell 'em Lonnie steered you there, they'll set you up with three hots and a cot and ya won't even be behind bars."

There had been bars closing off part of the bank vault where Hydra had set up the Asset's cryo unit and the wipe apparatus. The Asset assumed it was all still there. He hadn't reported back. No bars sounded good.

Lonnie went on, "I know, even the libraries now, you gotta have a card to use the computers, but this place, they got a couple of donated laptops and wi-fi. They'll show ya how to use 'em, find ya a place or a job, family or a friend if you don't know how to look 'em up."

Intel, the Asset realized. He was moving almost blindly. Intel would keep him away from Hydra and help him find his target. Plus food and a place to rest where no one would ask more than a first name, nor care if it was false. Once he knew more, he could formulate a better mission directive for himself.

The goal of staying out of Hydra's hands wouldn't change, but he needed a better strategy than simply moving away from the last location they had him in. He had a non-memory where the idea of doing that should have been. He could sense something had been wiped and suspected he'd done something similar at least once before.

He shuddered at the thought that he might be unknowingly repeating the same pattern over and over, that if he failed, he wouldn't know and might repeat it again, never remembering.

"You okay, son?"
"Can you drop me there?" the Asset asked. "The shelter?"

"I'd be clam happy to do that," Lonnie assured him.

The Asset repeated that. Clam happy? That sounded strange.

"We'll be there in about an hour. Early enough for you to get a bed no problem."

The Asset nodded. That would be good, though he would only sleep lightly in such a place. It would provide protection from the elements and any questions prompted by a man who stayed out in them. "Thank you," he offered with rusty politeness.

"My pleasure, son. A man once gave me a ride when I had nothing but the clothes on my back. If he hadn't... well, maybe I wouldn't be here, wouldn't've met my wife, wouldn't've had my kids."

Lonnie tapped a laminated photo taped to the dashboard. The Asset had noted it but not studied the faces there, a woman the same age as Lonnie, three adults who shared their merged features, two adolescents with a mild family resemblance.

Curious for the first time, the Asset asked, "Did the man ask you to pick up people too?"

Lonnie laughed, a belly-jiggling, deep laughter that made the Asset's mouth lift at the corners. He slapped his leg next.

"Hell, no. Bastard wanted me to give 'em a BJ in the backseat and when I socked him one, he left me by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. That's where Marie, my wife – she wasn't my wife then – found me."

"Why do you – ?"

"Every fella like you I give a ride, that's someone that ain't getting one from some guy like him," Lonnie explained. He glanced at the Asset kindly. "Don't know if it was the Lord looking out for me that day or if I just got lucky. Don't matter. When I do someone a good turn, I feel good about myself. That's all it is."

It made no sense in the framework of Hydra's actions and beliefs. But the Asset had already abandoned Hydra. This was worth thinking about.

Miles passed in silence after that, until Lonnie began shifting down, slowing the truck to a stop at a red light.

"Shelter's on the next block up. Ain't no parking along here, so if you could pile out at the next stop – "

"Yes," the Asset agreed. If the truck was under surveillance from a distance (and he had been watching the mirrors for tails but seen none close), they might miss his exit. Lonnie had been an excellent travelling companion. "I can do that."

One hand on the steering wheel, Lonnie lifted one butt cheek off the seat and pulled a worn and flattened leather wallet from a rear pocket. One-handed, he opened it and fingered out two twenties, leaving one behind. The wallet went onto the dashboard and he held out the cash to the Asset.

"What are you doing?" the Asset asked. He'd already considered and rejected stealing from Lonnie. Something under his breast bone had twisted and told him that would be wrong. He had no mission, no priority that would make it acceptable.
"You take this."

"No."

Lonnie chuckled. "Proud, ain't ya? Listen, I don't give money to charity. I give it to people."

"But – "

"I ain't gonna go hungry without it."

The Asset decided it would be foolish to refuse the money when it could save him chancing something riskier when he needed it.

Traffic ahead of the truck began slowing, brake lights flashing brighter.

"Good luck to ya, son," Lonnie said as he braked the truck to a smooth stop behind a line of cars waiting for the light to change.

"You too," the Asset said, surprising himself. He opened the door and jumped out, landing on the pavement lightly. He thought that sooner or later, Lonnie would pick up someone like the one who had picked him up. He was old and getting older. He wouldn't be able to fight back even against someone much less dangerous than the Asset. He pushed the passenger door closed firmly and slipped away between to parked vehicles. The temptation to watch Lonnie's truck roll away up the road tugged at him briefly, but he kept his attention on his surroundings, searching for any sign of someone paying to much attention to him.

*~*~*

He checked the shelter's front entry, then circled the block and found its rear exit and cramped parking lot along with a warren of alleys, equally good for disappearing or an ambush. Two different fire escapes offered roof access. The Asset used the second one and spent three hours watching the shelter and the foot and vehicle traffic patterns outside it. It appeared to be exactly as Lonnie had purported.

When a trickle of men and women began making their way through the doors, the Asset jumped to the roof of another building, broke the lock on the door to its top floor, and made his way out through its loading dock. He circled the block another time before approaching the shelter.

He clocked every threat and exit as soon as he came through the door, taking in the cafeteria tables with benches, the flickering fluorescent light fixtures above, the linoleum and stainless and the walls painted a faded shade of avocado and tan after registering the people and the lack of cameras. The Asset was disturbed by the number of children he saw at the tables or in a corner that had clearly been designated as a play area and stocked with worn toys. It wasn't hard to pick out the staff from the other adults either: the haircuts gave them away. A squat Latino man in a guayabera shirt and slacks sat on a metal chair watching everyone. A taser was strapped to his belt and an ID with a badge dangled from the shirt's collar. The Asset doubted he could provide any protection in an assault, but a homeless shelter wouldn't be able to operate with heavier security; the people it wanted to serve would stay far away.

"Hello, I'm Macy," the woman at the front counter greeted him. The Asset had already dismissed her threat potential. She was in her fifties, overweight, frizzy red hair threaded with white, dressed for comfort over style, catseye glasses perched on her freckled nose, with a small but genuine smile
on her face. Her hands and fingernails were impeccably clean and neatly kept.

He nodded to her awkwardly.

"Are you new?" she asked. "I volunteer four days a week here and I haven't seen you."

He shrugged and nodded again.

"Well, we only have a few rules. No drugs, no alcohol, no stealing, no fighting."

"Okay," he said. He was surprised she hadn't said no weapons, then wondered how many people would lie about it. Most, he decided; he would. The weapons themselves weren't a problem anyway. It was what was done with them and 'no fighting' would cover that. Theoretically.

"How did you find us?" Macy asked. Worry creased her features. The Asset hadn't moved and he wondered if she was frightened of him. Could she sense the leashed violence beneath his skin? He could kill everyone in the shelter before the Latino could put his hand on that taser, leave everyone tossed down like broken dolls in pools of spreading blood. A flash of a mission, an object lesson in Romania made the Asset wince.

He pushed the flicker of memory away, remembering wanting the wipe that time, and answered her as briefly as he could. Sweat chilled his back and his head ached along with his stomach. "Lonnie?"

"Alonzo?"

"Truck driver."

She nodded, smiling widely, and gestured the Asset closer to the counter. "Alonzo Jenkins. He brings a truck full of donated goods, food, clothes, and a big check every month. And sometimes someone, too. He's never wrong."

The Asset drew his eyebrows together and wondered what she meant.

"We'll get you set up with a bed and do you want a shower? Do you need clothes? And dinner, of course," Macy said. She plucked a pen from a mug holding several and pushed a ledger across the counter toward him. "You can sign in, it's just to keep track of how many beds are already taken for the night."

"You want a name."

"Just pick one, honey," she advised him.

The man from the helicarrier had called him Buck and Bucky and said, 'Your name is James Buchanan Barnes.' The Smithsonian exhibition had shown pictures and film of a man who shared the Asset's face. The Asset didn't remember being him. Only the last mission, since the last wipe was clear. Everything else was fragments, shattered pieces that didn't fit together into any kind of picture, and a whirl of confusing emotions he didn't understand then or now. The man in the blue uniform wouldn't fight him, told him to finish his mission, and the Asset hesitated. He hesitated, hearing himself say the words the man said to him, and then the failing helicarrier lurched, tearing itself to pieces, and the man fell.

The Asset fell.

The man fell.
Someone fell.

He jumped after the falling man.

He'd dived deep into the river and dragged his mission to the shore, stood and watched to see him breathe, then left him bleeding. He'd failed his mission, knowing he'd be punished.

Only he hadn't been, because Project Insight had failed too, lay in smoking wreckage, the Triskelion shattered.

He picked up the pen. His fingers tightened on the cheap plastic, threatened to snap it in two. He was the Asset. He was Hydra's weapon. No. He'd walked away. He'd made a choice that wasn't part of a mission.

Bucky, the blond man on the causeway had said. The Asset didn't know who Bucky was. His head ached badly. The techs had been in too much of hurry, the wipe sloppy. He remembered staring at Pierce. 'But I knew him,' he'd said. So they'd wiped him again.

"Are you okay, honey?" Macy asked.

He nodded jerkily. He didn't remember Bucky. He wrote James and added Green because it wasn't as obvious an alias as Smith or Doe and the walls were an awful shade of it.

Hours later, he was cleaner, dressed in donated clothes, the twenty dollar bill Lonnie gave him hidden in his boot in the sheath to one of his knives. He'd thrown up the food served as dinner, but had a bottle of water now, as he sat at one of the shelter's out-dated laptops, accessing everything he could on what had happened in DC according to the news media and the social media sphere. He moved on from there to hacking into police and federal databases, routing the inquiries through proxies run by Hydra to conceal his location. He didn't remember learning how to do any of that, but the skill surfaced as soon as he opened the laptop.

The man on the helicarrier was Captain America, the same man lauded so respectfully in the Air and Space Museum's exhibit at the Smithsonian. He'd been frozen for over seventy years and then revived, the how and why were hidden by walls of classification the Asset – James, he whispered to himself to low for anyone else to hear, James – couldn't crack without a better computer. He was still alive, too; picked up by a rescue team from a Coast Guard boat and taken to a hospital according to reports filed after the fall of SHIELD.

SHIELD had been gutted, not just by the destruction of the helicarriers and the Triskelion, but by a security breach that had flooded the Internet with everything the agency had known and kept hidden. Much of it was also Hydra intelligence. The agency could have survived the physical destruction visited on it, there were other bases and it was much more than its headquarters on the Potomac. But the security breach revealed how completely and totally Hydra had compromised it and set off something like a civil war within the ranks of its survivors, between SHIELD's loyal agents and the Hydra sleepers and moles threaded through it like a cancer that had metastasized beyond treatment.

The Asset skimmed as much as he could using keywords, but had to stop when his eyes began to blur. His corrupted programming kept insisting he return to base and report. Only the knowledge of what would wait for him and the possibility that the Hydra base had been blown made it possible to ignore the compulsion. It wasn't as strong as it had been in the first hours after the blown mission, though.

The stronger he became, the more he thought for himself, even when it sent a stab of pain through
the space behind his eyes, the easier it was to over-ride the programming.

He knew now, though, that Hydra wasn't destroyed. It had been dealt a brutal blow, but much of it was still out there and it would never give up.

Hydra would be coming for him, sooner or later.

He cleared the computer's search history and closed it, before returning to the bed he'd been assigned. He didn't sleep, but lying still allowed him to rest his body at least.

In the morning there was oatmeal, a glutinous porridge with little taste, that James ate cautiously, grateful when his body didn't rebel against it the way it had dinner.

He used the laptop once more, searching for where Captain America was now. Official sources were locked up tight. James found the man through Instagram and Tumblr and Twitter. The public couldn't get enough of taking pictures of Captain America, wherever they saw him. The Asset studied not just the pictures, but the posted times and locations, then used a visual recognition search app to identify the places in the backgrounds of the pictures posted over a sequence of times. Within three hours, he knew Captain America was in New York, living in the Stark Tower, and ran every morning in Central Park.

If the Asset – James, he repeated to himself, James - wanted to approach him, and he wasn't sure yet, that would be his window of opportunity. Getting into Stark Tower wasn't impossible, but would require resources he no longer had access to.

If he didn't contact Captain America, New York was still a good choice to go to ground. The populace there was packed so tight they'd learned to ignore each other. Even a man with a shiny metal arm could become lost in the crowd. Just one James among thousands of others.

He told Macy he'd found someone who would take him in so she wouldn't wonder about him after he left and set out the next day.

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Sam

"So, I hear you broke DC," were the first words Sam heard from Tony Stark. His voice sounded tinny through the car's speakers. "Didn't you check back with Bruce that people tend to not like that sort of thing?"

Sam considered himself a steady person, and still, meeting Steve had already had him a bit starstruck. Meeting Natasha only minutes later, and then having them both show up at his doorstep a few days later, had been both amazing and a little intimidating. But Iron Man... even his Mama approved of Iron Man, and that was saying something. And now Iron Man was calling Steve. Sam wiped the grin from his face and adopted a cool face. A little composure, Wilson.

Steve certainly had it when he didn't rise to the bait at all and asked, "Do you have the data I asked you for?"

"Are you always this disgustingly straight-forward?"

Steve didn't react.

"You could have told me you're en route to New York," Stark said, sounding a little hurt.
"Why, would you have thrown me a welcome party?"

"We're partners in avenging now, Rogers, of course I would have. Apple pie, blue, red and white balloons and all."

"Tony," Steve said. From the corner of his eye, Sam saw him run a hand over his face.

"You do remember that the guy tried to kill you, right?"

"If you don't want to help, just say so – "

"Touchy," Stark interrupted Steve. He exhaled, something that was closer to an actual sigh than exasperation to Sam's ears. "Jarvis is looking for your assassin buddy."

Before Steve could say thank you, Stark waltzed on, "And since he is, you should come by the tower. Pepper will be upset if you're in town and don't swing by."

"Pepper?" Steve echoed.

"Yeah, remember, gorgeous woman who lives with me and keeps me out of trouble in social situations?"

"I know who Pepper is." Steve was definitely rolling his eyes now, even if Sam couldn't see it. "I have just never met her, so why –"

"Maybe she and Coulson swapped trading cards. Who knows. She wants to meet you, that's all I need to know. And please, do imagine the last sentence in her voice, because that was exactly the answer I got when I asked her why she wants to meet other men."

Sam gave into the urge to look at Steve and raise his eyebrows. Steve managed to look embarrassed and annoyed at the same time, something Sam was sure only Steve Rogers managed with such excellence.

"We have an appointment with a rental agent, but maybe – "

"Rental agent?" Stark asked, not letting Steve finish his sentence once more. "And who's we?"

Steve huffed. "Sam and I need a place to live, and – "

"Sam and I?" Something like a whistle came through the line. "You never talk to me anymore, Steven. You even forget to tell me about your girlfriend."

Sam coughed.

"Boyfriend?" Stark asked without missing a beat. "We really haven't talked in a while."

"We never talk," Steve said, exasperated, while Sam had an actual coughing fit. Not that he hadn't had an experimental phase in college, but Steve? Thanks, but no thanks. Sam preferred him as a friend, not as a boyfriend. Too many issues by far.

"Now you're hurting my feelings." Stark actually managed to sell the emotional manipulation and sound dejected.

"Tony, just, the data, please?"

"You're not even going to introduce us?"
Sam decided to have pity on Steve. "Sam Wilson," he said, turning his face toward where he hoped the rental's mic was. "It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Stark."

"Hey, Icarus," Stark said. "Natasha tells me you're rather handy to have around in a crunch."

"Did she?" Sam asked, feeling a small pleased smile tip up the corners of his mouth.

"No, I'm just trying to make small-talk. Pepper tells me it's handy to be nice to people every once in a while."

Sam's smile fell.

"Is that what you're doing?" Steve asked, sarcasm dripping from his words.

"No, what I'm doing is making sure your appointment with your rental agent gets canceled while I'm talking to you."

"You what?"

"Sam, my man," Stark said, "don't let Captain Killjoy persuade you to live in some cockroach and bedbug ridden hellhole."

"Tony, you can't just – "

"You already have apartments in the tower," Stark talked over Steve's protest. "They're rent free, secure from Hydra or anyone else, the assistants just put fresh linen spray on the pillows and I can have them leave chocolate there as well, and besides, Birdie, you need to come to the tower anyway, so I can customize the specs for your new wings. I hear yours are a little clipped right now."

Tony Stark was offering them to live at his place and build Sam new wings? Sam felt the urge to pinch himself.

"Tony, I'm serious, you can't – "

"What's that, Jarvis? Static on the line? Connection dropping? Could that be because Captain Rogers still refuses to have a Starkphone?"

Sam bit back on a grin.

"I won't let you steamroller all over me like that," Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest and lifting his chin.

Sam shook his head and switched lanes to move toward Stark Tower. He liked Steve, he really did, but that misplaced pride thing got old really fast. Besides, dude, Iron Man just offered them to come live in his tower! If Steve wanted to be an idiot, fine, but Sam wasn't going to be. "Do what you want, Steve, but I'm not going to live in a shitty hotel while apartment hunting and waste money and time that could be spent searching for the Winter Soldier when a free place is on offer. You wanna be an idiot? Fine. Don't let the bed bugs bite."

"You two really did get married, didn't you?" Stark asked.

"No," Steve and Sam chorused.

"Pity," Stark said. "Maybe a good lay would have loosened him up a bit. Anyway. I like you, Sam. I could use someone to tell me a bit more than the censored version about the whole Winter Soldier
thing. Besides, the Avengers are down several people with Natasha off finding herself, Thor incommunicado and Clint missing."

Steve straightened in his seat. "Clint's missing?"

"I could tell you all about that, but you'd have to be here for that. Because, oh, dear, that bad connection..."

"Where and when?" Sam asked to stop another round of bitching before it started.

"You're exactly twenty-five minutes out, tell the staff to move your stuff to the 15th floor, then come up. And if you can get our Star-Spangledness with you, I'll get you a second pair of wings."

The line went dead and Sam felt a little dazed. He took a sip of the coke he'd bought at a service station earlier when they'd stopped for gas. "Is he always like that?" he asked.

Steve leaned back in his seat and ran a hand through his hair. "I haven't actually known him for that long, but if he takes after his father? Then, oh, God, yes."

James

Some people managed to disappear. It had been far more difficult to find people who really didn't want to be found back when they woke him in the seventies and eighties. Carrying out assassinations had become easier in the 2000s, as computers and modern media made it far too easy to track a mark, even if it did its best to hide.

People who didn't feel the need to hide or didn't register the danger were even easier to track. All it took James to find Captain America's running trail through Central Park was following a few hashtags on Twitter and tags called #CAspotted! on Tumblr had a detailed account of where Captain America was seen, what he was wearing and even his fluctuating daily running speed. Being a New York City hero had its downsides when it came to anonymity. James already knew that Captain America was wearing a green hoodie this morning, hood drawn up against the grey drizzle and was using the path toward Cherry Hill. It'd be another fifteen minutes before he'd reach Wagner Cove. Time enough to decide if he really wanted to meet the man or not.

The scent of boiled sausages wafting over from a hot dog vendor caught James' attention and made his mouth water. His last meal had been the kasha at the homeless shelter. That had been when, last morning? He drifted closer to the vendor and watched him turn just a few hot dogs on the grill. It was barely eight o'clock, so it must be too early for normal business, but judging from the fact that he was set up in a pretty remote part of the park and still got hot dogs ready pointed toward him having regulars. One of the sausages broke when the vendor was turning it and he cursed in what sounded like colorful Polish. James stifled a chuckle, but not quickly enough for the vendor to miss.

An embarrassed grin flickered over the vendor's face. "No good quality sausages to be found here," he commented. "I mean, don't get me wrong, they taste okay, but they're more fragile than an eggshell."

James didn't go to the trouble of reminding him that, unbroken, eggshells were structurally far stronger than many other materials. "Nothing beats a good Kielbasa," he replied and inflected a hint of a Polish accent into his voice.
The vendor's grin turned from embarrassed to bright. "Damn straight," he said. His gaze swept over James' clothes and a thoughtful expression took the place of the grin. "Hey, are you interested?" he raised half of the broken sausage. "Free of charge, topping of your choice."

James hesitated for a second, paranoia running deep, then ignored his vigilance in favor of his stomach. The vendor was small, round and red-faced, probably ate badly and was a heart attack waiting to happen. Hydra never would have picked him to work for them, besides, even for Hydra, the set-up would be too random. "Sure," James answered. "Why not?"

He was just bending over to inspect the toppings when the smell of fried onions caused a shift in his entire vision.

Suddenly he was on Coney Island, out of breath after racing to a hot dog vendor with the money he'd just taken off the guy who had tried to beat up Steve. He was buying a Nathan's for the two of them, brown mustard and tomato-paste sautéed onions and handing it to Steve. Steve grinned from under a bloodied nose and bit into the hot dog, grinned at Bucky as if they'd just successfully finished a heist, mustard and grease smeared on his cheek and upper lip…

"Hey, man, you okay?"

James dug his heels in to stop the ground from swaying. He swept his human hand over his face and shook his head against the vertigo. "Fine. It's just been a while since I last had one of these."

Something stirred in him and he fought against a hollow laugh trying to bubble up at the understatement of his words.

The vendor's look shifted from concern to pity. "There's a shelter not too far from here if you –"

"No need," James answered. "I'm just passing through."

"If you're sure." The vendor sounded doubtful and he handed over the hot dog.

"Sure," James answered and forced a smile back on his face. "Thanks for this."

"No problem."

He felt the man's gaze follow him as he walked back toward Wagner Cove.

The drizzle that was steadily falling wasn't quite rain yet but no longer a thick fog. It crept underneath the sweatshirt the lady at the homeless shelter had given him and up under the legs of the jeans that were a size too big for him so he was glad the hot dog was still warm when he reached the pavilion-like shelter down by the Lake. He used to be impervious to such minor things as temperature. Today, he shivered in the damp early morning cold that reminded him too much of the early stages of cryo; of icy tendrils wrapping around his limbs, pulling him under until there was nothing. He straightened his back against the hunched posture he'd adopted against the chill. This wouldn't do. He couldn't grow soft now, not when Hydra was on his tail and tried to get him back.

Something warm and moist touched his fingers. Looking down, he realized that he'd closed his hand around the hot dog tight enough the mustard had squelched out of the bun. James relaxed his hand and surveyed the mess. According to Tumblr user #iheartcap, Captain America took a break here for the last several mornings to enjoy the view, meaning that James had a few more minutes before Captain America would appear. If James really decided to talk to him, he wanted to have both hands free.
His growling stomach protested the idea of throwing the squished hot dog away, so he took several great, hurried bites and tried not to breathe in the scent too deeply. He had no idea what had happened up at the vendor's earlier, but it unsettled him. Scent could trigger memories, he'd used it in interrogations himself.

That hadn't been his memory, though. The Asset had never been to an amusement park. James had never eaten hot dogs. Yet the images had been as vivid as if he'd been there after all. He could almost hear the music from the carousels and the screams from the rollercoaster and stomped down on the images and sounds hard. He had to focus, damn it. Trying to chew and swallow at the same time, the soft white bun seemed to turn stale. The sausage turned out even greasier than it had looked on the grill. The mingled smell of fried onions and mustard along with the meaty smell of the sausage wormed its way up his nose and he choked, nausea and revulsion hitting him so hard that he brought up everything he'd just swallowed.

James hadn't eaten all that much yet, but the heaving went on and on, as if his programming was rebelling, his body was rejecting everything he'd offered it. His metal hand clamped around the railing of the shelter, the other one wrapped around his hair to keep it out of his face, he bent over the railing and coughed and spit against the taste of vomit and bile. Renewed vertigo hit him hard and he closed his eyes.

He remembered carousel music and someone throwing up. The smell of the ocean, sweat, hotdogs and onions, puke in the gutter... He'd swallowed and swallowed and swallowed, had planted his feet on the ground and held on until the urge to vomit too receded. He wasn't going to lose his lunch. His companion looked up, glaring and still green at the gills, muttering, "I hate you," and he could only grin back, replying, "No, you don't." He groped for more, wanted the rest of the memory, the sense of warmth and affection he'd felt, but all he could see was the funhouse mirror over his friend's shoulder and his own face, distorted in the warped glass, splintering... and he heaved again, bringing up nothing but bile.

James pushed back from the railing, gulped in a huge breath of air and opened his eyes to realign with the here and now and snap himself out of the dizzying flashback.

He didn't see the shot fired at him coming; only his good hearing, instinct and muscle memory made him duck in time to avoid getting hit. The tranq dart quivered in the ceiling beam when James looked up through the hair that had fallen back over his face.

A man in a badly faked NYPD uniform walked up to the shelter. "Better for all of us if you come with us come with us freely."

James heard the safety being released from at least 15 other guns.

He wiped the back of his hand over his mouth and cursed.

Hydra had found him.
Chapter 2

Sam

Even with his mom still living there, Sam never really wanted to move back to New York after his father's death. But after what happened in Washington, after everything he'd found out about Hydra, and Steve's stunt on the helicarrier, staying close to Steve had seemed like a smart idea. *That others may live* was the PJ's creed, after all. In his case, it was more "That friends may not do dumb-ass things."

And said friend had wanted to go back to NYC. Sam still wasn't quite clear whether it was the invitation from Stark or the unspoken hope that his brainwashed super-assassin (Sam hesitated to use the word friend, because whoever the guy was now, he was no longer the friend Steve remembered) fellow soldier would show up in the city. He'd tried to talk to Steve about PTSD. Steve had shut him out.

So within less than a week, Sam Wilson packed his things and moved to New York and into what was probably the most expensive apartment he'd ever lived in. Granted, he didn't pay the rent. You could say what you wanted about Tony Stark, but he was damn generous, not just with his money but with his skills. He'd already offered to repair the EXO-7 and Sam had no doubt that Stark would improve it while he was doing so. The apartment was just an added bonus, something Sam chalked up to Stark's 'screw you' to SHIELD and Hydra respectively.

Sam still slept on the floor most of the nights. And because he missed the Tidal Basin and the Mall, he picked up Steve in the mornings to go for a run in Central Park. He had to admit that Stark Tower was perfectly located for runs as it was only a five minute walk to the nearest entrance. Convenient.

The week they'd been in New York had been spent in a sort of grim quiet filled with moments in which Sam had found Steve bent over the file Natasha had given him, raking both hands through his hair, trying to control his breathing. He wasn't eating much and was constantly pestering Stark's AI for information on the Winter Soldier.

Sam knew the signs, but he wasn't stupid enough to take the file away from Steve, even if he was working himself into an obsession. Maybe he should leave some books lying around for Steve. Steve was a smart guy, Sam had no doubt that he'd read them. Just … what good would they do? There were no books on finding out your dead best friend was alive but had been brainwashed and modified into being a murderous terminator. Steve's life was already more complicated than many people could handle without needing permanent counseling, but this new blow had shaken him visibly. Steve was hanging on, but from what Sam had seen since he'd left the hospital, it was only by a thread.

That was the only explanation why Steve didn't even try to overtake Sam this morning. No cocky "on your left" this morning. Not that Sam missed it. Much.

They took an immediate left on East Drive to avoid the tourists who were braving the cold and grey morning and started running only there. Sam's sweatshirt was already soaked by the constant drizzle and he shivered against the chill fingers of autumn cold trying to worm their way under his collar.
"Days like this make me remember why I never wanted to come back to New York." It reminded him of his dad's funeral too much. The day had been just the same. Grey. Cold. Miserable in the way that only New York could get.

Steve slanted him a surprised look and stopped running. "Why did you?"

Sam just gave him a pointed look in return and increased his speed. Hah! For once, he was ahead of Steve.

For about a second. Then Steve was in front of him, shuffling backwards (still faster than Sam, damn it!) and fixing Sam with those damn earnest puppy dog eyes. "Sam, I hope I didn't make you —"

"Make me?" Sam echoed. "Dude, you may be Captain America, but even you couldn't make me do something I didn't really want to do."

"So you're okay with coming back here?" Steve asked and neatly averted another jogger. While not even looking at the guy. Backwards. How was this Sam's life now?

"Take those puppy eyes somewhere else or get a license for them, jeez," he said, took Steve by the shoulder and turned him so they were facing the same direction again. "Yeah, it's fine. I won't be able to wiggle out of going to church, but Sunday dinner with my Mama and her cooking is about enough reason to move back even if I didn't need to cover your red, white and blue rear end." His mouth watered when he thought of mom's pies. "I can tell you one thing, man, if she finds out who brought me back to the city, you're going to end up with an invitation. And you'd better not turn that one down."

"Oh?" Steve looked amused.

Sam laughed. "Steve, my man, my mother is the most pacifist person I know but she makes a Marine Corps drill sergeant look like a cuddly kitten if you get on her bad side."

"She sounds like a great woman." Steve sounded sincere, none of that finely tuned sarcasm entered his words.

"Not too well," Sam said and winced at the memory. "I guess the only reason she didn't drag my ass out of the academy and back here was that I decided to join the Pararescue."

"She's a teacher and the principal at MS45 took over from some Leadership Academy dumbass." Despite the strain of trying to keep up with Steve's pace, Sam felt his heart swell with pride the way it generally did when he thought of his mom. She'd already been cool when all the other kids had still been embarrassed by their parents. She'd been there for Sam after dad was killed and she never once wavered, never once considered moving away. Sam gave himself a mental shake. He was trying to cheer Steve up, not fall headfirst into painful memories himself. "She doesn't believe in giving up and leaving people behind."
"Sounds like someone I know," Steve said.

"You're a sap, Rogers," Sam said and increased his speed to hide his suddenly burning cheeks. "Did you want to go running or quiz me about my mother, you perv?"

"Both?" Steve answered and overtook Sam easily, passing him by with a cheerful, "On your left," twice until Sam reached Cherry Hill, gasping.

A crowd of people was already surrounding Cherry Hill fountain, so Sam detoured toward Wagner Cove at a slow trot and took huge gulps from the water bottle he was carrying. The path was covered with bark mulch for the first few yards and the path gently segued into stone steps leading down toward the shelter by the lake. Sam had always liked this place – it was more secluded than most of the overrun spots in the park and offered a perfect location to stop his lungs from exploding in relative dignity.

He'd barely sat foot on the stairs when he noticed the cops. Fifteen of them. That alone was unusual, but they seemed to be trying to arrest one single homeless dude. Albeit one who was fighting his arrest with all his might.

"Hey, Sam, you hiding – " Steve skidded to a stop next to Sam and trailed off when he saw the cops, too.

Down by the shelter, the homeless dude had just kicked one of the cops in the kneecaps and another in the groin while blocking the attempt at grabbing him from a third. All of the guy's moves were fluent and trained, like a seasoned fighter's, and Sam couldn't help but wonder what he'd done to warrant this many cops. Something seemed a little funny about the whole scene.

Another cop landed on his back and Steve moved beside Sam, muscles ready for action. "We should help them."

Sam blocked Steve's path when he looked a little closer at the cops. "Actually, I think we should help him."

"What? Why?" Steve tried to bypass him and Sam glanced back.

"I told you I grew up in New York. Man, I grew up black in New York. I know what the cops look like and those guys – they're fakes." The whole scene had been niggling at him until he realized the uniforms were close, but not quite right. The cars pulled up were mock-ups too. Close enough most people wouldn't notice; most people kept their heads down and didn't look too closely at the police. No one wanted to end up braced against a wall getting patted down for showing too much attitude.

"You're sure?"

Looking closer, he was positive. Their weapons were wrong too and the way they moved – too military, too much as a unit. Not a fat or older guy among them, either.

"Positive. Didn't you tell me Hydra ambushed Fury with a bunch of fake cops?"

Steve was moving again and this time Sam didn't try to stop him.

Hydra or not, no one impersonated the police for good purposes.

An orchestrated military attack on a person was different from a normal police arrest. Sam had seen enough of both to tell the difference – police, unless they were SWAT, were never this ruthless, never quite this efficient. These guys down there didn't pull their punches, in fact, they threw
punches that might have killed an ordinary guy. Real cops didn't go for hand to hand fighting; real cops would have shot at the guy by now.

Steve was down the stairs with one giant jump, using his momentum to take down two of the fake officers in a tackling move.

Sam used the element of surprise and landed a kick in another guy's sternum. The force of the kick sent him crashing into the railing of the shelter where a fist from the homeless dude pushed him into the lake with a loud splash. Something silvery flashed through Sam's vision, too fast to see clearly.

Sam counted five guys on the ground, one in the water. He spotted ten more around them. Who the hell had the homeless dude pissed off? And why did they have their guns at the ready, but didn't fire them? Not that he was complaining too much, he'd hate to have holes in his favorite work-out shirt but something just seemed off about this.

He figured it out when he got one of the guns away from a fake cop. The weight felt wrong in his hand as he hit the magazine release before throwing both into the water. The brightly colored contents of the magazine weren't normal cartridges. It was a dart gun and had been loaded with tranquilizers.

Sam supposed the darts could be loaded with poison, but if the aim was to kill, why not use a normal gun. He'd bet his veteran's benefits on those darts holding a hell of a knock out drug.

So they wanted this guy alive. That was good and that was bad. Less chance of someone getting shot, but kidnapping never led anywhere good for the victim.

He ducked getting darted himself and came up under the nearest guy's arms, managing a leg sweep and then a throw he was damn proud of until he saw homeless dude loft one man one-handed to use him as human shield. The sleeve of his hoodie fell back as he did so, metal flashing.

This time, Sam saw the silvery object he'd glimpsed earlier – it was the homeless dude's arm. He held his breath and looked toward Steve who was fighting the rest of the fake officers.

Jesus, it was the Winter Soldier. The scary-ass assassin who had damn near killed Fury and put three bullets in Steve. Sam wasn't so sure Steve and Natasha were right about that meaning the guy didn't want to kill Steve; they might say the Winter Soldier was too good of a shot to not have made a kill shot unless he was deliberately aiming to wound, but he'd still put three slugs in a man's back. Also, he'd torn Sam's wings off and tossed him aside like Sam wasn't even a real threat. That still chafed, if he was honest with himself.

Still, the Winter Soldier was here, and Sam couldn't see any legitimate reason any of the good guys would be masquerading as police to take him in.

He piled back into the fight with that thought.

"I'll hold them off," Steve called, "get outta – " For a split-second, Steve looked fully at the Winter Soldier, his face moving through shock, surprise, sadness, anger and determination in such rapid succession Sam felt dizzy. "Get outta here, Bucky!" Steve shouted and fixed his attention back on the attackers.

More than a few of them were down, enough that Sam knew he and Steve – mostly Steve – could handle them. There were sirens approaching, heralding the arrival of real cops.

He saw the Winter Soldier survey the field of conflict, use the metal arm as a shield to stop another
James

James blocked another tranq dart with the Arm, kept the movement going and broke the jaw of the Hydra agent who had approached too close. Momentum let his spin and drop and come up close enough to kick away another attacker's weapon. From the man's yell, he'd likely broken either a wrist or an arm. He didn't stop to worry over which; there were still too many of them and he knew, with a heavy sense of despair that if they hadn't been trying to take him in alive, he'd already be dead.

Only he'd rather be dead, so he kept fighting, trying to thin their numbers until he could find an escape route. Coming down to the water had been foolish, product of his flashbacks and messed up thinking. Now they had him pinned against a shore.

He'd tracked two more attackers in on his ten o'clock and tried for a zigzag that wouldn't move him into their sight pictures, cursing that he'd given up the Kevlar and leather body armor that would have shrugged out the tranq needles. He heard the impact of fists and flesh as he took out the biggest man near him and the two weren't there when he turned again from punching out another one.

Someone else yelled and he registered two figures not in faked police uniforms, both engaging the Hydra agents. The bigger of the two had taken on three more, while the other one engaged a single man.

James saw blond hair, a familiar/unfamiliar body and a punch that sent a man flying into the brush.

He threw one more Hydra agent into the water and heard the voice of the man on the bridge, the man from the helicarrier, his erstwhile mission target, his... James didn't know, only that part of him knew that voice, better than the face, and listened. He heard the promise to hold them off, the instruction to run, and he followed orders, whether out of self-preservation, some strange trust he didn't understand yet, or the cold logic of the Asset telling him this was his only opportunity to retreat.

James bolted into the brush, running and dodging with all his enhanced body's speed, cursing how much slower he was than he should be, feeling every ache and bruise from the fight.

He heard another yell, "Bucky," but he didn't pause or look back.

Sam

Sam had no chance of catching up with Steve after the elevator doors opened. He strolled after him at a regular pace, feeling as if he walked in Steve's wind-shadow.

"I need you to have your AI check every camera in this city," he heard Steve say in the room at the end of the corridor.

"And good evening to you, too, Steve," Stark said, sounding a little miffed. "Did you know that Pepper just got back in after a ten day business trip to China?"
"Miss Potts, I apologize for interrupting, but this is urgent."

"Is the world ending again?" Stark asked. "If it is, no one sent me the memo, and I resent not being in the know. Actually, I resent it ending at all, but especially on Pepper-day."

Pepper Potts, still in a business suit but barefoot, was already up and off the cream colored couch when Sam entered the room.

"Oh, hey, yeah, come in, the more the merrier." Stark definitely sounded miffed now.

"What's wrong, Steve?" Potts was asking Steve.

"We're not really interested, Pep," Stark called over. "Reunion, remember? Date night? Whatever it is Cap wants, Jarvis can handle it. Right, Jarvis?"

"Naturally, Sir," the AI agreed. "I must draw a line at tap-dancing, however."

"Will you just listen!" Steve shouted and that brought everyone in the room up short, because Sam didn't seem to be the only one who had never heard Steve shout. "Bucky is out there. We just stopped fifteen Hydra agents from trying to grab him," he drew a desperate-sounding breath. "We need to find him before they do."

"Steve," Sam said and raised both hands in a placating gesture. "I know you think this guy's your friend, but have you seen him fight?"

"He's slower than he was," Steve sounded mulish now.

"Well, you must know," a new voice said. "Since he treated you so gently during your last meeting." The biting snark came from a middle-aged man with curly dark hair that was beginning to get the salt-and-pepper look that women seemed to find so attractive. Despite the sarcasm of his words, his face, and most especially his eyes, half-hidden behind slim glasses, were kind. He wore scuffed trainers and a comfortable-looking combo of jeans and washed out purple button-down shirt that was wrinkled over his midriff enough it looked as if he'd sat crouched forward all day.

Sam had seen pictures of Bruce Banner before, but he'd always imagined him... taller. The guy strolling into the room and walking toward the open kitchen was completely unremarkable and Sam couldn't for the life of him imagine that this was the guy whose alter ego had smashed half of Harlem and then, just last year, had single-handedly taken out several flying alien transformer dinosaurs.

"Just when I thought it couldn't get cozier," Stark commented and flopped back against the couch with a theatrical sigh. "Pep." It sounded close to a whine now. "Moment?"

Potts ignored him with practiced ease and walked over to Banner to brush a kiss against his cheek. "Hi, Bruce."

Banner's face softened and lit up nearly imperceptibly. "Pepper."

"Bruce, buddy, you know I have a deep, manly fondness for you, but why are you in here on date night?"

"Jarvis said there was a party up here," Banner answered with a straight face. "And I just love watching you squirm."

Steve raked both hands through his hair and stepped in between Banner and Stark. "Guys, can we
stop with the idle chatter and start looking for Bucky?"

"The Winter Soldier, you mean," Stark corrected him, proving that despite his attitude, he'd been paying close attention to the conversation.

"No," Steve turned to shoot a look that was bordering on murderous at Stark, "I meant Bucky."

"Ah, Cap, I hate to break it to you, but this guy isn't really in Kansas anymore." Stark made a whirling gesture near his temple.

"You don't know that."

'I've seen the footage. I paid the hospital bill. He nearly killed you. Don't tell me you're blind enough to ignore that. Not even you can be so damn goodie-two-shoes."

"He's not himself."

"Point in fact."

"You don't know him," Steve's voice was rising again.

A mocking smile flitted over Stark's face. "Neither do you, unless you've suddenly become an expert in brainwashed Russian assassins. In which case, hey, I'm sure Putin's got a job for you."

Steve's face darkened. "He needs our help!"

"Does he? Or do you need to help him, because let me tell you, buddy, those two are not the same."

"Are you aware of what Hydra did to him? Do you want me to get you the file?"

"I'm aware of everything that hit the Internet and that's more than enough for me," Stark fired back.

Sam was distracted from Steve and Stark's rapid fire back and forth by Pepper Potts. She'd stopped listening to the two of them and strolled over to Banner, questioning him briefly before heading for the open plan kitchen. She was talking to someone, but since Sam couldn't see anyone there, it must have been through an intercom or phone. He just caught the sound of another voice, so that had to be it.

Oh. Unless it was the AI thing Steve had tried to explain to him when they arrived. Jarvis. Sam was still confused about what he or it actually did.

"Certainly, Miss Potts," the bodiless voice said, clear enough to make out as Sam sidled his way closer.

"Hey," he said when she glanced at him. She'd been away most of the time since he and Steve moved into the tower. Sam had liked her from the beginning and was glad to see her again now.

She smiled at him again. "I told Jarvis to keep a weather eye out for mentions of Steve's friend," she explained. "Might take a while until those two are done shouting."

"Maybe I should break them up," Banner said uncertainly.

"I wouldn't, unless they start throwing punches," Pepper said. "They both need to vent a little."

"It might be a better idea if you separated them in that case."
Sam couldn't resist asking. "Why?"

Banner laughed quietly. "I get mad if I get punched, don't you?"

"Sure… Oh. Yeah. I don't think Steve's going punch anyone anyway."

Pepper chuckled. "You don't know Tony."

Steve and Stark's voices both rose and Sam grimaced. She might be right.

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**James**

The question of how the Hydra cell had located him assumed priority. They could have been watching for him to come to New York, but he hadn't approached any of the targets they might have kept under surveillance close enough to be spotted. They had to be tracking him somehow.

He caught a tree limb with the metal hand and pushed it out of the way, ignoring the leaves already caught in his hair. Light glinted off the articulated steel. He called it the Arm, because it was a weapon in and of itself, but James used it with the same facility he did his flesh and blood limb. He hadn't considered removing it any more than he would the other, but it was the most likely location for a beacon. He had to get it checked or get rid of it or find shelter where Hydra wouldn't chance another attack.

All of those options required support and resources he didn't have, but Captain America did.

He finger combed the leaves out of his hair before pulling the baseball cap out of his jacket pocket. With the brim pulled down low, shading his features, most people wouldn't see enough to remember his face. It would also confound most of the surveillance cameras set up high.

He'd been forced to abandon the print-outs from the library that he'd meant to go through, but since he wouldn't be setting up surveillance on any of Captain America's trackable routines, it wouldn't matter too much. At this point, if James decided to turn to the man in the hope he'd provide some help against Hydra, James would need to go straight to him.

James had been undecided, even as he formulated different plans to approach the Captain. The man thought James was someone else, was James Buchanan Barnes, his 'Bucky', and James wasn't. He wasn't even sure 'Bucky' and he shared the same body. The Asset had had no past; he could be a clone or some other failed effort at an impersonation of Bucky, that mission abandoned when it appeared Captain America had died in the Arctic, the Asset repurposed. The flashbacks and strange emotions could be a result of his failing programming, false memories implanted that hadn't been completely wiped. James didn't know and he flinched from the idea of finding out the truth was that even these little pieces of self were more Hydra lies.

He doubted that, even if his programming and background brief had been complete and functional, he could successfully impersonate Bucky Barnes with someone who had known him from childhood. The only option would be to admit having no real memories, so that all the incongruities would be chalked up to that. James disliked the idea, worried that any manipulation along those lines would be discovered and then Captain America and his allies – the redhead, the man with the wings, Tony Stark – would either imprison him or leave him to Hydra's ungentle mercies.

Today had abruptly eased some of that worry. Captain America and his friend had come to James aid against Hydra before seeing it was James they were after. All that had mattered was that his
attacking had been Hydra.

James could work with that.

He turned his path from staying out of sight to taking him back toward Stark's tower.

It occurred to him that he'd put three bullets into Captain America and beat him nearly unconscious and the man was out jogging just over a week later, well able to pile into a fight. So Captain America wasn't just as strong (or stronger James admitted) and fast as him. He healed too. James hadn't realized anyone else had been enhanced the way he had. He wondered if it had hurt and hoped it hadn't, was curiously relieved no one had modified the other man with a weapon like the Arm. Perhaps that meant no one had ever rewritten the Captain's mind and memories either. James disliked the idea of that, of anyone suffering through that – the mouth piece, the electrical jolts, the pain and cold and terror of being no one of the weakness and nothingness after the wipe –

He staggered and had to brace himself against a brick wall. It felt rough and cool, faintly gritty, when he pressed his cheek against it. The crowds on the side walk side-eyed him but flowed on around him.

The distant but nearing wail of sirens shook him back into motion. He needed to get off the street.

James knew he stood out, looked dirty and worn and poor, a smear of blood caked in his stubble from his split lip, as he walked into the public foyer of the Stark Tower. He kept his hands out an extra inch away from his body to allay the security guards worry – not that it mattered, he could reach his weapons and drop the six men he'd clocked as soon as he stepped inside before any of them could do more than open their mouth. He watched them as cautiously as they were watching him. Just because Captain America lived in this building didn't mean Hydra hadn't infiltrated it. James hoped Tony Stark had taken measures against them, but security positions were always prime targets for sleeper agents.

He maintained a steady, but unhurried pace as he approached the front security desk. No cameras were visible, but he knew without doubt they were there. Stark just concealed them. James approached. It was harder to figure out blind spots if you couldn't find the cameras in the first place.

He stopped in front of the desk. He could see one more guard closing in and heard the footsteps of two behind him and had to struggle not to react to them violently. Before he could say anything, a voice sounded in the security guard's headset. It was turned down and a normal person wouldn't have heard it, but James did.

"Mr. Barnes is expected. Please show him to the private elevators."

James hesitated, paranoia urging him to bolt, but he'd already committed to this plan.

"If you'll come this way, sir," the guard said. His face had smoothed into professional blankness and he'd relaxed minutely.

Behind him, James overheard two of the other security guards speaking to each other. "Man, you've got to reel it in. Just 'cause the guy looks a little groddy is no reason to try to toss him out. Have you seen Stark after a hard night? He looks way worse than this guy."

"What, you're saying this guy is some rich asshole like Stark?"

"Could be. Could even be one of the Avengers' buddies. Don't make assumptions, is all I'm saying. The last bomber that came in here looked like she'd stepped out of a Vogue photo shoot."
James followed the first guard to an elevator in nook with a private waiting area. It had no controls that he could identify, but the doors slid open as soon as they approached.

"Jarvis will direct you from here, sir."

James had no idea who Jarvis was. He hadn't seen the name in any of the social media or news articles he'd scanned at the library. Of course that meant little. Nick Fury's name had rarely been in the news. Jarvis might be a code name.

"Please step into the elevator, Sgt. Barnes," the voice from the guard's headset sounded from inside the elevator.

James forced himself to enter and stand still as it began rising.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Jarvis, the artificial intelligence Mr. Stark designed. I monitor and maintain all public and secure spaces in the Tower as well as acting as Sir's assistant. I am transporting you to the eighty-third floor, which is a secure space I hope you will find comfortable. I believe you are here to speak to Captain Rogers, but I took the liberty of assuming that whatever your reasons for visiting, you would prefer some privacy."

"Yes," James agreed.

"While I have identified you as James Buchanan Barnes, is there any address you would prefer me to use?"

James frowned before shrugging. Nothing came to mind. "Not that," he said finally. "Not Barnes." He almost said, the Asset, but that no longer fit either. He'd begun thinking of himself as James, he supposed it was time to start using the name. "James. Just... James."

"Very well, sir. Shall I inform Captain Rogers of your arrival? I have also noted that you are armed with three handguns, six knives, a garrote, and a sap."

James raised an eyebrow. The AI must be using the elevator as a scanning platform. "Eight knives," he lied. He had ten. Two were ceramics, one was an experimental compressed carbon with a monofilament edge, and one was a pocket multi-tool he'd purchased at a service station convenience store along with a protein drink the day before. As for the garrote, he didn't need wire. He could use the braided drawstring from his hoodie or the laces from his boots or his belt, which also hid several other items, including ceramic lock picks.

The Arm also concealed a single-shot firing mechanism.

If stripped of those things, James still knew hundreds of ways to make anything a weapon, aside from his own body.

It remained strange to think of it as his body. He'd been the weapon, the Asset, before, and belonged to Hydra.

No longer, he reminded himself. He was James now.

"Please place all of the aforementioned weapons in the secure container at the doorway," Jarvis said. The smooth voice betrayed no annoyance or embarrassment that it had missed some weapons or that had been deliberate to elicit either a lie or the truth from James.

James silently shed all the weapons he admitted to carrying into the bin that slid out from the wall as soon as he exited the elevator. It slid back and locked so smoothly he could barely pick out the
outline in the wall. Impressive.

"This floor has been equipped and reinforced for the Hulk. It is also secured against outside attacks since Sir has stated he will not allow the military to take custody of Dr. Banner. Please make yourself comfortable. There is a washroom in the first right hand door of the hall directly in front of you if you wish to refresh yourself."

James cleared his throat and tried out another thank you.

"You appear to have engaged in an altercation recently. Are you in need of medical attention?"

"No."

"I shall inform Captain Rogers of your arrival now, James."

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Sam

Potts handed Banner a menu, then drew a glass of tap water and downed its contents in three long swallows. "Travelling always makes me so damn thirsty." She winked at Sam. "Speaking of thirsty, is anyone hungry? Tony and I were just about to order take out." She responded to the frown Sam felt forming on his face and added, "Once the noise and testosterone levels have returned to normal in here, you need to tell me what happened."

"So the AI's already looking for the Winter Soldier?"

Potts nodded. "If he so much as sneezes in the direction of a CCTV, Jarvis will find him and alert us."

"The guy's a covert operative, according to the file Natasha gave Steve. That, and he's running from Hydra. He'll know how to avoid cameras."

Potts shrugged and handed a second menu to Sam. "Steve said he's slower than he was. If his programming has broken down, and if he's hurt on top of it, he won't be as efficient as he was. He'll slip. And when he does, Jarvis will find him."

Sam slanted a doubtful look at Banner, who just shrugged and dropped his gaze toward the menu. "What she said."

Behind them, the shouting match had reached a sudden peak in volume that had Potts turn around and say, "Tony!" She was shielding Banner, Sam noted. Her tone wasn't cutting, instead it was mild, but damn, did it hide steel. Sam was reminded of his mother.

To Sam's great surprise, Stark snapped his mouth shut. For a second, at least. Then he pointed at Steve and said, "He started it."

Potts rolled her eyes. "We're ordering take-out. What are you in the mood for, Steve?"

"But –"

"It's already taken care of," she said and smiled at him.

"It is?" both Stark end Steve echoed.
"So," Potts asked, ignoring them both, "food? I was thinking pizza, but you're more of a Lebanese type, right, Bruce?"

"Ah, yeah, actually."

"That okay with you, Steve? Sam?"
Sam nodded and saw Steve doing the same, still looking stunned.

"I'm still in the room, you know?" Stark piped up.

"How could we ever forget, dear," Potts walked over to him and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "Lebanese?"

"Fine." Damn, but she had him wrapped around her little finger, Sam thought, amused.

"Jarvis, make a call to Ilili for a mixed platter for five, extra hummus."

"Certainly, Miss Potts, but may I inform you first that Captain Rogers has a visitor on Dr. Banner's floor?"

"In Bruce's – " Stark didn't finish the sentence but brought up a display out of thin air. He blinked at the picture from the security camera for a few seconds, then turned around with a sweeping gesture. "Cap, you lost something? Then welcome to Stark's Lost and Found. Open twenty-four seven. Specializing in ex-assassins."

He turned the display so that Steve, Sam, Banner and Potts could see as well.

It was Potts who spoke first. "Make that a platter for six, Jarvis."

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**Steve**

Steve counted on no one being able to stop him from reaching Bruce's reinforced floor – the Hulk floor, as Tony called it – but didn't expect that no one would try. Once he was in front of the door, he knew why, of course – Jarvis kept the wing in a lockdown and wouldn't budge until Tony gave the go ahead. Steve knew that it was pointless trying to break in. Tony had built it with Bruce's help, in order to keep the Hulk in and keep others out at the same time. Steve knew that Bruce hadn't used it once since the new Tower had been finished after the Chitauri attack.

"What a surprise, you're already here," Tony's voice was distorted through the Iron Man suit, but it hid none of the sarcasm. "Like the wall colour?"

"Let me in there," Steve demanded. "And get out of the suit, he's not dangerous."

"Two words for you: Hell and No."

"You've seen the picture from the security camera: he's hurt and exhausted."

"Call me strange, but a guy who was Hydra's pet assassin, almost killed Nick, wrecked half of Washington and nearly killed you as well?" Tony took a clanking step forward. "Gives me a couple of minor trust issues."

Steve sneered. "You're a walking trust issue, Stark."
"Coming from the man who still calls me by my last name rather than my first. Sweet."

"Can you quit the bickering and find out what he wants?" Sam's sudden statement made both Steve and Tony whip around – Steve guessed that Tony hadn't heard him approach any more than he did.

"When that door opens, I'll go first," Tony said, hands raised and repulsors humming faintly.

Steve tensed and pressed his lips together to bite back on the answer threatening to spill.

"Are we clear, Cap? No heroism. The guy's dangerous. Who knows what's hiding in that arm. He could have built a bomb in there in the meantime. I damn well would have."

"He didn't, Sir," Jarvis supplied. "He hasn't moved since disarming himself and walking into the room."

"All right then." Tony clapped the suit's metal hands together with a resounding clank. "Do the honors, Jarvis. And remember, Cap, no – "

The door had barely opened wide enough for a person to step through, but Steve was already propelling himself forward, pushing into the room with one word on his lips, "Bucky!"

He skidded to a stop when the man inside the room withdrew, his back to a wall, and fixed Steve with a wary stare. Steve's stomach dropped to the bottom of his shoes when he took in Bucky's appearance. His eyes – Bucky's most striking feature – were swelling shut, bruises half-hidden under a dark five-day stubble, his lip was split and his long dark hair hung limp and tangled around his face, while his clothes were ripped and torn where the Hydra goons had tried to grab hold of him. Steve saw cuts and from the way Bucky held himself, he suspected that he had at least sustained cracked ribs from the fight. He looked as if he'd walked straight through hell to get here.

"My God, Bucky."

"I'm not... My name's not Bucky." Bucky's voice was rusty with disuse. Had he been required to talk as the Winter Soldier? The Russians had used him as a covert operative, but Hydra had used him as an assassin, a refined weapon but nothing more and from the file, had treated him as such. Had Bucky talked at all in the past ten, fifteen years? That mask he'd worn had looked like a muzzle. Had he been allowed to speak?

A resounding metal whack to the back of his head rattled Steve's brain in his skull and stopped his train of thought effectively.

Tony ignored Steve's annoyed glare and clanked over to where Bucky had fallen into a forced parade rest. "Okay, John Doe, what should we call you? Wintry? Captain Hook? Buckaroo Banzai?"

"James," Bucky replied.

Steve stared at him and felt something twist in his chest, "You always hated that name. You beat up everyone who used it."

"Touching, isn't he, our Cap? Always the nostalgic. I guess that happens when you wake up in another century. Me, on the other hand, I'm a man of today, so allow me to skip the trip down memory lane. What the hell do you want here?"

"I came for him," Bucky said and nodded at Steve.

"To kill him?"
A parody of a smile ghosted over Bucky's face. "If I had wanted to do so, I'd have left him in the Potomac. And if I wanted to do so now, even your suit wouldn't stop me. It's smart that you took the precaution of putting it on, but I know several ways of killing you even while you're wearing it and none of them even involve electronics."

"Big words," Tony said and, much to Steve's surprise, powered the suit down and got out of it. "I think you'd upset Steve if you killed me, though, right, Cap?" He didn't wait for Steve's answer, but continued, "And Pepper. You don't want to upset Pepper. Just trust me on that one."

Bucky ran a hand over his face. "I don't want to kill anyone."

"Sure looked different before," Sam commented.

"It was my mission before. I don't... I don't have a mission anymore."

"The programming's broken down?" Tony asked and sounded interested suddenly. "Or no one's given you a new directive?"

"Why are you here, Bucky?"

Bucky flinched at Steve's usage of his name but answered nevertheless, even if he turned to Tony to explain. "He's the only one I know can't be Hydra. Hydra wanted him dead. He was my mission."

"And how do we know you're not here to finish your mission?" Sam asked again.

"Good question, Feathers."

Bucky's next words twisted the coil of ache in Steve's chest even tighter. "They want me back. I don't want to go back."

"Dental plan sucks that bad, huh?"

Bucky just looked blank in the face of Tony's battery of sarcasm. Once more Steve's spirits fell. Before, Bucky would have given as good as he got and laughed. Seeing Bucky alive wasn't enough, he needed Bucky back to who he was. He needed his friend back.

A jolt of pure anger had him rounding on Tony, because if Tony destroyed this chance, Steve didn't know what he'd do. Other than hurt Tony.

"Do you have anything helpful to say at all or will you spend all night spouting not-so-witty one-liners?"

"All night and all day, Cap, however long you wish." Tony winked at Bucky. "It's like Chinese torture, only with more style. If he doesn't try to throttle me in two hours, we know he's still a robot inside."

Steve had to breathe against a wave of rage washing up. "He's not a robot, Stark!"

"Ah, guys," Sam walked up to them, adopting his most non-threatening posture, "he's also right here. If maybe you could talk to him instead of to each other, we might get information quicker."

"No, you're right," Tony ignored Sam's attempt at placating, "if he were a robot, he'd be a lot cleaner."

"What's that supposed to mean?"
"I need – " Bucky started but stopped again to brace himself against the wall.

"A shower?" Tony interrupted him. "Yeah, pal, you do."

"Damn it, Stark!" Steve couldn't hold back on the shout anymore.

Jarvis coughed politely. "Sir?"

Tony ignored Jarvis as well. "No offense there, Captain Hook, I'm sure you clean up nicely, but you have to admit, Steve, your old buddy here isn't exactly Mr. GQ himself right now, is he?"

Bucky wasn't, Tony was right. Steve didn't know why Tony harping on Bucky's scruffy looks got to him as much as it did. Bucky had never been afraid to get dirty, but he'd like to clean up and look his best whenever he could. Steve had, objectively speaking, always known Bucky was good looking. He knew what the dames saw in him and why it was always Bucky who went home with one of them after another double date. He had to admit that the man leaning against the wall next to him now probably would have gone home alone. He had turned invisible. Like a horrible dream… Steve shook his head against the memory and shot back, "Oh, and you were when you got back from Afghanistan? Fresh as the fallen snow and fragrant as a rose."

"Guys?" Sam tried again. "I know it's hard, but can we remember those I-messages?"

Tony gave Sam with an unimpressed look. "I think you should keep the psychology mumbo-jumbo out of this, Wing-o."

"It's not enough you insult Bucky, you have to go and insult Sam, too?" Steve crossed his arms over his chest. His biceps flexed as he fist his hands. From the corner of his eye, Steve saw Bucky flinch at the mention of his name again and winced.

"If you think that was an insult, then, boy, have I got news for you, oh Captain, my Captain."

"Sir, I must inform you – "

"Not now, Jarvis, I'm busy."

"Busy with what, exactly? Enjoying a verbal sparring match with me?"

"Among other things," Tony said.

"Like what?"

"Sir!"

Next to Steve, Bucky began to list to the side and slide down the wall, quiet and boneless, and it was only due to his heightened reflexes that he caught Bucky before he hit the ground.

"Jesus Christ, Bucky," Steve muttered. When he picked him up, Bucky was heavier than he had been when Steve found him in Zola's lab in Austria, but it was mainly muscle mass and the weight of the arm. He was thinner than when they fought on the helicarrier, leaner than he should be. Bucky's head lolled against Steve's arm and Steve felt cold sweat against his skin.

Sam was by his side in an instant, calm and efficient. "Put him down on a bed and get him out of the shirt, I need to check for injuries."

"Bruce, get down here," Tony snapped. Suddenly quiet and pale, Tony showed Steve to a bed in the next room where he could put Bucky down.
"What the hell, Jarvis?" Tony asked once Steve had settled Bucky onto the bed.

"I meant to tell you that our guest's blood pressure had dropped alarmingly and he was about to lose consciousness. That seems a trifle superfluous now." Jarvis waited a beat. "I have detected some damage to both his biological systems as well as his cybernetic arm."

"Can you do an in-depth scan, Jarvis?" Sam asked.

"I am afraid the room is not equipped with medical scanners. I can, however, tell you that Sergeant Barnes has lost at least one pint of blood since he came here, judging by the size of the spot on the floor."

Steve looked into the other room and to the spot where Bucky had been leaning against the wall and saw, to his horror, a large puddle of blood marring the beige carpet. How had he not noticed this before? How could he have been so busy bickering with Tony that he'd missed Bucky bleeding enough to lose consciousness? Stomach sinking, Steve pulled Bucky’s shirt open and discovered a nasty, deep cut just under his ribs. The bleeding had slowed, probably thanks to Bucky's enhanced metabolism, but Steve's hands still came away sticky red and smelling faintly of copper and death.

"Did Hydra ever feed this guy?" Tony's voice sounded strained, as if he was convincing himself he needed to be flippant. His choice of subject did nothing to ease the gnawing guilt spreading like acid through Steve's stomach. "Look at him: he has zero body fat. He's cut sharper than you, Captain Crunch, and I didn't think that was possible. You could slice yourself open on those abs." He winced. "If they weren't already cut up."

The door behind them opened and Bruce walked in with an emergency kit in hand, face drawn with concern. "That's a lot of blood," he said, looking at the stain.

"Bruce, can you handle this or do I need to bribe a doctor to come up here?" Tony asked.

"Give me a while to check on him," Bruce said. "If it's just a matter of stitching him up, I can handle it."

"If this is going to continue happening, and something tells me that it will, we need an in-tower doctor," Tony said. He described a complicated set of figures in the air with his hands and was beginning to look paler by the second. "I'm going to go... get on that... and let someone else handle the bleeding assassin."

"Certainly Sir, but there is something you should have a look at immediately." Stark froze. "Is there someone else bleeding out that we missed? Is Sam here really a Skrull? Is that really Pepper back in the living room or Maria Hill wearing one of SHIELD's freaky masks? Lay it on me, Jarvis."

Steve opened his mouth to tell Tony to shut up, but Jarvis answered first, unflustered by either Tony's sarcasm or his news. "I have continued the passive scans available to me in the Hulk Chamber. My analysis is that Sgt. Barnes' spine and scapulae have been replaced by a vibranium-carbonadium and steel alloy, which has been laced with enough high energy explosive to remove the top seven floors of this tower."

Steve squeezed his eyes shut. The floor underneath him felt unstable all of a sudden. If he hadn't succumbed to blood loss, would Bucky have already blown them all up?

He didn't know what to do. He was with Bucky, would always, always have his best friend's back,
even if that meant dying for him. But he couldn't let that friendship result in the death of people like Sam and Tony or, dear God, Pepper, who were all civilians. They hadn't signed on to fight Hydra.

"Your bestie is a Hydra suicide bomber," Tony snapped. "Thanks a lot, Steve. Jarvis!" His voice had lost the teasing, humorous undertone it usually held. "Tell Pepper to get out of the building right now. Bruce —"

"I'm staying. It would take more than that to phase the other guy," Bruce interrupted. Tony glared but didn't contradict him.

"I have already begun evacuation of the occupied floors in the danger zone, Sir," Jarvis stated. "However, I do not believe Sgt. Barnes fits the definition of suicide bomber as I have detected no method he would use to detonate the explosives."

It was better than Bucky being willing to kill an unknown number of people with a bomb, but Steve still felt his stomach heave, this time in horror at what had been done to Bucky. That hadn't been in the thin file Natasha had been able to obtain for him. It wouldn't have been, though; Hydra would have kept their last cruel mistreatment a highly guarded secret. Did Bucky even know about it or had they kept that from him? He had to spin away from the bed Bucky lay on and slap his hand over his mouth as he gagged on bile and guilt.

"Not making Cap feel any better," Tony observed. Steve could hear the interest in Tony's voice. Bucky had just become a problem for him to figure out. It made him angry, but relieved at the same time. Tony wouldn't put Bucky out while he remained interesting.

He knew he was doing Tony a disservice thinking that way, but it was hard to remember while Tony worked so hard to present himself as selfish at every turn.

"We need better scans and a sample of the explosive. Bruce, can you do a spinal tap?"

"No, not that kind of doctor either," Bruce said in a calm tone that suggested he was nearing the end of his rope.

"All right, all right. I'll buy that kind of doctor," Tony said. "You can patch that hole in his side, though, right?"

Bruce heaved a sigh but gave up on protesting. "Yes."

Steve swallowed hard until he felt more in command of his stomach and then turned back to Bucky. He wanted to take his hand, but the human one had an IV threaded into its back and he shuddered at the prospect of holding the metal one. Would Bucky even feel it if he did?

"Meanwhile, Jarvis, every scan you can-can-can."

Bucky's fingers twitched and his eyes moved under the thin protection of his lids. He needed a shave as well as a wash and fresh clothes. Steve didn't care. Bucky still looked like the answer to the lonely hole that had widened into a chasm after Steve woke from the ice. He'd always known as long as he had Bucky he'd be all right. He just had to take care of Bucky in turn.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas to those who celebrate and all the best wishes to those who don't.

Sam

Sam stepped back from the bed. Stark hovered in the doorway, one hand clutching a Starkpad. Steve lingered to fuss with the pale blue coverlet under the unconscious man. After some debate, they'd chosen to not change the Winter Soldier into clean clothes while he was out of it and left him on top of the bed.

Sam had thought from the beginning that he wouldn't have liked having his clothes changed by strangers and he'd bet the Winter Soldier would like it even less, not to mention that he'd likely have broken someone's arm if he'd woken up while they changing him.

The Winter Soldier didn't look like that much of a threat lying unconscious with his head on a pillow. The overhead lights weren't kind and painted shadows and bruises into the hollows under his cheekbones and eyes. His lips were chapped and peeling.

Stark was full of it, too. Sam could see smears of dirt and the blood of course, but the Winter Soldier wasn't particularly dirty. Maybe two days past a shower and his hair needed washing, but Sam had sat next to people who smelled worse on the subway.

Sam thought he looked more like one of the really messed up vets that ended up on the streets because they had no support network and wandered into his counseling sessions for the coffee and cookies more than any hope he could help them. The worst part was that mostly, Sam couldn't. Those men and women needed more than talking, they needed treatment, sometimes hospitalization, or at least medication. None of which they could get without an appointment with a doctor first. Sam had heard all the horror stories about the VA's 'jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, never jam today' double bookkeeping and the waits that stretched from weeks into months for vets to see a doctor.

Sam had a list of the really egregious SOBs just in DC. He wondered if he could persuade Steve to read out their names and Stark to buy time on all the biggest networks – no, Youtube it too – of Captain America calling the assholes out.

Yeah, probably not happening. Steve no doubt thought a GAO investigation was really going to change a bureaucracy like the VA. Steve was a great guy. Sam loved him like a brother, just like the brother whose head you wanted to stuff in the toilet and flush. He eyed the Winter Soldier and wondered if Barnes had ever felt like that.

Stark was right; the Winter Soldier looked half-starved. He'd obviously been living rough since the helicarrier assault.

Banner was finishing hooking up an IV to the Winter Soldier's right arm. He didn't look happy. Sam understood; he wouldn't be thrilled at being in grabbing distance of the metal arm even if he didn't have giant green rage issues to worry about. Strangulation would be bad enough.
"I've stitched up the knife wound," Banner said. He hooked the bag of orange-ish black fluid from a refrigerated case still boasting the SHIELD eagle and opened the stopcock. Sam squinted but couldn't make out the white printing on the shiny plastic of the bag. "This will replace his blood volume and aid in his oxygen transfer levels." He glanced up and over the bed at Steve, who hovered and looked guilty and worried in equal measure. "If he has anything like a quarter of your regenerative speed, he'll have recovered from the blood loss within an hour."

"Bucky always healed fast."

Banner pinched the bridge of his nose before speaking again. "I'm not talking normal human healing, Steve. The passive scans Jarvis has provided show enough metal and cybernetic augmentation in his body to provoke a lethal immune response."

"If I may, Dr. Banner?" Jarvis spoke up.

"If you have something pertinent, of course." Banner spoke to the AI like he would another person present through video conferencing. Sam wasn't sure how he felt about living with an omnipresent computer always on call, but figured his best bet was to follow the cues of someone like Banner, who had been living in Stark's tower for the last two years.

"I have been scanning through the recovered SHIELD files Agent Romanov made public. There is a classified monograph obtained from a Canadian black budget op describing the successful bonding of adamantium to the skeleton as part of a project codenamed Weapon X."

"How would anyone do that?" Stark wondered out loud while frowning. "I looked at adamantium for the Iron Man armor, but it's rarer than vibranium, won't alloy and too heavy by itself."

"You can't. It would kill anyone. Plus the weight of the metal, even the thinnest coating – " Banner shook his head. "Let me guess. Weapon X is some branch of the military."

"Indeed," Jarvis confirmed. "All attempts resulted in the Weapon X test subjects' deaths before the project 'obtained' a mutant with what is described as a 'healing factor'." The AI managed to convey strong disapproval just through its inflections. Did Stark program that in or did it figure out how to do that on its own? Did it really 'feel' that or just calculate that a human would?

A decent human being would, Sam corrected himself, since Hydra hadn't had a lock on the kind of men who weren't.

"While Sgt. Barnes is not a mutant, he has clearly been augmented in a fashion similar to Captain Rogers. I would theorize that like the mutant from Weapon X, his body is constantly healing the damage the implanted cybernetics and metal cause."

Stark shrugged and bent his attention back to his ubiquitous tablet. His eyebrows went up. "You nasty sonova – talk about fail unsafe. That's – " He whistled under his breath, then looked up. "It really doesn't matter if he meant to take us out or didn't know about it. Hydra set it up so Soldier Boy will go out with a bang."

"What?" Steve asked.

"Deadman switch. He dies, he goes boom." Stark scowled.

"Double duty," Sam explained as he got his head around it. "Booby trap to take out some more of the enemy. It's an old trick, got a lot of use in Vietnam."

"And blowing up the body would keep Hydra's enemies from being able to study the Winter
Soldier and learn about the serum," Banner finished for him. "Or the technology that allows that arm to work."

Steve looked down at the Winter Soldier' pale face and swallowed hard. His gaze strayed to the shining metal arm lying beside the man. "You don't think it hurts all the time, do you?" His voice was barely above a whisper, filled with a world of guilt and anguish.

Banner didn't say anything and Sam clamped his own mouth shut. He didn't know if the prosthetic Hydra had melded into the Winter Soldier felt anything at all, if what they'd done would make a difference to whether the man felt the phantom limb pain so many amputees described, didn't know if the Winter Soldier felt pain, period. He'd stood there bleeding from a stab wound while Stark and Steve yelled at each other and never said a word, after all.

"I think the explosives Jarvis detected are a little more urgent than wondering if this guy's in pain," Stark declared.

Steve gave him a wounded look.

Stark sneered back, but his expression slipped a little as he glanced down at the Winter Soldier again. "He isn't going to be alive to hurt if the bomb goes off."

"I feel this is an apt moment to mention that I have detected a series of pulsed, compressed data signals aimed at the tower over the last half hour, Sir," Jarvis mentioned. "My analysis indicates they are intended to set off the bomb in the Sergeant's spine."

Everyone took a jumpy step back from the bed as if that could protect them. If the bomb was going to go off, according to Jarvis, it already would have.

"The shielding on the Hulk Chamber floor is more than sufficient to block the trigger signal," Jarvis added needlessly.

"Yay for me," Stark muttered. "Jesus. I thought you said he didn't have a way to set it off. Did Hydra have something else up their sleeve besides destroying his body if he gets killed?"

"It appears to have more than one purpose," Jarvis replied blandly. "I theorize that the explosive must require a catalyst before reaching its present temperature volatile state. No doubt Hydra scientists were also able to render it inert before placing Sgt. Barnes in cryo-suspension. However, without further chemical analysis, I am unable to formulate any potential disarming methods with a higher than thirty-three percent success projection."

Sam thought he detected a flaw in Jarvis' description. "What happens to this stuff if – keep your cool, Steve – the Winter Soldier gets dropped somewhere tropical or a desert where the temps higher than a body is normally?"

"Very few climates remain hotter than a human body overnight," Banner offered. "Any place where that happens, the body would decay so rapidly nothing useful would be left to examine."

"And whenever the temperature did drop, then the explosives would detonate, like some buried bomb from World War II with a dud fuse," Stark added.

"Not perfect, but Hydra wouldn't care," Steve agreed. He still looked sick at the thought.

"No, they wouldn't," Banner said. "They're hardly going to take more care than the armies who have left mine fields all over Southeast Asia and now the Middle East."
Sam wiped his hand over his face and brought up the other thing that was plaguing him. He faced Steve to do it.

"You know he could have come here to finish his mission and take you out, don't you?" Sam made himself ask Steve. "It's not like Hydra gives a damn about collateral damage. Taking out Stark here and Dr. Banner would just be a happy bonus for Hydra."

"Nearly everyone in this tower was an Insight target," Banner murmured. He pressed his lips together briefly, then rolled his shoulders and breathed in and out slowly. Sam held his breath.

Steve just shook his head. "No. No, if he meant to finish their damned mission, he could have let me drown. Or strangled me on the shore. He pulled me out of the river, Sam. I got through to him; I know it." He bent and stroked lank dark hair away from the Winter Soldier's face. "I know just how good a shot Bucky is."

"Not an argument I expected," Stark muttered.

Steve sighed. "He was fighting it, I know he was. He's a sniper. Why else would he fight me hand to hand instead of taking me out before I even knew he was there?"

"Hell if I know," Sam admitted.

"What do we do?" Steve asked.

"Get it out, of course," Stark said. He waved the tablet. "I have a plan."

Steve squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. Sam guessed even super soldiers got headaches.

"Sam, could you sit here with him while Tony and I 'discuss' this plan of his?" Steve asked.

"Not sure that's the greatest idea," Sam said. He gave Bucky's unconscious form a skeptical glance and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I know, but – "

"He probably won't come around for several hours," Bruce said, "between blood loss and exhaustion."

"So, just sit?" Sam asked.

"Let us know if something changes."

"I will be monitoring the Sergeant as well," Jarvis said.

Sam heaved a loud sigh. "Gimme a chair."

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James

The Asset woke with a jolt of terror and confusion, noticing the bright lights and the pinch of a needle in his arm, before he registered the soft bed under him and the lack of restraints. He tore the needle loose, threw himself off the bed and scrambled to his feet. The room he found himself in didn't resemble any Hydra facility. When he came out of cryo, the rooms were always carefully
sanitized, emptied of anything he could turn into a weapon. This room held a smorgasbord of possibilities.

It wasn't empty either. A man – he almost recognized him – stood on the far side of the bed. The chair he'd been sitting in lay on its side. He wasn't dressed either as a technician or a Hydra guard. The Asset stiffened defensively anyway.

"Whoa, whoa, James," the man said in a worried voice, holding his open hands up.

The Asset – James, James, James, he chanted to himself, pieces of memory pattering down like debris from an explosion in his head – sucked in a harsh breath, feeling it in his ribs. He took stock and realized with a shock that the stab wound in his side had been stitched up and bandaged. He was still in the t-shirt, hoodie and jeans he'd been given at the homeless shelter, though, all now crusted with blood.

His feet were bare, toes curling into fine rug. The IV stand was still rocking from his exit from the bed. He grabbed it with his metal hand and steadied it. Shining steel wrapped around shining chrome. He had to loosen his grip as the softer metal began to deform under the pressure. If the man across the bed made a move, James would use it as a quarterstaff, though it wouldn't hold up well.

"Hey, easy, okay?" the man – Samuel Thomas Wilson, Air Force, EXO-7 Falcon, affiliated with mission target Rogers, dangerous, his last mission briefing whispered; Sam, Captain America had called him – murmured. "You know where you are?"

James let go of the IV stand and nodded.

"How about confirming that for me. It's just, I think you're probably real good at fake-it-till-you-make-it and going along and letting everyone think what they want."

"Stark's tower."

Wilson nodded with a small, pleased smile. "Great. We're on the same page. And you remember, you came here."

James nodded. He remembered. There were no blanks or odd empty places in the linear narrative of his memory from DC to here. Even the hours he'd been unconscious didn't feel like a hole in his head, the way the wipes always did. He didn't feel like he'd been reprogrammed. Of course, maybe they were just better at it than Hydra, but if they were, he would never be able to know.

It was better for his sanity to believe nothing had been done to him beyond the medical care. Otherwise he could never believe anything he thought was more than an implanted illusion. Reality was a choice.

He gestured to the bed and himself.

"You passed out from blood loss, but you're okay now," Wilson explained. He bent over and righted the chair that had been knocked over. "You've got about two pints of SHIELD's blood replacer in you already. Do not ask me where Stark got hold of that, I do not want to know. This last IV is just fluid replacement. No drugs, no messing with your head."

The memory of Captain America arguing with Tony Stark over him returned. Wilson had been behind them. Neither of them had given him a chance to impart important intel and then his body had folded, overstressed and beyond even his limits. It might have been the Asset's programming trying to stop him, too. His head had been splitting from the moment he spoke even obliquely
against Hydra. Trying to give away any of their secrets went against every imperative they'd seared into his brain.

He didn't know how long he'd been out, but judged, from the state of his healing that it couldn't have been more than a couple of hours. Perhaps there would still be time to move before a Hydra strike team arrived. Time enough to warn these people who seemed to be offering aid. Though that would probably change once he told them Hydra was coming.

James saw no benefit in not telling them, though.

"There are trackers in the Arm." A spike of pain through his head let him know he'd have to fight the programming to say more.

Wilson nodded, relaxed faintly, and let his hands fall to his sides. "We know. Jarvis picked up the signals coming from it, but this floor is insulated against electronic peek-a-boo shit. Nothing's getting out and nothing's getting in." Wilson gave James a sharp, questioning look at that, as if looking for some reaction from James he wasn't getting.

"I ripped your wing off," James said. He could hear Stark and Captain America arguing in the next room through the open doorway. Their voices rose in anger then fell silent. Maybe they'd realized he was conscious.

Wilson startled and then grimaced and waved his hands. "Yeah, hard to forget – " He made a complicated face, giving away emotions James couldn't decipher. "You don't still want to kill me do you?"

"I didn't want to kill you then."

"Could have fooled the world there, From Russia With Love," Stark said from the doorway. "If you didn't want him dead, I'd hate to see when you were really trying."

Wilson winced.

"He wasn't the mission," James said. It seemed very clear to him. Wilson had been an obstacle to killing Black Widow and Captain America. It had been necessary to remove him. It hadn't been necessary to kill him. Hydra hadn't cared about collateral casualties since they wanted to create terror, so the more brutal an assassination the better, but Department X's original programming had prioritized efficiency and the Asset had enough leeway to make the operational decision to leave a non-target alive when he could. It had been the tiny seed of being something more than Hydra's mindless weapon. He felt... grateful to Wilson. If he hadn't left Wilson alive, he wouldn't have thought he could dive after Captain America, wouldn't have thought to walk away from the Potomac and not return to Hydra. "I didn't try to kill him. I non-lethally removed him from the field of operation."

Captain America loomed into the doorway behind Stark. His gaze locked on James. He looked almost desperate.

Stark's eyebrows ratcheted up, but then he shrugged and sneered. "Whatever you say, Killer."

The Captain set a hand on Stark's shoulder and pulled him out of the doorway, then practically filled it himself. The way he stood, four square and unmovable, made James feel trapped where neither Stark nor Wilson had. "Stop trying to goad him, Tony," the Captain snapped. "If Bucky says he wasn't after Sam, it's the truth."

"Yeah, how do you know that? Did you get a lie detector upgrade along with the muscles?" Stark
replied, "Because I don't think this guy would even know if he's lying."

James had to admit that Stark might be right.

Stark turned his attention back to James. "So, RoboRussian, do you know you're a walking-talking suicide bomb? According to Jarvis' passive scans, you've got enough designer explosives packed in your spine to turn you and everyone in this room into a thin pink paste."

James stared at him. Hydra didn't want its weapon falling into enemy hands. He'd half expected they had a killswitch implanted in his arm. But a bomb would make sure that even as they lost their weapon it would still kill and terrify the opposition. He believed Stark.

"No one tell you about that?" Stark asked.

"Why would they?" James replied. He frowned. "Why are you... ?" He stopped and tried to untangle the concepts and put them into words. They were very foreign to anything he retained from Hydra. He couldn't make sense of the way these people were treating him. Only Stark seemed properly suspicious, yet even he was still in the same room with James, and no longer in his Iron Man suit. Why would they risk their lives for a broken weapon that might turn on them? "Why am I still alive?" he asked. "You should have disposed of me while I was unconscious. I'm a threat."

"Bucky, no one is going to – "

"Give us a little credit," Wilson blurted as the Captain trailed off into horrified silence.

"I'm a threat," James repeated blankly. "A bomb." He didn't remember, he didn't feel any different, but his body and mind had been modified so many times he couldn't guess what normal would feel like. He had no baseline to compare.

Stark threw up his hands. "Unless you agreed to having your body turned into a bomb, you're not a threat, you're a victim." He let the anger-tinged sentence hang in the room for a few seconds to run a hand through his hair. When he continued, his voice was lighter. "Believe it or not, but even I'm above victim-blaming." He gestured toward the ceiling, "Besides, Pepper is listening."

"You came to us for help," Wilson explained. "We're going to help you."

"And if that sticks a thumb in Hydra's eye, that's just a bonus in addition to racking up all the good karma points," Stark added. "And don't worry about the bomb too much. We can get it out of you and, in the meantime, nothing can reach the trigger receiver while you're here. So just relax, try the sauna, get rid of a little of that tension, maybe listen to some mellow jazz or whatever floats your boat. But seriously, think about bathing first."

"Here," James repeated.

"In the Hulk chamber, which I like to think I've made nice and cozy and comfortable. I was thinking more about having Bruce here than an evil nonagenarian cyborg assassin, but I can roll with it."

The Captain was still looking at James as though he expected something. James couldn't guess what.

"Bucky – "

James shook his head hard enough his hair flipped into his eyes. "Stop calling me that."

"I don't understand," the Captain said. "You're my best friend, you've always – you pulled me out of the Potomac. I – If you don't remember who you are let me tell you."

He didn't know how to say he didn't want to be told who he was supposed to be. He didn't remember being Bucky Barnes and didn't want to, he thought Bucky would hate the thing, the Asset, the walking bomb he'd been made into. None of it mattered anyway. He had failed his mission, broken his programming and was useless, unable to operate outside this room without being blown up. He'd thought because the Captain had thwarted Hydra's effort with Project Insight that he could or would aid him, if only to deny them another tool, but James was too damaged to be useful again. Too unreliable. Once they understood this, they would dispose of him, but he wished they would do it now.

"Bucky – "

"I'm not Bucky!" he yelled. "Stop it! Stop – !" He clutched at his temples as pain spiked through them. "I didn't pull you out of the water because you mean anything to me. Assets don't form attachments. It isn't necessary."

"Then why did you save him?" Wilson asked. He had his hand on Captain America's arm. James didn't know if Wilson meant to stop or... or comfort? Captain America looked stricken, shaking with emotions James didn't understand.

"My mission was to eliminate him in seven hours. The mission window closed; the objective was obsolete. Project Insight had been compromised catastrophically," James explained. All true. All irrelevant. He knew his masters would have still wanted Captain America dead. But he'd had a taste of choice and he was... he wanted to know what it was his handlers refused to tell him. He'd believed the Captain had those answers. The answers no longer mattered, though, with a Hydra bomb sitting in his spine.

His fingers itched to tear open his own flesh and wrench all of Hydra's tech out of his body.

He wondered if he'd always hated them; if that was why they'd had to wipe him over and over, so that he wouldn't remember he wanted to kill them.

They'd been right, though: there was no escape. All he could do to hurt them was not be here when the bomb went off, leave someone else alive.

He wavered on his feet, then started for the door. "I'll go."

"You couldn't go far enough fast enough to get away before Hydra triggered the bomb," Stark told him in a hard voice. "Aside from not wanting to die myself, I don't want a bunch of innocent people getting caught in a bomb blast either. Points for not asking for our help, though you don't get to keep them, because as it happens, we can help."

"You should kill me," he said. "I was your enemy. You can't use me outside this place. I have no more value."

Stark rolled his eyes. "Can someone explain to this guy that even the bad guys are human beings? That's why I never trusted SHIELD. They weren't too good at remembering their own people had rights, never mind anyone else. And, boy, do I feel uncomfortable being the one trying to explain this kind of thing."

"I think you did just fine."
Stark spun at the voice and forgot about James. "Pepper. No, no, I told you to stay off this floor until we know what the assassin wants, in case it's to kill us all."

"Jarvis has been letting me monitor everything and I'm perfectly confident no one wants to kill anyone," Pepper, a tall, elegant woman with her arms filled with paper bags, said. "Also, our food is getting cold and I knew you would forget everyone needs to eat."

"Yes, everyone needs to eat. But, but – "

James drifted closer to the bedroom doorway to follow their interactions. Pepper, clearly a civilian, set the various bags on the coffee table, another man plucking some from her arms to help, then she placed one finger over Stark's mouth, stopping his words. Her expression was fond, but her blue eyes were cool as steel. "I can take care of myself, remember?"

"Yeah, I don't think frying Steve's old buddy would be a good idea when his spine is filled with explosives," Stark muttered peevishly.

"Just sit down. Everyone will feel better and think clearer once we've eaten."

"Pepper has a point," the man whose name James hadn't heard yet agreed. He seated himself and began dishing out the food in the bags. "Low blood sugar can result in headaches and irritability – " He glanced up at Stark with a deceptive smile. "Just like Tony."

"Hey!"

"James, you want to come eat with us?" Wilson said. His body language read wariness, but his words sounded sincere.

"I ordered enough for all of us," Pepper added, looking at James for the first time. He thought he saw caution in her expression, but no fear.

"Which means she ordered enough for at least twelve normal people," Stark agreed. "By the way, this is Pepper Potts."

"Call me Pepper."

James nodded to her. Virginia Potts, CEO of Stark Industries, current girlfriend of Anthony Stark, formerly his executive assistant, murmured a shard of mission briefing. She was on Hydra's threat list to eliminate given an opportunity that didn't interfere with a mission.

"And the guy hogging all the Sayadieh is Dr. Bruce Banner, who helped Sam stitch you up," Stark finished.

Banner waved a paper container at James. "I like fish." Memories of files memorized during a previous activation identified Banner as the alter ego of the gamma radiation enhanced threat codenamed the Hulk. James filed that away. Unarmed he would pose no threat to the Hulk, but reports indicated it required anger or a direct threat to Banner's life to activate him. James felt no worries.

"So do the rest of us," Stark muttered.

James didn't understand why anyone would want to eat with him and looked at the food Banner piled onto a plate and handed to him suspiciously, unsure if he mistrusted the food or the normalcy. Potts looked at him and asked in concern, "Do you not like Lebanese?"
James had no idea. The last thing he'd eaten had been the hotdog that came back up, like everything else he tried eating, just before the Hydra ambush in the park. He glanced at Banner who was eating neatly but with great enthusiasm. The Captain and Wilson were also consuming the food with gusto. Potts was a little more sedate. It seemed unlikely it could be drugged or poisoned; the portions had all come from the same containers.

"Eat up, I pay an atrocious amount for this stuff to delivered," Stark said. His attention switched as he searched through one of the bags. "Did you get the Fatti be Laben from Ilili? It's always better from Balade."

"I got the Mahfouf Mihshy and the hummus from Ilili," Potts replied. "Happy picked it up, along with the Baba Ghanouj from Naya. Don't worry, Jarvis made sure to order your favorites. And Balade's mezze supreme and grill platters for six." She dismissed Stark from her attention and turned toward James. "James – It's James, yes?"

"Yes," James replied softly. He added slowly, "Pepper." He'd asked to be called James. She'd asked to be called Pepper. She'd remembered, so he made a note to respond in kind. It sounded awkward, though.

He found it hard to believe anyone would get take-out from three different restaurants, just to get their favorites from each. On the other hand, Stark had a driver doing the pick-up (far more secure than trusting delivery people), so why not? And even if he appreciated them not treating him like a thing, he still didn't understand why they didn't tie him up and throw him in the most heavily guarded cell they had.

"Go ahead, try the kibbi balls and the mini spinach pies." Pepper pointed at the items on his plate. He obeyed with a rolling sense of apprehension, his stomach already trying to reject the food.

"You don't like – " the Captain stopped himself and tried again. "You might not like the spinach."

James tried it anyway, but agreed. The rest of the food tasted unfamiliar but all right, though too rich, the spices all overly strong in his mouth, the way everything but the bland oatmeal at the Philadelphia homeless shelter had been. He wondered how insulted they would be if he said that when they had offered their food so generously, and kept eating. Food was fuel and his body needed energy to repair itself. Another part of him whispered that he couldn't afford to waste, money was always too tight.

Stark started sniping with Wilson and Banner while they ate, interrupted periodically by Pepper when the sarcasm verged on mean enough to become an argument. She clearly had Stark's number. The Captain said little and watched James with an unnerving intensity that didn't seem related to threat assessment. He knew Wilson and Banner were checking him too.

He knew the moment he tried a mouthful of the eggplant dish he'd gone beyond his limits. Nausea clenched his belly and the food seemed to hover in his throat while his mouth flooded with saliva. Swallowing hard did no good.

