Known Associates

by thingswithwings

Summary

Steve Rogers isn't a self-made man.

Or, how a tough little Brooklyn fairy got turned into Captain America, and then turned back.

Notes
Acknowledgements: First of all, I have to thank eruthros, without whom this fic would literally not exist. She read the first twenty-five thousand words or so, and kept rereading those words and loving them and talking about them long after I’d put it on a shelf, and I never would’ve started it again without her enthusiasm. She read it as I worked on it, giving live feedback on every element of the story, and then she betaed it as a full draft. Her willingness to talk with me about worldbuilding, characterization, queer ethics, and a million other things brought this fic into being, and I’m forever grateful. I also want to thank my other three full-draft betas, Isagel, were_duck, and livrelibre, for all their hard work, insight, and kindness. Isagel was also an early cheerleader and spitballed some super hot Steve/Jim scenes with me on twitter that eventually, years later, made it into the fic; were_duck always listened, kept me company while writing, had feelings with me, and made me put in real conflict where the story needed it; and livrelibre told me it was gonna be all right, told me to let it go, talked through problems with me, and helped with research questions. These three took on this massive behemoth of a story and read ALL the words in it and made it so, so much better. I can’t tell you how insightful and wonderful they all are.

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I think it's also important to acknowledge that, during the years I spent writing this, I helped to organize and then voted to form a union at my work. We won our union, and we're now bargaining our first contract with the bosses. :) Wish us luck.

Relationship to Canon: This fic is not at all compliant with Age of Ultron or Agents of SHIELD, though it occasionally uses characters or concepts from them. Posted before Civil War came out. Mostly consistent with MCU up to the end of Cap2 (I took some creative liberties here and there), AU after Cap2. I messed around with the timeline in a couple of places; most notably, getting Steve into basic training a LOT earlier than the 1943 date in the movie and speeding up the events of Iron Man 3 in order to try to make it make more sense in-universe.

About the Fic: This fic is seven chapters long (though I had to break one in half, so it's eight chapters on the AO3). The ninth chapter is just the bibliography, with a list of sources and influences and recs, so don't be fooled - the story is over at the end of chapter eight. The tags are for the fic as a whole, so if you have questions about where some content occurs/how much of it there is/other details, please feel free to drop me a comment or email me at epistemophilia at gmail.

tl;dr I spent three years exteriorizing my heart; here it is.
"Sorry, Rogers," the foreman says, not even looking up from his clipboard. "We're gonna have to let you go."

Steve's tired and too hot, coming off his shift on the assembly line, and at first he doesn't even register what Mr Brown is saying. He was only hired a few months ago, and he's been doing good work. He's been going home exhausted, shaking, his hands trembling for hours after he leaves, so he knows he's been doing good work.

"Why's that, sir?" Steve asks, doing his best to hold back the flash of anger that's building inside him. Maybe they've noticed him ducking out back a few times, trying to hide the desperate gasping that comes along with his asthma attacks. Maybe he's run out of believable excuses for the days – only three, he's sure of it, it was only three days – when the pain meant he just couldn't get up out of bed for trying and had to miss work.

The foreman shrugs. "No one's buying what we're making. Gotta cut back."

Steve's twenty-two and he's been fired a lot in his life, which is impressive given how few jobs there are to get in the first place. It's always for the same reasons: too slow, too weak, too small. He thought he was onto something with this factory job; there are a couple women working the line with him, and one guy with a bum leg. He thought he could keep up, and he had been, he's sure of it. It'd been better, anyway, than the coughing fits he'd get yelling headlines all day, or the way his body'd felt wrung out and empty after he tried hauling crates.

And he thought that maybe, if he had a steady job and some free time, he could find the will to pick up his pencils again.

Getting fired means spending day after day pounding the pavement, begging for work when there's guys twice his size and strength unemployed. It means seeing that dismissive look in peoples' eyes over and over again, for weeks maybe.

He can't help it. He opens his mouth.

"And I'm the first to get cut back, huh," he says. It's not smart, Steve knows it's not smart: Mr Brown could hire him back someday, if there were open positions again. But he's too angry to keep the words behind his teeth, too angry to even regret them once they're out. The foreman finally looks up from his clipboard and down to meet Steve's eyes.