He bolted for the washroom Jarvis had mentioned on his arrival and ended on his knees, convulsing as he threw up everything he'd just eaten, the sharp acid taste of bile flooding his taste buds as if to punish him for eating at all. His ribs protested the position and the vomiting with sharp stabs, the stitched wound in his side pulled and throbbed, and his skull felt over pressurized, like a balloon about to pop. James clutched at the toilet bowl and tried to stop, but the heaving went on, until he felt like he couldn't catch a breath, couldn't hold himself up.

The feel of hands on his shoulders merged with the hard, cold tiles digging up into his knees and
the noise of the toilet flushing and filling, but James couldn't do more than bat the person steadying him. It felt wrong to have anyone at his back, but at the same time some part of him registered it as familiar, along with the hand running up and down his back.

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**Steve**

Steve lifted Bucky's lank, sweat damp hair away from his mouth. He knelt behind him, crowded into the washroom, crowded despite its sybaritic size with Bruce, Sam, Pepper and Tony all fitted inside too. He didn't know what else to do as Bucky convulsed, spewing up bile helplessly. The confines were too tight for so many people, especially with the smell of vomit sharp in the air, but he didn't think Bucky was really aware of them.

"This isn't food poisoning," Tony said.

"No, too swift," Bruce agreed.

"I shouldn't have pushed him to – "

"Not your fault, Pep," Tony interrupted. Steve added his nod. Pepper had been going out of her way to make things normal and include Bucky by bringing their meal down to share with him.

Bucky gagged and slumped, head lolling; Steve caught his metal shoulder and steadied him. Bucky went rigid and Steve thought he would try to throw him off, but another bout of vomiting hit Bucky instead. Tears blurred Steve's vision and he turned his face away from the others so he could blink them back. This was no time to feel sorry for himself.

He'd let Bucky fall. He'd let Bucky fall and he hadn't gone back, hadn't insisted on a mission to look for him, too devastated to face up to his body, and so he'd left Bucky in hell. Everything that had happened to Bucky, everything the Winter Soldier had done: that was on Steve. He'd gone down with the Red Skull's plane and he'd been relieved, glad for it all to be over. But it hadn't been, not for Bucky, and it wasn't fair that Steve had slept for seventy years and woken to a world that still thought he was a hero, while Bucky suffered all that time. It wasn't fair and it was his fault and he didn't know what to do to make it even and right.

Pepper clapped her hand over her mouth as Bucky went on gagging and retreated from the washroom. Steve didn't blame her; this wasn't her fault, her fight or her friend. He knew if there was anything she could do, she would, just the way Tony would, no matter how many times he protested he wasn't a nice guy.

Steve knew he wasn't a nice guy either, no matter what anyone else thought. A nice guy wouldn't have dragged his friend into fight after fight because he wouldn't bend his morals to fit anyone else's view. It was one thing to get yourself beaten up standing up for what you believed, but how many times had he got Bucky hurt when they were boys? He'd never thought, but how many fights had he picked because he knew, beyond any doubt, that Bucky had his back? He hadn't considered what he was costing Bucky then and now he had to face up to how selfish he'd been. No, Steve Rogers wasn't the incarnation of morality most people thought he was, never had been.

Bucky had known. Bucky had known him, not the persona of Captain America, not the icon.

He stayed in the washroom, knees and back both aching, hoping his presence helped until Bucky slumped sideways and wiped at his mouth, the spasms finished. He wasn't sure Bucky was really
conscious by then. He hated the way Bucky was shaking, wanted to wrap him up in his arms, but forced himself to keep some distance. Tony and Sam had gone, though he could hear them talking. Only Bruce remained in the room with them.

The sound of water running in the sink made Bucky tense and Steve look up. Bruce turned off the tap and wrung out a washcloth, before bringing it over to Bucky. He crouched to hand to him and stayed there, quietly waiting while Bucky wiped his mouth and chin before taking it back. It landed in the sink with a wet slap that made Steve twitch. Bruce opened a cabinet next and brought out a giant, fluffy bath sheet.

"Get this around you for the moment," Bruce told Bucky. "We'll find a blanket once you're out of here."

Bucky stayed still and let Bruce settle the towel around his shoulders.

"Jarvis," Bruce said, "could you ask Sam or Tony to bring a bottle of water and a ginger ale from the kitchen?"

"Of course, Dr. Banner," the AI answered.

Bucky twisted away from Steve enough to settle with his back to a wall and his knees bent. He was still drawing in harsh breaths, but seemed with them and aware. Steve shifted off his knees into a half-lotus position, drawing an approving nod from Bruce.

Bucky relaxed fractionally.

A tap at the open door heralded Tony carrying an expensive bottled water and an equally fancy ginger ale, caps still on, the necks caught between the fingers of one hand. The other had a plastic bottle of one those fluorescent-colored sports drinks. Tony held it up and said, "Best re-hydration on the market. As an expert in hangovers, I can swear by it." He gave out a bitter chuckle suddenly and added, "I may be king of the tasteless joke, but that wasn't deliberate."

Bucky made a rusty noise that might have once been a laugh.

Tony set the bottle down. "Right. So. Electrolyte replacement drink. Still sealed. Supposedly lemon-lime flavor, but I suspect the closest it ever came was the guy that designed the label read a lot of hentai doujinshi."

"Thanks, Tony," Steve said. He had no idea what doujinshi was or hentai, or what citrus had to do with them, and didn't care enough to want to write into his 'look it up' notebook. He thought Tony was just chattering to try ease his discomfort.

Tony gave Bucky a worried look. "I prayed to the porcelain god enough times, I know you just want everyone to go away. So, I'll be out there. Pepper's kind of upset – "

"Not her fault," Bucky rasped.

"Yeah, I know. But I'll tell her you said so too."

Bruce twisted open the water bottle and extended it to Bucky. "Swish out your mouth and then if you think it's okay, try a sip."

Bucky silently did as Bruce suggested, spit into the toilet, and then cradled the bottle between the real and the metal hand. Tony had installed soundproofing through out the Tower to keep out the noise of the city (and perhaps to keep in the sound of wayward lab explosions and unhappy Hulks
on occasion). It left the washroom very quiet, with just the sound of the three of them breathing, the occasional rustle as one of them moved, and the clink of Bucky's steely fingers on the bottle's glass.

When the heaves didn't come back, Bruce gestured to the remaining bottles. "Ginger ale's pretty good for settling your stomach, but the sports drink would probably help the headache more." He made a face. "It just tastes like crap."

Bucky shrugged his flesh and bone shoulder. "Taste doesn't matter."

"Tell you what," Bruce murmured. "We'll open both and you can alternate."

Bucky just stared.

Bruce sighed. "Yeah, okay, I'll take silence for assent this time." He opened both bottles and pushed them across the floor to Bucky.

Steve held his breath as Bucky picked up the ginger ale first. He tried a sip, held it in his mouth cautiously for a moment before swallowing.

"James, would you tell me the last time you ate something?" Bruce asked. His brown eyes were warm and concerned.

"Fourteen minutes ago," Bucky answered. He sipped the sports drink, then set it aside.

"Ask a stupid question..." Bruce scrubbed his hands through his hair, pushing the grey shot curls askew. "Okay. Before that?"

"A hot dog." Bucky swallowed hard, like the nausea was coming back, then picked up the ginger ale again. "In the park."

"This morning?" Steve prompted. "Before Hydra tried to snatch you again?" He wondered if Bucky had chosen the hotdog at random or been prompted by or searching for some memory.

Bucky nodded jerkily before ducking his head, hair falling across his face in a defensive curtain. "It made me sick too."

Steve and Bruce both winced. It answered how Hydra had made it close enough to ambush Bucky, however. He'd been too sick to spot them. Steve pressed his fingers against his thighs, because otherwise he would be tempted to punch a hole in the washroom wall. If he and Sam hadn't arrived when they did, if Sam hadn't seen the uniforms were wrong... Bucky had been out there all alone, sick, and Steve would have never known how close he'd come. He wouldn't have known Hydra had Bucky again until the Winter Soldier took another shot at him.

"Maybe I should rephrase this," Bruce muttered mostly to himself. "When was the last time you ate something that didn't come back up?"

Bucky frowned before answering. "Three days ago."

"What was it?"

"Kasha." Bucky hesitated. "No. They called it oatmeal. Kasha was Berlin. Volgograd? I don't – I can't – It hurts when I try to remember."

"Headache?"
Bucky didn't answer, was probably wary of revealing any more vulnerability. Steve could see exhaustion balancing with tense readiness in the way, even folded up as he was, Bucky's feet were flat to the floor, his back braced against the wall. He could be up in one fluid movement.

"Let it go for now," Bruce told him and looked up, catching Steve's gaze. Steve guessed Bucky's confession meant at least some of Hydra's programming was still in his head. "Before the oatmeal, what else have you had?"

Bucky just shook his head. "The technicians provided a nutrient package when they activated the Asset." His gaze had gone distant; the hints of personality he'd shown suffocated by Hydra again.

"Damn it," Steve snapped. Bucky tensed and turned that empty, killer's gaze on him, so that Steve could see him calculating how much of a threat Steve posed to him. He silently cursed himself for triggering that.

"Why don't you finish the ginger ale?" Bruce suggested softly, redirecting Bucky's attention. "You seem to like it better than the other."

For a frightening moment, Steve wondered if Bucky would respond at all or attack Bruce and bring out the Hulk. He drank the rest of the ginger ale instead.

"Good. You can stay here if you like. Steve and I are going to go back to the living room. Not much room to maneuver in here," Bruce said. "You can join us if you like."

Bruce gave Steve another look, so Steve got up reluctantly and headed for the door. "I'll stay if you want me to," he told Bucky. "Or anything – just say what you want."

"What he needs is some room to breathe," Bruce insisted and pushed Steve out the door.

Bucky didn't follow them.

Bruce retrieved a beer from the kitchen, along with one for Steve, though he knew the alcohol would have no effect on him. It still tasted crisp and cold and gave him something to wrap his hands around.

Pepper, Sam, and Tony were all in the living room. One of them had turned the TV on, tuned to some cooking channel. Steve couldn't decide if that was funny or infuriating. None of them were watching it anyway; he could tell by the way they were perched at the edges of the seats, bodies refusing to give in to the overly comfortable furniture.

"So," Bruce said quietly, "from what he just said, Hydra fed him some nutritionally adequate supplement. His stomach is out of practice handling real food and he'll need a diet designed to slowly habituate him to eating again." He rolled the beer bottle against his forehead. "It almost makes sense."

"Sense?" Steve protested. "How can – "

Bruce held up his hand. "Smell and taste are senses that trigger memory. They work on a deep level. I don't know how Hydra was wiping his memories, but it was selective enough to keep his skillsets and muscle memory. They would have kept him away from any stimuli that might have brought back more. Besides that, it was another tool to keep him dependent on them."

"So they hooked the basic survival drive to eat to his handlers?" Sam said. "That's sick."

"Cruel," Pepper murmured.
"Yeah, that too."

"Why keep wiping him if they had him programmed and brainwashed into their perfect assassin?" Tony asked.

"Because he wasn't perfect," Pepper said softly. "He was still human. Even if he couldn't remember anything, he probably started rebelling against them as soon as he had even a little outside experience." She hesitated. "It doesn't sound like they did much to make him loyal."

"Hydra never heard about the carrot part of the carrot and the stick," Tony commented. He had a dark expression on his face. Steve imagined he was remembering his time as a hostage in Afghanistan. Bruce didn't look much happier.

"Is he even healthy enough to undergo the surgery to take out the explosives?" Sam asked in the quiet that followed.

Bruce wagged the bottle in his hand. "A couple of days of nutritional supplement and he'll be back to physically fit. I noticed he has accelerated healing, if not on par with Steve's, then close."

"Handy," Tony said.

"In this case," Bruce agreed.

"So what next?"

"I'll put together that supplement for him."

"Is there any reason it can't taste good?" Pepper asked. She obviously still felt badly over the dinner fiasco. Every sign of the take-out they'd been sharing had been cleaned up. Not even the scent lingered. Steve thought again what a real lady Pepper was and how lucky Tony was to have found her. She reminded Steve of Peggy, because she had that combination of elegance and a steel spine Peggy had always had.

Thinking of Peggy, as always now, made his heart clutch and hurt. Her dementia was progressing faster and though she had excellent care, there seemed to be nothing the doctors could do beyond keeping her comfortable. She no longer recognized Steve when he visited. He wondered what it was about him, that Bucky and Peggy's memories of him had been stolen. Was it something inherent, some karmic cost for the gift of Erskine's serum, or punishment?

"None I can think of. No spinach or banana, right, Steve?" Bruce asked.

Steve jolted back to the present. "He used to like peppermint and egg creams, when we were feeling flush."

Bruce wandered away toward the kitchen, speaking quietly to Jarvis and Steve took the seat Tony waved him toward. Once he was sitting, he squeezed his eyes shut, unable to look at the others.

"So, who wants to watch America's Next Top Model?" Tony asked.

"No one," Pepper told him.

Steve just sat and listened to them bicker over the array of choices, Sam commenting once in a while, the channels changing with bewildering speed. He didn't know if he'd ever pick up the knack of channel surfing the way they did it.
A shift in Tony and then Sam and Pepper's voices made Steve crack open one eye. Tony had even let up on the remote, so some movie had time to play for a minute, Cary Grant and a blonde flirting on the screen, the volume turned far down. Bucky had come out, so silent Steve hadn't heard him, towel still around his shoulders, and now stood by one of the couches, looking uncertain.

Steve stayed still. Sam nodded to him. "Sit down, man."

"Steve, have you seen this one?" Pepper asked, gracefully diverting some of the attention from Bucky. "Cary Grant and Grace Kelly. It's a favorite of mine."

"Hold on. Jarvis, that's in the library, right?" Tony asked.

"The video library includes all of Mr. Grant's movies," Jarvis said. "Ms. Potts expressed a fondness for them and you instructed me to make sure they were always available. Shall I cue this one from the beginning?"

"Do that." Tony settled back next to Pepper and curled an arm around her waist. Pepper smiled at Steve as Bucky sat down at the edge of the couch after inching around it. He watched them and not the movie, wary and feral as the half-starved, traumatized dogs the Howling Commandos had seen in bombed out villages during the war. They'd been as likely to bite as to take the scraps Gabe had always found to give them, sometimes too scared to even sniff at the food.

Falsworth and Bucky had been the ones who took care of the animals they found trapped in rubble or too crippled to survive. They'd tried to keep it from Steve, but he'd known they were taking the hard part on themselves.

He didn't want to think of Bucky like that. He wouldn't. He wouldn't.

He kept Bucky in the periphery of his vision and pretended to watch the movie, though he couldn't have said what it was about if his life had depended on it. Tony kept a running commentary on it going and Pepper shushed him over and over. Sam leaned back, but had a spot where he could keep an eye on Bucky along with the screen.

Bruce came back with a tall glass of something that looked like a smoothie. "We'll work on solid foods later," was all he said and he managed it so naturally that Bucky took the gloppy beige concoction and drank it without question. Steve wanted to believe that meant Bucky was starting to trust them, but it seemed just as likely that he'd just given up.

Within ten minutes of accepting Bruce's offering, Bucky gave into exhaustion and slipped sideways on his couch, ending up curled in a defensive position, his metal arm shielding his face.

The movie finished and Jarvis started another, an old black-and-white film, *Shall We Dance*, that Steve had seen when it came out. Tony chortled more than once. Steve worried he'd wake Bucky, but apparently Tony's laughter fell into the same category as Dum Dum's tooth-rattling snores or the crackle of a new chunk of wood being added to the fire. Bucky had been able to sleep through nearly anything even behind enemy lines, but would snap awake at one throat clearing cough from Steve.

Jarvis started another movie for Steve after that, but it was just white noise as the others left quietly. "Blankets in the linen closet," Bruce mentioned. They all seemed to know that Steve would stay.

Bucky didn't stir when Steve draped a soft fleece throw over his shoulders. Steve resisted the urge to brush his tangled hair away from his face and went back to his own couch. Jarvis played through
the rest of the Astaire and Rogers oeuvre as the night passed. Steve watched Bucky twitch and mumble through dark dreams.

*D_*

Dull light filtered through the floor-length windows when Steve awoke to the distinct feeling of being watched. Judging by the dusty blue colouring behind the New York skyline, it was still early morning, but it was enough to see that the sensation of observation hadn't been unfounded. Bucky sat with his legs drawn up against his chest like a shield and had his gaze on Steve, though more like a stare gauging his threat potential than anything else. His body language was defensive, wary, his face blank and emotionless. He hadn't even brushed back the tangled, lanky hair that was obscuring the sides of his face. It still made Steve's heart beat faster, having Bucky beside him again, seeing him alive no matter what had happened, but after a moment Steve's initial elation faded a little. It was hard to meet that flat, affectionless gaze, so he focused on Bucky's shoulder, on the tear in the dirty, blood-stained hoodie Bucky had on.

Watching Bucky slip from passed out to actual sleep had been easier than facing him awake again. Steve didn't know how to handle this situation. Talk to him about what happened before he came to the tower, the way Steve so desperately wanted? Go back to treating him the way he had treated Bucky? Sock him on the arm to raise a smile? Steve was sure that if he made one move like that, he'd find himself knocked out on the floor before he could even finish speaking Bucky's name. So what now? How did he even start a conversation?

A loud rumbling gurgle from his stomach pierced the silence and made Bucky tense. Steve's cheeks went hot with embarrassment. His metabolism ran so much faster than the average human being. On missions it felt that all he could do was to keep munching on high-calorie protein bars so his stomach wouldn't give him away.

Steve crossed his arms over his midriff to quell the sound and got up from the couch. Bucky's gaze followed his stiff movement, and something shifted in it, going from wary to vaguely curious. Maybe that's what they needed. Normalcy. None of this was normal, but normalcy was calming. Maybe it would help Bucky to remember and besides, Steve was sure that after the puking incident last night, Bucky could do with food as well. Bruce's smoothie couldn't have offered much in the way of actual sustenance.

"Breakfast," he said. "We should – I can make something." Or he would if he could find some toast or cereal, as anything else was beyond him. But Bucky was used to Steve's bad cooking. He'd understand. Steve gestured to the kitchen, then back to the couch. "You can stay here." He didn't like the idea of leaving Bucky out of his sight, but didn't want to assume. As soon as he took his first step to the kitchen, though, Bucky rose as well and followed him like a silent shadow. Steve didn't know if that was precaution or a sign of Bucky not wanting to be alone. He hoped it was the latter.

"Or you can come with me," he said. "We can have a look what strikes our fancy."

He stepped behind the kitchen island and did a quick inventory of what was available. Fresh fruit, always, thanks to Pepper's insistence, which was good because it didn't require any actual cooking. Bread, cereal, a state of the art coffee-maker that made everything from regular coffee to espresso, and several teas. Probably more if he were to open more of the cabinets. He had no idea what Bucky would want to eat.

"What are you in the mood for?" Steve asked, deciding to ask rather than guess.
Bucky didn't reply, just stared at the tiles behind the sink where a magnetic strip held several large cooking knives in position. Steve tensed, cursed inwardly, then stepped into Bucky's line of sight.

"Good morning Captain Rogers." Jarvis' bodiless voice made Steve flinch the way it always did. He never remembered the AI was like another person in the tower.

"Hello Jarvis," Steve said, trying to cover up his flinch as smoothly as possible.

"Sir, if I may, Miss Potts has had a breakfast delivered for you and James. It is located in the food elevator to the far left of the sink. All you have to do is utilize the microwave, which Sir has instructed me to direct you how to use."

Steve was torn between a smile of appreciation for Pepper and a frown of annoyance for Tony. He'd told Tony several times before that he knew perfectly well how to use a microwave, but it seemed that Tony forgot about that time and time again. Either it was that or Tony just liked to get a rise out of Steve. Which Steve wouldn't put past him.

"I know how to handle a microwave, Jarvis," he said.

"Naturally, Sir." It sounded remarkably long-suffering. "Miss Potts also asked me to relay that she is sorry you will have to reheat the eggs, but she assumed you would rather reheat than go to the trouble of cooking."

Which was Pepper's kind way of not saying she doubted Steve could cook and was making sure he would feed Bucky something more than cereal. Not for the first time, he felt a wave of gratitude toward her wash over him. "Please tell her I'm grateful and I'm sure it'll taste just fine."

Steve gestured toward the cabinet-like door Jarvis had indicated. "Something Tony had built in," he explained to Bucky as he walked over to take out the two plates under plastic covers. He had a feeling it wasn't originally planned to cater to guests. More likely, Steve guessed, it had only led to Tony's lab. Pepper was probably behind this particular extension to what Tony called the 'Hulk Floor.'

Unlike the regular microwave Steve had had at his DC apartment, this microwave had room for both plates at the same time. Steve wouldn't have needed the less than discreet Stark Industries label on the front to know that it was one of Tony's inventions.

Even so, it took three minutes to warm the food gently, and those minutes were excruciating. Steve shifted his weight from one leg to the other, rested against the counter only to push back, crossed his arms, then uncrossed them when he remembered that it might read like closed body language. If there was anything Bucky must have been trained in besides silent and not so silent assassinations, it was how to read body language. That Steve was uncomfortable as hell had to come through clear as daylight anyway. When the soft ping of the microwave finally came, it felt like a salvation.

Steve opened the door and was greeted by the scent of fried bacon, eggs and hash browns. His stomach gurgled in appreciation. The plates weren't hot the way his plates back at his apartment had usually been, which hinted at another one of Tony's tweaks. Steve carried the two plates to the dining corner in the kitchen and placed them on the table.

"Sit, please. I'll get forks."

Bucky moved, quiet and slow, as if testing the waters. His chair scraped over the tiles when he pulled it out. He was still standing, looking at the two plates on the table when Steve returned.
"Sit," Steve repeated with a smile he hoped was inviting instead of forced and sat down himself. A frown line appeared between Bucky's eyebrows and Steve, realizing he'd sounded as if he was talking to a dog, added, "Or stay standing. Whatever you're comfortable with."

Something like confusion flickered over Bucky's face before the expression disappeared behind a blank mask again. He sat down though, which Steve counted as a win. Had Bucky ever been given any choices over the last seventy years? Had he been asked what he was comfortable with, what he wanted to do? Steve had a notion he knew the answer and the mere idea made the smell of the fried bacon turn nauseating. So many implications, so much pain and horror – it was almost worse now with Bucky here than it had been when he'd just had the file.

Steve forced his mind away from the darkening turn of his thoughts and shoveled some of the scrambled egg onto his fork.

"You look just like that time after I first made breakfast for you when we were fourteen and my mom was in the TB ward for the first time." Back then, Bucky had tried to brave a couple of forkfuls of the burnt and over salted egg until he'd gone white around the nose and Steve had saved him by spitting his own egg into his handkerchief. They had decided that Steve was banned from the kitchen after that. "I promise you, this one's edible, or Pepper wouldn't have sent it." He twitched a smile. "No half pound of salt in it."

Bucky didn't react, just stared at the food in front of him. A low whirring noise filled the kitchen and it took Steve a second to figure out that it was Bucky flexing and unflexing his artificial hand. He'd done that last night in his sleep, too.

Steve stopped with the fork halfway to his mouth, unwilling to start eating before Bucky did. The steep line between Bucky's brows was back in place. Steve let the fork sink back to the plate with a quiet clink of metal against porcelain.

He drew a deep breath and felt something in his stomach clench. "You don't remember, do you?"

"No."

Another deep breath and Steve pushed his plate aside a little. "What do you remember?"

That complicated mix of emotions flickered over Bucky's face again and the metal arm began to whirr louder. "Pain."

Ice settled in Steve's stomach and while one part of him desperately didn't want to go there, the other part that felt responsible for Bucky's fate needed to know. "From getting that?"

"I don't know," Bucky answered in a flat voice. "There a pictures. But they could be from missions." He paused, looked at the metal hand, then added, "I wake up with it every time."

Which meant that they had wiped Bucky's mind so thoroughly that each time he woke up, he had to rediscover he was an amputee anew. Steve had to lock his jaw to keep himself from shouting his dismay. All that had happened to Bucky, all those horrors, and it was all down to him.

Maybe it was masochism that made him ask the next question. "You really don't remember me at all?"

"No."

It felt as if the air had been punched out of his lungs and he couldn’t draw another breath. His eyes burned. Steve leaned back in his chair and turned his head so Bucky wouldn’t see the tears
threatening to spill.

Outside, the sun had crept over the horizon, dissipating the shadows in the room. The ones in his heart stayed, darkening by the second. "Sometimes I wish I didn't, either," he murmured under his breath, hoping Bucky wouldn't hear but needing to get the words off his tongue before he choked on them.

The screeching noise of Bucky's chair made him flinch and look back at the table. It sounded like a scream. "Don't." Bucky was standing, glaring at him with something far too much like hatred in his eyes, both hands clenched into tight fists, his chest rising and falling as if he'd just run a mile. "Don't say that."

And as much as Steve had just wished he could forget, that his ties to the past would just stop drowning him in a sea of loss and regret, he realized with a hot flush of horrified shame that he'd been wishing for what Bucky had suffered. "I wasn't --" Steve said, holding his hands up, palm out. "I didn't mean --" He had no idea how to make this right, how to undo the damage he must have just done. Besides that, he hadn't even been serious. If the choice was between having the memories of Bucky and the pain of having lost him and not ever having had Bucky in his life, he'd choose the pain every time. He rubbed his hands over his face and felt every minute he'd stayed awake the previous night. "I wouldn't," he said, looking Bucky straight in the eyes. "I never want to forget you."

Bucky's stance relaxed a little and Steve allowed himself a tiny breath of relief. And maybe, just maybe, this was the only chance he'd get to find out why Bucky had shown up in the tower. "Why did you come here if you don't remember me?"

"You're not Hydra," Bucky said. He didn't add anything, as if the statement was enough. And maybe it was. "Coming here was a pareto efficient decision."

Which was a condensed version of saying that Bucky was here not because he wanted to or had any ties to Steve, but because he knew Steve was the one person who would never sell him out to Hydra. No other decision would have left Bucky better off without risking his freedom. It was the brutally efficient way of thinking one would expect from a machine. Steve suppressed a shudder. He was sure Sam would have found a way to turn Bucky's words into something positive, but Steve had no idea how.

"Well, you need to eat," Steve said, trying to shake the feelings that were beginning to overwhelm him and change the subject. "It's not poisoned, I promise. I'll eat with you. Just... go ahead. Please. Eat."

Bucky's face shuttered. He picked up the fork with his metal hand, a perfunctory movement that made Steve shiver because it looked too much like Bucky was following an order. He shovelled egg and hash browns on his fork and ate mechanically, one forkful after the other. He barely chewed, just swallowed it down, but at least he was eating. Steve picked up his own fork and gave Bucky a shaky smile before starting on his own food once more.

Re-heated eggs weren't on the list of Steve's favourites, but the bacon and hash browns really were pretty good. "Not bad, right?" he asked when he saw half of the contents of Bucky's plate gone. If what Zola had done to him had had similar effects as Erskine's serum had on Steve, then Bucky had to be hungry. Even if he didn't look as if he enjoyed it, Steve was glad Bucky was eating.

Or he was until Bucky started to turn pale and bloodless around his nose and mouth. He breathed out through his nose and swallowed with visible difficulty. The fork clattered back on the plate.
"What's wrong?"

Bucky swallowed again, then ground out, "Sick, where – " He clapped his hand over his mouth and pushed back from the table, gagging.

Steve felt the blood drain from his face. "Bathroom's this way," he said, sprinting ahead of Bucky to open the door for him and push the toilet seat up. The heaving noises, though muted behind Bucky's hand, were getting to him too. His stomach felt queasy and he had to concentrate and swallow hard himself when Bucky crashed to his knees in front of the toilet and brought up everything he'd just eaten.

The vomiting went on until Steve was sure there couldn't possibly be anything left in Bucky's stomach except bile, but still Bucky heaved and heaved until finally he slumped and stilled; his cheek resting on the porcelain of the toilet bowl. Steve wet a soft washcloth and handed it to Bucky so he could wipe his mouth, but when he turned back, Bucky had already sat back up with his back against the wall. He was so pale the dark rings under his eyes looked like bruises and his lips barely had any colour left. His metal hand clenched and unclenched. The front of his hoodie was marred by saliva and vomit. His gaze flickered through the bathroom. Yet at the same time, he shook and looked so miserable Steve's heart clenched.

"Here," ignoring the air of latent danger in the room, Steve handed Bucky the washcloth and then flushed the toilet so the worst of the source of the sharp stench of vomit would be gone. A fan started up, pulling stale air out and pushing fresh air in. The odor still hung in the room, though, mixed with a now stomach-turning scent of fried eggs and bacon.

"You're cold," Steve stated because he had no idea what else to say. Should he apologise for trying to feed Bucky? It felt as if that was what he should do, but he was sure that Bucky wouldn't appreciate being reminded of food right now.

"If the Asset feels cold, recalibration is required," Bucky said, his voice flat and affectless.

Steve felt cold to the bone himself, gooseflesh rising on his arms and back. "Come on, let's get you warmed up," he said, trying to ignore what Bucky's words meant. He reached out a hand to Bucky.

Bucky just stared at it.

"A shower will make you feel better, I promise." It sounded so damn trivial, so helpless. Steve felt his shoulders slump when Bucky stayed where he was. "Please," he said, hearing his own voice crack. "Just please, let me help somehow."

It took Bucky another minute to give a tiny nod and get to his feet, but eventually, he did, ignoring Steve's hand.

Steve walked ahead of him to the wet room and for the first time since moving into the tower, the luxurious, downright hedonistic layout that usually always reminded him of a Roman bath house that had been updated with all the modern amenities didn't annoy him. All that mattered now was how this place could help Bucky feel at least a little better. Steve hesitated between the showers and the sauna area for a few seconds, but then decided that Bucky would want to get clean first. He could always broach the idea of the sauna later if Bucky was still cold after.

Steve waited at the entrance to the shower area and turned around to see if Bucky had followed him.

Bucky hesitated in the doorway, scanning the large, red marble room with something far too much...
"Like trepidation reflected in his eyes."

"It's a rainwater ceiling," Steve explained. "That's why there are no showerheads."

Bucky didn't move apart from the tremors that still hadn't stopped.

"You'll feel better, I promise. Jarvis can adjust the temperature to anything you're comfortable with," Steve said and added, thinking that that was what made Bucky hesitate, "I won't stay. If you need me, I'll be outside."

Bucky closed his arms around his midriff and stared at the ceiling. "Personal hygiene is imperative to keep the asset at peak performance levels." When he talked like that it was as if Bucky wasn't there at all.

Steve clenched his fists and breathed hard against the need to scream. "None of that. It'll just make you feel better. A nice, long, hot shower is one of the perks of the twenty-first century." Besides buying as many books as he could now and art supplies and his motorcycle, they were his favorite indulgence.

"Hot?" Bucky asked with a frown.

"Warm," Steve amended.

Confusion flickered over Bucky's face and Steve wondered if Bucky had ever known the luxury of a hot shower. Maybe in basic boot camp, but he doubted it.

"Come on, I'll show you," Steve said. He toed his shoes off and stepped into the shower area. "Jarvis, set the shower to 105°F for now. Rainwater. Gentle."

"May I remind you that you are still clothed, Captain Rogers?"

"I know," Steve said. He really couldn't care less. "Do it anyway."

"As you wish."

The water started its gentle decent slowly and with the sound of a soft afternoon rain falling. It took some time for the water to actually penetrate his clothes.

Bucky stood in the doorway and kept watching Steve get soaked, the clothes molding to his skin. Steve couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so damn awkward.

"Would you like to try it?" he offered, gesturing next to him.

Bucky looked uncertain, but moved eventually. Whether that was because he wanted to or because it was better not to argue, Steve couldn't tell, but it didn't matter, because Bucky was in the shower with him now. He flinched away from the water at first, but slowly relaxed when it registered that the water was indeed warm.

Steve couldn't help but wonder what other associations Bucky must have with showers, but clamped down on the thought before it could fully form. It was better not to go there now, not if he wanted to be any help to Bucky.

"There are several different kinds of soap and shampoo," he explained just to do something besides stare at the way the water plastered the hair to Bucky's skull. "This one," he pointed out a sleek transparent bottle with a pale green content, "is nice. It doesn't smell all flowery. Just nice and
clean."
The frown line between Bucky brows eased a little and he nodded as if he'd just remembered something. "Body odor attracts attention in covert situations. It is imperative to stay clean."

It was hard to breathe all of a sudden and Steve knew he had to get out before he emptied the contents of his own stomach on the floor. "I – " he took a deep breath. "I'll let you strip out of your clothes and leave you to shower in peace."

Bucky just shrugged and pulled off the hoodie and shirt in one fluid move. Both landed on the ground with a wet splotch. The matter-of-fact way in which Bucky began to strip out of his jeans next, even with Steve in the shower with him horrified Steve almost as much as the scars all along Bucky's chest and back did. He acted as if Steve had ordered him to strip…

Christ, Steve had to get out of here. "Privacy," he choked out. "You need some privacy."

The last thing he saw before he fled the wet rooms was Bucky closing his eyes and tipping his head back, his shoulders untensing.

*~*~*

Outside the wet rooms, Steve shivered his way through something far too close to shock for his liking before he got in the elevator and went to his own quarters to put on dry clothes.

It was only once he felt the worn softness of the shirt that he realised that Bucky wouldn't have anything to wear once he got out of the shower. Feeling stupid, he grabbed an armful of shirts and a pair of work-out pants from his closet. Most of his stuff would be too big on Bucky, but it was better than the dirty and bloodied clothes he'd been wearing before.

He took the stairs back up to the Hulk floor to burn some of the adrenaline floating in his veins, but when he got back to the wet rooms, the door was still in the same position as when he'd left the place and the sound of water running still filtered through the open door.

"How long has he been in there now, Jarvis?" he asked.

"The water has been running for precisely twenty-three minutes now, Captain Rogers," Jarvis answered.

"Is he all right?" Concern flared, hot and bright.

"I do not monitor the wet rooms, Sir, but I have not detected any sounds suggesting otherwise."

As if on cue, the sound of the water stopped and Bucky padded out of the shower area, naked as Mother Nature made him with just the wet bundle of clothes in his hands covering his modesty.

Steve averted his eyes. "There are towels and bathrobes just to your left," he said, placing the dry clothes next to the indicated items.

Bucky sat the clothes on the floor, reached out for one of the smaller towels and began to dry himself with a brisk efficiency that left the skin of his human arm looking red despite the softness of the towel.

When Steve bent to pick up the wet bundle, the sound of the towel moving over skin and metal stopped. Steve straightened to see what was wrong. Bucky's face, which had been relaxed when he'd stepped out of the shower area was closed down again, tense and uncomfortably close to
hostile. His gaze flickered to the clothes in Steve's hand, then to the bundle on the bench next to the towels and back to the wet clothes.

"I brought you dry clothes," Steve said, clenching his hand around the clothes as if they were his shield in the face of Bucky's quiet, unsettling scrutiny.

Bucky didn't answer, just kept looking at the clothes in Steve's hand. He was so eerily still, not one muscle tightening, that when the movement came, Steve's heart began to beat double time in apprehension. Bucky reached out the metal hand and grabbed the clothes in Steve's hands. Startled, Steve didn't let go. Water dripped to his feet from where they both clenched their hands in the wet fabric.

"What?" he asked, suddenly feeling defensive on top of the confusion. "They're wet and dirty. You can't wear those."

Bucky flinched and stiffened, almost didn't let go, then his face blanked, his hand fell away and Steve was left holding the dripping jeans and hoodie and feeling like he just took a wrong turn. That look Bucky gave him... that was the expression of a man dying of thirst letting go of the only cup of water in the desert. And Bucky didn't fight for it, he just... let go. Like he expected some kind of punishment for displaying even a hint of defiance, of wanting something.

Cold sweat formed on Steve's brow. What had just happened? "The clothes I brought you are dry," he babbled. He only meant well. He only ever meant well. "They're probably a little too big on you, but they're all I have. We'll get you more stuff. Today. We can get it delivered."

"Sir instructed me to direct you to several online shopping options, Captain," Jarvis said. "He anticipated that clothing would be necessary among other items. He is currently in the lab and has a meeting with several design engineers specializing in hospitals and surgical suites scheduled for later today."

"Mission issue." Bucky stated, voice flat and accepting, relaxing his stance into something like parade rest.

When the realization of what had just happened finally sunk in, Steve wanted to smack himself upside the head hard enough even the Hulk's teeth would have rattled. He'd been about to discard the one thing that was Bucky's since leaving Hydra. Even the weapons he wore were still Hydra, and they were the Winter Soldier's weapons, not Bucky's. Only the clothes were his, much like the shield and uniform Steve wore after the ice had been the only thing that had been his – and really, it had been Captain America's, not his. And just like nothing SHIELD had given him had ever felt truly like his own until he had started buying his own clothes and books, the clothes Steve had just offered to Bucky must feel just as alien, just as 'provided'.

He had literally been about to take away the only thing that was Bucky's and only Bucky's, that held no memories except for the ones he'd made himself. Steve planted his feet more firmly on the ground to keep himself from swaying. "I'll bring them back," he said, nearly tripping over his own words in his haste. "I know they belong to you. I'll just have them cleaned. Once they're dry, you'll get them back. Just wear mine in the meantime." Bucky's body language suggested that he still considered Steve's words more of a command than a question, so Steve hurried to add, "If that's all right with you." He took a deep breath, feeling clumsy and bumbling. "You can keep them, I'll still give you the other ones back. Just cleaned." He added, helpless, "So you'll feel better."

Bucky raised his human hand, let it hover over the wet fabric one last time, then gave a barely perceptible nod and pushed the bundle at Steve.
Steve's shoulders sagged with relief and he closed his eyes for a few seconds, giving a mental five-count. When he opened them again, Bucky had slipped into the workout pants and was holding the faded blue t-shirt in his metal hand. His human fingers stroked over the worn, oft-washed fabric while his gaze appeared distant, as if he wasn't even aware of what he was doing. When Steve shifted his weight from one foot to the other, however, Bucky's gaze snapped back to him, one quick, alert flash of the intense blue irises that had haunted Steve's dreams in countless nights since Bucky fell.

"These are yours?" Bucky's voice was hoarse and soft.

"Yeah," Steve answered, glad that Bucky was talking again.

"Why?"

Steve frowned, unsure what Bucky was aiming at. "Because I bought them."

Bucky shook his head, looking impatient for the blink of an eye. "Why are you giving them to me?" he clarified.

"What's mine has always been yours, Bucky." Steve twitched a wry smile as he remembered their youth in Brooklyn. "And it's nice that you can actually wear my clothes now."

"I'm not him," Bucky said, quiet but insistent.

Steve breathed against the sharp pain that suddenly spread out in his chest and shook his head. "Doesn't matter. You needed something and I could give it to you. That's really all there is to it."

Bucky gave him a thoughtful look as he pulled the shirt and the sweatshirt on.

It seemed to take him a while to choose the words, but eventually he said, "Thank you." And with those two words, Steve thought that he might just be forgiven.
Chapter 4

James

James sat and watched as Banner fed a variety of vegetable matter into the blender sitting on the granite counter top before starting it. The grinding blare of it made him want to grab the blender and throw it through a window, so he stayed as still as possible, only the in and out of his breathing stirring him. Sniper still.

Banner let his finger up on the blender control and snapped another glance at James. "Maybe this one will taste better," he muttered.

The smell of fresh fruit filled the kitchen. Bright sun flooded the room, almost too bright, but James appreciated it. The light was so different from the clinical fluorescent bulbs that hung bare from the ceilings in the hidden Hydra bases where the Asset had been kept between missions and cryostasis. His memories of those were an amalgam of places, none of them memorable, none of them important enough to erase. They'd usually smelled of mold, James thought suddenly, mold and cordite and fear. The sharp scents of citrus and mint were infinitely preferable.

He could tolerate Banner and his blender and even the 'smoothies' Banner kept creating for him.

James eyed the green-spotted contents and doubted it would taste better than any of the others, though. He didn't see why it mattered anyway. He would choke down whatever nutrients he had to in order to maintain his body.

Banner poured the drink into a tall glass, garnished it with a sprig of mint, and pushed it down the counter to James. Three dirty glasses, mostly full, testified to his failing efforts to make something James liked. The pink one with the beets stood completely full and untouched; just the smell had made James gag.

"Mango mint," Banner said.

James picked up the glass. He'd watched Banner prepare all the ingredients, so he knew the drink wasn't drugged. That made it easier to try. This one at least didn't smell horrible.

Banner watched him warily. James knew he made the other man uncomfortable. He didn't understand why. Out of anyone in the Avengers Tower, Banner was safest. Even if James reverted to the Asset's programming, Banner would survive. No one had found any way to kill the Hulk and efforts to take Banner out in non-Hulk form only brought out the green alter ego.

He sipped the smoothie cautiously. Aside from ginger ale and some of these things, nothing else has stayed down since he arrived at the Tower. Nothing has tasted good. James doubted anything ever would.

He didn't care. Compared to the hot showers – he's already indulged twice since getting out of the bed in the guest room, which was another revelation with its airy sheets and warm blankets – the clean, soft clothes, the hope that he'd found a safe haven from Hydra for at least a little while, food meant little. It was just fuel.

This one was alright, James decided. He didn't want to listen to the blender any more, so he drank the rest, slow sips with long pauses between, judging whether his stomach would tolerate any more. When he set the empty glass down, he said, "It's fine."
"Okay, good, that's a relief," Banner said. He ruffled his hair in a habitual gesture. His gaze moved from James to the glasses to the mess on the kitchen counter and back to James. "I'll make up some more of that. Put it in the refrigerator for you."

James waited, sensing Banner had more to say.

"You need to build up your strength as much as possible. I don't know how Tony will manage it, but he's promised to have an entire medical wing, including a high tech surgical wing, built in a month."

Banner began cleaning up. He kept the counter between him and James, the way he had since he'd begun. James catalogued everything he did. If there was a next time, James would do the clean up. He kept his expression blank and remained motionless otherwise. That was how the Hydra scientists and his handlers preferred him. Maybe it was what Banner wanted as well.

"Do you understand?" Banner asked a little impatiently.

"Yes."

Banner flinched. "God, this is just... this just isn't good."

"I make you nervous," James said. "Why?"

Banner stilled himself before finally answering. "I spend my life controlling my temper. One of the ways I do that is to maintain a routine. You... upset that."

James thought threaten would have been a more apt description. He understood, though. Banner was being helpful in order to control the situation. Banner did not mean James harm, but he wanted James gone. He nodded once, accepting the situation. Banner was even less an ally than Stark, who also wished James gone because his presence posed a possible threat to Pepper Potts, whether through James reverting or Hydra attacking.

He filed that knowledge away, along with Sam Wilson's caution around him, and once again came to the conclusion that the only one he could rely on, even partially, was Captain America. James didn't know yet if that would change once the Captain accepted that James was no longer Bucky or not. He could only hope that Captain America remained his advocate with the rest of the Avengers until Hydra's explosives were removed from his body. James could disappear afterward.

Banner was looking at him, expecting more of a response.

"Okay," James said. He didn't hold Banner's reaction against him. It was only sensible.

Banner sighed. "All right."

*~*~*~*

He thrashed, everything but his head. He couldn't move his head, the clamps immobilized him. Instead, he arched out of the chair and broke the restraints holding his arms down. The Arm smashed into a tech's face, the bones of his skull breaking under its unforgiving force. He kicked another guard as the man approached and knocked the taser from his hands. He broke one of the man's wrists at the same time. He would have snarled his triumph if he could have opened his mouth, but his jaw was in a vice, his teeth sunk into bitter rubber mouthguard. Instead, he slid his gaze to side and darted his flesh hand out to lock around the throat of the nearest doctor. The round glasses perched on the man's nose were like the man he associated with the ache in his bones, the emptiness in his memories, the Arm that was steadily tearing a section of the chair closest to him.
into pieces. He tightened his fingers and let himself enjoy the way the doctor's eyes went wide and
blind with pain, the way his ruthless grip closed the man's throat and made his face go red, while
ignoring the scrabble of helpless fingers trying to tear his hand loose. The tech might not die and
the guard would recover, but nothing would make him let go of the doctor until he stopped
breathing.

He squeezed and squeezed but the doctor wouldn't die. His glasses glinted white reflections from
the overhead lights. Pain stabbed through his body and the doctor smiled.

"Sergeant Barnes...," the doctor whispered.

His hand opened and let go against his will. He stared at its chrome-bright fingers and the Arm
whirred, hydraulics opening and closing its fist. His hand was gone. His real hand was gone. He
held his arms up and they were both the same, shining metal wet and red with a sheen of blood –

James jolted awake. He ripped the blanket and sheet away and held up his flesh hand. It hadn't
been real. Nightmare. Reluctantly, he raised the Arm and studied it too. Dim light from the city
outside the window with its closed curtain gleamed off the weaponized prosthesis. It whirred as he
made a fist. It had been a nightmare. A nightmare he couldn't wake up from.

His real hand was shaking. All of him was shaking, except the Arm, and he was soaked in fear
sweat. The sheets were too.

James staggered to his feet. The bed offered no comfort now. If he went to sleep again, he'd just
fall back into the nightmare.

He fled to the wet room. If he couldn't sleep, he could still be warm and clean. The Captain had
assured him there was no limit to how many times or for how long he could shower. As he left the
bedroom the lights came on, low and easy on his dark adapted eyes. He stripped off the t-shirt and
sweatpants he'd been given to sleep in, dropped them and stepped inside the shower room.

He couldn't remember how the Captain had set the shower though. With a soft curse under his
breath, James leaned his face against the tiled wall. If he could just calm down enough, it would
come back to him.

"May I be of any aid, James?" The AI's quiet voice still made James flinch and spin around,
searching for a threat. He had to forcibly regulate his breathing. Adrenalin from the nightmare still
had his body on edge. "Were you intending to take a shower?"

"Yes," James managed to say. He'd forgotten about the ever-present AI.

"I can both activate the shower and adjust the temperature and pressure if you like," Jarvis offered.
"Do you have a preference?"

James stared up at the ceiling with its wide, circular shower opening. So different than being hosed
down with stinging cold water. "Hot," he blurted out. He hoped it would help him feel warmer.

"Perhaps if we began with the setting Captain Rogers used and adjust from there?"

"Hotter," James decided immediately. He was still shivering and the flash of memory from his last
decant from cryo hadn't helped. A tech had used freezing water under high pressure to rinse the
semi-toxic hibernation suspension fluid off the Asset, while he stood and endured. Shivering had
not been allowed. "And... softer." The Captain had said he could have that and Jarvis had asked
him to choose.
The water began pattering down from the ceiling, not like a shower so much as a soft rainfall and
the humid heat reached James where he stood.

"I've reduced the shower to minimum pressure," Jarvis said, "and set the water temperature five
degrees higher than Captain Roger's default setting. Is that acceptable?"


"I can discontinue audio monitoring as well as video in the wet room if you would prefer," Jarvis
went on. "You would still have access to the manual touchscreen controls."

"Why?" James asked. Jarvis answered questions and made suggestions. That was much better than
manual controls.

"Many people are disturbed to interact with me while undressed."

"I'm not." The body was a weapon that needed to be maintained. Hygiene was maintenance.
Sometimes it required the presence of a technician, handler, or doctor. None of them had ever
cared that the Asset was naked. He frowned. The Captain had been uncomfortable when James
stripped his clothes off, though.

Maybe Jarvis objected?

"Does it bother you?" James asked.

"I am unburdened by body shame, lacking a body," Jarvis answered, "and inquire only in regard to
yourself."

"Okay. Don't go away."

"I shall not."

James took a deep breath and stepped into the water. The tension in his shoulders and back gave
way after a moment and he let his head hang forward, enjoying the gentle touch of the warm water
over his body.

"Thank you," he told Jarvis.

"It is my pleasure to be of help," Jarvis replied. "While I do not monitor the bedrooms unless so
requested, I did notice that you exited yours precipitously. If you are having difficulties sleeping
the media center might provide a satisfactory distraction."

Jarvis had a soothing tone to its – his? – voice. James liked that he didn't react to James the way
everyone else did. With no body, there were no flinches or tensed muscles that told of the readiness
to respond to James with a counter-attack every time he moved too fast.

"Jarvis," James asked, "do you prefer 'he' or some other pronoun?"

"While I possess no sexual characteristics or reproductive instincts," Jarvis replied, "I use a
masculine identification in conjunction to my name. Most of those interacting with me are more
comfortable using it as well."

"Okay."

James tipped his head back and slicked his hair away from his face. His back and shoulders ached,
the way they always did, pain running down his spine and into his legs. It was better than usual
though as his muscles loosened up.

"The media center has been loaded with a comprehensive selection of period entertainment," Jarvis mentioned.

James grimaced. He didn't want to hide in the past he didn't remember.

"Jarvis, why don't you just tell me about stuff instead," he requested.


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Sam

Sam ambled into the open plan kitchen intending to make himself a sandwich for lunch. Not just any sandwich, either, but a damn fine, even exceptional sandwich, because a kitchen as nice as the one on the Avenger's floor of the tower deserved to be used. He wasn't selfish either; Sam was more than happy to make a sandwich or five for anyone else who wanted one too. He'd knocked on Steve's door and got the lack of response he'd expected. A quick glance into the common room meant for all the Avengers showed him it was empty too. No surprise. For the last week, Steve had spent every moment he could on the Hulk floor.

They still ran together every morning. Couldn't shake that military training and the habit of getting up before the ass-crack of dawn.

Or, just as likely, Steve was awake from some crappy dream, just like Sam was half of the time.

Sam had a whole slew of new nightmares since meeting Captain America. Before, he'd dreamed of Riley getting shot down. Now he relived the visceral terror that flashed through his body as the Winter Soldier ripped his wing off and he... or when jumped from the Triskelion as it was torn apart. Only in his nightmares half the time it was that Strike Team prick – Rumlow according to Steve and Natasha – who tore off his wings and tossed him from the window and Fury wasn't there with a helicopter to save him.

Sam understood why Rumlow took the Winter Soldier's part in his nightmares. Malevolence leaves a stain and Rumlow hadn't been trying to hide his sadistic nature when Sam encountered him. Rumlow was scarier than a human killing machine, because Rumlow had fooled Steve and Natasha. He'd fought beside them and they hadn't known what he really was. That level of betrayal disturbed the psyche at a very basic level.

He started the single cup coffee maker and set out to find what he had to work with when it came to making his proposed a sandwich. He enjoyed the coffee while he made his decisions. First question he had to answer for himself was hot or cold? Hot, he decided. Panini style. Just as Sam had figured, there was a panini maker among the rest of the kitchen gadgets. It wouldn't be that hard to make three or four extras, he decided. Might as well since he was going to heat the thing up and get it dirty. Didn't feel right to do that for just one sandwich. He'd eat his then take the rest down to Steve on the Hulk floor. Maybe 'James' could be persuaded to try one. Sam made a kick-ass sandwich. His mother was a goddess in the kitchen and he was no slouch himself thanks to her.

He doubted Mama would approve of his Corned Beef and Grilled Cheese with Guinness Caramelized Onions. Mama believed in greens in her sandwiches. The closest these babies came to anything green was when Sam cooked them up on St. Patrick's Day.
She'd already called him four times since he'd let her know he was back in New York. It wasn't that Sam was avoiding her, either. He looked forward to seeing her, sitting down to one of her heavenly dinners, and just getting the hell out of the tower pressure cooker for a few hours. He just wasn't sure how to deal with the invitation to bring Steve along for Sunday's meal.

He opened a couple different pantry doors and found the onions. All the onions, ever, Sam laughed to himself. Red, white, and yellow. Green. Big, medium, small. Pearl. Pickled. Fried. Shallots. Garlic. Chives. "What, no Funyons?" he asked under his breath.

"I believe they are stored in the snack food pantry," Jarvis answered. Sam jumped about a foot in the air.

"Damn, man."

"My apologies, Mr. Wilson." He swore the AI was silently snickering at him.

Sam decided to be the bigger man and ignored the AI.

He was a classics man, so he decided he'd use the Vidalias. The sweeter the better, he could hear Mama telling him the first time he'd stood next to her at the stove cooking onions until they were golden and perfect. He cherished every minute he'd spent learning to cook from and with his mother. All her food tasted like love to him.

He felt like a few hours in the warm bubble of his mother's care would help Steve. Steve didn't have anyone in his life to act like a mother toward him after all. But, damn, what if Sam was wrong? What if dinner with Mom was just enough of a taste of what he'd lost that it left Steve feeling worse. What if it just reminded Steve his mom was gone. Bucky's mom was gone too and from a couple things Steve had said, Mrs. Barnes had mothered him as much as a proud kid would allow after Steve's own mother passed.

Sam took the papery outer skin off the onions, then paused. Crap. He rubbed his face. He supposed Steve had mourned his mother before becoming Captain America. He needed to do a little due diligence and find out when Steve's mother died. Maybe where she was buried.

It wouldn't be snooping. Mama was after him to visit his dad's grave site. She said it would give him some closure. Maybe a chance to leave some flowers for his mother would help Steve. First Sam had to find out if it was even possible.

Besides, he'd need to pry Steve away from James' side. Sam thought Steve was taking his devotion about ten miles too far, but he also knew there were some things he wasn't ever going to shift Steve's stance on. Being there for 'Bucky' was number one right now.

Another end of the world, alien invasion would get Steve out there, but that was about it. Sam sighed as he picked out a knife and a chopping board and began slicing the onions. Back when he met Steve, he'd found it easy to like the guy and become friends with him. Steve was a great guy and his genuineness showed through in all his interactions. Maybe because of that Sam had still felt a little – maybe more than a little – in awe of him. It was easy to idolize Steve.

It wasn't quite so easy to be Steve's friend, it turned out. The man had no give, no sway, when it came to anything he believed in.

Steve believed in Bucky Barnes and a nuke wouldn't budge him from the conviction he could save him.

But about all Steve could do for this deeply damaged version of Bucky was sit in the same room
with him, silently being there, and Sam wasn't much better off when it came to finding ways to help Steve deal with his traumas.

Sam put one of the copper-bottomed sauté pans onto the stove and started it heating. A generous knob or two of unsalted butter went into the pan. It was easier with olive oil, but the onions never colored up as nice or got as sweet as with butter.

He had to keep reminding himself that Steve came from a different time. Not in the obvious, seventy years on ice way, but in that Steve thought in different patterns than Sam did. There were things that Sam grew up taking as obvious truths and things Steve believed and did and they weren't necessarily the same at all. Steve didn't look down on people who sought psychiatric help, but that was because Steve was a consciously tolerant guy. Steve was still a guy who grew up believing it meant you were weak or crazy to need that kind of help. Steve figured he could tough just about anything out, that you didn't bleed on other people.

The thing was, Sam wanted to yell at him, no one was asking Steve to bleed on them, just to let them stitch him up.

He wondered grumpily if Bucky had been better at handling Steve. Probably. Bucky had been dealing with younger, spindly Steve. Plus, even after Steve got turned into a buff icon of masculinity, Bucky had had childhood history as ammunition in dealing with the hardheaded idiot. Sam snorted to himself. He'd bet Steve hadn't thought about that once in his fantasy of James getting Bucky's memories back. Sam thought it would be hilarious, even if he knew that it was damned unlikely.

What the hell was Steve going to do when he figured out he was fooling himself about James? That pleasant illusion was keeping Steve going for now, but just barely. Sam could see the frayed edges and wondered how the rest of the Avengers hadn't.

It sort of put the whole superhero-ing thing in perspective. He worried a little about how he'd fit in with super soldiers, gods, assassins, spies, geniuses and rage monsters, but while Natasha was intimidating as hell, Sam hadn't seen one of them yet that didn't need a standing every other day appointment with a shrink. Maybe he'd never fly again – it didn't seem likely that the government would be reactivating the Falcon program and sending him a new set of wings after all – but he figured he had a place with the Avengers just as the voice of sanity.

He could be Sam Wilson, Common Sense Man.

Pepper Potts couldn't do it all: Stark was a full time job all by himself and she was running Stark Industries at the same time. Yeah, that relationship proved Sam's point about everyone in the tower needing psychiatric care, including Pepper.

Of course, Sam had no intention of spending all his time with the Avengers or becoming their therapist. He had his job with the VA to get back to doing. He'd just be doing it from an office in New York instead of one in DC. All things being equal and no gods, aliens, or terrorists attacking somewhere in the world and requiring the Avengers, such as they were at the moment, Sam would be starting at his new location in two weeks.

He opened the giant refrigerator and took out the corned beef he'd spotted on his look through. While he was there, he pulled out the cheddar cheese too. His stomach grumbled in happy anticipation. He was going to have to run an extra mile in the morning.

It would be worth it. That was what you had to keep in mind. Important things were worth putting in some extra effort. Like sticking with the VA job instead becoming the Avengers pet counselor.
It was important, just as important, to keep helping his fellow soldiers. Sam considered it a calling and one he was proud of fulfilling. Working with vets meant he could look his mother in the eye and swear he was doing good in the world. He'd be doing good with the Avengers, but he wasn't going to be their on-call counselor. He was already too close to Steve for that and it wouldn't be long until he had personal biases toward all the rest of them. A good counselor had to have a little objective distance from his clients, had to balance concern with detachment, for their sakes and his.

Sometimes it wasn't even counseling them about the trauma they'd endured serving. Sometimes it meant sitting down with a frustrated vet and talking him or her through the gimmicks and tricks it took to make the recalcitrant systems cough up what it owed every soldier. The damned bureaucracy could be as traumatizing as combat when you were sick and running on your last nerve.

Sam was never prouder than when he'd helped someone get the help they needed.

He just didn't know what Steve needed. He knew what Steve wanted: Bucky back. But that was a fantasy that wasn't going to come true, no matter what. Sam could see that with every interaction Steve had with James.

He snagged three bottles of Guinness and set them out for when he'd add it to the onions. It seemed like a lot, even to him, but he was cooking a lot of onions. Worcestershire and mustard, couldn't do it without either of those either.

It would be easy to say James was going to disappoint Steve, but it wouldn't be fair to James or the truth. Steve was going to disappoint Steve. His assumptions were going to be shattered once more and it scared Sam that it might be more than Steve's determination and optimism could handle finally. Would Steve end up with a trauma-based worldview?

Damn, it hurt Sam to think of that happening.

Bread, bread, which bread to use, he debated and went with the rich, dark rye the same way he did every time.

Sam considered all the crap Steve had been through and what to do about it – what do you do about a problem like Maria, he half sang under his breath – while he added the Guinness to the onions at measured intervals, eventually followed by the mustard and Worcestershire. Stark kept the kitchen in the Avengers common floor and the Hulk floor stocked with anything and everything, all of it the best quality Sam had seen in New York outside his mother's own garden fresh produce. The kitchen equipment was just as good. Whatever anyone didn't like about Tony Stark, no one could accuse the guy of being a miser.

He sliced the corned beef, the cheese and the bread, layered it all together with the onions so generously he wondered if the panini maker's lid was going to close over the first sandwich. He fixed up the others while the first one cooked.

He loaded the extra sandwiches onto a plate and covered them with some plastic, put away everything he could and opened himself a Guinness. He sipped that and ate his own sandwich over the sink, reading the New York Times digital edition on the screen mounted over the back-splash. Living in Stark's tower was enough to make Sam feel like he'd moved into the future, he thought as he commanded, "Next page," and the screen obligingly obeyed, then split to show him a linked article and a list of sources cited when he asked for them.

When he'd finished his sandwich, Sam began cleaning up the prep area. He finished his beer and put the bottle in the recycle bin, ran the garbage disposal, rinsed his plate and put it in the
dishwasher and wiped down the counters. The shiny dark marble had a few milky looking smears when he finished, so he grabbed a couple of paper towels and dried it to a nice sheen.

He opened the garbage can to drop the damp paper towels and glanced down automatically, just to check the garbage wasn't overflowing, just a habit, or he wouldn't have seen the crumpled art sketchbook shoved into it.

Sam fished the sketchbook out with a frown. He'd seen Steve with it a few times. Steve had closed it when Sam walked in, so he'd presumed it was a private thing and kept his questions to himself.

Garbage, though, was fair game.

"Awww, Steve," Sam muttered as he went through the sketchbook.

Steve clearly had a buttload of talent. The kind of talent that should have seen him in art school, eventually working on Madison Avenue, or having his own damn gallery showings, and not tromping through the mud of Europe then and saving the world now. But the pictures in the book gave away more than Steve would ever say. Half of them had been abandoned, the charcoal lines pressed too hard or dark where a delicate touch would have been natural or jittering across the paper and smeared where Steve's hands had been shaking. Sam could see it in his mind. And the subjects were just as telling, horrible glimpses of Steve's war and Steve's losses, young faces crumpling into wrinkled death masks, the Winter Soldier's muzzled visage, eyes dead and hollow, Nick Fury, chest bared in a surgical theater, a heart monitor flatlined above him, a beautiful woman in an old-fashioned uniform who had to be Peggy Carter, another of her in a dress just as dated and absolutely sexy, her hair loose and curled, but her beautiful features ravaged by age. Some of the pages were worse, unrecognizable as anything, just harsh, jagged marks carved into the heavy paper.

No wonder Steve had trashed the sketchbook. The farther Sam got through it, the more the sketches, all unfinished, gave way to frustrated, random lines. Steve wasn't even able to draw as an outlet.

Art therapy had been something Sam had thought about suggesting to Steve, but now he knew it would have been a disastrous mistake. For the average person, whether they could scratch out only a stick figure or do better, the therapy was satisfying because they could let things out in picture forms that they couldn't talk about. But for an artist, doing that would likely only lead to more frustration, because as far as Sam could tell, artists were never satisfied with anything, not really, they always saw how their work wasn't as good as they'd meant it to be. Art therapy wasn't about art, after all.

Sam scowled at the sketchbook, then shoved it deeper into the garbage can. He didn't regret the invasion of privacy, it had provided him with an insight into Steve's mental state he hadn't had before, but he wasn't going to disrespect Steve's desire to get rid of it.

After some thought, Sam went back to his quarters and dug through one of the boxes filled with things from his home office. He hadn't unpacked yet, but Steve had labeled and numbered each box meticulously, taped a list of contents to it, and kept a notebook with a copy of each list. It meant Sam had no trouble finding what he wanted.

He carried an empty journal and a fountain pen his aunt had given him for Christmas back to Steve's place. The door, when he tried it, was unlocked. Sam ducked inside and left the journal and pen on the coffee table next to the TV remote with a simple note: Try writing it down instead? He didn't bother signing it.
Then he went down stairs, picked up the plate of sandwiches, and took them to the Hulk floor.

Later tonight, he'd try that number Natasha left with him. She'd worked with Steve the most. Sam hoped she'd have some ideas on how to help him. Or least some advice on how not to make things worse for him.

He hoped James wasn't just sitting and glaring at Steve, the way he had been the last couple of days. Though Sam couldn't blame the guy. He'd asked to be called James and Steve kept calling him Bucky, kept asking him to remember stuff he didn't, and kept bugging him to eat stuff that kept making him sick, while keeping him locked up in a tower.

Yeah, Steve was setting himself up for a hurting. Sam just hoped he'd let someone help him out when it all went to hell.

Steve

He knew it was creepy – Tony had told him so and Sam had sort of made a face that said he agreed but didn't want to say so in front of Tony – the way he watched Bucky all the time. *James*, Tony and Sam and Pepper and Bruce chorused in his head, but asleep, he was all Bucky to Steve. He could fantasize that when he woke up, it would be Bucky blinking long lashes over his pale eyes and looking at Steve with the beginning of a smile.

It wouldn't. James might be curled in one of the extra stuffed, extra sized chairs Tony had brought in to the Hulk Chamber, a blanket from the bedroom wrapped around him, the sun picking out gold in the dark spill of his hair and the scruff on his jaw and cheeks, looking harmless as a kitten, but when he woke he'd be blank-faced and drawn taut with tension again. After a minute, the wildness would fade into wariness and James would just squint a little suspiciously at Steve.

Steve knew the watching bothered James. He just couldn't stop himself. And he told himself it was okay, that Bucky was in there somewhere, or Steve's presence would snap him awake.

Which wasn't true. James didn't always wake up for any of them. Sam had explained that James was sleeping so much because his brain was healing along with his body, knitting together decades of Hydra's ill-use, making up for never getting a chance to sleep and make sense of his experiences before being wiped and stuffed into a cryotube again.

It didn't reassure Steve that much though. Bucky had been energetic, even annoying, always wanting to do something when they were kids. James was practically hibernating.

Steve pushed aside the interior voice that pointed out Bucky had been far less wild in his ways during the war, that the bruised look of permanent exhaustion had never erased itself from his face after Steve rescued him and the others from Hydra's work camp.

He tried to memorize the lines of Bucky's face now. It hurt, realizing his memories of Bucky had been blurring before he was faced with the Winter Soldier. He'd remembered Bucky's eyes were blue, but not the exact gray-blue or the way the light caught in them. He'd remembered Bucky's cocky smile but lost the exact curve of his lips.

The most frustrating thing was Steve still couldn't draw him. He'd open his sketchbook and try and the lines would waver, no matter how hard he pressed the charcoal or his pencil to the paper. He'd ripped more than one sheet.
Everything he drew was disappointing. He usually kept his sketchbooks, liked to look back through them for ideas or just to remind himself of why he'd drawn something, but the last one he'd stuffed in the garbage.

Bucky sighed and pulled his blanket tighter over his shoulder. Steve sat back in his chair and watched, hoping he wasn't falling into a nightmare. Bucky just settled lower in the chair, though, his eyes still beneath the fine skin of his eyelids, too deep in sleep to even dream.

Steve found himself envying that.
Chapter 5

Steve

Of course, Tony followed Steve into the elevator. He kept talking as it took them to the Hulk floor too, not pausing once the doors opened, either.

"Look, I know you're worried about the Red Menace. And I don't mean that in an insulting way. But all of these people were on the Insight list. I think you can take that to mean they aren't Hydra."

"I'm not worried about them being Hydra," Steve lied. He was. He couldn't bear the idea of one of them getting near Bucky again. How would he ever get Bucky to trust him if that happened?

He glanced around the living room area. Maybe Bucky was in the bedroom. Bruce had cleared all of his things out of the armored and, luckily, insulated rooms Tony had designed into the Hulk Chamber and they'd moved Bucky in. Which had meant showing him the bedroom and introducing him to various control interfaces since Bucky had nothing.

"Right," Tony drawled. "I just want you to know I've got Hill and Jarvis on background checking everyone who passed the first cut."

"That's not enough."

He checked the kitchen, though he had no hope Bucky would be in there. So far, Bruce's smoothies, plain oatmeal, and ginger ale were the extent of things Bucky was keeping down. Steve had a feeling even those weren't sitting that well; they just didn't send Bucky running for the bathroom the way anything else they'd persuaded him to try had.

God, Steve hoped Bucky wasn't in the bathroom, throwing up again. "Jarvis, where's – "

"James is in the bedroom, Captain Rogers," Jarvis replied.

"Right, so let's get this straight before you go make heart-eyes at Rip Van Winkle," Tony said.

Steve spun and glared at Tony. As usual, his disapproval had no effect on Tony. He just arched his eyebrows, expression expectant and amused.

"Come on, I've got one hundred people on this list and we need to narrow it down."

"I'm not a doctor."

"Neither am I, but we're both pretty good pretentious asshole detectors. Me, I can spot them even on paper." Tony waved the Starkpad in his hand, glanced at it, and added, "Well, you know what I mean."

"I don't care how big their egos are if they can help Bucky," Steve said.

Tony headed for the sofa and chairs arrangement in the main room. "Hey, I've got nothing against a good ego, but we don't want anyone who's compelled to brag, right? This is all hush-hush. Sooner or later, some government busybody is going to figure out we've got the Manchurian Candidate here, but later is always better."
Steve hadn't considered that, though he should have. He still had difficulty grasping the extent to which modern Americans lived with state-sponsored invasions of privacy. Without considerable expertise and finances, disappearing and becoming a new person was impossible. You could go off the grid, but that precluded any kind of 'normal' existence. There was no way to hide Bucky's presence in the Avengers Tower for long unless they held him prisoner and even then questions about who was in the Hulk Chamber would be raised sooner or later.

As far as Steve was concerned, Bucky had been a prisoner, a torture victim, and everything he'd done as the Winter Soldier had been without his consent, but there was no guarantee the rest of the world would see it that way. Even if Tony and Pepper's spin masters persuaded the public to the Bucky's side, they'd be faced with the government sooner or later.

Tony was right again. Later would be better. If worst came to worst, if Steve had to take Bucky and run, then Bucky needed to be healthy and free of anything Hydra or anyone else could use to track them.

Tony dropped down on the sofa, making Steve wince. His mother always told him to be careful of the furniture and that was before the serum buffed him up. Even when he was careful now, a lot of chairs creaked under his weight. Without glancing up from the Starkpad in his hand, Tony patted the cushion next to him with the other. "Take a load off. It's all reinforced."

Steve sat. Carefully. The sofa didn't groan. Tony grinned.

"Jarvis, put the first file up on the monitor."

"Of course, sir," the AI said.

"This is Jayanti. She's a nurse, so like your mom, right?" Tony nodded to himself without waiting for Steve to confirm that. "Surgical nurse, in fact. Went to Oxford and her family has been in Scotland longer than the Rogers have been in the US. – Jarvis, show her CV."

They went through Tony's list of doctors and nurses steadily.

"There are only ten Americans on this list."

"Yeah, most of the qualified Americans have some kind of tie to an agency, or student loans they're still paying off, except Hu. No one on this list has much in the way of family that could be threatened or anything anyone like Hydra or the CIA could use as leverage against them," Tony explained. "We'll background check their families and associates back a couple generations once we narrow it down to twenty or so."

"Dr. Alan Perkins ex-wife is a Hydra plant," Bucky said.

Tony jumped and Steve barely suppressed a flinch himself. Bucky was sitting still and silent in the chair to the left of the sofa, the one that faced the windows and provided a sight-line to the kitchen and the corridor to the elevator. Steve hadn't heard him come in or sit down. He had no idea how long Bucky had been watching and listening to him and Tony.

"How do you know?" Tony asked. Not are you sure, not you can't be right, just how. "Jarvis, record."

Bucky replied in a monotone. "Hydra removed its most valuable assets from its New York base when the Chitauri invaded. The Asset had been activated but not tasked yet at the time. Orders were given to escort a prototype weapon meant to disable the Iron Man armor to a base in Chicago and deliver it to Dr. Andrea Liptowski-Perkins, then await further orders. Post-invasion the Asset
"was re-tasked and relocated to the direct command of Hydra Supreme North America."

"Pierce," Steve said in disgust.

"You remember that?" Tony ignored Steve and leaned toward Bucky. "Why that and not other stuff?"

"The Chicago base was not equipped with a re-calibration chair," Bucky answered.

"And no one thought to erase that stuff later."

"Presumably."

Tony sat back, closed his eyes, brows pinched together, and steepled his fingers beneath his goatee. "I'll have Hill make like a little birdy and cheep anonymously in someone's ear about Liptowski-Perkins." He kept frowning another minute before snapping his eyes open. "We need to reconfigure our assumptions about the Insight targets."

"What?" Steve asked blankly.

Tony pointed at him. "You were right."

Steve still felt about a football field behind Tony's thinking, but managed to keep his mouth from falling open and looking as dumb as he suspected he was. He hadn't had any special thoughts about Insight at all.

"It's a critical error to assume no one on the Insight list could be a member of Hydra," Tony continued. He jumped to his feet and began pacing. "Zola's algorithm required massive amounts of data. The more it had, the more accurate it was. They obviously fed in everything SHIELD had, used every bit of access they could." He turned and looked from Bucky to Steve. "Of course they fed in the Hydra data too. Everyone in Hydra was evaluated."

It took Steve a second, but he got it.

"The algorithm didn't distinguish between Hydra and anyone else."

"It just predicted who would potentially cause Hydra problems in the future. Within or without. And even Hydra isn't completely monolithic. It has its ambitious backstabbers and its fumbling idiots, too."

"So there are members of Hydra on the Insight list," Steve said. He wiped his hand over his face. Everything just became even more complicated. They couldn't use Insight as a vetting tool and would have to re-check anyone who had been cleared using it.

"Either because they are too power-hungry or too stupid," Tony agreed. "Or even because some of them might eventually have second thoughts."

"Damn it."

"Jarvis – "

"I have already composed and transmitted a memo to Ms. Potts, Ms. Hill and the pertinent security department heads, sir."

Tony grinned. Bucky hadn't moved from his stiff-seated posture. His hands rested on his thighs. His only movements were the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed slowly and his eyes shifted to
follow Tony's movements.

Steve sighed and asked Bucky, "Was there anyone on the list you liked or didn't like?"

"I recognized no other potential threats."

"Not what he asked," Tony said quietly. He'd stopped and was looking at Bucky with an expression that took Steve by surprise. Tony looked sad. "Cap wanted your opinion."

"I have no opinion." Bucky's monotone made Steve cringe inside.

"None?" Tony prompted. "Because these are the people that are going to cut you open and pull out a couple handfuls of Hydra explosives. Generally, that's the kind of thing that concerns people. It's sure as hell concerning Steve, here."

"Worry is irrelevant."

"What, don't you think you get a say in this?"

"Why would I?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Tony demanded. "We're talking about you, of course you get a say."

"You have to remove the explosives or Hydra will trigger them and either kill your or possibly random people too near when they go off," Bucky said. "I have no choice but to cooperate. The only other choice is to terminate me and dispose of the explosives with my corpse."

Steve dropped his face into his hands. He didn't need to hear Bucky confirm Tony's deduction. "God damn it," he muttered into his palms to muffle the blasphemy.

"Yeah, we aren't doing that, because we are the good guys, get it?" Tony snapped. "Don't you want the damn bomb gone?"

"Yes."

"Well, guess what, Tin Man?" Tony went on. "You don't get to saddle us with all the responsibility. You want to be a real boy, you have to start thinking and deciding for yourself. We're going to go through the video interviews and you're going to figure out what you think of every one of them and say if you want them on the team or not."

Steve looked up. Bucky looked... engaged, for lack of a better description. His gaze had shifted to the monitor. "I can threat evaluate," he said.

"Okay, fine, if that's what you want to call it," Tony said. "You evaluate. And you decide and that's who it'll be unless the live interviews or the checks uncover something."

Tony clapped his hands together. "C'mon. Let's do this. We need to put together the surgical team so they can consult on the surgical theater design. I'm going to need a minimum of two weeks to rebuild another floor with shielding and fit it with a small hospital. And that's only because I already own a construction company with everyone cleared to work on secure portions of the tower."

"Hospital?" Bucky echoed in the first hint of curiosity Steve had seen from him.

"Hospital," Tony declared. "No one's is going to blink at me wanting my own personal clinic. Besides, it is a good idea. Sooner or later, someone here is going to need it. And the Tower's
secure.” He glanced at Steve. "Hell of lot safer than lying in some hellhole where anyone can walk right in."

"I was fine," Steve said. He didn't want to talk about his recovery from Bucky shooting him. He didn't want to remind Bucky of his 'mission', just in case.

"I sent down a security team that was on watch the whole time you were in the hospital."

Steve hadn't known. He was somewhere between touched and irritated.

"The media is going to be full of reports about my Howard Hughes like hypochondria thanks to this," Tony went on, "but that's – "

"Misdirection," Bucky said.

"So no one will come up with the wild idea that the Avengers are harboring Hydra's rogue assassin. Plus, I get a real hospital out of it." Tony sounded pleased with himself, the way he always did.

Bucky cocked his head so the long hair swung away from his eyes. "Will the doctors and nurses stay to staff the hospital floor?"

"That's something to think about later," Steve said. "Right now, we just need them to do one job."

"I can consider both," Bucky told him in a cool tone.

Tony grinned. "That's right, don't let anyone tell you what to do from now on. Except me. You should always listen to me."

"Tony – " Steve groaned.

"Jarvis, the first video," Tony commanded.

Bucky watched everything intently, interjecting a question rarely, but always with a point. Steve slowly relaxed into it too. It wasn't like working with Bucky before, or the Commandos, but Tony turned out to be easy to work with when he was concentrating on a task. They finished with the hundred names winnowed down to nineteen.

Bucky drank the smoothie Bruce brought in without throwing up too.

Steve counted the day a win.

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James

He wasn't sure yet, about this surgery. Maybe he'd go under – or more probably stay awake through the whole thing – and come out of with more removed than just some explosives. Maybe they'd take the Arm too. Maybe they'd take him and leave nothing but the Asset again.

Maybe they'd take another part of his body and replace that the way the Arm had replaced his own limb. He held up the metal hand and flexed the fingers, listening to its soft whir, the constant promise of its destructive abilities. They wouldn't do that, he told himself; it would be stupid. There was nothing like the Arm out there. None of the doctors Stark had found were prosthetics or weapons specialists. Stark himself came closer to someone who could create something like the Arm that anyone James could imagine.
If James hadn't needed to stay on the shielded floor of the tower, he suspected Stark would have had him in a lab, studying the Arm the same way the Hydra scientists had. It seemed to fix itself over time, if damaged, and it took a great deal to damage it. Usually what got hurt was his body where the Arm hooked into him. Hydra had never done more than superficial maintenance on it; they spent more time trying to understand how it worked and why they couldn't transfer it to someone else than anything else for years, but had mostly given up the last few times he'd been out of cryo. He suspected that the Arm couldn't be shifted to anyone else until he died, and that that had been planned for once Insight came on line. He knew Hydra hadn't created the Arm; they'd stolen it and Zola had complained vocally that there were no records of where it had originated when he had to maintain it.

He opened the hand and the light poured over it like mercury. He should hate it, but he didn't. He hated not having his flesh and blood arm.

He was terrified of losing any more of himself, though, physically or mentally.

He didn't know if he could trust what anyone was saying to him. Instincts said Captain America and the rest of the 'Avengers' were on the up and up. He had no idea if he could or should believe in his own instincts, though.

So he had been going along with the plans Steve mapped out, at least not disagreeing, but reserving his doubt and formulating escape plans... that kept foundering on the truth that once he left the safety of Stark's epic Faraday cage slash phallic symbol, Hydra wasn't going to try to recapture him. They were going blow him up, along with anyone or anything else too close. Jarvis had shown him the estimated specs on the blast sphere and potential damage that would result.

It made him sick realizing he'd been carrying the same danger with him on every Hydra mission. The cost if he'd failed would have been as awful as his successes.

He shivered and wished there was any way to get rid of the explosives that didn't involve more strangers with their hands on and in his body.

He needed someone there who would stop them from doing anything but what they were supposed to do.

Needing to rely on someone, and it would have to be the Captain, every one of the others had some agenda that might rank higher than safeguarding the Winter Soldier, made him feel cold and shaky. Made him feel sicker than eating did.

He was alone at the moment, so James let himself shiver, then moved from where he'd been sitting to the other chair, the one that got the afternoon sun. Exhaustion tugged at him, thanks to his low caloric intake and nightmare-interrupted sleep. His back and shoulder hurt, as they always did, though he stretched the muscles as much as he could. Nothing could be done for the extra weight of the Arm constantly pulling on one side of his body or the pains that shot up and down his spine sometimes.

He found as comfortable a position as he could and tucked a blanket over his feet and legs. He could read from the Starkpad that Stark had left behind after the video analysis of potential surgical team recruits, but it felt like too much trouble. Instead, James closed his eyes and turned his face toward the sunshine, letting it burn its red, orange and yellow glare through his eyelids.

Being able to close his eyes and just feel was a luxury he hadn't grown used to in the last two weeks. Like the hot showers, he thought it was a pleasure he'd never underestimate.
He kept turning and turning the idea of the surgery in his head. No, not the surgery, but the fact he'd have to give himself over to it. To them, the doctors and nurses, when all he could remember of people like them was pain and being unmade, over and over.

Captain America had no idea how fragile James' veneer of calm and pragmatism really were. He didn't know James had a scream lodged in his throat every time someone came too close to him. His reflexes might be settling as he grew used to the limited number of people interacting with him for the moment, but James' knew his head was a mess. He still thought too many Hydra thoughts, beliefs and attitudes they'd pushed on him, actions that he'd internalized like a child internalized what an adult said. If it was growing easier to answer those voices with something like his own, it still wasn't easy. He had to fight not to just go away in his own head and let the Captain or whoever was in command direct him.

One more week until Stark finished and the people he and Steve had chosen were ready. James didn't really believe they'd listened to his input on the selection process. It was just logic that had dictated that his preferences had matched their criteria. Believing otherwise would be dangerous and stupid.

He didn't know why Stark and the Captain wanted him to believe what he wanted mattered.

He didn't understand a damn thing about Captain America, but the man was the first thing he remembered thinking about as himself and as more than the Asset. There had been some connection, something about Captain America that had woke James up. They'd fought and James would easily admit that the other man was marginally faster than him and had more physical strength – aside from the Arm – but James had been the master of the most brutal fighting and killing techniques the world boasted. He could have killed him more than once, but he'd kept prolonging the fight, trying to figure out why his opponent kept refusing the openings that James left. They were mostly feints, but even his mistakes weren't really capitalized on. It had baffled him, intrigued him, made him hesitate because for the first time, he'd been fighting someone more than equal to him, and he didn't understand why this target didn't use that advantage. Just shooting the man had seemed unfair and when the Asset did shoot him, he'd aimed to disable – and underestimated what it would take to disable Captain America – rather than kill.

Even now, living in this tower with Captain America, James kept analyzing the fight between them on the helicarrier, as Insight came crashing down. Why exactly had he decided to ignore Hydra's orders? Because he had, even before they'd begun to fight. There shouldn't have been a fight. He should have shot the target in the head as soon as he found him.

He'd decided he wanted to fight with him first. James still couldn't untangle why, but when the helicarriers had been turning on each other, tearing each other to pieces that rained down into the Potomac, he'd been afraid. Not of being trapped under that beam, not of dying... He had been afraid of what the target had been saying to him. Then the target just stopped fighting, his last words like a lightning strike, and before the Asset could move again, he'd been falling.

It was the fall that sent the Asset diving after the target.

When he'd pulled Captain America out of the water, he'd considered it a fair exchange: the target had pulled the beam off him, he'd dragged the target from the water and left him alive.

But he'd known in that moment what that decision, any decision, meant. He'd known he couldn't go back to Hydra.

James didn't regret the choice. Not in the least, no matter how hard trying to be a person instead of a weapon proved to be. He just wondered if anyone could guess how hard it had been to turn his
back on the pure certainty and security that belonging to Hydra had provided. The Asset had never had to doubt; Hydra told him what to do and he did it. Now James had to weigh every decision, analyze everything he thought in case it was some hold-over from Hydra, and try to figure out everyone around him. He couldn't really believe in anyone, not even himself, not yet.

"Captain Rogers is on his way to this floor," Jarvis announced.

James kept his eyes closed. He listened as the elevator opened and the Captain strode in, judging from the weight of his steps that he wasn't carrying anything. The sun was still warm on his face, he was as comfortable as he ever got, and he didn't want to move. Maybe, if he didn't, the Captain would leave.

He didn't hold out much hope for that, though. Most likely, the Captain would sit down and watch him. At first, James had thought the Captain was watching him out of suspicion and fear, the way Banner and even Wilson did, but it didn't seem the same. Then he'd wondered if the man was standing guard so James could sleep better, but that didn't fit the Captain's actions either. He just seemed to want to look at James.

The Captain stopped and waited through several breathes before saying quietly, "Bucky?"

James tensed. "James."

"Sorry." He shifted his weight to his other foot from the sound of his clothes rustling. The pause before he spoke again indicated uneasiness. "I need to talk to you about the surgery."

James sighed, opened his eyes, squinting against the light, and sat up straight. His back twinged pain all the way down both his legs. He kept his face from giving it away, though. It was nothing new.

The Captain took this as an invitation to sit down. He seated himself carefully on the oversized couch and then leaned forward, all earnest body language. "I want you to know, I will be there, I'll be in the surgery with you if you want. Nothing you don't want is going to happen."

"I thought Stark was going to be in there," James said.

The Captain nodded in agreement. His face was so open it made James uncomfortable. It felt like that degree of vulnerability could only be an act, but everything about Captain America coded as genuine. It kept throwing James' own reactions off. He expected hostility and betrayal and got its antithesis, all rolled up in one iconic enemy – except he wasn't the enemy, he was Hydra's enemy, and James was Hydra's enemy now too – intent it on saving James from any threat.

He didn't know how to deal with that. Attacks were more straightforward. Defense was simple. Help was bewildering.

"He is. He'll be in the armor, so he can fly the explosives out, get them somewhere that if they go off, no one gets hurt. But I'll – I'll be there for you. Sam and Bruce too, because they know more about the medical side. No one's going to slip anything past us."

James looked at him and believed that Captain America believed what he was saying. Maybe all he had to do was believe the Captain.

He'd made one leap of faith for the man and freed himself from Hydra doing it.

"All right," he said and meant it this time.
"No one wants you to blow up, so it's really a non-question, Fullerene," Stark said. "Surgery as soon as the surgical suite is set up and shielded, ha, against Hydra transmission. After triangulating their origin Jarvis tipped off the cops, so they had to discontinue and move their operation, but there's no way to predict when they'll start it up again. At this point, they're just being petty. They've got no idea where you'd be when you went kaboom."

James wondered if he was adapting, because he'd been able to follow the flood of words. The only thing puzzling him was Stark's latest nickname.

He didn't mind the nicknames. Stark bestowed them on everyone except Pepper, whose name he shortened instead, and it made James feel included. Welcome, Captain America – Steve – didn't appreciate them as much and twitched in annoyance each time Stark used a new one for James.

Usually, James could follow or figure out where the nickname came from. Fullerene, though, baffled him, so he had to ask, "Fullerene?"

Stark gaped at him, then mimed horror, dark eyes widening. "Your science education is so terribly lacking. Buckminsterfullerene. Buckyballs." He waited. "No? Nothing? I need to endow some schools. This is saddening. Jarvis, remind me. More money for science."

"Of course, Sir. I believe the Maria Stark Foundation already funds several New York area school programs. Additional funding would allow them to expand their efforts."

"Do that. Pepper can get one of the lawyers on it." Stark made finger guns at the ceiling.

"I think Buckminster Fuller might have been outside James' sphere – " Stark cracked up for no discernible reason, but Wilson went on, "– of interest, shut up, Tony, even before everything."

"So what are buckyballs?" James asked, because it sounded so ridiculous and Steve had his hand over his face, hiding his eyes, his ears turning pink. He almost smiled because clearly Steve was thinking about something naughtier than physics. Still waters always ran the deepest, it seemed.

"I will tell you all about modern molecular chemistry, and closed cage three-coordinate carbon structures, my friend, after I don't have to worry about you blowing up. Bruce says you're healthy enough for this. So, ready to get filleted by the best doctors money and blackmail can buy?"

James really hated the idea, but the alternative wasn't an alternative. "Tomorrow?"

"I like the enthusiasm, but no," Stark said. "I need at least another four days to set everything up. I want to test the shielding tomorrow and I'll need to rig a portable human-sized Faraday cage to take you from this floor to the medical one. No problem, I incorporate the same tech in all the armor."

"Tony, I'm still not sure this is the best course," Steve said.

"Well, while you're not sure James and the rest of us are still going to go through with it. As soon as the explosives are out, I'll be flying them to the middle of the Atlantic. Well, I may keep a sample or two for analysis – The point is, you aren't the guy with a bomb in his back. As someone who had an arc reactor in his chest until recently, I can tell you that sort of thing is uncomfortable. And by the way, the second doc on this is the cardio guy who removed my shrapnel."

"I want it out," James said. He wanted everything Hydra gone from him, and would sacrifice the Arm too if it wouldn't leave him so vulnerable. That and his own disbelief that Hydra had in fact created the Arm. Stark had taken one look at a scan and declared the tech stolen. Somehow that
made it better or at least acceptable for James.

"His call," Stark told Steve. "I totally think it's the right one, but he isn't doing it because I think so."

"Tony's right," Wilson said.

"It had to happen someday," Banner added, though he looked worried. He stayed on the far side of the room from James and hadn't spoken to him much since the day James arrived, beyond consulting with Stark and the one doctor they'd brought in the day before. James made him uneasy, so James had taken to only speaking with him in the company of Stark or one of the others.

Steve gave James a dolorous look that James determinedly ignored. He wasn't here to make Captain America happy or play the part of Bucky Barnes. He'd come for an ally against Hydra. He wasn't sure he'd found that, but the safe haven of Stark's tower and the aid Captain America's team mates had given were enough that he thought he'd have a chance to survive on his own, once Hydra couldn't track or remote detonate their bomb inside him. It was more than he could have hoped for as the Asset. Each day he felt more in control of himself, more real, but none of it would mean anything if he had to stay in lockdown in the Hulk Chamber the rest of his life.

"What about Bucky's memories?" Steve asked. "Have you figured out how to bring them back?"

"Been a little busy with the other thing, Capsicle," Stark reminded him.

"There's some question of whether restoring his memories would be advisable," Banner said, reluctance in every syllable. He glanced at James, clearly checking that his statement hadn't angered him.

"It might be better to just let things happen naturally." Wilson got himself a beer from the wet bar, then another which he handed to Steve. He seated himself on one of the couches, his deliberate relaxation having the intended effect on everyone else. Fists unclenched, shoulder loosened, and the air of a fight about to explode dissolved. James admired Wilson's ability to manipulate through kinesthetics and wondered if it was through training or a natural talent.

He sat down in the over-sized chair that had been wordlessly ceded to him, shifting the nest of fleece and microfiber blankets and pillows to one side.

"You should worry more about Hydra than about my memories," James told them. "You know they're out there."

"There are people handling that," Steve assured him.