"Yeah," he says. There's no malice in it, which makes Steve even angrier. It's fair to fire him, Steve knows that. It's almost always fair to fire him. He shouldn't be surprised, and he shouldn't be mad.

The heat of the anger doesn't go away, though, doesn't drain out of him like it ought to, and Steve finds himself standing still, breathing fast, bone-tired and wishing there were some way to prove himself. He's been keeping up, he thinks: he could have sworn that he was keeping up, this time.

"You can collect your pay with Madeleine," Mr Brown says, looking back at his clipboard. To him, Steve is already gone, forgotten, a faulty part that's been removed from the machine, replaceable.
Like he never even existed.

He collects his pay with Madeleine and starts the long walk back to the rooming house where he shares a suite with Bucky. It'd be better if his next job were near the Navy Yard, so he could be closer to home. Then maybe he'd have enough strength left after walking in to work to keep up with the other guys. Not that there's much out at the docks that he can do, that he hasn't tried. Big tall dockers usually take one look at Steve's skinny shoulders and laugh themselves sick.

A bunch of folks are sitting outside his building, lounging on the stoop and smoking or talking, taking it easy after a long day of work. He notices Danielle from upstairs, pretty in dark blue slacks, patterned blouse, and bright red lipstick, taking a long drag on a cigarette. She notices him back, and smiles.

"Hey Steve," she says. "Long day?"

"I got canned," Steve replies, and settles down beside her on the stoop. He'll rest for a minute before he tackles the stairs. He might as well.

"Goddamn it," she sighs. A couple of heads turn, but no one says anything. Steve smiles, thinking how his Ma would've lost it if she'd heard a lady blaspheming like that, especially someone like Danielle who's at every Catholic Worker meeting.

"Yeah," Steve agrees.

"They fire a lot of workers?" she asks, perking up. "Force everyone to take a wage cut? Are they cutting some people to overwork the rest?"

Steve grimaces; selfishly, he wishes it were any of those things. He wishes he believed Mr Brown's explanation about making cuts. "They pay pretty well. And I think it was just me."

"Aw, that's too bad," she says. There's a big rectangle of canvas folded at her feet, and Steve nudges it with his foot.

"You were all ready to paint me a sign, huh?"

She laughs, and takes another drag of her cigarette. "Anytime, Stevie. Even if you're a union of one. And even if you're the better artist between us."

He tries not to think about his sketchbook upstairs, gathering dust, still three-quarters empty. Last time he tried drawing, his hands had shaken so much, and he'd gotten so frustrated, that he'd thrown the pencil furiously across the room before running after it to make sure it wasn't broken. He hasn't tried since.

"Who were you out for today?" Bending down hurts, strains his already sore back, but it's worth it to pull up the corner of the canvas and have a look underneath.

"Walkout on War, for the student union down at Brooklyn College," Danielle replies. "Lost cause, really, but a good one."

Steve nods. He's seen the flyers around, arguing against government censorship and the militarization of the schools. "You don't think the students will join in the protest?"

"Too many of them think we should be going to war in Europe," Danielle sighs. "Dumb kids."

"Maybe we should be," Steve says.
"Don't even get me started on that one again," Danielle groans. "Anyway, this is a free speech issue. You want them censoring German language classes or shutting down student peace organizations?"

"No," Steve says. "I don't. I'm with you, Danielle. It's a long walk down to the college, is all."

"Well, the walkout is tomorrow, so we've already done as much as we can. I just don't think it's gonna be big enough to get much attention."

"Might as well go down fighting," Steve says. "Like with that protest for youth job programs we did. Or the Sugar Strike last year."

"Now that was a good strike," Danielle agrees. "I remember one young man in particular who fought like he had the fire-a-God lit under him."

Steve smiles. "If by 'fought' you mean 'took a lot of hits from billy clubs,' then sure, I fought," he says.

Danielle laughs ruefully. "You didn't budge, though, Steve. That's the important thing."

"Didn't do us much good, though, did it," he says. They'd all been replaced by scab labor. The only good thing about the strike had been meeting Pauline, now Danielle's roommate, who had clued them all in to vacancies in this building.

Danielle purses her lips, eyes far away. "They all do good," she says. "Even when we get beat. It's worth standing up for, even if that's all you can do."

Steve's seen Danielle thrown to the ground and kicked, seen a cop step on her face when she wouldn't stop yelling, seen her take quite a few punches, but he's never seen her throw one. During the Sugar Strike, whenever Steve had tried to get between the strikebreakers and one of his fellows, or come close to losing his temper and hitting back, it'd been Danielle's hand on his arm to tell him to get back in line. She really makes him believe in pacifism, sometimes, in what it could do if they all took it up.

"I know," he says. It's harder when he can't do anything about it, anyway, that's for sure. Tired as he is, he wishes he could grab a sign and link arms with some other guys and scream a few slogans at Mr Brown.

"If you've got some time off in the next few days you should come out with us."

"For Walkout on War?" Steve asks, confused.

"No, we're going out stumping for Norman Thomas. Knocking on doors, trying to get community support. You're always good at that stuff."

Steve likes it, too, the part where you connect with folks, convince them to come around to your way of thinking. He smiles.

"Remember old Mrs Miller?" he asks.

"Good God, I thought she was going to thwack you with her cane right there on her front stoop! But you talked her around. That's what we need for Norman Thomas, that kind of passion."

"I don't know if I'm gonna vote for Thomas," Steve says. "The race is gonna be tight in New York, they're saying. And I like Roosevelt."
"Thomas is the only one who sees the war machine for what it is," Danielle says. "Sacrificing lives for profit. Making war to make money."

"I heard the talking points, Dani," Steve says. "I don't disagree. But war's gonna come anyway." He looks down at his hands, callused here and there from holding a hammer or a pencil, small and weak. If war does come, he could think of worse things than sacrificing himself – not for profit, or the war machine, but for somebody else. Another soldier. That would be a worthy thing to do. He imagines that President Roosevelt might understand that, wanting to do something good for others even if people might think you can't.

"Well, listen," she says, "you and I both know Thomas isn't gonna win the election. But his ideas are important, and maybe if we yell them out loud enough, it'll make the others have to talk about them, you know?"

Steve nods.

"If you're not working right now, come do this work instead. Knocking on doors with us, talking to people. We'll tell them what we believe, that's all."

"I'll come, okay," he says, and smiles. "Too bad there's no money in that kind of work."

Danielle's not what anybody would call independently wealthy, but she has enough from her Pop, who runs an auto repair shop, for rent and food. She nods ruefully, and there's a long, comfortable silence between them.

"Seriously, Steve, if you need anything, money or whatever –"

"Thanks," he says quickly. He knows it'd offend her if he said it, but he doesn't think he could take money from a dame. He'd feel the ghost of his Ma breathing down his neck for sure if he did.

Danielle shrugs. "Shoulder to cry on, then," she amends. "I'm pretty good at that."

"Too bad there's no money in that either."

"Too bad," Danielle agrees.

Danielle's friend Valentine, dressed nicely in a purple dress and a matching hat, walks up briskly from around the corner. Her eyes flick warily over all the people sitting on the stoop, calculating how safe it is for her to be there, but then her gaze lands on Danielle and her expression warms as a beautiful smile breaks over her face. Steve feels a little twinge of jealousy. No one ever looks at him that way.

"Valentine!" Danielle exclaims. "I thought you were tied up all evening."

"I was, but then the fat cats at Tillman's decided to go ahead and do a lockout," Valentine replies, slightly out of breath. Danielle's eyes widen. She sticks out her hand, and Valentine takes it firmly. Steve watches surreptitiously, the place where their palms meet and their fingers clench and hold together.

"See ya, Steve," Danielle says, as Valentine pulls her up. "Dunno when I'll be back, but I'll be around tomorrow if you wanna talk. We're leaving at ten to go knock on doors for Thomas."

"Thanks," Steve says, and means it; he feels a lot better for having talked to her, even if he's still in the same situation as he was.
He watches Danielle and Valentine go off down the street, arm in arm, heads bent close together as they discuss whatever heroics they're about to undertake. Steve smiles.