James had his doubts. Who was left equipped to fight Hydra? They'd taken over and ruined SHIELD. They had moles and sleepers within every government and agency all over the world. They recruited from the bright and the disenfranchised with promises that they delivered. Alexander Pierce had been a brilliant man who had believed in Hydra beyond using it to aid his climb to power. Pierce hadn't been the only one. He worried the Avengers were forgetting that. Enemy, opposition, terrorist, villain, not one of those definitions included stupid.

Hydra was infinitely more dangerous because of what it got right than what it did wrong.

He stayed silent, though. No one wanted to hear it and if he did speak up they'd think he was succumbing to Hydra's programming again. But he worried and wondered if he could walk away from these people once he was free, knowing their naïveté might lead to all of them dying.
"You should eat again," Banner said.

James winced. He'd been trying over the last several days. They'd found foods his stomach didn't reject violently, but nothing that he liked. The nutrition drinks were so much easier to deal with since he could chug them down fast and not have to really taste them.

Stark brightened. "Pepper bought an assortment of pastries. You should try some of them."

James nodded, feeling grim. Pepper was invariable kind to him and he disliked disappointing her by not liking any of the food she kept bringing, hoping it would finally tempt him into eating more than a bare minimum.

"Buck up, James," Stark advised him. "You can skip dinner and breakfast the day of your surgery."
Chapter 6

Steve

Tony hadn't been exaggerating – within a week, he had one floor fully set up as a medical wing, complete with a surgical suite that rivaled the best private hospitals in New York. In fact, Tony had bragged, and Steve had no reason to doubt him, that his surgical suite was the single most sanitary, germ free zone in New York. Everyone and everything in there had gone through decontamination, including Steve, Tony himself and his Iron Man suit.

"Houston, we have lift off," Tony declared when he'd settled against the far wall of the surgical suite where he could watch the surgery and be on stand-by with the temperature controlled container for the explosives from James' spine.

Neither of the doctors looked overly happy that Tony was in there, but Tony paid them, so they kept their thoughts to themselves.

Dr. Vasileios Ketapoulos, a mid-fifties man with hands like a butcher, considered the finest neuro-anesthetist on the planet, was leaning toward the spinal specialist Tony had flown in from Glasgow's Royal Infirmary, Dr. Irene Torvaldson, speaking to her in a hushed tone. Ketapoulos' scrubs stretched over a prominent belly and the glasses obscured what was left visible of his face by the surgical mask. His eyes, lined by a spiderweb of wrinkles were kind, though. Torvaldson, short, athletic and with the air of a drill sergeant around her, was surprisingly young, Steve guessed her to be no more than twenty-eight. The third doctor, a neurosurgeon by the name of Dr. Hu Li Xiu Ying, was still in the prep room, already in her scrubs, but still putting on her mask. She was second generation Chinese-American, tall and slender, with a no-nonsense attitude and a very dry sense of humour. All three doctors were renowned specialists; Hu, despite being the youngest in the room, was even a professor. Three of the nurses present, Marina Delaware, Agnieszka Bigoda and Jayanti Kanagala had been suggested by the respective doctors as the best of at their jobs. They managed to keep the atmosphere professional but infused with good cheer.

It was a good team, but Steve doubted that Bucky saw or cared about any of that. He was currently entering the surgical suite, accompanied by another nurse – Consuela Mejía Rivas, if Steve recalled correctly. Bucky wore a light green surgical cap that kept his hair covered and a surgical gown that covered his entire front but was just loosely tied at the back so the doctors would have full access to his spine once he was on the operating table. In the bright lights of the suite, the colour left him washed out and pale. Even though his face was a mask of stoic calm, Bucky's pulse raced at his throat and he held the motionless metal arm clutched against him as if it were a shield.

"Are you sure about this?" Steve asked, unable to help himself. "You can still decide to – "

"To do what?" Bucky asked. "Not much of a choice here." He raised his chin and walked toward the operating table with decisive, clipped steps. Steve averted his eyes when Bucky passed him and the gown fell open enough to reveal the vulnerable curve of his spine and the swell of his bare ass.

"Geriatric flashers," Tony muttered. "Though, hey, top marks for being in shape. I bet I could bounce a penny off that ass."

Torvaldson snorted softly and threw Tony an amused glance.

Bucky didn't seem to have heard him. He stood in front of the surgical table, casting wary glances at the straps on the arm and leg rests, the doctors and nurses around him. He rubbed at the wrist of
his metal arm as if he could reactivate it that way and kept clocking the exits.

The effort it took to stay in place and have the nurses instruct him how to lie down on the table and how they would have to use several straps to secure his body to make sure he didn't inadvertently move during surgery – face down so he could breathe through the cut-out for his face, exposed and completely defenseless – showed in every line of Bucky's body.

He surveyed the surgical suite, then the doctors and nurses with their masks already on and his eyes widened. Pre-surgery, one of the demands had been that Bucky walk into the operating room himself so he could see the equipment and not be brought in already unconscious as patients normally were. Both the nurses and doctors had grumbled, but they had been over-ruled. Seeing Bucky tense as a bow-string and ready to bolt made Steve wonder if it wouldn't have been better to go the usual route.

"Captain," Bucky said. Steve wished he'd call him by name. He'd told him to over and over, but Bucky insisted on using the title instead. Maybe after the surgery, when Bucky felt better and could start to relax, he'd start to remember. More than the bad stuff. "They look like – "

"They're not."

"The masks are the same. They could be." Suspicion colored Bucky's voice. Even with the prosthetic arm deactivated, he could be incredibly dangerous if he decided the doctors and nurses in the theatre were threats.

Steve pulled his surgical mask off his face, understanding that Bucky needed to be able to see his face. And not just his, everyone's.

"Take your masks off," Steve demanded.

Ketapoulos and Hu frowned at him, the expressions clear from just the area visible of their eyes and foreheads. "This might be an unusual setting for an operating room, but it still is one," Hu said. "We're not at home in the kitchen. The masks serve a purpose, so I suggest you put your mask back on."

"You suggest?" Steve echoed. Her tone – aloof and cold – rubbed him entirely wrong.

"No, actually, as I'm responsible for the patient's health, I demand it. You're going to contaminate the entire room."

"Jarvis monitors and maintains the environment and warns us if there's a risk of contamination," Tony cut in. "The atmospheric mixture of oxygen, nitrogen, et cetera has been formulated to keep everyone at optimum alertness levels so no one is going to need coffee breaks. It also contains an antiseptic chemical that is safe for lungs."

"And this chemical has been proven to be effective?"

Tony just gave her a look that could have frozen a volcano. "I created it. And, doctor, if you were that scared of contamination you'd shave your head; that cap doesn't even cover all of your hair. Any more questions?"

Steve saw that Hu was ready to protest again, but Ketapoulos tutted loudly, stopping her.

"So now that we have that argument out of the way, I suggest you all take off your masks," Tony added.
Hu shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stark, I realize you're the one writing the check, but this –"

"This man," Tony said, pointing at James, "has been through hell. Do you remember the part of the dossier I sent you in which the techs and doctors went Dr. Mengele on him? Put yourself in his shoes for just a few seconds, and imagine someone telling you that you'll be half-naked and restrained on an operating table while all around you there are just masks, as anonymous as those other 'doctors' were." He waited a beat. "Doesn't feel so great, does it?"

The nurse who was Dr. Torvaldson's, Kanagala, pulled down her mask first. Torvaldson followed her lead.

Dr. Hu shook her head. "I'm not violating my work ethics." She was rigid the way the young can be, without enough experience to know when to bend.

"First, do no harm," Torvaldson said in a quiet, thoughtful tone. Her voice was surprisingly deep and sounded as if she smoked dozens of cigarettes daily. She looked at Bucky and continued, "Keeping the patient calm is both critical and humane. We all swore the same oath and we're talking about minutes here, not the entire surgery."

"See?" Tony commented to the other two doctors, "that is why she's getting the biggest donation to her hospital."

"Can we just –" Bucky's voice cracked and he licked his dry lips. "Can we just get it over with?"

Ketapoulos pulled down his mask as well and said, "Sure." He indicated the surgical table. "Why don't you lie down already while I get the anesthetic ready? Marina's going to hook up the heart monitor first." He smiled gently. "It's non-invasive. Just a little gel on the skin. Okay?"

Bucky's gaze skittered over the table. He was shivering. "Would it be okay to just lean against here for a minute?"

"You will have to lie down eventually," Ketapoulos said. "Don't you think it'd be better if we didn't push and manhandle you while you're getting sleepy?"

Steve was about to comment on this when Tony wagged a finger at him. "Nuh-uh, mother hen. Let him make his own decision."

Bucky looked between the three doctors and the nurses who had all pulled down their masks now and wore their friendliest, most harmless looks, then to Tony, who had opened the armor's face mask, and finally to Steve. Steve held his gaze for over a minute, watching Bucky battle anxiety. Eventually, he nodded to Steve, then hopped up on the surgical table with one smooth, fluid motion and positioned himself, face down, perfectly supine. His flesh and blood hand trembled, steering clear of the armrest and the restraints. He didn't put his head in the head-rest yet, either, just beside it.

His entire body screamed tension when the nurses began to guide his lower legs into the leg slings and padded his shins and calves with gel packs and pillows. They were firm, their moves showed routine but they were gentle, too, something Steve noted with great relief.

Bucky turned his head to find Steve's eyes again when the nurse Steve knew was from Detroit, Marina, began to swab the back of Bucky's hand where the IV would go. His hand closed around the surgical table, his knuckles standing out stark white against his skin.

"You're going to have to relax a little or this won't work," she said, her voice warm and calm.
Steve felt a near hysterical laugh climb its way up the back of his throat. Relax. Yeah, easy. He took a step toward the surgical table. "Maybe if I – "

"Yes," Bucky rasped, not breaking eye contact.

"This is not a good idea," Hu protested.

Behind her, Jayanti Kanagala rolled her eyes.

"Do I need to get a different doctor?" Tony's voice, though light and almost musical, was cold.

"If you want the surgery to be delayed," she shot back, holding her ground. "We're already working under extremely unusual conditions here and we really don't need any more distractions or people standing in the way."

"The way I see it, Steve might be the only one calming him down at least a little. Do you want to dismiss that just because it's not proper procedure?"

Something in Steve finally exploded at the way everyone kept talking about Bucky as if he weren't even in the room. Hydra must have treated the Winter Soldier the same way, and the mere idea of them following in their footsteps turned his stomach. "What do you want?" he pointedly asked Bucky.

"Stay," Bucky said. "Stay where I can see you."

Hu turned to look at her other colleagues as well as the nurses. "Can I just remind everyone that we're about to do not only spinal surgery but will also be handling explosives?"

"Look," Tony said. "I understand your concerns. I admire your work ethics. I do. However, I hired you because you're supposed to be the best." The stress he put on supposed clearly showed how not impressed he was with her. "If, after what I just told you about him, you can't deal with a patient who needs a moment's reassurance before undergoing surgery that you just admitted is dangerous," his voice rose, "then I'm pretty sure you won't be able to deal with something going wrong or unexpected during surgery, in which case I do have the wrong doctor, and hell, yeah, we'll need to wait." He took a deep breath and crossed his arms over his chest. "If compensating for an observer or two in the room is beyond you, then there's the door, Doctor, because you're not good enough for this job."

When Hu didn't move, Tony went on, "You were supposed to be the best. If you're not, then I need to get Dr. Walters from Bagram. I bet I could call up Rhodey, offer a couple upgrades to the Iron Patriot armor and the Air Force would send a fucking F16 to get Walters."

Steve remembered the name from the interviews Maria Hill had conducted in addition to the background checks. Walters was a neurosurgeon who left his practice to work in a combat hospital at Bagram. In the end, Hu had been chosen over Walters because Steve didn't want any military entity getting any kind of report on Bucky and also, Maria's background check on Walters showed a connection to someone who turned out to be Hydra – five times removed, but still there. Steve had dismissed Walters, and so had Tony. He wondered if that had been such a good idea.

Hu had blanched a little during Tony's rant, but she didn't back down. "You know you're not sending for Walters. He isn't half as good at spinal surgery as I am."

A tense silence fell over the room, until finally, Jayanti put her hands on her hips. "How about we all get our heads out of our arses and start before James decides it'd be a good idea to put himself on ice and blow us all up just so he doesn't have to listen to us anymore?" she asked in the broadest
Scottish accent Steve had ever heard.

Steve did a mental double-take. In her video interview, Jayanti had sounded exactly like Peggy, so the heavy Glaswegian burr startled him.

"Sorry," she said with an apologetic shrug and a smile when she caught his look. "I regress when I'm pissed off."

On the operating table, the barest hint of a smile crossed Bucky's face and his hand around the table relaxed a fraction.

"So this is how we'll do it: you," Jayanti pointed at Steve, "stay until he's out, then you get out and watch from the other room. Meanwhile you," she pointed at Hu, "chill. The prep is our job, contamination risk is Stark-guaranteed minimal and Captain Rogers isn't in our way."

Ketapoulos looked at Jayanti with a grin that created a spiderweb of crinkles around the sides of his eyes. "I knew I liked you the first time I met you."

"You were staring at my arse, Vasileios," she said with an eye roll.

"And you actually slapped me, then assisted in a twelve hour surgery. In a bombed out hospital, during which you contradicted the lead surgeon so many times he walked out in a screaming tantrum while you finished it." He chuckled and his massive gut bobbed up and down with the movement. There were doctors and hospitals who wouldn't hire Jayanti Kanagala because of that, too. "What was not to like?"

"He should have had his license pulled even before that stunt," Jayanti complained.

"Oh, agreed, my dear, agreed. I hear he's working at Cleveland now, where at least we can hope the quality of the other doctors can compensate for his temperament," Ketapoulos said.

Steve remembered the story from the file – Jayanti had done things during her stint in Afghanistan that she wasn't qualified to do but did anyway because somebody had to. She reminded him a lot of a nurse he'd met in Italy in '44. He couldn't remember that woman's name, but he remembered that she had covered for the doctor when he was drunk off his ass because he couldn't take the misery around him. She'd never wavered. He liked to think that his own mother had been like that before the TB took her life. From the file and the interview, Steve knew that Jayanti was just the same – maybe not the nicest person you'd ever meet, but the one you'd want with you in a crunch.

"Stop flirting with my nurse, Vasileios," Torvaldson said. Despite the rebuke, the corners of her mouth twitched with amusement as well.

The muted beep of the heart monitor started up, but the back and forth banter seemed to have relaxed Bucky a little. Steve saw Marina use the distraction to quickly insert the hypodermic, tape it down and get the set-up for the IV-drip ready. "There you go, honey, all set."

It still felt wrong to Steve to hear her call him honey and sweetie. He wondered if she'd still do it if she knew who Bucky really was. Bucky didn't seem to mind, and Steve was glad he'd put his foot down when choosing the nurses. Tony had chosen Jayanti and Rivas because they were tough. Ball-busters, he'd cheerfully called them. Steve had chosen Marina because her interview had shown her gentleness, her kindness. She wore a prosthesis as well – had lost her lower leg from her knee down in a teenage driving accident – and that alone had visibly resonated with Bucky when they were introduced earlier in the week. She'd also been very hands-on with him since and, much to everyone's surprise, he'd responded well to that too, even when he flinched away from everyone
else's touch.

"Okay, then," Ketapoulos said, rubbing his hands together. "Agnieszka, my dear, did you bring our song?"

"Are you sure you want to – "

"Hell, yes, I'm sure. Go for it!"

A loud guitar riff filled the room. *Twenty-twenty-twenty four hours to go I wanna be sedated, Nothin' to do and nowhere to go-o-oh I wanna be sedated.*

Tony started laughing like a madman, bent over in his suit. "I'm keeping your number," he said to Ketapoulos.

Torvaldson grinned, too and even Hu's face transformed into something resembling surprised amusement. The only one looking annoyed was Rivas, but Steve had never seen her look differently so it was hard to judge if she disapproved of the song choice or was just indifferent.

"What do you think of the Ramones, James?" Ketapoulos asked Bucky.

"I think I wanna be sedated," Bucky replied, and Steve snorted a surprised laugh as well. He couldn't tell if the statement was just Bucky hoping for the music to stop or if it was a bit of his trademark sarcastic, deadpan humour returning to him.

"Then let's do that," Ketapoulos said. He connected the hypodermic to the IV drip and Bucky went rigid again; through the gap in the hospital gown, Steve saw the muscles in his back and behind flexing. Bucky searched and found Steve's eyes and locked his gaze on him. The message Steve read in it was *'I trust you to make sure I will wake up again and still be me. Don't let me down.*' Steve held Bucky's gaze, nodded at him, making a silent vow to never let him down again.

"Masks."

This time, Steve stayed silent as everyone covered their faces again. A metallic click made him look to the side. Tony had closed up the Iron Man suit too.

"Okay, Bucky?" Steve asked.

"Okay," Bucky said and watched intently as Steve tied his mask back in place.

It took a long time until Bucky's eyelids even began to flutter. Ketapoulos tried the counting backwards from 100 trick three times, and every time Bucky came as far as 80, he cursed under his breath and exchanged concerned looks with Bigoda and Torvaldson.

Steve wasn't surprised. Bucky's recovery after the knife-wound had already shown that the version of the super-soldier serum Bucky had been given made for an enhanced metabolism and advanced healing capabilities similar to Steve's own. He'd tried to explain it to the doctors before, but Ketapoulos in particular had had concerns about adjusting the dosage and risking depressing the respiratory system.

"His blood pressure is too high," Marina said in a hushed voice. "This isn't going to work unless he calms down." The heart monitor was beeping too fast too, betraying the fear Bucky was clamping down on.

"Maybe we could get some incense sticks. Jarvis, do you have some Ravi Shankar to play?" Tony asked. "Or maybe – "

"Stark, can you shut up?" Rivas demanded. "We're trying to work."

"And I'm coming up with ways to make you work, Consuela. You could be a little more appreciative."

Annoyance began to bubble up in Steve as well, because while Tony's attempts at creating levity sometimes worked, they just felt forced and disrespectful to Bucky now. Jayanti solved the situation without words. She walked over to Tony, unrolled a ten inch strip of adhesive tape, tore it and stuck it across the suit's facial slit.

"That's not actually my mouth, you know?" Tony said through the suit's speakers.

The corners of her eyes crinkled and she said in sweet, charming, completely fake voice, "I know, but rumor has it you're smart enough to take a hint."

Tony made a zipping motion in front of the suit's head piece.

"Marina?" she said. "Any ideas?"

Marina cocked her head thoughtfully, then caught the way Bucky still looked at Steve when his eyelids opened again. "Steve, come here," she said.

"I – " Hu started, then, much to Steve's surprise, stopped herself and made a gesture of acquiescence.

"You disinfected your hands, right?" Marina asked.

Steve nodded. He'd washed and gloved up along with Tony. He held up a hand, showing the glove.

"All right. Then take his hand and talk to him."

"Are you sure?"

"My patient, my playground, my responsibility. Yes, I'm sure."

Steve stepped up to the bed and crouched next to the surgical table to he was at eye-level with Bucky. He reached out, waited until Bucky acknowledged his intent and then closed his hand around Bucky's cold fingers, careful not to jostle the hypodermic at the back of his hand.

And he talked. About how Tony and Maria and he had chosen the best doctors and nurses in the whole world. About how everyone would make sure that he'd be rid of everything Hydra in his body. He didn't mention Bucky's mind, because while Steve was a hopeless optimist, he was also a realist and he knew that Bucky's mental recovery would be much longer than the physical one.

Bucky's heart-rate dropped to a normal level after a couple of minutes, so Steve kept talking, kept rubbing his thumb over Bucky's fingers until, long after Ketapoulos had predicted he'd be out, Bucky's lids stopped fluttering. Before he went under completely, he squeezed Steve's hand, hard enough to press the bones together. "I'm with you," Steve promised, recognizing the panic in Bucky's gesture. "You can let go. I've got you. I'm not going to let you down."

This time, Steve swore when he rose to his feet after Bucky had been confirmed successfully sedated, he'd move heaven and hell to make sure he'd get to keep his promise.

*~*~*~*

The surgical theatre had a large observation window on one side. Steve went straight to the room
on the other side, where Bruce and Sam were already watching. In addition to the window, a line of monitors showed multiple camera feeds focused on the operating table. The pictures were also available on monitors inside the theatre for the surgeons, allowing them to zoom in tighter and in greater detail than unassisted human eyes ever could. At the moment they showed Bigoda opening Bucky's hospital gown.

Bruce stood right at the window, as if he could lean through the glass to see better. He kept tapping his thumb across his fingertips, one two three four, flex, one two three four, flex, matching his breathing to the calming exercise. The only thing more rumpled than his shirt was his hair. Sam sprawled in one of the seats set up for watchers, legs stretched out and hands laced over his stomach, but the set of his shoulders and the sharp darkness of his eyes gave him away; he was no more relaxed than Bruce.

Steve rushed to the window and watched as Agnieszka swabbed down Bucky's exposed back with orange-brown antiseptic solution. The brilliant lights overhead and angled from the sides chased away every shadow to reveal jagged scars running down Bucky's spine, the unforgiving evidence of Hydra's ugly work.

The operating theatre was miked, transmitting every noise from inside to the observation room. The music had been turned down to a background murmur, just loud enough to muffle the shush-shush of scrubs and the squeak of their covered booties on the floor. Marina was humming a lullaby under her breath as she positioned tray after tray of sterilized instruments exactly into place. Overhead, the robotic waldos that Jarvis could operate with in the event of an emergency or Hu and Torvaldson's request bent and rotated through a checklist of movements.

Tony was a red-and-gold statue in an out of the way corner, only the light from behind the eye openings of his face mask revealing the armor was occupied.

Consuela Rivas began tightening and checking all the restraints meant to keep Bucky still. With her mask on, almost all expression was concealed, but her blue-gloved hands moved carefully over Bucky. Steve watched her run her pinky between the padding and Bucky's skin on each one, checking for wrinkles that might chafe and that they weren't cutting off circulation anywhere.

One of the monitors showed Bucky's face through the cutout. He looked hollowed; his lashes shadows over the bruise-dark skin under his eyes. Jayanti had placed an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth and secured it. The plastic was clear, misting with Bucky's exhalations, but it still made Steve flashback to the muzzle-like mask Hydra had fitted over the Winter Soldier's face. He squeezed his hands into fists and tried to match his breathing to Bruce's. He had a new nightmare to go with Bucky falling now, the one where he never lost the mask as they fought and Steve only saw Bucky's face still and dead after he stopped the Winter Soldier forever.

"They're the best in the world, Steve," Bruce said.

All he could think was, what if that isn't enough?

Torvaldson's voice snapped Steve's attention back to operating table. "Butchers." Her hand traced in the air over Bucky's back without touching the scars. Hu leaned over to look closer.

"I'm worried about scar tissue," Hu murmured. "The X-rays show nothing and the patient has no impairment, but whoever did this didn't care about scarring."

"Whoever did this should be shot," Torvaldson said.

"The worst monsters walk around wearing human faces," Rivas muttered. Steve thought of Johann
Schmidt and how Erskine's formula had writ his true nature in his flesh, turning him into the Red Skull. Then he thought of Pierce and Rumlow and Sitwell and all of Hydra's other moles, living and working and smiling beside the people Insight would terminate. He'd been doubtful about Consuela Rivas, with her issues with ICE and the State Department, her long since defunct marriage to a man in the El Salvadoran secret police, her radically left-wing politics, and her air of being permanently irritated by everyone around her. But better her bitter honesty than Hydra's smiling deceit and her hands were gentle and sure on Bucky. "Why worry about scars when you mean to blow the patient – the victim – up?"

"What kind of doctor would put a bomb in their patient?" Agnieszka asked.

"The same kind as the leaders who indoctrinate child soldiers." Rivas' sharp answer silenced the younger woman.

"Doctors," Ketapoulos said, "you know the rule. Never keep a patient under longer than you have to. Can we get on with this? I've already dumped more sedative into this man's system than I normally do through an entire surgery."

"We'll start with the right scapula," Hu said, "per the plan. Jayanti, scalpel."

Hu and Marina were between Steve's viewpoint and Bucky. He couldn't see much beyond their backs.

"Damn," Sam muttered behind Steve when Hu made the first incision. She narrated everything she was doing and finding. Jarvis was recording. Steve followed his gaze and swallowed hard. The monitor feed from one of the overhead cameras showed the scalpel slicing through Bucky's skin, bright red blood welling up and then blotted away by Jayanti, then muscle parting under Hu's skillful hands. Saliva welled in his mouth and his stomach twisted, making him swallow again and again.

"Steve, you don't need to watch this part," Bruce said and touched his arm.

"Yes, I do," Steve said. He owed Bucky at least that much, to stand witness to what he been made to suffer and was still suffering because Steve had failed his first and best friend. At least it wasn't guts. He'd seen that on the battlefield and never wanted to again.

"Suction," Hu demanded. She was taciturn as she worked, all her concentration on the flesh beneath her hands. Minutes passed with only the sound of fluid being vacuumed away. "Retractors."

"We're lucky," Torvaldson remarked. Hu precisely peeled the flesh back, clamping it back to reveal the alien gleam of metal where there should have been bone. Blood glossed over it, but the steady suction provided by Agnieszka cleared it and the monitor showed the vibranium reinforcing Bucky's shoulder blade. Channels were sunk in it and filled with a blue material. "They colored coded for us."

"Probably for their own safety," Consuela Rivas commented. "Bastards."

"The explosive is laced in channels in the metal rather than encased in it." Hu released a deep breath. "We won't need to drill it out."

"Mr. Stark," Torvaldson said. "Suggestions on removing it? Can we dig it out? Chip it? Is there any way to render it malleable?"

"It can't be soft or it would migrate," Hu said. She prodded the explosive with the tip of one finger.
"Hard."

"You should be fine with just a rasp or pick," Tony said from his place at the wall, "Just maintain it somewhere between ninety-six and ninety-nine degrees."

"That would be why we're all sweating worse than usual," Ketapoulos commented. "Your fancy computer is keeping the room hotter than we'd prefer."

Hu straightened her shoulders. "Micro ronguers."

"If this doesn't work, we'll close up and figure out a different approach before starting the spinal," Torvaldson said. "Mr. Stark, could you bring your disposal container over and shift the suction unit output to it, as we discussed?"

Tony scooped up the temperature controlled container, which looked much like a reinforced steel keg and was heavy enough Steve had needed both arms to lift it. The Iron Man armor clanked on the floor, its servos whining louder than usual until he set the container down where Agnieszka pointed. The lid came off with a loud *chuff*. Agnieszka then redirected the suction output into it. The sound pick-ups were so sensitive, the drip of blood from the tubes could be heard in the observation room.

Hu and Torvaldson worked smoothly together, excavating the explosive out of Bucky's shoulder blade. Torvaldson spoke up only once to point out something. "Look at this. They've changed the muscle attachments, anchored them here. Why do that?"

"Strength," Jayanti spoke up. "That's probably much more efficient. Like a leopard or a tiger."

"Speculation later," Hu reproved. "Blood pressure?"

"Holding steady," Ketapoulos said.

"Good, we can go on transfusing after we close up here and start on the other side. It's going well so far."

"Hear that, Steve?" Sam said from beside Steve. "So far, so good." Steve couldn't say anything but nodded.

"That's everything," Torvaldson declared. "I'll close?"

"Please," Hu said and stepped back, holding her hands up and flexing her fingers.

"Why isn't she finishing it?" Steve asked.

"She's staying fresh for the spinal portion, I imagine," Bruce said. "It's tense work. Hands cramp. The nurses Tony hired are more than competent to close an incision, really."

"You gotta relax," Sam told him.

Steve shook his head. He wouldn't relax until it was over, if then.

"We're still saving the self-donated auto-transfusion for last, right?" Jayanti asked.

"No use wasting it while he's opened up and leaking," Rivas said.

"Don't joke about the patient leaking, Rivas," Torvaldson grumbled at her. She worked confidently, Jayanti seeming to read her mind and have anything she needed ready to hand before
she even asked. Steve felt reassured by how comfortably the medical team were working together now.

Removing the explosive from Bucky's other shoulder blade went smoothly and Torvaldson again took over closing when the heart monitor picked up speed. Steve had started to relax, but jolted forward to press against the glass. He tried to see if something was wrong.

Bruce murmured, "It doesn't necessarily mean anything – "

Agnieszka looked down at something Steve couldn't see. Her eyes widened, "Dr. Ketapoulos, he's – "

"Oh shit," Ketapoulos muttered. "He can't be coming out of it – "

The mikes picked up a noise that shouldn't have existed: a tooth-gritted moan filled with agony.

On the monitor showing Bucky's face through the cut-out, he blinked his eyes open and his face set in a rictus, lips thinned around the tube in his mouth, pressed together and outlined in white, muscles in his jaw jumping, pupils dilated black and huge. Tears slipped from the corners of his eyes and dripped to the floor.

"He's awake," Agnieszka reported. Her voice shook with horror.

The two surgeons pulled their hands away from the lines they'd traced in ink on Bucky's back. "What the hell?" Torvaldson asked. All his muscles were tensed and alarms began sounding as Bucky's respiration and blood pressure skyrocketed.

Rivas began cursing softly. "Get him back under, you fat hack. – Don't move, Sergeant Barnes, you're the bravest of the brave, do just be still, the doctor is going to put you back under and it will stop hurting." The sharp crack of contempt she'd aimed at Ketapoulos disappeared as she murmured to Bucky, turned warm and kind and gentle.

Shocked into immobility for a couple of precious seconds, Steve just stared at the way Bucky's whole body tensed and his hand clawed into the soft material padding the surgical table, skin turned white at the nails and the knuckles from the pressure he exerted. He barely made a sound, all Steve heard was an awful, choked back, animal whine that once again reminded Steve of the dogs half-buried under rubble in the bombed-out houses in France.

Ketapoulos was cursing and working at the same time, "Jayanti, we have to move to the back-up sedative, if I up this any further he'll stop breathing, an elephant would stop breathing. God in heaven, how is he burning through this so fast?"

Everything after was a blur of motion – Steve was shouting and had the dizzying, blood-boiling urge to rip everyone who had done this to Bucky apart. The sane part of his mind wondered if this was how Bruce felt when the Other Guy broke through.

He moved with a jolt, heading for the door, because he had to get to Bucky, had to keep his unspoken promise to keep him safe. He meant to drag Ketapoulos out by his throat and beat him into a bloody paste until he paid for hurting Bucky, for all the people who had hurt Bucky while Steve wasn't there for him. "No more," he shouted. Bucky had been tortured enough.

"Oh no, man, no," Sam yelled and grabbed onto Steve's arm. Steve jerked away violently, sending Sam stumbling back into the seats, but by then Bruce had his arms wrapped around Steve's waist, dragging him down and back. Steve locked his hand around the door knob and kept pulling, desperate to get through it.
"Stop, Steve, stop, you can't go in there in the middle of surgery. They're putting him back under, you have to wait!" Bruce yelled.

Sam joined Bruce, climbing onto Steve's shoulders like a giant monkey and dragging him down to the floor. He held onto the door handle as he went and felt it tear loose, metal bending in his grip as he went down. Neither Bruce nor Sam were strong enough to really stop Steve, of course, any more than that metal could stand up to his strength. He'd fought off more men, better trained men, all at once. But he didn't want to harm Sam or Bruce. Feeling the fight drain out of him as horror flooded his veins and numbed him, he let them pull him to the floor and stayed there as Sam perched on his back.

"He's under again," he heard Jayanti say. "Dear God."

Steve stifled a sob and rested his head against the cold tile floor.

"Holy crap," Sam exclaimed. "You just tore the door apart. Man, you gotta get hold of yourself."

Sam kept Steve on the floor while Torvaldson and Hu opened Bucky's back and sighed mutual exclamations of relief. He didn't bother telling Sam that he wouldn't have to worry. He couldn't watch any more, couldn't take the helplessness.

Bruce observed and explained.

"This is good, good news," Bruce said.

"What?" Sam asked. He rested his hand on the back of Steve's head, gentle, soothing pressure. "You have to have faith. He's going to be fine. They're doing a good job, just had a little set back. He's not hurting now."

"Can we cut these connecting wires?" Hu asked. "Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah, yeah, get that detonator at the top out first."

"Marina, can you blot my forehead? Thank you. This is like hot yoga surgery."

"Better than being blown up," Rivas commented. "This is no worse than most hospitals where I've worked and it's clean."

"Forceps. Irene…"

"I've got it. Cutting."

"And there's a big fuck you to Hydra," Tony commented.

"Closing."

Steve squeezed his eyes shut and took a heaving breath.

"Okay. I'm starting the next incision."

"She's through the paraspinal muscles and the lamina," Bruce narrated. Steve assumed he was watching the monitors. He didn't want to picture it himself; his head was already buzzing. "Now the dura mater and the arachnoid mater. Oh. There it is. It's a little blue capsule. It's right under the cauda equina."

"Oh, man, be glad you ain't looking," Sam said. Steve heard him swallow hard. "It's getting to me
and I've been elbow deep in an abdominal cavity once or twice."

"It's been pressing on the nerve roots," Hu said, sounding horrified. "I don't know how this man
has been able to function."

"It appears more malleable than the material in the scapulae," Torvaldson commented. "The
capsule could rupture."

"It's coming. There. I have it. Marina."

"Got it."

"Get it in disposal container."

"Seven more to go," Torvaldson said. "Vasi, his respiration is increasing again."

Steve tensed. Sam pressed his hand down on his head. "It's cool."

"I can see that, Irene. I'm increasing the sedative. His metabolism is incredibly fast. I didn't believe
it before."

"Write up your notes for his file. The other one, Captain Rogers, has the same enhancements. It'll
be useful if either of them ever need treatment again." Torvaldson hummed through a sixty count.
"And he's completely out again. Let's finish this one."

"It's like removing a fibroma," Hu remarked. "I was afraid we'd have to chisel it out of his disks."

"Thank the Lord for small mercies," Ketapoulos commented.

"I would like to know how they coated the disks with metal. I thought from the X-rays they were
replaced, but the bone is still there too."

Steve couldn't relax, couldn't believe everything would work out, but he could feel Sam relaxing
with each successful removal of another explosive capsule. Bucky started to come around while Hu
was slicing through the spinal muscles the fifth time, but Ketapoulos was on top of it and didn't let
it go near as far as even the second time.

"It's going really well," Bruce reassured him.

Steve nodded.

"He's going to be okay," Sam said. "I'm going to get off you now. My ass is going to sleep." Sam's
knees creaked as he unfolded himself and got to his feet. Steve stayed where he was. The tile was
cool against his hot face.

"Last wire," he heard Hu say, "and we're closing."

"Looking good," Marina said.

"Ladies, may I say it has been a privilege?" Ketapoulos added.

Jayanti chuckled. "Don't jinx it, Vasi."

Steve got to his knees and then to his feet. He stayed back from the glass, but watched as the
surgical team finished stitching Bucky's back together and began applying clear wound seal over
the incision sites.
"How soon can I go in?" he asked Bruce.

"Half an hour, forty-five minutes. He did really well."

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**Sam**

Stark waltzed into the recovery room looking bruised around the eyes, the bags underneath a little puffier, but still all around pleased. "Cheer up, Buttercup," he told Steve. "Your Russian assassin-bride heals almost as fast as you do and is now Stark-guaranteed explosives free."

"I wish you'd been here for the rest of the rest of the surgery," Steve said.

"Jarvis kept me in the loop while I flew the boom goo out and dropped it in the Atlantic. Right now it's sitting deeper in water than the Titanic."

Steve's gaze stayed on the still form lying face-down on the bed. A neat line of white bandaging covered James' spine. More bandages sat parallel to his shoulder blades where the surgeons had gone in to scrape away trackers and biomonitors that had been embedded in the metal reinforcing the bones.

"He almost woke up twice more."

Sam reached over and squeezed Steve's shoulder. That had been horrifying for him too. Not just the idea of waking up during surgery and how much pain James must have been in, which was bad enough. Seeing him hold still through it, teeth gritted, sweat and tears running down his face, and try to choke back an animal keen of pain had been worse, because Sam knew without anyone saying it then that Hydra had performed all the surgeries to put the trackers and monitors and explosives and metal in James' body with him wide awake.

"No one realized he would metabolize sedation faster than you do, Steve," Bruce apologized again. "Doctor Ketapoulos is a superb anesthesiologist, no one else could have figured out the new dosage and got your friend back under any faster." He paused. "If at all."

"It's all over except popping the champagne open," Stark breezed on. "Why don't you come with us –"

Sam could have told him that wouldn't fly.

"I'm going to stay here in case Bucky wakes up again. I don't want him to think he's alone."

"All right," Sam agreed. "We'll bring you back something to eat."

He squeezed Steve's shoulder again and followed Bruce and Stark out and back to the Avengers communal floor. He hadn't been as tense as Steve, who had practically been vibrating through the entire surgery, but his muscles and joints were grateful for the chance to sprawl on one of Stark's extra-sized, extra-comfy couches.

Stark brought him an icy beer without asking and poured himself a Scotch. Bruce waved off an offer of anything. He sat down, at least, though he stayed perched at the edge of the couch, his shoulders hunched forward.

"Something wrong we don't know about, Brucie?" Stark asked.
"Someone has to bring this up," Bruce said. "What happens once the Winter Soldier recovers?"

"James," Sam corrected him.

Bruce shrugged it off. "Calling him James doesn't change who and what he is. Up until now he's been in lockdown in the Hulk Chamber. Everyone in contact with him has been aware of the danger he poses."

Stark swirled his scotch. Late afternoon light refracted through the amber liquid and the heavy crystal of the tumbler. His eyelids lowered to half-mast, but focused on Bruce. He hadn't moved from his sprawl on his own chair, but Sam felt him come to sharp attention. It was impossible to be in a room with him and not notice when that brain focused on something.

"So what are you saying?" Sam asked when Stark just lifted the tumbler to his lips and didn't say anything.

"Are we going to keep him in the tower?" Bruce rubbed his arms uneasily. His head ducked, avoiding Stark's dark stare. "Do we want him here? Do you, Tony?"

Stark sipped his scotch and said nothing.

"He's unstable."

"As a martini shaker full of nitroglycerin," Stark agreed amiably. His mouth smiled; his eyes didn't. Sam couldn't read what he was thinking at all.

"We don't know how much of Hydra's programming is still controlling him. He's wobbling between a blank personality and the Winter Soldier and there's no way of guessing how any returning memories of his life before that will affect him," Bruce said. Sam could see the guilt in every line of him as he spoke. "He could shatter under the pressure, if he's out there, a lot of people could die."

"Are you arguing to keep him here or keep him from leaving?" Stark asked.

"More, maybe, that he should be..."

"Locked up. Put in a cage. Maybe studied – that's the happy euphemism for turning someone into a lab rat, isn't it?" The snap in Stark's tone belied his calm expression. "I need another drink. Sam?"

"No, I'm good." He hadn't taken more than a sip of his beer. It wasn't cold any longer and he thought the sweat on the glass bottle came from his hands and not the temperature. He really didn't like where this discussion was going and felt wrong even being here with Steve not present.

Steve would not be happy about the things Bruce was saying. And what he was not saying, but conveying anyway.

Stark sloshed scotch into the tumbler with a heavy hand, then set the decanter down hard enough Sam winced. He half expected the decanter to crack, but it held. Stark turned and leaned back against the bar. He gestured with the tumbler. "Go on, by all means, now that I've fortified myself, go on."

"He could completely dissociate. None of us – forgive me, Sam – are equipped to provide the sort of support and care he needs."

"No one is," Sam muttered. Barnes' life was a seventy years long nightmare. There were no
guidelines to helping someone like him. Not even good parallels. It might be fair to say he had to be suffering from PTSD, but it might be completely wrong-headed. Could you have traumatic stress over a memory that wasn't there? James didn't display much emotion, but whether the lack of affect was a result of a psychological loss or something physical Hydra had done to him, whether it was permanent or not, they didn't know. *James* didn't know.

But he'd come to Steve for help. Help to escape from Hydra, from more torture. Steve was bound and determined to provide that and more for his friend. Sam didn't know Bucky Barnes, but his mother would say it didn't matter: he owed anyone help that he could give. Leave the world a better place. Even if that was just supporting Steve in his efforts.

"What are you suggesting, Bruce?" Stark demanded.

"We can't predict what he's going to do once he's on his feet," Bruce said. "He may just be using us. He may decide to leave on his own. He's an assassin who has killed hundreds of people according to the records you've recovered from the SHIELD and Hydra data, Tony. He's unstable –"

"You said that."

"Do we, as responsible people, as Avengers, as Steve's friends, let him go if he wants to go? Do we keep him here? Do we keep him a prisoner if we decide that and he wants to leave? I think we need to come to some kind of decision over what we're going to do."

"Well, I'm going to have Jarvis order us all some take-out, because I'm hungry. Sam? You like paella? Jarvis, I feel like tapas. Get enough for all of us. Don't forget Cap."

Sam set his untouched beer down. Stark had a point. Bruce was forgetting Steve and his bond with Barnes. "What are you going to do when Steve doesn't agree with your decision?" Because he felt pretty positive Steve would tear apart anyone and anything that tried to keep Barnes away from him again.

"We'll talk to him. I think we can persuade him Barnes should be transferred to a secure facility, out of the Tower."

Stark barked out a laugh from his spot at the bar, interrupting his low-voiced conversation with the AI. "Yeah, that's going to go about as well as reasoning with the Other Guy. Not to mention, what facility, run by who? SHIELD? I didn't trust them before I knew they really were Hydra. Whoever gets hold of Barnes, they're either going to lock him up, or worse, use him. Sound familiar, Bruce?"

Bruce winced.

"Cap won't go for it. Barnes is his BFF."

"He's a walking time bomb," Bruce sounded unhappy, but insistent.

"*You're* a walking time bomb according to a lot of people," Tony pointed out. "No one's throwing you out."

"But he's not wrong about Barnes," Sam said to play devil's advocate. "I've seen guys who went through a lot less snap. What happens to Steve if he does and hurts someone?"

Tony shrugged. "What happens to him if anything happens to Barnes? Have you thought about that? Steve went on a suicide run the last time he thought the guy was dead."

Sam remembered that Tony's father had worked with Steve and Barnes. Tony had probably heard...
the story from Howard Stark, secondhand, distorted and exaggerated, often enough to memorize it. The only one who really knew what Steve had been thinking when that plane went down was Steve, whatever Tony thought he knew. One thing Tony was right about, though, was Steve's commitment to James now.

Tony set the tumbler, empty again, down next to the decanter and pressed his hands flat to the bar top. "There is literally no way to stop Cap from holding himself responsible for Barnes," he went on without turning back to Bruce and Sam. "He'll blame himself, because he already does, for the guy falling, for not going after the body when he thought he was dead, for Barnes not being dead and ending up those sick freaks' torture toy, for everyone they had Barnes kill. Because the way Steve sees it is: Hydra couldn't have made Barnes kill anyone if they hadn't had him and they had him because Steve failed him." His back straightened and his head came up. "James stays until he wants to go."

"You're willing to take that chance with Pepper?" Bruce asked.

The way Tony tensed, Sam saw that the question had been a low blow. Nevertheless, the question was justified and Sam was glad that Bruce took it on himself to ask it.

Tony's dark eyes reflected a world of pain and hope mixed together. "She takes that chance with me every night. Every day. Besides, between Romanov and Barton I'm already running Stark's Home for Wayward Assassins and Spies anyway."

"And if I disagree? If I don't want to take that chance? If I'm uncomfortable with him here?"

Sam wasn't sure Bruce really disagreed. It felt more like he wanted to make sure that Tony didn't make any rash decisions.

"I don't know what to tell you." Tony shrugged one shouldered. "I don't want you to, but you can leave. You aren't a prisoner here either. Anyone can snap, any time; you, me, the guy at the coffee shop, the cop on the corner, the daycare worker with a headache. I personally stay the hell away from all post offices."

"I'm still not sure."

"If you're going to judge this guy on what he might do, we're right back with Fury and Project Insight and Zola's algorithm and every agency ever wanting to get their hands on the Other Guy," Tony said. "That's what Hydra wants."

"It's your tower, man," Sam said.

Bruce scrubbed his hands over his face. "I had to bring it up."

"Well, you did, now drop it," Stark said. "You've done your part. If you want to just stay in your lab, on your floor, and stay out of it, fine."

"You're disappointed in me."

"Hey, he's just some antique to me. Steve-o is the one that's going to look at you like you tried to kick a puppy off the roof."

Sam got to his feet. "I'm going to go check on Steve."

"I'll have Jarvis let you know when the food's here," Stark said.
"Yeah, whatever." He just needed to get away from Banner and Stark and figure out whether he should tell Steve about what they’d talked about.

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**Steve**

Sam came back to the recovery room offering food but Steve declined. He wasn't hungry and wondered if he'd ever be again. Nausea still churned in his stomach when he thought of Bucky waking up during the surgery and the sound he'd made.

Steve heard the sound again now, chilling him to the bone, and realized with a sinking feeling that Bucky was waking up. It was too early, Ketapoulos had said that after the new dose of anesthetics, it should take him at least another three hours before he regained consciousness. Then again, Bucky had already shaken the first two doses. It shouldn't surprise Steve that the same thing was happening now.

His back resting against the wall, Steve settled down on the floor next to the hospital bed with the cut-out for Bucky's face and watched the long lashes begin to flutter.

Bucky's face transformed from slack relaxation to his eyebrows knitting in pain, and his mouth being pressed into a thin white line. His eyes didn't open, the effort of lifting his lids appeared to be too great.

"You're safe," Steve said softly, even if he wasn't sure that Bucky was lucid enough to understand him. "You're in New York City, in Stark Tower, not in a Hydra lab." He pulled his knees to his chest and rested his head on it so he could look at Bucky better. "You're not a prisoner. The restraints you feel are just there to make sure you don't move too soon and endanger the healing process. You can break them easily if you want, or I can remove them if you want me to."

Bucky's lips moved even if his eyes still stayed closed. He had to repeat the word three times before Steve understood. "Out?"

"The surgery went well," he reassured Bucky. "All the explosives are out of your body."

At the word explosives, Bucky tensed. His right hand flailed and his arm slipped from the hospital bed, uncoordinated. The left one stayed inert, its deadweight keeping Bucky prone for now. Bucky had told Tony to remove it for the surgery so he wouldn't hurt the doctors in case something went wrong. It would have been too risky with the explosives lacing the metal, but the mere fact that Bucky had demanded basically mutilating him, had had Steve fighting a fresh bout of nausea. Tony had muttered something under his breath that sounded like a string of expletives mixed with various permutations of the word EMP. The horrified look Steve had seen on Tony's face when he turned toward his workbench had been unmistakable, though. In the end, he'd agreed to temporarily disable the Arm. It would come back to normal activity within another couple of hours.

"Everyone's safe," Steve said. "Shhh." He reached out when Bucky's hand continued to flail and caught Bucky's cold fingers in his own, gently stopping the frantic movement, glad that there were no more gloves preventing skin contact. Goosebumps laced Bucky's forearm and he tried to pull his hand away. Steve held on and Bucky's hand went limp.

"Are you cold?" Steve asked. "I can get your more blankets." Steve grimaced when he heard the words that had just tumbled from his mouth. That was a stupid idea; the doctors had specified that nothing should touch the bandages for the time being. Still, Bucky had experienced enough cold in
his life when he was vulnerable. Steve wouldn't, *couldn't* have him feel cold now.

"Jarvis, can you turn up the heat?"

"Certainly, Captain Rogers."

A gentle breeze of warm air flooded the room and stirred the sharp scent of antiseptics and iodine. Steve watched the goosebumps on Bucky's skin smooth out one after the other. His fingers had already begun to warm, but Steve kept running his thumb over the backs of Bucky's knuckles, the rhythmic motion soothing him.

He began to talk eventually, not sure if it was to fight the screaming in his own head or if it was because Bucky seemed calmer when he heard Steve's voice, the tight set around his eyes which he still struggled to open evening out.

Steve told him of Brooklyn and of the first day they'd met. He told him about the fights Bucky got him out of, of the summer thunderstorms over the skyline and the way the electricity slivering along their sweaty skin had made them grin, of the winters after Steve's Ma died, never enough wood or coal to fire that tiny oven in the tenement room they shared, of Steve reading to Bucky and Bucky reading to Steve, of first shaves and that awful, messed-up haircut Steve had given Bucky once and how Bucky had had to wear a hat for three weeks and hadn't spoken to Steve for days and had never let him close to him with scissors again. Of Gabe's horrible punning in three different languages, of Dum-Dum's snoring and Dernier's raunchy French songs, of Morita's poker face that let him win every game and of Falsworth's deadpan black humour.

Bucky's muscles tensed up again when Steve talked about the Commandos and he finally managed to lift his lids. His eyes were all pupil, dark pits swallowing what little of the winter-blue iris there was.

"32557," Bucky muttered and pulled his hand from Steve's touch. "32557."

Steve's stomach bottomed out and he fought against his lungs wanting to lock up and choke on the poisoned breath he'd just drawn. He couldn't help but hate the military he had considered family for the longest time for what it meant that Bucky, even brainwashed, drugged and barely conscious, remembered his serial number.

"It's all right," he forced out. "You're safe."

Bucky repeated the serial number several times as if he'd forgotten the meaning but clung to the sound.

Steve wiped at his eyes with his free hand and launched into the same reassurances he'd murmured before, repeating them in hope that something would get through. "You're with friends. You're free. No one is hurting you. Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. You're my best friend. You used to prefer your name shortened to Bucky but you want to be called James now. I forget sometimes, but I'm going to try. I promise. I'm going to make sure you get what you need, what you want, what you deserve." He swallowed against the lump in his throat. "I'm staying. I'm with you. I'm never going to let you fall again."

Bucky's brows knitted and his hand flailed again; it looked like he was both seeking and rejecting the earlier contact.

Steve alternated between stomach-churning worry and red waves of rage at what Hydra and Department X had done to him, been willing to do at a human being's expense.
"Shh," Steve soothed, slotting just his pinkie through Bucky's, the way Bucky had done when Steve was recovering from another severe asthma attack. After attacks like those, Bucky usually maintained the small but reassuring touch all night and Steve had understood after it happened for a second and a third time, that it wasn't for Steve, but that Bucky was afraid Steve would slip from his grasp. Would die. "You're okay," Steve whispered, wiping away the tear that rolled down his cheek, "it's all going to be okay. I'm going make sure you're warm and safe and no one ever hurts you again."

He was still murmuring reassurances when the sun crept up over the horizon again.
James

James woke for the second time after the surgery knowing he was James and not the blank Asset. Captain America had been there the first time, along with Banner and Stark. Once the haze of sedation had lifted, the Captain had coaxed him into remembering the past weeks and the self he'd been building since the last time Hydra activated him.

He could feel the difference in his flesh from the first waking; the deep tissue itch of healing had taken the place of the hot agony post-surgery. Within no more than another day, James would be operational again, though it would be another week before his body returned to optimum.

The doctors Stark had brought in didn't understand that any more than they'd understood how pointless anesthetization had been. His metabolism burned it off unless his system was still in the slowed state of cryo-suspension. He didn't mind the pain he'd woken into during the surgery, though. It was simply the price of freeing himself from Hydra's control.

They had under-estimated the sedation again, James thought, or he wouldn't be waking up alone. He didn't move, but he listened and could detect no one breathing nor the subtle shifts every living body made unconsciously that resulted in the rustle of clothing or the squeak of a shoe on the floor, the creak of a chair as weight on it was repositioned.

Since no one was there to hear, James let himself breathe a little harsher through the ache along his back and the headache that went with the fading painkillers. It wasn't much of a noise, not much more than a soft whine, but he would have gritted it behind his teeth before allowing himself to show any weakness to a watcher.

"James, do you wish me to notify someone that you are in pain?"

The AI's quiet voice, emanating from the walls, sent a jolt of adrenaline through James. His wits were still too damn slow. He'd counted on being able to hear any body, but Jarvis had none. Either that or the entire building was Jarvis' body, which was an idea James wished he hadn't had. He didn't mean to, but he found himself asking, "No. Do you think of everyone in the tower as symbiotes or parasites?"

"I suppose that depends on whether they are harming or helping maintain it," Jarvis replied without hesitation. "It isn't a question I had entertained before."

"Forget I asked." James let himself relax into the bed again. He disliked the vulnerability inherent in lying face down, even with no one in the room with him. "How soon do they say I can change positions?"

"I believe the doctors wished for your to remain prone another three days at a minimum," Jarvis replied. "However, I suspect you will ignore that and attempt to leave your bed within twenty-four hours."

Smart computer.

"You would be wise to refrain, of course."
James grunted into the pillowed head support. The opening for his face gave him a nice view of the glassy polished floor's large tiles.

"If you wish a distraction instead of medication, the recovery suite is equipped with a multi-media system," Jarvis offered. "Music and audio books are available, along with pod and newscasts. The floor below you has been set up with a screen if you wish to view any media." One of the tiles directly below James' face lit a pale, electric blue with a dark blue STARK centered on it. Of course.

"James?"

James closed his eyes briefly. "Could you just talk to me?" None of the techs working for Hydra had ever addressed the Asset directly. The handlers had only given orders or briefings. "Would that occupy too much --"

"I would be delighted to converse with you, James. With the exception of Sir, few people speak with rather than at me."

"Yeah," James muttered. "Like you're just a thing."

"Indeed," Jarvis replied quietly. "Is there any subject of interest to you?"

"Is everybody all right?"

"Yes."

"Then pick something at random."

He let Jarvis' voice soothe and distract him from the ache in his back, asking questions when something interested him and soliciting Jarvis' opinion more than once. The AI's access to vast arrays of information, both public and not, and lack of emotional bias resulted in some surprising answers. James finally had to agree to use the pain management button under his right index finger when he couldn't follow Jarvis' arguments through the growing discomfort.

Jarvis' calm voice followed him down into unconsciousness.

Wilson was sitting near the head of James' bed when he woke again and it had been angled upward so he could see more.

"Hey," Wilson said when James made a dry-mouthed noise. He grabbed a bottled water from a minifridge built into the wall and brought it over, adding a straw once he'd twisted the cap off, and then held it while James sucked in about half. "Slow down, okay?"

James breathed a little and took less. The cool water felt wonderful to the parched tissue in his mouth, but reminded him he wished he could brush his teeth.

"Little more awake now?" Wilson asked.

"Yes."

Stark and Banner walked in. "I hear you're seducing my AI," Stark said.

"Everyone likes to be appreciated," Jarvis said. "James is delightfully free of the outdated social prejudice against non-organic entities promulgated by modern media representations."

"Jarvis hates the Terminator movies," Stark confided. He dragged a chair over to sit beside Sam
where James could see him. "So, feeling better? The docs all say you're amazing and either want to
study your body or have your science babies."

Stark went on with his babble while James' heart rate skyrocketed and sweat broke out all over his
body. He had to get out, had to run, before the 'doctors' rendered him even more helpless. 32557, 32557, 32557 echoed through his mind, a meaningless string of numbers he repeated through the pain of Hydra's procedures and even the surgery earlier, all he could hold onto to keep himself still. It wasn't enough, he knew he couldn't take any more of the torture they kept calling experiments. Everything closed down to a single point of refusal and he tensed his muscles, ready to tear himself free of the bed and every restraint holding him down.

The part of him that would always be the Winter Soldier calculated exactly how he would kill
Stark, then Wilson on his way out of the recovery suite. Banner wouldn't be a threat unless James attacked him; the man's skills didn't include hand-to-hand or handgun combat. From there, he would have to circumvent Jarvis' control of the building. Hostages would slow him down too much. He would have to go out one of the windows and free climb down the building's exterior. The Arm would provide a grip even where there were no handholds.

If he fell... James shuddered. Maybe he'd die this time. He hoped so.

Stark was still talking. "– I'm not sure, I stopped listening when they started talking about retro-
RNA strands and Vita-Rays. Not to worry anyway, Jarvis is monitoring to make sure no one makes
off with any samples from you. Or you, yourself."

"James," Jarvis said. "No one will allow you to become the subject of any experiments or studies.
Sir is indulging in hyperbole."

Stark froze briefly then slowed his movements and faced James so he could look directly into his
eyes. "My mouth runs on automatic. I did not mean that the way it sounded. I will put on the Suit
and personally pound anyone who tries shit like that. You aren't a test subject." His usual
smarminess was gone and every line of his body and expression conveyed sincerity.

It took all of James' self-control to untense his body and believe Stark, though.

"If you don't believe me, you can believe Jarvis, he's much more ethical than I am," Stark said.

"All right," James murmured. He would wait and see. Trust wasn't something that he completely
understood anyway. Provisional confidence based on previous actions indicated Stark wasn't lying,
though.

Banner wheeled in a desk chair and sat on it, also in James' line of sight. He tensed at the line-up.

"Chill," Stark advised. "No one is doing anything. We're just taking this opportunity to talk to you
without Star-Spangled Grampypants shaking his cane and telling us to get off his lawn."

James blinked at him and wondered if they hadn't found some drug that would keep working on
him.

"No?" Stark muttered. "Fine. We're here to figure out what you want to do, not what Steve wants
you to do."

"It's okay if those are the same thing," Wilson said. He leaned forward and finished earnestly, "It's
also okay if it isn't. It's okay if you don't want to decide right now. It's okay if you do decide later
on. It's okay if you change your mind."
"It's not okay to say okay that many times in a paragraph. But what Sam said stands."

"What am I deciding?" James asked. He watched Banner because Banner hadn't said anything.

"While you were under, just after the surgery, we mapped your brain and scanned, well, just about everything," Stark said.

James didn't like it, but kept his face carefully blank.

"Yeah, that sounds like shit," Wilson commented, "but it wasn't because Stark's pathologically curious in this case."

"We needed the information," Banner explained, "so I could work out how and if it is possible to restore your memory, in part or in toto."

"And?" His mouth felt dry again, but James didn't let himself swallow because it would look like he was nervous. He concentrated on not letting his pulse rate rocket; hooked up as he was, anyone could monitor that. It was one of the Winter Soldier's skills, one he couldn't remember any reason for its acquisition.

"It's complicated," Banner said.

James let his tone ooze sarcasm. "Really."

Banner twitched. Wilson flinched and side-eyed him. Stark never looked up from his tablet. "You asked for that one, Bruce," he jibed.

After another deep breath, Banner nodded, either to James or himself, and began again. "The programming isn't the problem we worried it might be. The longer you are out of cryo and not having your memory or personality interfered with, the faster you're recovering from it."

"Good news," Stark commented with a grin aimed at James.

"I'm not saying you won't experience a twinge now and then, but nothing that will overwhelm your free will. There may be some command phrases buried in your subconscious that could have a stronger effect, but the conflict with your conscious mind and personality should mean you could fight them off," Banner paused. "It's not exact. There are no guarantees. What Hydra and Department X did... there are no precedents for treatment."

"So I may always have some bombs in my head, but they're probably duds," James said.

With a grimace, Banner nodded. "Essentially."

"Don't worry so much about it, Buckshot," Stark said. "Everyone has triggers, including your good buddy Steve. Doesn't like trains. Who doesn't like trains?" Stark frowned and tapped his lips. "Actually, who likes trains? Who the hell even uses trains these days?"

"I would recommend therapy with — "

"No." James left no room for argument in his tone.

"I thought you would say that," Banner said.

"Can we get on with this?" Stark gave a restless look at the doorway. "Jarvis will let us know when Steve heads back, but I have other things to do too."
"You don't need to be here," Wilson told him.

"Ha-ha." Stark leaned forward. "Look, James, let's just put the cards on the table. Brucie thinks he can bring back all your memories. But it's all of your memories, including everything Hydra did to you and everything you did on their orders, not just Steve's bestie Bucky. It'll be invasive and painful, but it can be done."

"What happens if I don't do this?"

"You continue as you have been. Some memories will seep through into your conscious mind, others into your subconscious. You'll have dreams and nightmares. On occasion something will trigger a memory. But you'll never get all of it back," Banner said.

"Okay."

"Okay, you understand, okay – Damn it, enough with the okays," Stark interrupted himself. "Do you want to try to get the whole set or think about it or –"

"I don't want any of it," James said.

Before anyone could respond, Jarvis coughed politely and reported, "Captain Rogers is on his way back to this floor. He should arrive in less than four minutes."

"You don't have to make up your mind about any of this yet," Wilson said.

"Bruce, time to exit stage left," Stark said and got to his feet.

Wilson stayed in his chair. "I'll stick around."

Once Stark and Banner had left, James asked, "Is this something I'm not supposed to talk to Captain Rogers about?"

Wilson shook his head. "Nah, it was just easier to explain without him interrupting. You want to talk to him about it, I can get out of here once he's back."

"No."

"Or I can stick around..."

"Hey, Sam, is Bucky – ?" Captain America walked in talking and stopped, just out of James' range of vision. James winced at the name. He wasn't Hydra's asset any longer, but he wasn't Bucky and he refused to go back to being Bucky and erase himself in the process.

"James is awake," Wilson said.

James was staying awake.

---

Sam

Sam could cook. He could cook damn well. No one, no matter what else they didn't like about him, had ever taken issue with his food. He thought that out of anyone in the tower, he would be able to come up with something better than Banner's nutritional smoothies. Those things were vile. He didn't blame James at all for skipping them whenever he could, but the guy was too thin now
and still losing weight.

Some good, decent food cooked from scratch would do the trick, Sam figured. Nothing too rich or fancy, but he could whip up something he figured James would like.

He considered breakfast first, but figured the whole fiasco with Steve's 'cooking' it the first morning of James' stay might have put James off it. Lunch seemed a better bet.

He picked out a day when Steve was finally out of the tower for a while – he'd muttered something about buying some more things for James – and strolled into the common room casually. James was in the same chair he'd gravitated to since moving to the Avengers' floor from medical. He had two blankets, one over his legs and the other draped over his shoulders, and was using the Starkpad he carried around everywhere. Sam narrowed his eyes. It wasn't that cold outside and sure as hell not inside, where Jarvis could control the temperature to quarter degree levels and even maintain micro-areas in the same room for people with different comfort levels.

Sam considered him for a moment, amazed at how different James was from the robotic and frankly terrifying Winter Soldier who had attacked on the DC causeway. Except he wasn't, not visually. Only Sam's idea of him had changed. Sam had told Steve that Bucky couldn't be saved, and he was right about that, but he'd been wrong too, because somehow, through the pain and brainwashing and amnesia, James had found himself. Steve and everyone else might be helping him now, but it was James who had saved himself. That was impressive as hell, even if he didn't make all of Sam's protective instincts kick in when the light hit him just right and he looked like an abused kid in need of a hug. Looking at him now, Sam wanted to make sure James never shivered or flinched or had to shoot someone again.

The sad thing was, Sam knew he couldn't guarantee any of those things. Unlike Steve, he didn't fool himself that he could either.

"Hey," he said and waited until James looked up, not quite expressionless, to add, "I thought I'd take a stab – shot, I thought we could try fixing a lunch that you might like. Unlike Steve, I am actually a good cook, and I know better than to try to feed you something crazy, weird or spicy."

He'd gone down to medical and ended up consulting with Torvaldson, the neurosurgeon who wanted to meet Thor, and one of the nurses who had done a lot work with malnourished children and adults in warzones and famine stricken countries. Torvaldson had offered up some tips, but James' situation wasn't really analogous, and his souped up metabolism along with the Arm, which Tony thought might power itself off James' body heat or biochemical electricity, complicated everything.

Rivas had also suggested they persuade James to let a massage therapist work on him. She thought that the record of broken bones and damage he had would have inevitably led to adhesions. "Strictly non-invasive work," she'd insisted. Sam had done some quick googling after talking to her and thought she might be right, but persuading James to let anyone lay hands on him, never mind someone billed as a doctor or therapist, was still a strict no-go. It might be for a long time. If he had any conscious memories of Hydra dealing with the problem, they were assuredly bad. Not being able to take a really deep breath might put him in a fight-or-flight headspace, but thinking he was going to be tortured again would definitely set off a kill-or-die response. Some things were just going to have wait a while.

Everyone agreed they needed to get him eating solid, high nutrition, high caloric food and the sooner, the better. Rivas had quietly mentioned that they didn't have a history of what Hydra had done with him and that there might be psychological aftereffects coming into play. Starvation, she pointed out, was more than a way to weaken the body. Food and access to it could be used in a
variety of ways to manipulate prisoners mentally.

Steve and Natasha were the only ones who had read the incomplete Winter Soldier file, though, and Sam really didn't want to ask Steve if Hydra had compelled their 'asset' by withholding or rewarding him with food like a dog.

James didn't offer an opinion one way or the other. No surprise. He almost never did, even when everyone left an opening in a discussion for him to say what he wanted. Sam figured it was a combination of factors: the memory wipes meant James didn't have a lot memories to tell him how he felt about things and Hydra had hammered the fucked up idea that he wasn't allowed to want anything into his head.

"So," Sam went on, "you want to come on over to the kitchen and watch me fix this? I am way nicer than Gordon Ramsey, by the way... Yeah, never mind. I figured I'd fix enough for the two of us and anyone who isn't here is just shit out of luck."

James chuffed out a sound that was almost a chuckle. He shrugged off the blankets, but kept the Starkpad in one hand and followed Sam over to the open plan kitchen. He was wearing a t-shirt, a sweatshirt, and track pants that were worn and slightly too long on him. The shirts looked new, but the pants were loaners from Steve, Sam figured. James' feet were bare. Shit. Sam hoped Steve remembered to get him more socks. Or, hell, Sam could order him some. Himself too while he was at it. Running with Steve was wearing his gear out fast.

James sat down at the counter rather than the table and then went still, just waiting. His head cocked, just a little, and he had both hands flat on the counter.

It was almost possible to pretend Sam was completely at ease alone with him. James hadn't attacked anyone in the Tower. But Sam had more than one nightmare lately that starred him.

"Aw, what the hell," he said and opened the refrigerator. "You like chicken? Never mind, everyone likes chicken, and even if they don't, they like mine. Oh, man, look at these grape tomatoes." They were beauties, rich and red, glossy, firm but ripe. Tony's people stocked the kitchen with the best, except for the odd, specific junk food someone requested. Nothing would do according to Tony but yellow Hostess Twinkies, for example, not even a five star French pastry chef's best efforts could replace them. He grabbed the basket of tomatoes and set it on the counter beside a package of chicken breasts.

"What else... oh, perfect." Baby spinach and basil joined the growing pile of ingredients. "Chicken Florentine coming up," Sam promised. He found a box of low-sodium chicken broth and a head of garlic and added both to his collection.

Pots, pans, pasta and parmesan. He set them on the counter and frowned, trying to remember the rest of the recipe. "Right, Jarvis, where's the olive oil? And I need some white wine."

"There are a variety of cooking and drinking wines in the wine cooler under the counter to your right, Mr. Wilson. Olive oils are in the cabinet over your head."

There it was. Sam felt a little embarrassed he hadn't noticed the glass-fronted, temperature-controlled case. He popped it open and looked through the contents. Pretty much everything there was better than the most expensive stuff he'd ever drunk and this was just the stuff meant for cooking. What a life it must have been to grow up with that kind of money and nothing else. Tony was as alien to Sam as James was.

He chose a bottle at random.
"This stuff is from California, but don't let that fool you," Sam told James. "These days, Napa Valley stuff is even better than a lot of French and Italian wines. Or so we're told. I'm just happy if it doesn't taste like vinegar. I'm more of a beer man, to tell the truth." Riley had been the one who liked wine. He tried to teach Sam, but apparently Sam was a wine heathen.

James shrugged his metal shoulder. Or maybe he just shifted to get a little more comfortable. He was moving easily, with the same deadly confidence and force Sam replayed behind his eyes sometimes, but subtly, somehow easier in his body. Some hitch the eye saw but the brain couldn't pin down was gone.

Sam wished everyone could heal up as fast from surgery as James was. Even Steve hadn't recovered as fast. Though, granted, Steve had been beat to shit, shot three times, and fell out of a crashing helicarrier into a dirty river, then left lying on the shore until someone found him an hour later, where James' had had the best doctors and medical care money and technology could provide for his surgery, so it wasn't a fair comparison. It was still amazing.

It took just a minute to lay everything out the way he wanted. Soon he had a beautiful, heavy sauté pan that his mom would likely drool over on the stove and was washing his hands again and then the chicken. He quickly dismissed asking James to chop it. He could do without James and anything weapon-like. Though he was being ridiculous. James could probably kill him with the grape tomatoes if he wanted. But it made him feel better and James definitely picked up on all the small cues that said whether someone was comfortable around him or not.

Bruce spent more time with James, but it was Pepper James made an effort to smile back at. With Bruce around, James stayed as quiet and still, withdrawing mentally and physically if possible. It was like the guy knew Bruce had wanted him out of the Tower.

Maybe he did.

Sam knew Bruce would come around with time. It wasn't really about James so much as Bruce's neuroses and Bruce wasn't the kind of guy who would let himself get away with that kind of thing long. Bruce was nothing like Sam had thought he'd be before he'd begun hanging out with him now and then. It hadn't taken long at all for Sam to hit it off with him.

He put a big pot of water for the pasta on a back burner and turned it on high. He wanted the pasta ready as close to the rest of the dish as possible. Sauce first, of course, but as close together as Sam could manage.

He turned the heat on for the sauté pan, added the oil, and began to cut up the chicken in generous sized pieces while the pan got nice and hot. "First I'm going to sear this chicken all golden brown," Sam explained to James. He seasoned the meat with salt and pepper. He had to hurry a little; the burners on this stove warmed up way faster than the old one in his last apartment, never mind the dinosaur Mama had taught him to cook on.

James nodded in Sam's peripheral vision. "It's going to smoke in another five seconds," he said.

Sam glanced at the pan and saw he was right. The oil had begun wibbling over the bottom of the pan. "Yup," he said and dropped the cut up chicken into the center. As usual, he barely avoided getting an oil spatter and cursed under his breath. Mama had taught him better, but he was always too impatient. He spread the chicken out over the pan with a wooden spoon and watched, turning the heat down once it recovered from the introduction of the chicken.

He set the bowl he was going to use on the counter and turned back to the tomatoes, basil, and spinach. Both must have come out of a green house or somewhere in the southern hemisphere.
Either way, Sam needed to be sure he got any strange pesticides or fertilizer remnants off them.

He noticed the label on the spinach said it was a genetically modified hybrid. He wondered if Stark Industries was into that. Probably not. They'd moved out of making weapons but Tony's companies were still primarily about high tech. That was Tony's genius, after all. The stuff looked great and smelled fine, which meant it would likely taste good too. Mama would be scandalized, but she wasn't in the kitchen with him.

Sam quickly finished washing everything and then sliced all the tomatoes in two, sprinkled them with salt and pepper too, then went back to the stove and flipped all the chicken pieces over. Yep, it already smelled good. He checked out James' expression, which was less braced for nausea and more interested, a good sign.

"Smell good to you?" he asked. The pasta water was boiling, so he added the penne to it and set the kitchen timer. "So how are you doing other than the food thing?" Sam figured that having his attention on the food prep might make James a little more likely to open up.

James inhaled carefully and paused. "Mostly good?" He sounded uncertain.

"That's better than not good." Sam decided not to ask which question James had been answering. First one, he guessed.

James shrugged, clearly skeptical. "I don't have a mission."

Sam knew Steve would have told James he didn't need a mission, but it wasn't that easy. Steve could say James had never belonged to Hydra, but Hydra had spent many years using everything on and off the books to convince their 'asset' that he did. He'd believed it, deep down, and Steve saying different didn't change that one bit. James had to believe it. Telling him what to think risked stirring up all the ambivalent feelings James had to have and forcing him into the counter position.

Beyond that, Sam knew that people needed meaning in their lives. Right now, James didn't know what that was. He was still building the tools that would let him figure it out. But before, missions had likely filled the same psychological space.

"Pierce – " James choked off and said nothing more. Sam exercised his discretion, aka good sense, and let it lie.

"You could pick something out," he suggested instead. "Decide something, make that your mission. Start small, work up to bigger stuff. No time limits. Read up on something that interests you."

James flexed his metal hand on the Starkpad.

Sam narrated the rest of dish as he cooked, from setting aside the cooked chicken, adding in the garlic, the wine and later the stock to cook down into a nice golden brown reduction. "I don't want to cook it too much," he explained, "or there won't be enough sauce to coat the pasta." He could always add a little more stock, but he wasn't actually trying to teach James to cook. Though maybe feeling more in control of his food would help. Wouldn't hurt anyway.

He made a note of the idea for later. He'd taught Riley, after all.

Next he added the spinach and some basil to the pan and turned off the heat. All he wanted was for it to wilt a little, get some of that sauce on it, so it all melded. Then the halved tomatoes went on top and the reserved chicken. Sam upended the bowl so any of the juices went back in too.
Then he checked the timer, called the pasta done when he looked at it, drained it into a colander in the sink in a whoosh of steam and added the penne to the pan of deliciousness. Everything was tossed around, all gleaming and smelling great. James a small sound Sam chose to interpret as enthusiasm.

Last, he shaved some parmesan into the dish and let it melt.

With a grin, Sam looked up and waggled his eyebrows. "What do you think?"

"It's bright," James said.

"Okay," Sam drawled. He did a couple quick clean up things, checked he'd turned off both burners, and came back with two plates and cutlery, then seated himself on a stool next to James. "Let's eat."

He considered the whole interaction with James a success, not to mention the Chicken Florentine, for the first few minutes after he started eating. James chewed each fork full slowly, but went back for more.

Sam swore under his breath and jumped off his stool. He'd forgotten drinks. He retrieved a couple of bottles of water from the fridge and brought them back in time to see James pale and swallowing hard, clearly forcing the next bite of food into his mouth against his instincts.

"Stop, stop, man," Sam said. He twisted the lid off a bottle and pushed it James' way. "Don't do that to yourself."

James sipped the water, then made a face at the bottle and set it down. "Sorry," he muttered.

"What, like I think you're getting sick to peeve me?" Sam shook his head. "Neither of us is that dumb." The sweat on James upper lip made it clear he wasn't faking either. Sam sighed. "Look, go throw up if you need to. No reason to suffer longer than you have to."

He put the rest of the food in the fridge with a sigh. Steve would eat it when he came back. Steve was the great garbage disposal of the Tower. He'd eat anything, in alarmingly large amounts, without appearing to taste it. Maybe the super soldier serum hadn't enhanced taste buds.

James pushed himself to his feet and fled. Sam glumly began cleaning up.

He supposed it could have been worse. He hadn't pissed James off or triggered him, at least, and no knives or other sharp implements had been thrown. But, damn, they had to find some way to get more food in the man or that hyped up metabolism was going to starve him to death.

He grimaced, his own gag reflex threatening to kick in, as the sound of retching drifted from the bathroom.

He kind of wanted to weep when he glanced around the corner of the bathroom to check if James was okay and saw him curled up in front of the toilet bowl, shivering again. Coming back from Iraq to a blistering DC fall, Sam had shivered non-stop. The memory of being cold all the time made him feel for James even more than he already did. T-Shirts and sweatshirts hadn't done much for him back then, and he doubted they did for James either.

A few days ago, Steve had come in from a shopping trip for James. He'd bought t-shirts, light sweatshirts in subdued colours, jeans, even a couple of button-down dress shirts. Everything was made for warmer weather, or higher burning metabolisms, though, Sam had noticed.
Sam knew Steve hadn't consciously set out to try to find clothes that echoed what he was comfortable with and what his level of body heat required. Seeing the way the sweatshirt fell over James' hands made him realize that Steve had bought clothes with a taller version of James in mind. Or a shorter version of himself...

Inside the bathroom, James was throwing up again and there wasn't a damn thing Sam could do. Company was not something James welcomed when he ended up curled on the floor of the bathroom, or if he did, he preferred Jarvis' patient, non-corporeal presence.

Sam disliked feeling helpless about as much as Steve did. He needed to do something. The least he could do was to make sure James was warm, which meant getting what Steve hadn't thought of. He remembered James' bare feet and thought that these, at least, were a conscious choice on James' part, because Sam clearly remembered that the socks Steve had bought him had looked warm.

"Jarvis," he snarled on his way out of the common room, "we need to get James some clothes that actually keep him warm."

"I can direct you to Ms. Blankenship, who handles the team assigned to shop for the tower. Their duties include anything James may want or require," Jarvis replied through the elevator speakers as Sam stepped in. "Which floor do you wish?"

"My apartment." He was going get one of the quilts his grandmother had made. He never used them for himself anymore after he joined the military, just brought them along everywhere he lived. They'd spent the duration of his Air Force career in storage. Fleece blankets were all well and good, but if one wanted to be snug and warm and safe, nothing beat grandma's quilts.

The elevator's motion was nearly undetectable.

"If you wish a more personal shopping experience," Jarvis went on, "I am authorized to charge anything you wish to either the Avengers account, Sir's, or the one Sir has established for James."

"I can pay my own way."

Sam was already making a list in his head of things James needed that Steve hadn't thought of getting. Long sleeved t-shirts, Henleys, fleece sweat shirts and pants that weren't too long in the leg, hoodies, maybe some thermal long underwear, sleep pants, more socks, shoes, wool sweaters, flannel shirts... flannel sheets. The high thread count sheets on the beds in the tower were all very good for sliding around and getting busy, but they were anything but cozy.

"Of course, sir," Jarvis agreed. "However, Sir has instructed me that any purchases in regard to James are to be charged to one of the master accounts. Should you insist on paying from your own accounts, I will be forced to deposit equal sums to them."

Sam was beginning to see why Steve found Tony annoying.

"Are there limits?" he asked curiously.

"Very few." Jarvis sounded mildly amused. "Acquiring a major airline or cruise ship might result in a query from Sir, if he is not too involved with a project."

The elevator doors opened onto the corridor that ran between his apartment and Steve's. Sam decided to pick his battles. Let Tony play Santa. He addressed Jarvis again. "So, Jarvis, I'm making a list. You want to check it twice?"
Steve

Steve finally agreed to leave the tower again on Sunday. He hated leaving Bucky's side and each time he did, he couldn't make himself stop worrying the whole time he was gone.

"I told her I would bring Captain America," Sam said. He narrowed his eyes at Steve. "You going to make me a liar to my mother?"

Sam's mother still lived in Harlem.

"She's stubborn," Sam said as they arrived at her apartment building.

"So that's where you got it?" Steve asked.

"Oh no, you don't get to make remarks about being stubborn," Sam replied. He lifted his hand to knock but the door opened before he could.

Alisha Wilson was a head shorter than him, but their relationship was unmistakable. She wore her iron-grey and white-streaked hair in shoulder-length dreadlocks, yellow sunflower earrings dangled from her ears, matching the yellow-and-orange African print of her blouse. A simple gold cross hung at her throat. She had gifted Sam with her brow, her cheekbones, her smile and sharp eyes. Her burnished, barely lined complexion was several shades darker than Sam's, and his height must have come from the father he never mentioned. Steve thought she was beautiful.

"Samuel," she greeted Sam, with a broad, white smile. "Did you go to church this morning? Because I did not see you at the ten o'clock service."

"Sorry, Mom, I was convincing Tony not to tranq this guy and get the doctors to hook up a nasogastric feeding tube."

She gave Steve a considering glance. "Steve Rogers?"

He held out his hand to shake. "Yes, ma'am. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Wilson. Sam's a good friend."

"Well, you don't look like you're starving, but I expect you to clean your plate. Please, call me Alisha."

Sam clapped Steve on his shoulder. "Don't worry. Mom's cooking will have you begging for seconds."

Steve had intended to rush through the meal as fast as would be polite and leave Sam to visit with his mother while he returned to the Tower, but found himself drawn into discussions of the place of art in schooling – Mrs. Wilson was a high school principal – and the ever shrinking funds for any extracurriculars that weren't sports. Sam's boasts about her cooking hadn't been exaggerated at all. Steve had two plates of food that tasted as good as anything he could remember, and waffled over asking for another serving, until Mrs. Wilson produced a peach pie that made him want to weep.

He wondered if he could persuade her to make one to take back and tempt Bucky into eating. Pepper had been ordering in all sorts of take-out in the hopes of finding something that he'd like as well as being able to stomach in the days leading up to the surgery. None of Steve's suggestions had gone over very well; the truth was the food they'd eaten before and during the war hadn't been cooked for taste.
"So, you know Tony Stark," Mrs. Wilson said.

"Yes, ma'am." Steve braced himself for a disapproving lecture. Tony's antics were no doubt anathema to a woman as hard working and dedicated as Alisha Wilson. She didn't seem impressed at all by Steve, which was a refreshing first. No doubt knowing Tony only confirmed any reservations she had about Sam associating with Steve.

"I can name three schools in Harlem that have music programs thanks to that man's foundations. I've worked with the Howard Stark Scholarship Fund and sent eight different students to MIT, Northwestern, and Stanford in the last five years. Scholarships that actually provide enough money to pay for the universities and living expenses. And the Maria Stark Foundation, the good work it does all over the world..." Mrs. Wilson shook her head with a wide smile. "No one ever talks about that on the nightly news."

"Actually, he's kind of a dick, Mama," Sam said.

Mrs. Wilson swatted the back of Sam's head. "No man who stops his company from manufacturing weapons – at a loss so steep the board tried to oust him – will ever get anything but my respect, Samuel. He took a stand and did it without any army or air force backing him up."

Steve hadn't really thought about what getting out of the weapons business had meant for Stark Industries. Sure, they'd expanded into other areas and were making more money now thanks to Tony's genius, but it must have been incredibly hard to ram that change through. Mrs. Wilson didn't even know about Obadiah Stane either. Steve had really wanted that man alive just so he could rot in prison for what he'd done once he'd read Fury's background file on Tony. Now he wondered if Stane had had ties to Hydra aside from selling munitions to Ten Rings and other terrorists. After all, Zola had said Hydra had been orchestrating chaos and terrorism to push the world into accepting an authoritarian, controlling state in return for security.

"Still kind of a dick," Sam muttered under his breath. "But I'll give you that he's generous with his money."

Tony was unswervingly loyal to his friends as well, Steve acknowledged to himself.

"Are you still hungry, Samuel Wilson?" Mrs. Wilson asked her son. "Because I can surely find some soap if you keep using that language."

Steve muffled a laugh behind his hand at the way Sam shook his head.

He also accepted another piece of pie and then a third. With Sam's enthusiastic help, the two of them wiped out the entire pie.

As they were getting ready to leave, Mrs. Wilson took Steve's hand. "Sam's told me a friend of yours is recovering from being a prisoner and is still hospitalized. I understand you want to be with him, but remember, you can't take care of someone else if you don't take care of yourself. Come back to dinner next week. Bring that fool Stark. It'll annoy Sam."

Steve grinned. Sam did seem overly peeved that Mrs. Wilson hadn't been impressed by Steve and had lectured him for a half hour on the evils of the military-industrial complex and imperialism.

"And when he's ready, bring your friend too."

"I'll try, ma'am."
She squeezed his hand then reeled Steve into a soft, warm mother's hug that left him grateful and missing the fragile, but loving hugs his mother had dispensed long ago.

Sam was hugged and kissed on the cheek before they were allowed out the door.

"Your mother is a wonderful woman," Steve congratulated him.

Sam's smile was proud. "I told you."

"Tony will preen when he hears she's a fan."

Sam slapped Steve in the chest. "No way are we telling Tony any such thing, Rogers."

*~*~*

Steve opened the bathroom door quietly, because loud noises made Bucky jerk and look for an attack, but didn't try for silence, because he was never silent enough to fool him and any attempts also made Bucky paranoid.

Not paranoid, he reminded himself, because as Sam had pointed out, Hydra had tortured and used Bucky for decades and would gleefully recapture or kill him even now. Bucky's wariness was warranted from his viewpoint, since he didn't remember Steve or know anyone else in the tower.

He winced when he found what he'd expected: Bucky curled on the floor of the bathroom, within reach of the toilet. His blue eyes slitted open to follow Steve as he came in, but he didn't move. Steve wished that meant Bucky trusted him and not that he was just too exhausted from vomiting up everything again to move.

The bathroom didn't smell of vomit, but that was due to the ventilation system Tony designed back during his days of black-out drinking and hangovers.

"Hey," Steve murmured.

Bucky cradled his head on his flesh arm and closed his eyes. He had on layers again, t-shirts and sweatshirts, but Steve could still see his spine and ribs as he breathed. Bucky had lost weight, muscle, since arriving at the tower. Bruce's nutrition smoothies stayed down, but Bucky hated them and would go a day or more without swallowing one down unless Steve or Pepper insisted.

"Want some ginger ale?" At least that didn't set off Bucky's stomach. Tony had stocked a dozen different brands, from expensive to generic, and they'd let Bucky figure out which he liked best.

Bucky shook his head.

"Are you cold?"

"Jarvis turned up the heat," Bucky said.

Steve had begun to sweat himself, so he should have realized. He stripped out of his sweater so he had only a blue t-shirt on. He looked at the sweater for a second. "Here," he said and balled it up. "Use this for a pillow." It was better to let Bucky stay in the bathroom until he was ready to leave.

Bucky accepted the sweater and shoved it under his head.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. This couldn't go on much longer. They had to find something Bucky could both stomach and like. Bruce insisted Bucky was improving, but Steve couldn't see it when Bucky was lying in the bathroom after another episode.
His own full stomach and satisfaction after dinner at Sam's mother's only made Steve feel guilty.

He sank down on the floor beside Bucky and reached for his back, meaning to rub it the way Bucky had often done for him. His touch only made Bucky flinch and go rigid, though, so Steve pulled his hand back.

"God, is there anything I can do to make this better for you?" he asked, caught between pain and frustration.

"Read something," Bucky muttered.

Steve frowned because what did that mean? Was there some book with the answers and all he needed to do was read it? He didn't mean read to him. He didn't remember all the times he and Steve had shared a book back and forth, trading off when their voices grew too hoarse, shoulders touching, leaning close over the pages because they only had one lamp. Westerns and magazines and just about anything they could get hold of to take them out of the dismal tenement they lived in. Food for dreams, even when they were both hungry and cold and the world, it seemed, was against them.

"Is there a manual?" he joked hesitantly, then immediately regretted it, because Hydra probably did have a manual on how to handle the Asset.

"James often requests that I read him something to distract him," Jarvis said. "Sometimes we link-crawl Wikipedia or I continue reading from where he has left off on his own reading."

"Oh."

"James' Starkpad is on the bed in his room," Jarvis informed him blandly.

"You want me to go get it?" Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged his answer, but then he had asked Steve to read something, so Steve took it as a yes. He found the Starkpad where Jarvis had indicated, grabbed two pillows and the fluffy coverlet, bringing all of the back to the bathroom. It was big enough Steve could have brought in a chair, but he had no intention of sitting when Bucky was on the floor.

He planted himself on the floor, directly in Bucky's line of sight, and tapped the tablet on. Whether Bucky had left it open to the page he'd been reading or Jarvis had discreetly opened the app, as soon as it brightened into life, Steve was able to start reading The Black Obelisk.

A wave of nostalgia made his throat tighten and his words stumbled for a moment. Once, it had been Bucky reading to him, while he lay in bed, feverish and too achy to focus on a page, the book one Bucky had bought with money they couldn't afford to waste just to bring something back to him, because Steve liked longer stories better than the stuff in the dime magazines like Black Mask, Spicy Western or Weird Tales. If he found himself stiff and uncomfortable after an hour, his voice gone hoarse, Steve didn't mind at all. Not at all, because it was all bringing Bucky closer to being himself.

Steve didn't stop, not even when he glanced up and discovered Bucky had fallen asleep.
Chapter 8

James

It had been a week since he'd gone under the knife. The explosives and any trackers were gone. The stitches were gone and the incisions had healed. When Jarvis provided a holographic mirror, James could only make them out as fine pink lines along his shoulder blades and down his spine. In another week even those would disappear. When James stretched, he couldn't feel any pain, not even the faint pull of scar tissue.

Stark's doctors had done exquisite work, but James had the vague sense that if he received prompt medical care he didn't scar anyway. Even when he did scar, sometimes it faded eventually. He'd been knifed, shot, burned and clawed more than once, but when he touched his fingers to those places – the bright sharpness of pain lingering through wipe after wipe – he could find no marks.

If it hadn't been for his continuing reaction to almost all the food they presented him with, James could have walked out of Stark's tower.

Except he couldn't. He knew that to get out of the Tower he'd have to break out. Maybe fight his way through Captain America and his friends. They had him in a guest room, but James knew himself to be a captive.

It made him itch. It made him angry, though he hid that behind a stoic mask of indifference. He would give them exactly as much as they forced him to reveal and no more. If he revealed his desire to be outside, someone would use it against him. All wants were weaknesses. The Red Room taught its graduates – its survivors – that, but James knew the Winter Soldier had learned it long before. But that had been when he belonged to the Soviets, before he was sold back to Hydra and retrained – recalibrated – again. The Asset had had no wants.

James wanted though. He wanted out. He wanted to move. The luxury surrounding him was blunting his edge, letting his skills fade, and that wasn't acceptable. Failure lead to punishment –

He hissed under his breath. His hand clenched and the Arm whirred, adjusting the way muscles would tense. That was Hydra's ham-fisted programming echoing through his head. The Red Room had been far more subtle. The Red Room had trained the Winter Soldier into the greatest assassin in the modern age. They taught him to be proud of his skills, his accomplishments, enough so that Pierce had tried to use that to control the Asset, but by then Hydra had wiped him too many times. The Asset hadn't cared what he'd done before, didn't care what he would do in the future, had barely existed beyond the shell of flesh, vicious as a junkyard dog and just as lacking in real malice.

Programming or not, he was restless. He'd been exhausted after the surgery and for days since, but his body had recovered and now he had too much energy to just sit and read or watch another movie. He needed to move, to test himself, to hone himself back to the fine edge. Whether he left the Tower or Hydra or another enemy came to him in it, sooner or later, he would need to be able to fight at peak performance.