"That fucking buldyke," one of Steve's neighbors sneers, and Steve turns angrily toward him.

"You wanna say that again?" he asks.

The guy - Gerald, Steve remembers, he lives one floor up – narrows his eyes. "Not saying nothing that ain't true," he says. "I'm next door to that Mick girl. You should hear the caterwauling when the colored one visits." He laughs, and a couple of other guys around him laugh too.

"I don't care what you can hear," Steve says, standing up and squaring his shoulders, ignoring the aches in his body. His full height has never impressed anybody, but Danielle's right – it's worth standing up, if you can, for its own sake. "You treat those ladies with respect."

Gerald rolls his eyes. "Respect! That colored girl ought to show respect by not coming up into our neighborhood."

"Valentine does more good for this community than you ever do," Steve says. It makes him angry, to think that her hard work could be so invisible to this guy. "She works for the people in this neighborhood. So I'm telling you, watch what you're saying," Steve finishes, as evenly as he can.

"Or what?" He looks up at Steve with a smile on his face. Sitting down he's nearly as tall as Steve standing up.

"Or I'll teach you respect," Steve says, clenching his fists. The anger from before comes back, blooming under Steve's skin like fire, filling up his head with noise.

Gerald laughs, and his first swing is sloppy, so Steve gets two good punches in before he gets knocked down and kicked in the ribs. He scrabbles to get up again, but Gerald pushes him back down, knocking the wind out of him and leaving him gasping.

"Jesus, kid," he says, disgusted. "I don't wanna fight you."

That's the long and short of it, really. By the time Steve gets to his feet again, Gerald's gone, along with most of the other neighbors, though a few are still sitting out on the stoop and giving him the occasional interested glance.

"Nothing to see," Steve mutters, even though the little crowd seems to disagree. His ribs hurt like hell, though he's pretty sure they're not broken this time. He can't catch his breath and his joints hurt, but that's not so unusual. The real pain is in the way everyone looks at him, like he's nothing, or close enough as makes no difference. He stumbles up the front steps and manages to get the heavy door open. Alone in the little lobby he feels better, safer, though no less angry. His face is hot and he keeps replaying it in his mind, the moment when Gerald walked away like he wasn't even worth fighting.

At least when they fight him, he feels like he's real, like he makes some difference by being alive.

It's a lot of stairs up to the apartment. Steve lets himself take the luxury of going slow, pausing and taking deep, aching breaths every few steps. Long day, he thinks. It'll be better tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll beat the pavement and find himself another job. He's got a little put away from the last few months, at least, though it's not enough to last long.

With his thoughts chasing themselves around in an ever-collapsing spiral – how long will his savings last? how long will his next job last? will the next thing he gets knock him down with
another fever? – he trudges up the last few rickety stairs to his rooms and fusses through all the junk in his pockets till he finds his keys.

Just then his next-door neighbors step out into the hallway. Steve is hit with a sweet wave of perfume, and the soft, enveloping scent stops the train of bad thoughts in their tracks. He turns around and smiles. Betty and Marlene are all dolled up in rouge and lipstick, brightly-colored flowers pinned to their lapels, eyebrows perfectly plucked.

"Steve!" Betty trills, reaching out to slap Steve companionably on the chest. "You look a fright, whatever can be wrong?"

"Fired again," he sighs, deciding not to tell them about the kick to the ribs he'd taken downstairs. The ladies cluck their tongues.

"You'll find something else, tiger," Marlene says, offering him a smile. She's so pretty and so sincere that Steve can't help but smile back.

"I hope so. I don't suppose either of you knows of any work?"

"I could ask around," Marlene offers, and Steve nods gratefully. There's a little pause. Steve fiddles with his keys again.

"Steve," Betty says slowly, "please don't take this the wrong way, but didn't I see you down at The Hotel St. George one time?"

Steve blinks in surprise, a wave of fear passing through him. He's been to the St. George now and then, and a lot of folks really let their hair down there. It'd be easy for someone to get an eyeful. There'd been the one guy who had kissed Steve in the lobby.

But no one has ever asked Steve about it before, and he's never had to talk about it.