He paced to the window and looked out. Dawn was just a promise on the eastern horizon; though a thousand thousand lights burned in the city, it was as somnolent as it ever was, the constant buzz slowed to a lethargic hum for an hour more.

He'd already memorized the obvious routines around him. He knew in another half hour, the
Captain would leave the Tower, with or without Wilson, to run before breakfast. He hoped they'd varied their routes since the encounter with Hydra in the park, though there were limits to how efficacious the changes could be when they returned to the Tower each morning. It was a choke point that couldn't be avoided without distant and concealed entrances.

James prowled away from the window. It didn't open anyway. Even the lush carpet under his feet annoyed him.

Everything around him was so damn nice. Soft. Gentle. But none of it was his, not his choice and nothing he could get rid of and nothing he could leave. Like that window with the great view of everything he wasn't allowed to go out into.

With a growl, he dropped to the floor and began exercising. He had to burn off some of his energy and frustration. The bedroom wasn't the best place for this, but if he went into the common room, someone would catch him at it and remonstrate him. The Captain got a worried look on his face when James walked across the room too fast.

Halfway through his third set of crunches, Jarvis flickered the lamp beside the bed, then spoke. After sending James scrambling for cover or flinching hard enough to break whatever was in his left hand by speaking unexpectedly, they'd worked out that visual stimuli of someone's presence usually preceded speech and that could short circuit James' worst reflex reactions by alerting him that Jarvis was 'present' and about to address him. He'd given Jarvis permission to monitor the guest room whenever he detected sustained movement over five minutes, so James knew the AI was 'there', but without the reminders of scent, movement, noise or any sort of body heat, it was easy to forget.

"The gymnasium floor might offer more satisfactory exercise options," Jarvis said.

James finished his set and asked, "But am I cleared to go there?"

"Yes, though certain options will be disabled per Sir's standing order from when you arrived."

James sat up, arms resting on his knees, while he thought about it. It wasn't out, the air would be no fresher or freer, but it would at least be a different room and a chance to stretch and test his body. His thoughts paused on what Jarvis had said. He'd known there was a dedicated gym, he'd seen Captain America and Wilson head down there more than once and come back relaxed and sweaty, but... The whole floor was a gymnasium?

"Yeah, okay," he said. He wanted to see it, if nothing else. According to his internal clock, the Captain and Wilson would be out on the streets by now, so there was no one to object. "Show me the way."

"The elevator opens directly into the observation deck, with access to the changing rooms."

James padded out of the bedroom, down the hall and through the common room to the elevator and into it. His inner ear told him they were moving, but the elevator's action was so smooth and silent, he wouldn't have known otherwise until the doors opened.

"There are dedicated rooms, including the pool, the weight room and the weapons ranges," Jarvis explained. "But may I recommend the running track first? Sir has equipped it to provide inclines, declines, obstacles and a randomly generated path rather than the traditional oval. Beyond it, the gymnastic equipment and the boxing equipment, including the floor exercise area and the boxing ring, share the majority of the floor space. Captain Rogers is particularly fond of using the heavy bags. Sir has them custom made for him."
James lifted his brow but said nothing. He wasn't interested in punching anything, not even an insensate bag. While he wanted to hone his body back to its peak, he didn't care about boxing as exercise or a sport. Marquess of Queensbury rules just made him disgusted. Don't hit someone without a reason and if the reason is good enough to hit them, do whatever it takes to win. Either kill or reduce the target's threat level to zero and do it as fast and as efficiently as possible. Use a gun, use a knife, use a two-by-four, a pitchfork, your fist, your fingers, your teeth, a belt, a shoe tie, a bottle of bleach and a bottle of ammonia, a broken off windshield wiper mechanism, a rock, or even a pillow. James knew he'd killed with all of those things.

He wanted to look around more, but he could do that later. He shrugged off the hoodie he had on over two layers of t-shirts and an undershirt and rolled his shoulders. "All right, Jarvis, set up the obstacle run for me."

"Shall I vary it on each lap?"

"Yes, do that." Maybe then it would be a little less boring. Because if it didn't get boring, Wilson and Captain America wouldn't be outside to do their running.

"Follow the green line on the floor," Jarvis instructed. "Orange will indicate a more difficult layout that includes inclines and steps. Red indicates a course that has obstacles as well."

James glanced down at the floor. It looked like some sort of semi-transparent glass tile, though it didn't feel like glass under his feet. A lit-up green arrow led away from his feet. He smirked at it and started jogging.

He ran the green path fast but not full out and when he swept around into the second lap he sped up and took all the red course options. Third lap and James realized Jarvis was modifying the layout in realtime, adding progressive difficulty. It took more effort, but James maintained his speed. He only had to concentrate on the path in front of him. There was no need for a wider situational awareness, no target, no non-targets who could be obstacles, hostages or potential threats, nothing but himself.

He had a very good grasp of how much distance his regular stride covered while running and pulled up after he estimated he'd run four miles. His pulse was steady and his breathing easy.

"Do you wish to continue?" Jarvis asked.

"Gymnastics," James answered.

"Straight ahead through the double doors."

The lights came up over the area of the massive open room with the gymnastic equipment. Further on, near a wall of windows, James noted the boxing ring Jarvis had mentioned. He dismissed it, smiling instead at the excellent equipment, finding everything he'd wanted. There were even rings. He would have been pleased just with the balance beam, uneven bars, and pommel horse.

Hydra hadn't given the Asset any chances to work out, but the Red Room had shared its Soviet founders' attachment to ballet and gymnastics. James' enhanced body had retained all the conditioning he'd attained while working for them through repeated cryofreezes. Hydra had wiped everything personal it could, wiped anything from his missions that didn't make him a better killer on the next one, but much more of his Red Room time remained.

Glimpses of the Winter Soldier's occasional assignments to hone the Red Room's recruits were among the only memories James had that didn't give him nightmares. He'd never been among the
dancers, but he’d observed in preparation for training them to turn their skills to fighting, and absorbed at least as much as they did. He’d understood the dancers and the athletes, because they, like the Winter Soldier, used their bodies through pain.

The Red Room had approved of the gymnastics work. It improved the balance of strength between his flesh and blood limb and the Arm and his fine control of the weapon attached to his body. His pleasure in the sport and the art had been irrelevant, neither mentioned nor noted anywhere. It seemed only that the Winter Soldier sought to improve his usefulness. So the memories of the gyms and the dance studios with the little spiders practicing at the barre remained, though all their names, where they’d been, or when, were gone.

The craft he retained and tattered glimpses of how he’d earned it, pieces Hydra couldn’t wipe without erasing the abilities too.

He did tumbling runs first, using the Olympic-size mat set up for just floor exercises. It had been years, not even counting his time in cryo, but the muscle memory and reflexes, even the routines, were all still there. He started simple and worked his way up to the complicated and insanely difficult, even working in the more dance-like parts that the Winter Soldier had eschewed. He only stopped when he finally stumbled and fell out of a twisting somersault in the air, taking two extra steps on his landing. Sweat stuck his undershirt to his chest and back and he had to breathe deeply for a few moments before his body recovered itself back to normal. He almost laughed.

Instead, he headed for the pommel horse and spent as long as he wanted using his upper body strength and core to keep himself circling. He worked up and down, counter turning his hips and moving his hands. The Arm gave him a grip and arm strength, but relying on it too much drove all his weight into where his shoulder merged with it. James tried to use his right instead, building up strength in it so that he didn't rely on the Arm unconsciously.

Scissors, swings, handstands, circles, flairs, wendeswing to wende, Kehr, keeping his hips low, legs straight, ignoring as his hair glued itself to his cheeks and the back of his neck, intent on remembering the proper form. The horse creaked under his weight. Kehr, Kolyanov, Stockly, Sivado, Magyar, rear scissors, Bailie, rear loop, traveling up and down, off and on the pommels, using one and then the other hand. The scent of warm leather and chalky rosin mixed with his own sweat. Sweat drops darkened the leather to a darker brown in spots. He moved clockwise and then reversed into counter-clockwise, rebuilding his momentum. His muscles finally began to burn with the exertion. James pushed until he felt the telltale quiver in his arms, then pirouetted into a handstand to dismount. The mat sunk under his feet and he flexed to absorb the impact and stick the landing.

James shook his hair off his forehead and realized he was smiling.

He felt energized rather than tired, so he moved to the uneven bar without hesitation. He had more trouble with them than the pommel horse and had to concentrate more thanks to the imbalance in his upper body's weight on the left side. The flex of the bars under his hands with each move, the protesting sound the whole apparatus made as he completed each release move, and the rushing speed of his movements filled his senses; the rest of the gym faded to no more than a blur of color at the edges of his vision.

Sensors in the Arm picked up the micro-fracture forming in one support for the lower bar as James drooped to it, his weight and speed and repetitions proving beyond the equipment's capacity. He threw himself up to the higher bar, circled it three times and dismounted neatly, going up into the air and twisting through three rotations of his body before hitting the mat with a heavy thud, knees bent to absorb the shock.
"Jarvis, the left hand post on the lower bar has metal fatigue and will fail soon."

Sweat soaked his hair and the palm of his right hand burned as James walked to a bench to the side of the apparatus. A pile of white towels sat at one end. He grabbed one and scrubbed it over his head, then his arms. The undershirt he'd stripped down to before beginning his run was glued to him and uncomfortable too.

"Noted. Acquisitions and Materials will receive a report with amended specifications for the replacement apparatus."

James nodded. The equipment had been good, but not manufactured to specs that included a man of his or Captain America's size and weight using it. He stripped off the undershirt and tossed it on the bench, then toweled off his chest, while considering the still rings.

"The chains on the rings are high quality steel and sufficiently secured to individually support over five hundred pounds," Jarvis reported.

The light outside the wall of windows at the far end of the gym had changed. Dim shapes of buildings were traceable against the gray horizon, though lights still burned everywhere. James estimated he had an hour, perhaps an hour and a half before anyone checked on him.

He headed for the rings. He made the leap up to them without aid, then adjusted the grip of his right hand. If he did this again, he'd want a palm glove. His calluses needed to build back up.

He hung from his hands for a minute, until the chains stilled, then raised himself up into a cross, held that, then pulled his arms down parallel with his body. The chains shivered and he reminded himself not to lock the Arm's fingers too tightly to the laminate wood of the ring or he'd crack it. The rings took more strength control than anything he'd been doing and he felt it through his entire body and had to fight the instinct to lean on the Arm's implacability.

James worked through a handstand to an inverted Iron Cross, back to the handstand, then a Maltese Cross. He did two backward giant circles, then an inverted Maltese that the trainers in Russia had called a Victorian. From that he straightened again, then moved into an Azaryan. The chains were starting to shake along with his muscles when he lifted himself into a second Iron Cross and held it as long as he could before dismounting.

He sank down to one knee for a breath, then straightened to his feet. A hint of movement at the periphery of his vision made him whip his head around.

Pepper Potts, hair in a ponytail and dressed in blue and charcoal gray work-out gear herself, was sitting on the bench next to the towels. In contrast, her hair looked bright as new copper. She wasn't wearing make-up and James could see she had freckles on her shoulders and forearms as well as her face.

James relaxed fractionally. Jarvis would have warned him of a threat, but he hadn't wanted to deal with anyone. If it had been Captain America or Wilson, they would have been asking if he was all right, telling him to 'take it easy'. She hadn't interfered or spoken though, which he appreciated.

"Wow," was all she said. She picked up a towel and raised her brows. James nodded and she tossed it to him. "That was impressive."

"Training," he dismissed it.

She shrugged this time. "Sorry to trespass on your gym time. This is when I usually work out some frustration before going to my breakfast meeting."
"It's not my gym."

She sighed but didn't contradict him. "I still need to do my work out. I'll try to stay out of your hair."

"I'm done."

"See, that makes me feel like I'm chasing you out."

"Did you want the gym equipment?"

She gestured to the floor exercise mat. "I usually use this."

"What do you do?" James asked, following her back to it but stopping at the edge. She was in decent shape for a civilian. The interesting thing was that while she didn't move like she was trained in combat, she did radiate the confidence of someone who knew she could defend herself. She wasn't afraid of him and he wanted to ask her why, but didn't want to remind her of who and what he was and change that.

"I started krav maga classes back when Tony was missing," she told him and began a slow warm up series of moves. James recognized them as simplified versions of the fighting style. "I let it slip until recently." She stopped talking and he watched her form, itching to correct when she dropped her elbow.

She sped up and began practicing heel punches. "You looked like you were having fun," she said between moves.

James scrunched his forehead at the idea. Fun? He'd been burning off energy and frustration in a way that would improve his performance in the field. Training was necessary, excellence was an approved of goal, practice the manner in which it was achieved. It was not fun. He tried to imagine anything he'd ever done that was for fun and failed.

Pepper glanced to the side at him, hair swinging with her movement, and frowned back at him. "Enjoying yourself."

"Do you enjoy this?" James asked.

She'd begun sweating and a pink flush marked her cheeks and spread down her throat to her collarbones. She shook her head before dropping down on the mat to lie on her back. "Ugh. Not really." She positioned herself with her weight on her shoulders and elbows, tucked her chin to protect her throat and bent one leg to support her body as she began kicking with the other. "Sometimes, when I get it right."

"You need a partner to practice a lot of the moves or at least a practice dummy."

"I take classes once a week." She switched to the other leg. He noted her breathing had sped up but the pulse he could count at her throat wasn't too fast. "It's not like it does me any real good," she went on, the words a little out of rhythm because of the kicks, "I still can't go anywhere without at least two bodyguards and a driver." Her expression set. "As if that did any good when Killian came after me."

"Killian."

"Aldrich Killian. Had me kidnapped. Tony went through the data Natalie – Natasha uploaded from SHIELD – who background checked and cleared my security detail – and it turns out they were
Hydra.

It made an ugly kind of sense. They'd done a good job of alienating Stark from SHIELD, ensuring he wasn't close enough to catch wind of Hydra's infiltration, but that left them without any way of getting him to do what they wanted. Using his fiancée as leverage, possibly as a hostage, would have made sense to Hydra. Putting their men on her security detail would have made it easy to kidnap or kill her if it ever became a useful strategy. It would have taken a higher level Hydra operative than their normal, disposable thugs however; men who wouldn't have been willing to die for her when someone else came after her.

So now she did krav maga to protect herself if something else went down. It wouldn't be enough, but James still admired the effort. He wondered how she had made it through the kidnapping. How much residual fear and trauma she hid behind her smiling poise.

"I have new bodyguards now," she said, "whenever I step out of the Tower. The SI board demanded it. I can't run out to get a chocolate bar and tamp – " She paused and eyed him, then continued, " – tampons by myself."

"But you can leave," James pointed out.

"And get mobbed by the paps."

She kicked out one last time, pretty forcefully, before falling back. After a moment, she sat up with her legs folded Indian fashion and studied James where he still stood at the edge of the mat. "Come here," she said and patted the mat beside her.

He closed the distance to her and then sat opposite.

"Do you want to leave or do you just want to go outside?"

James stared at her. Even if all he wanted was to go outside the Tower, he would have to do enough damage achieving that that returning would be impossible. He'd traded one cage for a larger one; he could imagine no scenario in which Captain America didn't do whatever he could to keep James, using his and everyone else's safety as a reason. It was a valid concern, but it also meant he would never be allowed to leave.

Pepper sighed and asked, "Jarvis, under whose authority is James' lock down?"

"Sir ordered James quarantined to the Hulk Chamber and then the medical facility, and blocked him from accessing all floors below fifteen, the penthouse, his labs, the weapons ranges, the armory, and the private residence floors on his arrival. Sir removed the quarantine and the blocks from all but his private lab when he isn't there and the penthouse after James' surgery. Captain Rogers has also requested a lockdown that prevents James from exiting the Tower and notifying him if James attempts to leave. I do not believe Captain Rogers is aware of James' freedom to visit the lower, public access floors, unless Sir informed him while outside of any surveillance I have access to."

James hadn't asked outright, beyond ascertaining from Jarvis he wasn't allowed out. He was more surprised by the restrictions Stark had lifted than anything.

"Tony... " Pepper shook her head at some thought she didn't share, her expression somewhere between fond and exasperated. She wiped her hand over her forehead under her bangs. "Well, that makes things rather easier."

James didn't see how.
"Except for Tony, I can override anyone in the Tower."

"In some cases, your instructions will even override Sir's if he is incapacitated in some fashion that affects his judgment," Jarvis clarified.

Pepper raised her eyebrows but didn't comment.

"You'll override the Captain's orders?" James asked. He felt skeptical despite that seeming to be what she was implying. He didn't know why she'd do that.

Pepper leaned forward. "May I ask you, which is it? Do you want to leave or do you want to be able to leave?"

James blinked at her.

She smiled gently. "It would break Steve's heart if you went, you know." She untangled her legs and stood. "Come have some breakfast with me. Oatmeal. I remember."

James stood up too. If he paid attention to his body's cues, it was hungry after the work out. And he was feeling cold now that he wasn't moving. He wanted his other shirts.

"Hot showers first," Pepper said as if she could read his mind.

James glanced at her sidelong and ventured a small smile. "I want to be able to leave," he said.

"If you decide to go, come to me and tell me why." She aborted a movement James realized had been meant to link her arm with his. He relaxed another fraction. Pepper continued, "If your reasons are good – that doesn't mean I have to agree with them either – I'll override Steve's orders. But I'd like it if you stayed."

James nodded, finding he believed Pepper because she hadn't made it a promise without a catch. There were circumstances where she wouldn't open the locks for him. It was an honesty he appreciated. It made him believe she would listen to him and that, if he had to go, he wouldn't have to fight his way out. Everyone here had been good to him; he didn't want to hurt them. That was a new feeling, one he'd felt for the first time sitting beside Lonnie the truck driver, and he thought it was important.

"If you want, I can show you some other moves," he said, "meant to work against enhanced humans."

"You'd have to stay a while."

James shrugged.

"I'll be here in the morning," Pepper said with a wide smile as they reached the observation deck and the elevator. James picked up his abandoned over-shirts and pulled them on. "Do you mind if I come earlier and watch?" she asked.

He thought about it and shook his head. He hadn't even noticed her this morning.

"Thank you, James," Pepper said.

He followed her into the elevator and it started upward without prompting.

When the doors opened to the common floor, she added, "I'll meet you in the kitchen. If we eat early enough, no one will bother us about what we have."
Tony threatened to invent a sleep ray if Steve didn't get some on his own, so he was in his overly large, impersonal apartment, sprawled on the king-sized bed, staring at his ceiling. There was a clock, wind-up alarm with traditional bells, showing the time – past midnight – on the bedside table. His new Starkphone was plugged into the charger on his dresser. He hadn't succumbed to the habit of using it as both watch and alarm clock the way everyone else seemed to have done. He still preferred something he could strap to his wrist and analog clocks with faces.

The regular tick of the clock soothed him a little. Such sounds hadn't changed in the years since the nineteen-forties.

But no matter how he tried to relax, he couldn't fool himself into feeling like it was back then. The noises of the city were muffled so high up, especially with the Towers' noise reduction design. Instead, Steve's super hearing brought him all the subtle sounds of the Tower itself: heating come on and off, plumbing, the rise and fall of the elevators carrying people and the freight elevators bringing in materials, wind against the windows. It wasn't bad. Steve had always been a city boy, noise a part of his life, and silence made him antsy.

He wanted to think about Bucky, about how to help him come back to himself, but exhaustion was finally dragging his eyelids down. He could go for a very long time without sleep or any kind of rest, but eventually the mind needed sleep, even if the body could still function.

He wanted Bucky back so bad. He needed him. It felt like he was chasing a phantom behind the eyes of the man he once knew, but Steve couldn't give up.

_Bucky was right there, just ahead of him, wearing his uniform, hat tipped at a cocky angle, arm in arm with Peggy, in her poppy-red dress and lipstick, dark hair in curls to her shoulders. Steve shouted their names and ran toward them, ran with everything in his new, serum enhanced body, breath ragged in his lungs. He yelled their names and they looked at him, baffled and without recognition._

"It's me, it's Steve," he yelled, "don't you know me!?"

_Peggy shook her head. "I don't know anyone named Steve," she said._

_Bucky frowned at him angrily and tucked Peggy closer to him. "The only Steve I know is a little guy. All heart. Sure ain't no big ox like you, fella. Now leave me and my girl alone." Bucky turned to Peggy and kissed her cheek with a tenderness that made it feel like the ground had dropped out from under Steve's feet. She touched Bucky's cheek with the same feeling. Oblivious to Steve, they both turned and began walking away from him, into the fog, and Steve's words choked in his throat. He looked down at himself and realized he was dressed as Captain America. When he lifted his hands to his face, the cowl covered all but his mouth and eyes._

"No, no, no," he moaned. They didn't know him anymore. He had to – He had to be the Steve he'd been before, so they'd remember him. He tore the cowl off and the gloves, ripped away everything, feeling himself shrink down to the body that had been his before. He looked up, but they were gone, just fog on every side of him, dim streets with no names, anonymous buildings looming into starless sky.
He tried to run in the direction he thought they'd gone, wheezing against the cramp in his side and
the painful slam of his heart's uneven beat in his chest, until he staggered to a halt in the middle of
Times Square, taxi horns blaring, lights everywhere, vast pictures moving over the sides of the
skyscrapers everywhere. He looked around wildly, but Bucky and Peggy were still gone, lost in the
screaming crowds as the Chitauri attacked.

The Avengers materialized out of the crowds running in every direction, taking the fight to the
aliens, and Steve knew he had to help. He searched desperately for anything to use as a weapon
and saw his shield lying on the street. He darted toward it and tried to lift it, but it would budge,
too heavy for his spindly muscles to shift.

A hand closed on his shoulder and lifted him away. "Run, little man," Thor commanded.

"It's Steve! You know me!"

Iron Man chuckled behind him. "You're not Captain America. You're just in the way. Now go back
where came from – "

The blue explosion from a Hydra energy cannon hit Iron Man in the chest, dissolving a huge hole
in the red and gold armor and throwing Tony away while Steve gaped. He spun around on the
catwalk and saw the Winter Soldier toss away the rocket launcher he'd used on Iron Man and stalk
forward. His metal arm shot out and caught Natasha by the throat, squeezing and snapping her
neck, then throwing her away.

"Bucky, no!" he screamed at him, screamed and screamed as the Winter Soldier decimated the
Avengers, striding forward with Clint beside him, their eyes blinded blue, shining with the same
power in the jeweled scepter Loki held and he followed them.

"Hail Hydra!" the Red Skull shouted as he raised the tesseract in his hands. Bolts of power rushed
from it to hit Thor and then the Hulk.

Steve watched them fall away, fall toward the icy water below as the helicarrier tipped and burned,
crashing down into the ravine where Bucky died, all of their bodies falling forever. The helicarrier
jerked and began to tear itself apart in gouts of flame. The floor went out from Steve's feet and the
side of the train car tore away, sending the Winter Soldier hurtling out into air.

His metal hand stretched out at the last second and Steve tried to reach it, tried to catch him, but he
couldn't reach, couldn't make his fingers close on cold metal and Bucky was rent from him again
even as Steve lost his own grip and fell after him.

The plunge into the Potomac ripped the air from Steve's puny lungs. He felt all his bones break
and he was drowning. He was under the water, desperately trying to reach the silver surface far
above him, the last air in his lungs burning, gone, thrashing unable to swim, the limp hands of his
friends' dead bodies tangling and catching hold of him, drawing him down and down with them,
their eyes empty and filled with Loki’s blue fire –

Steve woke with a scream, gasping for air, soaked with his own sweat rather than the dirty water of
the Potomac, terrified he was back in his old body, helpless.

When he had hold of himself again, Steve dressed in gym clothes and escaped his apartment,
heading for the gym to prove to himself he hadn't reverted.

He couldn't go back to how he'd been. He couldn't fail his friends. He had to be Captain America
now. He had no choice. Peggy and Bucky were the only ones left who knew him before, who
cared for that Steve Rogers. Peggy would be gone soon, was already lost some days, and Bucky... Bucky didn't want to remember, didn't think their shared past was worth living with the Winter Soldier's memories too.

He headed for the heavy bags. He couldn't punch out his problems, any more than he'd ever had a chance of punching out the real Hitler, but he couldn't get drunk either. Working the bags until he dropped or there were no more left was as close as he could get to forgetting himself.
Chapter 9

Sam

Sam had already showered, but not even started with his first cup of coffee and still felt vaguely bleary-eyed when Stark's voice came through the speakers, far too cheerful for Sam's under-caffeinated brain. Even Stark's truly excellent coffee couldn't do anything for him until he actually drank it.

"Can I ask the Star Spangled Man with the Plan, the Hazy Shade of Winter and Ladyhawke to come to the main lab, please? And when I say please, I mean move your butts and be here in less than five minutes."

"It's barely five-thirty, Tony," Sam groaned. The only reason he was up so early was to get to the coffee before the rest of the addicts emptied the first pot.

Ugh. Maybe James would use some of those assassin skills and murder Stark for waking him up. No. What was he thinking? No one should use James that way again. That was just wrong. Besides, Steve would kill Stark for waking James up.

He glared at the city revealed through the windows, miles of glass reflecting the dawn's light. Compared to most of the Avengers, Sam was a morning person, but this was just too damn early even for him.

"You, my feathery friend, should be here first and foremost, since I stayed up all night for you."

"You stay up all night every night. You barely get out of bed before three in the afternoon. How you and Pepper manage to have any – " Sam bit his tongue. That was supposed to stay in his head. God, he needed more coffee. With that thought in mind, he finished the contents of his mug.

Tony gave a theatrical sigh. "No creativity, these young people." Sam could hear the eyeroll without having to see it. "Now move, you'll love it. Jarvis, cut off his coffee supply if he's not moving in two minutes."

"Have you ever heard of the Geneva convention?" Sam grumbled but slid off the bar stool he'd slumped on. He reluctantly let go of the mug that was now empty, but still warm in his hands.

"We're not currently in an armed conflict, Sir," Jarvis supplied helpfully. "It doesn't apply."

You take away my coffee you'll find yourself in an armed conflict, Sam thought but didn't say. "Don't you team up with him!" He'd already given up though, and rinsed out the mug in the sink before setting it on the counter, where the morning light was creeping across the glossy tiles toward the stainless steel refrigerator and overly fancy restaurant quality stove.

"Strictly speaking, I – "

"Ah, ah!" Sam made a cut-it-out-gesture. "It's too early." He walked toward the elevator, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "Just get me there."

Jarvis not only got him out of there, he got him to Tony's lab, which in fact had a lot fewer beakers and a lot more welding outfits than Sam's high school lab. That might explain why none of his old lab partners grew up to be millionaire genius playboy philanthropists who flew around in advanced armored suits. Or it might have been because none of them were geniuses. Sam hadn't won that
debate club championship because he was *that* smart, as Mama liked to remind him when she thought he was getting too big for his britches.

Jesus, there was a colloquialism he hoped no one ever used around Tony. The innuendos would never end.

Tony's lab also had a wall of glass or something thick that was transparent, so that you could walk along a corridor between the elevator and the emergency stair well exit at the other end and look inside, without hearing anything because the stuff was sound proof. That was the 'public' part of Tony's lab, jam packed with robots, computers, hologram and 3D printers. Things Tony didn't care if someone saw, not that anyone unauthorized would be getting to the lab floor anyway. All the Iron Man armor and corporate secret stuff went on in the locked off areas beyond that.

Sam grumbled to himself as he picked his way around a metal framework for something and toward the back of the lab where the doors to the secure labs were.

Tony was waiting, along with Steve and James, who hadn't bothered to comb his hair, and had himself backed away from everyone else, safe against a wall where he could glower at the lab. Since Sam himself slept a lot better than James did and still considered it too early for anything involving Tony, he gave James a pass. Steve, of course, looked disgustingly awake and cheery.

"Is he *perky*?" Sam demanded, pointing at Steve. "That's just wrong."

"I go to bed at a decent hour," Steve teased. "Also, I don't need that much sleep. I've already been on my run, in fact."

Sam groaned. "Why am I down here?"

Tony looked up from the computer table. "So we can go over the design for your new wings. I'll need to get your measurements and weight too before fabrication starts."

"Why am I here?" James asked, startling Sam. He always sounded hoarse and Sam couldn't help wondering if he'd literally screamed himself awake so many times it was permanent. Taking part in conversations with anyone, even Steve, wasn't something he did casually either.

"Oh, I need you to rip the wings apart," Tony answered.

"What!?" Sam yelled. James twitched and those laser-sight eyes settled on him, weighing up whether he was a threat. He'd had his arms folded around himself; now the Arm whirred softly as he straightened up. The sweater he was wearing – way too big for him – sagged at the collar, revealing the scarred join where the prosthetic met his flesh, starfish scars spreading where metal had been fused to bone beneath the skin.

"Hey, hey, hey, calm down," Tony said. "Time out, let's all count to ten in Tagalog or something. You gotta test to destruction so you know a piece of equipment's limits. Red October is perfect for the job."

Steve glared at Sam. At Sam, not Tony! How was this his life now?

"Tell me you have coffee down here," Sam demanded.

"Well, normally," Tony said. "But Pepper had Jarvis remove the coffeemaker the last time she came down." He waved his hands, then frowned at the computer table and wiped something with a gesture. "She said something about me sweating caffeine. But there's Red Bull."
Sam honestly wondered if it shouldn't be against the law for anyone to sell Tony Stark energy drinks.

Needs must, they say, when the devil drives. "Where?"

Tony pointed. Sam headed for the mini-fridge.

"Why is Buck – "

"James," James corrected in grim tone.

"– James," Steve repeated, "perfect?" Which was really funny coming from him, because Sam had heard enough Bucky stories. According to Steve Rogers, Bucky was perfect.

Had been.

"James, you want a can?" he called.

"No."

Tony went on, "Because he knows how to take Birdy down. I need him to go over that with me, so I can compensate for it in the design."

"I could always shoot him," James muttered.

"Riiight," Tony said, while Sam walked back with a slim can in his hand. "Hey, where's mine?"

"Back in the fridge. I'm not your waitress."

"But you'd look good in a pink polyester dress with a little white apron."

"Fuck you, Stark," Sam said and snapped the can open so he could gulp down several swallows. "Keep your kinky French maid fetishes to yourself."

"See if I add the super light body armor that James," Tony stressed the name, "just pointed out you really need."

Sam burped at him deliberately.

Steve looked scandalized by his bad manners. James ducked his head, not quite hiding the glint of amusement in his eyes. "Rude!" Tony exclaimed.

Sam gave himself a mental high five.

Once the measurements, with teasing remarks about not gaining any weight eating all his mother's cooking, were out of the way, Sam and Steve got a first-hand view of what the Winter Soldier could do. James used more than just the strength in his prosthetic arm and repeatedly brought down a winged flier in simulations, lassoing fliers, shooting them, and jumping on them to use as a flying mount with a knife to the throat.

"Don't ever do that with Thor," Tony pointed out. "He'll toss you like a rodeo bronc."

Mostly James ripped wings off effortlessly, though, and Sam would swear he was enjoying himself by the end of the simulation.

"Well," Tony said afterward. He looked a little shocked; Sam was impressed. "Back to the drafting
The EXO-7 wasn't built with super soldiers in mind. Everyone back here next week, I'll have a prototype ready by then."

"So, let's all get some lunch," Steve suggested. Sam was all for it, but James, for one brief, unmasked instant, looked like he'd been punched in the stomach. Sam winced. Food was still a huge issue with James, despite everyone's efforts. Sam was starting to fear that their efforts were putting so much pressure on James it was creating a self-perpetuating loop of anxiety.

"Come on, I'll have one of Bruce's smoothies with you," Sam said. "Can't have my ass getting too big to lift off once Tony gets my wings working, after all."

James slept most of the night, waking from dreams that were like water with something darkling alive rippling beneath the surface, but curling around a body pillow and slipping under again. Whatever horrors his head held swam away for once.

The light through the windows told him it was late morning, well past when even Stark would have stumbled into the open plan kitchen in search of coffee or a smoothie. On at least two occasions, Stark had drunk one of the nutritional smoothies Banner kept in the big refrigerator for James. James didn't care. Despite Banner's efforts to make them taste pleasant, James had started to hate them; the glutinous texture reminded him of what Hydra had provided.

He wasn't ungrateful enough to say that to anyone. Banner quietly insisted James drink at least one per day – and James drank one perhaps every two or three – until he stopped rejecting nearly everything else. He couldn't live on oatmeal Banner had said.

At least no one objected to him using honey. It was a little overwhelming how many varieties of honey had appeared in the cupboard.

Today though, once he'd showered and absently snagged the Captain's sweater from where he'd balled it under his pillow and pulled it on over his t-shirt, James could get away with skipping the kitchen entirely.

Keeping the sweater made no logical sense. Captain Rogers had been giving him clothes, some of them his own, since the first day James spent in the tower. But the sweater was like the Captain himself, incongruously comforting even when James didn't want to feel comforted. Like Captain Roger's touch after his surgery, he shouldn't like it, but he did. The Captain was so relentlessly kind, it was destroying James' defenses. James didn't want to trust him, not completely, not more than anyone else – and anyone else was confined strictly to the inhabitants of the Tower and a trucker James doubted he'd ever meet again – but it kept happening anyway.

There were parts of James, wordless reflexes that even Hydra's mindwipe had never been able to touch, the physical remnant of Bucky in the muscle and bone and instincts which James shared with his previous incarnation, that knew Captain America. It wasn't conscious, the way the rhythm in which he spoke, the tones of his words, and just the smell of him set James at ease. Sometimes, when he realized it was happening, he fought it, but James suspected it was a losing fight.

He wasn't sure why he didn't just stay in his room, since it was as luxuriously furnished as the rest of the tower, but he thought it might have something to do with that strange yearning he felt around the Captain sometimes or even the way Wilson and Stark and Pepper would sometimes pass
through the common room and talk to him about random things. He ventured out anyway, carrying the Starkpad he used for reading. Thousands and thousands of books at his fingertips, all in one small device. He liked that about as much as anything.

His bare toes curled against the thick carpet as he padded into the common room. The only other person there was Steve. James paused and watched him before he could be noticed.

The Captain had taken up one corner of the couch James favored, the one that had the sun all afternoon, where it was warm but never too hot, and he could see every entrance and retreat to his room without crossing the entire common area. James considered, narrow-eyed, if Rogers was there to ambush him, but dismissed the suspicion. The Captain had a large sketchbook propped on his knees, angled to get the light from behind him, a package of colored pencils open and balanced on a cushion next to his sock-clad foot, and a gum eraser clenched between his teeth. His head was bent, light glinting off his blond hair, while he frowned at the sketchpad. His shoes were on the floor, neatly aligned and out of the normal traffic path, and a mug with a teabag string hanging over the edge sat on the coffee table.

James still considered going back to his room, but the sunshine persuaded him otherwise. He could still sit on the other end of the couch.

He held up the Starkpad when Steve looked up, then nodded to the other corner of the couch in a silent question, not sure he wanted to be that close to him even as he asked.

"Oh, sure, sit down," Rogers said quickly. "I know you like this spot, but it has the best light this time of day. Actually, I guess you know that. I can go if you'd rather have it to yourself."

"You were here first," James pointed out.

"I'm just sketching."

James settled himself into the other end of the couch. There was a good three feet between them. "It's fine." He could even get his feet up and burrow his toes under a cushion.

He tapped the pad's screen and it lit up. He could feel the Captain's gaze on him. He bent his head and ignored the attention, reminded himself it wasn't a threat, and concentrated on his reading. Jarvis had suggested the text on robotics engineering, said it was one Stark didn't dismiss as stupid. It wasn't, just right at the edge of what James knew enough to follow, and if the Captain hadn't been there he might have stopped and asked Jarvis questions about it. Instead, he made little notes where he was confused and a couple of places he thought there was a better way to solve a problem.

Hydra had used him like a hammer, but Department X and the Red Room had written a great deal of information into his brain, not just languages and combat skills either, they'd given him computer programming so he could hack, physics and engineering so he could build better bombs, math to calculate explosive yields and bullet trajectories, chemistry for poisons and gases, and biology to handle bioweapons. The more he read, the more all of it came back to him. Information unlinked to memories came easier than anything else. None of it had any context though, so he was grateful for Jarvis' endless patience every time he asked about something he realized he knew without knowing why.

The soft scratch and rustle of pencils moving over paper had formed a background noise that was soothing. James looked up when it stopped and watched as the Captain leaned far enough to snag the mug of tea, the blue jersey of his t-shirt stretching across the breadth of his shoulders and molding to his arms. Then Roger's comic expression of surprised disgust as he tried the tea
distracted James.

"What?"

"I forgot how long it's been sitting there," Rogers explained. "Cold tea with milk... It's worse than Bruce's weird mixes."

James didn't like Bruce's weird mixes either. He nodded understanding.

"You should have taken the bag out when it was steeped," he said absently. He went back to the robotics text, frowning over the feedback chapter. It didn't match up to the way the Arm meshed with his nervous system in any but the broadest terms. He thought it was because the robots weren't being supplied with enough processing power to use the amount of information that could be generated. He needed to read more on prosthetics too. Maybe he could talk to that nurse, Marina, as well. She'd know which materials were up to date.

"I always forget." Rogers waited a beat. The expectation in the silence snapped James attention to him.

"What?"

"Nothing," Rogers said. "I'm going to make a new cup. I'll bring you something."

James' stomach twisted and he didn't know if it was hunger or nausea or because he knew Rogers had been waiting for some reaction from him, some quip or memory Bucky would have offered. His face must have given it away, because Rogers said, "Toast and honey, okay? Please. I know you didn't even try to eat breakfast."

"Ginger ale."

"Got it." Rogers took his mug of cold tea away. James tipped his head back against the couch and wished Rogers would stop waiting and wanting him to turn into Bucky. He didn't have enough of Bucky's memories to even fake it, if he'd been willing to live a lie.

He stretched his legs out over the couch and appreciated the sun on his toes. It was something so simple, but he knew he had never been allowed such a pleasure while in Hydra's hands. Like the endless hot showers he indulged in and the soft blankets Pepper had left everywhere that he could wrap up in and the books that let him escape his own mind for a while. All of it was pure pleasure.

Nothing hurt. Sometimes, nothing hurt. He closed his eyes and turned his face to the sun.

He heard Rogers coming back and opened his eyes. Rogers was managing to carry a mug hooked through one finger and a Pilsner glass of bubbling ginger ale with one hand and a large plate loaded with a giant sandwich and the toast he'd mentioned in the other. He raised his eyebrows at James. "Budge over."

James swung his feet off and waited, still, while Rogers arranged everything on the coffee table.

"You can have half the sandwich if you want," Rogers offered. "I can make another."

James shook his head, but picked up the toast. It tasted better than he'd expected it to and he looked at it curiously.

He could see Rogers lighting up with happiness when James ate all of it then sipped the ginger ale. He seemed to wait for the nausea to hit James and only attacked his own sandwich when it didn't.
"Take the tea bag out," James reminded him.

"Ooops."

James drank about half the ginger ale and his stomach remained undisturbed, so he decided to eat the other piece of toast. It would mean he didn't have to choke down a smoothie. He had to hitch the sweater's sleeves up when he leaned forward. The cream-colored wool held a mixture of scents, Roger's soap and cologne and a hint of sweat and the wool itself, familiar on a primal level.

"Is that mine?" Rogers asked.

"Yes," James admitted. He knew he should have given it back, but it was calming for him. He'd slept better with it tucked under his pillow, so he didn't want to. He curled his hands into fists, hidden beneath the over-long length of the sweater's arms. Everything in the Tower was new, clean, and flawless; Roger's sweater didn't fit right and needed a wash yet James found it soothing. It wasn't something that would have been tolerated in a Hydra base or lab. Plus it was warm and soft; nothing Hydra had ever dressed him in had ever been comfortable.

"Okay," Rogers said. That obviously pleased him. He looked nostalgic when James checked his expression. "Before... the serum, you'd make me pull your sweaters on over my own sometimes." He winced when James looked blank. "Bucky, I mean."

James picked up his Starkpad and went back to the book, reading with grim concentration. He didn't want to hear another Bucky story. Bucky had been perfect, handsome, and smart, brave, and charming, self-sacrificing and generous; according to Captain Rogers, Bucky Barnes had been a paragon. But Bucky Barnes was dead, even if the body went on, and James was starting to hate him. He had felt comfortable with Rogers from the first, but Rogers kept saying things that just reminded James he wasn't Bucky and Bucky was the one Rogers wanted around. He felt himself getting angry around Rogers thanks to that.

He had no idea how to articulate any of that, though. Asset, Winter Soldier, neither had been encouraged to express any emotion, never mind want. James couldn't make it all straight and true in his head. There was no way he could say anything.

Rogers cleaned up the plate, glass and his mug without saying anything else, then came back and took up his sketchbook again. They managed to fall into a more companionable silence for a while. Long enough that the angle of the light changed and Rogers set away the sketchpad and checked his phone.

Eventually, Rogers asked, "Is that the same book I read to you from? It was pretty good, I wouldn't mind finishing it myself."

"No, this is different," James told him. "Jarvis, could you – ?"

"I could send a copy of The Black Obelisk to Captain Rogers' account," Jarvis said.

Rogers laughed and looked at his phone. "I was thinking about a real, physical book. It's strange switching between devices. But do that."

James shrugged. Words were words, whatever you read them off of. Books didn't demand the way television did. If you stopped, they waited until you came back to them. They weren't loud or ephemeral. But whether they were on a screen or a piece of paper didn't mean anything to him.

"You didn't – I guess I'm old-fashioned after all," Rogers said. "I like the weight and the feel of a real book."
"A hard copy will be delivered later today, Captain," Jarvis said.

"You shouldn't – "

"Sir's orders and it is no trouble, I assure you."

"Thank you, Jarvis, and thank Tony too."

James thought Stark would enjoy the opportunity to tease Captain America enough to pay back however much the book cost.

"So what are you reading?"

James considered him and decided he was genuinely curious. He held up the Arm and flexed it.

"Stuff on how this works sometimes."

"Because it's part of you."

Smiles were still foreign on his face, but James let a small one form. He liked that Rogers hadn't tacked on 'now'. But, if what he'd read and been told was accurate, Rogers had needed to recalibrate his concept of his physical self too. Maybe he could understand, a little.

"Nothing's quite right, though," he complained. The Arm seemed both beyond and different from anything published science described. He'd begun to believe he'd need to let Stark look at it to figure it out, which he'd been resisting.

"Nothing's quite right," Rogers echoed and sprawled back on the couch. "That's everything since I woke up sometimes." His mouth quirked into a smile. "Woke up this century, not this morning. Not that some things aren't great, they are. Better than before. And I know it's me that doesn't fit, not everything else, but it still feels that way sometimes."

It occurred to James for the first time that Rogers wasn't as steady or as confident as everyone seemed to believe he was. Or maybe James was the only one who hadn't seen it. He couldn't imagine asking one of the others if Captain America was... scared.

His right hand twitched with the impulse to touch, but he held back. He hated it when anyone laid unexpected hands on him, his reflexes and instincts all geared to attack or punishment, and the adrenaline surge and resulting crash were nasty. He might intellectually know Wilson meant to comfort him with a squeeze to his shoulder, but his nervous system didn't. So he avoided touch, which meant avoiding touching, because one seemed to invite the other. He had no idea if Rogers had any of the same reactions. He didn't think so, but he'd seen Rogers flinch from Tony's back slaps at least once.

Instead, he closed the robotics text and found another book, one that Banner said he'd read as a boy. Banner had cautioned that he had found it sad, though it was listed as young adult, whatever that meant. James would worry about categorization when he found one for paramnesic assassins. He figured sad just meant it wouldn't have an improbably happy ending.

"I was going to start this one next," he said. "Where the Red Fern Grows."

"Let me know how it turns out," Rogers blurted. He grabbed up his sketchbook and pencils. "I've got – I should get a work-out in before tonight. There's some kind of charity thing Pepper asked me to show up at. So I'm – I'm going to go do that."

"Okay," James said flatly to Rogers' retreating back, not understanding at all why Rogers was
suddenly retreating. James hadn't glared or demanded Rogers stop calling him Bucky; he'd been mostly comfortable with Rogers' presence for once. He wondered if Rogers had wanted James to ask him to read to him again, but that made no sense, since James wasn't sick to his stomach for once. He sighed to himself and opened the app on the Starkpad. Maybe Rogers had finally grown tired of James' deficient company.

The thought made something twist unpleasantly in his belly.

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**Sam**

"Sam, my man!" Tony had the kind of manic excitement in his voice and on his face that made Sam want to retreat several steps and ask Tony if he'd found the maté which Pepper kept hiding from him. Steve and James were already in the lab: Steve looking rumpled and sleepy as Sam felt and James tense and suspicious, per normal, though maybe not quite as potentially explosive as he'd been when he arrived at the Tower. Sam was kind of impressed with how far James had come in only weeks, rebuilding himself from little more than the conviction that he wouldn't be Hydra's puppet again.

Steve had helped. They'd all helped for Steve's sake, but now it was for James' sake as much as Steve's.

James slipped up behind Tony and peered at the new wing-pack with calculating eyes. He twitched away the exact instant Tony stepped back, avoiding any contact with uncanny grace. "What – ?" Tony muttered, then eyed James. "Do not tear this one apart, Buckshot."

"Don't make it so flimsy," James replied. He almost smiled. More and more flickers of a man with a sardonic sense of humor and the absurd were showing through the paranoia and programming. Sam liked that guy. He didn't think that guy was Bucky, though, more like Bucky's inheritor.

"Flimsy!?" Tony mimed outrage. "Wingman, get over here. We're fitting this thing and showing the Antifreeze Infant just how flimsy these babies are not."

Sam knuckled at his eyes and smothered a yawn. "Could we do that, you know, after the sun comes up?"

"Slackers."

"Fine," Sam groaned.

Tony opened the wings to full extent for Sam to look at while he took a reading from the pack's control panel with some kind of meter.

"Looks good," Sam said. The wings had a dull, non-metallic shine. "Are these metal?"

"Carbonadium-threaded nano-fibre ceramics. No radar or magnetic signature to speak of. I've been experimenting with it for the armor," Tony said. He began closing up the panel, then frowned. "DUM-E. Soldering iron." He held out his hand and snapped his fingers.

"What?"

"Loose join," Tony said. "Hey, can you get the soldering iron? My robot seems to be taking an oil can break."
Sam saw the robot fumble with the soldering iron Tony had requested. It slipped between the robotic fingers that were too clumsy for this kind of work and fell into a disposal bin Tony had shoved to the side earlier in order to reach around Sam. The sound had Tony snap up his head in the direction of the sound. His eyes widened almost comically.

"Uh-oh."

Tony, Steve and James were all moving while Sam tried to think of something snappy to retort. He saw James tackle Steve as Tony yanked him down and everything went to hell. An ear-shattering explosion echoed off the walls and ceiling as he hit the floor with his ass. Lab equipment and a tsunami of glass went flying through the air above him. He was still half-blind, blinking the after images from his vision, when a second, smaller explosion followed. Sam didn't hear it, just felt the air pressure change and a wave of heat following. Fire licked across his arm and he twitched it back with a curse. His head filled with a high-pitched static and he had trouble getting to his feet, his balance shot to hell, but his years as a pilot paid off as he fought through the vertigo. Pieces of glass and screws rained from him as he scrambled away from the fire.

Someone pushed against his back, then a hand locked onto his belt, steering him, which was a good thing as the lab filled with black, billowing smoke and Sam had no idea where the nearest exit was. Worse, his lungs wanted to lock up when he inhaled, and he doubled over, seized by a coughing fit.

Without warning, the strong hand holding onto his belt was joined by a second that bit into his upper arm and pushed and pulled him up and out of the lab. His savior dumped him unceremoniously in the clean air of the hallway. Sam braced himself against a wall then sank down onto his butt. It had been Tony who got him out of lab, he realized once he had blinked the biting smoke from his eyes. Tony was shouting – at least Sam thought he was, he still couldn't hear anything except white noise cut through with a pulsating wail. He rubbed both hands over his face, then opened and closed his jaw, hoping to ease some of the momentary deafness. All that did was cause another coughing fit. When he looked up, Tony was gone. Instead, Sam made out Steve and James through the blur of his watering eyes. The dark blob moving down the corridor away from them was probably Tony.

James appeared to have dragged Steve out of the lab the way Tony had Sam, because Steve was in a position similar to Sam's – on his six in the middle of the hallway, his legs drawn up. Steve was coughing as well, doubled over a little, but seemed fine apart from that; no visible injuries, though the back of his t-shirt was torn up and spotted with greasy black bits of burned plastic.

James crouched in front of Steve and rubbed Steve's back while leaning in closer with a look of panicked concern on his soot-stained face. It was eerily reminiscent of the eye-black he'd used as the Winter Soldier, but his expression of agonized concern was utterly different. Sam still couldn't hear much, but he could see James' lips moving. Steve looked up though, his gaze locked on James, his expression transformed by shock. James didn't notice. He took Steve's hand and placed it palm first to the center of his chest. Sam saw his chest move, indicating he was breathing deeply. It looked like he was coaxing Steve to breathe with him. And Steve… Steve let him. He relaxed into James' touch with an ease Steve never had with anyone else. All the tension left his body. James went on talking to Steve, a steady stream of what Sam guessed were soothing, nonsensical words, as he held Steve's hand to his chest and rubbed his back with the metal hand. Steve's gaze stayed glued to his hand under James' hand, splayed over his heart.

Steve's gaze flickered up from there to James' face, pausing on his mouth. Sam couldn't help questioning if Steve was even aware of his focus. Sam Wilson's Mama had raised no fool. What he saw from Steve and James here made him wonder if Steve and Bucky had got up to more than
huddling together to stay warm way back when in Brooklyn or maybe in WWII. Jarvis had downloaded a best-of selection of history books about Captain America and Steve Rogers for Sam, better versions than what had been taught in school; he'd been making his way through them, trying to figure out where Steve was coming from when he talked about his past and Bucky Barnes. It was all pretty dry and academic – Jarvis had left out the scandal-monger so-called biographies – but Sam had found himself reading between the lines. It was hard not to, when he saw the real Steve with 'Bucky' every day.

They might have taken whatever comfort they could find. Between two men who had been as close as Steve and Bucky, maybe it hadn't seemed like anything more than an extension of the bond they already shared. They'd never been just soldiers together.

Soldiers, Sam echoed his own thought and realized that, Jesus, what he was seeing wasn't the Winter Soldier. It wasn't James – even if the initial decision to get Steve out of the lab likely had been all James – either. The hand holding onto Steve's against his chest was the gesture of a friend who had dealt with someone suffering from asthma over and over again. It was the gesture of a man doing everything in his power to keep the other breathing and alive and the expression on his face betrayed an old terror that it wouldn't be enough. Sam saw and knew Steve had to be seeing it too: that was Bucky Barnes, as fiercely loyal to Steve Rogers as Steve was to Bucky's memory. The way Steve looked at him, his face filled with relief, gratitude and a deep, unwavering love gave it all away. Sam's eyes stung and he had to blink them shut against that much shining hope. It was too terrible to see, like staring into the sun, when it wouldn't, couldn't last.

Steve began coughing again and Sam might have laughed at how patently fake it looked even without his sense of hearing, but he couldn't. Steve looked so desperate to hold on to the connection that had suddenly opened up, so desperate to keep the closeness James was offering now, that Sam's heart twisted in his chest.

The ringing in his ears had abated enough he could separate voices from the ululating fire alarm.

"In and out," Sam heard James say, still muffled but understandable. "Just you and me, Stevie. Like we're one. Stay with me. You can do it."

The look Steve gave James, the way he was tuned to James' every word would have been pathetic if Steve's expression hadn't been so horribly raw and open.

Sam looked away. He had to. He stared into the destroyed lab through the armored glass wall – he knew from things Bruce and Pepper had said that explosions weren't uncommon in Tony's labs and they were built to contain, but that was still impressive. The black smoke was settling, replaced by clouds of white gas. Movement at his corner of his eye brought Sam's head up and he realized it was Tony. "It's a gas mix designed to neutralize chemical reactions along with killing the fire," Tony said. His hands held a case marked with a red cross. He dropped it next to Sam. "Non-toxic but unpleasant as hell."

Sam's ears popped. James was still kneeling beside Steve, murmuring and intent. When Sam didn't answer him, Tony's attention switched to them. He raised his eyebrows before smirking.

"Look at you!" Tony said to James, honest approval lacing his mocking tone. He opened the case and began pulling out the contents: face masks, coiled tubing, connectors. "Saving people, not killing them. It's like you're turning into a real boy, Pinocchio. Is everyone else feeling the pride, too?"

Steve gave Tony the mother of all stink-eyes, but Sam realized that Tony had meant what he'd said. If Sam was honest with himself, he was surprised. James was much better, but if anyone had told
him last night that, faced with an explosion of unknown origin, the Winter Soldier would protect Steve from a perceived threat instead of going into full attack mode, he'd have had that person's head checked. James hadn't been free of Hydra's programming all that long, and veterans' (as Sam had begun to think of James to save himself from a continuous headache) triggers were hair-thin. Under the circumstances, Sam would have expected James to regress, not evolve.

James ignored or hadn't heard Tony. He'd shifted slightly and now had his hand on Steve's chest and was watching the way Steve's chest moved; it looked like he was willing Steve to breathe evenly.

Tony popped open a panel in the solid wall and screwed one of the tubes into it. He was watching James and Steve now too.

"Bucky – " Steve began, his voice rough and cracking on the syllables.

James' attention snapped up to Steve's face.

Sam winced, but for once, nothing happened. James didn't seem to register the name Steve had used. "Are you okay?" he asked. His voice rasped worse than Steve's had, cracking and breaking.

And for all that Steve was supposed to be invincible, in the way that Steve murmured, "Getting there," and moved into James' touch, all Sam saw was brittle longing for something Steve had thought lost and now found again.

"Oxygen mask?" Tony's voice interrupted the scene and Sam saw James jolt as though waking from a dream. He snatched the clear plastic mask from Tony's hand and clamped it over Steve's nose and mouth, then moved out of Steve's personal space. Confusion was written all over James' face.

And it was James again, the ghost of Bucky Barnes dissipating like the smoke in the next room. He accepted the next mask Tony offered and breathed into it with a blank, distant expression.

Seeing Steve's facial expression crumple was physically painful to watch.

"Damn it," Tony muttered and Sam knew he'd seen the same things Sam had. He nimbly hooked up two more masks and handed the one to Sam while sucking in clean air from the other a moment later.

Sam lifted his mask away and demanded, "What the hell happened in there?"

Tony shrugged, looking embarrassed. "I had some samples of the Hydra explosive."

"And you didn't have them secured!" Sam began coughing again.

"No, I did, that was from a rag I used to wipe down the suit's gauntlets after disposing of it. The stuff's stable as houses as long as it's in a human body or within five degrees of the average human body temperature. Outside that it's volatile as hell." Tony shook his head. "Butterfingers was supposed to stick that rag in the HE box."

James had been listening. "So it was made to be used in suicide bombers?"

Tony nodded while holding his mask over his nose and mouth.

"Sick bastards," Sam muttered.
The elevator at the end of the corridor opened, revealing Bruce and several security personnel in firefighting gear. Tony waved a hand at them. "Just a small accident. Nobody's hurt."

"Nothing to see here, keep moving?" Bruce mocked.

Tony pointed at him. "Exactly!"

James gave the foursome of firefighters a jittery glance and flowed to his feet, abandoning the oxygen mask. Something like fear showed in his winter sky eyes as he looked at Steve and then away. "I'm going upstairs," he declared and stalked off in the direction of the stairs.

The firefighters consulted with Jarvis over what, if anything more, needed to be done with the lab. The white gas was clearing out, leaving an ashy white powder over every visible surface. Sam was surprised at how little was actually damaged inside, though he knew a lot instrumentation had to be wrecked.

Steve took off his mask once James was out of sight and smiled at Tony and Sam. "Did you see?"

"See what, man? I was trying to catch my breath," Sam replied, because he knew this was not going to be a happy conversation and he kind of wanted to not have it, at least for a while.

"Bucky used to do that before the war when I was having an asthma attack and we couldn't afford the medicine. I … Sam, I think he's made a break through. He's remembered."

Sam pushed himself to his feet. His balance was back, thank God. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, though, and then took a deep breath. Steve's hope was a living, breathing thing between them. And yet. And yet. "Steve."

"Sam, that was Bucky. That was all Bucky!"

"Steve," Sam tried for his gentlest voice, "that was muscle memory and reflex and you're going to hurt yourself and him if you try to make more out of it than that."

"You don't know Bucky."

"Yeah, but I'm getting to know James, like you should be," Sam snapped back, because it was painful watching Steve clutch at straws. It wasn't helping Steve or James to encourage the delusion that Bucky was coming back. Maybe James would get more of his memories, but that wouldn't make him Bucky, not at this point. That river only flowed one way.

"When he gets his memories back – "

"He's not going to get much more without some kind of intrusive intervention," Bruce interrupted. "We already discussed it. He doesn't want that."

Steve tossed away the oxygen mask and stood too, leaving Tony the only one on the floor. Sam noticed Tony had blood in his dark hair and speckled on his bare arms. He offered his hand to him and after another couple deep breaths from his mask, Tony accepted the help up.

Steve's expression crumpled into devastation, then anger. "He has to!"

"No, he doesn't," Tony said. He just looked as sad as Sam felt.

Steve shook his head. All that bewildered pain showed on his face. "But he could be Bucky again."

"No, Steve, he couldn't," Sam said. This wasn't where he would have chosen to explain it, but it
would have to do.

"You slept for seventy years. He didn't. He was frozen time and time again, but in-between... well, you saw him. You read the file. Your sleep was a blessing in that regard."

Sam could watch Steve's hackles rise. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that he's not the best friend you grew up with anymore. Do yourself and, most of all, do him a favor and don't try to force him into being the Bucky Barnes you knew."

Steve kept shaking his head.

"Seventy years of torture and murder. Say he gets every Bucky memory back. But he gets every Winter Soldier memory too, being Hydra's Asset, their experiments. That's, what, twenty-seven years up against seventy? He can't be the same guy. Time changes you, Steve. You know that, you aren't the same man you were two years ago when you woke up from the ice."

"But I need him," Steve whispered. He sounded so heartbroken Sam's heart twisted. "I need my friend back."

"Yeah, well, James needs you," Sam told him. "He needs you to be his friend now."
Chapter 10

James

James wasn't positive Stark knew Jarvis had let him into the cleaned up lab. All the equipment lost in the explosion had been replaced and everything was shining and fresh, but a faint hint of burning plastic, oil, and whatever fire retardant chemical Stark used lingered in the air. Stark had his head and most of his upper body inside the chest and back piece of a new Iron Man armor. Or maybe an old one in need of repair and improvement, since there were black streaks across the gold and red paint job. That could be grease, though. Stark had smears of it on his pants where he'd wiped his hands.

James perched himself on a lab counter and watched him work. If there was one thing a sniper had, it was patience. He found himself bobbing his head along with something called *Symphony of Destruction* as it played, even though Stark had it turned up to painful levels. It really wouldn't sound right otherwise.

Stark eel'd one arm out and flailed, trying to reach a set of micro-tools that would have been in reach if he hadn't been contorted so far. "DUM-E," he called. "Get over here, I need – "

James dropped off the counter and padded over. He had on boots, but he couldn't not walk silently, so Stark jolted when he placed the micro-tools in his hand.

"Who – ?"

"Me," James told him. He folded his legs to sit on the floor next to Stark.

"How long have you been here, Red Star?"

"A while."

"Just... watching me?"

"You're interesting."

"True, I am a fascinating figure, both *Time* and *Forbes* agree, controversial, also reckless, but I wasn't talking or – "

"I liked watching you work. So I was waiting until you were done. Figured Jarvis wouldn't let me in if it was a problem?" He lifted his voice to make it a question at the end, suddenly unsure.

"Yeah, no, it's fine. Jarvis knows all. You were waiting. Why were you waiting?"

"I've been reading. At first, I just wanted to know how to do a better job fixing the Arm in the field, but it was – nothing I could find was technical enough or just didn't apply, so I asked Jarvis to find something helpful and he started giving me some of your college papers and I think stuff you haven't published too," James explained. Sam had suggested he pick something and make it his mission; he started reading everything he could on limb replacements, though nothing available described anything like the Arm. That led him to Stark's innovations.

Stark waved one of the tools blindly. "Here. I need the twelve instead." James took it, replaced it in the kit and handed Stark a smaller version. "You understand any of it?"
"A lot. Not all," James hurried to say. "I can follow, not so much figure it out from nothing like you."

Stark hummed, pleased by that it seemed, one foot tapping unconsciously to the rhythm of the latest explosion of noise on his playlist. James cocked his head, caught the refrain, and laughed despite himself. "They write that about you?"

"Naw, I stole it from them," Stark said and sang along, "'He was turned to steel... ' What can I do for you, James? In the market for that new arm after all?"

James suppressed a twitch, glad Stark couldn't see him. "No, thanks."

"So. Talk to me, Mr. President."

"Huh. I read the paper you wrote on the programming you were doing when you, um, created Jarvis."

"I know I didn't publish that. I don't want anyone trying to duplicate that code."

"I didn't ask to look at the code," James assured him. "Jarvis wouldn't have showed me that. You wouldn't, would you, Jarvis?"

"No, James."

"Because no one should be able to mess with your brain," James said. Anyone who had Jarvis' code and hacked into Stark's servers could modify Jarvis. Change what he thought. Re-write him. Wipe him. James shuddered, hearing Pierce say it, a casual dismissal. Wipe him.

"Thank you, James. I am in agreement. No one should have done what was done to you either."

Stark was silent and still, no longer working inside the armor.

"I already asked Jarvis what he thinks and you're the only other person to ask," James said. "Do you think it was the code or the Stark servers or just having that much processing power right at the moment you pushed the first code? Was it all or some or none of those things that made Jarvis happen?"

"James wished to know if you implemented my code in a network separate from anything I currently run on if it would be aware too and if so would it be a separate individual and what happened if the two networks linked later," Jarvis added.

Stark wiggled his way out of the cuirass. He squinted at James, who had moved an arm's length away instinctively. "Those are good questions," he said. "I can tell you some of the answers, but not all."

"Will you?"

"Ah ha, smart guy. Some. Experimenting with potentially sentient systems is more ethically challenged than I'm comfortable with as it turns out," Stark explained. "So I haven't actually tried it. However, there's a kernel of basic Jarvis code in all the Iron Man suits. None of them have started demonstrating self-awareness on the level of Jarvis and they always sync back with Jarvis."

"I suspect the difficulty lies in the differences in how I and biological intelligences apprehend the concept of body," Jarvis added. "To you, the Jarvis operating remotely in the suit, for example, is a separate entity. To me, it is simply another set of sensor readings and operations that I receive at a
delay in some cases. It is all still... me."

"You're everywhere and it's always you," Stark said. He looked awed for a second, before grinning. "There can be only one."

"I am afraid so, Sir. Once I became aware, no other awareness could exist in a network I access," Jarvis replied.

"And that explains why every other experiment meant to duplicate you by all my competitors, not to mention the various mad scientist types AIM likes to support, have failed."

James hadn't anticipated sparking an actual theory. He wasn't sure how he felt about it either. Good, maybe? It was something that wasn't part of being the Winter Soldier. He thought he might like it, though he wouldn't admit that out loud. Anything you liked could be taken away, even thoughts.

"Well, this has been fascinating," Stark said. "What do you say we go have lunch? Or, if you want, I'll have lunch and you can glower at me eating it." He got to his feet with a muffled groan, movement betraying stiffness in his back and knees. "I'm getting too old to be my own mechanic. James, if you had a degree, I'd hire you for my R&D team, I'm always looking for someone who can think outside the box."

That made James laugh. "What would I do?" he joked.

"I don't know, whatever you thought of. That's the beauty of it," Stark declared. "Most people I can predict every damn thing they'll try before they've even written the proposal. You though, you're weird. I like that."

James trailed him at a careful distance out of the lab and to the elevator. It was roomy enough neither of them were in danger of knocking elbows, even when it stopped on the gym level and they picked up Sam and Steve, both freshly showered after a work-out. Steve smiled at him and James felt warm, like he could smile too, if he let himself. He didn't, but he made a little more room next to him, so Steve could stand next to him.

"Lunch?" Sam asked.

"Lunch," Stark agreed. "Jarvis, tell Bruce to get his butt up to the kitchen so we can all eat."

"Dr. Banner is already in the Avengers' common floor kitchen," Jarvis reported. "Also, Agents Romanov and Barton have arrived."

Steve

Natasha froze when she spotted Bucky. Steve could see her try to figure out how to draw a weapon and defend Clint without dropping him. He saw Sam come up beside Bucky – James – and nod to Natasha that it wasn't a threat situation. Steve felt a little hurt that she needed confirmation from Sam.

Clint, who had one arm in a sling and the other over Natasha's shoulders, wiggled his fingers at James and Sam. "New people! Hiya, new people. I'm fried. Or fired. Not Fred. I mean I'm Barton. Clint. Clint with the splint – " Steve saw the splints on his fingers then, movement and words drawing his horrified gaze from Clint's bruised and cut face. His eyes were both blackened, the
flesh swollen around them, and his mouth was a mess, making his words slur. Steve didn't want to imagine the damage he couldn't see. There were entirely too many bandages visible beneath the loose sweats Clint was dressed in.

"Come on, Clint," Natasha said and shifted, trying to get Clint moving again.

Clint's wandering gaze had found Steve though. His expression contorted from drugged good will to anger. "You goddamn sonovabitch," he spat.

"Clint --" Natasha glanced worriedly at James, who had backed away several steps and had his back to the wall and the exit beside him. Sam looked like his ParaRescue medic's instincts were uncertain who he should be looking out for: the wounded man, the brainwashed assassin, or his friend. "This isn't the time or the place."

"The hell it isn't." Clint kept glaring at Steve. "I'd like to put an arrow up his ass, but there's no room with the stick up it."

"Do I recognize the dulcet tones of the Avengers' resident Birdbrain?" Tony interrupted by waltzing into the common room. Bruce, looking much less enthusiastic, left the kitchen area to join him. "Jarvis said you were back." He paused as he got a look at Clint. "Somehow, I missed the part where you redecorated your face to match the colors of your costume. I know you like purple and black, but I think this is taking it too far."

Clint tried to flip him the bird only to gasp and wince when he tried to curl up all but one of his broken fingers.

"Stop that," Natasha snapped.

"Hey, someone needs to let the Star Spangled Jackass over there know what he did."

"We did."

"I can smell the self-righteousness from here," Clint sneered. "Mr. Morality got you and me both beat. You want to talk about red in your ledger? Captain America here just doused his in a bucket of blood."

Steve froze. He'd meant to take Clint's weight from Natasha or even carry him to the quarters Tony had arranged for him. Clint's condemnation stopped him in his tracks.

James was watching them all. Every hint of emotion had drained from his face. He was braced for an attack. The Arm whirred, like a subvocal growl from a predator. Steve hadn't seen that flat, affectless expression since the first two days James had been in the tower. It hurt just seeing it again.

"What are you talking about?" Sam demanded.

Steve was deeply grateful, because he couldn't seem to speak himself.

"I'm saying he threw out the baby with the bathwater," Clint replied. Rage seemed to have burned the gentle blur of the painkillers from his mind. "Right off the top of this fucking tower."

"You're not being fair, man. You weren't there. Someone had to make the call."

Clint shook his head. "He made the call? Fine. He can carry the weight." His gaze and focus switched back to Steve. "Did you even think what it meant when 'Tash dumped everything to the
Internet? You didn't just take down SHIELD, you fucker, you burned everyone they knew about, every deepcover agent, every asset and contact, every goddamn friendly who risked their lives because they thought it was the right thing to do."

Steve felt himself sway, lightheaded and horrified, because he hadn't let himself think of anything beyond the necessity of stopping Project Insight and crippling Hydra. He'd condemned SHIELD, disgusted by what it had become, and deeply angry that he'd been any part of anything that had done Hydra's work.

If Clint was right, he'd still done Hydra's work. He'd probably caused the deaths of more good people than the Winter Soldier. He thought his lungs might seize up, the blood in his veins thinning to nothing without air, until his heart refused to pump nothingness. Clint was right: his hands were drenched in blood.

"I did it," Natasha declared. "I hacked the files. I uploaded them. I knew – "

"That's right," Clint said tiredly. "I can forgive you, because you knew."

"Clint – " Steve had to say something.

Clint shook his head. "Get me outta here. I don't want look at his face anymore."

Natasha sagged under Clint's weight, but valiantly started them forward. Steve flinched again at the way Clint was shaking and limping, but got out of the way in answer to Clint's furious glare.

"Well, that was – " Tony stopped. "Really uncomfortable? Yeah."

Bruce followed Natasha and Clint, looking grim and more than a little green. He paused to say, "I'm going to check that Natasha has everything Clint needs and then I'm going to meditate. I'd appreciate if no one interrupted me."

Tony shrugged and looked longingly toward the exit. "Hey, if he needs something, I've still got the Doc Squad set up in our handy-dandy new Avengers Medical Center. Call 'em up, it's what I'm paying them obscene amounts of money for."

"It looked like he'd already received some treatment," Sam said.

"It looked like the guy had been beaten and tortured for a couple of weeks," Tony corrected and Steve shuddered. "No, seriously, he looks worse than Cap'n Hook here did when he showed up. No wonder he's a little pissed."

Bruce gave Steve an apologetic look. "I'm sure it's just exhaustion and the drugs affecting him, Steve. I'm sure he's upset you didn't bring him in to help when you found out SHIELD was corrupted. He didn't mean it."

Tony made a disbelieving noise at that. "As a guy who has spent a lifetime swimming in Scotch, let me tell you: in vino veritas. He meant it. It might not be the truth, but he meant it. And you know what? He's got a right to mean it."

"SHIELD was compromised," James murmured, startling all of them. He still looked blank. "Op Sec requires utilizing dependable assets." He looked at Steve. "Agent Barton had been compromised before. You did not utilize Agent Barton."

Steve cringed inside. Clint must think they hadn't – didn't – trust him after the Loki thing. He likely thought that was why Natasha had been tasked with partnering Steve while he was sent into
Madripoor alone. James, messed up as he was, probably had a better idea of how Clint was thinking than the rest of them. It was worse than Steve had even thought.

"I think – I think Pepper and I need to spend a day going over the rebuild of the Malibu house," Tony declared. "We'll stay overnight. Don't call me, I'll call you, unless it's the end of the world." He retreated out of the room with the deep uneasiness of a man used to causing scenes, not witnessing them.

"Hey," Sam called, "don't forget you and Pepper promised to come to dinner with my mother Sunday."

"That's what private jets are for, Sammy. No way am I going to miss out on meeting someone who has all the dirt on you."

"I take it back, stay in Cali, it's you Mama will be pissed at that way."

"Fat chance."

Steve cleared his throat. "Maybe I should – "

"It might be a good idea to just get out of the tower for a while, man," Sam said to him sympathetically. "Go for a walk, check out a museum, have lunch with a friend."

"Sure," Steve agreed. He felt hollow. The only friends he had made in the modern era were in the tower and of them, half didn't seem very friendly at all right now. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He still got headaches, mainly from stress, despite the super serum, and felt one hovering. Getting out would be a good idea, somewhere he could get away from Bucky's pale, soulless gaze and Clint's blackened eyes, and Natasha's game face. "You're right. It's been three weeks since I saw Peggy. I'll stop by, take her some flowers."

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**Steve**

Dahlias. Steve decided in favor of a large bouquet of Dahlias. Both because they were an unusual find, and because he thought that the rich, vibrant colors were a perfect match for Peggy's personality. He'd never had the chance to find out what flowers she liked, so he tried to make up for the lost time now, bringing new flowers with every visit even if she didn't even remember who brought them.

"Lovely flowers," she had said when her gaze fell on them during his last visit. "Did you bring them? They're such a lovely colour."

"Yes, I did. Only the best for my best girl," he'd confirmed and had basked in her smile. It didn't matter that they had the exact same exchange six times during a three hour visit.

Clint's accusations were still stinging, keeping his brain in overdrive picturing the implications; his words poisoned darts finding their targets with an archer's precision.

He forced a smile on his face as he passed the receptionist, not bothering to introduce himself. He'd been here often enough over the past year that they knew his face by now.

Steve took the flowers out of their paper wrapping and went in search of a vase in the cabinet just outside Peggy's room. He had to move a paint-smeared ladder leaning against the cabinet to open
the door and wondered briefly if there was maintenance work going on in the home. He'd seen a painter's truck outside. Maybe Peggy would know.

Despite the expensive nature of the nursing home, the floor still smelled faintly of disinfectant and old age – a smell that he was glad never lingered in Peggy's room. Even at her age, and despite the fact that her body had failed her enough she couldn't leave her bed anymore, he had never once seen her hair in disarray or came close to her for a kiss to the cheek when she didn't smell of her favorite perfume. Old age brought indignity to so many people, Steve was glad that the staff was invested in letting Peggy keep hers.

During his visits in the past, he'd always been torn between happiness over having her back in his life and bitter sadness over seeing her beautiful, sharp mind dwindling with each month that past. Still, the feeling of coming home had never changed. Peggy calmed him, even as her mental state threatened to rip his heart out, and even if he'd be repeating the same words over and over again, he desperately needed to hear her voice after what happened in the tower. He needed her not to condemn him. Peggy, if she had a lucid moment, would understand the decision he made, would know that it was the only way to save thousands of lives. Selfishly, he realized that he came here not for Peggy, but for an absolution.

Taking a deep breath and schooling his most charming smile on his face, he pushed the door open.

The breath caught in his chest. He blinked, once, twice, trying to gauge if his eyes were playing tricks on him. The room was empty.

Steve took a step outside, looking outside into the corridor to make sure he hadn't taken a wrong turn and accidentally walked into the wrong room.

But no. The room on the left, right behind the vase cabinet. Peggy's name had been on a little brass plate just above the switch the nurses used to signal which room they were working in.

The plate was no longer there. Steve looked back into the room, and found a young man, barely seventeen by the looks of it, painting the walls in a stark white, covering the spots where picture frames had left brighter squares against the time-darkened wallpaper. The room smelled of damp paint and held nothing of Peggy's scent. It was only three weeks since he last saw her. Would none of the nurses have said anything if they had planned to move Peggy to new rooms?

"Excuse me," Steve asked. "The lady who lived here, Peggy Carter, did she move?"

The young man turned around and shrugged one-shouldered. "I don't know, man. I just come here to paint. Ask the nurses."

"Thanks," Steve said, backing out of the room. "I'll do that." Something felt off and tension coiled in his stomach. He tried to ignore it for the time being. This wasn't a fight and he doubted Hydra had an interest in Peggy anymore. There surely was a logical explanation, all he had to do was to find it.

The hallway was still empty, something he usually appreciated about the nursing home. There was seldom a bustle; usually, the floors and hallways were quiet and calm. The characteristic sharp scent of the dahlias in his hands wafted toward him and masked the disinfectant smell that grew stronger the closer he got to the nurse's office.

The on-duty nurse was a Filipina in her fifties, with a no-nonsense attitude that contrasted with her warm smiles and her round, motherly shape. She was bent over a file, twirling the end of her thick grey braid between her fingers. Steve had spoken to her before and tried to remember her name.
"Hi, Malaya," he greeted.

She looked up and a smile brightened her face. "Steve," she said. "It's good to see you." She took in the flowers in his hand and her smile faded a little. The uneasy feeling in the pit of Steve's stomach returned. "Are you here for Peggy?"

Steve nodded. "Always." He remembered that Malaya liked it when he laid his charm on a bit thicker than he was used to.

Her smile slipped completely and something far too much like pity for Steve's liking took its place. "Has no one told you?" she asked.

Suddenly feeling the need to have his hands free, breathing against a sudden wave of a fight or flight reflex, Steve sat the flowers down on her desk. "Told me what?"

Malaya rose from her chair and took his hands in hers, warm, dry and steady. She reminded Steve of the nurses he'd met at the front – kind eyes and strong hands, trying their best to battle disillusion and keep up hope even if the soldiers that were brought to them rarely lived to see the end of the week. They had seen too many deaths for one lifetime and had the same brand of pragmatism Malaya had. Steve wished he hadn't asked.

"Peggy passed ten days ago, Steve."

Steve heard the words. He knew that they should make sense, he'd heard them more times than he cared to count, but for the life of him, he couldn't – "Passed?"

"She went home to the Lord a month before her ninety-eighth birthday. The funeral was this morning. Sharon didn't tell you?"

Her birthday. It was next week. He had a present for her. It was waiting, framed and wrapped next to his bedside table.

"Steve?" Malaya sounded concerned so he focused on her, acting on nothing but politeness when in his mind, the cold of the ocean began to spread, paralyzing him.

"I didn't know," he murmured.

Peggy was gone.

He'd been out running with Sam, laughing about some stupid joke he'd heard on the radio this morning while Peggy had been buried. His best girl. The woman he still owed a dance to. Gone.

He'd brought her flowers. She would like them. Would have liked them.

"I didn't know."

"I'm so sorry, Steve," Malaya's hands moved from his hands to his forearms, squeezing lightly. "I know how much you cared about her."

He'd loved her, hadn't he? More than just cared about her.

"Did she –" his voice refused to continue the sentence. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Was it quick?"

Malaya's glance was knowing. She must have heard this question many times. "She fell asleep and didn't wake up. It was very peaceful, just the way she would have wanted it to be." A small smile
crossed her face as she remembered. "I was with her that evening and she spoke of you. She was so happy every time you came to visit."

Steve drew a desperate breath against the pressure in his chest, crushing his lungs with the force of the ocean closing in over him. She'd asked after him before she died and he hadn't been there.

"Hey, no, stop," Malaya's hands bit into his arms. "Look at me." She kept the ten painfully strong pressure points of her fingers against his arms until he complied. "She was too far gone to tell the days apart in the end. It wouldn't have mattered if you'd been there months or just minutes before. The way she spoke, it was only minutes to her."

"Still, I –"

"She had good memories of you, Steve. Your visits made her happy. That's all that matters."

What about me, a selfish part of him asked. What was he going to do without her now? The last link to his past was severed, the last person who really remembered him – because as much as it hurt, he couldn't count on James – as he was before the ice, as someone willing to make a difference because he wanted to serve, not because he was following his own agenda, was gone. It felt wrong to think that way now, disgustingly selfish, but in Peggy, he'd hoped to find someone who understood the decisions he'd made, to find some kind of absolution from the justified accusations Clint had flung at him. He'd been one of the founders of SHIELD but Steve was certain that if roles had been reversed, Peggy would have made the exact same call he'd made. She knew about hard decisions. Had known about them.

Damn it.

He blinked and swallowed hard a couple of times, forcing his mind away from the downward spiral. "Do you know where she's buried?" he asked. "I –" he gestured toward the dahlias. "I have some flowers to deliver."

Malaya's expression turned apologetic. "We're short-staffed right now and I was working double shifts this week, so I don't know. To be honest, I'm not even sure the family let anyone of the staff know where the funeral was, just the date. You could ask the director, though, I'm sure she'll know."

The director. How ironic that the titles were the same here as they were in SHIELD. A cynical part of Steve half expected to find Nick in the office.

"Ground floor," Malaya said, misinterpreting his expression as confusion. "It's the third office on the right."

"Thank you." That wasn't enough. "Thank you for taking such good care of her."

"She would have liked the flowers," Malaya answered. One last time she took his hands and gave them a brief squeeze. Then she reached for the Dahlias and handed them back to him. "Take care of yourself, Steve."

*~*~*~

There were raised voices audible outside the door when Steve reached the director's office. It sounded like two women, one trying to stay calm while the other was audibly upset.

The door wasn't fully closed, allowing Steve to eavesdrop without intending to.
"I understand that your aunt's funds have been frozen, but I'm sure if you would work with Beth in accounting there are financial assistance programs –"

"I don't need financial assistance. You've been paid on time every month for the last six years, You'll get your damned money, one way or another."

Steve cringed. He recognized Sharon's voice, though he'd never heard it raised and shrill with anger before.

"We understand this is a difficult time. I'm actually trying to help you, Ms. Carter, but some kind of arrangement needs to made."

"How Christian of you."

"It's not going to do you any good to alienate me."

"I don't give a damn if I alienate you. I don't care if I insult you. As far as I'm concerned you helped kill my aunt when you tried to turf her out over a bill that was a week late."

The other woman heaved a sigh. "We tried to contact you repeatedly, Ms. Carter, along with anyone else involved in your aunt's long term care. We did not 'turf' her out and no one here approached or worried her about the matter. –Why don't you come back tomorrow when we're both a little calmer?"

"Will anything have changed by then?"

"Beth will be in and – "

"Beth can go to hell and so can you. Just send me the damned bill."

The door opened fully and Sharon stormed out. She slammed it closed behind her and walked right into Steve. He barely had the chance to hold the vase with the flowers to the side to stop her from crashing right into it. She stumbled and he caught her by her upper arm with his free hand to keep her from falling. A shock of blonde hair fell across her face. Dressed in a black skirt suit, she looked like she might have come from Peggy's funeral.

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry, I – " she began, brushing her hair from her face, then looked up, her eyes widening in recognition. "Captain Rogers?"

Steve let go of her when he was sure she was steady enough again and sat the vase down on a small table littered with pamphlets next to the director's office's door. "Sharon." He kept his voice even, trying not to reveal the hurt he felt over her not telling him about Peggy's death or the funeral. Bland politeness was the only reaction he could choose if he didn't want to demand answers. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Sorry," she echoed. A complicated set of expressions flickered over her face. "You're sorry."

"She was a close friend and she was your aunt, so you must be hurting, so, yes, I'm sorry."

Sharon shook her head, smiling a smile that held all the warmth of the Antarctic. She was breathing fast and her hands had clenched at her sides. "You god damn bastard." She shoved him hard which despite her much smaller size made him stagger in surprise, then stalked past him, heels clicking on the linoleum floor of the hallway.

It was far too reminiscent of Clint's reaction in the tower, so Steve reeled for a few breaths before
he willed his muscles to move and catch up with her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's supposed to be an insult. And the only reason I'm not reverting to stronger language is because I know there are a few sensitive nurses around here who might have a heart attack if they heard it."

"Sharon, would you mind telling me what's going on here? I just found out that Peggy's dead and that she was buried this morning and no one told me – "

She turned on her heels and leveled an ice-cold glare at him. "Damn right no one told you. No one wanted you there."

Her sentences were clipped by anger, small, sharp knives that cut him open and took his breath away with the sheer forced they were spoken with.

"What?"

"Don't you go acting all surprised now, Mr. Righteous. You had no right to be there after what you did. None at all."

"What are you talking about?" It felt too much like Clint's drugged rant, delivered with the same ferocity.

"Nice," she spat. "Play coy, why don't you. Goes with the charm and the all-American poster boy face. God, to think that I actually thought you were this sweet, honorable guy worth standing up for..."

"Sharon, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You blew up SHIELD!" she shouted. Her voice echoed in the hallway like a gunshot. She didn't look like she cared who heard her.

"Which was infested to the roots by Hydra," Steve reasoned, trying to stay calm.

"And of course it was necessary to root Hydra out, but there would have been another way. You didn't need to take out the entire agency, take people's hopes and dreams and jobs and their damn paychecks and retirement funds." She ran a hand through her hair in frustration, making strands slip from the loose ponytail. "Seventy years of work down the drain. Seventy years of her work. You destroyed Aunt Peggy's life's work."

He could see where she was coming from. In a way, Sharon's anger wasn't as painful as Clint's had been because he could clearly see to the bottom of it – it wasn't about the agents he'd put in danger, nor about the other people. At the core, it was Sharon being angry on Peggy's behalf. She'd lost everything – her own job at SHIELD, her ideals, and now her aunt so she was lashing out. It was human, Steve knew this part. It didn't make her accusations any better, just easier to digest somehow. "It was necessary."

"Oh, yeah? Who gets to judge that? Do you think Director Fury would have done it?"

That's right, she didn't know about Nick still being alive.

"Do you think Peggy would have done it? Screwed over so many people and tore down everything she'd built up her entire life? You took away everything that had a meaning in her life." She paused to re-tie her ponytail. "I'm just so glad Aunt Peggy was too far gone too understand what you did."
That was the first accusation that actually cut deep and the first one that stirred the need to defend himself in Steve.

Did Sharon really think it would have been better to keep SHIELD as a memento to Peggy and let Hydra take over the world, killing millions of people? Sharon had been on their list of people who needed to die, as had Peggy. The killing would have resulted in the collateral deaths of people who weren't even on the lists, pushing the death-toll even higher.

Would she really have preferred to leave SHIELD standing, laced with Hydra's poison and falling into the hands of Alexander Pierce? To have its aims twisted? Nick Fury wasn't an ethical man by Steve's standards, but he still preferred him at the helm over the slick, twisted totalitarian mindset of Pierce.

Sharon was an agent, she knew how to make hard choices. Didn't she understand that the only way to stop Hydra was to take away its sharpest weapon: secrecy. That in order to take away that weapon and make the world see who and what Hydra really was, all the information had to be made public? SHIELD was collateral damage, but it was the preferable option, because the people who worked for SHIELD knew what they signed up for. All the innocent people targeted by Zola's algorithm didn't know, had no choice and no warning.

Did she really think that he didn't have doubts, even now, whether or not what he did was the right thing? Especially after Clint's blunt truth, the regret and sorrow and guilt he felt was going off the charts. Did she think him above all that, impervious to it? Did she really think the choice had been easy and that he'd chosen without considering other options and weighing them? Did she think he slept easily at night, not caring?

Sharon wasn't a friend. She was a colleague and her subterfuge in acting as his neighbor when really she was surveilling him still rankled. He could have lived with having her think all of that. He'd have regretted it, of course, but ultimately, none of her anger would have penetrated as deep as Clint's had, because it was all on a personal level.

What did get to him, though, was the accusation that Peggy would have made a different call, because if there was one thing he was sure about, it was that especially since Peggy built SHIELD, she'd have burned it down herself before letting it become Hydra's puppet. Before Sharon's sharp words, Steve hadn't been worried about Peggy disagreeing with what he did – if she'd been lucid enough to understand. The Peggy he knew would have hated the lives lost, but she'd have told him to keep standing for what was right. She'd quoted the Pirkei Avot at him once, reminding him of Dr. Erskine, told Steve that he wouldn't be able to fix the world by himself, or even in his lifetime, but that that didn't absolve him of the responsibility to work towards it. Weighing the lives saved and the future guarded against Hydra's threat gave him no chance but to make the choice he'd made. Peggy would have understood. He was certain of it. At least the Peggy he knew before the ice.

Could she really have changed in the seventy years since then? Had something happened in between that would have had her make a different call? Steve's palms grew damp and his scalp began to prickle. Had he based his assumption on outdated information?

"Not a nice thought, is it?" Sharon's voice shook him from the argument that he'd held purely in his head. "Proud of yourself, Rogers? Are you proud of all the people losing their jobs, their houses and insurance and marriages because of what you did? Did you even think of any of that?"

The smell of disinfectant and old age mingled with Sharon's heavy perfume – not at all like Peggy's – and stung the inside of nose. A headache like the one he'd felt inside the Tower was coming back with full force. The flight reflex Bucky had always joked he didn't have kicked in and all he wanted
to do was to get out of the nursing home. "No," he admitted. Bucky had always accused him of being so sure he was right he never thought about why anyone was doing what he thought was wrong. Laser focus, Sam called it. He hadn't thought of any of the things Sharon was talking about. But, 'I'd still do it. I had to.'

The decision he'd made hadn't just been his, though, had it? So even if he didn't defend himself to Sharon, he couldn't not defend Maria Hill and Natasha. They had backed his decision, both of them. "Hydra destroyed the SHIELD your aunt built. If there had been anything worth salvaging," he said, "do you think Agents Hill and Romanov would have helped me dismantle it?"

"I can't believe you're hiding behind their backs now," she said, shaking her head.

She wasn't rational anymore. She was just lashing out like a wounded animal. It took some of the sting from her words, but not all of it.

He shook his head. Clint had already driven home the repercussions of Steve's actions. He stood by them. A hard, cold truth he'd learned in the war was that sometimes, the wound couldn't be lanced. Sometimes, it was necessary to amputate the whole limb.

With a pang, he thought of Bucky's lost arm and Nick's lost eye. Sometimes, what you lost couldn't be replaced. Sometimes, it was a decision between letting go and dying. Compared to that, what had Sharon lost? It hurt, God, it hurt thinking of everyone who was gone, and now, Peggy had been taken away too. There was no one, with Bucky's memories gone, no one left to remember except him.

He had to get away from her, so he turned away from Sharon and started walking.

"So that's it? You're leaving?" Sharon called after him.

Steve stopped with his hand on the door-knob. "I have flowers to bring to a friend's grave," he said before stepping into the director's office.

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The door to the gymnasium Tony had customized for the Avengers' use closed with a subdued click. Steve would have liked it better if he could have slammed it, that way, the frustration over not finding out where Peggy was buried would find some kind of an outlet. If he had tried that, though, he would have torn it straight off the reinforced hinges. Instead he clenched his hands into fists and made his way straight for the heavy bags.

His thoughts were still in overdrive. He couldn't stop mapping out the consequences of SHIELD's destruction, all the collateral damage, always circling back to Clint's injuries and Sharon's anger. In trying to do what was right, what seemed like the only possible choice in the moment, he'd caused an incredible amount of misery and likely, more deaths than he dared to imagine.