"Yeah," he stutters, blushing. "It's just – it was only a couple of times, you know."

Betty nods. "And Marlene told me she saw you at Vincent's once, too."

Put together, it makes a pretty damning picture. "If she says so, then I guess she did," Steve agrees, clearing his throat. "You wouldn't tell, though." He's sure they wouldn't.

Marlene rolls her eyes at the suggestion. "We wouldn't throw stones, dear," she says.

"Marlene," Betty says, turning conspiratorially to her companion, "What would you say to the suggestion that we take Steve out on the town with us tonight?"

"Oooh!" Marlene smiles. "I'd say, I think that's just what he needs."

Steve's heart starts to race at the idea. It's been so long since he's let himself, and he's filled up suddenly with wanting it. Bucky's out with a new girl, probably won't be home till late, but still . . . he shouldn't. He gulps, looking for an excuse.

"Oh, but I'm not – I'm not all prettied up like you gals are, I'd look out of place – " He looks down, frowning, at his jacket, which is dirty from his up close inspection of the sidewalk, and wonders if he's got cuts or bruises showing. He's tired and humiliated and doesn't know if he could bear to show his face downstairs again.

"Nonsense," Marlene says, and ushers him into their apartment. Steve's never been inside before. It
looks like any set of rooms that a couple of guys might share – hats on the hatrack, socks hanging on the tiny radiator – except for the little table in the corner with the propped-up mirror and the rows of cosmetics, and the scent of perfume, and the bright feathers and scarves and ties adorning every available surface.

"How long's it been since you went out on the scene, Steve?" Marlene asks gently. Steve thinks back, but he can't remember. He tries not to go too often. Bucky'd ask questions.

"I dunno," he says. When he's gone, it's always been on his own, leaning against a brick wall or the side of a bar until someone noticed him and took him somewhere private: up to a room, or out behind the bar, where they could make Steve forget his troubles for a bit. But Betty and Marlene, they get dressed up, they get seen, they – people probably know them, down at Vincent's or at the St. George.

"Too long, then," Marlene says softly, patting his arm.

Maybe it would be good, Steve thinks, to get out. To go with them. There's nothing to do in his apartment but sit and stew, anyhow.

"We can just tidy you up and lend you some clothes," Betty says. "We got boy stuff, we got girl stuff. Or we could give you the whole treatment."

"The whole treatment?" Steve asks. He can't take his eyes off of the little table, the gleaming bottles and soft-looking brushes that cover its surface. They all look so pretty.

"Lipstick, rouge, the works," Marlene grins. "I am dying to bring out those cheekbones."

Steve feels a heavy anticipation settle in his body, nervousness warring with the sudden desire to know how his cheekbones might look with some rouge, how he might look if he – if he really played the part of the fairy. He clears his throat. "I'd – I think I might like that," he says.

"Pansy in the making," Betty laughs. "You've never worn makeup before?"

Shaking his head, Steve says, "I've seen – you know, fairies and stuff, girls like you, and I always thought they looked so . . . glamorous." It's a dumb word to pick, and it does make Betty laugh, but her laugh isn't unkind.

"Less glamorous when your lipstick's wrapped around somebody's prick," she says, "but that's sweet, I like that."

"It makes me feel glamorous," Marlene says, with a pointed look at Betty. "We can do that for you, Steve."

He thinks back on Mr Brown, how he hadn't even glanced up at Steve while he fired him, and on the sight of Gerald walking away, not even willing to waste his time fighting. In makeup, at least, folks might have to see him.

"Okay," he says, almost sick to his stomach with nerves but unwilling to back down. "The whole treatment, then."

"Welcome to our salon," Betty says. "Won't you sit down?"

Steve, gamely, sits down on the little stool in front of the mirror.

"This won't take a moment," Betty says. She wipes his face with a wet cloth, frowning – he
must've picked up some dirt when he hit the steps – and pulls out a little razor. "Stubble and rouge don't really mix," she says, apologetically. "Do you mind?"

He shakes his head no. Betty gets a little more water from the tap in the corner and comes back with shaving soap too.

"I can do that part, if you want," Steve says, feeling a little odd about it. He's used to shaving himself.

"But isn't it nicer when someone else does it for you?" Betty asks. "Here, see what you think."

She runs the shaving brush over his face, then scrapes away his whiskers with a few careful strokes. Her touch is light and delicate, moving his face this way and that, never once nicking him with the blade.

"Not quite barbershop quality, but Betty's got the touch," Marlene says, smiling as she watches the process.

"Yeah," Steve sighs. The humiliations of the day are fading in his memory, under the soft, kind feeling of Betty's hands on his face and neck.

"There," she says, finally. "I'm afraid I haven't got a hot towel, though." She wipes him clean instead with a rough regular towel.

"It's okay, that was nice," Steve says. "I might have to come to you for a shave every day."

"Two bits," she says insistently.

"Now the fun parts," Marlene says, coming to crouch in front of Steve with a little pot of rouge in her hands. "First, those cheekbones." She brushes some rouge onto Steve's cheeks, her touch feather-light against his skin.

Marlene's thumb, when it presses against his jaw to turn his head, is rough and callused; Steve wonders where she works during the day, what kind of trade job might not mind a fella showing up with his eyebrows plucked. Maybe she keeps her cap pulled down tight; Steve's seen fairies who could get away with that, though he imagines it gets embarrassing if you have to take off your hat for some reason.

They loan him a soft red shirt so outrageous that it might be a ladies' blouse, and a fresh yellow carnation to tuck into the buttonhole of his hastily dusted-off jacket. The flower doesn't look cheap, and Steve is warmed by the idea that they'd share the few special treats they have with him. The sight of the bright yellow smiling up from his lapel lightens his heart.

"You ever wore ladies' clothes before?" Betty asks, looking him over. She puts her hand through his hair once or twice, brushing it up and away from his forehead. It feels good, just to be touched like that, with care and kindness. After the day he's had, he finds he can't help but lean up into it.

"Nah," Steve says. "I don't even, uh, go out very much." He's too embarrassed to tell them the truth, that he's only ever cruised for as long as it took to find somebody warm and willing, that he's never worn anything special or been too picky about it. This is a whole new experience.

Betty puts a little lipstick on his lips, showing him how to press them together to make it spread around.

"Then we blot, darling, so put your lips on this," Betty says, holding out a kiss-stained
handkerchief.

"I dunno if I should listen when a fairy tells me that," Steve cracks, and Betty and Marlene both laugh. But he leans forward and does as he's told. Opening his mouth for the little slip of cloth seems more intimate, in a way, than some of the blowjobs he's given.

Marlene moves in with another brush and a brick of mascara. "Hold on a minute, let me do your lashes. You've got beautiful long lashes, Steve."

"Thanks," Steve says, feeling his skin heat up again. He doesn't know what he'll do out on the street with all this stuff on, whether he'll look people in the eye or want to duck his head and hide.

Marlene smiles softly at him, and it makes him a little less nervous. He does his best to look up, like she tells him, and not blink while she applies the mascara.

"There," she says, after a moment. "All done."

"Be straight with me, girls, do I look like a dope?" He figures he'll look silly, a guy awkwardly playing dress-up, not like the sweet, beautiful fairies he's seen at the bars and nightclubs.

But when Betty presses her hands to Steve's shoulders and spins him around on the stool to face the mirror, Steve doesn't recognize himself for a long, intense moment. His cheekbones stand out with the rouge, making him look soft and girlish, caught in a perpetual blush. His lips look full and so, so red; his dark eyelashes flick up and down, reminding him of lady movie stars from the pictures.

The red of his shirt is intense too, eye-catching; his first thought, once he gets over the shock of it, is that he'll have to button his coat and put the collar up to hide the flash of color until they get there. The slippery material of the shirt – not real silk, surely, but still nice and soft – slides and clings along the lines of his shoulders and chest as if caressing them.

For the first time in his life, Steve looks at his slight build and thin bones and doesn't see a scrawny failure; the person in the mirror isn't frail or weak, but delicate, vulnerable, beautiful.

He touches his fingers to the edges of the carnation. It's soft, and still alive.

"Not too bad," Betty drawls.