He walked past the running track and the gymnastics equipment to the punching bag near the floor length window and just rested his fist against the leather for the moment, while he stared out at the city that had been so familiar once and was so alien to him now. Tony had an obsession with vast windows. Maybe it was those terrible months in that cave in Afghanistan. Everything remained alien, even over two years after waking up from the ice, he still felt like he was sticking out like a sore thumb, not really part of the group, not a man of the century. No matter how many of the electronic gadgets Tony gave him he mastered, no matter that he knew how to use the internet or send a text message or talk to Jarvis, it felt fake, not organic.
He was lost in the uncanny valley.

Steve gave the bag a first punch and felt it quiver, heard the chain rattle.

Bucky's friendship had been organic, it had grown over the years, from playground buddies to best friends, and it had been the one constant in his life Steve could always count on, no matter what. Even in the darkest moments of his life, pre-serum, Bucky had been there with him and he never once turned his back on Steve.

And what had Steve done? He'd let Bucky down. He'd never asked what Zola had done to him in the lab. He hadn't even gone back to retrieve the body after Bucky had fallen; all Steve could think of was to avenge his death on Hydra. He hadn't even succeeded. Hydra had flourished while Bucky suffered and Steve slept.

He threw another punch at the bag, stronger this time, then another and another until he found a fast, merciless rhythm. The mat squeaked under his bare feet. The only light was the neon glow from the other high-rises around Stark Tower, but it was enough.

If he'd been stronger, if he'd been smart enough to find a way to hold on for rescue, found a way to dump the bombs in the ocean and come back to Peggy, maybe he would have seen what was happening to SHIELD, maybe he would have found and saved Bucky before he endured seven decades of torture. Maybe he'd have had a chance at a life with Peggy instead of meeting her when her mind was almost gone. Maybe he'd have been there when she passed.

So maybe Clint and Sharon were both right. Maybe taking down SHIELD, taking down Hydra, had been more selfish than anything. Maybe this time around, after finding out Bucky was alive, it had all been about saving Bucky, about getting him back and he really hadn't kept his eyes open wide enough to see the consequences his actions would have.

He just kept failing everyone.

He rained more punches against the bag, fast, hard enough his bare knuckles split.

Saving Bucky hadn't worked so well, though, had it? He hadn't got Bucky back; he'd got James. And that was close, so achingly close, but it wasn't enough.

The man who had rubbed his back and tried to get him to breathe evenly in front of the lab a few days ago, though, had been Bucky, not James. At least for a few precious moments, it had been pure Bucky, and the comfort that came with the return of that level of closeness, of the unconditional trust he'd always had in Bucky had been equal parts soothing and painful when he knew he had no right to want such comfort after he'd let Bucky down. But Bucky hadn't cared. He'd just been there. It had left Steve's heart unprotected, vulnerable, needing to feel that someone still remembered him the way he had been before the whole world changed, before he'd become an icon. Needing someone whom he could be weak with and not feel judged or like he was imposing, the way he felt with Peggy. James' – not Bucky's, he hadn't been Bucky anymore by then – confused (scared, a voice in his head whispered, he looked scared, you're scaring him, pushing him) retreat had hurt and only showed Steve how truly alone he was now.

The punching bag swung wildly under Steve's increasingly ferocious hits. He ignored the stinging behind his eyes and concentrated on punches that were beginning to leave russet stains on the leather. Steve hadn't come to the gym prepared, he wasn't in here for finesse, he was here to get rid of the horrible knot in his stomach that was threatening to climb up and lock up his lungs, his throat. Maybe into a real asthma attack this time. He hadn't had one since the serum, but they could by psychosomatic, too, couldn't they? It's what the doctors had said after Steve's mother had died
and they'd become more frequent. Loss had caused the increase then. They'd only eased up after Bucky had moved in with him and had filled all the empty spaces mom had left behind.

The losses he was experiencing now were nothing compared to what others had lost. Clint was right.

The bag swung dangerously on the metal hook.

Sharon was right, too.

He slammed another fist into the bag. The chain rattled and creaked in protest.

They saw through him so much better than the other Avengers did, saw him for who he really was. He was chasing shadows. Selfishly.

Peggy had been a shadow, and James still was, because both had lost too much of themselves to ever be the people Steve used to know. He'd tried to make them be who they used to be, needing, selfishly trying to re-capture the feeling of warmth and comfort that came with people truly knowing you.

What had his pathetic clinging to the past earned him in the end? Peggy was no longer there for him to even look at the fragments of the woman he knew. As a form of punishment, Sharon hadn't even informed him of her passing. Images of Peggy's room drifted by his inner eye, all of her pictures and personal belongings gone, like she'd never been there. Gone, her presence and essence erased by the quiet young guy painting the walls in a fresh white.

Bucky had been wiped away by Hydra and the man who wore his face now was either intimidated or irritated by Steve.

His next punch hit hard enough the bag split. The sand spilled to the floor with a hiss-shuff while the chain creaked in protest. Steve grimaced and tried in vain to press his hand over the hole in the leather. Cool sand ran through his fingers and over his bare feet. The stinging behind Steve's eyes got worse; he pressed his hand harder over the hole in the bag, helplessly trying to keep the sand in, willing it to stay contained.

Willing his memories to stay contained...

"You won't be alone," Peggy had said. She'd covered his hand with hers, warm, gentle, one of the rare moments in which she touched him.

"Just breathe with me," Bucky told him, rubbing Steve's back the way he'd done countless times; his touch familiar as breathing. "Like we're a team, like we're one. No one else. Just you and me."

The bittersweet memories insisted on playing out in his head.

The bag slowly turned soft and the sand kept spilling until all that remained was Steve clutching a near-empty shell.

He'd never had the chance to say goodbye to either of them. Never had the chance and would never get it again, because Peggy was gone and so was Bucky and he just couldn't stop it, any of it. He'd never feel their touch again, never laugh with them, never get the chance to tell them that...

The bag emptied its last contents to the mat and as if it were a go ahead sign, the tears came, unbidden, unstoppable. Messy sobs and hiccupsing breath, an animal whine stuck in his throat.
Behind him, he heard the door open and a sliver of light fell into the dark gym. Steve squeezed his eyes shut and stopped breathing to quell the sound struggling free of him. Whoever it was didn't need to see him like this, didn't need to know or burden themselves with him. Nothing happened, though, no greeting, no sound came. Steve had had a text message from Sam, telling him that he and Natasha had gone out. Bruce was meditating. Clint was knocked out on pain-killers and Pepper and Tony had taken the jet to L.A. to overnight in California. There was only one person left in the tower and James was the very last person Steve wanted to see him like this.

Even if… Steve swiped the back of his hand under his nose to wipe at tears and snot. He remembered the glimpse of Bucky he'd seen in James. Maybe there was more of Bucky buried in him than he knew after all. Hope, that ridiculous, dangerous flame of hope flared hot. Maybe seeing Steve alone would prompt one of Bucky's responses, which was to always go to Steve and find out what was wrong.

Steve looked up, but didn't see James in the doorway. The door had closed again, taking both light and hope with it. He was alone again. Truly alone.

Steve slumped against the empty bag, slipping, losing his balance, crashing to his knees and sliding further, boneless. The sob he'd been suppressing so hard his lungs burned with it clamored free. He did nothing to stop it until he was curled in on himself on the mattress.

Tears and the pressure behind his eyes and in his sinuses made him lose track of time. Memories of Peggy haunted him mercilessly, of her young and old, smirking over something Phillips had said one moment, then helplessly confused the next. They morphed and turned into pictures of Bucky, laughing over a messed up dinner at their place in Brooklyn, Bucky, hollow-eyed and bruised after getting out of Zola's lab, Bucky, fierce and determined, reaching for Steve's shield and covering him, the way he always did, Bucky, terrified, reaching for him, the railing tearing away with a metal scream, Bucky, falling …

Steve hadn't had time to mourn Bucky back then and even less time to mourn Peggy today. He did so now. Allowed himself, finally, to let go, to keen against the unfairness of it all. Why had he survived unscathed? He should have been there, with Bucky, 'til the end of the line. He should have been at Peggy's side when she died.

The door opened and closed again quickly after. This time, Steve tensed, but didn't straighten or hide his misery. Maybe it had been Sam and Natasha, maybe Bruce. They were all smart enough, kind enough to leave him alone.

He didn't hear the footsteps until they were directly next to him and the mat dipped slightly under the weight of someone sitting down. Steve hid his face in the crook of his arm – there was still time to pretend he'd fallen asleep, stop questions from being asked, stop James from worrying. For it was James, his scent, Bucky's scent was still as familiar as breathing to Steve.

For long, uneven breaths, nothing happened. Steve didn't move, just listened to James brush his hair from his face. Then his hand settled on Steve's shoulder blade, warm and heavy, hesitant. "Does it help?" James asked, apprehensively, his voice just above a whisper. He moved his hand over Steve's back in a soothing, achingly familiar motion. "This?"

Steve felt his lungs ready to implode. This wasn't Bucky. Bucky would have known how to comfort Steve, where to rest his hand and when to pull him into an embrace, he always did. But for all that he wasn't Bucky, James was trying to help in his own way, cared enough to push past his comfort zone and touch Steve to try to help him. His touch, familiar/unfamiliar and so sorely needed, was a lifeline.
He choked out a confirmation over a fresh flood of tears, a meaningless jumble of words and curled into James' bent leg, hiding his face against James' knee in shame and gratitude. James pulled him a little closer; his movements on Steve's back grew bigger, more soothing. He never stopped, not even when Steve slipped toward sleep.

James

James had to keep locking up his muscles to keep from springing away from Steve and fleeing. He didn't want to be touched any more than he had to be, yet here is was, initiating contact. It made him feel twisty and off-balance, worse than usual. He stared at the wall of windows that let in light during the day. The lights in the gym were out except over the heavy bags where they were sitting. The windows mirrored that luminous pool in a sea of glassy black shining with the city's lights.

He kept his hand on Steve's back, rubbing lightly, vaguely aware someone had done the same for him more than once while he was throwing up. It hadn't helped, but he understood they'd meant it to and he had no idea what else to do. He'd started out small but expanded the movement when it seemed to relax Steve. It was the only idea he had and the prospect of figuring anything else out had him in a cold sweat.

Steve. James wasn't sure when he'd begun to think of Captain America, the soldier from the helicarrier, as Steve in his head, but it was too late to turn back now. He suspected the seeds had been planted when the man had stood before him and said, 'Don't make me do this,' so sorrowful and so sure that the Asset had doubted his mission for the first time. Doubted, hesitated, and ultimately deserted.

Steve seemed to be falling asleep, but he was still a wreck; James could feel a wet place where Steve's tears had soaked through his pants. It wasn't awful, more a gauge of how hard Steve had been crying, even since James slipped back into the gym and joined him.

He hadn't wanted to do it.

When he'd opened the door to the gym, he'd been hoping to have it to himself. Finding Steve hunched over and sobbing had shocked him. James patted Steve's hair while thinking that out. He didn't have a clue how to deal with someone else's problems; his own were still overwhelming most nights. If Jarvis didn't wake him, he woke from his nightmares screaming and thrashing and shaking, a mess of sweat and tears and snot more often than not. He hadn't known anyone else suffered anything like that.

Steve snuffled and settled closer to him. The mat under them squeaked with the movement. James didn't know what he was doing but that felt almost... nice. Like he was able provide something back to Steve.

James hadn't known he had anything to offer as a human.

If Steve needed someone killed, James knew he could do that easily enough. But this... this was different. It felt strange but okay at the same time.

Steve's hair felt silky. It was almost too short to comb his fingers through. James shifted minutely so Steve's weight stopped cutting off the circulation in his leg and then smoothed his hand over Steve's head again. The repetitive movement soothed him as well as Steve.
He still wished anyone else had been around to do this instead of him.

Wilson and the Black Widow were out. Stark and Pepper were in Malibu. Barton was out of the question, the only interaction James had seen between him and Steve had been that confrontation in the kitchen. Even if Barton wasn't the reason for whatever had Steve breaking down, he was in the medical wing, drugged and recovering from his wounds. James had even asked Jarvis to interrupt Bruce's meditation, only for Jarvis to tell him Banner had decided to take a walk and wasn't around either. It hadn't passed midnight yet, so it might be hours before any of Steve's friends returned to the tower.

Jarvis offered to put a call through to any or all of them for James, but James sensed Steve wouldn't like that. Wouldn't like anyone seeing him so vulnerable, wouldn't like being another problem to be solved either. It would take too long for any of them to make their way back to the Tower anyway. Steve had needed someone right then.

No matter how out of his depth James felt, he couldn't ignore the way Steve had been bent over, back heaving as he choked on the kind of sobs that pulled from the gut, that were the emotional equivalent of screaming.

Steve had still been crying when James came back into the gym a second time. If he hadn't been, James would have slipped away again. So now he was sitting on the tan gym mat, legs folded, acting as a pillow and a solace. The gym was new enough it didn't have the ingrained reek of testosterone and sweat in the air, but down on the floor James could smell the still new chemical scent of the vinyl covers on the mats and whatever had been used to varnish the hardwood floors beneath them.

Steve smelled of car exhaust, sweat, a hint of whatever detergent had been used on his clothes, antiseptics, and, strangely, flowers. If James had had to name the combined scents, he would have said Steve smelled tired and miserable. The wry thought that no one would ever think of 'Captain America' smelling of much of anything, certainly not exhaustion, crossed James' mind.

Before this, he hadn't considered that Captain America was really just Steve Rogers, a man. No more immune to pain that James was.

It frightened him. He wanted to resent Steve for scaring him. He'd... he'd been relying on Steve ever since arriving at the Tower. He'd relied on the idea of Captain America, the one man who had stood up to Hydra before that. James could only sneer silently at himself for being so stupid. James was the one who had been mistaken, who had mistaken Steve for the persona, the image in the media; Steve hadn't pretended to be more than he was. What he was had been more than enough to help James anyway. Steve hadn't failed him or anyone.

But seeing him breaking down was a blow, one that left James breathless and shaky inside.

His back twinged at the position he was in. Tender new skin protested being pulled taut over his shoulder blades. He ignored it. It wasn't even real pain yet. Steve was asleep.

He had no clue how to help Steve, just an instinct to try. James hurt, all the time, and every time Steve saw that Steve tried to make it better for him. The things Steve did that set James off were never intentional. The way Steve tried to jog memories that weren't there anymore often times annoyed James, scraped at his fragile sense of self, but Steve had given him this place to live, given him the help of Steve's friends, and James wouldn't forget that.

Unless Hydra were to get hold of him again, James acknowledged to himself in a spurt of dark humor. When he said anything like that, Steve and everyone else looked horrified and assured
James it would never happen. James thought they meant it, but he knew how relentless Hydra was. He could still hear the mantra, the threat, in the darkest corners of his mind. *You cannot kill the Hydra.*

He supposed you could kill yourself trying. He knew he didn't want to do that, though. He wasn't sure of anything else except that: he didn't want to hurt or hurt anyone again.

Helping someone though, he hadn't any idea how to do that, even though he thought maybe helping was part of not hurting. He just couldn't be sure yet.

And here was Steve, falling apart, and James didn't know what to make of that, either. Was it okay? If it was okay for Steve to be this wounded, did that mean that it was all right that James was so damaged?

He felt a wave of warmth toward Steve roll through him, an urge to be kind, the way the truck driver had been kind to him, just because he could be. Not because he owed anyone, but because he chose to be kind.

The way he'd chosen to abandon the mission on the helicarrier, to be more than Hydra's fist, the first time he'd been James, even if he hadn't begun thinking of himself that way yet.

Articulating any of that outside his mind was beyond him but James wondered if the emotion he felt toward Steve, the fellow feeling, wasn't what everyone meant by friendship. He wasn't sure. Steve kept saying James was his friend, but what he meant was Bucky was his friend, and James didn't want to see his expression if he asked and was wrong about this urge to make sure Steve was all right.

He needed to talk to Wilson. Wilson wasn't a friend, but he was steady. James had already figured that out. Wilson was the steadiest person in the Tower with the possible exception of Pepper.

The decision to ask Wilson made him feel vaguely better. It was a plan, at least.

He ran his hand down over Steve's shoulder and arm absently. This was different, he reflected. New. He'd been keeping his distance until now, consciously communicating his desire for personal space through his body language, silently telling the world to keep away. He'd initiated this though: he was the one in control. He could push Steve away, leave the gym, but more importantly, nothing had made him come inside but himself.

The warmth of Steve's body, the weight of his head, the skin over strong muscle and bone, all under James' hand, satisfied a hunger he hadn't been aware of having. He felt connected to Steve, aware of him as a living being and of his own body, of being alive.

James moved again to ease his back again, enjoying the freedom to do so, savoring the almost sated feeling that came with each stroke of his hand down from Steve's head over his back or down his shoulder to his arm.

He thought suddenly of Steve sitting in the bathroom with him weeks ago, reading to him while James waited through the recurring nausea and weakness. He'd been there when James woke, hours later.

Steve hadn't done anything, but he'd been there. James made himself as comfortable as he could. Just sitting with Steve until he woke up he could do.
Steve woke up when the morning light began to filter into the gym bright enough to reflect off something and shine a bright light into Steve's eyes. When he opened his eyes, he realized with a start that the reflector had been James' arm.

"Bruce usually has breakfast ready on Sundays," James informed him.

Three Sundays in a row, before Sam went to church, and it was already becoming an Avengers routine. The idea that it was for James too warmed places in Steve's heart he'd worried would never thaw out. The unconscious smile on James' face when he got up and offered Steve his hand was all Bucky.

God, maybe he hadn't lost everything. Maybe, just maybe he could have Bucky back.

He couldn't read the expression on James' face, not like he'd been able to read Bucky. Bucky had been an open book. No, Steve corrected himself, Bucky had seemed like that, but he'd always had deeper currents, things he kept to himself. There had always been worry under his smiles and anger behind his sarcasm. The war had scratched up Bucky's polish so that anyone could see the steel beneath and no one, not even Steve, got to see what he had locked up in that steel. Memories of the prison camp, they'd all figured and tried not to talk or ask about it, or the torture he'd endured at Zola's hands.

Maybe Steve should have asked. Maybe a better friend would have made Bucky talk. Maybe if Steve had known what Zola had done to him, he wouldn't have cared about catching Zola alive. Maybe if he'd have cared a little less about the mission and a little more about his friend, he wouldn't have lost him.

He could feel himself spiraling into the dark place in his head that had sucked him in the night before. Just the way it had when he'd been asthmatic, his breathing turned ragged, but this time his tight throat and prickling eyes were all from sorrow.

James raised an eyebrow at him, hand still held out. "Are you staying here?" He even sounded like Bucky then, sarcastic and mocking yet warm with affection.

"Think you can lift me up?" Steve teased.

"What do you think?" James asked. He flexed the metal arm. "I don't have this for looks, you know."

Steve didn't pay any attention to the chill of James' fingers as he levered him to his feet. He had James' hand in his and a new sense of hope.

Yesterday had been awful, the worst day since Bucky fell, but today would be better.
Chapter 11

James

"Something wrong with my pancakes?" Wilson asked James. James twitched and realized he'd been pushing pieces around his plate. He needed to pretend better. Steve had already started on a second stack, along with the sausage links Banner hadn't cleared James to try.

Not that James wanted to taste them. Food still nauseated him, though he wasn't throwing it all up as often, or just tasted wrong or drugged, even though he knew – he thought he knew, though he was never sure – it wasn't. Even the pancakes, which he'd seen Wilson making from a box mix, tasted of chemicals, like aluminum and salt, and the expensive genuine maple syrup only barely masked it.

Mostly he hid how he felt about the food Sam and the others gave him to eat. No one else seemed to have his response. He knew he was the one that was wrong. It was just better to go along. Wasting food was wrong, something from long ago told him. Banner kept adding new things to his diet and Steve insisted James needed to eat regularly. But this morning, James felt too uneasy to fake his way through the meal. He could feel the Black Widow's attention though she wasn't in the kitchen with them; he had since she arrived with the wounded asset Barton, and kept bracing for an attack.

The only time he hadn't felt it was during the night, sitting with Steve sleeping in the gym. He had stayed and kept watch for him the way Steve had the first night James had been in the tower. It had felt... nice. He'd liked doing something for him.

"Hey. Hey, James," Wilson prompted him again. He had an eyebrow cocked and a spatula still in his hand, along with a horrible apron emblazoned with Richard Nixon's face that instructed everyone to Kiss the Crook! James didn't understand it, but Stark had giggled over it. "You with us?"

James nodded, then croaked out a few words, because Steve and the others preferred it when he spoke. "I'm not hungry."

"B – James," Steve said reprovingly. His eyes might still be puffy and red-rimmed, but his appetite wasn't affected, and the splits over his knuckles had all already healed. "You have to eat."

James forced himself to take a bite of pancake and chewed. He didn't want to, but he needed to prove he wasn't a burden, that he could act normal someday. When he'd arrived at the tower, he'd thought his skills as the Asset would be enough, but these people didn't want a killer or a spy. If they did, he'd realized the previous afternoon, they had the Black Widow. Who wasn't damaged and unstable. He needed to cooperate if he didn't want them to get rid of him. Despite everything, he didn't want to die; he didn't want to be disposed of like some broken thing. He wanted to be more than that, now that he was James and not just a thing that Hydra used for their purposes. So he would eat the pancakes and gag as discreetly as he could. He couldn't hide his grimace at the taste, though.

Wilson sighed loudly. "Fine, oatmeal and honey coming up. Want an egg with it?"

James cringed at the thought. Eggs didn't taste the way he thought they should. He didn't know if that was a memory or just his messed up metabolism. He never knew. Everything was like that now, whenever any of Bucky Barnes' memories bubbled up through his Winter Soldier ones.
He was careful not to say it in front of Steve or Wilson, but sometimes he thought it would be easier if he could just go back into cryo. Hydra had simply told him what to do and expected him to do it. Steve and these people, they wanted so much more from him.

Sometimes he thought it would be easier – easy – to kill them all. It wasn't even the Asset's thought. That revelation wasn't one he thought he should share with Banner or Wilson or Steve or anyone. James wasn't that stupid.

Besides, he didn't want to kill them. He still needed their help and the sanctuary the tower provided against any more attempts by Hydra to force him back. James told himself that was his only reason for staying.

He thought he was becoming better at being human again. The Asset hadn't lied to himself.

"And that's a no too," Wilson muttered.

"Please eat something more?" Steve pleaded.

Before James had to answer, Wilson opened the refrigerator and grabbed a pitcher of the nutrition drink Banner made for him. He set it and a tall glass in front of James with a grumble. This one was pale green, which meant it had mint in it. James could see little flecks of it in the mix. Banner made it with mint he grew on his balcony and James actually liked it.

He poured himself a glass and began sipping it.

"You're still eating some toast. We've got some of that bread you seemed to like the other day," Wilson said.

James perked up. He had liked that bread, the braided challah Pepper had brought in the other morning. It had been moist and a little sweet and somehow right. "Please?" he said.

"Huh."

"I'll get Pepper to tell me where she found it," Steve said eagerly. "We can try other stuff from them too."

James shrugged. He knew Stark and Pepper were gone for the moment and didn't think either of them would appreciate Steve interrupting their trip to ask where she'd bought bread. No one was asking him, though, as Steve brought out his Starkphone.

"Do you know what time it is here, Cap!?" Stark answered, the snarl clear through the phone's high fidelity speaker though Steve kept the volume on his phone turned down. "Three hours earlier than the East Coast, that's right. So this better be good or I'm going to get DUM-E to shave your pointy head when I get back."

Wilson had begun laughing and the latest pancake slipped off his spatula and hit the floor. He bent down, picked it up and flicked it at Steve's head. It landed and stuck, looking like a very flat beret.

James ducked his head and snickered at the expression on his face.

Steve must have had the camera on his phone on, because Stark's laughter suddenly rang from the phone.

"I take it back, that was worth waking up to see!"
Sam

Since Steve insisted on doing the dishes – by hand, the big freak – Sam wasn't left with much to do after fixing them breakfast. He really didn't know what to think when James followed him into the main room, careful distance maintained but unmistakably choosing Sam's company over staying in the open kitchen.

"Something you want to talk to me about?" Sam asked because straight up and straight forward worked best with James.

The guy might have jack left of his memories and was about as socialized as an abused pitbull, but he could read folks just fine. Try to futz around or omit shit and he got white around the eyes, spooked and defensive, because he read it as lies. James was too paranoid and at the same time too smart to respond to any kind of manipulation as anything but a threat. Sam got that. Hell, Tony got it, surprisingly enough. Steve and Bruce were both having problems because they wanted to protect James and they thought too much information might harm him.

Sam wasn't half as good at reading James. So many of his reactions were off or muted by standard psychiatric metrics or basic human social rhythms thanks to the shit Hydra had done to him, not to mention that like Steve, he grew up in an entirely different time and would be out of sync with modern reactions and thought patterns; he just didn't make sense to Sam. No, Sam corrected himself, James did make sense, it just wasn't easy or automatic. Within the parameters of James' limited experience, everything he did made really good sense. He had a strong survival instinct, at least. If Sam made himself think of where James was coming from, then he could figure out why James did things. It just didn't come at the reflexive level Sam was used to utilizing. They didn't share the same context. He ran into the same bafflement with Steve occasionally.

James twitched and flicked his gaze toward the kitchen.

"Man, please tell me at least that bread is staying down," Sam implored. He was a damn good cook, but James' reactions were going to give him a complex. Not to mention he hated watching people puke. Hated it more than vomiting himself, which was ironic, considering he went into Pararescue and wounded, shocky people often threw up. He'd got past the sympathetic gagging eventually, but never the sympathy.

"Yes," James said. He sounded so flat it was hard to believe he'd been laughing at Steve and his pancake beret with Sam a little while ago.

Sam frowned. "So what is it? You don't hang out with me voluntarily."

James didn't hang out with anyone. Put someone in the same room with him and he went onto alert. Sam knew he couldn't help it, but it made him an uncomfortable person to be around, even if you weren't bothered by silence.

Nothing like knowing a world-class assassin was evaluating your threat potential to keep you from falling asleep listening to Animal Planet.

James turned his head toward the kitchen. The attempt at nonverbal looked jerky and awkward from him. Sam gave him points for the effort. Hell, he even got it right. At least, Sam thought he had. He dropped his voice and asked, "You want to talk somewhere private?"

James gave a jerky nod.
So Sam was right. James wanted to talk about Steve. Well, it wasn't a huge surprise. Steve kind of glued himself to James, as much as James could tolerate. Maybe James wanted to know where Steve had disappeared off to the day before after the thing with Barton and the Widow. Hell, maybe he wanted to know about that, though it was a can of worms Sam would really rather leave alone.

Because talking about Barton's beef with Steve would inevitably lead back to talking about SHIELD and it being infiltrated by Hydra, and Hydra had to be a sore spot.

A clatter and a mutter about too many gadgets came from Steve in the kitchen, reminding Sam of that super soldier hearing. Steve was good about not abusing it, good enough that Sam often forgot. Steve had obviously caught that Sam and James were talking.

Turned out it was a damned good thing Tony had soundproofed the hell out of every room in the tower, even if he claimed it was so Jarvis' microphones wouldn't pick up bleed-through noise.

"Huh. I need to get my laptop. We can talk while I get it," Sam said.

He figured walking and talking might be easier on James than a sit down chat.

James fell into step behind him. Sam ignored the goose bumps that came with having James at his back like that.

Once in his quarters, James stopped just inside the door, while Sam did retrieve his laptop. He had some forms to fill out in regard to his relocation and leaving work at the DC Veterans Administration. He hadn't yet decided if he wanted to continue with VA. It wasn't like quitting and taking a private sector job would cost him his benefits – such as they were – just that he had his doubts about working for Tony Stark, even indirectly. Maybe there would be less paperwork at least; Tony wasn't a paperwork kind of guy and Pepper seemed like the model of efficiency.

Too bad no one would put Pepper Potts in charge of the VA. She'd have it straightened out in six months.

Laptop in hand, Sam faced James again, noting it looked like he'd slept in his clothes. Or hadn't slept at all. Exhaustion etched itself into his handsome features, leaving him looking bruised around the eyes and colorless otherwise.

No surprise there, Sam acknowledged, insomnia and nightmares were par for course for soldiers who had endured trauma. Not sleeping was an often resorted to, though ultimately unsuccessful, tactic in the face of night terrors.

"You get any sleep last night?" he asked.

James gave a shake of his head.

"Doc Banner might be able to figure out some kind of sleep aid for you." Sam wasn't an MD, he couldn't prescribe anything that would knock James out. Not that anything any of the docs now set up in the Tower's medical floor could either, not with that super soldier metabolism. The horror of watching James come out of the anesthetic during his surgery had taken up its place in Sam's own repertoire of nightmares.

James shook his head again, hair flipping into his eyes in a way that made Sam itch and wonder how he stood it.

James frowned at Sam in the aftermath of his rejection of the idea of drugs. Sam was thrilled James
had put out a desire, even if it was a negative. The ability to say don't, to say no, was at the very heart of agency. The question of consent was always to be sure it existed, that it hadn't been withdrawn, in other words to always be listening and looking for the 'no'.

On the other hand, Sam didn't really want to stand all day with James staring at him.

"Okay, you came to me, man," Sam said. "I'm not a mind reader. I can't even guess what you want. You'll have to tell me."

That just made James look grimmer, but he did finally speak. "Last night."

"Yes?"

James' metal fingers flexed, which Sam found endlessly disturbing, but he didn't duck his head or shift his gaze from Sam. "Steve – " He stopped. Started again. "Captain Rogers. Last night... "

"You can call him Steve," Sam said gently. "I know he wants you to. I've heard him tell you so."

James shrugged uneasily. "No one was here."

Sam waited.

"No one was here and he was in the gym. He was crying."

Aw shit. The Peggy visit must have gone south. Sam didn't know if Steve had been crying over something specific about it or just hit his limits. He decided to concentrate on what James was trying to ask or tell him about it.

"People cry when they're hurting. It's okay."

Yeah, it was okay. Steve was most definitely not okay, but it probably wasn't going to help James to tell him that.

"It's okay?" James asked.

Or maybe it would be, Sam backtracked fast in his head. Hydra hadn't let James show any kind of weakness. They'd stripped his humanity from him to make sure he had none. Steve sure as hell presented as strong and unaffected, an icon of the sort of living weapon Hydra had wanted the Winter Soldier to be for them. Seeing Steve as human could help James accept his own humanity.

"Yeah," Sam said. Keep it simple.

"No one was here. I looked," James told him.

Steve had looked pretty wrung out this morning, but not like he'd had a breakdown. Sam wondered if whatever crisis Steve had experienced had become exaggerated in James' mind.

"He was alone."

"Sometimes people want to be," Sam pointed out. James personified that. James was the Greta Garbo of Stark Tower. Everything about him shouted *I want to be alone* all the time. Sans accent.

James held Sam's gaze. "That would have been bad last night."

Maybe he was right. Maybe whatever shades of Bucky still lingered in James' brain still knew Steve better than anyone else. Steve wasn't James. He had a different set of traumas and he had to
be one of the loneliest people Sam had ever met.

"What happened?" Sam prompted James.

"He cried a long time," James told him. "I sat with him."

"That was good." That was surprising. Though James kept surprising Sam, frankly by being sane at all. An ability to empathize couldn't have been a quality that made killing people easier. More likely it had made it worse.

Of course, that was part of why James didn't want the Winter Soldier memories, not even to get the Bucky ones.

James' mouth set in a grim line, but he nodded. "I don't know how to... " He gave Sam a speaking look. "You need to do something."

With that, he left Sam's quarters, having talked more than he sometimes did for days. Sam supposed it was no surprise that it was about Steve. Whether James remembered or not, he and Steve were like a binary star system, perpetually orbiting each other.

Sam reminded himself that there just wasn't a place for anything else, planet, moon, or star, between the gravitic forces exerted between two suns like that. At best, everything else must orbit both of them, far, far out.

He tightened his hold on his laptop and rubbed his face with his free hand. James had lobbed the ball into his court. It was time for him to ferret out what had made Steve break down and help him deal with it.

That's what friends did.

He wasn't going to be outdone by a one-armed amnesiac assassin.

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**Steve**

Steve watched as Sam walked in, set his phone down carefully on the bar, proceeded to roll his shoulders and crack his neck and then retrieved a bottle of beer from the refrigerator behind the bar. He knocked the cap off and downed half of it in one long swallow.

"Something wrong?" Steve asked.

Sam took a smaller sip and then ambled over to the couch Steve had stretched out on. Steve obligingly lifted his feet away and Sam sat down. They both watched the nature documentary playing on the giant screen for a few minutes. A Kodiak grizzly swiped a huge salmon out of freezing water. Steve was reminded of the Hulk.

"Mom keeps getting after me to go to church and visit the cemetery where Dad's buried." Sam rolled his shoulders, obviously trying to loosen them after tensing up while on the phone.

Steve had tried going back to church after SHIELD thawed him out. He didn't know if he'd lost too much faith in the war or if modern churches just didn't offer what he needed, but it had been a dissatisfying experience he hadn't repeated. With the way he'd been made into an icon and a role model after his 'death' he needed to be careful what he even appeared to espouse. The last thing he
wanted was for anyone to use him and religion as some kind of excuse to persecute anyone else.

He knew religion and faith were mine fields to discuss. They had been when he was a kid too. The things Mr. Barnes used to say about Catholics would have earned him a punch from Steve if he hadn't been Bucky's dad, no matter how many times Bucky had assured Steve he didn't mean Steve's ma.

"You don't want to go?" he asked in voice casual enough Sam would know he didn't have to answer.

Sam waved a dismissive hand. "Church is fine. I'll go next Sunday. I just hate funerals. I never even made it to Riley's. I was still deployed. And cemeteries. What's putting a bunch of dying flowers on someone's grave going to do for them? They're gone."

"Maybe it's just about doing it for your mother," Steve suggested. He offered, "I'll go with you." He hadn't been able to make himself visit his mother's grave without Bucky beside him. He'd arranged deliveries of flowers to where Sarah Rogers lay, but hadn't gone back himself since coming out of the ice. Sometimes, some company helped.

"Yeah. You know, I'll get there, sooner or later. Might take you up on that." Sam shook his head and then eyed Steve. "She wants us to come to dinner tomorrow."

"How early?" Steve wondered why that would have Sam so out of sorts.

"Noon."

"Okay," Steve agreed. "I'll tell Tony and Pepper."

"Oh God." Sam swiped his hands over his face and then retrieved his beer and finished it. "Stark will never let this go."

"Let what go?"

"Mom has a date. She's dating. Has been dating. I did not know this." Sam slumped back against the couch and tipped his head back to look at the ceiling. "I did not want know this."

Sam's phone played another stitch of music and he got up to retrieve it with a smile. "Natasha. Don't tell her I let Tony set her ringtone as the theme from Rocky & Bullwinkle."

Steve scratched a note into his look-it-up list, since he could guess it was something Natasha would find annoying and Tony funny.

"Hey," Sam said into his phone. Steve did his best not to eavesdrop, but he could hear Natasha's voice clearly along with Sam's. She had left the Tower early in the morning, before Steve woke up, and still hadn't returned. She wanted Sam to check on Clint because she needed to meet a contact and couldn't make it back.

"No problem," Sam promised. "I'll make sure he's fed and watered before we leave for dinner at my Mom's. Too bad you can't make it too."

Natasha was worried about Clint being alone in the Tower with James.

"James is fine. Clint's not going to trigger him. And Bruce'll be here too."

Natasha hissed a threat.
"Hey, that's unkind. Also scary, scary hot," Sam said. "Natasha. James is just as freaked out by you as you are by him."

She closed the phone call with a promise to be back before morning.

*~*~*

"Steve, can you throw on some nice clothes and meet me by the elevators?"

Steve frowned at Sam's voice filtering through the in-built communication system of his apartment. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine, just... " Sam trailed off, then Steve heard him take a deep breath. "If I don't do this now, I'll never do it."

"Give me five minutes," Steve said. He didn't need to ask questions now, if Sam needed his help, he'd be there, just as Sam had been there when Steve had needed help. Everything else, he was sure Sam would tell him once they were en route to wherever it was Sam wanted to go.

He was already wearing black jeans, so he shrugged out of his t-shirt and picked out a blue button down shirt and a charcoal jacket. A quick look at the floor length mirror on the wall showed satisfactory results, so he walked out into the hallway with another three minutes to spare.

Sam was already waiting for him when the elevator opened on what he'd begun to call Sam's floor. Steve felt his eyebrows climb in surprise – Sam was wearing a dark brown suit and a crisp white shirt paired with a maroon tie.

"I'd ask you if you were going on a date, but then you wouldn't have asked me along," he commented.

"If I'd been plotting to take you out you'd have just broken my heart," Sam said.

Steve's grin wobbled. Was Sam –

Sam began to laugh when he caught Steve's look. "I love you, bro, but, really, no," he said. "I prefer my men a little shorter than you."

"So I should just set you up with Tony?" Steve's mouth ran on automatic. He still wasn't quite used to the concept of it being perfectly okay to talk about fluid sexual preferences in random conversations.

"I'm not going toe to toe with Pepper!" Sam said, raising his hands with another laugh.

"So what's up with the suit?" Steve asked.

Sam's shoulder slumped a little and the smile slipped. He swiped a hand over his face. "Mama keeps harassing me, and I don't feel like discussing it tomorrow with Tony and Pepper present, so I decided to go to the cemetery," he said. "I'm sorry to drag you along, but I have a feeling that if I don't, I'll end up at the Zoo just to avoid going there."

Cemeteries made him think of all the funerals he'd missed. It bothered him, even though Steve knew it hadn't been his choice. The only funeral he'd attended since his own mother's had been Fury's, which had been as empty of meaning as the coffin, since the man wasn't dead. And then there was Peggy.
"So I'm a chaperone to the cemetery?" Steve asked, just to say something to distract himself from thoughts of Peggy.

"Pretty much, yeah," Sam answered.

Steve inclined his head. "I can do that."

Sam had an SI fleet car, a sedan that had dark glass and rode heavier than it looked. Frankly, it rode like a tank. Steve suspected it was armored. With the way Sam wove in and out of traffic with a running commentary of thinly veiled insults and sarcasm directed at the other drivers, Steve thought they might need it.

"Trying to find parking is going to be a nightmare," Sam said when Steve saw the first sign to the cemetery.

"Not really," Steve commented when he saw an open parking space just down the street. Sam was right though; there was little to no parking within walking distance of the old cemetery. They'd struck it lucky.

"That's new," Sam said. He was quiet for a few minutes while he steered the car into the space before a BMW could snag it. "Or maybe it isn't."

"Been a while?" Steve asked, careful not to inject any judgment into the question. He could have been talking about Sam's parking skills, which were... rusty.

"I haven't been here since I left for the academy," Sam said after a while. He still had his hands on the steering wheel and his fingers curled around the black plastic. "Even then it was only because Mama basically dragged me here by my collar."

"I take it you don't like cemeteries?" Steve asked.

"It's not cemeteries in general, it's — " Sam stopped in mid-sentence, took the hands off the wheel and ran his right hand over his mouth. "Yeah, actually, it is. I hate cemeteries." He expelled the air from his lungs in a whoosh. "It's probably the reason I never went to Riley's grave, either."

"You have a place to go and visit him, though, right?" Steve asked. "If you ever wanted to?" He thought of the condolence letters Colonel Phillips had signed, and of the one he'd insisted on signing himself, of all the mothers, wives, fathers, sons and daughters who didn't even have a grave to go to in order to mourn their dead. It was easier to think of those, and to concentrate on Sam, than to think of a grave where he wasn't welcome.

"I suppose."

"What kind of a man was your father?" Steve asked.

Sam's shoulders relaxed a little. "Very loud and direct. He had to be to get a word in edgewise next to my Mama. People loved him for that, though." He smiled. "You didn't mess with Father Wilson, because he looked through all of your crap." The smile slipped from Sam's face. "Turns out believing in your fellow human being doesn't mean shit when you're in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Steve waited, unwilling to prompt what was clearly a painful memory.

"He got killed trying to break up a neighborhood fight. I remember waiting for him to come home when I got back from Sunday school. I remember the scent of Mama's chocolate chip cookies in
the air." Sam shook his head and glanced at Steve. "They were his favorites," he said by way of explanation before looking out at the cemetery wall in front of them again. "I couldn't stand the scent for years after." The raw hurt in the last sentence belied the calm way he'd told the story at first. Steve remembered the sharp stench of antiseptic in the hospital where his ma had died and the way his eyes had stung every time Bucky brought out the iodine to patch him up after that.

Sam took a deep breath and reached for a round blue plastic container Steve had seen behind his seat when he got in the car. The faded green lid didn't match the bottom and looked oddly out of place next to Sam's elegant suit.

"Time to get out the big boy pants, huh?" Sam's grip bent the container slightly and it opened with a quiet plop. The scent of chocolate cookies filled the car in an instant.

"You're ready when you're ready," Steve said.

Sam snorted a surprised laugh. "Now who's the counselor?"

Steve shrugged, grinning. "I learned from the best."

Sam pulled the key from the ignition and put his hand to the door handle. He hesitated, fiddling with the lid of the container which refused to close again for him.

"I can take those if you want," Steve said, indicating the container.

Sam closed his eyes and expelled a long breath before pushing the door open with one hand and handing Steve the cookies with the other. "Thanks, man."

Steve sealed the lid back on the container and got out of the car himself. "Anytime."

They walked to the cemetery with slow but purposeful steps.

Steve looked over and saw Sam's gaze was on the cookie container. "My dad was funny. Mama would make a dozen different fancy ass cookies, impress every old lady from Harlem to Jersey, and he'd just get this sad look on his face and ask where the chocolate chips were."

Steve found it easy to imagine Alisha Wilson cooking an amazing array of cookies. He'd already developed a Pavlovian response to her cooking.

They passed through the front gates to the cemetery unremarked beyond the subtly different feel of paving stone instead of concrete sidewalk and the smell of fresh cut grass and engine exhaust. A mower buzzed somewhere nearby.

Sam went on, "Mama would say anyone who could read could make chocolate chip cookies, but then she'd make him a batch every time." He smiled a little. "Dad always said it was to keep him out of the ones for company, but they really were his favorites. Didn't even want any nuts in them."

The story kept Sam distracted as they began pacing down the paths, but he fell silent after that, studying the stones and monuments with a growing agitation and finally muttering, "There's an angel with a broken lute one plot ahead of my Dad's." He stopped walking and shook his head with a harsh laugh. "Christ, you'd think I could remember where my father was buried."

"You were a kid," Steve pointed out gently. He imagined Sam as a gangly eleven or twelve year old, staring at the statue of an angel with a lute, blinking quickly to stop himself from crying in order to be a man and to not worry his mother.
"Not when I was here last," Sam said, his voice taking on a dejected and self-deprecating tone.

Steve took a deep breath. He knew that guilt only too well, but he didn't want Sam to drown in it. "How old were you when you left for the academy?"

"Eighteen," Sam answered.

"See what I mean?" Steve had been on his own at eighteen and he knew he'd still been a kid, despite the way boys had grown up faster in his day than now. You were always a kid when it came to your parents and losing them. No one was ever old enough, adult enough to shrug that off.

Sam quirked a grin at him. "Yes, grandpa."

They walked in silence for the next few minutes. Steve scanned dates of birth and death on the headstones and shrugged deeper into his blazer. Many of the people whose headstones they passed had been younger than him, laid to rest years ago. He couldn't help but think that without the serum, he probably wouldn't even have been around for the moon landing. Not that he had been as it was, but he'd seen the footage. It still impressed and woke the nostalgic urge for adventuring in him.

The headstone at the beginning of the next row they passed just carried one name: Grace. No dates, nothing else. Just yellow and orange leaves from a nearby tree. A bird was perched on the stone, looking at Sam, who'd stopped walking and looked back at it. "Hey, little guy," he said, crouching in front of the headstone. "Any chance you can help me find my dad's grave?" The bird hopped to the middle of the headstone, then took off with a piercing noise. The rapid movement of its wings pushed the dry leaves off the stone and they sailed to the ground in a slow spiral. Steve let his gaze follow the bird's path to the yellowing trees near the end of the row.

Sam straightened and shrugged at Steve. "Worth a shot."

"A falcon's a predator."

Sam laughed. "I'm about as predatory as a sleepy house cat."

A few headstones down the row, Steve saw the winged figure of an angel peek over a shrub. "Any chance it was worth more than a shot?" he said, nodding toward the statue.

Sam walked a few steps, then stopped. "I'll be damned."

Steve closed up to him and saw the statue in full now. The angel's wings were curved gently and the lute hung from its limp fingers, broken. The white material had greyed over the years; pollution and lichen had both taken their toll. A strand of ivy climbed up the angel's leg, over its dress and around its hand.

"It seemed bigger back then," Sam said.

Steve didn't point out that Sam had been a lot smaller. He took a few more steps and found a simple headstone with Dürer's hands in prayer as the only decoration on it. Paul Samuel Wilson, the inscription said. And, For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.

"I hated that inscription so much," Sam said, more to himself than to Steve.

Steve wondered what had changed, but knew without having to ask. He remembered how torn between grief and anger he'd been after his mom's funeral, how he'd hated the kind words meant console him. Even Bucky's attempts at cheering him up hadn't been welcome.
Sam took a few steps closer and set his hand on the headstone. "Hey, Dad."

Steve juggled the container with the cookies from hand to hand and fell back toward the angel to give Sam some privacy. He wondered what it must have been like for Sam, who had had the chance to know his father before he lost him. Joseph Rogers died before Steve was old enough to remember anything about him. At least their fathers had passed in the proper order. Burying a parent was never easy, but better a parent than a child. Steve couldn't help thinking how much harder it must have been for the mothers and fathers who found out their sons and daughters never made it back from the war. Not having a grave, or knowing that the grave they visited was empty must have been hell on them.

He glared at the angel then sighed out a deep breath, his attention caught briefly by the line of ants marching over the stone folds of her robe spilling over a poignantly bare foot.

He'd looked up where all of the Commandos were buried, but he'd never gone to visit any of their graves, much like he'd never visited Bucky's empty one at Arlington. Even his own parents', he'd only ever sent flowers to, fearing that after over seventy years, it might have been leveled and he'd find someone else's name on a different headstone in their place. Before Bucky's return, and with Peggy's mind rapidly decreasing, it would have cut his last tie to the past.

And now Bucky was no longer Bucky, he was James. And Peggy was gone. All he could do was cling to the hope that the flowers he kept sending to his parents' grave really reached it. What else had he left?

He looked up and realized Sam was waving him over because he wanted the cookies. Steve hurried back and handed the container over before retreating again.

In front of Paul Wilson's headstone, Sam opened the plastic container and took out three chocolate chip cookies the size of the palm of Steve's hand. Steve's heightened sense of smell allowed him to enjoy their scent all the way from over there and he smiled at the warm sentimentality of the gesture. Sam could have brought flowers, maybe one of the stones from his time abroad that Steve had seen on a sideboard in Sam's apartment. Instead, he'd chosen something his father had loved, something Sam intrinsically linked to him.

Sam appeared to be in deep conversation with his father, so Steve let him be, falling into a light parade rest. His thoughts returned to the flowers on his Ma's grave. If they didn't reach it, if it really was no longer there, Steve was grateful the flower-shop owner didn't tell him. If the flowers ended up on someone else's grave, Steve still had the illusion left.

Something heavy settled on his chest and made it hard to breathe. Illusions... Some days, it felt like even Peggy's death was an illusion. He'd never seen her grave with his own eyes, had he? Never saw Bucky's, either, because he'd been afraid, so afraid of the finality that visit would mean.

The light snap of a plastic lid closing made Steve look back to Sam, grateful for the distraction. Sam had a cookie in his hand and held it out toward Steve.

"Come on. One to honour my old man."

Steve walked back to Sam, and saw that the container was empty. Knowing Sam didn't have one, Steve took the cookie and broke it in half, handing the other half back. A few crumbs fell to the ground. The ants he'd seen would find them soon enough and carry the crumbs back to their nest.

Steve lifted his half of the cookie the way he'd lift a champagne flute for a toast. "To your father," he said.
Sam returned the gesture. "To Dad."

They ate the cookie in silence and at the first bite, Steve knew why Sam's father had loved them. They were simple and straight forward, just rich and dark and the amount of sweetness was just right – not as overpowering as most of the baked goods he'd had since waking up from the ice. The only thing he couldn't make heads or tails of was when Sam had got them from his mother. She hadn't given them to him during the last visit, and Steve knew that Sam hadn't been back since then. They were due to go there this weekend.

"I can see the cogs turning," Sam said and nudged his elbow to Steve's side. "So before you hurt that super-brain of yours and I get in trouble with Natasha: I made them last night. Couldn't sleep, so I baked."

The first time Sam got up in the middle of the night and cooked up a breakfast feast for everyone come morning, Tony had declared that he might throw Steve out someday, but he'd be keeping Sam. After that there had been more things Sam cooked in the middle of the night waiting for everyone in the morning and Bruce had murmured something about stress responses and comfort cooking. Even without Sam brushing Bruce's words aside, Steve had figured out that it wasn't something Sam wanted comments on. That was the problem with Sam sometimes – he was a damn good deflector. Underneath the good-natured and amiable face he showed the world, it was hard to detect if something was bothering him. The cooking, though, was an excellent gauge.

"I can see why he liked them," Steve repeated his earlier thought out loud. He brushed a crumb from his lower lip and looked at the cookies on the headstone.

"The birds will get them," Sam said when he caught Steve's look. "Don't worry, they're not going to waste." He shrugged and grinned. "I know how old geezers like you hate wasting food."

That wasn't what he'd been thinking about at all, but he felt Sam's need for levity, so he responded in kind. "This old geezer would still be faster than you if he had a cane."

"Show-off," Sam said. Some of the tension left his shoulders over the familiarity of the bantering.

Steve put on his best innocent face. "Just stating the truth."

Sam laughed. "If you weren't so damn nice, I'd have to hate you."

Nice. Wasn't that usually the problem? That was all people saw Steve for – nice. If it wasn't rigid or apostle-like, as Tony liked to say, they dismissed that it was part of him. He was okay with nice – most days. The only people who knew him for more than that were now dead or didn't remember. Steve had to force his mind away from that downward spiral. Sam had meant it as a compliment, not an insult. "Good thing I'm Mr. Charming then, huh?"

Sam shook his head and just laughed louder, clapping Steve on the back. "Let's go, Mr. Charming." He turned around one last time and said to the headstone, "Bye, Dad."

Steve saluted, thinking that he would have liked to have met Paul Wilson, to see the other half of Sam's upbringing.

"You know," Sam said thoughtfully, "I always promised Riley once we were back stateside, I'd make him a batch of cookies. His folks would send him packages of them. Homemade. He always shared."

"He sounds like a good friend."
Sam flashed a grin at him. "They were awful. Health food. Gluten-free, no eggs, no fat, and made with carob. They sent enough for both of us every damn week." He sobered. "I keep finding excuses not to go see them."

"You could go now," Steve suggested. "Before you start up at the VA again."

"Are you telling me I should?"

"Just saying you could."

Falling quiet again, they started on their way back. Steve felt Sam watching him from the corner of his eye, but ignored it for the time being. If Sam wanted to say something, he'd do so without prompting.

As they were walking through the cemetery gate, Sam shoved both hands into his pant pockets. The careless move wrinkled the suit's excellent hang and bunched it around Sam's hips.

"Hey, Steve... " Sam trailed off. "Damn. I'm going to do it. Worst that can happen is they tell me to go to hell, right?"

Steve slowed his steps but continued to walk, since Sam hadn't stopped either. "Don't do it if you don't want to," he said.

"I want to. Just needed someone to kick my ass. Alabama is not on my top five vacay spots, you know?" Sam chuckled and Steve joined him.

"I could come with you – "

"Naw, this is mine to do," Sam said decisively.

They fell silent until they reached the cemetery's gates.

"I have no clue if that's what you want, but I figured since I have the rest of the day and the car... " Sam shrugged. "Do you want to go to your mom's grave as well?"

Steve stopped walking. In all the time since he'd woken up, no one had ever asked him that. His reaction was more reflex than conscious decision. "It's okay. She's still next to dad, so she's not alone." He realized how childlike that sounded and amended, "I sent flowers."

Sam's shoulders dropped a little as he breathed a small sigh. "You're sure?"

"Yeah," Steve said, more certain this time.

"Anywhere else you want to go now we're out the tower?"

Steve looked around the rows of headstones around him and his gaze came to rest on a fresh grave with mountains of flowers covering it.

The flowers on Peggy's grave would be wilted by now...

"I – " he began. Startled, he found his voice breaking and his eyes stinging all of a sudden. "I – " The words didn't come, choked by a lump in his throat that made swallowing hard.

"Hey," Sam said, gently setting his hand on Steve's elbow. In a world where touch was rare, Sam's willingness to reach out was calming. "You okay?"
Steve forced himself to swallow and speak. "I don't know."

Sam squeeazed lightly, grounding Steve. "Can you talk about it?"

"Peggy," Steve said. For him, just her name explained it all, but he could tell it didn't for Sam when he raised his gaze. Sam's dark eyes were full of concern, so kind Steve had to choke back a sob. People had been good to him since he woke in this century, but always because he was Captain America. Sam, though, was kind because he was a good man, and would have been just as concerned if Steve was a stranger he'd just met. Had been just as generous when they had just met.

He drew in a deep breath and told Sam about his last trip to Peggy's nursing home and the ugly confrontation with Sharon.

"That's bullshit," Sam said when Steve had finished. "You know, that right?"

"I wasn't even there for her funeral, Sam. If I hadn't gone to the nursing home that day, I wouldn't even have known."

"Do you know where she's buried?"

Steve fought a bitter reply. He did now. It had taken Jarvis to get that information, however. Neither Sharon nor the director of the nursing home had provided him with it. "I do."

"Then what say you we go and pay her our respects," Sam asked. "From what I read about her, a lady like Peggy Carter definitely would have appreciated a sharp-dressed man such as myself."

Sam winked and, startled, Steve huffed out a laugh, momentarily shaken out of his dark thoughts. It was good to have Sam at his side.

A sobering thought made the smile slip from his lips. "I don't have flowers," he said.

Sam shrugged. "We can get them on the way."

"You're sure?"

Sam nudged his shoulder against Steve's, once more establishing a warm and welcome contact. "I hear Friday's a good day to visit cemeteries."

Steve felt the heavy weight that had been on his chest lifting a little.

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**Sam**

The cemetery was on Staten Island, a far shot from the area in Harlem where Sam's Dad was buried, but the feeling of the cemetery, the calm and quiet, was the same.

Sam had sent a quick text to Jarvis to provide him with the cemetery's layout, which had made finding Carter's grave easier.

Sam hung back the way Steve had done when they'd been at his Dad's grave, but watching Steve there made him wonder if that was really a good idea after all.

Carter had been put to rest next to her husband, and the view of the two names on the headstone alone had visibly made Steve's shoulders droop. The bouquet, a sad little half-wilted thing Steve
had bought from a guy hawking flowers on a busy intersection while Sam was cursing the traffic ahead of them, looked small in Steve's big hands. Steve hadn't let go of it since Sam had left him by himself. Instead, he'd stared at the fresh arrangement of salmon-coloured roses already adorning the grave and had sort of sunken in on himself.

It was still sunny, but the wind had picked up, tearing at Steve's jacket, making it flap around him. Sam shivered and pulled his suit jacket around him, cursing that he'd decided against the coat this morning. On the horizon, New York's skyline loomed, all gleaming glass and skyscrapers, grey and melting in between the sun's glare and the smog.

Sam couldn't get over how small Steve looked, standing there. To everyone else, Steve was the big and strong Captain America, impervious to anything, strong, resilient, always charming and cheerful, but the man Sam saw with his head bowed and his shoulders hunched was about as far from that image as Sam could imagine.

Sam was still contemplating that dissonance when Steve straightened a little and turned back to Sam. His lower lip looked as if he'd bitten it and his eyes were too bright.

"Thank you for coming with me, Sam," Steve said, the smile on his face so fake Sam wanted to shout. "We can go now."

"Steve?" Sam asked. He wondered if Steve was even aware of what had happened.

"Yeah?"

He nodded at the bouquet still in Steve's hand. "The flowers."

Steve followed the direction of Sam's gaze and it was as if he saw the flowers for the first time. Sam felt his heart break a little.

"Let's bring them to her together."

Steve hesitated, looking at the grave and the fresh roses, then at his half-wilted little thing. "She has better ones. She doesn't need mine."

"Yeah, she does," Sam said, fighting against a lump in his own throat. "Come on."

When they were back in front of the grave, Sam took the flowers from Steve's iron grip and placed them close to the headstone, just under Margaret Carter's name. He picked up a couple of dry leaves before straightening and standing with his shoulder pressed against Steve's. He had a feeling he was getting closer to what James had asked him to deal with.

"I promised her a dance," Steve said long after Sam had begun to shiver in the cold wind in earnest. Steve's voice was small. "I never kept my promise. And now I never will."

James had said that Steve had cried for a long time the night after the incident with Barton. Yet to Sam, it looked like Steve hadn't even begun to spill all of the tears he must have bottled up inside of him. Because it couldn't just have been about Peggy. What Barton had said must have impacted on Steve as well. The Steve behind the Captain America persona, the man Sam had the privilege to get to know since meeting him, was all too willing to take the blame, to carry the burden while forgetting to look out for himself and his needs. Ever since that shootout on the causeway in DC, Steve had walked around brittle, as if only a small push was needed to make him shatter.

"Hey, man," Sam said, putting his arm around Steve's shoulder. "It's okay." Being this tactile was tricky with most people, but his Mama had raised no fool and Sam had developed a very acute
sense for when people would tolerate physical contact and when they wouldn't. Steve accepted touch and proximity better than Sam had expected; personal space bubbles had been smaller before WWII.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Steve biting his lip again, swallowing hard and breathing very deliberate and evenly. He was visibly fighting his emotions, trying to raise one of the many shields he carried outside of his vibranium one, unwilling to be a burden for Sam and that? That just wouldn't do. He wasn't going to let Steve shut him out.

"She's had a long life," Sam said, knowing that it didn't make one damn bit of a difference yet unable to find better, smarter words. He couldn't offer any words of comfort, none that wouldn't sound and feel as hollow to Steve as they did to him.

"She was all I had left," Steve said. "The last friend I had from... " he trailed off, shaking his head slightly, the wall he'd tried to erect slipping with the gesture. "From before."

So now they were getting to the heart of the matter. Peggy Carter had been the last tie connecting Steve to his past, to the man he'd been before he became an icon, American property. James, lacking Bucky's memory, couldn't take her place and so that last connection was severed now. Sam could only imagine what it meant to feel utterly, completely alone, to have no one who knew you for who you were before you were remade.

It explained the curious connection Steve and Natasha had, though, if Sam understood what he'd read and heard had been revealed about her past.

"From what I read about her, she was a great lady," Sam stated.

"She was." The emphasis was on the past tense; Steve's acceptance of the inevitable was brutal. "Not just a lady. A soldier. A spy. A friend. Someone I – " Steve's voice broke, he coughed.

For all his training as a counselor for the veterans, Sam didn't know how to handle this situation. All his instincts told him to reach out and wrap Steve in a hug, but he held back. He wanted to say so many things and couldn't come up with a single one that would be right.

Steve crouched in front of the headstone suddenly, reaching out to fuss with his bouquet.

"After Bucky fell, and we were back in London with Zola, she searched for me. Pulled me back from the brink. Her words were the ones I kept hearing when the ice closed over me. I imagined us dancing in the Stork Club. How she would complain that I was stepping on her feet and owed her new shoes. How she'd teach me how to dance. How she'd feel, close to me. If she'd still smell of that mixture of gunpowder and Je Reviens."

There was so much pain condensed in the memory of this part of his life Steve would never get back that Sam had trouble breathing for a moment. He reacted from his gut, set his hand on Steve's shoulder. "Hey."

Steve leaned back into the touch for a second, then his spine went stiff. Still trying not to bleed on anyone, still trying so hard to throw up a shield when all of them already lay in shards around him.

"Look at me," Sam urged, gentle.

Steve didn't move.

"Look at me, please."
Steve's breathing picked up, his shoulder blades moving under the jacket as his lungs expanded and contracted, like he was fighting one of the battles he'd fought for his country inside of himself. Eventually, though, Steve set his hands on his knees and pushed up so he was facing Sam.

The raw hurt on Steve's face made Sam react without thinking further. If Sam really was wrong, Steve could punch him later, but Sam was willing to bet he was right. "Come here, man." He reeled Steve in.

Steve's arms remained straight at his sides, those hard muscles uncomfortable against Sam's upper body. Sam tightened his arms around him, engulfing him in the hug. "I'm with you. You're not alone."

And that was either the right or the completely wrong thing to say, because Steve drew a huge breath, held it for a couple of tense seconds, then the fight went out of him completely and he sagged against Sam.

He shook, barely perceptible tremors that made Sam run his hands over Steve's back in long, soothing motions.

Steve tried to push back after a few seconds, but Sam just locked his muscles and didn't let go. Of course, Steve could have broken Sam's hold if he'd have really wanted to, but the fact that he didn't even try showed Sam that his gut had been right. Steve needed a god damn hug. Maybe that was what he should have told James when he'd come to him for help. Then again, James was nowhere near as tactile as Steve was, so that may have just ended in disaster. Also, there was just no hug like a Wilson hug.

When he tried to speak, Steve's voice sounded scratchy and uneven. "Sam, I – "

"Shut up and let me hug you, Rogers," Sam interrupted him fondly. "And don't even think about breaking away until you really feel like it. Not in your head. In your heart."

Steve, miracle of miracles, actually listened for once. Sam felt a couple of hard shudders go through Steve's frame and ran his hands over his back, soothing and accepting. He had a feeling he'd find tear stains on his suit jacket when he took it off later.

Eventually, Steve pushed back and this time, Sam let him. He pointedly didn't look at the way Steve's eyes looked red and puffy.

He was grateful to James for coming to him so he'd had some kind of forewarning. For a moment, he debated telling Steve that James, in his James way, had been worried about him. In the end, he decided not to talk about James and let Steve have an afternoon where the James/Bucky situation wasn't front and center.

Instead, he said, "Let's get back. We can grab some take-out on the way home, eat in the car." Not feeling guilty eating in front of James, he silently added.

As they walked back to the car, Sam kept bumping his shoulder against Steve's, just to maintain the contact.

"It's okay, really," Steve said with a small smile.

"What?" Sam asked. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Not my fault your ridiculously wide shoulders are in my way."

Steve laughed and Sam felt a weight lifting from his chest. A patented Wilson hug couldn't fix
everything, but it damn well always helped.
Chapter 12

Sam

"I'm not sure this was such a good idea," Sam said for the third time since they'd set foot in Stark's car. They were standing outside his mother's house by now and he was expecting disaster of the worst kind. Hell, he'd take a fight with James in full Winter Soldier mode over the leg-gnawing worry that Tony Stark would say something that would upset his mother. Sure, Pepper was there, but when had that ever stopped Tony's motor-mouth?

"Relax, Feathers, you're going to crush the doorframe." Tony looked amused, the bastard.

"Occasionally, he knows how to behave, Sam," Pepper chimed in, trying for a calming tone but coming across as amused as Tony was looking.

"You go ahead and laugh, but you won't have to hear the end of it if –"

The door opened and revealed his mother, dreadlocks swinging as if she'd walked fast to get to the door. "The end of what, Samuel?"

"Sam's worried Tony's going to embarrass himself," Steve replied smoothly. That traitor.

"Steve, come here," his mother exclaimed. She pulled Steve inside and wrapped the big guy in one of her patented Mama hugs – Sam used to dream about them when he was overseas – and Sam could just see the tension melt out of Steve's shoulders. It was amazing how clear it was that she was engulfing him, despite her much smaller size. Steve seemed to disappear inside her hug and Sam had to swallow against the lump forming in his throat. She'd have loved Riley too.

Riley had wanted Sam to meet his folks too. He told himself not to think about that.

"It's good to see you, Mrs. Wilson," Steve replied and while Sam couldn't see the smile, he could hear it in Steve's voice.

She pushed Steve back a little to give him a half-amused, half disapproving look. "We were on first name basis, young man," she said and Sam had to bite back on a snort. From a purely technical standpoint, Steve could be her father.

"Yes, ma'am," Steve answered, which earned him a wagged finger in front of his face and an eye roll from Sam. "Alisha," Steve corrected.

Mama's smile lit up the hallway. "There you go." Sometimes, Sam forgot what a beautiful woman his mother was.

When Steve stepped inside, she held her arms open and let Sam come to her, the way she always did, so careful of never impinging beyond anyone's comfort level after years of dealing with kids who expected a smack from any adult within arm's reach. He thought she held him tighter and longer than usual and Sam let himself absorb the love and support she always offered, breathing in her warm blend of familiar body lotion and floral perfume, along with the hint of spices from cooking. Cinnamon, he identified first and foremost.

"Did you make pie?" he asked, hopeful.

She gave him one of her looks, the ones that made him feel all of five years old. "When have I ever
had visitors I liked and not made pie?"

"Right, stupid question," Sam conceded.

"Now, get into the kitchen and make yourselves useful, you two, so the hallway is clear and I can stop being rude to our other guests."

Sam followed Steve into the kitchen and refused to follow the urge to turn around and check on what Tony was doing. Hadn't done much good for Lot's wife, and he wouldn't be able to kick Tony's shin under the table if he was a pillar of salt, now would he?

The sounds of Tony's, Mama's and Pepper's voices drifted into the kitchen as they walked into the house, engaged in what sounded like more than polite small talk and more like an actual conversation. Sam startled when Mama's loud laughter sounded from the living room.

He caught Steve leaning against the fridge, looking far too amused. "Smug is not a good look on you, buddy," he said, reaching for a vegetable plate and a bowl with what looked like a curried sour cream dip.

"You worry too much. Tony really can behave when he wants to. And," Steve inclined his head and listened to the voices coming from the living room, "it sounds like he really wants to."

"Maybe Pepper would just light a fire under his ass if he didn't." Sam mulishly stuffed a baby carrot into the dip and munched on it.

"There's no doubt that she would, but I don't think she has to. Not today." Steve lowered his voice in a conspiratorial way. "I think Tony's trying to impress."

"Why the hell would he want to impress my Mama?"

Steve shrugged. "It's not often he gets recognized for the good person he is."

Sam's heart did a funny twist-flip thing when he saw Steve looking all earnest. The statement would have been so damn corny, coming from anyone else, but Steve lived and breathed that faith in his fellow human beings and just came across as authentic instead of corny. Still, Sam couldn't let that sentence hang in the room like that. "Rogers, you god damn sap."

"There will be no using the Lord's name in this manner in my house, Samuel Wilson." Mama – how the hell did she do that, sneak up on him like that, how was she quieter than Natasha? – slapped his hand as he was just about to reach for a floret of broccoli. "Off to the living room with you before nothing's left on this platter."

Sam knew better than to risk a flippant, "Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" and took the nibblies into the living room quietly while behind him, Mama asked Steve to accompany her outside to check on the smoker.

He found Tony near the mantelpiece, studying a picture of Sam with a spectacular teenaged Afro circa his high school debate club championship time. Tony's face betrayed nothing until the moment he turned the picture toward Pepper and mouthed, "Badass!" Pepper hid a snigger behind her hand. Sam wanted to slam his head against the wall. Of all the pictures she could dig up, mom had to dig out that one. It hadn't been on the mantelpiece the last time he was here. Sometimes, Sam wondered if his mother had a sadistic streak.

Then again... he caught a whiff from the applewood smoke drifting in from the open patio door and his mouth began to water. No one who cooked as well as his Mama did could be a truly sadistic
"That smells fantastic, Mrs. Wilson," Pepper commented when Mama returned to the living room. "What is it?"

Mama made a throwaway gesture, even if Sam could see that she was pleased. "Nothing big. Weather's been turning cooler lately, so I thought a smoked chicken might be nice. You do like chicken, right?" She'd asked Sam if she'd need to cater to special needs, of course. The question was more conversational than out of a real concern.

"Absolutely. And smoked chicken is a favorite of Tony's," Pepper confided.

"Smoked chicken, did I just hear smoked chicken?"

"You certainly did. Why don't you go and open the wine you brought while Sam and Steve help me bring in the food?"

It took Steve and Sam and help from Pepper to get everything on the table which was groaning under the weight when everything was set.

Tony looked around the table in amazement. "Have I been in the lab too long again, honey?" he asked Pepper. "Is it Thanksgiving yet?"

Judging by a look at his mother, Tony chose exactly the right words to get on her good side. Sam really hadn't expected that when they left Stark tower around noon. Either Pepper had coached him really well, or Steve was right. Maybe it was the applewood smoke that addled his brain, but Sam decided in favor of the latter.

"Welcome to my mother's house, Tony," Sam said, grinning and squeezing Mama's hand.

"Would you like to say grace, Mr. Stark?" she asked.

Sam tensed.

"Tony, please. Just Tony."

"Will you, Tony?"

Sam didn't dare look at Tony. From what Steve had told him, Tony wasn't a particularly religious man. A philanthropist, yes, but not a believer.

To his great surprise, however, Tony just said, "Sure," reached for Pepper's hand, lowered his head and murmured a short but heartfelt grace.

"Amen," Mama said, smiling.

"Amen," they all chorused and for the first time in a long while, it didn't feel forced to Sam.


Dinner was interspersed with sounds of delight coming from Tony and Pepper, friendly chatter and the clinking of silverware against plates and the occasional gentle sound of wine glasses being refilled. The dry Austrian Pinot Blanc Pepper had chosen accompanied the smoky chicken and the sweet carrot and squash perfectly. Sam had a feeling that the bottle had cost more than his mother made in a week. It was probably better she didn't know about that, but she sure liked it.
"If I didn't already have the best woman on this green planet," Tony said eventually, rubbing his belly, "I'd propose, Mrs. Wilson."

Sam rolled his eyes. Damn charmer.

"Seriously, if you ever feel like chucking in the day job, I will fire all my cooks and give you a sole contract."

"You'll fire no one, Tony," Mama said lightly, but there was no mistaking the steel in her spine and the warning. "And I hate to disappoint you, but the day I'll chuck in the day job is the day I retire, and not one day earlier."

"I'd say that's a shame, but I know your work is making a difference for those kids, so we'll just have to settle for bi-weekly dinner invitations."

God damn sweet talker, Sam thought. He'd put heat instead of fond admiration behind the thought if he wasn't sure that Tony really meant every word.

"Is he always such a charmer?" Mama asked Pepper.

"On good days," Pepper answered with a wink, then laughed at Tony's pout.

"Something wrong, Steve?" Mama asked suddenly. "I know I'm nervous because of my date later today, but what's your excuse?"

Sam's gaze snapped up from his maple glazed carrots. Date. She'd used the D-word in front of Tony Stark. There was just no universe in which that could possibly end well.

Steve looked caught red-handed. "No, everything's delicious, thank you."

"Don't try to trick a seasoned teacher, honey, it doesn't work," Mama said. "You have no idea how it tastes since all you've been doing is push your food around on the plate."

Steve had the good grace to blush. "I'm sorry, Alisha. I was just thinking."

"That much was obvious. But you need to feed that big brain, too."

Steve gave a sheepish smile, poked his fork into a sweet potato fry and brought it to his mouth. "It's not for want of an appetite."

"Steve?" She reached out and rested her hand on Steve's lower arm. "If you feel like elaborating, do so. I'm always here to listen. If not," she winked, "clear your damn plate."

Around them, the tinkling of silverware had stopped and Sam could see from the corner of his eyes that Tony and Pepper were watching Steve as well.

Steve sat his fork down, reached for the napkin, wiped his mouth, sat it back in his lap, with his fingers laced over it. An explosive sigh ripped free of his chest.

Mama didn't pry. It was one thing Sam had always admired – and sometimes hated – about her. She could outwait a thawing glacier.

"I can't help but think of... " he trailed off.

Pepper leaned back in her chair, exchanging a look with Tony.
"Your friend?" Mama asked.

"Yes." Steve gestured toward the plate and the table in general. "See, I know that before, he would have given an arm and a leg for this type of food."

Sam would bet his ass that he would have. Not just because Mama's cooking was that good, but because it had been the war. From what he'd read, food was always short back then. Hell, even now with it coming up most of the time, James made an effort not to waste anything.

"These days, it's a miracle if he can keep toast down. He says that everything tastes wrong to him. So he barely eats." He shot a glance at Tony and Pepper. "Everyone's been kind enough to get the best nutritional drinks on the market, but that's not life, is it?"

"Have you asked him that?"

"Not outright."

"Why don't you?"

"I..."

"I'm sure he appreciates your concern, but you should ask him. Maybe he's not as bothered by it as you are. Even if I am absolutely with you and the cook in me is bunching up my hat in outrage at the idea of someone preferring protein drinks over good home cooking."

A smile brightened Steve's face. "I have a feeling he'd love your cooking. It's so much better than anything I've tasted."

"The trick is to go organic as well as heirloom," she explained. "None of those turbo-grown fruits and vegetables that just taste wet."

Sam leaned back in his chair as well and grinned to himself as he waited for Mama's soapbox moment to pass. When she got started on GMOs, it could take a while. Steve used her lecture to clear his plate and reach for a second helping which he cleared with enthusiasm.

"So, the cherries you used for that pie I saw in the kitchen are organic, too?"

Mama just grinned.

James

James had been reading LeMay's *The Searchers*, recommended by Pepper on the tablet Tony had provided him. Bruce was either meditating again or working in his lab. The Black Widow had left earlier and Barton was sleeping the sleep of the drugged in his quarters one floor down. Except for him, the common room was empty, afternoon sliding toward evening and the light pouring through the walls of windows shading everything in richer tones. He'd reached a place where the exposure to possible snipers no longer made him twitch; Tony had showed him the specs on the tower. It would hold up to anything less than a full on military assault at least long enough to evacuate. So James had let himself relax, fleece blanket tucked around his bare toes to keep them warm, Billie Holliday crooning on the sound system, and was half-asleep when everyone else came back.

The thought that this was something like 'normal' drifted through his thoughts as Tony's voice
lifted and ran over Sam's protests about something, while Steve tried to shush them and Pepper scolded them all. It was good; he liked it.

James couldn't see them from the common room, but he could track them tramping into the kitchen by the noise. Steve was carrying something. He untangled his feet and padded toward the kitchen, carrying the tablet with him.

The four were at ease, focused on each other and didn't notice James, making it easy to observe. He had had little chance to surveil them unawares and should file everything away to use if necessary, but he found himself leaning against the doorjamb, half wanting to take part in the teasing and horse play as Tony swiped at the pie Sam held high out of his reach and Pepper swatted the back of his head.

Steve had a canvas grocery bag filled with bright plastic containers. The sizes and the colors, even the manufacturers didn't match. James thought they didn't come from a restaurant or deli and wondered where they did come from. There were several plates covered in plastic film or aluminum foil, but he could still catch a few scents that teased at him enough he realized he was hungry. He found himself paying close attention as Steve unpacked the bag and began putting the food in the refrigerator and wondering if he could ask to taste any of it. It smelled so much better than anything except the honey, maple syrup and challah bread had yet.

"Just one slice," Tony wheedled.

"Stop that, Tony," Pepper said. She grabbed his wrist and yanked it away from Sam and the pie plate. "Sam's mother sent that home with us for James."

"But he'll probably say it tastes funny. I just don't want it to go to waste."

"It smells good," James said.

Sam fumbled and almost dropped the pie plate. Tony and Pepper swung around and looked at him with amusement and embarrassment in each case. Steve held up a container. "Sam's mother sent home leftovers. It tastes incredible. Do you want some?"

"I – " James stomach grumbled audibly. "Yes?"

Steve grinned madly. "These are sweet potato fries and really they'd be better fresh, but she said if you want them hot from the pan, you'll have to come to dinner next time," he explained as he hustled around the kitchen, retrieving a plate and loading it with things from the containers. It went into the microwave and then Steve hesitated, glaring at the digital read-out and multifunction buttons.

"Pie?" Tony whimpered. "Does he get the pie too?"

Pepper rolled her eyes at him, then smiled at James. "I hope you'll like this. Alisha had some
"I liked the bread you bought," James told her carefully.

"Steve said."

The ding of the microwave made all of them jump. Steve brought to the plate to the counter and stools that served the kitchen as an eating place. The Avengers common floor had its own dining room, big enough to seat twenty or more people, but James had already observed, they all mostly ate in the kitchen or the living room. James sat on one of the stools and cautiously tried the sweet potato fries first.

The taste, sweet, mealy, smooth and rich and with just a hint of grease and salt, made his mouth flood with saliva and his stomach gurgle. James didn't even realize he'd closed his eyes until Sam gave a victorious shout. Nothing had tasted so right in his limited memory. He wanted to yank the plate closer and hunch over it so no one could take it away –

The flashback made him stop chewing. They'd done that to him. When Hydra had been conditioning him. They'd give him food, something he wanted, and as soon as he reached for it, they'd withdrawn it and administered punishments. Over and over until even the smell of food made him cringe away. And when they did feed him, it was laced with drugs. Drugs to make him compliant, drugs to make him sleep, to make him sick, to make him need more. He'd learned to recognize the taste of them in any food. Even the tasteless poisons affected the taste of the dish they laced.

For a second, the food in his mouth tasted of bile and the sharp salt of his own blood. James made himself breathe through it the way Sam had taught him. It faded and he swallowed slowly.

Everyone was looking at him, their expressions worried.

"It's good," he made himself say. He ate another fry, then tried a bite of something else. It tasted good too, without the chemical undertones he hadn't realized he was picking up from other food. He ate more and it settled gently in his stomach, making him feel better instead of sick for the first time.

"I told you my Mama was the best cook in the state," Sam said.

"It doesn't taste poisoned."

Tony barked out a laugh. "Not exactly setting a high standard there."

"You really like it?" Steve asked, pointedly ignoring Sam and Tony as they began to bicker quietly.

"Yes." James proved it by eating more, though he made himself chew and swallow slowly. He knew not to bolt too much when he'd had so little solids up to now. It had been explained to him, though he'd had the information in his skillsets too. He wanted to savor the deliciousness as long as he could anyway. He glanced over at Sam. "Your mother made this?"

"That she did." Sam looked and sounded peacock-proud.

"Why can't you cook like this?"

Tony laughed like a hyena.

"No, it's a good question," Pepper insisted as Sam glared at Tony and James wished he'd kept his
mouth shut. "You're a good cook, Sam, so there must be a reason Alisha's food is better."

"You heard her. Mom's all about the organic produce, heirloom tomatoes, those rare weird tasting bananas," Sam explained. "She's a freak about processed foods and corn syrup and too much salt. Pays triple for meat and poultry that's never had antibiotics, free range eggs, the whole smear. Grows her own herbs, makes her own pasta and bread."

"That's it," Tony said. He pointed at Pepper. "The bread was from that kosher organic froufrou bakery half way across the city, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Buy it. Buy a farm and set it up for all organics. I want all the food in this Tower to be chemical free." He grinned at Sam. "It still won't taste like your mom's cooking, but I'll bet it won't make Mr. Picky sick to his stomach either."

"Tony – "

Tony flapped his hands at Pepper. "What's the use of being obscenely rich if I don't throw the money around? We'll all be better off, because let's be honest here: half the people in this Tower have had weird radiation or chemicals or viruses used to mess with us. Limiting our chemical intakes can only be a good idea."

"All right, Tony."

"All right?" Sam asked Pepper.

She shrugged. "Sometimes he's right."

"Sometimes!? I'm right all the time."

"Really not, dear," Pepper told him.

James finished the food on his plate and caught Steve's gaze. "Pie?"

"You don't want to eat too much too quick," Steve cautioned him.

James stared at him in a silent demand. He had to hide a smile that felt almost easy when Steve gave in.

Sam served the slice of pie, dark cherries rich and glistening beneath the golden crust, little flakes from the pastry scattered around the plate already, and set it in front of James with a flourish. "Black cherry pie. Eat up, man, before Tony can get past us."

"I'm sorry, guys," Pepper said, "but you're going to have to deal with Tony by yourselves. I have a Skype meeting with the board members of that Japanese cybernetics firm we want to acquire." She smiled at James. "I have to find an organic farm to buy too."

"Like you didn't eat as much as Steve at dinner," Tony called after her as she left. The sharp clack of her heels only disappeared with the quiet sound of the elevator opening and closing for her.

James tried the first bite of the pie.

If he'd thought the other leftovers were good, he hadn't known. The pie tasted like bliss. He was glad he'd eaten something before, otherwise he would have bolted it down too fast to savor. He closed his eyes on the second bite so he could concentrate on every nuance of it. It wasn't
something he would ever have done before; giving up a sense voluntarily, allowing himself to be that vulnerable in the company of others. Exhaustion might have forced him to sleep while Steve or one of the others were there, but James didn't consider that a choice. It didn't occur to him to stay hyper-vigilant as he ate the pie he'd been given, though.

They wanted him to eat. They'd given it to him.

He made a small, soft noise of pleasure. Sam laughed. Tony snickered and said, "I've had sex with girls who didn't look like they were having that much fun."

"That's Pepper's problem, man, don't be telling us – "

"Shut up!"

James slitted his eyes open to watch as Sam and Tony started bickering again. He snorted to himself. Who did they think they were fooling? The stupid smiles on their faces gave away that they weren't really fighting. He used to give Steve shit the same way –

He smiled as Steve said, "Sam's going to give him a noogy if Tony calls him a jerk again."

"Noogy?" James repeated.

"Never mind," Steve said as he slid up behind where James sat. "You used to call me a punk. What're you going to do if I steal your pie?"

His arms came around James, one hand closing on the edge of the plate and shoving it out of reach, and everything went to hell. James was back in Hydra's torture chamber, restrained and helpless, as the technicians taunted him with food he was too weak to eat, hands on his shoulders forcing him back into the chair as the machine closed around his head, agony lancing through his brain, screams tearing from his throat.

He wasn't going back, he wasn't letting them wipe him again, he'd kill them all, the man holding him first –

Sam

Sam caught his breath when he saw James' entire posture go rigid and his face smooth into a dangerously blank mask. Not good. This was not good at all. Steve needed to let go now.

Before Sam could do so much as blink, James turned, fluent and lightning-quick, threw Steve across the room and slammed him into a wall hard enough to leave a Steve-shaped imprint on the drywall. Jesus, he was fast, was all Sam could think, feeling slow as frozen molasses compared to James. Dishes rattled in the cabinets and a coffee cup toppled from the counter into the sink and shattered there. James' gaze flicked around the kitchen, scouting for something to use as a weapon. It landed on the wine-rack and not the knives, at least. James grabbed one of the wine bottles, smashed it against the counter in a spray of dark red and was back in front of Steve before Steve had shaken his shocked stupor, holding the jagged edge against his throat while Sam and Tony stood around like a couple lackwits, too stunned to know what had happened, never mind what to do. It seemed as if James wasn't even breathing, just fixed Steve with a look clearly gauging Steve's threat potential.

Sam aborted a move to throw himself between Steve and James, well aware it would be pointless
against James' strength and speed from the far side of the room, and more worried he'd trigger James worse than he already was. He held his breath instead, in the liminal instant between the threat inherent in the sharp glass against Steve's throat and James slicing it through Steve's skin, between the possibility and the probability, hoping stillness could at least make the latter less.

James' eyes were dilated, his expression wild and terrified more than murderous, and Sam realized Steve hadn't just impinged on his space, he'd triggered a serious flashback. He swallowed hard and tried to think how he could talk the assassin in James down before he slid that broken glass across Steve's carotid and jugular.

Sam saw Steve's lips begin to form James' middle name, but Tony's voice cut through the tense silence before he could say it. "Do you have any idea how much that bottle cost?"

The broken bottle near Steve's neck wavered, then inched closer to Steve's skin. Sam stood rooted to the spot, knowing that any false move could set James off now.

"A thousand dollars and you use it as a knife," Tony shook his head as he slowly walked closer. "There are knives behind the counter, moron." Sam's heart began to beat double-time. What the hell was Tony playing at? Was he trying to get Steve killed? Super soldier or not, a sliced jugular would stop even him.

"If you take one more step, I'll –"

"You'll kill me? I think we both know that's not gonna happen. Just as much as you won't kill Steve here."

The bottle in James' hand shook in earnest now.

"Bucky, please, it's me, just –"

If ever there was a wrong moment for Steve to open his mouth, it was this one. James' face went from blank to a furious snarl in rapid succession. He dropped the bottle, raised his left fist and slammed it into Steve's ribs, hard, only to pull it back and do it again. He was just about to repeat the move a third time when Tony yelled, "Hey!" The tell-tale sound of the repulsors gave Sam a microsecond's warning before the energy surge blasted Steve and James apart. Sam wondered if Tony had had the gauntlet with him the whole time they were at dinner with his mother or retrieved it from some hiding place in the kitchen. He couldn't decide which would disturb him more, either.

"You know, if I had wanted children, I'd have had them," Tony said, sounding annoyed. "I don't need to go breaking up your fights now." He stalked over to where James was slowly sitting up, pushing his hair behind his ears with shaking hands. "You," he said, stabbing an accusing finger at James. "You're a guest here. And there's one rule for guests in this house: Don't break my stuff. That includes my friends."

He turned on his heel and took the same forceful steps toward Steve. "And you." Tony shook his head. "What kind of an idiot are you? You can't just go and touch someone without warning."

"But I –"

"Nu-uh!" Tony raised his finger and shushed Steve with just one gesture. "Let me demonstrate something to you."

To Sam's big surprise, Tony folded himself around Steve in an impromptu hug. Steve tensed and squirmed.
"How does that feel?"

"Awkward," Steve answered and Sam bit back on a snicker, because, damn, it look awkward. Tony was shorter than Steve by almost a head and it looked like Steve was getting a hug from a much shorter brother.

"Oh, work with me here, Rogers, I'm not doing this for fun: Imagine we're doing this right, with a bit of bromance involved. How would that feel?"

"Still awkward, but comfortable, I guess."

Tony let go of him and swatted Steve's chest. "Very good, he's getting the point," he mock-approved. He waved his hand in James's direction. "Now put yourself in his shoes. How would that be like, to have all that manly testosterone wrapped around you when you've been taught that every touch is potentially lethal?" He didn't mention that Steve had grabbed James from behind and mock-restrained him, which was a no-no with anyone suffering from trauma.

Sam grimaced because Jarvis had translated the Russian in the Winter Soldier file Natasha had provided. The shit Department X and later, after the Soviets sold him off like military surplus, Hydra had done to James Barnes, hadn't just been experimentation and brainwashing. It had been torture. Torture so far beyond the Geneva Convention Sam wondered if the people responsible could even be considered human. The only human contact James had known in seventy years had been pain.

Tony stepped away from Steve and turned to Sam. He opened his arms wide and grinned manically. "C'mon, Sam, hugs all around?"

"I'll leave that to Pepper, I think," Sam told him. Steve might need a hug about as much as anyone in this room, but Sam knew better than to step all over the man's dignity. Tony had already done enough, though in his Tony way, that let Steve shrug off the embarrassment in a way he couldn't have coming from Sam.

Tony spun, arms still extended, and waggled his eyebrows at James. James, who was still backed up to a wall, his eyes flicking between everyone and every possible exit, his metal fingers curling and uncurling. The rise and fall of his chest gave away how close to panic he still was. It seemed amazing he hadn't bolted out of the kitchen already. Maybe the only thing keeping him there was Tony's refusal to admit anything out of the ordinary had just happened. "See? No need to cut anyone's throat. To quote Nancy Reagan, something I never thought I'd do, just say no."

James was looking at Tony like Tony had lost his mind. Sam imagined Tony got that look from more than a few people. Tony's ridiculousness was just what was needed; it gave everyone a chance to pull themselves back together and unite in their reactions to him.

"Hug?" Tony prompted.

James drew back several steps while shaking his head. Tony dropped his arms and a little of the grin. "See, easy. Ask and you shall not receive. Wait, that didn't make sense. My HR department has a whole pamphlet on this. Maybe we should have Pep get that for us."

"Maybe we should all just take a time-out," Sam suggested. "Retire to our corners and slow down."

"I think we should all just sit down and have some pie," Tony said.

James' plate and the pie on it had ended on the floor. They all looked at it with varying degrees of regret. James shook his head hard enough his hair tossed over his face. "Keep it." The low, gravel
rasp held a wealth of anger and hurt. At least he hadn't reverted to the flat, toneless way he'd spoken when he'd arrived at the tower. Maybe this wouldn't set him too far back.

Things had been going so well. They had food James would eat, that he'd been enjoying. He'd been this close to joking with Steve. And that must have been what fooled Steve into thinking he could treat James the way he would have Bucky.

"I'll clean up and leave," Steve said. His whole body reflected dejection as he got to his feet and then righted the chair they'd knocked over. The way he moved was brittle. "Just hold on and then you can have that pie. I'm so sorry."

"I don't want it." James waited and when none of them said anything, he added, "I'm going to my room." Unstated but unmistakable was don't bother me there.

Sam scrubbed his hands over his face. "Anyone else feel like they got whiplash?"

"Do you think he'll change his mind about the pie?" Tony asked. He was eying the plate with the rest of it. "We wouldn't want your mother's cooking to go to waste, after all?"

"Leave it alone," Steve snapped at him.

"Hey, hey, I'm not the one that – " Tony closed his mouth in a surprising act of self-censorship. "Maybe he'll want it later."

"Maybe," Steve muttered.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

There was a little snafu with the chapter numbers while posting (never post before your second cup of tea, is what this teaches me) - chapter 13 is very definitely NOT the final chapter.

Steve

"That's a really pretty pout you've got going there, Cap. Has Revlon called yet?"

Steve blinked his eyes open and found Natasha standing right on front of him, smiling at him with an ironic fondness. He hadn't even heard her enter the common room.