"You look gorgeous," Marlene says, coming up behind them and looking over his shoulder into the mirror. "The fellas are gonna love you."

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In the end, he doesn't keep his head down when they leave the building. He doesn't feel ashamed, or weak, like he should hide; instead, the makeup makes him feel powerful, like he's wearing a suit of armor and not just a touch of lipstick.

In the dark, he figures, no one's going to notice anyhow.

It's a bit of a hike to Vincent's, but Marlene and Betty go slow for him without him having to ask, and spend the walk filling him in on building gossip and teasing him gently about his pretty new looks, so that by the time they get there Steve's smiling, happy to be in company and letting go a little. His back's still hurting, but it's a hurt he can own, one he's taken on himself to go out and have a little fun. It's different from the hurt he gets from standing on the assembly line all day.

"Once more unto the breach," Betty jokes, as they open the unmarked door to the little hole-in-the-
wall club on Sands Street. A wave of sounds and smells emerges: cigarettes, laughing, music, booze. Steve gestures the ladies in ahead of him, then follows them through the door.

He's only been to Vincent's a few times before, and never dressed like this. He didn't really need to get dressed up; his size and his features have always told the fellas everything they needed to know, and Steve usually kept to the shadows and went with the first guy who asked him.

In this new getup, he feels obvious, like a sore thumb in lipstick, and looks around anxiously more than once, worried that people are going to be staring at him. It's ridiculous, because Marlene and Betty are more dolled up than he is, and they're far from the most outlandishly dressed at Vincent's. The feeling sticks around, though, stubbornly, making Steve feel visible, and pretty, and self-conscious.

The bar hasn't changed, at least, since the last time Steve was here: young ladies and young gentlemen, most of whom'd be gentlemen – or, men, anyway – any other time of day. There are drinks and music and dancing, and everything's bright and colorful, a hidden pocket of beauty tucked into a dank, dismal corner of the street.

Steve watches the singers and orders himself a drink. He knows he should be saving what little money he has in case he doesn't land another job, but he can't find it in himself to care that much right now. The alcohol goes down easy and hits him fast; one good thing about being a little guy is that it doesn't take much to get him relaxed. Marlene and Betty dance almost every dance with various suitors, but switch off so that one of them is always with Steve at the bar. After about an hour of this treatment, now on his third drink, Steve grins at Betty and nudges her with his shoulder.

"I don't need looking after, you know. And that fella down the bar is giving you the eye."

"He can give me a drink or an offer to dance if he's so smitten," Betty grins, tossing her head in a way that would have thrown her curls over her shoulder, if she had any curls. "Anyway, we wanted to cheer you up, not drag you out with us and then abandon you."

"I'm having a swell time," Steve protests. Betty raises a fine, delicate eyebrow at him. "Okay, a nice time," Steve amends with a smile. He finds, as he says it, that it's true; there's something relaxing about the place, something about the girls in full drag twirling and sparkling, the laughter and the exaggerated flirting that makes him feel at home.

The fella from down the bar moves a few seats closer, so that he's sitting next to Steve. Steve wonders how he can encourage Betty to go dance with him without being too pushy about it. He's got plenty of experience from the times he's been out with Bucky, making Bucky feel okay about going to dance with some beautiful girl in the dance hall. It shouldn't be too hard to do it the other way around.

The guy is handsome, tall, broad in the shoulder, corded and solid with muscle. A real man's man, Steve thinks, but the effect is softened by his boyish face and the freckles scattered across his nose. When he smiles, it comes across sweet and a little shy, which Steve figures probably melts the hearts of all the girls. Jerk probably knows it, too.

"Can I ask you to dance?" the guy says, and Steve was so sure he was going to ask Betty that it takes him a while to notice that he was looking at Steve when he said it.

"Uh," Steve says.

"She'd love to," Betty replies over his shoulder, and pushes him forward. He topplies off his stool
and ends up standing right up close to the guy, close enough to feel the heat of his body.

To his credit, the stranger broadens his grin and holds out his hand, not touching Steve without permission. "Well?"

"Yeah, sure," Steve says, and takes it. "But I'm not much of a dancer." The fact is, he's never danced before at all, with anyone, and doesn't much like his chances now.