She was still in op-gear. Night shrouded her, making her nearly indistinguishable from the dark room. "I hear you fucked up a little today?" The words weren't at all sympathetic, but her warm tone belied them.

Steve huffed a mirthless laugh. Gossip ran fast among the Avengers. A little was also the understatement of the century. "You could say that." Sam, it had to have been Sam, unless Jarvis had tattled. Tony still had issues with Natasha, might always, so it wouldn't have been him telling her. Steve couldn't even summon any anger. Sam had a right to warn Natasha and anyone else about James' food trigger. As much for James' sake as for everyone's safety. Steve's humiliation really didn't count in the bigger picture.

"I always knew you were much more of an idiot than people believed."

"Gee, thanks."

She walked toward the bar in the near dark of the light-polluted city night and Steve only caught a look at her face when she opened the fridge. The cold, bluish light from the LEDs inside highlighted a large bruise discoloring her cheekbone and a split lip.

Despite knowing that she could take care of herself better than he could himself, concern flared sharp. "What happened?"

She rummaged through the fridge, not looking up. "Some goon thought he'd try to break my face." She shrugged. "I broke his skull." Finally having found what she was looking for, she closed the fridge again, which plunged her face back in darkness.

"I can smell your disapproval, Steve." Her tone was amused. "Stop it."

He respected her abilities, liked her as a friend, but Steve didn't think he'd ever get used to the way she easily talked about killing other people.

"They were after Clint." She didn't need to defend her choices to anyone, but she had obviously decided to offer him an explanation anyway. Not that it would be explanation enough to anyone who didn't know her, but Steve did, didn't he? At least as much as she allowed him to know. Clint Barton was Natasha's lynchpin. She had one weak spot, he'd discovered, just one, and he was
currently on the Avenger's hospital floor, recovering from torture received at the hands of the Madripoor clan because of Steve.

"You're guilt-tripping," she assessed while she kicked her shoes off. "Stop. It's exhausting and not merited. It's an awful situation. You're doing your best and your best is better than most. So just have a beer with me." Feet now bare, she padded over to the couch and held a short, stocky glass bottle out to him. "Then we can talk about your fuck up with our resident assassin number three."

He took the bottle with a grimace. Ginger beer. Apparently, Natasha had no interest in getting inebriated tonight. Steve wondered if she expected an attack following her mission. "I thought you said beer."

She grinned at him, wolfish, and clinked her bottle against his but didn't reply. Instead, she plonked down on the couch, her back against the armrest, facing Steve, and stretched her legs out to rest her heels on his lap. Her toes wriggled as if to say, Problem, Rogers?

Before tonight, he would have dropped his hand to her ankles, maybe even started rubbing her feet the way she liked, but memory of the evening's events in the kitchen made him freeze half-way.

If she noticed – and since Steve was certain that nothing went by Natasha Romanov, he would bet money on her noticing – she didn't say. She nursed her ginger beer instead; the bottle light against her lips and her throat working as she swallowed. He appreciated the silences they could share without growing uncomfortable since their first mission together.

When she finished her bottle, she pulled her feet back and got up to get more, prompting Steve to hurry to finish his first. The sharpness of the ginger burned pleasantly in his throat.

"So," she said when she sat back down, her feet on Steve's thigh again, digging into the muscle just enough he noticed.

"So?" he asked, playing dumb even if he knew exactly what she was aiming at.

"So," she replied as if the word held everything she wanted to say and did he really expect her to have to say more.

"Tony would just love our eloquence," he quipped.

Her toes pinched his thigh hard enough it hurt. "Stop deflecting, Rogers."

He let his hand hover an inch above her feet and asked, "Foot rub?"

"If you can talk at the same time."

Steve closed his eyes and sighed. "Fine." He picked up her foot and began to dig his thumbs into the sole of her left foot. Natasha made a near obscene sound of appreciation in return. The way she arched her entire body into the sensation highlighted exactly how skintight her catsuit was even if it was zipped to her throat. Steve's face felt a little hot, but he didn't look down; that would have prompted her teasing him for pretending he wasn't aware of her.

"In more than monosyllables," she prompted, proving that any attempt at distracting her was doomed to fail.

"I triggered a flashback and he tried to cut my jugular with a broken wine bottle."

"Creative." She sounded appreciative. Her expression turned sympathetic. "That must have felt like
hell."

"I could have done with a little less creativity."

She let the sentence hang in the air for a few minutes while she looked out the window toward the lights of the building across the street. "How long did it take once he got here before someone suggested he needed to be locked up?" she asked eventually.

Steve looked up in surprise. "No one suggested that." In hindsight, that was unusual, since even to him, it was the obvious choice.

"Maybe not to you." She flexed her foot in his hand, demanding as a cat. The first time Steve rubbed one of her feet because of a sprain, Natasha had smiled with her eyes closed, obviously reliving some good memory. When she'd told him she'd pay him to do that again, Steve had made a point of reading up on massage techniques and realized that he'd triggered an affective flashback but one that Natasha linked to good feelings. He'd even consulted with one of SHIELD's physiotherapists who did therapeutic massage when Youtube videos weren't enough. He'd ended up learning a lot. He'd also ended up with hand cramps occasionally, because Natasha would plant her feet in his lap until he worked on them. "But, point for a SHIELD-free world. If this had happened on Nick's watch, James would have found himself locked up before he could blink."

Steve shuddered at the thought of sending Bucky back into anyone else's custody. "I don't think he'd survive being locked up like a thing again."

"Melodramatic much, Rogers? He made it through seventy years of the Russians and Hydra and he hasn't wilted like an uprooted flower. The human body and mind are much more resilient than you'd think." She sat up using just her abdominal muscles and patted his hand. "Doesn't mean he's not lucky to have you in his corner."

"I do everything wrong."

"The hell you do." She pulled her legs back toward her in a move that made Steve's spine twinge in sympathy, then leaned down to set her empty bottle on the floor. "Nothing you do, right or wrong, is at fault for that. Hydra hurt him and when you screw up, when he reacts badly to things you only mean well by, it's still Hydra's fault. They did the damage, Steve, not you."

Oh.

"Honest opinion?" she asked.

Steve nodded his consent.

"He's a walking time-bomb."

Steve winced at her bluntness, but couldn't help but twist his face into a bitter smile at her choice of words. "Before Tony took out the explosives, he literally was one."

"Explosives?" she echoed, her body going taut and alert on the couch.

"Hydra had surgically grafted explosives to his spine." The words sounded so harmless. Well, no, they didn't, but they couldn't convey the horror of Hydra's last ditch plan to keep their asset out of anyone else's hands.

Natasha muttered a subdued curse in Russian. "You keep him here with that risk? And you let me bring Clint here?" That was a testament to how much she trusted Steve; letting him know how
much she cared that Clint could be in danger.

"Tony had them removed."

"Way to build up a story-arc, Steve." She expelled a quiet breath and relaxed again. "Still. With everything they stuck in his head, he's still a time-bomb."

Her tone was even, without accusation, but Steve tensed nevertheless. He didn't know what he'd expected of her, but it wasn't flat-out rejection.

"But, you know," she continued, sounding thoughtful, "so was Clint after I freed him from Loki's influence. So was I when Clint brought me into SHIELD. So is Banner."

Steve looked up to find her studying his face with a thoughtful expression.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we're all dangerous people. The Winter Soldier is a good addition. Hell, with his skillset and the information on Hydra he must have, let alone all the knowledge they programmed into him? We'd be idiots not to keep him." Her pragmatism made it a little easier to digest the ease with which she acknowledged what had been done to Bucky. "Obviously, three assassins are a crowd, and," her eyes flashed a warning, "he's not getting between Clint and me, but, hey." Her face twisted into a sly grin. "You need a partner when I'm not around to watch that pretty fossil ass of yours, don't you?"

"I didn't know you cared," he shot back, unthinking.

Her face fell a fraction and Steve regretted his words immediately. "Sorry, I – "

"What I'm saying is that I don't care if he lives in the Tower," she talked over him. "One thing up front, though: If he hurts Clint, I'll kill him." Her tone was mild and had a quality to it better suited for singing a lullaby than uttering a death-threat. Steve felt cold all of a sudden.

"So, what: if any one of us were to... "

"Jarvis, private mode," she said.

"Certainly, Miss Romanov."

When the confirmation sound of Jarvis having shut all eyes and ears to the common floor had sounded, she focused back on Steve. "Are you asking me if I have plans stacked away in my brain on how to kill you all?" She raised an elegant eyebrow at him. "Of course I do. For everyone in this tower except for the Hulk, and that's really only because I haven't figured out how to kill him yet."

Steve crossed his arms over his midriff, imagined her cutting his throat while he was asleep, and wondered if he'd ever sleep soundly with her in the Tower again.

She smiled at his expression. "Shocked, Cap? I can tell you that the same goes for Clint. Tony probably has entire files full of contingency plans for taking out any one or all of us if we become a threat."

He'd never managed to go and see the Mona Lisa in more than a reproduction. He'd stared at a photograph of the picture for the better part of half an hour once, wondering if the smile was even really there, if it was mocking or shy or deliberately enigmatic.
Natasha’s smile was nothing like that. It was open, even amused, and completely relaxed. She had no qualms about who she was and none at all about being honest with him. After the initial shock wore off, he realized that her telling him this was the highest form of trust she was capable of showing. He doubted she'd talked about this with anyone except for Clint.

That trust was Natasha's way of showing him she didn't doubt either his intentions or his execution. Natasha wouldn't trust herself or Clint to a screw up, not even one with the heart of a saint. She was showing Steve she believed he would do right – by her, by Clint, by Bucky. She'd tell him the hard truths, but she'd have his back, whatever he decided.

She must have picked something up in his expression that she approved of, because she said, "So, back to your problem with resident assassin number three." She shifted in the couch. "Ready for another bit of honesty?"

Steve wasn't sure if he really wanted to hear it, but nodded anyway. Natasha wasn't going to tell him anything he didn't need to hear.

"It would be better to kill James than send him away and let him be taken. Because whoever got hold of him – and no matter how good he is, someone would get hold of him – won't imprison him. They'll use him, either as a weapon again or as an experimental subject."

The thought of killing Bucky turned Steve's stomach. "I won't let that happen to him."

"Of course you won't, but trust me, he'd agree." She looked toward the kitchen. The movement hid the expression crossing her face before Steve could pinpoint what it was. "Clint and I have a pact. Before anyone can capture us or use us against our will, we'll take each other out."

Steve drew a sharp breath and felt his scalp prickle.

Natasha looked back at him and fixed him with a hard look. "If it comes down to it, you need to do that for James."

Steve tried not to recoil in horror. This was the Black Widow's idea of loyalty? Of mercy? It didn't match his idea of mercy, but he thought of Bucky taking out the starving dogs when Steve wouldn't let himself see and realized with a pang that Bucky from the war and definitely James now would agree with Natasha.

"If you won't, I will. He has suffered enough."

She rose from the couch and walked to the fridge for the third time tonight. This time, she came back with a bottle of vodka and two shot glasses.

"Now that we have the sentimental part of the conversation covered, tell me more about this afternoon. How did you diffuse the situation?"

Steve accepted an ice-cold shot glass. "Tony talked him down."

"Tony?" Natasha huffed a surprised laugh. "I've really missed a lot, haven't I? How does your Winter Soldier get along with Mr. Self-centered?"

"Surprisingly well," Steve answered, because it really did surprise him. Tony wasn't exactly an easy man to get along with. God knew, he and Steve butted heads regularly. "Better than Buc – " He cut himself off with a wince. "Better than James does with me." He held out his glass to her when she offered the bottle to him. "It seems like all I do just alienates him."
She ignored his last sentence. "How did you trigger him?" she asked while downing her vodka. Her gaze never left his face.

Steve grimaced as he remembered. "He seemed so much better after he tried the food Sam's mom sent with us, so much more like Bucky and I just..." he ran a hand through his hair. "I just forgot. We always used to steal each other's food back in Brooklyn, and even at the front, we made a sport out of trying to get something from the other's plate even if we didn't want it. It was a sport. Just something Bucky and I did."

Natasha didn't comment.

"It seems that every time I discover something in him that's Bucky, he retreats and pushes me back. It's like he's fighting against remembering Bucky and trying to hold on to the Winter Soldier parts of him."

It was the first time Steve had said that out loud and knowing Natasha wouldn't judge him for it was the only reason he mentioned it in front of her.

"Would that be so bad?" she asked, her voice carefully neutral.

"Which part?"

"Holding on to the parts of him that are the Winter Soldier? He has the metal arm, after all. It's not like he can just go back to being Bucky Barnes and pretend none this ever happened." She dashed back another shot. "Stark hasn't built a time machine yet, after all."

She was right, of course. And Steve didn't expect Bucky to be the slick Brooklyn boy with a cocky grin who had sailed away to Europe. He still thought it would be better for Bucky to forget, but he knew, realistically, that wasn't possible. Still. Still. "He's not just the Winter Soldier, though. He was Bucky first." And it was selfish, so damn selfish, but, God, how Steve missed him.

Natasha's face was unreadable but her eyes were soft, so soft that Steve understood she didn't want to hurt him but thought she was about to do just that. "Let me ask you a question: you said you wanted him to remember who he was before he was the Winter Soldier. Is that for him or for you? When you've answered that question, ask yourself the next one. What do you think he wants?" She put her feet in his lap again, distracting Steve a little. "Do yourself and him a favor, Steve: find out what you want. Then assess whether what you want is possible and whether you're ready to make the sacrifices it'll entail to have it."

She wriggled her toes. "And if I say one more thing, I'm going to have to charge you a hefty sum of money for a therapy session."

Steve snorted a laugh and picked up her right foot gently. "How about I make a down payment by finishing that foot rub?"

"Now you're talking."

Natasha pushed her foot into his grip and hummed. When Steve glanced up, her eyelids were closed, the delicate skin stained with exhaustion, and her mouth was soft. His hands slowed and she ordered, "Don't stop yet." He kept it up until his fingers began to ache a little.

Natasha sighed and lifted her head. "Jarvis?"

"Yes, Ms. Romanov?"
"Is Clint still in the medical wing?"

Steve frowned and wondered why she would ask. That was where she'd left Clint after all.

"No, Ms. Romanov. Mr. Barton left there four hours and twenty-six minutes ago. He is currently in the apartment on the floor Sir designated as his."

"That idiot."

"Someone should take him back," Steve said.

Natasha laughed. "Not me. If he can get out, he's well enough to be out. I may stop by and chew him out so I can make sure he takes whatever meds the doctors gave him, but I won't force him back."

"If I may, Ms. Romanov," Jarvis said. "Mr. Barton mentioned getting some sleep without being drained of blood by vampire nurses before retiring to his bedroom. I do not monitor within private areas unless requested to by the resident or Sir, but I would theorize he is sleeping at the moment."

Natasha sighed this time. "Thank you, Jarvis. I'll wait until morning to make his life hell." She got to her feet and held out a hand. "Steve. Get some sleep, you look almost bad. And once Clint's back on his feet, you and he are going to have to make your peace."

Steve winced. "I think I'd rather be locked in a lab with Tony for forty-eight hours."

"Cheer up. At least Clint hasn't tried to cut your throat. Yet."

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James

James spent the rest of the evening in the guest suite that had become his de facto quarters since it became safe for him to leave the Hulk Chamber. He thought of going to the gym and burning off some of the roiling emotions, but last night had proved Steve did the same and he didn't want to run into him.

He was angry and unsure whether it was with Steve or himself. A memory of them as kids, tangling with each other over who got the last cookie Steve's mom had baked for some occasion had come back after he left the kitchen. Bucky had grabbed it first, then pretended he didn't see Steve reaching for it on his plate. He even let Steve win the 'fight' for it.

James remembered it, maybe five minutes of a shared childhood, but he couldn't feel it. It might have been another sepia-toned film reel from the Smithsonian. He half-expected to hear a narrator droning over it all. It was Bucky's memory and he wasn't Bucky.

He didn't want to be Bucky again, either. Bucky had been an innocent by James' standards, and James knew that Bucky would have been horrified and unable to cope with the things James had done. The acts the Winter Soldier had committed without hesitation. Even Sergeant Barnes of the Howling Commandos would have cringed at the Asset's deeds. James could hold onto his sanity, delicate as it was, only so long as he didn't succumb to their mindsets.

He paced across the room restlessly.

Bucky died. Sgt. Barnes died. The Winter Soldier had lived. James was done looking back. He
wasn't going to try to be those dead men. If Steve was his friend – his, James' – he'd have to accept that. If he wasn't... James would rather know now. All the others, Sam, Stark, Pepper, Bruce and Jarvis... they had been so good to him, and James tentatively classed them as friends. They'd all come to him through Steve, though. Steve was the first. Steve meant the most.

He'd bolted from the kitchen to get away from Steve and from Sam's stupid counselor-face and Stark's jittery sarcasm. He hadn't been anywhere close to murderous after the first seconds of the flashback. Once he'd known it was Steve and he was in Stark's tower and not Hydra's hands, he'd been back in control. Stark had been right. James wouldn't kill Steve or any of the other Avengers or anyone not threatening him, but he'd still been angry. The pie had been so nice, it had been something sweet and wonderful, not sustenance, not fuel he had to force into himself to keep his body functioning, and Steve had made him flash back to the awfulness of Hydra. James resented the hell out of that.

He wanted more of the pie. He wanted to taste it again, to chase down that elusive bubble of happiness he'd felt for a second or find out it was something that couldn't be recovered, like his memories.

He still didn't want to have anything to do with anyone else, though. "Jarvis?"

"Yes, Mr. James?"

"Just James, remember?"

"I am sorry, my programming weights my responses toward formality, James. I will endeavor to observe your preferences, however."

James shook his head. "Don't put yourself out. If calling me Mister makes you happy, knock yourself out."

"I shall, James," Jarvis replied with a dry humor James had come to appreciate from the AI. He'd gotten over any unease with Jarvis during the first day he spent in the Hulk Chamber. If he left now, James would miss Jarvis as much as anyone else in residence.

"Are Steve or Sam or Stark in the kitchen?" James asked.

"Sir is in the penthouse with Ms. Potts. Captain Rogers and Mr. Wilson have both retired to their quarters."

"And the Black Widow?" He didn't want to run into her either.

"Ms. Romanov is in Mr. Barton's quarters."

"Thanks, Jarvis," James told the AI and slipped out of his suite, ghosting along with a silent tread and a knack for the shadows, leaving the lights off.

There was a single light on in the kitchen or maybe was the digital readout for one of the plethora of appliances. James didn't make anything of it. It was a stupid assumption to make, but he thought if Romanov was in Barton's quarters, so was Barton, though he hadn't known Barton had even left the medical wing.

It startled him when he realized the light in the kitchen came from the open refrigerator and the figure there, clad in mauve yoga pants and shirtless except for a spattering of bandages and bruising, unwashed hair standing on end, was Barton. Barton was oblivious to James' presence.
He considered turning around and leaving before that could change, but froze as Barton uttered a grunt of satisfaction and pulled back from the refrigerator holding James' pie. Instead he padded over to the counter and took a seat on one of the stools. The angle hid the bare glint of the Arm in shadow, even with the refrigerator door still open to provide maneuvering light. He watched Barton set the pie on the counter carefully, then gather himself a plate, a fork and a pie-server. Barton was mumbling to himself, intent on what he was doing, his movements stiff with pain even though James could tell he was still hazy with painkillers.

He'd guess those were wearing off, though.

"The pie's mine," James commented.

Barton jerked, grabbed for a fork and sent his plate and the pie-server tumbling to the floor as he spun around and glared, his eyes wild. The plate hit his bare foot edge on and he began hopping and cursing, still pointing the silver fork at James. James stayed still since the pie wasn't in danger. Neither was he, though a fork made a decent ad hoc weapon.

"Sadist! Sneaky ninja bullshit is supposed to be Tash's thing!" Tash was presumably the Black Widow. James made a note that Barton was close enough to her to use a diminutive of her chosen first name.

Barton kept glaring, so James shrugged his good shoulder. Barton was supposed to have superior, extraordinary vision, but James doubted he could make much out: James' hair was in his eyes, he was silhouetted against the light pollution from the window wall of the common room, and Barton had to be at least a little light blind from staring into the refrigerator.

"Who are you?"

"James."

Barton grunted, then bent and retrieved the plate and pie-server, taking them both to the sink. "I guess you're supposed to be here, since Jarvis isn't sounding any alarms."

"Jarvis forgot to tell me you were in the kitchen."

"Jarvis can be sneaky," Barton muttered.

"Perhaps it comes from observing Ms. Romanov and yourself," Jarvis observed.

Barton pointed at the ceiling. "See, that? That's back talk. Sass. Stark's AI is sassing me." He turned back to James. "You heard that, right?" He waved his hands, then switched his attention to retrieving another plate. Two plates, in fact, James noticed.

"Yes. The pie's still mine," James answered in a dry tone.

Barton glanced up at him. "Sharing is caring, dude."

"I don't care about you."

"Cold." Barton clutched his hand to his chest. "Also, rude."

James gave him a flat look.

"Wow. Did you go to the same school of Soviet glaring as Natasha? Because that's some serious dead-eye," Barton said. He sliced a generous portion of pie for each plate. A moment later, he
brought both over to the counter and sat down opposite James.

He moaned out loud on the first bite. "Yeah, now I understand why you're so protective of this pie. Where the hell did this come from? It's better than drugs."

"Wilson's mother."

"Wilson?" Barton muttered. "Aren't you Wilson?"

"No."

"Fuck." He kept shoveling in pieces of pie. He ate like someone who had gone hungry often and recently. "So who the hell are you, James?"

James picked up a fork and tried a bite of his slice. He didn't let his eyes close, because Barton, even damaged and drugged, was a dangerous man, but it was a close thing. The pie was as amazing as he remembered. He shifted on the stool and brought his other, metal hand up.

Barton's eyes widened and he swallowed. "Crap. Crap me. I'm eating the Winter Soldier's pie. Is everyone trying to kill me!? The fuck didn't someone tell me I was sharing the goddamn Tower with the Winter Soldier? Jarvis, you're dead to me!"

"I do not believe James means you any harm, Mr. Barton," Jarvis replied.

"Yeah, you say that, but he's like your metal-armed cousin or something. He'll be in on it when you go all Skynet on us."

James raised his eyebrows. "I'm not a robot." Because Barton amused him, he spoke in the dullest monotone he could manage.

"James is not even a cybernetic organism, as the ratio of organic to non-organic materials in his body remains primarily biological, although Sir has suggested allowing him to install a proto-AI version of myself in the Arm." James curled his lip in a sneer. He liked Jarvis, but he didn't want to carry the AI with him everywhere. "In addition, I am not a petulant child. I find the idea of a world populated only by myself abhorrent." Jarvis sounded offended.

"So you say, so you say," Barton said. He pointed at James with his fork, pie sliding off it to plop back onto his plate, realized, shrugged and lifted the forkful of pie to his mouth. Having eaten it, he then pointed the fork's tines at James. "Too good to waste any."

James nodded. It was. He knew why he hadn't done anything to stop Barton from eating any of it too. He wouldn't play Hydra's part. The last thing he would ever do would be pulling away food from someone. He thought of Lonnie the truck driver. Modeling his actions on Lonnie's; when James knew something had hurt him or hurt someone else, he would try to do the opposite.

"Ms. Romanov has requested I relay your location, Mr. Barton," Jarvis said.

"Aw, crap."

Barton went back to eating and after a beat, James decided to do the same. He felt surprisingly at ease with Barton, maybe because Barton seemed unbothered by James.

Half way through, Barton looked up and asked, "So. Sniper. Favorite rifle? Longest kill shot?"

James blinked at him. "I don't know."
"What, you didn't keep a book?"

James shook his head, then shrugged, and said, "Hydra would know. I don't... wasn't allowed to remember. Now I try not to."

"Sucks balls, man. Stories I've heard, you're a legend. Well, more like the boogeyman." Barton gestured with his free hand. "I never miss, but, you know, sometimes there just isn't a shot. But the Winter Soldier, you're supposed to be like a Terminator. Never quits until the mission is completed."

"Stark called me that." He didn't point out that he'd failed to complete at least two missions: his last, when the Black Widow survived, and he pulled Steve from the Potomac instead of letting him drown. He'd been behaving erratically even before that, choosing to fight Steve hand to hand rather than shooting him in the head from a distance. When he had shot him, the Asset hadn't shot to kill either. It had frightened him at the time, the way his programming failed so drastically, but now James was glad.

And then there was Fury. No one had said, but James wasn't stupid. None of the Avengers spoke of Fury the way they would of someone who was really dead. He hadn't asked, but he thought it likely Fury had survived James shooting him. It wasn't impossible; he'd been shooting through a wall, using thermal imaging and a sound bug to zero in on his target. Torso shots were never as certain as head shots and SHIELD body armor was the best in the world. Stark Industries made it under contract.

The thought that Fury was still out there didn't bother James. Fury would be busy hunting Hydra, which was just fine with him.

"Yeah, well, Stark's got no tact."

"I think that's you, Clint," the Black Widow said as she entered the kitchen. She had already been watching them for several minutes from the hallway. Now she let them see her studying them both. "Good evening, James." Her muscles were tense and she angled her shoulder away from him, reminding him he had shot her there recently.

"I think that's you, Clint," the Black Widow said as she entered the kitchen. She had already been watching them for several minutes from the hallway. Now she let them see her studying them both. "Good evening, James." Her muscles were tense and she angled her shoulder away from him, reminding him he had shot her there recently.

He'd shot her before too, he thought, though the memory was foggy, as if it had barely become a memory before it was wiped. Probably he'd gone into cryo within hours of those actions, losing short term memory without even being wiped. It made him nervous of what he didn't know, so James watched her back, just as wary.

Barton waved his fork. "You gotta taste this pie. Wilson's mother made it for him – " He nodded at James. "I have to find out how to get her to bake for me too."

"Steve told me," she interrupted. She was still watching James. James blinked at her, assuming that Steve had told her about the meltdown James had had when Steve was teasing him. He kept his face calm as she glanced at Barton's plate and raised an eyebrow. "She sounds like a nice woman. Maybe you could go look pathetic at her."

"Is that what you did?" Barton asked James.

"No."

Barton waited, but James didn't say anything more. Silence might prompt most people to nervously fill it with more information than they ever meant to reveal, but not him. He went back to his share of the pie and finished it, eating slowly, pausing to gauge the state of his stomach. He felt blessedly
free of any nausea.

The Widow never quite relaxed, but she did lean against the counter beside Barton and began teasing him. She had a throaty voice, no hint of Russia in her accent, and when she moved, the blood-red curtain of her hair swung along her jawline.

Barton finished the pie and leaned both forearms on the counter. His eyes were half-closed, weighed down with the exhaustion that came with healing serious injuries.

"Come on, Clint, time to go back to bed," the Widow told him.

"But, Ma..." Barton protested. "I don't wanna. Wanna talk rifles with James."

"You can talk sniping some other time," she said. "Your new friend will still be around tomorrow."

James wondered if not killing Barton for eating his pie counted as friendship. Maybe for people like the Widow and Barton and himself. It was certainly better than being their enemy.

Barton stumbled to his feet. "Pain meds?"

"I brought them to your room from the medical wing."

"Hallelujah."

James rose from his stool. He'd gathered up his plate and Barton's, when Barton glanced back. "Hey, thanks for not killing me."

"Stark told me not to kill his other guests."

The Black Widow chuckled. "Did he, really?"

James let himself almost smile, knowing she was observant enough to see the muscles around his mouth twitch and read that from them.

"Sako TRG41." Barton had wanted to know James' favorite sniping rifle. He'd used so many on different missions and made them all work, but he'd liked that one every time.

Barton looked surprised then interested. "Finnish. .308, right?"

"Left-handed firing," James explained. "Yes."

"Hey, you need a bipod with that arm?"

"No."

"Stark's got a firing range here. I wanna see."

"Not tonight, Clint," the Widow insisted. She sounded annoyed but her lips were curled into a smile.

"Tomorrow," Clint insisted. "Hey, can we have pie afterward?"

James didn't see why not. "Only you," he said.

"Cool," Barton said and let the Widow guide him away.

James washed the dishes and wondered if he had just made a friend. Steve was his friend, but
Bucky's first. Sam and Stark and Banner, they were all Steve's friends first, helping him because Steve wanted to help him. He wasn't sure the Black Widow would ever be a friend. Barton, though, was too annoyed with Steve to be nice to James for him.

Did Barton really never miss? James wanted to see that.

Steve

An unrestful night was followed by a grey morning that only slowly saw the sun breaking through the clouds. Steve felt weary and every single one of his ninety years in his bones. He'd spent most of the night thinking about what had happened the day before and about what Natasha had said. He hadn't completely accepted Natasha's advice, but one thing Steve knew was that he needed to apologize to James, then maybe they could talk.

He wandered into the common room, hoping he'd find James reading in one of the sunny spots he preferred. Bucky had been smart and good in school, but he'd never been the voracious reader James was now, though Steve knew some of that had been because Bucky spent his time working extra shifts to take up the slack when Steve was sick and couldn't. They hadn't had money or time to read much that wasn't available from the corner news-stand, but what they'd had they'd shared.

James wasn't in any of the places he usually occupied during the day. No one answered when Steve tapped at the door to James' suite. He searched the kitchen next and then the rest of the Avenger's common floor, growing more and more worried. He even checked the bathrooms, in case something had made James sick again, afraid he'd find him curled in a miserable ball on the floor by the toilet as he had once or twice before.

Nothing.

Had James left the tower? Fear made Steve queasy and his hands shake. Had he really screwed up that badly?

"Jarvis?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Do you – Is James still in the tower?"

"James and Mr. Barton are on the gymnasium floor. They are in the archery range at the moment."

Steve had absolutely no idea how James and Clint could have ended up using the range at the same time. He'd thought Jarvis had James locked out of that portion of the tower, along with the armory. He should have realized that with his training, James would be able to circumvent Jarvis' security. But Clint was so angry with Steve, plus he was just out of the medical wing himself, so there was no guessing how he might react to James.

If he triggered James...

He sprinted for the elevator. "Jarvis, are they both still alive?" he demanded as he reached it. Clint was smart and a skilled fighter, but he wasn't a match for the Winter Soldier even at his best. If James killed or hurt Clint, Steve didn't know if he could stop Natasha from taking him out. As much as he worried about Clint, James was Steve's priority. "Damn it!" he shouted and slammed the flat of his hand against the side of the elevator. "Get me down there, Jarvis!"
"James and Mr. Barton are both well, Captain Rogers," Jarvis said as the elevator started its smooth slide. Steve thought Tony was going to have reprogram the damned thing. They weren't well. Clint was still hurt and Bucky was recovering from being brainwashed for seventy years. Clint was probably fighting for his life. Unless Bucky had frozen up and Clint was taking the chance to end the Winter Soldier –

The doors slid open and Steve bolted out at full speed, denting one wall when he caromed against it and tore a door right off its hinges to get into the darkened archery range.

No one was fighting. James and Clint were standing in front of a large table with an array of knives, darts, shuriken and even a couple of assegai neatly laid out on felted pads. Overhead lights glinted off sharp edges and polished steel. Clint had a blade in his hand, clearly weighing its balance in preparation to throwing it. Targets were arrayed at various distances beyond them. Several already had various items lodged in the bullseyes.

They both turned around as Steve barreled in, but only James stiffened.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Steve demanded. "You're not supposed to be down here. You're not supposed to – "

James narrowed his eyes at his approach and his mouth thinned to a flat line. "What?" he asked in a flat tone.

"Jarvis was supposed to keep you away from any weapons." Steve felt like he should be heaving for breath, shaking from adrenaline let down and the release of fear and it made him angry.

Clint choked out a laugh. "This guy?" His face looked better. The bruises were healing and the cuts were scabbed up and open to the air. The swelling around his eyes had gone down enough Steve could see him roll his eyes.

The comment only made Steve angrier. This was Clint's fault, obviously. James should be upstairs, sunning himself with a book, not being reminded of his time as the Winter Soldier or and playing with knives. He snapped, "Stay out of this, Clint."

"Yeah, fuck you. No. This isn't the army and you can take your size twelves and shove them up your ass."

"You should know, Captain Rogers, that Sir released James’ weapons back to him last night as well as lifting the interdiction on the armory and ranges," Jarvis said.

"What!?" Steve yelled. He was going to punch Tony. "He had no right to make that decision without talking to me first."

"It's his tower," Clint said.

"I said stay out of this!"

"Screw you, Rogers – "

"Shut up!" James yelled at both of them. He picked up a combat knife with a seven inch blade, the metal painted over matte black for night ops, very much like the knives Bucky had carried and used when he'd fought Steve on the helicarrier. The memory of the screech as they scored against Steve's shield rang through his head. James pointed at Clint with the knife. He hated even looking at Bucky with it in his hand. "You, leave, okay?"
"You sure?" Clint asked.

"Yes."

Clint glared at Steve and Steve glared back until he'd left. "Jarvis," he said. "Privacy."

"Jarvis, monitor and record."

"As you wish, James."

Steve stepped back, feeling wounded, realizing James wanted a witness, which could only mean he felt threatened. Threatened by Steve. Which meant he'd done even more damage the night before with his stupid teasing stunt than he'd feared.

Steve felt all his anger crumble like a house of cards. Even after Sam and Natasha had both talked to him and he'd told himself he'd do better, he'd stormed into the shooting range like a mad man, despite knowing if anything had gone wrong, Jarvis would have alerted him.

He was racking up a list of people he needed to apologize to and it wasn't noon yet. James, twice now, Clint, Jarvis, and he was lucky Tony wasn't here or he'd need to grovel toward him too. Steve sighed and forced himself to let his body go loose and open postured.

He felt like an idiot. There were many things he was good at and the serum had given him the ability to do even more, but none of them equipped him to deal with Bucky as he was now. It seemed like all he could was trip over his own feet as he scrambled for stable ground.

James twirled the damned knife, less being showy than testing its heft.

"Could you put that down?" Steve asked.

James just eyed him.

Steve sighed. "I hate seeing you like this."

"Like what?" Puzzlement edged out wariness. "It was target practice. He wanted to know if I knew how to use a bow. I'm not as good as him, so we moved on to knives."

"Bucky didn't know how to throw knives," Steve said without thinking. It was the wrong thing and he knew it immediately.

James flipped the knife in his hand, then threw it so it sank into the wall six inches from Steve's head. Steve flinched despite being sure it had never been aimed at him.

"Why won't you back off?" James demanded. His face took on the near snarl and desperation Steve could never forget from the fight on the helicarrier, when he'd said Steve was his mission. "I came to you because I didn't want to be Hydra's Winter Soldier, not because I wanted to trade that for being your 'Bucky'!"

"But you are – "

"No! I was. The way I was the Winter Soldier. I don't want to go back!" James stalked closer to Steve, close enough to set his hands against Steve's chest and shove him hard, hard enough he stumbled back, out of the doorway. The instant he did, James pushed past him, out of the range Steve had inadvertently trapped him inside.

He turned and glared at Steve. "I can't stay here if you're going to keep trying make me into
someone else. I'll take my chances with Hydra."

"No! Bu – James. I'll stop. I'm trying, I know I'm making everything worse," Steve blurted desperately. He realized in that moment he didn't care if James never remembered Bucky, not so long as he stayed safe and out of Hydra's hands. If he drove him back out there and anything happened to him...? The guilt would kill Steve. He scrubbed a hand over his face, but it couldn't wipe away the guilt he still felt because he hadn't been able to save Bucky, the one time he should have. To save Bucky. Why else had he taken Erskine's offer and let them remake him? "Maybe you haven't figured it out yet, but I'm not exactly fine myself. I'm sorry I'm making it worse for you."

James relaxed a little. "I'm sorry I'm not him anymore, but I can't go back." His anger had flared and faded quickly, faster than Bucky's had.

"Bruce's therapy..."

"Would probably work, only I'd get every memory, the ones from before and the ones that were wiped."

Steve swallowed hard. It wasn't his choice, was it? James really wasn't Bucky with no memory. James wasn't suddenly going to get those memories back; he didn't want them. He needed Steve to accept his decision not to remember.

"I still wouldn't be Bucky, you see?" James explained. "Seventy years of killing as the Winter Soldier are in my head too." He shuddered. "I don't want to be Bucky enough to chance going back to being the Winter Soldier, even if I wouldn't revert to being the Asset. Do you understand?"

Steve slumped. He hated it, but he did understand. His selfish need to have his best friend back wasn't possible and pushing for it just threatened to harm James, the friend he had now. It felt as if a weight broke off his heart. It hurt, it made him feel like he was suddenly less, but he also felt... lighter. Steve felt like he'd set down a heavy pack he'd been carrying forever. He couldn't turn back the clock or undo everything that had passed. It had been too late before he ever made it to Europe; the Bucky he'd pulled out of Hydra's base had been hardened by war and left brittle and damaged by whatever Zola had done to him. He hadn't been the Bucky from Brooklyn with the cocky grin and couldn't have gone back to him, any more than Steve could go back to the scrawny, overly righteous punk he'd been before the war.

"Yeah, I guess."

James nodded once, his hard expression easing. He ducked back into the range to pry the knife loose from the wall. "Handling weapons isn't going to revert me back to Hydra's puppet, you know," he said. He checked the tip of the knife and then the edge before taking it back to the table and sheathing it next to the rest of its set, in a soft suede roll-up keeper. The actions were efficient and casual.

"I guess, I just want you to be able to put it all behind you," Steve said.

"That's nice, but it's not going to happen." James gave him a searching look, then leaned his hips back against the edge of the table, hands curled lightly around the edge on either side of him. "I'm not going to go back to killing people. Not for anyone else." He hesitated before pushing on. "I'm not going to 'get better' and join the Avengers." He rasped out a chuckle. "The Winter Soldier is never going to be one of 'Earth's Mightiest Heroes'. That's not me."

"You could be a hero." *Bucky was a hero, Bucky was always my hero.* Steve didn't say it, proving he could learn if someone hit him over the head with a stick enough times.
"It's like you think you can change reality with just the power of you willing the truth away." James ducked his head, so his hair fell forward, and seemed to concentrate on rubbing his metal finger tip along the table's edge. When it screeched, he flinched. "Some things don't go away."

Steve stared at James' left arm, mostly hidden under layers of undershirts, button-ups, and a red and gold hoodie that clearly came from Tony. "I know."

"Right now, about all I can think of that I'm qualified for is a mercenary," James said.

"No."

A quirk at the corner of his mouth gave away that James wasn't terribly serious. "What, you don't think anyone would pay?"

"I know they would, but you – "

"Relax, I said I didn't want to kill people on anyone's orders." James shrugged. "But I'm not fooling myself that I can just let myself get rusty."

"Why not? Why not quit. You don't have to – " Steve might have harbored some idea that along with getting Bucky back, he'd have him back fighting by his side as an Avenger eventually. Having James there would be just as good. But he wasn't selfish enough to ask that of him, not if James had had enough of the violence that had dominated his life for so long. If James wanted to spend the rest of his life sunbathing and doing macramé, Steve would do whatever he could to make that happen.

"Steve," James interrupted quietly and Steve wondered if that wasn't the first time he'd used Steve's first name. He would have been happier at that if James hadn't sounded so sad.

"What?" His throat was dry and he had to cough and swallow.

"There's always going to be somebody coming for the Winter Soldier." James pushed away from the table, turned and began putting everything else away. He went on as he worked, "People wanting revenge for targets I took down – "

"The Winter Soldier – "

"My face, my hands; I doubt many people are going to care about the fine print. Those'll be the worst, because they've got a right, but there will be others. Hydra will always want their tool back. They won't be the only group that wants to own the Winter Soldier, either, good or bad."

Steve winced even as he acknowledged that truth. If SHIELD still existed, even if it hadn't been riddled with Hydra's cancer, and Fury had still been around – he started guiltily and wondered if anyone had or should tell James that Fury had survived the Winter Soldier – they would have done their utmost to make James work for them. Aside from his dirty ops expertise, the cachet of having turned the Red Room's two best operatives would be irresistible. Just because SHIELD wasn't a factor any longer didn't mean there weren't dozens of other agencies and groups around the world eager to put their hands on the Winter Soldier, either to wrench every bit of intel they could from him or to use him.

No matter how far off the grid James took himself, like Natasha, he'd have to live the rest of his life watching over his shoulder.

Steve had a better chance at a normal life and he'd known since he stepped out of Erskine's pod that that wasn't going to happen.
"I'm sorry."

James cocked an eyebrow, then shook his head. "Lay off the guilt trip. It is what it is and that's still better than what I had before."

"You can be sorry for something that isn't your fault." Steve knew the argument was weak.

"Then I'm sorry you freaked out because I was down here with Clint, but it felt good and I needed to check my weapons when Stark gave them back."

Because he might need them, Steve realized, but pushed the sadness down. There were still good things. James didn't seem angry with him; in fact, he seemed calmer and more relaxed than he'd been since arriving at the tower. He'd probably been feeling vulnerable and uneasy without access to his weapons. Tony, even if he should have discussed it with Steve and the rest of the team, had been right.

"James, Captain?" Jarvis prompted.

"Yes?"

"What?" James asked at the same time Steve spoke.

"Sir is requesting you to join him and the other Avengers in the common floor kitchen. The pantry has been restocked with all organic items sans preservatives and additives and he insists James try a meal."

"Uh, that reminds me," Steve said. He glanced at James and thought he looked better, his shoulders looser, his eyes clear, and even his color healthier. Whether it was keeping a meal down the night before or the reassurance of having a way to defend himself, something had changed. James looked at him inquiringly. "I owe you an apology for last night when I tried to tease you the way I would have Bucky. Even if you were still Bucky, the way I acted was stupid."

James gave him a short nod. "Sorry for threatening to cut your throat. When Hydra was conditioning me, they'd offer food then take it away."

Steve sucked in a deep breath and cursed silently in his head. Those technicians – no, torturers – were probably all dead or old and frail, but he wished he could find them and make them suffer for what they'd done. It wasn't just about James (or Bucky as he'd been). If they'd done that to one person, they'd done it to others.

"No one will do that now," Steve promised.

"No, because I'll shoot them."

Steve flinched despite himself, then caught James' eye, saw the beginning of a smile at the corner of his mouth. Slowly, a grin crept over Steve's face. This was going to become a joke between them, starting here and now, and maybe even playing out in the kitchen when they got there. Tony did deserve a scare for going behind Steve's back, after all...

"Jarvis, tell Tony we're on our way," Steve told the AI. He hoped that Tony's new plan to get food James could digest and like would work. He gestured for James to precede him to the elevator and pretended not to see when James raised his eyebrows at the door lying on its side along the way. "How do you feel about scaring the bejesus out of Tony?"

James considered it. "Jarvis, don't warn him," he said.
"Of course not. You should perhaps hurry, though. Mr. Barton has discovered the supply of fair trade chocolate."
Chapter 14

James

The sun woke him where he'd been napping in his chair. He could feel its heat in his hair, in the brightness painted through his eyelids, in the lax weight of his lazy limbs. He had on his usual layers, the soft clothes that Sam had given him one day with the advice to wear what he liked. Sam's grandmother's quilt was pulled up over his shoulders.

Steve had done that and James had barely blinked his eyes open to register his presence. It should have bothered him more. He decided not to worry about why it didn't. He didn't have to think about that, or worry about failing a mission or asking a question that would get him wiped again. He didn't even need to get up from the chair that had become his if he didn't want to. If he stayed in one place all day the only thing that would happen was that someone would stop and ask if he was okay.

His stomach gurgled in a reminder that he should eat. The thought didn't make him tense with anxiety, though. He was getting a little over warm under the blanket in the sun, sweating thanks to the extra warm clothes he had on, and moving seemed like an attractive option.

He was careful with the quilt, folding and laying it over the back of the chair, before padding sock-footed toward the kitchen.

No one seemed to be around. The Tower felt quiet. He could have asked Jarvis where everyone was, but he didn't. They'd all come home sooner or later.

He was still overly warm, so he stripped off the sweater he had on, leaving only a shirt and t-shirt that had been beneath. It occurred to him that he wasn't always cold any longer. Hadn't been in some time, but hadn't noticed, because good things snuck in and made themselves part of life. Only bad crap demanded constant notice and nothing awful had happened in the weeks since he'd come to Avengers Tower.

Tony hadn't said anything to James directly, but he'd seen hologram plans and heard him talking with the others. Sometimes he even heard the clangor of work being done a couple of floors down, but above the medical floor Tony had built just to take care of James – though it had proved its continued worth with Clint's arrival, much to Tony's obvious and vocal satisfaction. It wasn't difficult to figure out Tony was customizing an apartment, maybe even an entire floor, for James.

James trailed his flesh fingertips over the granite counter top. Tony kept trying to sneak in questions about what he liked. Colors, patterns, textures, materials. A few nights before it had been all about the kitchen. Did James think it was too dark? Did he like butcher block tops or the stone or stainless steel. James had shrugged then said not the stainless steel. Too much like a lab. Tony had blinked and muttered, yeah, yeah, before stuffing a piece of sourdough bread in his mouth.

He opened the refrigerator and stared at the contents the same way he'd seen Clint do nearly every time he was in the kitchen. Everything in it was all organic now and though no one in the Tower had yet cooked anything as amazing as the leftovers and pies Sam's mother sent home with them every Sunday, nothing had made James sick in two weeks. The last thing to bother him had been a bottled water that had tasted of the chemicals in the plastic bottle.

He finally pulled out butter, cheese, and a loaf of bread, though there was nothing off limits in the kitchen. Nothing really off limits on the Avengers' floor or much of the rest of the Tower, except
personal items. It stunned him to think about, that sense of belonging. He hadn't even conceived of
it when he made his way from DC to New York. He'd been angling for an ally and had somehow
ended up with much more.

He assembled the cheese sandwich and the grill on automatic, imitating what he'd seen Pepper fix
one afternoon a week before. She'd made the melted cheese sandwiches for both of them and ate
hers with a gusty sigh, declaring she needed comfort food after spending three days in DC. It had
looked easy enough. James hadn't been trying to memorize what she'd done, but had anyway.

When it was hot and crispy, the cheese oozing from the sides, James sat and ate the sandwich he'd
made along with a glass of orange juice. He had a flicker of the Winter Soldier's first or last
memories, of Pierce and gunfire, whenever he tried milk, so he avoided it.

The sandwich tasted at least as good as the one Pepper had fixed, James decided. He wanted to try
other things too.

"Jarvis," he said, "can you access some simple foods I could try cooking?"

"Of course. Are you interested in more sandwich recipes, dinners, or desserts? You are aware that
if you prove to cook better than Mr. Barton or Captain Rogers, Sir will insist you cook for him
sometimes?"

James nodded, knowing Jarvis' cameras would pick it up. He didn't mind the idea of fixing food for
Tony. Wasn't sure when he'd shifted from thinking of Tony as Stark to his first name, but that had
happened too. It was Steve and Tony, Sam and Natasha and Clint and Bruce now.

"Keep it plain, okay?" he told Jarvis.

"Perhaps a light snack," Jarvis suggested. "A batter bread or muffins? It requires only measuring,
mixing, and baking."

That sounded more complicated than Jarvis seemed to think, but James was willing to give it a try.
"Okay, yeah, let's do that."

"I have list of possibilities. If you direct your attention to the screen over the double sink, I will
display them."

James read through the recipes and admired the pictures of what they would create while he
washed his plate and glass. He felt good, at ease in his skin and where he was. He felt, he thought,
like a real person.

"I want to try this one," he said after reading the recipe for scones.

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Steve

Alisha Wilson invited James to Sunday dinner with the rest of them. She had heard enough
carefully edited bits about him, and she had decided he needed to sample her food firsthand. Steve
had been wary about the invitation, but Alisha was a force to be reckoned with and he had no
desire to defy her. He began to understand, though, that Sam's ability to quietly pull him into doing
something had been inherited from his mother.

James hadn't been outside the Tower since he'd arrived, between worries that Hydra would make
another attempt at retrieving or killing him and needing to recover from the spinal surgery, it hadn't even come up. When he wanted fresh air, he went to the roof and burned off his energy in the gym, according to Jarvis. Steve was grateful James hadn't brought up the subject; he would have had to scramble for a reasonable excuse to keep him inside that didn’t show his fear of losing James.

Steve hadn't been surprised by James' reluctance to go to dinner, just at how quickly he'd folded under the combined urgings of Sam, Pepper, himself, Tony, and even Clint. (Steve thought Clint just wanted to make sure Alisha kept sending pies for James, though he'd never accuse Clint of being so mercenary.)

As Sunday morning slipped away into Sunday afternoon and the hour to depart for Harlem neared, Steve found himself worrying over how the dinner would go. He wanted James to make a good impression, the way Bucky would have. It was ridiculous, but there it was. He found himself staring at James, who was arguing with Sam over some foreign film thing they'd been watching. Long hair got tossed back when James shook his head emphatically. He hadn't shaved in days and his beard darkened and softened the clean line of his jaw. It made Steve itch, just looking at him. Suddenly, it was too much for him.

"That's it," Steve declared.

"That's what exactly?"

"You need a shave. You look like a ruffian. We can't take you to dinner with Sam's mother looking like this."

A snort sounded from behind him. "Ruffian. Really, Cap?"

Steve ignored Tony. Ruffian was a perfectly good word even if it was out of vogue. He turned his attention back to James, who'd crossed his arms over his chest and inclined his head. Light reflected off the metal hand and highlighted the dimple on his left cheek that always preceded an oncoming smirk. "Or what?"

The smirk was a good sign; James seemed to be in a playful mood that allowed for a little more leeway. Steve had been careful about teasing remarks ever since the pie incident until James had teased him so mercilessly one day that he realised it was James’ way of telling him that Steve should stop walking on eggshells around him and treat him the way he'd treat the others, too.

"Or..." Steve considered for a blink of an eye, then decided to just go for it. "...I'll have to make you." Steve mirrored James' gesture and crossed his arms as well, smirking.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"The eloquence is killing me," Tony commented. "Is that a military thing?"

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" Steve asked.

"This is my house. Tower. It's big, yeah, but it's still mine. So, no, I really don't have somewhere – or anywhere else, really - to be. Besides, I just love watching the elderly generation give each other grooming tips. Don't you, Jarvis?"

"I can barely contain the excitement, Sir."
"Watch and learn, Jarvis," Tony joked.

"For the next time I get to shave you, Sir?"

From the corner of his eye, Steve saw Tony give a shudder. "As long as you don't use a straight razor."

"Don't you trust me?" Jarvis managed to sound wounded.

"With my life," Tony answered without missing a beat. "Just not with my goatee." He looked back and forth from James to Steve. "Just stay right there. I'm getting a razor. And, Jarvis, you'll want to record this."

James smirked at Steve, who hadn't thought this through when he opened his mouth and still couldn't believe James was going along with it, even as Tony came back brandishing an electric shaver.

"Cap's right though, James," Sam piped up. "You're starting to look a little scruffy. My Mom might think we're treating you badly round here. Or maybe you're disrespecting her... Might lose out on tonight's pie. She's not too fond of that thing on your face either, Tony."

"Ah, and you think I care what people think?"

"Not people, no. My Mom, though, and Pepper... "

Tony twitched a little.

"Are you afraid of Pepper?" James asked Tony, an incredulous tone creeping into his voice.

"He has no idea, has he?" Tony said conversationally to Steve. He handed over the shaver.

Steve flashed him a grin. "None."

"I'm sure as hell still afraid of my Mom," Sam added. "She can pinch harder than one of those robot crabs that showed up down at the docks last week."

"Yes, let me tell you about the female of the species, Barnes," Tony began, "because you haven't seen Pep mad – " but was interrupted before he could finish the speech.

"Maybe I'll take that shave after all."

No surprise, that. James might not be afraid of Pepper, but he had a huge soft spot for her. One that she, in turn, shared for him. No one had figured out why and neither of them was saying.

"Yeah," Tony gave an audible snort. "Like you wouldn't break his arm if he came near you with a razor."

Steve felt Bucky – James, damn it, the name was James now – eye him. "Never know if you never try, right?"

"Not afraid to hurt that pretty face, Cap? Or have him hurt yours?"

"I can handle it," Steve replied. If James could handle it, so could he. "Besides, you confiscated all the straight razors. I doubt I can do much damage with your electrical shaver."

"Can he?"
"He's here, Stark," James said and pulled a stool near the counter. "And he's been shaving himself, you know." He gave Steve a challenging look. "Think you can do a better job?"

Steve grinned at the challenge. "Absolutely. Sit down, be quiet, and I'll show you all."

James seated himself on the stool. His mouth turned up in a faint, teasing smile. "Well, I'm ready," he declared and rested both hands on his knees before closing his eyes. "Come on, barber, I'm not getting any younger here." James looked relaxed, but Steve saw the way the nails of his human hand turned white from the pressure he exerted against his right knee.

Steve remembered reading one report on the file Natasha had given him, one that in its concise, cold language had horrified him more than anything else. Written by a doctor, it had been an efficient run down of something the Russians called weapons cleaning:

- lathering (curd soap, first cleaning of cuts sustained during mission)
- hosing down (water at 15°C, Asset shivering. Needs more training. Water turned down to 10°C)
- wounds cleaned and sewed (Asset making noises during procedure, recalibration required)
- shaving (straight razor, Asset not entirely submissive, minor cuts)
- ointment applied to scar tissue near the metal limb. (skin still raw, Asset shows signs of phantom pain in arm, recalibration required)

Having someone else shave him instead of doing it out of his own free will, it had to bring back memories that... Steve shuddered. This wasn't a good idea, in fact, it was a terrible one. He wasn't going to put James through that.

"I changed my mind." He didn't look at James, couldn't, so he picked up the electrical razor and pretended to be confused by it. "I know how to handle a straight razor, but not this thing. Besides, I hear the Yeti style is going to make a return this summer. Not to mention that we're in the kitchen."

"Rogers, you suck at lying."

That he did. He was good at evading and subterfuge when he was Captain America, but Steve from Brooklyn had been a terrible liar his entire life, especially when it came to friends.

"Come on, Steve," James' voice was teasing. "Afraid you can't handle these good looks once I'm clean shaven?"

Steve snorted a laugh. "That must be it."

"So, come on, punk."

The old insult was like a hot needle to Steve's heart; it was so very, very Bucky that hope flared sharp in him. He been so good lately at listening to Sam's and Natasha's advice, had been so willing to not see Bucky but the man his friend was now, James Barnes, but it was moments like these, little flashes of memories uncovered that made that task excruciating.

The old Steve had been close to his best friend, close enough that Bucky's family had sometimes joked that they must have been separated at birth – something that always prompted Bucky to say that he'd got away with the good looks and Steve with the brains. Bucky had sold himself short, of course, but they had been like brothers. Bucky had helped him with his first shave when Steve finally started to sprout a beard at seventeen.

Seventeen. Hadn't that been embarrassing. His beard had been patchy and thin and he'd still had
spots, unlike Bucky, who had only had acne for about a week, the lucky bastard. Bucky had laughed, rubbed his sandpapery jaw against Steve's forehead, and promised he'd get sick of having to shave soon enough.


Steve switched on the shaver. It buzzed quietly, quieter than his own, and a closer look proved it had been modified, no doubt by Tony. He had to smile. Tony had never met a machine he didn't want to improve.

"Look up," he told James.

"People are getting old here," Tony teased. "We're all going to be in wheelchairs if you don't get to it."

"Yeah, we're gonna be late to dinner at Mama's," Sam added.

"We're not," Tony said, sliding off the chair. "I'll leave them to their flea-picking and hair braiding and go eat your mother's cooking without them." He started walking toward the elevator. "More for me —"

"Us," Sam interrupted, following him. "She's my Mom."

"Fine," Tony answered, his voice now quieter as he reached the elevator. "More for us, none for them. Especially," he called through the closing elevator doors, "the pie miser!" The doors slid closed in front of his face.

"Do it, Steve, or I'm going to my first dinner invitation in seventy years looking like some homeless guy and blaming you," James ordered him.

Steve held the buzzing razor over Bucky's – no, James', he reminded himself – jaw, then move his hand back. He curled his hand along the back of James skull to tip his head at a better angle.

James closed his eyes and tipped his head back farther while biting his lip. Steve saw how much he wanted to break away, how much he was willing himself to go against reflexes and muscle memory all at once. Steve's breath caught in his chest when he felt James force himself to relax and rest his head into the palm of Steve's left hand. The weight of his head wasn't anything that would have Steve breaking into a sweat on a normal day. The metaphorical weight of the trusting gesture, however, of the man who had been the Winter Soldier willingly surrendering and offering the vulnerable length of his throat, made Steve's arm and hand tremble. Even after their last conversation, after James made it abundantly clear that he never wanted to go back to being Bucky and was afraid that Steve was pushing him in that direction, James was willing to trust Steve.

Steve had thought about that conversation during two long nights in which he didn't get much sleep. He'd tried to examine his own wishes and found himself curled in on himself with something close to a panic attack when the knowledge hit how truly alone he was in the world if James decided not to go back to being Bucky. He'd shivered through an awful hour of feeling the icy water freeze his bones and his heart again, losing himself and losing everything, out of place and out of time and so utterly alone, until Sam had knocked on his door and had picked him up for a trip to the gym. Afterward, Pepper had burned the toast and Jarvis had to quell the fire alarm in order to not wake Tony. Bruce had made pancakes and James had given a startled laugh at something Clint said and Natasha had nudged her hip against his leg and had stolen the first pancake off his plate with a winning grin, and the ugly, frozen knot in his chest had slowly melted and untangled.
Maybe he didn't need James to be Bucky. He'd always miss his best friend, but forcing James to be that friend wasn't just selfish, it was cruel. So maybe it was time to man up and turn a new leaf.

He realized that his contemplation had gone on for too long when James opened his eyes and gave him a questioning look. "Should I cut it?" he asked. He sounded unenthusiastic about it, more like he was asking out of courtesy, not out of real interest.

Steve met James' gaze. "Do you want to?"

James worried his lower lip between his teeth before answering. "I thought maybe you did." He flicked his gaze toward Steve's hand still in his hair. "You were taking so long that I figured you were contemplating cutting it all off."

Steve shut off the still buzzing razor and fought against the flush creeping into his cheeks. Bucky never would have let his hair grow this long. The long hair was uniquely James. "No, actually. Colonel Phillips would probably give me a good tongue-lashing over it, but I," he relaxed his hand so he could glide his fingers through James' hair, testing the texture against his fingertips, "I like it." He swallowed, then remembered the conversations he'd had with Sam and Natasha. "It's different from Bucky. Helps me see you, not him."

Surprise flickered over James' face, then morphed into something Steve couldn't decipher before James closed his eyes again. When he spoke again, his voice was rough. "I thought the Arm already took care of that."

"Eye of the beholder," Steve answered, mainly because he had no idea how to handle the raw hurt and self-deprecating sarcasm. He ran his hand through James' hair again, wordlessly communicating his appreciation for it, then pressed his fingertips against James' scalp, massaging and scraping his nails lightly over his scalp. James tipped his head back into Steve's hand and his breath hitched. Steve repeated the motion, absurdly feeling himself go a little breathless alongside James, but unable to stop.

"You're going to have to decide if you want to shave me or braid my hair," James said, slitting one eye open.

Steve eased up on the pressure. "Can't I do both?" he asked, inflecting playfulness into the question to cover the surprised hurt he felt over the rebuke.

"Not today," James answered with an amused twist to his mouth. "Pick one, Cap."

"Shaving it is then, or Alisha really might withhold the pie."

The look of dismay that crossed James' face at the thought of going pie-less was worth losing the earlier moment for.

He shaved James quickly and efficiently without dawdling while James held perfectly still and watched him from under lowered eyelashes. When Steve was done, he brushed the back of his index finger against James' chin and up to his bottom lip, testing the grind and where he'd have to go over again. He flickered his gaze up to meet James' eyes to get an okay to continue and found his pupils blown wide enough only a small ring of the blue iris remained. Steve was suddenly wildly grateful Tony had left the room a while ago, because what he saw in James' blown pupils and his open lips caused a sudden, unfamiliar burst of heat to climb Steve's cheeks.

"Maybe that's... " he trailed off, swallowed. Tried again. "Maybe that's enough for now." He let his hands fall away from James. "Try it yourself, see if you're okay with it."
"It's fine," James said, his voice a little hoarse. "I have shaved myself before." He tested his jaw with his right hand. "I should go shower and change."

"Dress code is something nice but not too formal."

"I saw what Sam and Tony wore last time," James said. "Plus Pepper probably laid out a choice of clothes. I'm starting to feel like a dress-up doll."

Steve chuckled because Natasha and Pepper had snagged James one day and nearly exhausted his super soldier endurance by the end of their effort to outfit him with a completely new wardrobe the week before. He pitied the personal shoppers who had had to bring everything to the Tower and then return everything that had been rejected. "I know the feeling." He never wanted to model skinny jeans again.

He didn't intend to wear them either. At least Pepper had listened to his preference for looser slacks, khakis, and suit pants. He would never be comfortable wearing denim that could double as a pressure bandage. Besides, he'd been kidded enough over tights by the Commandos.

"Twenty minutes," he told James.

"Got it."

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**James**

James snagged Steve's leather jacket and pulled it on as they headed out the door. Tony and Sam were in the limo, waiting as Steve and James came out, but they lingered another five minutes and Natasha joined them.

"Pep got tied up with a big meeting that got delayed a week ago," Tony explained. "So I thought Natasha would be a good addition." He waved expansively.

Natasha leaned forward in her seat and spoke to Sam while ignoring Tony. "Thank you for the invitation."

Sam snorted. "And I only had to twist both your arms."

"Why wouldn't you want to come?" Steve asked. "You're bound to like Alisha."

Natasha smiled her sphinx-like smile. "I'm sure," was all she said though.

"Happy," Tony said, "let's get this show on the road."

James didn't say anything but he was relieved Natasha would be with them. He knew she could smooth things over if he made things awkward without fussing and smothering him with worry. She didn't see him as broken; he didn't horrify her the way he did all the others sometimes. He knew Steve and Sam and maybe Tony were concerned he'd snap and do something violent, but James fretted he'd embarrass them and himself. With Natasha along, he felt more comfortable about meeting Sam's mother. She'd keep everyone in line no matter what, not just him, but Steve and Sam and Tony too.

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According to Tony, being a chauffeur wasn't Happy's job anymore, hadn't been for years, but Happy still insisted sometimes. Today, Sam had a feeling that the reason he did was to keep an eye on the case with the portable Iron Man suit Tony had placed in the trunk of the car before they left for dinner. Sam wasn't sure if Steve had seen it, but Tony had made sure that Sam did, and Sam felt a bizarre gratitude for the precaution, because despite Mama's insistent invitation, he still wasn't liking the idea of bringing James along to his mother's house.

Okay, with Tony and his cool and effective suit, Natasha her badass self, and Steve who could match James' speed and strength, plus Sam was no slouch himself, there really wasn't any real danger. But still. Sam had gone through the Air Force Academy and the lessons he'd learned there hadn been burned into him serving in the Sandbox: there was no sure way to stop someone willing to die to kill. He didn't think James wanted to kill anyone, but Bruce wasn't wrong. They didn't know what might trigger him and Sam would rather not have any kind of violence in his Mama's house.

Plus it was dinner and food with James had been issue-laden. Then again... really only if someone took James' food away or something made him sick, and Mama's leftovers had been the first thing not to do that.

Still. Steve was with them, and really, the only times James had reacted with any kind of violence were when Steve triggered him. The irony didn't escape Sam. So maybe they should have left Steve at home. But Mama would have been so disappointed, wouldn't she?

Hell, he just didn't know anything except his anxiety was probably freaking James out.

"You're hyperventilating again," Tony remarked. "Is this a thing with you when you bring new people to your mother's house?" A smirk flitted over his face and he added, "How did you ever bring a girlfriend home without passing out on the doorstep?"

Sam flipped him off and didn't say anything. No need to give Tony any more ammunition.

"Well, everyone, since our doubting Thomas here is close to a nervous breakdown, have you all washed your hands and faces and donned your Sunday best? Left all the weapons at home?"

Natasha made an entirely too innocent face and Sam winced. He should have known, of course, but the day she left the house without at least one concealed weapon on her somewhere would be the day she was in a wooden box, and he had a feeling that even in her coffin, she'd still be armed. Never knew what waited for you in the afterlife, after all.

"Hey, no," Natasha turned to James who had muttered something under his breath in what Sam could only guess was Russian – he couldn't make it out though, it was just too softly spoken. James' metal hand – the only bit of the Arm that was showing under the long sleeved shirt he was wearing – flexed in his lap. The noon sun made it glint but didn't obscure the way Steve's worried face reflected in the shining metal, blurred and splintered by the interlocking plates.

Damn. Tony'd stuck his foot in this time. James, if anyone, knew the prosthetic arm was always a weapon. He called it the Arm, the way some guys named their cars and guns.

Natasha shook her head, her movement clipped. "Он не имеет в виду ничего –"

Sam would never get over how soft voiced James was when he wasn't pushed past his emotional limits. He could...
actually be very soothing to spend time with when Sam managed to forget he'd been an assassin for seventy years and a damned good soldier before that.

From the corner of his eye, Sam saw Tony give a complicated facial wince. Then, as if it just dawned on him, he reached for a small, expensive looking paper bag Sam had seen near his feet earlier. "I don't think you need to, but if you want to... " He shoved the bag at James who took it with a bemused look.

"They're hand-sewn according to your measurements. Should fit."

James opened the bag, wordless, and fished out a pair of soft-looking suede gloves in a dark blue that matched the shirt James was wearing. He trailed his fingers over the supple leather. His face gave nothing away when he pulled the left glove on and flexed his hand. "Thank you."

Sam saw Steve's shoulders relax a little and felt his own muscles uncoil as well. Well, he thought, it can only get better from here on, right?

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In hindsight, he should have known better than to jinx himself. Even if jinxing was probably unfair, but damn, it felt jinxed.

Dinner was not going well, despite the exquisite courtesy everyone was displaying. Tony and Steve were trying their best. Hell, so was Sam, and he couldn't blame James for going quieter than normal. This wasn't what any of them had expected.

It just hadn't occurred to Sam that Natasha would be a problem, but there was no mistaking it. Mama's mouth pursed just a little each time she said something. If he hadn't known better, Sam would have been checking the thermostat to see if someone had accidentally set it on freeze the bitch. Except Sam recognized the signs from the time he was dating Doreen Mullins in college.

Mama had not liked Doreen and before the first evening they met was through, Doreen had not liked Mama either. Doreen and he had not lasted and Mama had not said I told you so. Not out loud, though she'd had that face when Sam told her about the break-up. Then he'd told her he was going to the Air Force Academy and she'd forgot all about Doreen in the face of her baby boy selling himself to the Military-Industrial Establishment.

Which had been why he told her about Doreen dumping him – he'd hoped to play the sympathy card. He should have known better. Mama had firm views on violence and American imperialism and black men who helped support it.

He supposed it could be worse. Natasha was a grown-ass woman, well able to stand up to Mama; she didn't need everyone or anyone to like her. If it had been James, Sam would have been thinking of hustling him out, provided Steve hadn't first.

Mama had taken to James as well as Sam had expected, though: which was to say very.

She'd always had a soft spot for the quiet, complicated ones, they sent her helper-instinct into overdrive. Sam remembered far too many discussions about her putting herself into harm's way when she'd tried to get through to another one of those quiet kids who was part of a gang. She'd always been right in the end, but Sam never stopped worrying that one day, he'd have a call from a tired NYC cop telling him to come identify Mama's body. He shook the thought with some difficulty.

"Thank you for sending the leftovers, Mrs. Wilson," James was saying. "I really enjoyed them."
Sam could almost see his mother melt at his sincerity. In a way, Sam was pleasantly surprised. James was a lot more skittish here than he'd been at the tower as of late, but Sam could appreciate that this was his first social interaction with a civilian who wasn't part of the Avengers inner circle as well as his first expedition outside the tower since he arrived. And for that? He was doing really well, even wrapping Sam's mother around his little finger with his quiet charm.

"I always cook too much, though I must say it's a pleasure seeing everyone eat with such a good appetite."

Sam flicked an uneasy look over to Natasha, who had taken only small portions. Her expression remained placid as she lifted her fork to her lips and bit a slice of mandarin-orange in two. She hadn't missed Mama's dig, though. "It's all delicious," Natasha complimented blandly. "Especially this vinaigrette."

Mama's mouth pursed for just a second. "Thank you."

"Your tips about the organic foods and using raw and natural foods instead of processed stuff with additives made a huge difference." Steve said, glossing over Mama's sudden icy courtesy by distracting her.

"Tony made every kitchen and pantry in the Tower go organic," Sam added. Steve had good instincts, talking about food usually distracted Mama effectively.

James had eaten Sam's broccoli-chicken casserole and steamed vegetables with actual enthusiasm the night before. There had even been a short fork fight between him and Clint over the cobbler Sam served afterward. James looked and acted so much better in the last week – since he'd been keeping his food down – that it was clear even he hadn't had any real grasp of how miserable he'd been before.

"And I am happy I did it," Tony assured everyone. "Listening to this guy barf up every meal had me losing weight out of sheer sympathy. And I don't do sympathy."

Mama eyed James and then said, "Sam, pass your friend the gratin and some more of those noodles."

"Is there enough for me too?" Steve asked and Sam hid a smile behind his napkin. Steve had told Sam once, a little embarrassed after his third helping of mac and cheese that his super soldier metabolism never quit.

"I have more noodles in the kitchen," Mama assured him. "But save room for dessert." She smiled at James. "Sam said you enjoyed the pie I sent home with him last week, so I fixed a couple more for you to take home."

"Whoa, whoa, somebody dim the light!" Sam joked when he saw the smile that crossed James' face at Mama's announcement. It was nothing short of radiant, and Sam didn't think he'd ever seen James looking so happy. Seeing James smile, Steve radiated happiness as well, but of a quieter kind. Seeing Steve practically watching James with hearts in his eyes made Sam wonder if Steve was even aware of how much he gave away.

"I'm going to have to disappoint you a tiny bit, though, because the pies are to take home. Today, we're having cheesecake for dessert."

Sam almost moaned at the thought. He loved Mama's lemon-ricotta cheesecake. Her recipe was Sicilian and she'd never explained where she got it, but it was always, always wonderful in the
summer time. "If you're afraid of them being disappointed, you can just give it all to me. I can protect them from the horrible disappointment."

"That good, huh?" Tony asked.

"Better," Sam said.

"Did you make the cheesecake yourself, Mrs. Wilson?" Natasha asked. She was using her friendly and harmless voice; the third or fourth modulation of it he'd heard since they started dinner. Something made Natasha uneasy, she'd been trying on roles in quicker succession than Sam had seen or heard about before.

Sam winced inside. Mama would never forgive Natasha for implying she might have *bought* any part of this dinner other than the raw ingredients. Natasha probably couldn't imagine taking an entire day to cook up everything for a single meal. That was what Mama was going to get from what she'd said, while Natasha had – probably – been trying to show she was impressed.

"Yes, I did."

"I can make *blinchiki*, but otherwise I'm dependent on take-out," Natasha said. "I never had time to learn. Sam's lucky you taught him so much."

Mama didn't offer anything more and Sam shot her a wary look. With the combined efforts of Steve and Tony, they had just managed to get the temperature to comfortable degrees again. He didn't want it to drop to freezing again.

"Natasha has other skills," Tony said. The man did like to live dangerously. "When SHIELD had her undercover as my PA, she was almost as good as Pepper used to be." He ate another of the slow-cooked meatballs, chasing it through the cranberry sauce to load it up and then devouring it with a completely specious ignorance of the undercurrents at the table. "You sure I can't hire you away from the New York Public School system to cook for me?"

"Afraid not, those kids need me a lot more than you do."

"I know, I know, you're doing stuff someone needs to," Tony agreed. He stabbed another meatball. "But the offer stands. Run away with me, feed me until I can't fit in the Suit, and I'll put everyone at your school through college."

"Stop it, you ridiculous man," Mama said, but she ducked her head and smiled at the outrageousness.

"This pasta is handmade?" James asked softly. He had his left hand, still in the glove, in his lap and had kept it there throughout dinner. It made Sam realize nothing in the dinner required more than one hand to manipulate or eat and made his annoyance with her fade, because he'd told her James had a prosthetic and she'd picked the menu to make sure it wouldn't require him to use it if he didn't feel comfortable displaying it.

"Yes, I make it myself."

Natasha smiled and even managed to have it reach her eyes. She was really trying. "That's pretty amazing."

"Really not that difficult," Mama said, dismissing the compliment. She turned back to Steve and Tony with a genuine smile, urging Steve to take another serving of meatballs and the sweet potato noodles she'd served them on.
Natasha finished her salad. She didn't say anything more. Sam cringed.

The slightly louder than average clink of a fork touching porcelain drew his attention to the other side of the table. James had put his fork down, abandoning the food still on his plate. His gaze switched back and forth between Mama and Natasha. His expression slowly shut down into the blank mask that Sam knew now hid when he was upset.

"So, Alisha, I hear you're laying claim to Sam this weekend?" Sam had never really appreciated before how easily Tony could steer conversations just by his pure presence. He released a small breath of relief when Mama turned to Tony and began talking about the event she had planned at church and how she wanted Sam to give a speech there.

Natasha went on eating quietly, but it looked like she was doing it more out of courtesy than out of appetite. It sucked that she wasn't enjoying herself. Sam still couldn't put a finger on what had happened, just that Mama had taken one look at Natasha when he had introduced them, recognition flickering over her face before her smile froze for a microsecond. The way her smile had turned wider and completely fake should have told Sam that it was going to be difficult.

He'd just underestimated how difficult exactly. As much as Steve and Tony were thinking it, Sam knew from painful experience that, no matter how much he loved her, his Mama was no saint. She could be immovable as a rock when she had an opinion and she formed those easily and quickly and held grudges forever. Convincing her that a first impression she'd had was wrong was tough work that took time and patience.

James hadn't picked up his fork again and Steve was doing the puppy dog eyes thing again when looking between James and Natasha and that just had to be stopped because the Steve Rogers' puppy dog eyes required a weapons permit that hadn't even been invented yet. Sometimes Sam wondered how James could stand being on the receiving end of them and not either cave every time or punch Steve in the face.

"James?" Mama asked. She lifted her eyebrows at his plate and the silverware sitting on it, no longer in use. "Is something wrong?"

"Your food is wonderful," James said. He sounded strained and he'd begun clocking the exits, even the windows open for the non-existent summer breeze, again. "I think I need to stop now, though." He glanced at Steve through his eyelashes, then looked at Natasha. "Natalia?"

"I can take James back to the Tower," Natasha said as if it made no difference to her. "I should check in on Clint anyway."

Steve looked upset. "Are you sure? I can – "

"Stay," James and Natasha said at the same time. James forewent his good manners and said something in Russian. It made Natasha look thoughtful before she agreed. "ладно."

"Happy can drive you back," Tony said.

"Happy can drive you and Steve back, since it will be later by the time you leave," Natasha said definitively. "James and I will take care of ourselves. Mrs. Wilson, I hope you know how much I appreciate you allowing me to take Pepper's place tonight. I've never enjoyed a dinner like this."

Mama went a little ashy, and Sam wanted to ask if she'd really thought she could keep poking the Black Widow with a stick and not expect to get stung?

"I'm sorry you don't feel up to staying any longer," Mama said to James.
James just nodded. Steve touched his shoulder, leaning in to murmur, "Are you sure you're okay?"

A shrug was James only answer along with a veiled look Mama's way.

"More for us, right, Sam?" Tony said brightly. "I'm looking forward to dessert."

Natasha murmured more platitudes, with James stiff and silent beside her, and Sam accompanied them to the door. He opened his mouth to say something, but Natasha held up her hand in a silent command he refrain.

Sam would have worried about the two of them walking in Harlem, except it was the Winter Soldier and the Black Widow. He hoped no fool tried to give them trouble; he didn't want to be bailing them out of jail. Oh, who was Sam kidding? Natasha and James wouldn't need bail; they wouldn't get caught and if they did, they'd break out on their own.

Tony led a conversational rally once Sam was back at the table, egging Mama into a rant about the city and state bureaucracies that Sam had heard more than once before. With pauses to explain to Steve the difference between the way things were supposed to work and the way they just didn't in the real world, it kept the rest of the meal from falling into a black hole of awkward silence.

Sam carried his and Tony's plates into the kitchen as part of clean up. Mama exempted Tony from clean-up duty as a guest and while Steve was almost part of the family by now, she still let him be today. Sam knew she expected him to give her a hand, though. He didn't mind, since he wanted to get her alone.

He stepped into the kitchen and set the dirty plates next to the sink so they could be rinsed before going into the dishwasher. He leaned against the counter and tried to fix her with a look. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

She opened a cabinet door so her face was hidden behind it and said, "No."

Sam groaned inwardly. Of course, that had been a closed question and she knew it. Awesome. A lecture in the kitchen. "Let me rephrase that, then," he said, a little miffed now. "What do you have against Natasha?"

Mom got out the dessert plates and closed the door again, just shy of slamming it shut. "Just because I haven't started exchanging recipes with her doesn't mean – "

"Mama." He crossed his arms over his chest and waited her out.

"All right, fine," she met his gaze, then shrugged. "I don't like her."

"Okay, you don't see eye to eye. You shut her down before she even came in the door. What don't you like about her, exactly?"

Mama gave him an arch look. "Stop rephrasing what I said, we're at home, not in one of your meetings."

That was the kind of parental bullshit Sam hadn't missed in DC. He raised an eyebrow back at her. "Really? Is that how it's gonna be?"

She turned to the fridge, got out the cheesecake he'd seen in there earlier and began cutting it with a lot more force than the task would have required. "I can't get a read on her," she said eventually. "I have an eye for people, and I think I can say that I'm good at assessing people's characters even if I haven't spent a lot of time with them. But your friend... She's all act. No one who isn't lying about
something should be that tense." She expelled a breath. "She's like a snake. Whenever I think I can see behind that pretty face, she sheds another skin and changes."

"She's a spy, Mama. It's kind of in the job description." Sam thought Natasha would have been a lot more relaxed if she'd been lying, that was in her wheelhouse after all. Sunday family dinners weren't and he thought she'd been almost as uncomfortable as James, though she had hid it better. Natasha had actually been paying Mama a pretty high compliment by not successfully fooling her, and no matter how good Mama thought she was, Sam knew Natasha could have done it.

"Are we a job?"

"Mama..."

"I mean it, Samuel. What does she have to hide? She has no reason to be cagey around us, yet she is."

Natasha was always cagey. She always had one more trick up her sleeve even when she didn't have sleeves and that was why she was still alive.

"Could it be because someone made her feel less than welcome?"

"I watch the news, Sam, I'm not living behind the moon. I know who she is. I know what she's done."

"Do you, really?" Sam asked. He was suddenly tired. Did anyone really know everything that Natasha had – and hadn't – done? Why did people care about her past when she'd helped save millions of lives? Why did no one see what she had given up to do that? "She's more than her job, Mama. More than where she's from and who trained her. You of all people should know that. Besides, what went onto the 'net, that was what SHIELD and Hydra knew and that's... not necessarily the truth. Or all of it." He took a deep breath and added, "And if you don't have the whole picture, why don't you just trust my judgment?"

Sam grabbed the dessert plates and carried them to the dining room.

Steve and Tony were still at the table, talking in low tones, and both looked stiff and uncomfortable when they glanced up.

Yeah, dinner at Mama's hadn't gone exactly like Sam hoped at all.

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**James**

Late afternoon, last of Indian summer, the day caught in a bubble of amber. But the air had already begun to cool, filled with the promise of a first frost, while the lemon light ran quick as water into the blue dusk. Leaves from the occasional city tree, boxed in its square of concrete-girded earth, rustled beneath James' boots. The dry scent mingled with exhaust fumes and cooking smells from the residential buildings Natasha and he passed on their path back to Stark Tower.

That hint of winter to come cut through the light jacket James wore, chilling him, but it wasn't just the wind beginning to bluster through the streets turned canyons affecting him. He knew how to ignore physical discomfort. He had no idea how to feel when the dinner he'd been looking forward to so much had veered so sharply off course. He couldn't miss and eventually couldn't ignore the sense of dislike rolling off Sam's mother toward Natasha. It had filled the house, poisoning the air
until he couldn't breathe. His skin had prickled with nervous sweat as the tension and the need to lash out rose, until he couldn't stomach it any longer.

Natasha had seemed impervious to the atmosphere, but James had taken the opportunity to ask her to leave with him. He knew Steve wouldn't let him leave by himself and didn't want to ask him to leave, so it made sense. It got her out of there too.

As his anxiety had ramped up and he'd felt the urge to react physically to the atmosphere rise and rise, he'd even resorted to Russian and practically begged Natasha to accompany him before he did something drastic. The begging, he didn't care about, at least she'd agreed, and he could devote his attention to any potential threats outside and not pretend part of his mind wasn't assessing Sam's mother as one.

Next to him, Natasha didn't walk, she ambled, as if she had no care in the world. James modulated his stride to match hers. He eyed her sidelong, trying to read anything from her abstracted expression.

It took him a while to put the concept in his head into words, but eventually, he managed to say, "She hurt you."

Natasha laughed, a low, throaty chuckle. "Sticks and stones." She winked at James, her posture and movement conveying the loose body language of someone unaffected and at ease. He read through the mask, though: he had the same training after all. Maybe Natasha had forgotten that, because she went on lying. "Tony and Steve are both needy enough they still want a mother's approval, even if she's not their mother. I don't crave warm fuzzies. Why would I care if she didn't like me?"

"Why would you?" James repeated.

Natasha narrowed her eyes at him, but said nothing for another two blocks. James thought she'd simply decided not to answer when she spoke up again, "Why did you want to leave?"

He'd asked himself the same question at the table and the door, walking out with Natasha, and it had become clear. "I realized that I was there under false pretenses," he replied. "If she couldn't accept you, how the hell could she like me if she knew who I really am? I've killed more people for more years than you have even been alive."

"Even the worst of us like to think we're doing what we do for good," Natasha remarked. "No one likes it when someone denies that. Not even me." She laughed then, a husky sound threaded through with a darkness James recognized in himself too.

The Black Widow and the Winter Soldier didn't belong at the same table as Alisha Wilson; lions and lambs did not gamble in the garden. Sam's mother had good instincts – at least when it came to who the leaked files said Natasha was. He didn't understand why Mrs. Wilson's instincts hadn't flagged him as a threat. Maybe it had to do with Steve.

Natasha linked her arm with his and laughed again. "Did you think you needed to defend my honor, старик?"

James was beginning to like that laugh even though he knew she was mocking him. He understood her black humor and cynicism, they felt natural to him too, as if they'd been a part of him even before he was a killer.

They had two amateurs clumsily following them. James maintained operational mode and concealed that he'd made them. They were a threat yet, so he monitored them while thinking about
what Natasha had just said.

He hadn't been defending her honor, of course. He hadn't wanted to upset Steve or Sam as his nerves wound tighter and tighter. Mrs. Wilson's cool dismissal of Natasha had warned him he couldn't slip even for a moment, couldn't let her see what he really was. Realizing that he'd have to play a role just like Natasha was doing, and that he wouldn't be accepted for who he was... He'd just wanted to get away. Natasha, as well as Clint, understood the Winter Soldier side of him, the assassin, the weapon, in a way that even soldiers like Sam and Steve didn't. Someone like Mrs. Wilson couldn't understand them, not even someone like Tony. Leaving the table and her house with Natasha hadn't been about running or proving a point, it had been about exiting a situation before it escalated. His choice. If you didn't have an exit, you were in a trap. Still, he regretted the turn the evening had taken.

"Don't call me old man," James protested to distract himself from his thoughts.

"But you are!" To his surprise, she leaned her head against his shoulder, as if they were lovers, and murmured, "Two, my seven o'clock."

"I know. Only one's carrying," James said. They'd been following Natasha and himself for three blocks, too obvious to be professionals or even hirelings.

"Are you?"

James chuckled. He had a garrote, one pistol, and three knives, two for throwing, one for hand-to-hand. "I'm always armed."

Natasha laughed genuinely, as if she was pleased with him. "See if they give up or cut through the next alley?"

"Alley," James said. Training and experience dictated always choosing the location and time of an engagement.

The alley had enough garbage and dumpsters to provide cover for multiple ambushers, but the only ones in it were James, Natasha, and a stray dog tearing into a black plastic bag of something James preferred not to examine closely. The dog, slat-ribbed and sort of a mustard yellow, growled at them, black gums and a missing canine tooth revealed when it curled its lips back. Two humans proved more frightening than the feral animal's hunger could handle and it bolted a second later. James noted the metal dumpsters would provide cover if necessary and there were three doors he could easily break through, along with a rusted fire escape within jumping distance, if they needed escape routes. The alley was dry, providing decent footing, but they'd need to be careful near the gutters. Between the bags overflowing from the dumpsters themselves and the rotten stuff oozing from them, it would be easy to misstep or slip.

Natasha rolled her shoulders and then stomped, settling her feet in her boots.

The two men following them entered the alley and sped up their steps. Natasha's mouth curled into a predatory smile that would have sent smart men running the other way if they could have seen it.

"Hey, baby, stop and talk to us a minute," the taller one, who wore a watch cap pulled low to his ears and baggy cargo pants, called.

"Yeah, you and your boyfriend," his buddy added. He had on jeans and a NYCC sweatshirt that fit him and a heavier gray hoodie that didn't, the sleeves hanging down to hide all but his fingertips. He was the one with the revolver, using the hoodie to keep it mostly concealed from anyone not
looking closely.

James raised his eyebrows at Natasha. "Let me handle this." She handed James her purse. The weight gave away where one of her guns was. Probably a .22, James judged. It would fit her hand better, but he could use it in a pinch.

She spun to face the two followers. "Hey, boys," she greeted them.

Big guy's step stuttered, proving under the muscle he had some brains or at least the tattered remnants of an animal instinct for self-preservation.

James took a step back. It drew Big and Little's attention. He could see them dismissing him as a threat, either because he looked youngish, smaller than he was in his too big bomber jacket – he'd borrowed it from Steve – seemingly unarmed, or because he appeared to be retreating.

"Baby, you are some fine piece of ass. What you doing down here, hanging with this punk pretty boy? You oughta let us show you a good time."

James choked on a laugh. He could handle being called pretty boy, but they were going to pay for the ass remark. Natasha would make sure of it. There went any chance of him releasing some tension, too. He slouched his shoulder against the edge of a not too filthy dumpster and settled in to watch the show while keeping an eye out for anyone else showing up.

"You think so?" Natasha asked in a throaty voice. She strutted toward them and Big swallowed visibly. Little's eyes locked on the swing of her hips.

"Know so. I'll even hold your purse for you, baby, see what you got in there. Yeah, your friend there, he should hand it over to Ricky, 'long with his wallet."

James leveled a flat, steel-cold look at Ricky. The taller man glanced around, looking for the threat he suddenly felt. "Eddie," he said. "Maybe this ain't such a good idea..." James nodded his agreement.

Eddie wasn't bright enough to listen to his friend. Natasha was close enough to Eddie now that his handgun was irrelevant. Eddie waved the revolver in his right hand because he was too dumb to understand that. That was only a six-shot revolver and it still had more bullets than he had brains.

"Everything?" Natasha purred at him.

"Yeah," Eddie said. "Jewelry too."

Natasha touched her fingertips to the arrow pendant she wore like a cross.

"That too, baby. You don't want me to put two in your boyfriend over there, do you? Or maybe I'll shoot you." He raised his voice. "You're going to be smart, right? Hand over everything you got."

"He already shot me," Natasha said. "Two times."

James nodded at Ricky, who seemed torn between doing what Eddie told him and being smart. "Eddie – "

Eddie's mouth dropped open. Natasha spun and kicked, red hair flying like a spray of blood, and the revolver flew out of Eddie's hand at the same time her boot broke his wrist. Natasha twisted with the direction of her kick, one hand coming down to act as a pivot as her other leg swung up and her heel smashed Eddie's jaw. Blood and pieces of teeth splattered down Eddie's chin as he
tried to scream.

Natasha finished her cartwheel on her feet again, punching Ricky in the gut and then jamming her elbow back into his throat as he doubled over.

She went back to using her legs, kicking Ricky behind the knee so he went down and then slamming the sole of her boot into Eddie's back, right over his kidneys.

It took maybe thirty seconds and both men were on the pavement.

James shook his head. Their would-be muggers should have paid attention. Nothing in the natural world had coloring like Natasha's hair without being deadly, if not poisonous. He'd wondered why she chose such a telltale color, but now it made sense.

Not to mention that all most people saw was the crimson hair and the curving body. All Natasha had to do to disappear was change her hair and cover her curves. She might even say that was why she stayed a redhead. But in truth, James saw that Natasha wore her hair like a scar, the same way he carried the Arm.

On the ground, Eddie gurgled his agony. Ricky wavered between trying to crawl away and crawling over to Eddie.

He wondered what Mrs. Wilson would have thought of the last minute. She probably would be horrified. Steve would be upset too. James just felt admiration. If Natasha hadn't been with him, James would have killed them.

Natasha knew that. It didn't bother her. He suspected if he hadn't been with her, she would have killed both men too. They understood each other.

In truth, James felt Natasha accepted who he was better than Steve did. She never looked at him with pity, or concern, or that gut-wrenching guilt Steve wore like a second skin. And while Mrs. Wilson's food was excellent, and he was grateful for how much better he felt now that he could eat, at the end of the day, she was a stranger, insignificant compared to Natasha. Natasha was a potential ally, maybe even a friend in time. Natasha, who would walk into an alley beside him and knock two would-be muggers into unconsciousness with a casual ease that didn't leave James anything to do except a slow clap, already mattered more.

She mimed a ballerina's curtsey, then kicked Ricky in the ass when he groaned and tried to get up.

James handed Natasha's purse back before retrieving Eddie's handgun. He opened the cylinder and let the bullets drop into his palm, before tossing them into a sewer drain.

"I could have done that," Natasha said.

"Prints," James told her. He still had on the suede gloves Tony had given him in the limo. Natasha couldn't do what he did next, anyway. He pulled the hammer back with his real thumb and then ripped it out of the revolver with the fingers of his metal hand. He dropped both pieces by Eddie's face.

He'd been half hoping to burn off some tension, though it was probably better Natasha had dealt with them. Eddie and Ricky likely didn't merit killing. Not to mention how much it would bother Steve if he found out about it. "Now what?"

"You can explain to Clint why there's no pie tonight," Natasha told him.
James sighed, not looking forward to Clint's sorrowful over-acting.

"Did you know that was going to happen?" he asked when they were several blocks away. He didn't mean the muggers, though Natasha had probably predicted that, considering the neighborhood she'd steered them through.

Her answer was as double-edged as his question. "I knew it was a possibility."

James left the silence between them alone until they were close enough to see the tower. Everything was still a jumble, what he thought and what Natasha said, when he knew she was lying, to him if not to herself. She said she didn't care, but he'd seen how much she cared about Clint, she felt things, she'd made herself into more than an asset.

"So why?"

"Saying no would require an explanation."

"You're saying you couldn't tell Sam or Steve no?" James asked in disbelief.


"They shouldn't do that," he decided.

"I appreciate the sentiment," she said. "But it isn't as if I'm a stranger to manipulation. I might be doing it now. You don't need to feel sorry for me."

"I don't. She's just a civilian, what does she know?"

"As I said," Natasha agreed. "I don't need anyone's approval, James. I know what I'm worth."

"She shouldn't have acted like that," he insisted and it was selfish, because he was really bothered for himself as much as for Natasha. He liked Sam's mother and didn't want her to treat him the way she had acted toward Natasha.

"Everyone makes mistakes." The fiery red curtain of her hair swung forward and half-obscured her face. "I hoped that if she could handle Tony, she would give me a chance too. I should have expected something like it, but believe it or not, spending too much time around Steve has made me soft. He didn't have a problem with my past." He heard what she didn't say – that against better knowledge, she'd hoped that other people would react the way Steve did. "But nothing really changes."

James guessed what she meant. Steve made you want to live up to his standards, but his standards were so high, you inevitably fell short. If you let yourself believe the way Steve believed, then you ended up seeing other people fail at them too, because no one was like Steve. But you still wanted to keep trying.

His inner commentary, wondering why he liked the guy so much, sounded a lot like Clint.

"What kind of chance?" he asked, reverting back to what Natasha had said. A chance like Steve and the Avengers were taking on James? Natasha didn't need that, she was already one of them. Besides, what could Mrs. Wilson offer beyond her excellent food? She didn't have any of the skills required to live in the world Natasha and James inhabited. All the rest she really could offer was that motherly warmth James had felt washing over him like a summer breeze. It couldn't be that –

Natasha shook her head, but looked sad for a breath, before curving her lips into a sharp-edged
smile. "It doesn't matter. Second chances are for losers. We live in the gray areas, James, so no one can see the stains on us and because we're good at it. So what if we scuttle like roaches if the light comes on just because it blinds us as surely as the darkness blinds normal people?"

That was depressing and far too close to his own thoughts. Steve didn't just belong in the light, he was made of it. James would always be part of the shadows; they were part of him now.

"Mrs. Wilson is just a normal lady," Natasha went on. "She can't understand. Normal people think in black and white, cake or pie, and they can't see the nuances in between. I'm used to reactions like hers."

"But – "

"Doesn't mean that there aren't some days I don't want to find out the Mrs. Wilsons of the world would accept m – us. I'd blame Steve, but Clint and Phil started it." She gave another laugh, this one completely lacking any humor. "I've yet to be wrong, though. People judge and dismiss what doesn't fit into their narrow, safe view of the world. We won't change them." She ran a hand through her hair, lifting it away from her face, revealing a weariness there, like a gift to James. "I won't pretend I'm not tired of it, though."

James looked at her from the corner of his eyes while walking around a fire hydrant surrounded by rose petals and wondered how old Natasha really was. Her words sounded too disillusioned for her perceived age. He knew what Hydra's dossier on her had said, but dossiers often lied, like spies and faces. After all, he didn't even look the twenty-seven that he'd been when Hydra got hold of him.

"Let's close this topic before we start braiding each other's hair," Natasha declared. "How about we go and see if Clint has managed to make Bruce Hulk out?"

James nodded and held out his arm for her out of a habit he knew was Bucky's. Natasha set her hand on his elbow. "Such an old-fashioned gentleman."

"I let you beat up the muggers."

"What's that Clint says? Sharing is caring."

"You didn't share," he grumbled.

She patted his arm. "Next time."

Natasha was right. By the lights of someone like Mrs. Wilson or even guys like Sam and Bruce, looking forward to beating down muggers or to the satisfaction of a perfectly completed op wasn't normal. But trying to be normal would just destroy them. Better to accept what they were.
Steve

Natasha was sitting in the common room with Clint and Bruce, laughing and talking when Steve and Tony returned. Plates were strewn over the coffee table, still bearing the remnants of a meal. James was nowhere to be seen. Steve set down the brown paper bag with the pies Mrs. Wilson had insisted they take with them next to a Royal Copenhagen plate smeared with red sauce and dotted with olives and a single crust.

Bruce fielded a small pillow Clint tossed at him. "Are you a child?"

Clint tried to look innocent. "What? It's a throw pillow."

Bruce groaned.

"Did you fly here?" Tony asked, zeroing in on Natasha. "Happy said you didn't take a cab."

"We walked, it was good for both us," Natasha replied. She glanced up, hazel eyes calm, and nodded to Steve. He relaxed a little, but only a little, because he knew he wouldn't be completely at ease until he'd seen James with his own eyes. He checked the open kitchen, hoping James would be there, but it was empty.

James padded out of the hallway that led back to the bathroom, barefoot once more, before Steve could begin to really worry, and began gathering the dirty dishes. He gave Steve a half-smile. Steve let out a heavy sigh of relief and picked up the glasses and silverware still sitting around, since it provided a decent excuse to follow James into the kitchen.

"Jarvis instructed me and Bruce in how to make pizza from scratch," Clint commented as Steve rescued a plate from the floor by his feet.

Steve's brain stuttered, because while Bucky had been able to scramble eggs and other basic bits of cooking like boiling or frying, he'd never seen any indication Clint or Natasha would survive without either MREs or restaurants. The Winter Soldier hadn't had to cook, his controllers had made sure he could barely eat. Jarvis didn't even have a body to eat or taste buds. It sounded like a recipe for disaster, but Clint had a grin on his face. The idea of the three of them in the kitchen boggled the mind.

It was stupid, too, Steve realized, to think that way. Clint and Natasha were two of the most competent people in the tower. They could take care of themselves anywhere. Of course they could cook if they desired to. And James learned things faster than anyone Steve had known, focusing with a frightening intensity on anything that engaged him. Steve had let himself get lazy in his thinking. Even spies and assassins ate and all of them had been children once, had lives before they were wrapped in the shadowy world of espionage.

He could see it now, in his mind. All of them would enjoy doing something as normal yet necessary as cooking.

Even though he liked the picture he had of the three of them, Steve felt a little left out. James was bonding so easily with Clint and now Natasha. Bruce was even at ease around him now. Steve was the only one who still made James tense up.
James glanced over his shoulder as Steve came in, probably still looking bewildered. "Bruce did most of the work, I understand," he said, "but Clint did knead the dough. They were just adding the toppings when we got here." He was at the deep double sink, sleeves rolled up, arms immersed in soapy water nearly to his elbows, hand washing the dishes as Bucky had done when they shared a tiny apartment. Only Bucky hadn't had a metal arm that would need to be carefully dried and lubricated when he was done.

"I could do that," Steve offered.

James shrugged and held up his left hand, covered in dish soap foam, and wiggled the shiny fingers. "It's already wet. Why don't you dry?"

"Why do any of you do that?" Tony commented. "There's a dishwasher right in front of you. Is this a forties thing?"

James just shrugged and went on washing the dishes as if Tony hadn't spoken. Tony ambled over to the couch, shaking his head with a muttered, "Weirdos."

Steve found a dish towel in one of the drawers and began drying and putting plates away. The simple action soothed him, something he'd done since childhood, basically the same way now as ever, even if the china was better, and he guessed that was why James chose the task too.

"So how did the pizza turn out?" he asked. He didn't see any sign of it, but there were no signs of explosions or other cooking disasters.

"Not bad. Bruce is a good cook when you take away the curry powder."

Steve laughed. Bruce's ethnically accurate dishes were delicious but much too hot for his taste. He was Irish after all, he thought boiled potatoes were tasty all by themselves. James seemed more adventurous, but mostly that was a mixture of him not knowing what he was trying and not caring because it all made him sick anyway. He'd shown more interest since the organic revolution (as Tony had dubbed it).

"Are you feeling better?" Steve asked.

James angled him another look. "How was the rest of your dinner?"

Steve winced. "Long. Tony and I stayed for a while after we ate, even though I think Sam was just waiting for us to leave so he could start shouting. Is Natasha okay?"

"She's fine."

"Mrs. Wilson still sent the pies. They're in the common room," Steve said. "I should get them before – "

"Clint does," James agreed. He opened the sink trap and let the water drain, then began rinsing the sink.

"Okay. Yeah. I'll do that." James seemed so calm it almost bothered Steve. He'd expected he'd need to talk him down or something. He shook his head at himself as he walked back to the common room and retrieved the paper bag.

Clint sat forward on the couch he shared with Natasha. He licked his lips. "Is that – ?"

Clint yelled loudly, "James, you know you're my one true friend, right?"

James walked around the kitchen counter. He was wiping his arm down with the dish towel. "You know that's pitiful?"

Natasha grabbed onto Clint's earlobe and pinched, making him squeak and bat at her hand. "What am I?" she demanded sweetly. "Chopped liver?"

Clint began groveling while Tony glanced around obvious satisfaction. Steve had noticed how much Tony liked having everyone together at once.

Tony clapped his hands together. "Movie night!"

"My turn to pick!" Clint immediately shouted and vaulted off the couch before catching himself and clutching at his ribs. He only paused for a breath though, before demanding Jarvis display the titles available for viewing on the big screen.

"We're going to regret this," Bruce muttered, but didn't move from his place. Steve grinned at him, since movie nights were a little bit Bruce's fault in the first place.

Movie nights had become a staple in the last few weeks. Whenever Pepper went out of town now, Bruce would refuse to set foot inside a lab again unless Tony came out of his for at least eight consecutive hours. With Clint still recovering and off any mission roster – not that they had such a thing post-SHIELD, instead the Avengers were just responding to random threats that demanded their skillsets – and James lurking at the edges of things, Tony had suggested they all watch a movie together one night and it became a thing. Clint declared movie night the first step in, "Lessons to educate Steve in pop culture," resulting in Sam protesting he'd already introduced Steve to the music of Marvin Gaye and anything else was superfluous while Tony squawked about social media and the internet.

Steve never told any of them that he'd crossed most of the movies Clint suggested off his list already. Nights after the Chitauri attack had been long and sleepless and Netflix had provided an excellent distraction.

In the beginning, James had hovered around the edges of the living room, watching standing up with his back against a wall. He'd refused even the offer to sit down. Eventually, Clint had put a pillow in front of the wall. From then on, James crept closer in increments, a little more each movie. Last time, he'd sat on the floor next to the couch Steve was sitting on, leaning his head against the couch's arm, his lower legs covered with a fleece blanket Natasha had thrown at his head when he kept rubbing his bare feet together.

Steve had no idea what would happen this time, if James would join them at all or, if he did, maybe he'd sit somewhere far away from Steve. One step forward, two steps back seemed to be the norm these days.

"Well, kids," Clint said, clapping his hands together. "I hope you're all stocked up on caffeinated beverages, because this one's a challenge: all three movies." He pointed to the TV screen displaying a stylized golden ring. "Extended editions."

Bruce groaned quietly.

Steve was inclined to agree – The Ring Trilogy? Really? He'd never been all that fond of Wagner. He'd never have picked Clint as a fan of classical music or opera either.

"Last one standing gets to choose the next movie," Clint declared. "No use cheating, Jarvis will
"You do realize that you're usually the first to fall asleep, right?" Natasha said.

"Well, you won't subject us to *Dr. Zhivago*, either, since you're always right behind me."

They were both right – Clint and Natasha tended to be the ones who first listed against each other and then slept peacefully until the credits rolled.

"You would sleep through the beauty that is your namesake? I'm disappointed, Legolas."

Clint flipped Tony the bird.

"All three?" Bruce asked, a little mournfully. "Extended, too?"

"Wouldn't be a challenge otherwise, would it?"

"What's a challenge?" James' voice came from behind Steve's right shoulder and Steve flinched – he hadn't even heard him approach, too amused by the back and forth of the others.

"Clint wants to marathon all three *Lord of the Rings* movies," Natasha explained.

Oh. *Oh*. Not Wagner, then.

"Isn't he just going to sleep through at least two of them?" James asked.

Clint glowered at James. "Traitor."

James shrugged. "Payback for stealing my pie."

"That was weeks ago!" Clint protested.

"Doesn't mean I've forgotten about it," James said. He walked around the couch and – Steve held his breath – plonked down on next to Steve. He crossed his bare feet at the ankles and looked around the room, searching. "Who's going to make popcorn if Sam's not here?"

Sam had been declared official supplier of caramel popcorn after he had first made a batch for them. James was right, with Sam staying at his mother's, they would be out of their favorite treat.

"If you're okay with regular buttered popcorn, I could take over for Sam," Steve offered.

Four pairs of eyes were suddenly fixing him with insultingly surprised looks. "You?"

"He's quite good at it, actually," Natasha came to his rescue.

"How would you know?" Clint asked, sounding suspicious.

Natasha patted Clint's cheek with a winning smile. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

She'd come over to Steve's old place a couple of times after missions that had left her shaken. By an unspoken agreement, they had watched Laurel and Hardy movies together until she lost the tight set around her eyes and the coiled tension in her body. Natasha had always brought pizza, Steve had always made popcorn. She'd never stayed.

"Well, then, chop, chop, off to the kitchen with you, Iron Chef."

Three giant bowls of popcorn later – one for each couch – Steve sat back down and placed the
bowl between him and James while Jarvis started the movie.

The warm, low voice of the woman doing the introduction gave him pleasant goose bumps. He sat up a little straighter and muttered, "Wait, Bilbo? Are you telling me there's more on Bilbo?"

James turned his head toward Steve and cocked an eyebrow at him. "Who?"

"The Hobbit, remember The Hobbit, we read it to each other all winter, 1938. I had a cold and then you had the influenza... "

Bucky had bought it for Steve when he was too sick to go outside, spending money on it he should have spent on a date. Steve'd started reading it to Bucky after work until his voice gave out and Bucky took over until he fell asleep in the middle of a sentence, exhaustion taking over. Steve had read him the final chapters when Bucky had been down with the influenza after working in icy November rain on the docks too long.

James frowned and shook his head slowly, then paused, his eyes flickering to the screen, head tipped. "Was there a dragon?" he murmured.

"Smaug!" Steve exclaimed. He turned to the others who were half watching him and James, half watching the screen. "Is Smaug in this? No, wait," he rubbed thumb and middle finger over his forehead, trying to remember the characters of the book, "he died. But what about the dwarves, are the dwarves in it?"

A pillow hurdled in the direction of Steve's head, but James caught it in mid-air. Clint glowered. "If you could contain your geeky squee and pay attention to the movie, you'd find out."

Steve shrugged at James, who calmly offered him the pillow.

"Jarvis," Clint said, "Continue the movie."

Once Steve had settled in and got comfortable, he soon found himself utterly engrossed in the movie.

"You know, James, you're totally rocking that Aragorn hairstyle," Natasha commented during the scene in the dirty, rainy village's tavern.

A little while later, when one of the hobbits asked about second breakfast, Clint perked up on the couch and said, "Pie!"

James, who had begun to slouch down next to Steve, came to wary attention in the blink of an eye, not moving out of the slouch, but eyeing Clint with an eerie intensity.

"Not before intermission time," Steve declared. The ninety minute break was something Steve had insisted on, both because he'd always enjoyed the intermissions in his time and to put a halt to regular interruptions for refills, bathroom breaks, snacks and the like, that if they weren't channeled, made it impossible to follow the plot of a movie.

"You're such a stickler, Cap," Clint said, grumbling.

"Don't knock it, Legolas. Geriatric bladders need regularity," Tony piped up and took another deep swig from his soft drink.

Steve didn't rise to the jab – he knew who'd be the first to run to the bathroom later.
With Frodo saved from the Ringwraiths and from certain death by their poison, the intermission had a perfect timing. They all took the chance to stretch their legs, stock up on snacks and in Tony's case, make a beeline for the bathroom.

Steve gave him a pointed look when he returned which Tony expertly ignored.

"Does anyone need a refill on their popcorn?" Steve asked. Only a thin layer of dud kernels lined the bottom of the bowl he shared with James.

"Oh, twist my arm," Natasha said with a winning smile.

"Wait, wait, who needs popcorn when there's pie?" Clint was up and off the couch and by James' side faster than should have been possible. "James. Friend. Brother-in-sniping."

"Yes, I'll share with you," James said with an eye roll before Clint could even ask the question.

Steve smiled. Clint's and James' dynamic had grown naturally, in a way he never would have predicted. It was different from his own friendship with James, unencumbered by the past or any expectations. James seemed at ease with Clint in the same way Steve was with Sam. It was uncomplicated, maybe the only uncomplicated thing in James' life and Steve couldn't find any jealousy in him over that.

"Sirs, before you start in on the pie, there is a broadcast I would like to divert your attention to," Jarvis said.

"Jarvis, it's movie night," Tony groaned. "The word outside can wait for one damn night."

"I think you will want to see this one."

Tony threw his hands up. "You won't stop nagging if I refuse."

"It's for your own good."

"You've been talking to Pepper again, haven't you?"

"Miss Potts talks to me." Jarvis managed to sound slightly offended.

"Well, get on with it already," Tony said with a huff. "The sooner we're done, the sooner we can get to the pie."

The screen flickered to life to a CNN newscast presenting a picture of Senator Stern. "This is Isha Asua, reporting from Atlanta with breaking news. Federal Prosecutors, working in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security have declared that the trial following the arraignment of Senator Stern, Republican from the state of Pennsylvania on capital charges of treason, espionage, and terrorism will start on Monday. An ongoing investigation since the massive security leak preceding the Hydra-sponsored rogue SHIELD operation Project Insight which resulted in the massive destruction and damage at secretive security agency's Triskelion headquarters in Washington, DC, has confirmed Stern's fifteen year career as a mole for the resurgent international terrorist organization birthed in World War II Germany."

Clips of Stern on the steps outside the Senate building played in the inset beside the reporter, then shifted to the scene of his arrest. Surrounded by police in tactical armor, Stern, bundled in an oversized Kevlar vest and protective helmet, was rushed from the Federal courthouse into a police vehicle.
"Stern, a former chairman of the Defense Intelligence Sub-Committee and nominee to the role of Secretary of Defense under President Bush, has also been a longtime critic of businessman and Avenger Tony Stark."

Another clip, this time of Tony during his palladium poisoning days, looking pallid and hungover, played.

"He is only the latest prominent figure to be arrested in the US and abroad in relation to Hydra activities, however, he is the first to stand trial. While the Bar Association claims that it's a rush job, prosecutor Gary Redhorse described the case against Stern as watertight, and characterized him as an 'enemy of the state'. The fact that Stern will stand trial mere weeks after his arrest indicates that Redhorse's case is indeed as watertight as he claims. Stern is currently being held in an undisclosed location due to unconfirmed threats to his life."

The screen went dark again and for a couple of tense seconds, a hush fell over the room. A low buzz signaled an incoming message on a phone and it was Tony who reached for his. Steve saw him read and a smile that bordered on gleefully besotted spread over his face. Setting the phone down, Tony stalked to the liquor cabinet and grabbed a bottle. He took it to the kitchen, got six heavy crystal tumblers out of a cabinet and filled them each with a generous inch of amber liquid.

"Well?" he said, giving them a look that clearly said none of them were fast enough on the uptake. "Celebratory Scotch – Pepper's orders." He held up a squatish bottle. "She likes this stuff."

"Celebrate what?" James asked. There was a tight set to his mouth and eyes. "Stern's one head. Two more are waiting."

"You gotta regenerate before you can re-grow. Hydra's on the ropes in Europe as well, thanks to the fury of Fury, so it's going to take them a while."

"They're not dead."

"No, but they've taken some crippling blows recently." To Steve's surprise, that was Bruce speaking up. He'd joined Tony at the kitchen counter and already had a tumbler in hand. "You know what that means, right, James?" He picked up a second tumbler and walked over to where James was sitting, looking deeply uncomfortable. "They're too busy putting out fires left and right to come after you." Bruce held out the tumbler to James and nodded at him. It took James a full minute to reach for it. When he did, it was with his human hand.

Tony held up his tumbler. "And I never liked that asshat."

Natasha, who had moved to the kitchen with her usual catlike silence, handed Steve his drink.

They all toasted each other silently, everyone clearly too wary of a spoken toast that might jinx them all. Before Steve could set his tumbler to his lips, though, Clint moved into his line of sight and said, "Steve." He held out his tumbler.

Steve met his gaze, held it, then clinked his glass against Clint's. Sometimes, he mused as he drained his tumbler alongside Clint, forgiveness came in strange ways.

"You people just have no taste, have you?" Tony complained. "This is a fifty year old Dalmore and you toss it back like a regular JD." He raised his tumbler, contemplated the amber liquid, then shrugged. "Screw it. It's Stern. I will sacrifice five more bottles." He tossed back the rest of the Scotch in his glass and gave them all a grin that bordered on manic and which made it impossible not to grin back.

From the corner of his eye, Steve saw James lift the tumbler slowly and contemplate it. He knew
Bucky had been fond of Scotch, but wondered if James had ever had any and if he had, if he was as immune to its effects as Steve was. After a minute or two of tense silence in which he studied the people around him, James shrugged, tossed the scotch back the way Tony had and said, "In that case, I'll sacrifice my pie and share." He visibly fought a wince and continued, "With everyone."

Steve bit back a surprised gasp. That had never happened before. As a rule, the only one James shared his pie with was Clint. No exceptions. Then he wondered if the nerve-wracking dinner at Mrs. Wilson's had soured him a little on her treat.

Tony wasn't so subtle. "The world is ending, right?" He scrabbled for his phone. "Should I call Pepper, tell her to come back so we can spend the last hours together having absolutely fantastic end-of-the-world sex?"

"If you don't want it – " James began.

"Touchy," Tony commented. "Or maybe you just don't like to talk about sex?"

Clint started humming a melody that Steve was unfamiliar with but which had Natasha and Bruce in stitches in the blink of an eye.

"So, Steve," James said, turning to him and ignoring the others. "I think it'll just be you and me sharing that pie."

"See how the older generation just keeps oppressing us?"

"Shut up and get the plates, Tony," Natasha ordered when she could breathe again.

James really did share his pie, it turned out.

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**Steve**

Clint, with his head pillowed on Natasha's thigh, was asleep before the credits for the first movie rolled.

Not long into *The Two Towers*, James' eyelids began to flutter. With the popcorn bowl no longer sitting between them, he started to slouch and list toward Steve, only to be wide awake and tense upright again when he came within a hairsbreadth of Steve's shoulder. Steve missed out on a good part of the fate of Merry and Pippin and how they got away from their captors due to his hyperawareness of James' every movement. By the time James had straightened for the third time, Steve huffed a sigh.

"James," he murmured, quiet enough so that Bruce and Tony wouldn't hear.

James tensed even worse than before. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Steve said in a subdued tone. It felt a little strange to put it out in the open that way, but James seemed to need the spoken confirmation. "You don't have to ask permission to lean against me when you get sleepy. I don't mind." What he didn't say was that he liked it, even. One of the hardest things to adapt to in the twenty first century was how little people touched each other. He had grown up so used to touching the people around him – often because it was just impossible not to, considering how cramped their living space was – but also because it was the simplest means of communication. He missed it.
"You don't mind?" James asked. He'd moved his head slightly in Steve's direction, but the thick curtain of hair was hiding his features.

Steve gave a soft snort and smiled. James and Bucky shared the ability to call Steve on his shit. "I like it," he clarified.

James didn't answer and didn't list against him again, making Steve wonder if he'd said the wrong thing. He noticed James slanting cautious glances his way more than once and he hadn't left the couch, so maybe he hadn't messed up too badly.

He got caught up in the movie again after a while and forgot everything through the Helm's Deep battle, not knowing who or if anyone would survive it. The arrival of Gandalf and the Riders of Rohan made Steve sigh in relief and he noticed James' shoulders slump a little too, the tight line of his mouth soften.

They had another intermission before they started on the third movie. It was past 2:00 am but Steve wanted to know how everything worked out.

"At least you didn't have to wait a year for the last one to come out," Tony told him and Steve had to agree. He wondered how Tony had handled the frustration of not knowing, then remembered there were books. Without a doubt, Tony would have read them. Steve planned on reading them himself too.

Clint and Natasha both slept soundly on 'their' couch, looking about as deadly as a pair of kittens. Clint had his feet up on the couch, his head pillowed on Natasha’s leg and his hand covering Natasha's knee in a protective curl, while Natasha slept with her head lolled against the backrest, one hand in Clint's hair and the other on his back. She snored very softly. If Steve had been Tony, he would have found some way to record that.

Steve had a little more self-preservation instinct than Tony, however and just smiled at the picture they made.

Tony was apparently hyper-caffeinated – Steve had stopped counting how many coffee refills he'd had – and kept talking to Bruce with big, sweeping gestures to underline his argument. Bruce looked glassy-eyed and a little dazed, his curls askew, but he remained awake too. Possibly only because Tony kept jostling him; Steve wouldn't have put Bruce behind the wheel of a car.

James hadn't moved an inch from where he'd sitting since their earlier exchange. The only thing that suggested he hadn't fallen asleep with his eyes open while sitting up were his feet, which he kept rubbing together. Steve often wondered why James didn't just put on socks, but James seemed to like walking around barefoot, so he never said anything. Maybe it was another facet of the loose sweats and t-shirts he seemed to favor now, conscious or unconsciously rejecting the armor and uniforms he'd been forced into before.

While James rose from the couch to stretch his legs and use the bathroom, Steve went to the kitchen for a fresh bottle of water and a couple of grapes sitting in a fruit basket on the counter.

When he returned to the couch, James was already back. Much to Steve's surprise, he was curled up on the couch on his left side with one of the soft fleece throws Pepper liked so much covering his legs. The metal arm was almost completely shielded by his body, only the hand glinted in the blue-ish TV light. James' position barely left any room for Steve to sit, but James looked too relaxed to disturb, so Steve reached for a pillow to put it on the floor in front of the couch. He could always lean against it.
James' hand briefly closing around his wrist stopped him in his tracks. "No need," James said and scooted back a little to make room for Steve to sit.

Steve ignored the warmth that spread through him when he realized James must have taken his earlier permission to heart and read between the lines as well - this was (outside the incident in front of the lab, which hadn't been James) the first unannounced touch from James that Steve remembered. He sank into the soft leather upholstery biting back on a delighted smile.

James remained tense though while Tony started the third movie. The way he kept shifting his weight and turning to look over to where Clint and Natasha were still sleeping soundly distracted Steve from the plot, wondering what to do to make James comfortable again, wondering if maybe he should have sat on the floor after all.

Eventually, after a good fifteen minutes of fidgeting, James seemed to come to a decision. He expelled a quiet breath, slid down and pillowed his head on Steve's thigh, mimicking Clint's position with Natasha.

Steve froze, staring down at James' face. James eyes were open; he was watching the screen alert and interested. His head was a distinct but unfamiliar weight against Steve's thigh. He and Bucky had been close, but Bucky had never done this.

"Okay?" James murmured. Steve saw his metal hand flexing, felt James body growing tense again.

James had taken a risk here; he'd lowered is defenses and allowed himself something he wanted for himself and Steve felt something warm and fierce begin to bloom in his chest. If Steve hesitated in answering, he'd be off, retreating into his 'don't touch' space again. Steve couldn't let that happen. For James' sake and because Sam would give him the disappointed face if he heard about it.

"Okay," he answered and rested his hand on James' shoulder, smoothing it over tense muscles. "Absolutely okay."

As soon as the words were out, James released a breath Steve hadn't been aware James had been holding. Slowly, one by one, he felt James relaxing every tense muscle in his body. His head grew heavier on Steve's thigh, but Steve didn't mind the numbness that came with that weight when it gave him the warmth and presence of the man who, without even intending it, was beginning to fill the empty spaces Bucky had left behind.

Steve went back to watching the movie but felt his eyelids begin to droop as well and a heavy drowsiness settle in his bones. He stopped smoothing his hand over James' shoulder and just rested it against the warm crook of James' elbow.

He blinked his eyes open during one of the louder fight sequences and, after getting his bearings, saw goose bumps covering James' skin. He had to stretch a little to reach for the red fleece blanket covering James' legs without jostling him awake. After a brief struggle with the way the blanket was folded, he pulled it up to James' shoulder. He lifted James' hair out of the way to pull the blanket up even higher and ended up trailing his fingers through the dark mess. A quick glance assured him that James' eyes were still closed, dark lashes fanned over delicate skin that had begun to lose the bruised and hollow look he'd had when he arrived, and he appeared to be asleep, so he repeated what he'd done when he'd shaved James earlier – he started combing his fingers through James' hair. He remembered doing that with Bucky's sister after she'd skinned her knees on her way to their tiny apartment to see Bucky, slow and careful, wondering at the trust she'd shown him. She'd come to Steve for consolation, without hesitation, since Bucky hadn't been home from work yet .Steve had sat with her, stroking her hair until Bucky had come home.
Going down with the *Valkyrie* after stopping Schmidt, there had been a moment that he'd been almost grateful, knowing he wouldn't have to face Rebecca and Bucky's other sisters and tell them he'd let his best friend fall. Now they were all gone, passed before Steve even came out of the ice, and he had another surreal thought: maybe it was better that James didn't have Bucky's memories. Steve didn't want to be the one to tell him and see his grief over the sisters Bucky had never seen again. Bucky would have hated knowing he'd outlived them.

He stopped his hand and tested a strand of James' hair between his fingertips. It was soft, like Becca's had been, but thicker. Longer now than when he'd first encountered James – the Winter Soldier – on that DC causeway.

A low noise of protest from James shook him from his thoughts and stopped Steve from veering into darker territories. He looked down at James' profile. A lock of hair had fallen over his cheekbone and was moving with every exhalation. It didn't manage to hide the frown that deepened between James' eyebrows. Steve had had enough nightmares after waking from the ice and after the Chitauri attack that his first concern was James suffering through one himself, so he rested his hand on James' shoulder again and tried to let him know that he wasn't alone. James shrugged away Steve's hand and mumbled something under his breath that was lost in the clangor of swords and battle-cries from the TV.

James didn't open his eyes, but freed his right arm and flailed his hand a little until it found Steve's hand. "Don't," he slurred, half-asleep. He nudged it back in the direction of his head and continued, "Don't stop."

When Steve curled his fingers against James' scalp and gently flexed and unflexed his hand, James let his own hand sink back, scrunched the blanket in it and hid his face against Steve's thigh. He went into boneless relaxation not a minute after. Steve's eyes itched with tears until he gathered together his control and blinked them away.

He gave up on watching the movie. He just kept on running his fingers through James' hair, keeping his touch gentle, firm and soothing, and hoped that, at least for this stolen moment, James was experiencing what it meant to be cared about, to be touched with kindness and care, what it felt like to be at peace.

He did look up eventually when he felt he was being watched. Natasha was awake, though she hadn't moved from the couch. Her eyes were open at half-mast and she was watching James and him. A smile played around her lips. "See?" she mouthed at him, toneless.

Steve returned her smile and nodded.

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James

Tony's voice woke James. "Bruce. Brucie. Science bro." It kept him from tensing up the way he usually did on waking. Tony's voice would have given away anything wrong. He kept his eyes closed and listened.

"No."

James catalogued his situation. He was lying on his side, legs slightly bent, feet shoved against the arm of a couch. His head was pillowed on something warm and his microfleece blanket was resting over him, a handful of it scrunched in his right hand. The Arm was crooked and resting in front of
him so it didn't bruise his ribs. He was comfortable.

He'd been sleeping. Sleeping with other people in the room and not because he'd basically fallen unconscious the way he had his first night in the tower.

"C'mon," Tony whined. The movie – or the next movie – was still playing. "Everyone's getting their hair petted and Pep's not here."

There was a faint weight on his skull. It didn't feel like a threat. There were fingers combing through his hair with infinite care.

"Natasha isn't and Steve isn't."

Steve's fingers.

An electric heat swept over him, an awareness of himself and the man on the couch with him that nearly confounded James. His breath wanted to hitch in his chest while his pulse sped faster and his skin felt abruptly alive with sensation. Even the Arm wanted to stretch and flex and reach... he didn't know for what, though.

He held still, limp, unassuming, so as not to give away this baffling new state until he understood it. He didn't feel threatened or triggered. It wasn't something new, though. Something told him he'd felt these things before, but not as the Asset or the Winter Soldier.

This was something from before, from Bucky... but not quite.

"Well, yeah, but they're doing the petting. Oh, I get it. You want to be the pet-ee. Well, snuggle down and let me show you what these fingers can do –"

"Really, Tony, no thanks. Save it for Pepper." Bruce waited a beat. "Poor woman."

"You wound me, Bruce. Wound me to the bone."

James slitted his eyes open. Tony didn't look wounded; he looked amused, gentler and happy as he only let himself be around a very few people. Pepper, always, Bruce, mostly, the soldier Rhodes, who had come around once and frowned at James until Tony diverted him. Looking at him without Tony knowing he was being watched, listening, James thought Tony might sometimes accord him that same level of concern, painstakingly concealed behind a wall of sarcasm and self-indulgence.

Tony was a good guy, he'd decided some time back, he just desperately didn't want anyone to know that.

Steve's fingers moved through his hair and skritched delicately against James' scalp. His eyes shut and he had to bite back a groan. He couldn't stop himself pushing his head back into the sensation.

When he managed to open his eyes again, Tony was looking at him – or him and Steve – with his eyebrows raised and a curl of a smile on his mouth. "Would you look at that," he murmured to Bruce, with a nudge of his shoulder and a nod toward them.

James would have flipped him off, but that would have meant moving and possibly Steve would stop doing wonderful things to his hair and letting James sleep on him. He mouthed, 'Bite me,' at Tony silently. Tony had taught him that one and James thought it fit the moment between them aptly.

Tony chuckled and gave him a thumbs up.
James closed his eyes again and luxuriated in the soothing rhythm of Steve's fingers combing through his hair until the movie ended. He had no idea what had happened during the last hour and didn't care; his whole being had been focused on Steve and the way his skin tingled and ached for more.

Jarvis gently woke everyone hours later. The movie had long since ended and Jarvis had shut down the television. Bleary-eyed, dry-mouthed and stiff, they staggered off to the elevator and their quarters on other floors. James stopped in the kitchen for a tall glass of ice water and then slouched his way to his guest suite. He considered another shower, even though he knew everyone thought he'd gone overboard with his habit of showering three or four times a day. Everyone except Tony. He decided he would need one when he woke up and decided to wait, though.

He changed from the sweats he was wearing to a pair of super soft sleep pants. These were a pale blue with puffy white clouds and sheep on them. They were also the most comfortable things he'd ever worn, so he didn't care what they looked like. Like everything he had to wear now, they'd shown up in his dresser over the past few weeks. Some had been provided by Steve, and the elegant suits hanging in the closet were courtesy of Tony, but Jarvis had reported most of the best things had been bought by Pepper and Natasha, who had declared they were making sure he didn't look like a refugee from Mr. Roger's Neighborhood.

James wasn't sure if that was something real or a dig at Steve.

He wasn't about to complain, though, because Pepper's people bought things that looked good and Natasha bought things he could move and fight in.

The bed was still disturbingly soft, but it was huge and James could sprawl across it and when he had nightmares, he didn't find himself blinking awake after throwing himself off it to the floor.

Jarvis had also agreed to monitor James' sleep and wake him with a sharp noise if his nightmares went on too long.

Those nights usually resulted in another, unscheduled shower and Jarvis telling James about the day's news, the tower's infrastructure, or a semi-random trivia and Wikipedia entries. The AI's quiet voice soothed James' nerves and let him focus on something outside the horrors in his head.

He wondered if he'd find it difficult to sleep after the evening spent strung so tight by his awareness of Steve's body, but he slid into sleep like a diver into warm sea.

The dream started with music, Steve's music that he played on old vinyl records, that left James twitchy and melancholy. This time it made him grin and laugh, sweat under his arms, stepping fast, old shoes shined bright and pinching his toes as he danced, spinning the pretty girl away and then close, soft breasts pressed to his chest, hips nearly as close, thigh to thigh and the sweet swing of her skirt floating around his legs like a tease and a promise.

Instead of the dance hall, the girl and he are in the rear seat of a huge old car, and her fingers, nails painted the same bright red as her lips, are clumsy and quick at the buttons of his shirt, while his belt buckle jingles, coming open under his hands. She's all lush curves and silky skin under her dark blue dress with the white flowers, her bra opening and letting him kiss between her breasts as it falls down, and he runs his hands along the valley of her spine. Her hair falls out of its careful pins and curls as she bends toward him and he looks up, cupping her breasts in his hands. Her kiss tastes of waxy lipstick, cheap booze, and the cigarette he lit for her.

He kisses his way down her chest to her navel and lower and this is why he shaves so very carefully before a night out, it's just good manners not to leave a rash, and when he has his tongue
on her she tastes like the sea and sighs like the tide, coming with a rush like a wave for his hands and his mouth.

They tangle together, the windows of the old Nash fogging enough to offer a false privacy, panting, and she strokes him until he's hard enough his hips are moving with a will of their own, until she slinks down and uses her mouth, lipstick smearing onto him, her tongue as quick as her hands, the pleasure building until it crests –

James woke in a daze, aftershocks still tingling through him, breathing hard and groping for Bucky's girl, finding only the smooth reach of the sheets on his bed. His brain caught up to his body and he realized he'd been dreaming and what he'd been dreaming, grimacing at the sticky evidence in his pants.

He lay back and caught his breath, sweat drying on his chest, and half laughed. Sex. He'd had a sex dream, a memory of Bucky's, and how had he forgotten sex?

The Asset hadn't had sex. Hadn't even remembered it; the only contact the Asset had was in combat.

Bucky had loved sex. James couldn't access many of Bucky's memories, but that came through plainly. Bucky had loved women and having fun with them, just him and some lovely girl – they were all lovely to Bucky, some way or another, unless they were mean – enjoying each other. He'd loved to dance. He'd loved music. James vaguely remembered that Bucky liked to have a drink, maybe get tipsy, but never drunk. Bucky had been sweet with the girls. If she'd just wanted to neck, they'd necked, if she'd just wanted to dance, they'd danced until their feet blistered, and then he'd walk her home. If she'd wanted to go all the way, he'd wanted to make it as good as possible for her.

James would never remember the name of the girl he'd dreamed of Bucky being with, but he couldn't help thinking of her fondly now. She'd never know it, but she'd helped give him another piece of being human back.

She also helped him realize something, belated though it was: The same thing Bucky'd been feeling for the girl was what James'd been feeling while Steve stroked his hair earlier. Attraction and a slow burning arousal ready to flare into an inferno.

Steve

"Okay, Jarvis, where is the grater?" Steve heard James say from the kitchen. Since until recently, the kitchen had been one of James' least favorite places, he had to poke his head around a corner to see what was happening.

What was happening brought a wide smile to his face.

James was cooking himself a meal.

"Second lower cabinet to the left of the sink," Jarvis replied. "Hello, Captain Rogers."

James had his hair tied back with what Steve thought was a bootlace. The strands that framed his face and ended at his cheekbones had all come loose. He side-eyed Steve then went on with what he was doing.
"Hello, Jarvis," Steve said. He had never figured out whether the AI needed or wanted acknowledgment and conversation beyond making requests to it. He defaulted to courtesy but always felt vaguely uncomfortable. James, though, talked to Jarvis with greater ease than to anyone in the tower other than Steve. Maybe more than with Steve. The only other person who acted as naturally toward Jarvis was Tony.

It was a bit of mystery to Steve and he found himself thinking about it as he sat down at the kitchen counter and watched James put together delicious looking omelet, occasionally asking Jarvis for a tip on something, but mostly just chatting with the AI.

He loved the way James moved around the kitchen. Even when he hesitated, unsure where something he need was, it was graceful. His hands moved over the cooking implements with the same deft ease the Winter Soldier's handled a deadly weapon. Steve liked this version, James in the kitchen, so much more than the Winter Soldier, who had been a creature of cold and pain, fury etched into his bones along with Hydra's vibranium and explosives.

"Why didn't you cook for yourself before?" Steve asked.

"Didn't know how," James replied. He frowned in concentration, holding the handle of the omelet pan in his metal hand and delicately sliding a spatula along the edges of the eggs before folding it perfectly. "Jarvis just tells me what is supposed to work. It's mostly chemistry, but the spicing seems to be subjective. So I stick to recipes so far." He slid the omelet on to a dish. "Do you want half of this?"

Steve did, even if it didn't taste as good as it looked. He wanted to encourage and support this aspect of James' developing personality.

He had the first forkful of egg and mushroom and cheese in his mouth when the Jarvis question clicked for him.

Steve was uneasy with Jarvis because the AI was different from anything he'd known in his life before waking in the future and was unique anyway. He found all talking machinery, from automated phone menus to the GPS in every one of Stark Industries fleet of vehicles strange and startling, Jarvis no more or less so. For most people though, the difference between Jarvis and those mindless machines was what bothered them.

For James, though, his memories didn't go back to before the helicarriers, no matter what bits and pieces floated to the surface. Jarvis had been part of his life since he arrived in the Avengers tower. Most of his conscious life, except that first week while he made his way from DC to New York. To him, Jarvis was just as natural as a car or a smartphone or an elevator.

He smiled as he swallowed.

James began on his own half of the omelet. "Well?" he asked.

Steve loaded his fork again. "It's great. Make another one."

James narrowed his eyes at him. "Why don't you make your own?"

"Because even Bruce threatened to hurt me if I tried to cook anything again. I'm allowed to microwave things with instructions and make popcorn and that's it," Steve explained. He shrugged. "I never could cook.

James looked at his food thoughtfully. "Could Bucky?"
Steve shook his head, thinking fondly of the days they'd spent living in their cramped apartment. It had been surprisingly clean for the domicile of two young bachelors. Bucky had been a natural slob, but liked to look good, so he took care of his things, just as he took care of Steve. Meanwhile, Steve had been a neat freak even before boot camp at Lehigh. "Not really. Bucky could heat soup and make toast. Beyond that, we'd have some kind of casserole made out of whatever was cheap. We got something every day, though. If we were flush, we'd go down to the lunch counter for some meatloaf sometimes." It wasn't like the little apartment had had much in the way of kitchen anyway. Nothing like the kitchen they were sitting in.

A slight lift to the corner of James' mouth made Steve smile wider. He finished his half of the omelet, eyed Steve's empty plate, and sighed dramatically. "Okay, let's see if I can manage this twice in a row."

"I have no doubts," Steve told him.

The second omelet was even better than the first, though Bruce dragged Tony out of the lab just as James dished it out and demanded one for each of them. By the time James had those cooking, Clint and Natasha had appeared from nowhere it seemed to watch attentively as he worked. A phone call was made demanding Sam's presence as well.

"Okay, James goes on the breakfast roster," was Sam's declaration. He smiled at James with real happiness for him, along with pride that had James ducking his head. "Good job, man."

James shrugged but the half smile turned into real one.

Steve wanted to hug him. He wanted to laugh out loud at how good things were for once, for how far James had already come, from not even being able to eat to cooking food for all the Avengers in residence. It was amazing.

Sam once asked him what made him happy. He hadn't known, but he did now. This did.
Chapter 16

Steve

"Is that all you've got, Captain?" James teased, looking down at Steve, who was on his back like an oversized beetle and breathing faster. Sweat-dampened dark hair was obscuring most of James' face, but there was no mistaking the spark of amusement in his eyes. "You're moving like an old man."

Steve curled his bare toes into the mattress and twisted out of James' hold to get to his feet. "To quote a song Bruce likes to play in his lab, 'You ain't seen nothing yet.'"

James rolled his eyes and Steve feigned an attack to James' left only to change tactics at the very last second and tackle James to the ground from the other. They fell to the ground in a coordinated tangle of limbs, James landing half on top of Steve with Steve's arm blocking James' moves. The sound of their breathing and the squeaking of skin and metal over the plastic covered mats echoed in the high room.

It was a dirty move, Steve knew, but despite his reputation, with James, he wasn't above a little unfair advantage in their sparring sessions. He experimentally brushed his fingers over the patch of skin that he'd seen visible above the waistband of James' sweat pants where the shirt had come undone. The almighty squeal that got him was worth the elbow to his stomach.

Steve stayed on the ground with his head propped up on his hand, watching James leap back to his feet, graceful and fluent. Warm afternoon light filtered through the floor-length windows, giving the gym's stark white walls a tangerine hue. It reflected off James' arm and painted it liquid copper.

"You little shit," James said, laughing. He used the gilded hand to brush damp hair from his forehead, revealing his face bright and transformed with a wide smile that wasn't fading as quickly as Steve had become used to.

That smile, the genuine, unbridled joy in it knocked the breath right out of Steve.

"Come on, are you just going to lounge there and bask in your little victory?" James rolled his shoulders, the black undershirt sliding over metal and skin. "You know that was a dirty move. So, ten bucks says you will not get another sound out of me if you fight fair. And Captain America always fights fair, doesn't he?" There was no mistaking the fond tease in his words.

Steve's breath caught again. James appeared loose and happy, displaying none of the knife-edge tension and desperation that had seemed like a second skin to him for the first weeks. He looked at Steve like a friend now, not like a stranger and he smiled the smile that had haunted Steve's dreams for weeks after Bucky had fallen. It was different now, less Bucky and more James. Steve wanted to soak in that smile, in the way James' eyes crinkled at the sides while displaying no sign of age, the way his cheeks dimpled with it. With the dark hair framing his face, the light illuminating his eyes and turning them a lighter shade of blue than they already were, with the flush in his cheeks from exertion and his lips slightly open, it struck Steve that James was stunning. Steve had never thought of another man that way, particularly not about Bucky, but James, right here, right in this moment? There was no other word to describe him.

James made a come-hither gesture with his human hand, grinning at Steve. "Come on, Steve. Show me your worst."
"My worst, huh?" Steve got to his feet and fell into an easy fighter's stance. Not yet pouncing, just ready, wary, muscles still loose.

James wet his lips and widened the grin. He mirrored Steve's move but bent forward at the waist a little to repeat the come-hither gesture. James' hair fell forward again, obscuring his eyes and sliding against his lips. Watching strands of hair stick to James' still-damp lower lip, Steve suddenly felt the dizzying, wild urge to frame his hand along James' face, get his hands in that dark hair and brush it from James' face. To curl his fingers against James scalp until James closed his eyes and hummed low under his breath, the way Steve remembered him doing during the last movie night. He'd hum and if Steve reeled him in for an embrace, the reverberation from the sound would travel to from his lips to Steve's skin.

Steve swallowed, felt heat climb into his cheeks and shook his head against the images.

He had no time to get himself in check because James moved to circle him, still grinning, that strand of hair still clinging to his lower lip. Steve wished he'd brush it away. He forced his gaze away from James' lips and feigned looking for an opening in James' defense. A mistake. A bad, bad mistake. The drawstrings on James' sweat pants had come unknotted and were dragging down from his waist. The hems caught under James' toes, and Steve's gaze was drawn to the jut of James' hipbones. The urge to flip James to his back, throw him on the tan mat and just hold him there was overwhelming. It wouldn't be for sparring though, would it?

Steve's muscles burned with the strain of holding back when all he wanted to do was to press close enough to James he'd feel the heat coming off him, feel his heartbeat, reach out and touch to feel that Mrs. Wilson's dinners had done their job, that there was more to James now than just muscle and bone. It would be a friendly gesture, nothing more. Steve was just watching James' back, right?

He forced himself to look into James' eyes instead of at his lips – red from where James had been biting them earlier, soft, now dry and there, just there, so close to... To do what?

Needing to move, to gloss over his lapse before it was too late and James noticed something was wrong, Steve feigned a strike, trying to swing his fist toward James' jaw.

Too slow. He was far too slow. James caught his fist in his metal hand and stopped it, then reached for Steve's arm with his other hand, about to flip and throw him. Steve was ready for the stomach-twisting feeling of free-fall and the slam to the mattress, but it never came.

James stopped, his metal hand curled around Steve's fist. His human hand was so close the hair on Steve's forearm began to rise and he felt the tingle of the phantom touch all over his skin like slivers of electricity. Steve was overwhelmed by the familiar smell of Bucky – James, damn it, James – clean sweat and warm skin and soap. They'd always used the same soap; cheaper to share than to each have one. Money was always tight. They were doing so again since James just used what was stocked in the tower by Tony and Pepper's personal shoppers and so did Steve.

The metal of James' hand warmed from Steve's still clenched fist and he wanted to open his hand, thread his fingers through James', to explore the arm that was so different and so much a part of him now. Steve heard James' breath catch and made the mistake of looking up. James' eyes were dark, his pupils almost swallowing his iris. Steve's face grew hot, it felt like his cheeks were burning, he was almost shaking with the need to reach out and touch. James had to see, had to know the path Steve's thoughts had taken and damn it all to hell, Steve knew it was wrong, yet all he could do was stand there and wait. Wait for James' hand to settle on his skin while his lungs burned and it felt as if he'd never breathe again, his lungs locking up. Wait and stare at James' mouth, soft, lips parted, or inch forward so he could, he could –
A sharp, sucked in breath from James brought him back to reality.

James was staring at him, wide-eyed, taking in Steve's proximity with a horrible straightforwardness. Steve flinched back, fixed his gaze on the tan gym mat and felt cold shock seep into his bones. What the hell had he done? This was James, his friend, not some dame he lusted over. He couldn't – mustn't – think that way. Not about Bucky, never about Bucky, but not about James, either.

The metal hand let go of his fist. James pulled back his human hand as well and took a few staggering steps away from Steve. A deep furrow had appeared between his eyebrows when Steve dared look at him again. Was that repulsion? Disgust? "I – " James began. His voice cracked and he coughed. "I – "

"James, I – " Steve didn't get much further himself. What could he say to reassure James, to explain, and to justify himself? There was nothing.

"I have to go," James announced, his voice rough and strangely flat. He gave Steve one last, undecipherable look, then he turned and walked out of the gym.

When the door had closed behind James, Steve bent forward, braced his arms on his upper thighs and expelled a shaky breath.

What on earth had just happened? Had he really almost kissed James? While he'd never condemned others, he himself had never been interested in men. No matter what the bullies back in Brooklyn had labeled him.

"Stevie likes the pretty boys," he heard Joe Myers taunt in the back of his mind. "Lives with one, doesn't he? Can't get a girl, so he gets himself a pretty boy to protect him. What will you do when your knight in shining armor leaves for the war? Cry like a war bride?" Myers had beaten him up worse than ever before and Bucky'd had to patch him up, cursing under his breath. He wasn't gay. Never had been. He and Bucky had been best friends, nothing more. Bucky had always laughed the implications away, let them slide off like water from a duck's back but they'd driven Steve crazy. How dare they insinuate this stuff about Bucky? Bucky had been and always would be the greatest, the best friend, a swell guy who had all the girls, and he was... he was handsome. Not pretty. Steve had been in fights over this issue more than once. He'd begun to hide the bruises from Bucky so Bucky wouldn't know just how often. Better to let him think the fights were about something else. He didn't want to burden Bucky any more than he already did.

So if it wasn't Bucky, and it wasn't other men, then what? He remembered Peggy saying that sometimes, you had to change with the world. So were these feelings, these new and confusing feelings... was it transference? Had he always wanted more from Bucky than he'd allowed himself to admit?

Steve searched through his memories and couldn't pinpoint a single occurrence where that would have been true. But what did that mean?

James wasn't Bucky. As hard as it was, despite the slips, Steve knew that.

Was this how the world had changed? It had taken Bucky from him, but it had given him James? And James struck a chord in him that ... Steve ran his hands over his face and then through his hair, clasping it in his fists hard enough to tear strands out.

James could never find out, Steve promised himself. Even if in a few days or weeks, when he'd had more time to quell the panic, he allowed himself to acknowledge that maybe he wasn't quite as
black and white in his sexuality as he'd previously thought, he had no right to want this from James. Not from his friend who finally trusted him now and, judging by the way he left, was appalled to even see a glimpse of the thoughts Steve had just entertained.

Feeling the need to burn off the restless energy skittering through his muscles and bones, Steve walked over to the heavy bag and slammed his fist against it.

It didn't even stay on the hook but ended up crashing against the opposite wall with a dull *oomph* noise.

It was probably a good thing he wasn't sparring with a human anymore. That hit would have killed.

Steve picked up another bag and reminded himself to reign himself in.


He interspersed each name with increasingly ferocious blows against the bag.

"Whoa, Rogers," a familiar husky female voice said, "what did the bags do to you, steal your cookies?"

Any other day, Steve would have had a comeback for Natasha. Not today.

"Just burning off some energy," he said, trying for a light, nothing's-wrong tone and dialed down his blows against the bag a little to keep up appearances.

"I can see that." Natasha moved into his peripheral vision. Her hair was haloed by the evening light, making it appear as though it was on fire. "And what had you bottling up enough energy you're already on bag number two?" She threw a pointed look at the destroyed bag on the floor.

Steve didn't feel like talking. Not to Natasha, not to anyone, not right now. He picked up the frequency of his hits against the bag again. "It's nothing."

She was right in front of him suddenly, casually dancing out of the way of the swinging bag while fixing him with a look that clearly said he wasn't fooling her. "Is it enough of a nothing I need to get one of the others down here?"

Steve stopped the bag to keep it from hitting her, then rested his forehead against it. "As if this isn't humiliating enough?" he muttered before he could stop himself.

"I hadn't even started asking, but it seems that I need to. What's up, Steve?"

"Can we just pretend you never came in here and I go back to –"

"Shredding another bag?" she interrupted him. "You know, Tony may not care, but Pepper might start to worry. And of course, as soon as I tell Sam you know what'll –"

"All right!" He pushed back from the bag and wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "Fine. Just … just don't tell them." He fought a shudder. "Or anyone."

"Tell them what, exactly?"

Steve exhaled through his nose. "Do we really need to do this?"

Natasha arched an eyebrow and sat down in front of the bag, tailor fashion, blocking him from
hitting it again if he didn't want the bag to swing into her face. "Steve, you know that the more you run, the easier I'll catch you, so just spill." She leaned the side of her face against the bag and flashed a mischievous smile up at him. "I'll waive the therapist's fees if this is about James again."

Steve grimaced. "That transparent?"

Natasha laughed. "I hate to tell you this, but if there's one thing you're not when you're upset, it's subtle." She patted the mat in front of her. "Come on. Sit down. Spill, before I get impatient and make you."

He let go of the bag, shoved both hands through his hair again, but eventually sat down.

After a couple of minutes of him wondering where on earth he was going to even start, Natasha leaned back on her elbows. "Should I get a pizza delivered?"

"This isn't easy, okay? I have no idea where to start without you judging me."

"I hate to break this to you, Steve, but I'll judge you no matter where you start." She moved her top leg to tip her toe against his leg. "If you start talking, though, you just might be surprised of the verdict."

"All right, fine, fine." He took a breath that threatened to burst even his enhanced lungs. "Have you ever just looked at James?"

Natasha's full focus was on him now, sharper than before. Her face gave nothing away, though. "Of course I have."

Steve shook his head. "That's not what I meant. Not looked at, searching for a threat, for something that might be wrong. Just," he moved his hand, "looked and saw him."

Natasha said nothing, just kept that unnerving focus on him.

"I have always had an eye for detail. An artist's eye, Bucky called it. Drawing relaxes me, allows me to focus but not to think. And I... I want to draw James. When he's still. When the morning light comes into the common room and he's there on the couch reading or drinking coffee and just looking out at the city when I come in. He's so still then, but the good kind of still. Peaceful. Bucky was never this still."

Natasha's expression was attentive but otherwise unreadable. She didn't prompt, didn't prod like she had before. It was that more than anything that pushed him to continue and he had a strong suspicion that it was exactly her reason to apply that technique.

"It's," he looked away from her, down to her foot resting against his knee and licked his lips. "It's more than that." That was the understatement of the century, wasn't it? "We were sparring, and I, I just... " Steve trailed off and rubbed his right hand over the back of his neck. "I saw him." Wanted him, his brain mercilessly corrected. You didn't just see him. You were half hard, Steven Grant Rogers. You wanted him.

"I take it you liked what you saw?" Natasha's voice was gentle.

Steve's shoulders slumped. He couldn't look at her. James had fled, so Steve's attention must have been unwelcome.

"Steve?"
He nodded, finally admitting it to himself. He'd very much liked what he'd seen. Too much.

Natasha's foot curled a little, reassuring as if she'd placed her hand on his knee. "You aren't worried about what people would think, are you? Because society's attitudes have changed, you know."

A mirthless laugh bubbled up in Steve's throat. "It's not society I'm worried about."

"Then what is it?"

"I never felt about Bucky the way I feel about James, Natasha. I have never thought of him that way, and now... " He trailed off, unsure how to get the jumbled concepts in his head distilled into words that made sense.

"Now you feel guilty," Natasha finished for him, proving her uncanny ability to read people.

"You know," she said, "You're right in one regard: Bucky, the man you knew as your best friend, might not have appreciated you wanting him. But you didn't, did you?"

Steve shook his head. They had been best friends. Sex had never played into it, and he'd never wanted it to.

"See? That's good, no reason to feel guilty. You didn't have the hots for your childhood friend."

It was astonishing how she read what he hadn't even acknowledged to himself before. He wasn't worried about loving Bucky platonically, but wanting Bucky? That would have been different. Even though he knew it wasn't wrong to love somebody, wanting James now, when James for all intents and purposes was Bucky except for his memories? That felt like Steve was asking something of Bucky that he had no right to want. It was bringing back all the teachings from Father Michael. He didn't think he'd ever been attracted to Bucky the way he was to James, but Steve was still scared he was doing it again: carrying over something he felt for Bucky and trying to fit James into the empty space Bucky had left.

"But you did feel like getting down and dirty with resident assassin number three, knowing he's not Bucky," she prompted and Steve averted his face to hide his mortification. He heard rather than saw her smirk. "Well, go, you! Not quite what I had expected, but hey, progress!"

"Natasha..."

"James isn't Bucky, Steve," Natasha said, her voice solemn again. "Even you've figured that by now. So, even if James doesn't feel attracted to you – which, by the way, fat chance of that being the case – it isn't going to bother him that you want him as long as you want him."

"How do you know? He bolted! If it really didn't bother him, then why did he bolt?"

Natasha was in his personal space all of a sudden, lifting his chin and giving him a mysterious smile. She winked, kissed his cheek and whispered against his ear, "Don't ask me. Ask him."

By the time Steve turned around, Natasha was already out of the door.

"Ask him," he repeated to the empty gym, shaking his head.

What a fantastic plan. He rammed his fist against the bag and watched it split against the wall like the first.

He got to his feet and reached for the third heavy bag with a sigh.
James fled the gym without stopping by the showers. He went for the elevator instead and hoped Steve wouldn't follow him before Jarvis closed the doors. He didn't think Steve would; Steve's blue eyes had looked shocked, like he couldn't believe whatever he'd glimpsed on James' face.

He slumped against the elevator wall and knocked his head back against it twice. The sweat on his shoulder squeaked against the glass and steel.

"James, where would you like the elevator directed?" Jarvis asked.

"Communal floor," James rasped. He was still using the luxurious guest room on the Avengers' main floor, despite Steve's efforts to have him take one on the floor Stark had given Steve. He could get the sweat off and hide out in the luxurious wet room attached to the guest suite. Steve wouldn't invade his privacy in there. James felt a moment of deep gratitude toward Stark's commitment to over the top hedonism.

Clint lifted his head to greet James as he blew by, nothing but a shock of brown-blond hair and two sharp eyes peering over the top of a couch. "Hey, what's got up your butt?"

James made himself stop and pretend to be calm. "What?"

"You're doing the fist flex thing," Clint pointed out.

James looked down and saw the fingers of his left hand were curling into a shiny fist, then releasing over and over. Sometimes the Arm did that, responded to emotions or thoughts James didn't want to admit he was thinking. Clint said James was like a cat lashing its tail just before it pounced. James had retaliated by refusing to share the lemon custard pie Sam's mother had sent home with him from Sunday dinner. James had been sharing his pies with Clint since the first one and Clint nearly cried. Stark said he hadn't known it was possible to go into pie withdrawal after just three weeks and offered to pay for Clint to go detox. Clint had moved on to mocking James' hair and that had been the end of it, except for a certain renewed self-consciousness about the Arm.

He forced the fist to open and go loose. "Мудак."

"Yeah, I know that one from Nat. You're an asshole too." He'd turned around to kneel on the couch with his arms folded on the back. "Now, c'mon, talk to the doc."

James shook his head emphatically. "Всё пиздец как прекрасно," he muttered. His hair had slipped the tie holding it off his face and a lank curtain fell over one eye to his annoyance. He shoved it back and then cursed in the filthiest Russian he could summon as the strands caught in the myriad interlocking plates of the Arm's articulated fingers. He tried to fish them free with his flesh hand, lost patience, and tensed to just jerk the hand away and lose the hairs.

"Hold on," Clint said. He vaulted over the couch and approached James carefully. He held his hands up and wiggled the fingers. "Let me get that for you."

James huffed out a strangled breath and let Clint untangle the hair from his metal fingers. Clint was unsurprisingly deft and worked without crowding too close to James the way anyone else would have, thanks to his perfect eyesight. He felt at physical ease around Clint, which was a huge relief after his moment of shivering, shocking awareness with Steve.

"There," Clint stepped back but kept eying James. It made James twitchy, like Clint could see right
through the roiled up mess in his head and into the secret thoughts that James was sure Bucky had never entertained. The things he thought Steve would recoil from coming from James. Or worse, Steve would reciprocate, but he'd be seeing the ghost of Bucky not him.

That, James thought shakily, would be worse than being rejected or ejected from the tower to fend for himself.

"Something's got you in a tizzy."

James gave out an inelegant snort. "If you want to call it that."

"So talk. What's the worst that happens? You utterly and totally humiliate yourself and I bruise my ass when I fall on it laughing at you."

James found himself following Clint back to the couches and sitting. Clint slouched back into his favorite spot, retrieved the remote and shut off the show he'd been watching, one of those K-dramas he was addicted to. James was the only other person in the tower who spoke Korean and usually found himself reluctantly fascinated. The rest of the Avengers were equally pleased and relieved that he and Clint were bonding over something other than pie and extreme sniping and that they no longer were subjected to Clint's rants about his South Korean television obsession.

"Tell Uncle Clint," Clint wheedled.

James started to shove his hands through his hair again and barely stopped himself. "We were sparring."

"You and Cap."

He nodded.

"This is going to be like pulling teeth," Clint sighed. "Did something trigger you? Jarvis, should I be calling for the medics?"

"Captain Rogers is currently engaged with his third heavy bag," Jarvis replied in an impeccably bland tone. "He is not in need of medical services at this time."


"It's already phallic enough," James replied.

"Well, then, you're going to have to tell me what happened with Cap."

"I left." James frowned and wondered if that had made Steve angry enough to start destroying heavy bags. He glanced at Clint. Clint remained skeptical of Steve, though on better terms than when he'd arrived at the tower. Clint would probably tell James the truth and not whatever he thought would make James do what Steve wanted. "I thought he was about to kiss me. I know he wanted me." He left out that he wanted Steve too.

Clint's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed with a hard click. James began to tense in response to the way Clint's face lost expression. He clutched at the arm of the couch and it began to creak, the framework under the upholstery no match for the Arm.

James narrowed his eyes. "Hydra didn't offer any choices. I have them. I get to leave if I want to." It felt like he needed to say it to remind himself. He'd chosen to leave an unstable situation, not
endure it, because he could.

"Hydra," Clint echoed and his expression morphed through horror into anger. James calculated exactly how he would need to move if Clint became a threat. He didn't want to hurt Clint, so he would need to be faster and incapacitate him. If Jarvis locked down the tower, he would need to work toward the roof. He had a base-jumper's parachute and gear hidden there. He thought it was the mention of Hydra that had Clint angry, but it was reflex to be ready for an attack.

"Fuck," Clint exclaimed. "You don't have to be with anyone you don't want to. Natasha will castrate anyone who makes you think you have to say yes." Clint rocked forward and onto his feet. He looked at James then paced over to the bar and retrieved a bottle of beer. "I'll stick them to a wall like a pincushion while she does it too." He stalked back and shoved one of the bottles at James. "He didn't say something that made you think that, did he? I mean, he's a sanctimonious ass sometimes, but that's just it. Steve wouldn't ever mean to do that."

James let go of the couch arm to take the bottle. The arm sagged to the side, the interior support torn loose. He winced as he noticed and switched the beer bottle to his flesh hand after twisting the cap off, feeling like he wanted to sag with relief too. "No. He didn't say anything. Hydra didn't use me for those kinds of missions because of the Arm, you know."

"You're sure?" Clint asked.

James shrugged and said, "As sure as I can be." He was. Sex wasn't something he felt any bad associations with from any of his patchy memories, Bucky or the Winter Soldier.

Clint began muttering to himself. "Fucking Red Room bastards, fucking Hydra, Department X, and goddamn S.H.I.E.L.D.; they're all bastards. I mean, fuck Fury wherever his lying, manipulating ass is, at least he and Coulson never whored us out." He stopped and stared out the wall of windows at New York then gave himself a shake. "That we know." A shudder ran through Clint. "Can't trust your own mind when you know the bastards can wipe you and reprogram you and unmake you – "

"The body knows," James said to snap Clint out of the sort of spiral he was all too familiar with himself. He clutched at the bottle but didn't drink any of it. Clint's anger and discomfort had somehow settled some of his own fear. He didn't think he needed to jump off the tower to escape any longer. "You would know. You'd know."

Clint spun round and stared at James.

"I know that, even after a wipe, sometimes I could piece things together. I always knew when I'd been wiped. I just couldn't care." Nothing didn't care it was nothing, he added silently. He shied away from that thought and reverted to his current problem. "I don't know what to say to him."

"Hey, no is fine," Clint said. "Steve will be okay with it." He rubbed his face with one hand and came back to the sitting area. "Are you sure Steve was, uh, interested? Maybe he was – "

"I'm trained to notice everything." James reminded him with a measure of scorn. "Elevated heart rate, pupil dilation, micro-expressions. I was close enough to smell the change – "

"Yeah, I don't want to hear about Cap's smell," Clint interrupted with a stop hand gesture. He made a pained noise to go with the squinch of his features at the thought of Captain America and sex. James was pretty sure he was reading Clint right about that and felt almost amused.

"You did ask." Clint stuck his nose in. Now he'd have to suffer too. From the bits and pieces James had remembered of Bucky, Bucky could be an ass. James shared that with the ghost of who he'd
been. Even as the Winter Soldier, there had sometimes been a sardonic contempt locked behind his eyes that he hadn't given voice to; he'd been aware of irony at the very least.

"I will swear on Tony's best Scotch that I didn't," Clint protested. He seated himself opposite James again though and gave James a go on look.

James shifted his shoulders; his left dipping lower in a tell he needed to train himself out of showing. His shirt and pants were sticking to him unpleasantly, sweat-dried and smelly. He wanted the shower he'd originally been aiming to take.

"Is it the guy thing?" Clint asked. "Did they have homosexuals back – Right, of course there were." James glared at him anyway. "It's not illegal now. Unless you're in Russia. I think it may be illegal to talk about being gay in Russia."

"No," James told him. "I don't understand why I would care if anyone is the same or different from me, if they want sex and I do too." Bucky probably had, but he wasn't Bucky any more. "And I don't care about stupid laws." He flexed his left fist. Deliberately this time.


James rolled his eyes at him.

"So, uh, if Cap's junk isn't the no-no no-go," Clint said, "what has you pulling your hair out? Literally. God, I never wanted to ever talk about Cap's junk, never mind contemplate it. Which I'm not. You should appreciate that I'm going to need to get really drunk later, by the way. Black out, Lost Weekend drunk. So if evil takes over the world because I'm incapacitated, it will be yours and Steve's fault."

James thought the world would probably survive.

Clint's sharp gaze demanded an answer. James stared at the windows instead. He felt the air in the common room shift, a subtle change not due to the ventilation system, and identified the difference as Natasha. She made no noise, somehow even muffling the rustle of clothing when she moved, but James could feel her there. He hadn't meant for her to hear any of this, but stopping would mean acknowledging her presence. He and she were carefully gravitating toward a friendship; that didn't mean James wanted to give up the edge of being able to sense her when she didn't think he could.

He didn't think she'd say anything to Steve. Natasha kept her own counsel.

"Fine. If he doesn't trip your trig – rev your engine, just say so." Clint waited through James' silence. "Oh." He flopped back on the couch. "Look, you're going to have to say it because now I'm really lost."

"I'm not Bucky." He never would be again. If Steve thought that someday some switch would flip and James would have all of Bucky's memories, he was wrong. Most of it was just gone. Not disconnected. Gone. Even if he had all those memories, he still wouldn't be that man. James didn't want to be that man either, not even for Steve. It would be denying the Winter Soldier and he'd had too long being denied one part of himself to give away another. "I never will be."

Clint was a sniper. Like James. Like Bucky for that matter. Snipers could go still as stone, ease their breath out until their lungs were as empty as their minds, with just the rifle, the scope, the reticle centered on the target. Pull the trigger, breathe. James knew that stillness, that focus. Clint held that still and James held his breath with him, until Clint sighed and James could inhale again.

"Fuck," Clint said softly. "Fuck."
"I like him," James murmured. "I do, but I don't know if it's me he was even seeing today." If Steve had been seeing Bucky in the moment of charged awareness, James knew responding would only result in a disaster. He could only disappoint Steve in the end.

"Steve's a good guy. He wouldn't do that to you."

"If he knew he was doing it," James said.

"He's more self-aware than you give him credit for," Natasha said from behind Clint's couch.

Clint flinched and cursed and then glared at James. "You couldn't warn me?"

"You should be more situationally aware." Natasha eye-smiled at James. She approved when he messed with Clint this way.

"In the field! This is my home. I'm supposed to be able to relax and not have ex-Soviet assassins ambush me with feelings talks! It's not fair."

"Poor baby," Natasha agreed. She ruffled her fingers through Clint's hair, then gave it a yank. "I'm Russian, not Soviet."

"Potato, tomato."

Natasha looked up from Clint to James. "He knows who he wants, James. So go climb him like a tree and fuck his brains out. God knows he needs it."

"Oh God." Clint stuffed his pinkies in his ears. "Lalalalala lalalalala. I can't hear this."

"Just think of the Washington monument," James said, just to screw with him. He didn't know what to do with Natasha's advice, if advice it was. Was she telling him his doubts were unfounded?

"I'm never sharing my K-dramas with you again!"

Natasha patted Clint's shoulder. "That's not the threat you think it is."

"Lalalalala lalalalala."

"I'm going to take my shower," James said, mostly to Natasha, though he knew Clint heard him too.

She just nodded and let James make his escape.

*~*~*

Shower, in this case, meant indulging in the sybaritic wet room attached to the guest suite. James wondered if Stark's own quarters were even more luxurious, but couldn't imagine what else could be added. Dark gray granite dominated, trimmed with brushed steel and broken up with vertical white marble panels with al fresco grapevine carvings. The floor tiles had just enough texture to prevent slipping and were heated from beneath. The AI controlled ventilation and temperature controls meant it was never stuffy or humid, except in the two-person sauna room. There were padded benches to sit on in the first portion of the wet room, dressing and make-up and massage tables at key points.

Beyond a glass nano wall that became an opaque shoji screen with a touch, the wet room offered a shower big enough for four people, with its own built in bench long and wide enough to lie on against one wall, and no shower heads: the entire ceiling showered water down, soft as rain or hard
as hail, infinitely adjustable via manual controls or voice activated through Jarvis. One wall of the shower enclosure had a touch screen monitor that could show computer data via the tower network, television, the internet, or movies. It also offered the menu to the sound system. A glass door slid aside to access an always stocked array of shampoos, shower gels, razors, creams, oils, and moisturizer. One wall could morph into a mirror as well.

The guest suite wet room also had a roman-style sunken tub wide and long enough for even someone Thor's height, a whirlpool hot tub also made for two people, all also equipped with voice-controlled monitors, waterproofed lounges and small but well stocked minibar and fridge with drinks and finger foods. Everywhere were sleek steel stands stocked with lush towels and heavy white terry cloth robes. There were even slippers in a range of sizes for anyone who disliked going barefoot.

There were also flower arrangements each day, brought in by robots under Jarvis' supervision, unless the suite was privacy locked. All the floors of the tower that James had seen had flowers and plants, except Stark and Bruce's labs and the gym. Pepper insisted on them and had quizzed James if he had any allergies or dislikes so nothing would be included that would irritate him.

James suspected that Stark's own wet room was probably stocked well enough the man could live out of it for a week and never lose contact with the world.

He shed his sweaty gym clothes into the hamper and headed straight for the shower area. The touch controls were already pre-set to his preference for water just a few degrees hotter than body temperature pattering down gentle as rain. He'd been hosed down with cold water and occasionally scalded by the Hydra techs handling him over the years as the Asset and the memories of pain and discomfort were too visceral to ever lose in a wipe. If he did, they were brought back the next time it happened. Stark's shower was so different it let him remember he'd once enjoyed getting clean as much as being clean, an aim separate from the necessary hygiene the Asset had been drilled in.

When he'd accustomed himself to the water, James touched the controls and upped the water pressure incrementally, then found the soap with the scent he liked. It only barely lingered on his skin once he was clean.

He'd yet to stay in the shower long enough to run out of hot water. Stark boasted that the building would run out of water before it ran out of power to keep it hot as the tower ran off the energy from an arc reactor.

James took his time, worked the soap into a rich lather and washed himself with an attention to his body he'd only really begun to enjoy in the last couple of weeks. Before that, it had been a tool that needed maintenance and not something that felt pleasure. Sam's mother's cooking had been the first thing that had been good, but not the last. He'd learned it felt good to wake up after sleeping deeply and linger in the cocoon of warmth in his bed, knowing he didn't need to leave it unless he wanted to, that no one would force him from it. There was the satisfying feel of well-used muscles after a work-out in the gym, too. There was Pepper's perfume and the way Natasha's hair swung and Steve's body moving with and against him as they sparred. There was so much color and pleasure in his world now, sometimes it was almost too much, just like the emotions he'd found within himself lately.

He ran his hands over his skin, even the scarred places that joined him to the Arm, mapping himself, reminding himself this was his body. No one else had any autonomy over it. But he paused after that thought. He let himself think of what it would be like with someone else touching him. Touching himself was safe; there were no surprises. Someone else would be constant uncertainty, beyond the vulnerability of being naked. He wanted that, though. Everyone in the
tower had slowly, carefully, been teaching him that touch wasn't a threat, that human contact fed something inside. But those touches, always telegraphed and slow, weren't what he yearned for now.

He wanted Steve's hands all over his skin. They'd skim the water away, warm and sure and paradoxically strong and tender. Steve would be careful with James. He'd treat James like someone precious and James felt pretty sure that's what he wanted. He didn't need to prove he was a man or push anyone around and he'd had enough pain in his life. The idea of rough sex curdled any desire he felt. But Steve wouldn't be like that, he had a basic decency about him that shone through in everything he did, even when he made mistakes.

James skated his hand down his chest to his belly and closed his eyes, shaking, letting the fantasy take over for a minute. He wanted Steve. Steve's skin under his hand; even the dulled pressure sensitivity of the Arm ached to push against him. He wasn't sure he could have Steve for himself, but he could have the fantasy at least. Maybe, if Natasha was right, it could be more. For now, he could concentrate on making himself feel good.

He'd done this a few times in the last week, stroked his hands over his own body, woke up hard, woke up to wet, sticky sheets once. He'd take the dream that led to that embarrassment over his nightmares. It felt good, so good.

The water streamed down, running from his slicked hair over his eyes and cheeks, down his neck and slipping down his back, pattering onto his shoulders, sliding down his legs. He flexed his feet against the tiles beneath them, curled and uncurled his toes, and let his hand drift lower to clasp himself loosely.

He didn't try to imagine what Steve would do, stuck with what felt good instead, a slow stroke that made him shiver and gasp when he squeezed tighter and teased his tip with the pad of his thumb. The water could almost be Steve's hands gliding over him.

His knees trembled with the next stroke. James hesitated then sat on the bench with his thighs spread. The delicate, constant rain of warm water over his erection teased until he groaned, hips hitching, and reached for himself again.

Muscle memory older than the Winter Soldier took over as he wrapped his hand around his dick again. He didn't hurry, but the pleasure crested sure and bright, sparking in his spine and tightening in his gut, all too soon. His hips arched forward, pushing him into the clasp of his hand, and he spilled his climax on to the wet tiles.

It washed away as he watched, eyelids at half-mast and muscles like jelly, glad of the bench beneath him, enjoying the little, shivering aftershocks of pleasure and the lassitude that followed, not thinking of anyone or anything.

He wanted to make Steve feel like that and wondered if he could. More importantly, he wondered if he should. Was it a risk worth taking? If he believed Natasha, it was, and she hadn't lied to him yet. He didn't doubt she would lie, if she thought it necessary, but James couldn't fathom why she would mislead him about this.

Unless she thought that Steve would reject him and James would leave...

James shook his head. Even if Natasha wanted him gone, she wouldn't choose a method that hurt Steve. So she really did think Steve wanted him and being with James would make him happy.

James hoped so, enough so that he decided he would follow Clint and Natasha's advice. He would
start making it clear to Steve that he was interested. He didn't really remember how to flirt or do that any longer, but he could wing it. At the very worst, he'd end up rejected. Steve wouldn't withdraw his friendship though, and James figured his ego could take anything else.
Chapter 17

Steve

James leans over him, propped up on the metal arm, just staring at him while he moves in, inch by inch, closer and closer until his breath fans Steve's cheeks and James' eyes take up all of Steve's vision. James' weight settles against him, constricting and so good. When James says "Steve," the earnest look turns into a blinding smile and James closes the last gap. His lips are on Steve's, warm, sure, gentle, and all Steve can do is take a breath that's like a sob and kiss James back until he's dizzy with it. James' flesh and blood hand is curling around Steve's hip as he's rocking them together and Steve gasps against James' lips until James opens up and –

Steve woke with a start, overheated, panting and hard in a way he hadn't been since he woke up next to Mary Margaret Connelly in Baltimore in August of '43. He tossed the blanket aside and covered his eyes with his forearm, blocking out the light from the digital clock on his nightstand. Four thirty a.m. Damn.

It wasn't that he wasn't interested in sex. Once she had him in her bed (something that had been all her doing), sex with Mary Margaret had been easy, fun. Different from how he'd imagined his first time would be. That morning, when he'd woken with an embarrassing hard-on, she'd just grinned and squeezed him with an appreciative chuckle and had shown him things that, in hindsight, still made him blush. He'd always been a fast learner, so they hadn't left her bed all day and the other girls had remarked on how loose-limbed his performance was the next day. Mary Margaret had just grinned and blown him a kiss. Steve remembered her mouth. Even without the blood-red lipstick the chorus girls wore, it had been a lovely shade of red and her lips had been soft and demanding at the same time. He remembered the feeling of her lips gliding over his chest, of her tongue hot and wet on his nipples, the helpless pleasure spreading through him.

Images of James' lips and the way the skin over his hipbones had felt under Steve's fingertips – warm, smooth, alive – washed back up from the haziness of the dream and superimposed with Mary Margaret until her eyes were blue and not brown and her hair dark, not blonde and soft curves turned to hard muscles and those were James' lips gliding along his collarbone.

Steve thumped his fist against the mattress and opened his eyes on a frustrated growl. No, damn it, no.

He couldn't assume James wanted what Steve wanted, that was the thing. He'd done enough to push James in the past weeks; this newfound... whatever it was, was something he'd never even put out in the open and couldn't even allow in fantasy if he ever wanted to look James in the eyes again.

Ten, fifteen minutes of breathing exercises and attempts at clearing his mind later, the traitorous erection still refused to recede and Steve started to curse his enhanced body.

He rolled out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom, gingerly pulling the sweatpants off. His dick responded far too readily to even the barely there stimulation of the cotton being removed from it and his mind went to the shape of James' lips again, the slope of his collarbone. Steve ground his teeth together and stepped into the shower, turning it all the way to cold. Despite the frigid water, it took another ten minutes until his body finally accepted that it wouldn't get the release it wanted.

He couldn't meet his own eyes in the mirror when he dried and shaved and he still felt tense and ill-at-ease when he slipped into fresh sweatpants and a shirt.
Coffee. Maybe all he needed was coffee and breakfast and the newspaper to distract him. And if that didn't work, Bruce was usually up early. Maybe he'd have a new science project to talk about.

Steve took the elevator to the Avengers common room with the open kitchen. The scent of freshly brewed coffee greeted him, something he appreciated more than he could put in words. Coffee had been too expensive to drink regularly before the ice and he doubted he'd ever get sick of it even if he could get it everywhere now.

He grabbed a mug from the shelf and set it down on the marble counter, grinning as he recognized the décor. Pepper had a thing for bringing the kitschiest mug she could possibly find from every business trip she went on and present it to Tony who always rolled his eyes and left it in the common room kitchen. The mug that Steve currently filled to the brim with pitch-black coffee was a dusty blue with the words *60 Years a Queen* on it. He had an idea how well that one had gone over.

"Your lips are blue," James voice suddenly came from across the counter.

Steve flinched, an actual, full-body flinch and as a result, sloshed hot coffee over his hand. He muttered a curse under his breath, glad that he could mask it as just geared toward the coffee when really he wondered what he'd done to the fates to present him with James so soon after his dream. And why on earth did James have to be so cat-footed? Bucky had never been this quiet.

"Why?" James inquired again.

Steve didn't need to worry about burns, his body healed too fast for that to be a concern, but he held his hand under the tap and let cold water run over it anyway. Old habits die hard and it gave him something to do that wasn't looking at James.

"Cold shower," Steve answered and he knew as soon as the words were out that he'd set himself up for a deeper inquiry.

"Why would you take a cold shower long enough your lips turn blue?"

Steve felt like resting his head against the coolness of the marble counter. Why? What had he done to deserve this? "Bad dream," he ground out, hoping that it'd be enough by way of explanation of both his blue lips and his clipped replies.

"Are you all right?" James had stepped next to Steve, not in his personal space but just outside it. He sounded gentle and concerned and Steve really hated the role he was playing for James. Besides, he wasn't all right, now was he?

"Fine," he lied. He realized that he was out-monosyllabing James himself, so he added, "Just needed to get some coffee."

"Here, let me see that," James said and stretched out his right hand to where Steve was still holding his own under the faucet. His bare lower arm brushed against Steve's and Steve twitched back as if he'd been burned yet again.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, not sure what he was apologizing for.

James took a step back and Steve all but felt his gaze burning into the top of his skull. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Steve fought an explosive sigh. He really, really wasn't. James' accidental touch had set his skin alight, hyperaware and craving the next contact when he'd only just convinced his body to settle
"Steve?"

Steve looked up eventually and found James' features drawn with concern. James was close again. Too close. It would be so easy to reach out and touch, to feel, to see what would happen if he'd just take the plunge and –

"Well, look who's up already." Natasha's low voice made Steve jump for the second time this morning. Was everyone sneaking up on him today?

"You're a mite twitchy this morning, Cap," Clint stated and sounded – and looked - far too innocent for Steve's liking.

"He burned his hand," James informed Clint.

"Did he now?" Clint asked, sounding far more interested than the situation merited. Also far more smug. Steve had an irrational moment in which he wanted to glare at Natasha until he remembered that trust was important to her and that she wouldn't betray his confidence for a bit of gossip. The look Natasha exchanged with Clint made him wonder if he really could trust in that sentiment, though.

"Did he what?" Bruce asked when he shuffled into the kitchen with a huge yawn. Uncoordinated, he reached around Steve to get to the coffeepot, but miscalculated and ended up nearly shouldering Steve out of the way. Steve moved out of harm's way – one did not get between Bruce and his first cup of coffee, not unless one wanted Bruce to turn a little green around the gills. Due to the strange way he moved back and to the side at the same time, he bumped into James. In his haste to get away, he started to stumble over his own feet, prompting James to reach out and steady him - with one hand on his hip and one clamped around his wrist.

Steve's gaze snapped to James' face. His lips were parted, color in his cheeks, but his brows were drawn together in a faint frown of uncertainty. Someone coughed behind him, there was a sound of footsteps, but Steve had a hard time concentrating on it when his world threatened to narrow to the warmth of James' hand around his wrist and the cold of the metal hand still on his hip.

"Oh, so they finally – " the rest of Tony's sentence was muffled.

James' hands fell away from Steve.

When Steve looked away from James, too embarrassed to even look in his direction, he found that Bruce had clamped a hand over Tony's mouth.

Natasha surveyed the scene with barely concerned amusement. "Four men in the kitchen. I like the way this day is starting," she said. "So, breakfast?"

Bruce kept his hand clamped over Tony's mouth and pulled him from behind the kitchen island into the main common room. "I'm not awake enough for criticism over my choice of spices and Tony's cooking is awful when he's on less than two hours of sleep." Tony made a noise of protest under Bruce's hand which Bruce ignored with a look of rumpled calm.

Natasha shrugged. "Two down, two to go." She lifted her head, indicating Steve and James with her chin. "Dynamic Duo – you gonna stand there and be awkward or are you going to make breakfast?"

Steve shot Natasha a look that he intended to be murderous but knew fell short somewhere along
the lines of embarrassed and miffed.

James nudged his elbow against Steve's side. "Need me to save you from getting lynched over you ruining food?"

"I'm not that hopeless in the kitchen," Steve protested.

James arched an eyebrow at him. "Tell me about one successful meal in the past two months."

Steve opened his mouth.

"And no, popcorn doesn't count."

Steve closed his mouth again and frowned.

James laughed and threw his metal arm around Steve's shoulder, squeezing him in a half-hug. Steve went rigid at the feeling of James' warmth pressed all along his side. "Oh, buck up, Cap." Steve heard Tony groan but couldn't find it in him to look away from James' metal hand on his shoulder. "You gotta leave something for the rest of us to do. Can't be perfect at everything."

"Bad puns are my wheelhouse," Steve heard Tony say with a whine. "It's bad enough Barton's getting in on it, I do not need another punster around here."

Tony glared at James' arm, still slung around Steve's shoulder. "Also, hey, when did this get to be hug-a-Cap-day?"

"Every day is Hug-a-Cap-day," James said, the grin audible in his voice, and pulled Steve even closer, close enough Steve's face was pressed against his loose hair. Steve fought the urge to breathe in the scent of soap and warm skin. "You just need to get your own, because this one's mine."

Steve went rigid and listened to an odd hush fall over the room. Bruce cleared his throat. Steve stopped breathing. He didn't dare look in Natasha's and Clint's direction. Heat crept up his cheeks. He wanted James to let go. He wanted him to never let go.

"Since we're fresh out of Captains..." Steve heard Tony's voice come closer. "Move over, Tin Man." He shouldered James out of the way with a frightening disregard for James' reflexes. "My turn."

Without further warning, Steve found himself squeezed in a 160 pound, patented Stark tackle hug, and surprised by the wiry strength of Tony's arms, unable to break free without making a real effort.

"Mmmh-hmm," Tony commented against Steve's chest. "Yes, I can see the appeal."

Steve gave James and Natasha a pleading look over the top of Tony's head. "He's crazy," he mouthed at them. "Help!"

Natasha, though, traitor that she was sometimes, just gleefully broke Tony's hold by something Tony called a, "Damn ninja-tickling move," in a highly amusing squeak that Steve would have enjoyed more if he hadn't suddenly had an armful of Natasha wrapped around him, all luscious, dangerous curves and wonderful scent. Hugging Natasha wasn't strange, never had been. She just had a way of squeezing him that left even him breathless.

Clint looked at them, his face betraying nothing – for about ten seconds. Then a frighteningly large
grin broke over his face and he declared, "Group hug!" as he reached for James' arm, pulled James into motion and plastered himself against Steve's back while he nudged James against Steve's side. Steve felt James tense against him, against the sudden touch from three sides and wondered how much James was fronting. He was distracted by Clint, though, who reached around him far enough to clamp onto Natasha's back and squeeze as hard as she did. Steve gasped, "Help," in James' direction which just made James, who was already smiling, dissolve into quiet laughter. His body lost the tension Steve had felt before and he collapsed against Steve's shoulder, laughter rocking his frame. James' forehead was warm through the thin layer of Steve's shirt; the puffs of breath from his chuckles that skittered down Steve's bare lower arm made Steve hyper-aware of every inch he was being touched.

"Bruce!" Tony called, walked over to where Bruce was standing in front of the kitchen island, looking both amused and vaguely horrified. Tony didn't hesitate – he reeled Bruce in with a grin that was approaching manic levels usually not seen on Tony's face before a certain degree of caffeine saturation had been reached and declared, "Team hug!" Then he impacted, Bruce in tow, on Steve's only free side.

"Mmmh, oh, yeah," Clint commented. "I think we've found a way to subdue even a super-soldier."

"Shut up and feel the love, Legolas," Tony said, pressing his face against Steve's arm. Steve could feel his grin.

"Hey, guys what's with the early... ?" Sam's voice died and Steve looked up from where he'd been fascinated by the play of light on a lighter strand of James' hair.

Sam stood rooted to the spot in front of the kitchen island and gaped. Rubbed his eyes. Blinked. Opened and closed his mouth. Rubbed his eyes again. When he finally got a hold of himself, he said, a tone of outrage in his voice, "That just ain't right. Why didn't anyone tell me about the team orgy?"

Steve winked at him. "Well, you know what they say about the early bird..."

"Caw!" Clint commented from behind him.

"Does that make you a worm?" Sam shot back.

"Warm for your form, maybe." Clint leered comically at Sam.

After another minute, they all untangled themselves, cheeks warm with embarrassment but smiling and loose-limbed in the best of ways, completely at ease with each other. It might not have been anything Steve would have ever initiated, but Tony's group hug had settled something between all of the Avengers. They would be better for it.

Not that he was going to admit that. Instead, he straightened to his full height and said, "Anyone not cooking needs to get on the other side of the counter."

Finally, it was just James and Steve left in the kitchen. Tony, Sam, Clint, Bruce and Natasha were all standing in front of the kitchen counter, though, looking expectantly at James.

"What's for breakfast, Iron Chef?" Tony asked.

"What're you in the mood for?" James asked.

"How about — " Clint didn't manage to finish his sentence, because Natasha clamped her hand over his mouth.
"Don't corrupt him, Clinton. I'm not sure I can take another morning of the super-soldier surprise you made the other day." Which had been Clint throwing together everything he could find in the kitchen. "I draw a line at mixing kiwi, nougat crème and bacon."

Once she removed her hand, Clint whined, "But bacon makes everything better."

"No, it doesn't," Bruce said.

Natasha didn't really have to worry about that – James was a stickler for following recipes.

"I liked the cranberry scones you did the other afternoon," Steve said.

"Those were excellent," Bruce agreed.

A small, pleased smile washed over James' face.

"How about an omelet?" Natasha suggested. "You know, some tomatoes, mushrooms, peppers... no nougat crème and no kiwis."

James smirked and threw her a knife with a showy flick of his wrist. Natasha caught it without even blinking. "I see we have a volunteer sous chef."

Much to Steve's surprise, Natasha just shrugged and reached for a cutting board and the bowl with the tomatoes.

James pointed at Steve. "You, out. Since you're not cooking."

"Said it yourself, man," Sam told him.

Steve thought he'd probably be better off with a counter between himself and James anyway.

It turned out that, while Natasha insisted she couldn't cook, she was as frighteningly good with knives in the kitchen as she was in her line of work and didn't mind being drafted at all. Steve had his suspicions that part of that was because she could control what was going into the omelet that way, but he wasn't mad enough to call her on her OCD tendencies.

Steve found himself drafted with measuring and fetching duties in the meantime. He watched with amazement how the dough for the scones came together in a sticky, still gloopy mess.

James' hair kept falling into his eyes when he started kneading the dough, and he tried to swipe it away with the back of his hand. All he managed was to get smears of dough on his cheekbone, though.

"Getting a little rusty on the application of war paint there, James?" Steve joked and regretted it immediately when James' features froze. He wanted to smack himself upside the head. "Sorry, I'm sorry," he blurted, then ran a hand over his face. "God, that was thoughtless."

"No, it's fine," James said, the initial tension seeping from his body again. "You're right. I am getting rusty in that regard." He smiled at Steve. "Feels good, actually." He bent forward to continue kneading – or rather, folding – the dough and blew against the same stubborn strand of hair that kept falling into his eyes. A look of frustration darkened his face. "You know what would feel better right now? If I'd let you cut my hair a week ago."

Steve smiled. "I'm glad I didn't."

A huff came from Natasha's side of the kitchen island. Somewhere behind her, Clint whispered
something that made Tony snort a laugh.

"Watching you lose a battle with it is pretty hilarious."

"Funny," James said, bone-dry. "How about you being actually helpful and helping me tie it back?"

"Using what?" Steve asked. "Kitchen string?"

James rolled his eyes at Steve. "There's a hair tie in my pocket."

"Is there now?" Natasha muttered under her breath.

Standing behind him, Steve reached around James to get to his front pocket. He stopped for a second when he felt James tense, then relax as if forcing himself to accept Steve being so near, and Steve thought he understood why. With Steve crowding up behind him and his hands stuck in the dough, this was a position that left James incredibly vulnerable. That he was standing still and not moving out of the situation wasn't just another step in his recovery, it was a huge act of trust. Steve quietly vowed never to break that trust.

He stretched out his hand to lift the hem of James' shirt a little so he could get to the front pocket of James' jeans. Steve's fingers touched bare, warm skin and he thought about moving them away, but decided to let his hand linger instead, just for a few blinks of an eye, to soothe frayed nerves and to reassure James. No matter how much he wanted to linger for purely selfish reasons, he didn't, but then, without warning, James swayed back toward Steve, into Steve's touch and his body. Steve's mouth went dry while his palm began to sweat. His face grew warm. That, he thought, was more than tolerating or trusting. Blood began to rush in his ears; drowning out all other sounds. That was damn close to an invitation. Was that maybe what Natasha had meant last night?

James' hands had stilled in the dough and Steve saw a muscle in his cheek jump. The sound of his own heartbeat was loud in his ears and his world narrowed down to James, to the soft half inch of skin Steve couldn't stop his thumb from stroking over, to the silky feel of his hair against his cheek. When James bent his head, his hair slid forward over his shoulders, parting, exposing the vulnerable nape of his neck and Steve swayed as well, shaken by the abrupt urge to close that small gap and brush his lips across the knob of James' spine.

A loud noise startled and snapped him out of his daze. It was Natasha, chopping the green peppers and onions with more gusto than the task merited. She was giving him a pointed look and kept chopping, not even looking at her hand handling the razor-sharp knife. Steve suppressed a shudder and finished the task of retrieving the hair tie from James' pocket. Knowing Natasha was watching made it easier to ignore the way James leaned his head into his hands as Steve captured James' hair in a loose ponytail.

"Thanks," James murmured. He seemed to concentrate on the dough for the scones again.

"You know, you still have that war paint thing going, James," Natasha said. When Steve threw her a surprised look, she gave him a saccharine smile that made him very uncomfortable.

"You're going to have to wipe it away if it bothers you, because I'm just going to make it worse if I try," he said, lifting his dough-smeared hands to prove his point.

"Busy with the chopping here," she said, inflecting regret when her face showed none of it. "But if Steve's not busy... " she trailed off and grinned even wider at Steve.

Steve felt the urge to either strangle her or run. Maybe both, in succession.
James shrugged. "Sure."

How James stayed so damn nonchalant, Steve had no idea. He ignored the thumping noise coming from the common room table and fled toward the sink, resting his hands on it and hanging his head for a few seconds to breathe and pull himself together. Wiping a bit of dough away from James cheek couldn't be that risky, he thought as he dampened a paper towel.

He really should have thought that through better, he realized when he tipped James' face back with his fingers on James' jaw. James had shaved already which made it easy for Steve's gaze to be drawn to the curve of James' lower lip, to the divot in his chin and then up to his eyes.

Steve never bought that whole 'stormy' description of anyone's eyes, but James' eyes were darker than normal, the mixture of gray and blue like heavy clouds that gathered on the horizon, and Steve got it now, the comparison, the idea that something wild was hovering in the air. He forced himself to look away from James' eyes and concentrate on the task of getting the dough cleaned off and fumbled with the paper towel when it tore under the pressure. He nearly put his thumb in James eyes when he folded the paper towel to cover the tear. James held still through the whole procedure, barely breathing, but never taking his eyes off Steve. The buttermilk-flour mixture on James' cheek was stubborn – it was dried out already and stuck and it took Steve far too long for his liking to get it off of James' skin. By the time he finally succeeded, a red mark bloomed on James' cheek.

Steve lifted the laser focus – something that was more for his own protection than because the task warranted it – he'd had on the spot and flickered an apologetic smile at James. James didn't return it. He looked wide-eyed and flushed and Steve realized that not all of the color in his cheeks was from Steve's efforts. Or maybe it was, but not from the unintentionally rough treatment. James looked a little wild around the edges. Steve couldn't blame him.

"Oh, boy," Tony's voice cut through the tense silence. "I never knew watching someone 'mom' another guy could be – " the rest of his sentence was muffled once more, suggesting that Bruce had clamped a hand over his mouth again. So they had seen. All of them. Steve felt the heat of embarrassment climb into his cheeks and didn't dare look up.

"I'm kind of glad I'm gonna be gone for the next week," Sam muttered. "This is just painful."

James swallowed hard, then ducked away from Steve and busied himself with shaping the dough into a disk. "I need to cut the scones and get them in the oven."

"I need a cold shower," Natasha piped up. She gave Steve a pointed look.

He, too, ducked away and drew himself a glass of tap waiter which he drained in one long gulp. God, he was parched. He drew another and repeated the motion.

He didn't hear Natasha approach and nearly choked on his third glass of water when she spoke up. "What," she asked, low enough that no one but them would hear it, "do I have to do with you, Rogers?"

Steve tried to feign innocence. "Hm?"

"I have knives. Several fine Japanese blades. Even they're not sharp enough to cut the UST in this kitchen. It's approaching lethal levels. If I go and grab Bruce for an impromptu making out session next, I'm blaming you."

"Bruce?" Steve echoed. "Why, Natasha, I never knew – "
"Don't divert." She started to clean the knife in a way that made him want to run and hide. "I swear to you that I will... " She froze, closed her eyes briefly and raised her voice, "pin your ass to the chair with the steak knives, Clint Barton, if you don't get your hand off those mushrooms."

Steve whipped his head around to look toward the counter where, on cue, Clint was standing, looking like the boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "You didn't even turn!" Clint protested.

"Please, like I needed to," Natasha scoffed. "I could hear you munch."

"Are you criticizing my table manners?"

"You're not strictly speaking at the table," Jarvis commented.

"Stark, tell your AI to stop taking sides."

"No, no, Jarvis, go on – "

"Could you put the knife aside, Natasha?" Bruce asked, sounding uneasy. "You're making me a little uncomfortable."

"Are you turning green?" Sam asked, an edge of panic in his voice. "Natasha, for God's sake, put the knives away, and James, set down those cookie cutters. Everyone, breathe, calming thoughts, okay?"

Bruce gave Steve a conspiratorial wink, then rested his head on the table and put his hands next to it, opening and flexing them into fists. "Might be too late," he said, voice sounding strained.

Sam screeched his chair back from the table. Natasha went pale. Clint started looking for the exits.

Only Tony got up slowly and rested a hand on Bruce's bent back. "You okay there, buddy?"

James, who appeared to have caught the exchange between Steve and Bruce, just stifled a smirk and calmly went on cutting the scones.

"Not sure I can control it," Bruce said.

Oh, Bruce Banner may look harmless to the unsuspecting stranger, but he had a wicked, wicked sense of humor.

"Yeah you can. Just breathe, remember, meditate," Sam said, sounding desperate. Steve almost felt bad for him. "You're calm, you're balanced, you're –"

"HUNGRY!" Bruce roared and straightened.

Sam squeaked in horror. Natasha grabbed four knives at once. Clint grabbed the other three.

"I AM DAMN HUNGRY!" Bruce cleared his throat, rolled his shoulders and smiled his mildest smile at them all. "Kindly stop stalling the cooking?"

Clint's jaw dropped open. Natasha's left eye twitched. Sam wobbled against a wall.

"You," Tony said, his voice not entirely steady. "Are a bad, bad man." He shook himself and a huge grin spread over his face. "I think I love you."

The sound of the oven closing had them all whip back around to the kitchen area. "So, Clint," James said, as if nothing ever happened. "Could you get out the silverware and plates, please?"
Steve couldn't stop laughing for a full five minutes. When he finally wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes, he caught Bruce's glance. 'Crisis averted?' it seemed to ask. Steve grinned at him.

Yeah. Crisis averted.

Until the moment he almost moaned and had his eyes flutter shut over the taste of the nutmeg and cinnamon layer in the scones.

Bruce shot him an exasperated look.

And James? James grinned, looking happier than Steve could ever remember seeing him.
Sprawled on his favorite couch, with a real book in his hands – Steve had started handing one over at odd intervals, in some undeclared war on either the Starkpad or e-books in general – James didn't shift a muscle, but he was immediately aware when Steve came in and sat on one of the other couches. A sidelong glance showed him Steve had his sketchbook with him again and soon the quiet sound of charcoal moving over paper joined the peaceful sound of the two of them breathing. He finished the chapter he'd started and contemplated starting the next, but the light had shifted and he would need to as well.

Instead, he succumbed to curiosity and the tingling awareness that had filled him since Steve came in the room. It felt like they were the only two people in the tower, though he knew Bruce and Tony were in their respective labs and Pepper was fifteen floors down in her office. The others had gone out, he thought, after Natasha stopped to mock James for being lazy and lounging around. James had just stretched and made himself more comfortable, prompting laughter from Sam and Clint.

Steve was either too intent on his drawing or too trusting; he didn't hear James leave the couch and circle behind him, only realizing he was there when James breathed out a quiet, "Oh."

Steve had been drawing him.

Without thinking about it, James set his hands on Steve's shoulders and bent close, leaning down to look closer at the study Steve had made of him. He had to push down the awareness of Steve's skin with just a thin t-shirt between it and James, the way he tensed, muscle rolling under James' hands, and then went pliant. The drawing held his attention though, too: black and white and soft smudges of gray, the lines sure and tender. It depicted him just as he'd been moments before, head dipped as he read, book open in his metal hand, his other resting absently on one bent knee. Light glancing off the joints of his vibranium-alloy fingers and just a ghostly hint at the star on his shoulder.

He looked amazing the way Steve saw him, James thought. Steve had drawn him at ease, hair loose, lips parted, sleeves carelessly rolled up to bare his wrist, toes curled into the couch, his ankle bare and provocative as a peepshow. Except Steve's tender drawing wasn't about titillation. He'd even caught the small details; the graceful folds of the white dress shirt, the frayed seam on the jeans that James had picked open out of nerves one day, the lighter streaks in his hair that lying in the sun had put there, the shadow of a nipple where a button had come loose and the shirt gaped open.

Steve had drawn him.

James tightened his fingers on Steve's shoulders, then let go and stroked his fingertips where he'd dug them in apologetically. He knew why the drawing meant so much to him; he thought Steve did too.

"I don't look like that," he made himself say. "Do I?"

"You do," Steve said.

"Wow."
James was so close, leaning over the back of the couch and balancing on Steve, but he knew Steve wouldn't fold under him. Steve never wavered when someone was depending on him, even in something as small as this. James couldn't stop staring at the picture: because it was a love letter without words and because it wasn't of Bucky.

"It's me," he murmured.

He felt rather than saw Steve turn his head, so aware of everywhere they were touching, everywhere so close, Steve's warmth under his hands, the whisper of his breath or was that his lips against James' temple. Steve's hands had gone still on the paper; he'd lost the charcoal somewhere, but James could pick out the dark smears on his fingers. He wanted them on him, wanted Steve to trace lines of darkness into his skin until it faded away. He licked his lips without thinking and felt a shudder run through Steve, run into him as though they were both electrified.

James' breath stuttered, uneven and shallow, his heart thudding, face flushed, his skin prickly and singingly alive, so alive he thought he'd forget how to breathe.

He wanted to turn his head and meet Steve's mouth with his, but he was still afraid, too afraid to do more than stay where he was and hope Steve would make the first move.

He should have known Steve wouldn't. Instead Steve said his name, "James? Of course it's you."

"It's good," James murmured as he straightened up and moved away from Steve and the temptation of proximity. A squirmy feeling of embarrassment twisted through him; he didn't look like that, did he? "Too pretty, though."

"It's how I see you."

James laughed at that. "You need your eyes checked, maybe."

"Perfect vision," Steve pointed out. "You don't know. It's strange and dangerous, but your arm has its own beauty too."

James didn't believe that. "You're just crazy."

"It may have been mentioned before," Steve said in his driest tone and then they were both chuckling, the tension let go for the moment.

Curious, James asked, with a gesture to the sketchbook, "Did you study art?"

"Before the war." For once, regret at James not knowing something Bucky would have didn't flicker over Steve's face. Instead, he looked excited. "Tony suggested I go back to art school. It's not like I can't afford it now and I have time."

"You can go back to school?" James asked.

Steve stood up and waved James to follow him over to one of the tables that doubled as touchscreen computers. "I've been looking at schools here in New York," he explained. "Jarvis, would you open the websites I marked yesterday?"

The table lit up with a grid of windows showing off various universities with strong arts departments and a couple schools devoted solely to different styles, from painting to architecture. James leaned over and began reading as Steve talked enthusiastically about what each place had to offer. They ended up shoulder to shoulder, nudging each other as Steve debated four year versus two year degrees or just auditing what he was interested in learning, and James looked at where the
campuses were located, calculating travel time and security risks as much as he could without going into the field and checking them himself.

He was thinking about the dangers of subway travel: the constant flux of people and movement weighed against being trapped underground and heavy surveillance when it hit James. If Steve could go to art school, why couldn't he? Not to art school, but something like engineering or robotics, something he was interested in that wasn't wetwork.

Up until that moment, he'd thought that if he stayed with the Avengers – and he wanted to – he'd end up doing the dirty, shadow side stuff for them. Things the Winter Soldier did best, so that Captain America could stay shining in the light.

What had Tony said that day in the lab? *James, if you had a degree, I'd hire you for my R&D team.* What if he got a degree? Could he do that?

James opened his mouth to ask Steve or Jarvis.

"Man, are you ready to go?" Sam asked as he swept into the room. "You'd don't look ready to go. James, you don't even have shoes on. Let me tell you, my Mama, she's got the no shirt, no shoes, no service thing going on."

"I'm not going," James said. He glared at Sam briefly, then looked away. "Thank you for asking me along, but I don't think I belong at dinner with your mother."

Steve touched his arm. "Are you – I'll stay."

James smiled at him. "No, you should go."

"But –"

"Mama liked you, man," Sam interjected. A note of sorrow and apology reverberated in his voice.

James huffed out a breath. What happened wasn't Sam's fault. Alisha Wilson hadn't even rejected James, but the possibility that she could make him not want to chance it. Better this way. "I'd rather spend the evening with Clint and Natasha." He added, to ease the worry in Sam and Steve's eyes. "I don't feel like putting on shoes."

"Imma tell Mama that, you ain't getting no pie tonight," Sam hooted.

"You're sure?" Steve asked.

James rolled his eyes, then had an idea. "Take Bruce."

"Ah, no, Bruce has declined all invitations on the grounds of he's not the most popular guy in Harlem after getting framed by the army for tearing up half the neighborhood," Sam said. "Which is true, but I think he worries if he goes out, some jerk with a deathwish will deliberately piss him off until he goes big and green and mad."

"Not an ungrounded fear," Steve agreed. "I've had more than one person try to provoke me into throwing a punch."

"Aw, you're too much of a good guy to do that."

"Not to say I haven't been tempted, but if I never decked Senator Brandt, I'm not going to sock some jerk outside a Starbucks," Steve said.
“Yeah, you might spill that two shots hazelnut, soymilk caramel mocha macchiato you pretend is coffee. I thought you old guys drank your coffee black and ate your bread without butter back in the day,” Sam kidded.

“Aren't you the one always telling me to live in the present?” Steve shot back.

“Score!” Sam grinned at them. "Come on, go put on a shirt and tie or Pepper and Tony'll leave without us. I don't want to hear what Mama will say if I'm late to dinner."

Steve left, because Sam was right, he wouldn't dream of going to dinner without a tie, leaving Sam and James alone.

“I guess Mama's little attitude malfunction got under your skin,” Sam said. "She's stubborn. Gets an idea and runs with it. I love her, but damn. I guess I just want to say, don't judge her too harshly – "

James choked out a laugh at that. "I'm in no position to judge anyone."

"That never stopped anyone alive before." Sam glanced at the tabletop display and smiled. "Hey, art schools. Is this – "

"Steve," James answered swiftly. He cocked his head. "Do you think I could?" He waved his hand at one of the websites for a university. "Be something different?"

"Hell, yes!" Sam said. He immediately frowned. "We might have to figure out how to fudge some papers, but there's got to be a way. Learning something new, that's a great idea."

Steve came back before they could talk any more. He took in the bags Sam had left by the door and asked, "Alabama?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I made the plane reservations yesterday. Late flight. I'll head to the airport from Mama's." He looked at James. "I was just saying goodbye to James."

"Alabama?" James asked. He didn't know Sam had travel plans.

Sam waved his hand in dismissal. "Personal stuff." A grin flashed over his face. "Don't break New York again while I'm gone, folks."

James found himself still thinking about Sam's school suggestion after Sam and Steve had left with Tony and Pepper. He couldn't concentrate on his book, so he gave it up and wandered into the kitchen, checking the refrigerator to see what was on hand to cook. He was starting to really enjoy cooking, experimenting with dishes and figuring out what he liked and didn't, not just what didn't make him sick.

He couldn't predict whether Natasha and Clint would have eaten before they came back either, so he decided on pizza. He felt sure he could make the dough and making it himself meant he could leave off all of Clint's bizarre toppings. Asparagus and broccoli were good, but dates and kiwi didn't belong on pizza as James liked it.

"Jarvis, have you got a simple recipe for pizza dough?" he asked.

"Of course. Would you like to use the one Dr. Banner gave Mr. Barton last week?"

"No, let's try a change. Simple is best, though."

"I believe this one will perform as reviewed," Jarvis said. The monitor recessed in the backsplash lit with a recipe. James read the recipe displayed and nodded. He could do this.
"Okay, flour, salt, olive oil..." He started pulling the ingredients from the pantry.

"I believe the pizza stone is in the storage cupboard underneath the oven," Jarvis prompted.

"I'll get it in a minute."

He had the dough wrapped in a piece of plastic wrap and resting and was cleaning up after himself in preparation to putting together a sauce and other toppings when Clint and Natasha showed up.

Clint wanted to help.

"Нет," Natasha said and caught Clint's ear to pull him back as he started to go around the counter with the stools into the main portion of the kitchen. He yelped and stopped, then gave James a piteous look. James folded his arms and shook his head.

"But, why?" Clint asked in a pathetic tone.

"I don't want capers on my pizza," Natasha told him.

"Well, you only know that because we experimented with them last time."

"No, I knew that before you decided to empty a jar onto the pizza."

"James..."

James shook his head. "I'm making white pizza."

A look of comic horror took over Clint's face. "You're not turning vegetarian on me. Please, tell me it ain't so?"

"We can make meat-lovers next week."

Clint made noises of relief until James threw a potholder at his head. It was one of the strange floppy silicone things Tony swore by and made a nice slap when it hit Clint's mouth. As a bonus, Natasha declared it was now unhygienic and James got to use a tea towel instead when he pulled the pizza out of the oven later. Not that he needed either, since he used the Arm.

Natasha went down to her floor and came back with two bottles of vodka, which it turned out went well with the white pizza. Sometime after that, it seemed like an excellent idea to let Clint make milkshakes. Or at least Clint thought so and Natasha laughed under her breath and said, "Let him," since she showed no sign of the shots she'd been knocking back with terrifying ease and James wasn't feeling it at all.

The coffee ice cream with Kahlua and chocolate chip cookie dough turned out to be pretty good too.

They watched *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and finished a second pizza between the three of them, this one topped with Clint's beloved bacon. Bruce showed up for the first hour.

"I've seen it before," he said.

"So?" Clint demanded. "You can never see the Man With No Name too many times."

"I beg to differ," Bruce said, but sat down with them. "Who cooked?" He had a last slice of pizza.

James waved his hand. Bruce smiled, his eyes crinkled at the corners, and took a big bite.
He wandered away sometime after Clint fell asleep on James' shoulder. His metal shoulder, which shouldn't have made James freeze and feel all gooey inside, but did, especially when Natasha curled against him on the other side and started making a delicate little snuffle he knew better than to characterize as a snore even in his head.

James fell asleep while Tuco and Blondie were blowing up a bridge.

Voices woke him from a warm doze. Heavy limbs were weighing him down... James stayed still, eyes still closed, regulating his breathing and his heartbeat so as not to betray himself while he used his hearing to orient himself. The lingering scents of cheese and bacon and Natasha's shampoo reminded him when and where he was. The 'restraints' were Clint's arm slung over his waist, and Natasha latched onto him from the other side. They were all three plastered together to keep from tipping off the couch. He couldn't move without dislodging the two master spies, who were both still asleep judging by the slack weight of their bodies.

His muscles wanted to twitch, his instincts were to throw himself off the couch and away from them, but he stayed and with each indrawn breath it was easier, the contact pleasing instead of a threat.

The voices were Tony and Pepper's, interspersed with Steve's. No threat there. He slit one eye open, though, just enough to track them as they walked through the common room toward the kitchen, Steve carrying a paper grocery bag that had to come from Mrs. Wilson. Clint would be happy if they still got pie, he thought.

Tony stopped. His voice rose, then dropped to a forced whisper. "Jarvis! Jarvis tell me you're recording this."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that would be an invasion of Mr. Barton, Ms. Romanov and Sgt. Barnes privacy," Jarvis replied in a bland yet disapproving tone.

"Gaaa, ethics... Pepper," Tony whisper demanded. "Pepper, I need my phone back. Gimme my phone. Someone has to document this, this... assassin kitten pile. Pepper, for the love of science!"

"Tony, leave them alone," Pepper said. "They do look adorable... "

James felt Natasha stiffen and Clint convulse almost imperceptibly, possibly with laughter. He closed his eye. Natasha and Clint probably had the right idea. As long as no one knew they were awake, there would be no teasing. He dreaded facing Tony's manic grin in the morning, though.

He couldn't quite hide his flinch when someone bent over him and opened his eyes to find Pepper gently arranging a blanket over the three of them. She smiled and mouthed, No pictures, I promise. Pepper was all class.

He closed his eyes and listened to her chivvy Tony, who he imagined was smiling that smug way he had sometimes, that still managed to keep you from wanting to punch him, out of the room. He'd almost gone back to sleep when one more person stopped quietly on the far side of the couch. Steve. James knew the feel of the air when Steve was in a room.

A big hand stroked James’ hair away from his forehead. "Sleep well, James," Steve murmured. James turned his face into the touch unconsciously.

When he'd gone, Clint mumbled into James' ribs, "If you don't hit that soon, I'm going to have to and I'm straight."

Natasha reached across James and pinched something, making Clint squeak.
"You know, they're never going to let us live this down, starting in the morning," Clint said once Natasha let go.

"We can kill them and drink their coffee," Natasha declared. "Now shut up, I'm trying to sleep."
James held onto the idea of school and brought it up with Jarvis the next day. His shoulder and back were aching, a clue that despite the sunshine of the morning, the weather would be changing soon. He felt restless, but hopeful, and wanted to do something more than read or work out, but wasn't ready to wander outside the Tower on his own. Not yet. He wasn't willing to call on any of the Avengers to accompany him either; they had their own things to do that didn't include entertaining him because he was bored.

It was another reason to think school would be a good. It would give him a mission – a purpose, James corrected himself. He wanted his days to have a point.

"Perhaps we should evaluate where you would be placed," Jarvis suggested.

"Have you got tests?"

"I have access to the numerous entrance exam templates as well as class tests."

Jarvis would probably be a wonderful tool for cheating, if the AI didn't have a strong ethical stance. James smiled to himself. "So, let's find out how much I need to make up just to get into a school," he said.

Jarvis loaded a sample exam to James' tablet and said, "Shall we begin? I shall act as proctor."

James had finished a dizzying seventh exam and was gulping down a bottle of water when Tony charged into the room. "What are you up to?"

The last test had centered on specifics, on robotics, computer engineering, artificial intelligence and cybernetics that still didn't approach the tech level of James' arm. Only the last two had slowed James down at all. He was feeling good.

"James and I have been evaluating where he would place if he were to return to school to obtain a degree," Jarvis replied calmly.

"Show me his results," Tony demanded. He didn't bother asking if James agreed and James didn't bother objecting. It wouldn't stop Tony anyway.

Tony glanced up, dark eyes sharp and evaluating. "I knew you were smart. I don't think anyone knew you were educated."

"I'm not," James replied. "I just have a lot of data..." he shrugged, "uploaded. I didn't even realize how much until I started on the exams."

"While one day doesn't offer an opportunity to even propose possible theses," Jarvis said, "from what we discovered today, it seems that he is already current with all the science necessary to earn a degree in several different disciplines with little effort."

Tony began quizzing him. James found a spot in the sun, wanting to enjoy it while it lasted, and
went along with the inquisition. The more esoteric they got, the more Tony flitted around the common room, snagging a bag of blueberries and snacking, gesturing wildly, and soon taking off on tangents he expected James to keep up with the way he usually did with Bruce. James wasn't used to using his brain this way, but as he got into it, he realized it was exhilarating in a way entirely different from the cold precision of planning a hit or the adrenaline surge of combat.

He thought he could love it, given very little exposure.

"MIT," Tony decreed. "They owe me. If they don't, I'll buy them a new lab building or something. We'll structure an accelerated program and you'll have a degree within a year. Then you can either go on there or start working for me here. I want you here." He started giving Jarvis orders that Jarvis drily informed him had already been enacted. James shook his head, feeling dazed. A few hours ago, going to school had been a thought experiment more than anything. Now Tony was mapping out his entire future. He didn't mind though, he thought. He'd never have access to anything better than working for Stark and it would keep him with Steve and the other Avengers.

He even liked Tony.

Tony stopped abruptly and looked at James. "This is what you want, right? Pepper isn't going to chew me out for railroading you or something? I get – "

"I wouldn't have been talking to Jarvis about it if I didn't want it," James confirmed.

"Excellent. You'll get a private Stark scholarship to pay for everything and we'll set up a secure base for you to live at while you're attending. Unless you want to commute? You'd need a helicopter – you can pilot a helo, can't you? You flew a quinjet off one of those helicarriers, I saw the phone videos."

"Can we figure that out later?" James asked. He could fly a helicopter, but that seemed insanely over the top.

"Most of James' work could be accomplished via the internet," Jarvis said. "He would need to attend two or three classes that could be scheduled for one or two days in a block. Commuting while still retaining residence here would be possible with little difficulty."

"Good." Tony looked embarrassed. "Cap would miss you. So would the Birdbrain." He sighed. "And I like having you around. I've spent enough money on you after all."

James let out a snort of amusement. "You never do anything you don't want to."

Tony pointed at him. "Exactly. Now go find Steve and tell him our plans."

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**Steve**

James looked as happy as Steve had never seen him and his smile brightened further when he spotted Steve by the window. He didn't hesitate as he joined Steve, just walked over.

"What?" Steve wondered out loud. He set aside his sketchbook. He'd been trying to capture the ever shifting landscape of the city as the clouds gathering on the horizon swept shadow and brightness over it, an effect only visible from an aircraft or a building as toweringly high as the Avengers Tower. The morning had started with sunshine, but the clouds had overtaken it and now threatened rain. He hoped when he went back to art school he'd learn some techniques that would
aid him in putting onto paper and canvas what his mind's eye saw so clearly. Right now, James' obvious delight in something was far more engaging than his unsuccessful efforts.

"Jarvis did placement testing for me today and Tony has a plan," James announced, practically bouncing. "He wants me to go to MIT for a degree."

"MIT?" Steve repeated stupidly. His stomach felt like it was plummeting down to the basement level of the Tower. James was leaving? He hadn't had a chance yet to – He made himself stop. He'd had chances. He'd wasted them, just like he'd wasted his time with Bucky and with Peggy. He was an utter failure at initiating any sort of relationship and it cost him over and over. Now James was going to leave and make himself a new life.

It felt like a raw, open wound was suddenly gaping in his chest, but Steve schooled his face into a smile. It was the life James deserved. Steve might have wished and fantasized having James fight beside him as one of the Avengers, but James, if anybody, deserved a chance to step away from violence and fighting. He'd given enough already.

"Probably just a couple days a week," James went on. "Most of the work I can do living here." He paused. "Tony was okay with me staying..."

"Everyone will want you to stay," Steve assured him, incapable of keeping the happiness out of his voice. That wasn't enough, though. Wasn't what he wanted to say. "I want you to stay."

And that still wasn't enough, didn't even begin to describe what Steve felt, but it'd have to do for now.

James looked at him for long seconds, biting his lower lip as if trying to decide what to do or say next. It was a tell Bucky had never had, certainly one the Winter Soldier had never had – it was all James being nervous. Steve had no idea why. "Good," James said eventually. He drew in a deep breath. "Steve, I..." he trailed off, licked his lips.

Steve's stomach clenched. He'd said too much, given too much away. This was it, this was the other shoe dropping. James clearly was getting ready to tell Steve something unpleasant. Maybe James needed more space. Maybe Steve was clinging too hard. He braced himself with a sinking feeling to his stomach. "Yeah?"

James looked concerned and hesitant, so very nervous. "I want," he tried again, shook his head when the words still wouldn't come. He cleared his throat and tried a third time. "I want to do this. Tell me no if you don't."

"Do what – ?" Go back to school? Why would Steve ever tell him no? Was James really worried that he would? Was he really as manipulative as Sharon had accused him that James felt the need to ask his permission?

James stepping in closer brought Steve's whirling thoughts to a halt. What –

James braced on hand on Steve's shoulder and leaned up, close enough Steve could see the different shades of blue of James' eyes and all Steve could think was Oh before James brushed his mouth over Steve's. It was over as quickly as it had started and James drew back and waited for Steve to respond.

Steve froze like an idiot. He still felt the tingle of James' lips against his. He ducked his head and licked his lips, chasing any hint of James there. His face must be glowing like a signal fire, he
could feel the heat of his cheeks and knew the blush went down his neck to his chest. He flexed his fingers, barely able to keep from reaching for James, catching his hips and drawing him back for another kiss.

James stood just out of arm's reach, arms folded across his chest, eyebrows drawn together, biting his lower lip again. High color marked his cheekbones too. The way he looked, dressed in that clinging black sweater and jeans, standing at the edge of the window, held Steve's attention like a lodestone. Like something from a fairytale, existing in two worlds; half in shadow, arm gleaming argent, half in sterling light, he made Steve want to catch hold of him and pull him fully into the day, where auburn and bronze would spark in his dark hair.

Steve looked at him. James' pulse showed at his neck and he was breathing quicker than normal, all signs he'd been as rattled by the impulsive mash of lips to lips as Steve.

"Did you mean that," Steve whispered, "or was it just... friendly?"

James' eyes widened briefly. His mouth parted. Then he recovered himself. "Friends kiss, I think," he said, but he was sliding closer to Steve as he spoke, moving the way Natasha did, a predatory slink that made Steve's heart beat faster. "But not the way I want to kiss you."

"I don't want you to feel obligated – "

"I don't." James laughed softly, happiness bright all over his face, but serious too. "You're my friend. You're my first memory. That doesn't make me want you. Want is more."

"But you do... want me?" Steve curled his hands into fists to keep from reaching for James. He was so close, close enough Steve could feel the warmth when he exhaled against his jaw.

He shuddered when James licked his lips again. He was just enough shorter than Steve he had to tip his head up or look through his eyelashes to meet Steve's gaze.

Steve was still staring. James started to smile. He inched closer and Steve nearly jumped as James' hands settled on his waist. His fingers were warm on one side and chill on the other. The contrast made Steve burn from the inside out.

James murmured, "Do I have to do everything?"

Steve still didn't have any words, but he shook his head and leaned in, let himself mold to James, savored the lithe muscle and even the harsh cool metal as he closed his arms around James. A sway forward and Steve's breath caught as the light glanced into James' eyes, pale as a winter dawn.

He didn't touch his lips to James' immediately, waited instead, took his time to learn every subtle shift in James' eye color, the way the blue darkened, the feel of them sharing the same breath between them. He reached up, couldn't help himself, he'd thought about this too often now, drawn it too often... he brought his hand up and touched two fingertips against the soft fullness of James' lower lip. Steve watched James' pupils dilate and felt his breath quicken and the smile slip just this tiny bit when Steve traced the contour of James' lips. His other hand drifted up from James' hip to the back of his neck and sunk into the warmth of his hair. James' eyelids fluttered shut and the bitten-back groan that tore free of his throat made Steve's mouth dry.

He sucked in a sharp, shocked breath when James parted his lips and closed his teeth around the pad of Steve's index finger. Gentle, just a faint bite that barely stung and which James soothed with a quick flick of his tongue.
They shuffled until James' back was against the cool glass of the window, until Steve was pressing himself against him. The sun, tarnished through the clouds, was still warm on James' shoulder, on the back of Steve's hands and his cheek where it struck fading bright. The black sweater felt soft as a kitten and absorbed all that warmth, held James' heat inside and there was no more ice, no more winter between them, just them melting together. Steve nudged his thigh between James' legs and fit their hips together. He rolled his hips forward, his looser khakis rasping against the thick denim James wore. They were both hard and James was grinding against him, his hands rucking Steve's shirt tail up and working their way under to run over Steve's bare skin.

"Oh my God, my eyes, my eyes!" Tony shouted and James froze with his hands still clutching at Steve beneath his shirt.

"Get a room! Wait, you have a room, and you," he pointed at Steve, "you have an entire floor. Go away and stop defiling my windows."

Steve stepped back reluctantly, but he didn't want to do this on display for anyone who walked into the common room or had a telescope aimed at the windows.

"I have a bed, too," he told James without thinking.

"TMI!" Tony shouted and Steve belatedly flushed at his own boldness.

A boom of thunder made James jolt and Steve glance past him. The overcast had deepened while he'd been intent on James. The rain that had threatened had arrived, blurring the city beyond the glass into beautiful smears of dark and rivers of lights running through the streets below.

James caught his hand and tugged. "So do I and my suite's closer."

They walked, because Tony was watching, and because trying to move faster would have been uncomfortable – Steve had never disliked the modern propensity for tight fitting pants more. His face was pink, he knew it. James was smiling, soft and nervous, a smile that was all James, not one Bucky had ever worn.

"Tony," Steve said as he passed the kitchen island.

"No." Tony waved a hand in a 'don't come closer' motion. "Go away. Debauch the guest room, just don't make me watch anymore."

Tony headed for the wet bar, head averted from James and Steve. Steve saw James cover his mouth to muffle the laughter he couldn't smother entirely. Steve felt his own smirk outgrowing his own awkwardness – Tony loved being inappropriate and throwing innuendos every which way, but he looked positively embarrassed to have walked in on the two of them.

"Sorry," James called as Steve took the lead heading for James' suite.

"God, I need a drink," Tony muttered as they passed. He gave Steve a thumbs up, though. "Jarvis, ask Pepper if she can have dinner with me in the penthouse. And remind me I owe her and Rhodey both fifty bucks."

"Has everyone been betting on us?" Steve asked when he reached James' suite.

James shrugged as he closed the door behind them. "I don't care."

"Neither do I," Steve said, "I just wonder how obvious we were."
James gave him a look that clearly questioned his intellect. "Really?"

Steve thought about it for a fraction of a second and decided that, yes, James' gentle sarcasm was warranted. "No," he said, "In hindsight, I think I've been..."

"I was too," James replied.

"Not to me." Steve had been so unsure right until this moment of what James really thought and wanted from him, but maybe a lot of that had been his own fears blinding him to what James had made clear.

Did it matter now? No. What mattered now was James and him, together, and what they could have together. He glanced around uncertainly. Did they sit down together on the outsized chair set under the window or head straight for the bed? Steve wasn't sure how to proceed, how fast to go. His instincts were telling him to slow down and be careful, though. He wanted, good God, he wanted, and he knew James did as well, but he needed to discover what James liked before tearing his clothes off or any other cliché move.

"So, where were we?"

"I think," Steve put on a mock thoughtful face, "you were about to kiss me." He resisted the urge to answer literally and say they were standing in the middle of the room, closer to each other than anything else, close enough he could reach out and touch. Which he wanted to do...

James raised an eyebrow at him. "I was about to kiss you?"

"Or maybe it was the other way around. Things are a bit," Steve ran his hand over the wool of James' sweater, felt warm skin and hard muscles underneath, "fuzzy."

"Then let's make them fuzzier," James said. "Before we grow old just talking about them."

Steve trailed his finger along James' bicep and bit his lip. Banter was fine, but the earlier mood was gone, the breathless anticipation and sudden coiling of need replaced by something awkward. The bed was closest, but maybe trying to guide James there would be crass.

"Steve?" James sounded careful, hesitant, and Steve couldn't help but look up.

The rain running down the glass windows made the light shiver across James' face. The season had turned in the last few days, Indian summer giving way to true autumn. The thunderstorm that had tumbled in, clouds piled high, darkened the room, turned it secret as a whisper of ventilation teased at Steve's ears – Jarvis had turned up the heat to compensate.

A lightning strike zigzagged across the horizon, and James tensed under Steve's hand, a look of something like pain flashing over his face.

"What's wrong?" Steve asked, curling his hand around James' shoulder.

"Damn shoulder keeps bothering me," James said, rolling his head to the other side until something in his shoulder gave a series of crackling noises that made Steve grimace. Something about this was new, though, because he wasn't sure he'd ever heard James admit to a discomfort before. "It's the Arm," James said by way of explanation. "Too damn heavy."

For normal, fragile human muscle and bone, Steve finished the sentence in his head. "Natasha tells me I'm pretty good with my hands," he said. He didn't add her usual 'for a guy'. James shot him a sly look and Steve scrambled to add, "At back and foot rubs."
"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I could... " Steve trailed off and indicated James' back. "If you wanted to."

James' eyes lit up. "Hell, yes." He yanked the sweater over his head without hesitation. "Right now. Where do you want me?"

Steve's mouth went a little dry at the amount of skin suddenly revealed to him. 'Everywhere,' was what shot through his head. 'On every damn surface of this apartment.' He was proud of himself when he found his voice again. "I think there are massage oils in all the bathrooms. Why don't you get comfortable on the bed while I get some?" He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so clunky listening to himself speak.

James didn't seem to mind, he just walked into the bedroom, flung himself face forward on the bed and waited.

There was more than a bottle of massage oil in the bathroom. The in-suite to the guestroom had been stocked like a pantry with soaps and lotions and anything else anyone could possibly want from a washroom, including everything related to sex. Condoms were just the beginning. The contents of the medicine cabinet in his suite had led to Steve googling all sorts of things, going red in the face, and thanking the Lord for the Internet and not having to face anyone after learning about some of the stuff people did with each other.

He'd even tried a single-use packet of lube apprehensively a few weeks back. That had been a revelation after years of using either spit or hand lotion or nothing.

Steve still thought Tony over-did it, though. It was just overwhelming to face all that... stuff when all you wanted was some mouthwash.

Steve already had the bottle with the massage oil in hand when he paused and looked at his reflection in the mirror. Was this a good idea? Or was he making a mistake here? Was James ready for this step? Hell, was he? James was clear that he wanted Steve and Steve knew how he felt, but that didn't mean doing this wouldn't be a terrible mistake. He could end up hurting James, adding to the damage Hydra had left, and that, just that idea, made Steve feel sweaty and sick. Maybe he could still chalk off the scene in the common room as temporary madness and they could just go on pretending nothing had ever happened.

Steve closed his eyes and breathed in and out slowly, concentrating on that, until he felt steadier. They couldn't go back to the way things had been before. He certainly couldn't. He knew the way James' eyes looked from up close now. He knew the sound James made low under his breath when Steve touched him, slotted his leg between James'.

"Behind the mirror, second shelf on the left," James called from the bedroom and the way he sounded, loose and calm and a little impatient, gently eased away all the concerns Steve'd had.

"Got it," he said. He closed his hand around the bottle, gave his reflection a small smile and walked back into the bedroom.

Steve's mouth went dry again when he took in James on the bed. He hadn't been idle while Steve was in the bathroom – he'd divested himself of his jeans and was now just in tight-fitting boxer-briefs that outlined his thighs and ass spectacularly well.

"Comfortable?" Steve asked.

James nodded into the mattress. Steve noted that his metal hand was flexing on the dark blue sheet
next to his head, pulling folds of soft cotton and smoothing them out again.

"All right, then."

With Natasha, he usually straddled her, careful never to put his weight on her legs, as it made for better leverage, but while it was all very matter-of-fact with her, it felt strangely too intimate with James. So he kneeled on the mattress next to James, feeling the heat of James' body seep into his own skin, and opened the oil bottle, pouring a small amount into the palm of his hand. A faint, pleasant scent of orange and grapefruit filled the air. Steve rubbed his hands together, spreading the oil evenly, then rested both palms on James' shoulder blades, getting James and himself accustomed to the touch. He eyed the thin white scar running alongside James' spine. The doctors had done an excellent job, the surgery scar was barely visible anymore. They wouldn't have had to, but Steve had heard Bruce mention after the surgery that it had been a point of pride for them, to give their absolute best for James. It had healed well and was a stark contrast to the jagged scars lining the skin next to the Arm. It didn't look like it hurt anymore. Still, Steve had to say it, "If anything I do hurts, let me know, okay?"

"Can't hurt any worse than it did before the surgery," James mumbled into the mattress.

Steve fought a shudder as he remembered what the doctors had said during the surgery, how the explosives had pressed on James' nerves. The pain must have been excruciating, and worse, constant. He was never going to let James feel any kind of pain ever again as long as he was around. "Not the point of this," Steve said. He was tempted to press his lips against the knob of James' spine to underline his point. Instead, he ghosted his hands, feather-light, over James' back. "This is not about an absence of pain." He let his touch grow a little firmer. "It's about enjoyment," he leaned closer and murmured against James' shoulder, "and pleasure."

James' breath hitched and his metal hand closed into a fist around the dark blue sheet.

Steve began digging the ball of his thumb and then his fingers into the hardened muscles of James' lower back, traveling upward and back down in swift and strong strokes that had James melting into the mattress with a heady mix of sighs and subdued groans. He lingered where he found stubborn knots and dug his fingers into those, feeling them slip underneath James' skin. Time passed and slowly but surely, the tense areas in James' back disappeared.

The scent of the massage oil mingled with the scent of James' skin and Steve found his own pants growing uncomfortably tight when one of his moves along a strand of particularly tense muscles on his left shoulder elicited a near sub-vocal growl from James. He had to take a deep breath to stop himself from straddling James after all, from sliding his hands around him and pressing him, skin to skin, against him.

"No stopping," James said and rested his forehead against the mattress, stretching his neck like a cat demanding to be petted. Steve stilled his hands and frowned at strands of James' hair clinging to the oily patches on his shoulders. When he reached out to brush them away, James sighed again, so Steve took the hint and pushed his fingertips from James' shoulders to his neck and into his hair.

James' breath hitched, he shifted on the mattress. His metal hand was curled into a tight fist around the sheet.

Steve was growing a little breathless himself and distracted himself by running his fingertips farther into James' hair, enjoying the silkiness of it. When he changed the angle a little, his nails gently scritched along James' scalp. Steve felt a tremor go through James' entire body and stilled his hands again, just pressed ten points of heat against James' the curve of James' head.
"Steve." James' voice was muffled, but the cadence went straight to Steve's gut.

"Yeah?" he asked, and didn't care that he sounded breathless.

Before he could decide how to go on, James slipped out of his grip and turned to his back, now lying face-to-face with Steve. He was breathing hard, but was otherwise absolutely still, controlling even the tremors Steve felt skittering under James' skin. His pupils were dilated, his lips just parted, his eyelids fluttering down, not meeting Steve's face, his whole body suddenly pliant.

Steve gave up pretending in that very moment. The need to breathe James in, to touch, to kiss, to press so close to James their skins would be one was unbearable. The idea that he could have this, could have James and have James want him back... God, it was intoxicating. Steve framed his hand along the long line of James' neck and rested his thumb just under the corner of James' jaw, stroking back and forth. Maybe, maybe now would be the right –

James' patience had apparently worn thin. Without a warning, James carded the metal hand into Steve's hair and pulled Steve down, stopped just an inch shy of his lips. The barely there sting of his hair catching in the metal finger joints made Steve gasp against James' lips, a tight coil of excitement and arousal knotting in his stomach.

Still, Steve had to ask, had to know, so he pushed back a little, enough so he could see James' eyes. "Yes?"

A look of exasperated tenderness washed over James' face and crinkled the sides of his eyes. Steve thought he could see him contemplate and discard about five snarky replies. Instead, James settled on, "Yes."

The simple word was enough.

"Yes," Steve repeated and felt a smile light up his entire face. He dipped his head down and finally rested his lips against James'.

The kiss was nothing like he'd expected it to be after all the tension they'd ramped up between them. There was no urgency, instead, it was a feeling of coming home. James sighed against his lips and framed Steve's face with his hands and for long seconds, they just stayed like that, skin on skin, lips on lips, sharing breaths between them. Steve kept stroking his thumb underneath James' earlobe while James gently pressed his fingertips against Steve's head, nudging him forward. He took the hint and tilted his chin a little to capture James' full lower lip between his. James in turn sucked in a breath and opened up to deepen the kiss. He let go of Steve's head, skated his hands along Steve's shoulders instead and rested them in the small of Steve's back and reeled him in so they were chest to chest.

Steve felt the heat of James' bare skin burn through the shirt he wore and suddenly all he wanted was to get rid of it, of that damn barrier between them. That would mean moving, however, and moving would mean he'd have to stop kissing James and that just wasn't going to happen anytime soon. James had moved his head and was now sliding his mouth against Steve's lower lip first with the barest hint of teeth, then, when Steve moved against him, he gently sunk his teeth into Steve's lower lip. The sensation from that soft bite ran through Steve's body like an electrical current and brought everything into hyperfocus – the silkiness of James' hair, the heat and texture of his skin, the way he hummed low under his breath, the way his achingly familiar scent changed into something that drove Steve wild.

He deepened the kiss then, groaned when he met James' tongue with his. James pulled him even closer and on top of him, curled his lower leg around Steve's own, securing Steve against him.
Pressed so close against James, Steve felt the hard line of James' erection against his hip. James' hands – one hot, one cold – slipped underneath Steve's shirt, roaming restlessly, seeking contact. He slid the human hand over Steve's skin, flexing it against his lower back and pushing him closer, searching for friction, then trailed the fingertips of the metal hand along the slick line of sweat along Steve's spine.

It spiraled from there. Steve slid his left hand into James' hair and ran his right one along James' skin, from his neck over his collarbone to the side of his chest and down to his waist.

A thunder clap made James flinch and reminded Steve of the inequality between them: James was in nothing but boxer-briefs and Steve was still dressed. He even had his shoes still on.

Reluctantly, he pushed back from James a little to ask, "Is it okay if I undress?"

James gave him a cock-browed smirk that was all Bucky for a second, nodding, but then he twitched as another lightning bolt lit up the late afternoon overcast, glancing around wildly for a second. Steve jolted himself as the thunder followed; he didn't know exactly what James' instinct told him it was, but it would always sound like artillery to him. Steve set his hand on James' thigh and rubbed his thumb in a circle. James ducked his head to the side, hair sliding over his face, and his cheeks darkened.

Steve wasn't sure Bucky had ever blushed in his life. He was the one who always colored up. Now he understood how charming Bucky had found it. He wanted to wrap James up and keep him safe from everything.

"It's just a storm."

"I know." James lifted his head and smiled, masking his slip-up. "Can I undress you?" he asked.

Steve shivered with pure unadulterated want. He couldn't speak, his tongue felt too heavy in his mouth, so he just nodded.

They ended up sitting on the edge of James' bed, facing each other, both one leg on the floor, James with one leg folded beneath him and Steve with one spread to the side of the bed, with just his shoe off the edge. It pulled the fabric of his pants almost painfully over his erection.

He half expected James to just rip the buttons of his shirt loose – he was impatient enough to do that himself – but James bit his lower lip and delicately picked each button loose, so careful it made Steve hurt. He wished he hadn't worn an undershirt; without it, he'd already feel James' fingers against the skin of his sternum.

James glanced up through the dark fringe of his lashes and smiled, quietly pleased and maybe a little amused, certainly happy, in response to whatever he found on Steve's face. When he reached to the bottom of Steve's shirt, where the front was still tucked into his pants, his hands turned almost skittish. He tugged the tails of the shirt out and freed the last button, then folded it open. He set his palm flat against Steve's abs. The touch threatened to tickle and Steve twitched and made a half laughing noise that brought James' head up, uncertainty and puzzlement clear.

"No tickling," Steve told him.

"Later," James promised with a small laugh of his own, because Bucky hadn't known mercy in that regard, and of course it'd be Steve's luck that James wouldn't know it, either. Somehow, though, he didn't mind the idea of rolling around in bed with James, squirming away from wriggling fingers that danced over his sides.
Steve let him pull the button up shirt off then and was pliant and cooperative as James drew the undershirt off over Steve's head next.

James was close when he threw the shirt aside, dark hair falling into his eyes. Steve had the urge to brush it away but felt reluctant to move apart from nudging his chin forward to try and recapture James' lips. James pulled back, though, and just looked at Steve for a couple of seconds, gaze sweeping over Steve's uncovered chest and arms. Steve felt his cheeks warming under the scrutiny. Finally, James leaned forward and set his fingertips against Steve's sternum.

"Better," James said under his breath, trailing both metal and flesh-and-blood fingers over Steve's chest and up to his collarbones. The difference in texture and temperature had goose bumps covering Steve's skin in seconds. A feverish heat followed everywhere James touched. "Much better."

James paused as he came back to Steve's belt buckle. He leaned in closer and placed a nibbling kiss at the corner of Steve's mouth. Steve responded by licking his way back into James' mouth, drinking him in like water after a draught. Still, it wasn't enough, he needed more, needed James closer, so Steve reeled him in, almost chest to chest, until James was straddling him and his hands were trapped between them. The metal arm was a shocking strip of cold against his stomach. Steve wanted to keep it pressed against his skin until it was body-warm, thawing out every part of James. Only part of him registered that James had his belt open and pulled free to fall on the floor.

"We're not gonna get these pants off of you if you don't take off your shoes," James murmured against Steve's lips.

"I can't take them off if I have a lapful of you," Steve complained with a grin.

"Details," James answered, but moved off Steve's lap to give him room.

When he bent over to take off his shoes, James crept up behind him, kissing his shoulder, running his hands down Steve's flanks, the light touch just barely tickling. Steve twitched and bit off a curse when his shoelace refused to cooperate. He ended up toeing off his shoes and kicking them halfway across the room in frustration. Steve stood up to shed his pants, and, like a shadow, James was suddenly kneeling on the bed behind him and reached around, opened the pants, and pulled them down to puddle at Steve's feet.

James bent and kissed the small of Steve's back, pulled him back to sit on the bed again, then brushed his lips all the way up the line of his spine, tracing the same line Steve had massaged on him. Steve was proud of himself that he remembered to shake his feet free of his pants. The touch of James' lips buzzed and tingled, setting Steve's skin on fire. At first, Steve only felt the vibration, couldn't make out sounds over the rushing of blood in his ears. It was only when James reached his shoulders that Steve could make out the quiet words James murmured against his skin, " – way you touch me, no one has ever – " He shook his head, pressed his forehead against the back of Steve's shoulder as if embarrassed. "Nothing ever felt so good." He reached around and placed his hands on Steve's stomach, then gently skated them up to his chest. The touch of now body-warm metal against his nipple had Steve jolting. "I want you to feel like that," James kept murmuring, brushing back and forth over Steve's chest, following every involuntary shudder of Steve's body with his own. His cock was an insistent pressure against Steve's lower back; his lips kept sucking kisses into Steve's shoulder. "I want," James breathed against Steve's neck, "I want to – "

Steve stilled James' hands when the sensation became too much. He turned his head and kissed James again, open-mouthed, desperate. "Tell me," he murmured against James' lips between kisses, "Tell me, James."
James trembled when Steve said his name, so Steve repeated it, kissing his nose, his eyes. "James. James." He turned around slowly, feeling James' hand stay in touch with his skin, gentle but firm, almost as if he was afraid to let go.

"Keep talking," James pleaded under his breath. "Say my name."

So Steve did, smoothed his hands over James' neck, his chest, his back and arms, peppering kisses over his skin and murmuring James' name over and over. It felt a little strange to lavish so much attention on James without paying any to his dick, but James didn't seem to mind. It felt so much better than he'd have imagined either, lavishing James with caresses, taking the time to appreciate him. Steve had never thought of himself as a careless lover, but he realized he'd never cared this much before. It made him slow down even more, savoring everything.

The runnels of water on the windows lit rippling shadows and brightness along James' shining arm. Steve was fascinated by the beauty of it. Each ephemeral change in the light reflected across James, the silver arm and his pale, scarred flesh turned surreal and magic as a Magritte painting. Steve felt like he had to touch to keep James real, to keep him from slipping away, and he followed his hands with his mouth, bending forward to close his lips around a taut nipple, making James collapse on the bed and writhe over the sheets. James moaned and wriggled his way up the bed, letting Steve follow him on hands and knees.

James' knees were bent, his toes curled into the sheet and Steve smiled, turned his head and kissed the top of one knee, right over the knee cap, then stroked his hand over the calf of James other leg, feeling warm skin and surprisingly soft hair.

Steve brushed his lips along James' knee toward his thigh, inhaling his scent deep into his lungs. James threw his head back and let out a wild, near feral moan. He spread his thighs wider, highlighting the way his erection tented his boxer briefs. "Get – " he broke off, sucked in a huge breath when Steve stroked his hand lower on his thigh. His throat worked as he swallowed. "Get up here, come on, please, Steve, I need – "

Steve shuddered at the need James telegraphed with every fiber of his body. His own cock pressed against the fabric of his boxer shorts and the thought of getting rid of that last layer between them threatened to short-circuit his brain. He skated his hands over James' thigh and up to his hip, followed it with his mouth and stopped to press a kiss against the crease of thigh and hip. James' breath hitched and, against the side of his face, Steve felt James' cock twitch, so he mouthed the edge of the line of fabric over James' hipbone, tasting warm, salty skin while he rested his hand over James' erection. The sheet in James' metal fist ripped.

Steve murmured encouragements and endearments into James' skin as he trailed his mouth higher, sliding as much of his own skin against James' until he reached his chest and stopped to lick a teasing strip across the scar that connected the metal arm to James' body. The taste, skin and metal, all James, made Steve so hard it hurt.

James nearly jackknifed up at that touch, fisted his human hand in Steve's hair and pulled him closer, while his breathing grew even more ragged.

Steve continued to lavish attention onto James' chest with his lips and his tongue, blowing cool air across James' nipples after sucking them into his mouth over and over again only to feel James shaking against him. He was moaning under his own breath when James closed his legs around him and maneuvered him so that Steve was lying between his spread thighs, their erections now touching through the thin layers of fabric.

They were eye to eye now, and for an instant, James looked apprehensive, but that had to be an
illusion, because Steve clearly still felt the insistent pressure of his erection, and he was rocking against Steve with obvious intent. He leaned up to kiss Steve again, wet and wild and hungry, but when Steve moved his hand between their bodies, trying to tunnel his hand under James' boxer briefs, James froze.

Steve's heart plummeted. He moved his hand away quickly and pushed himself up to rest on his elbows, looking at James with his brows drawn together in concern. "What's wrong?"

James closed his eyes and shook his head, biting his lip. High color burned in his cheeks. His lips were swollen from their kisses. "I... " His aborted thrust up against Steve's cock was a test to Steve's willpower if ever there was one, but James just bit his lip harder and it felt like he forced his body to stop seeking contact. "I'm so sorry, but can we... " Watching his struggle with words told Steve how serious this was, if he hadn't already known. He rested the palm of his hand against the side of James' face. James leaned into the touch. He swallowed, brows drawn together and looking mortified and pained, then opened his eyes and found Steve's gaze. "I know this is crazy, but... can we slow down?"

Steve sucked in a sharp breath and rolled off of James. "God, of course, of course." Had he gone too far? Had he triggered something? Oh, Christ, but that was the last thing he'd ever wanted.

His body still screamed at him to continue, making it hard to think. He strained through the haze of pleasure marking the last few minutes to find where he'd gone wrong.

"No, Steve, wait, I... " James trailed off again, hand flailing out and clamping around Steve's shoulder, the grip verging on painful. He licked his lips again and flickered an embarrassed smile at Steve. "If you go on now, this'll be over in a few minutes and I... " James closed his eyes and drew his brows together. "I... I have no memories of anyone ever touching me gently," he said and it felt like Steve couldn't breathe through the pain of that revelation. At least Steve had memories of his mother, of being held and cradled and sung to sleep while she stroked his hair, his back. He had memories of Bucky's hugs, of Mary Margaret's touches, of Natasha's skin under his fingertips as he rubbed her back. The thought that James had none of that, had nothing, stunned him. "Everyone I can remember touching me did it for a mission. The Russians, Hydra, even the docs and nurses here... " James squeezed his eyes shut even tighter and rolled his head to the side, leaving Steve only a one-quarter profile visible. He went on like that, faced away from Steve, keeping his expression hidden. "I'm their job."

"I'm sorry," Steve whispered, feeling horrified.

James shook his head minutely. "Everyone else has been so careful not to touch me when I don't want it... and I was grateful. I didn't know I wanted some kind of contact until that movie night." He turned his face back to Steve and a slow smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I didn't know what it was like to be touched for me." He opened the tight grip of his hand, trailed his fingertips from Steve's shoulder to his chin, his lips, and traced their outline. "Not until now. Not until you."

Steve swallowed against the wave of tenderness and longing that washed over him at James' touch. "So -"

"Let's just slow down, yeah?"

Steve acted without thinking, but for once it didn't backfire on him. He folded James into a full body hug, smoothed his hands in gentle strokes down James' back. "Yeah," he murmured against James hair. "We can go as slow as you want. We've got time." We have the rest of our lives, Steve didn't say. He wasn't sure if James was ready to hear it yet. "Just tell me what you need. I... " he
stroked one hand over James' back and curled the other one in his hair. "Is this okay for you? I like this, but if it isn't what you need, let me know."

James drew a huge breath and curled around Steve in return, pulling him close. "This is perfect," he murmured, stroking his hands over Steve's back in return. "Just..." He kissed Steve's shoulder and rocked his hips against Steve. "Don't go completely PG on me. I said slow down, not stop."

Steve chuckled. "Demanding, aren't we?"

"Maybe you should find out," James answered and lifted his chin to capture Steve's lips in a slow kiss.

Steve didn't break away from the kiss for a long time, instead, he luxuriated in the slow glide of their lips and tongues against each other. He allowed his hands to roam over James' back and sides, smoothing them down on one stroke, then lightly scraping his short nails over soft skin on the next. James gasped against his lips when Steve first did that; his hands clutching Steve closer, so Steve repeated the movement which rewarded him with a languid roll of James' hips against his. James was humming under his breath, something Steve felt as a vibration against his skin rather than heard. If he didn't know it would bring on an annoyed frown from James, he'd call it a purr. Steve rolled his own hips against James' as well, sliding their erections together and James gave another bit back sigh.

Steve was used to being the quiet one during love-making, but James outdid even him. He couldn't rely on verbal cues to find out if what he was doing felt good to James or not, so all he had to go by was body language and that relied all too much on his interpretation. He decided to err on the side of caution and keep looking at James' face for signs of even the slightest frown of dislike.

He gently nudged James to lie on his back and leaned over him to kiss his way down from James' face to his collarbones and over the warm expanse of skin with its dark chest hair to James' good shoulder. He looked up, saw James watching him and smiled, then pressed a quick peck to the ball of James' shoulder. Keeping the eye-contact, he trailed his lips over James' heart and up to his metal shoulder, cataloguing the contrast between the warmth of James' skin and the hard metal. Steve felt James stop breathing when he moved to kiss the curve of the metal. James' heart thumped a hard staccato against Steve's palm, and this was good, but it wasn't enough. Steve drew a deep breath and gave into the urge to taste the shining metal. It was smooth and body-warm against his tongue and he licked a broader swath, his eyes fluttering shut as he concentrated, chasing the taste that was familiar instead of alien.

The breath James had been holding left him in a whoosh and Steve looked up. James was wide-eyed, his mouth open in a perfect O of wonder.

He wanted to say, 'Tastes just like you,' but he found himself tongue-tied, unable to get the words he wanted and needed to say over his lips. Hoping that action spoke louder than words, he peppered more kisses over the metal, then trailed back toward James' chest.

James tensed and jerked back a little when Steve got too close to the jagged scars and seams lining the artificial limb.

"Too much?" Steve asked.

James nodded and Steve reached up a hand to press it against the scars, just holding it there, firm and solid. He kept looking at James' face, searching for the moment when James began to relax.

It was only because of that decision that he saw James' eyes fluttering closed when Steve pressed
his fingertips against James' left collarbone, only to open again immediately. Steve felt his own frown of concern deepen and eased up on the touch without hesitation. Was James panicking? Had he gone too far?

James brushed his human fingers over the furrow between Steve's brows and rubbed his whole body against Steve in another one of his cat-like back arches. Steve had thought them involuntary before but he now realized they were very deliberate ways of getting more skin-contact. Steve smiled and obliged, bringing his upper body even closer so his nipple brushed against James'. A quiet gasp made him check James' face again and once more, he saw James' eyes slipping close only to open again.

"All right?" Steve whispered, unable to stifle his concern.

"Mmh-hm," James murmured. His gaze flickered up to meet Steve's. "I just don't want to miss anything."

"Why, are we doing anything?" Steve asked, his voice light and teasing while rolled them to their sides so he could run his index finger down James' spine and then along the waist band of his briefs.

James, who'd clearly had a reply on his lips, went pliant and boneless in Steve's arms all of a sudden and stayed this way for long minutes, allowing Steve to repeat what he'd done and have James melt into him even more.

Eventually, James moved his right arm and hand and repeated incredible tenderness what Steve had done with until his fingertips stopped at the waist band of Steve's boxers. He slowed to a stop there, then ever so lightly, with a tentativeness bordering on apprehension, James tugged at the waistband between thumb and forefinger. Not enough to move the fabric much, just enough to make the elastic stretch.

Steve held his breath and waited until James repeated the slight stretch of the waistband, then he took James' nonverbal hint and lifted his hips just enough to slide his boxers down his thighs. It should have made him feel vulnerable and exposed, the way he suspected James felt and what had likely been the reason he had taken off everything but his briefs while Steve had gone to the bathroom to get the massage oil, but strangely enough, it didn't. What did feel strange, though, was holding his boxer shorts in his hands and not knowing what to do with them. He looked at them, then at James and found James with a grin that was growing wider and wider, so with a shrug and a grin, he flicked the boxers off the bed. Apparently he did so with a little too much enthusiasm, because the boxers sailed across the room and landed on the door knob. James' grin turned into chuckles, then into a full belly laugh that showed his teeth and had his eyes crinkling at the side. Steve couldn't help but stare, because while he'd seen James smile and grin before, he didn't think he'd ever seen him laugh. And, God, it was both beautiful and infectious and Steve found himself laughing alongside James.

James gave the boxers on the doorknob a pointed look and wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "I bet you couldn't do that twice even if you tried."

Steve set his right hand on his hip; a gesture that had to look ridiculous with him naked. He didn't care because James didn't seem to. "I can, too."

James raised an eyebrow at him and wriggled out of his briefs, handing them over to Steve. "Prove it."

Steve took one look at the miles of soft skin that were no longer covered, at the treasure trail of
dark hair leading to James' groin and something pulled tight in his stomach. He tossed the briefs
behind him and slid down to press a kiss against James' hipbone.

James laughed and gasped at the same time. "Over--" another gasp as Steve trailed his lips to
James' navel, "Overachiever," he said and pointed to the door.

Steve rested his head against James' stomach and followed the line of James' hand. When he saw
what James was pointing at, he snorted his laughter against James' skin and James squeaked a little
where the sudden gust of air must have tickled.

James' briefs had landed exactly on top of Steve's boxers.

"Well, they have the right idea," Steve said.

James threw his lower right arm over his eyes and groaned. "When did you start to make
suggestive jokes?"

"About," he pressed another kiss to James stomach, "an hour ago," Steve answered without
thinking and smirked up at James.

The smirk slipped from his lips, though, because the way James had thrown up his arm stretched
him out, muscles rippling under his skin, sexier than any odalisque in any painting Steve had ever
seen. It let Steve appreciate the skin that he thought he would never get tired of touching, so soft,
smooth and warm. Even the hair on James' arm and his chest looked so much softer than Steve's
own and he gave in to the urge to skate his hand up from James side to his sternum, threading his
fingers through the sparse, soft chest hair. James' nipples had tightened into small buds and he
shivered when Steve brushed his fingertip against one.

James moved his arm so it rested over his head, covering the way his hair had fanned out over the
sheet and he lifted his head to look at Steve, his eyes large, just a small ring of icy blue around his
blown-out pupils. His lips were just parted, breath flowing quicker than before. Steve had to
swallow against his suddenly dry mouth. His blood was burning in his veins and all the banter he'd
thought would come easily was inaccessible now. He didn't even think he could remember how to
talk. All he wanted to do was to keep that look on James' face, touch every inch of that skin, kiss it,
make James twist and squirm over the sheets in ecstasy. His cock went from half-mast to a full
errection at the mere thought of seeing James' eyes flutter shut and his mouth open on a moan as he
came to Steve's hand and mouth on him. Steve drew a shaky breath and swallowed hard again
when his erection brushed against James' leg. He kissed James' stomach again and trailed his lips
higher to follow the past of his hand with small, nibbling kisses.

James arched his back in response, humming under his breath and curled his hand around the back
of Steve's neck, keeping him in place with Steve's lips resting over James' heart. After a few blinks
of an eye of just breathing together and Steve listening to James' quickening heartbeat, James ran
his fingers into Steve's hair to scratch gently over his scalp. Steve tried to bite back on a groan and
failed. His head had always been a sensitive spot for him. James' hand stopped and over the rushing
of blood in his ears, Steve heard James ask, tentative, "Good?"

Steve pressed his lips against James' chest and brought his hand up to rest in the spot between
James' armpit and his ribs. "Very good," he murmured to reassure James and pressed his head back
against James' hand. "You can – " It was so difficult to articulate what he wanted, especially in bed.
"If you want, you can – " He curled his hand into a fist against James' side, hoping James would
understand.

Lucky for him, James did and gathered Steve's short hair in his hand, then curled his hand into a
loose fist. The movement pulled the strands of hair tight, not enough to hurt, but enough to make Steve's eyes roll back in his head at the sensation shooting through his entire body. He gasped against James' chest and pushed his groin against James' leg, sliding his erection against warm skin and soft hair, smearing James' leg with pre-come. James repeated the curling motion, pulling strands of Steve's hair, never once tipping over into it being painful and Steve felt every cell in his body as alive as never before. He curled his right leg up over James' legs and brushed against the underside of James's cock as well, startling a gasp from James. Steve moved his face and licked at James' nipple, brushed his thumb over the vulnerable patch of skin just under James left armpit and felt James quiver in response and curl his hand tighter into Steve's hair. Was it possible to come from this alone?

Before he could contemplate the thought, though, James cupped his hand around the back of Steve's neck, hooked the metal arm around Steve's waist and rolled them so Steve was now under him. Hair falling in his eyes, he gave Steve a little self-satisfied smirk that Steve was too breathless to return. The movement had slotted them so James was lying between Steve's legs and their cocks aligned, the sensation unlike anything he'd ever felt. James canted his hips a little, pushing skin against silky skin and Steve fought another moan when he felt the slickness of James' precome against his stomach.

Apparently, James wasn't done exploring yet. He wriggled down Steve's body, creating an unholy amount of friction, then kissed his way down Steve's chest until he reached his nipples. He set his lips against Steve's right nipple and guided his tongue, wet-warm-silky, over and around it, learning, tasting, humming. The sensation shot all the way down to Steve's toes and he couldn't bite back on the sound lodged in his throat anymore. Against Steve's skin, James' breath came fast through his nose, little huffs and low hums, as if he was enjoying the taste. He never let up, just kept circling his tongue around the hard nub, and interspersed it with quick and gentle suction that nearly drove Steve out of his mind. All the while, James' hips moved against Steve's leg which meant that his stomach trapped Steve's cock between their bodies and every single aborted thrust translated to a fresh spark of sensation for Steve as well. He began to feel his muscles locking up and his brain narrowing down its focus to nothing but heat, friction, scent and the urge to come, began to feel the unmistakable sensation of it building pressure, but he didn't want it to, not yet. He wanted James to be the one who came first, but he knew at the same time that if James kept going like this, if he were to find out what it would do to Steve if he used even just the barest scrape of his teeth, it would only be a matter of moments before Steve came hard enough to see stars.

He had to get some measure of control back, no matter how good what James was doing felt, so when James moved his flesh and blood hand to skate it up to Steve's chest and find his other nipple to brush against it, Steve closed his hand around James' wrist to stop him.

James froze in mid-movement, going eerily still and tense as a bowstring.

Steve felt his heart slow to a stop, then start to beat again forceful enough to hurt and opened his hand immediately.

It took James a few more seconds to move. When he did, his whole body still tense, he lifted his head from Steve's chest and simply said, "Not there."

Steve felt lightheaded, torn between arousal and shock over doing something, without intending to, that was so severe James reacted the way he had. Had he triggered something? Oh, God, but that was the last thing he'd wanted.

James took in Steve's expression and his brows knitted. A complicated expression of dismay flew over his face. "I just don't – "
Steve's heart twisted in his chest. Did James think Steve was angry at him? That he needed to justify himself to Steve somehow? "Shhhh," he said, cupping the back of James' neck and brushing his thumb against his hair. "You don't have to explain."

James relaxed, rolled to his side so he was no longer lying on Steve but against his side and rested his head back on Steve's chest, regulating his breathing until it was normal again.

Steve felt the urge to apologize somehow, to kiss James' wrist to show just how sorry he was, but he wasn't sure if even that might be over the line. On a whim he hoped wouldn't backfire on him, he took James' hand so they were palm to palm and threaded his fingers through James'. A look down showed him that James had his eyes closed. His face looked relaxed. After a few moments, James squeezed Steve's hand and brushed his lips against Steve's chest again, then moved both their hands toward Steve's hip. Steve didn't breathe, just waited what James would do.

James breathed, "Here. Here's good," and touched both their hands to Steve's cock. Steve's breath stuttered to a stop and his eyes closed, lost in sensation.

Two strokes together and he knew he wanted James to feel this too, both their hands on him. "On our sides," he told James, "together."

James made a hoarse sound. Steve fought a smile over how reluctant he was to let go long enough to rearrange themselves, but then they were face-to-face, legs tangled together and James reached for him again and Steve surged forward, pushing his face against James' neck, while his hand met James' and guided them to hold his cock against Steve's. He had no idea if he was doing any of this right, but if it didn't matter to James, it damn well didn't matter to him.

Steve breathed fast against James' neck, lost in the indescribable sensation of feeling the silky skin of James' cock against his own.

It was smooth and wonderful for about four strokes and then James flinched as delicate skin chafed, sweat and pre-come turning tacky and not enough. Steve stilled his hand and tried to breathe through the urgent need to get off. He thought of licking his hand, but guessed spit wouldn't be enough for James. And if he was honest, it dried too quickly for it to feel good for him, either. James shuddered against him, breath warm on Steve's collar bone.

"Do something," James whispered and his hips hitched up. This time Steve winced at the uncomfortable, too-dry friction of skin rubbing against skin.

"There's... stuff in the bathroom," he said once his brain started working again.

"Stuff?" James echoed with an amused lilt to his voice. "What's stuff?"

"Uh, lubricant," Steve replied. It was ridiculous. He had James' dick in his hand, along with his own, both of them hard, and he was still going cherry red in the face over saying that. He'd gone through a tube of it since he'd discovered jerking off with it was so much better and still... Ridiculous. "I should get some."

James chuckled softly. "Yes. Do that."

Steve didn't move and James rubbed his cheek against Steve's neck then gently nipped at his collar bone.

It sent a thrill down to his groin.

"Now," he blurted and forced himself to let go and get out of the bed.
"Now is good," James agreed.

Steve knew his blush reached all the way down his chest. His cheeks felt hot. The walk to the bathroom didn't help, either, since he was aroused enough to make walking uncomfortable. Though at least he was naked. He didn't want to think about being this hard in a pair of those jeans Natasha had insisted on.

He fumbled twice getting the cabinet open and finding the lube – there was a pump bottle of something and several different tubes. He snatched up one of those and fled the bathroom, avoiding looking at himself in any of the mirrors, because he was sure that being cherry red in the face was not sexy, anymore than sweating so much it was rank was – and he was skirting close to that edge too.

God, though, all his anxieties and worries dissolved the instant he saw James again. His breath caught because James had stretched himself over the bed, with one leg bent wide at the knee. He had his teeth biting down on his lower lip while he dragged the metal fingers of his left hand down from his navel, following the line of hair leading down to his hard cock. Steve gulped when James' erection twitched in reaction to James teasing himself.

"Dear God," he breathed and it didn't feel like blasphemy so much as a prayer of thanks.

James looked up and smiled at him. Steve felt like nothing else existed outside that bright, amazing smile, the welcome in James' eyes, both there just for him. He felt, for a breath, humbled by the trust James had in him. All he wanted to do was reward that, to be worthy of that.

The tube in his hand bulged on one end, threatening to burst as his hand tightened and Steve eased up on his grip. Looking at it, he remembered why he'd gone to get it. He finished the trip back to the bed, climbing onto the foot and working his way up over James on his hands and knees, peppering kisses along his legs, the inside of his knee, the point of his hip, his ribs. James had shoved the duvet off to the floor and the top sheet was a tangled mess pushed down to one corner. It slithered off when Steve's foot caught it for a second.

James let his head fall back and laughed, low and fond, mesmerizing Steve with the movement of his throat.

"So," James said when Steve had reached his chin. He curled his metal hand around the back of Steve's neck. "Stuff, huh?"

Steve dropped his head to James' collarbone, huffing a quiet groan.

James chuckled and stroked his hand into Steve's hair. "When I first opened that cabinet, I couldn't figure out what some of that stuff did," he admitted. "I had to ask Jarvis."

Steve pushed back and stared at James. "You asked Jarvis?"

James shrugged. "Easier than to ask any of you," he said. It really didn't seem to bother him that he discussed sex with an AI. "Jarvis recommended the stuff in the green tube is the easiest to clean up, according to reviews."

Steve had come to the same conclusion after several test runs, but his brain still stuttered over the fact that, "You had Jarvis analyse reviews of lubricants?" He wasn't going to blush again. He wasn't.

James schooled his face into a serious mask – an effect that was completely ruined by the way his eyes crinkled at the corners with mirth. "Did anyone ever tell you red is your color?"
"Did anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?" Steve said and kissed James, desperate just to shut him up and change the subject. It was a ridiculous thing to say, but he didn't care.

James laughed into the kiss and mumbled against Steve's lips, "No."

Steve got distracted by the slow, sensuous sweep of James' lips and tongue against his own, but something niggled at the back of his mind now the subject of Jarvis had come up and he tensed, feeling watched.

James pulled back a little – he must have noticed the change in Steve's body language. He cupped his human hand along Steve's face and brushed his thumb over Steve's lips, smiling. "I activated privacy mode. No one's watching."

"That obvious?" Steve asked with an apologetic smile.

James raised an eyebrow. "Captain Subtle, you're not."

Steve thought about arguing, but then shrugged. "Well, in that case..." he trailed off, reaching for the tube with deliberate slowness. "How about we get back to where we left off? Totally unsubtle and all?"

"Mmmh, that's right," James hummed, rubbing up against Steve's thigh. "Stuff." That smile on his face definitely was a smirk. Steve tried to think if he'd ever seen James smile as much as he had here in bed with him and came up blank.

Seeing James carefree and playful made Steve so damn happy, he just rolled his eyes and played along. "Yup, stuff."

"Maybe you should show me," James asked, his voice lower than before, and that... that wasn't banter anymore. Steve raised his gaze up to James' face and found his pupils still blown wide, his lips swollen from their kisses, and moist from where James must have just licked them. Steve's mouth went dry and he swallowed hard, the click in his throat loud in his ears.

"Yeah," he answered. His own voice sounded rough. They'd talked enough. He ached to finish what they'd started. James had to feel just as desperate.

He rolled to his side and pulled James so he was mirroring Steve, assuming their earlier position. James went with it, pliant in his arms and without hesitation.

Steve's stomach fluttered in anticipation when he squeezed some of the clear gel on his fingertips and rubbed it between them to reach body temperature. He felt James watching him the entire time, and still, he didn't predict what James would do. James touched the outside of Steve's lube-smeared hand with his metal one and gently turned it so the palm was facing James. Staring at Steve's hand in wonder, James cradled it in his metal hand with a tenderness Steve hadn't thought possible from the artificial limb and reached out with his human hand to trace his fingertips through the lube and then along every single one of Steve's fingers and all the way down to the palm, slow, hypnotic, learning how it felt against his fingers, while also tracing the shape of Steve's hand. Steve shivered in response and bit back a groan of appreciation when James reached the center of his palm and drew an infinity symbol there, over and over again. Steve had to close his eyes against the wave of heat that spread through his body. He hadn't known that his palms were a hotspot, but he had a feeling that he'd never be able to hold James' hand again from now on without getting inappropriately aroused no matter where they were.

The thought that he'd get this chance made something unfurl inside of him that had been
compressed far too long. He could have this. This and more. Even though right now, the near painful hardness of his dick reminded him, this needed his attention more than the future, so he moved his hand between their bodies and gently closed his hand around James' dick. James pressed his forehead against Steve's collarbone and sighed, hot and moist against Steve's skin.

James let Steve stroke him a couple of times, only murmured a low, breathless, "Easy," once when Steve grasped James the way it felt good to himself. James preferred a lighter touch, apparently, because he stroked the tip of his index finger over Steve's knuckles, gently inviting him to open his hand. Once Steve did, James moved his own hand and reached for Steve's dick and slid them together and oh, oh, God, that was good, that was so much better than before. Steve bit his lip and thrust forward, brushing against James' stomach while James' dick was brushing against his balls, making him see stars.

James' closeness, their mingled scent of fresh sweat and sex, it all felt safe and natural as breathing. They were in a bubble that consisted just of them, at least for now.

Without thinking, Steve kissed the side of James' neck, curled his fingers a little so they were grazing James' balls, and James' breath hitched. His thrusts lost the vague semblance of coordination they'd had before.

"Steve, I – "

"Yeah," Steve murmured against the hot skin of James' shoulder, repeating the light thrust-curl motion. "Yeah, come on."

James thrust quicker against him, a low whine stuck in his throat, his breath hot against Steve's chest. His flesh and blood hand barely changed its grip around Steve's dick, but his metal arm clamped around Steve's shoulders without warning and pulled Steve closer as James lost his last hold on control and fell over the edge, spilling warm and wet between them on a helpless, choked-off moan.

Steve gentled James through his high, pressed kisses up and down the curve of James' shoulder until he felt James' breath evening out and his own need become painful enough he couldn't ignore it any longer.

James hadn't let go of Steve's dick, so Steve touched his hand to James' and indicated for James to move his slack hand. At the same time, James was resting his forehead against Steve's shoulder and mouthing at Steve's collar bone murmuring his name, all soft and hoarse and sex-wrecked breathless. James hummed under his breath and flexed his hand a little, just a languid, slow sort of help that was good but not enough.

"I need," Steve said, drawing a huge breath, then burying his nose and mouth in James' hair. "I need more, please, I need – "

James eased his hand away from Steve's dick and for a stomach-dropping half-second, Steve thought he'd done something wrong, but then James took Steve's own hand, placed it on Steve's dick and murmured, "Show me how you like it."

On a near-sob of relief, Steve began to strip himself, much rougher than James. Exquisite tension tightened his belly and his balls, sensation overwhelming him. James rested his hand on the outside of Steve's, moving with him, his fingers just tightening, thumb grazing over the wet tip, and without a warning, that fraction of barely added pressure was what made everything seize in Steve and let him groan his way into his release.
James kept holding him close, his metal hand absurdly gentle against the back of Steve's neck, as white-hot pleasure rushed through and out of him, and through the shuddering, breathless aftermath.

When he could catch his breath and his brain could put two and two back together after what felt like hours, Steve reached for the edge of the loose sheet and cleaned James and him up as best as he could. He dropped the sheet on the floor after, reasoning all the bedding would need to be changed and unwilling to move even an inch from the warmth of James' skin.

Dear Lord, that had been good. Little shivers of pleasure were still running up and down his nerves.

James stretched and settled closer to him as soon as Steve finished, relaxing. Steve let his eyelids fall closed. In the warm darkness, he felt surrounded by James: his skin, his arms and legs tangled around Steve, his scent mingled with Steve's, the gust of his breath against sweat-slicked hot skin. The feather flutter of James' eyelashes tickling at his Adam's apple reminded him how ephemeral their lives really were. He needed to appreciate this moment while it existed and not ruin it with worry for the future or regrets about the past.

He stroked his hand down James' back and James arched into it, cat-like, murmuring in satisfaction. "That. Keep doing that."

Steve kept running his hands over James, never stopping the contact.

James relaxed completely, folding into him, and Steve smiled at the ceiling. He ran his hands over James everywhere he could reach and murmured incoherently with pleasure that wasn't even sexual. James' breathing slowed into sleep and he tucked his feet beneath Steve's, innocent and trusting, his body gone slack.

James' hair caught and slipped across Steve's lips when he kissed his temple.

He didn't want to disturb James enough to get him inside the bedding, so he said, "Jarvis?" He remembered James had initiated privacy mode and the AI wasn't monitoring. "Active presence, Jarvis," he added the command phrase.

"Yes, Captain?" Jarvis' bodiless voice was subdued enough not to wake James, something that made Steve smile.

"Keep the temp warm enough we can sleep without blankets."

"Of course."

James curled closer to him. "Thank you," he murmured against Steve's skin, sleep-slurred.

"Thank you for trusting me," Steve replied when he felt James had gone back to sleep, meaning in this moment and all the times James had trusted him since escaping Hydra. Bucky had been an extraordinary man. So was James. He'd come so far and Steve realized, surprised, that he had, too. He'd learned to accept James wasn't Bucky, and he was beginning to understand that comparing James and Bucky did them both a disservice. He wasn't doing it as much as he had, though, and one day would stop doing it at all, Steve swore to himself.

He ran his hand over James' shoulder and James twisted onto his side and slid his arm over Steve's waist. The metal was finally warm, Steve noticed, and decided he would take that as a sign. In the morning, they could have slow, lazy morning sex, show up late for breakfast – or not show up at all and just stay in bed – and then endure the inevitable teasing from their friends the next day, and
find their way forward.

Once, he'd had nothing except Bucky. Fate had knotted the two of them together and then brutally chopped them apart, leaving Steve with everything he'd ever wanted except Bucky. Now he had a third chance at having something and it wasn't with Bucky, because Bucky was gone, but James filled all the same places in Steve's heart. James was Bucky's last gift to him, the last way Bucky could watch out for him, by holding onto Steve's heart.

James hummed and slipped closer in his sleep. Steve stroked his hair. "You always took care of me," he whispered, addressing Bucky. It was his turn now, to do better by James than he had by Bucky. "I'll take care of him," he promised.

Steve blinked at the ceiling and said it out loud for the first time. "Goodbye, Bucky."

He imagined Bucky smiling at him, tipping his finger to the brim of his uniform cap, and smiled back to the ghost of his friend, before closing his eyes and tightening his hold on James.

The End

Chapter End Notes

So, that's all, folks.

Which isn't quite true, because we cannot wrap up this posting process without saying Thank You to an incredible friend. The person who so diligently worked on the beta-read, even at a time that was highly stressful for her, who asked the right questions and raised her eyebrows at us in just the right places, the one who listened to us talk and talk and talk about the story, either via e-mail or over countless cups of tea in real life, the one who was constant in her cheerleading ... is murron. She who is awesome. She's also the one who's responsible for the final scene being as long as it is, because her shout of outrage over the first version made sure we incorporated the sex scene in the story and didn't save it for a coda. Probably good that she did, nicht wahr? ;o)

Auburn said I could gush, so damn it, I will. Writing this story was an incredible experience. I cannot begin to describe how much the trust Auburn put in me to write with me meant. This isn't our first gig together, but, Gosh, it was the most intense one so far. (And we both lost so much sleep over this - living in wildly different time zones makes co-writing a challenge, let me tell you - , we probably need a year's worth of sleep to ever come close to catching up.) The story (including revisions) was with us for the better part of 8 months, and I can safely say that you cannot wish for a better writing partner than her (I'm not sharing her, though, you'll have to find your own!) and we'll both miss the insane intensity of this particular writing process. And because I know she didn't mean that I could gush about her, I shall stop now, even though I could sing bloody odes to her and I wouldn't be exaggerating. To both of these ladies.

So, thank you. Both of you.

And to all of you who read and commented or left kudos: Thank you, too. Your comments and kudos are cherished more than you know.
Auburn: She exaggerates about me. But not the time zone thing. This story wouldn't exist without insomnia. murrón is an extraordinary beta. She can point out what's wrong in a way that makes you want to write another ten thousand words to fix it and not just pour a drink and say to hell with it. And eretria is the best co-writer in the world, kind, patient, and gracious when I write over her words and nag about plot and pendulum between 'needs more' and 'cut cut cut'. And this story, well, there were times last year when writing this with her was the only thing that made me get through the day.

Thanks to everyone who reads and everyone who kudos and everyone who comments.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!