"I'll get you through it," the guy says, leading him away from the bar. His hand is big, his grip rough and masculine, enveloping Steve's fingers. Now that they're standing up together Steve can see that he's over six feet and built like a football player.

"I'm Frank, by the way," the guy says, laughing at himself a little for not saying so sooner. Steve smiles at him.

"Steve," he says. You don't give out last names at places like this. They move together to the music but it's not really dancing; just as well since Steve wasn't wrong about his two left feet.

"You're very pretty, Steve," Frank says, cupping Steve's cheek and rubbing a thumb over Steve's cheekbone. He might be rubbing off some of the rouge but Steve figures he can more than make up for it; his cheeks feel hot and he knows his blush is natural, now.

No one's ever said that to him before.

"Thanks," Steve says softly. Frank touches his face, his neck; wraps slow hands around Steve's waist and lets his fingertips dip lower, over Steve's thin hips.

"Always did have a weakness for blonds." Frank bends down and gives Steve a little kiss. Steve kisses back, though it's over before he can really enjoy it. He looks around, nervous, thinking that everyone must be staring, but no one seems to be paying attention to them at all.

Steve relaxes, and tries to follow Frank's movements. This dancing could be fun, if he could get the hang of it.

Then he steps on Frank's foot, and Frank yowls in pain. So, probably not a football player after all.

"Sorry, sorry," Steve says, wincing in sympathy. "I'm really not a dancer." Then, to make up for it, heart hammering in his chest, he forces himself forward: he wraps his arms around Frank's neck and pulls himself up, pulls Frank's head down, and kisses him sweetly. "I'm better at the other part," he breathes, daring.

"Oh yeah? You want to give up so soon?"

"More like – I'd like to focus on my strengths," Steve says. Looking up at Frank, he realizes that there's lipstick on his mouth, rubbed off from Steve: that Steve's kiss left marks behind.

"I got a place not far from here," Frank offers.

This is what he needs after a day like today, Steve decides: Frank's big arms around him and the opportunity to forget for a while. His heart thumps fast in his chest; it's been a long time since he's done this. He nods, biting his lip. "Let me say bye to my friends," he says.

He turns back toward Betty, where he left her at the bar, to find that she's watching him closely, grinning and making shooing motions at him. Impulsively, he blows her a kiss; she catches it in one fist, the way she'd catch a baseball, and winks at him.
Frank warns him that he shares his place with a couple of other guys, but hastens to add that they're both sailors and won't mind Frank bringing home some company. Steve's a little doubtful, but his doubts slip away when they open the front door to find two men in rumpled sailors' whites necking on the couch. At the sound they break apart and look up, then laugh with relief as they see Frank and Steve.

"Found a friend after all, hey Frankie?" one of them calls. Frank rolls his eyes.

"Steve, this is Bartie and George. Bartie and George, Steve." He's so quick at the introductions that Steve isn't really sure which one's Bartie and which one's George, but he also doesn't care that much.

"Hey fellas," Steve says, a little out of breath from the climb up the stairs. Then, as Frank sweeps in and picks him up, Steve laughs, "Bye, fellas." Bartie and George laugh behind them, but Steve doesn't care; Frank bears his weight easily, and he's hot where Steve is pressed against his body, and it feels wonderful.

"Never had anyone carry me over a threshold before," Steve says. Frank closes the bedroom door behind them with a foot and glances down, worried.

"Sorry, you don't like it?"

"No, I – it's good. I like, uh, how big and strong you are." Steve's never been very good at the kinds of lilting intonation that some of the fairies use for lines like that, the teasing girlish way of talking to men, but Frank smiles anyway, slow and warm, so Steve thinks he's doing okay.

"I like you too," Frank says, boyish again. For all his size, Steve doesn't figure they're very far apart in age.

There's a hot, awkward silence between them, which Steve breaks by gathering his courage and kissing Frank again. It starts soft and gets hard fast, so that before too long Frank is pressing him down into the squeaky cot, his weight almost too much to bear.

"Let me know if I'm squashing you," Frank whispers. Steve nods, and starts pulling off Frank's shirt, baring his wide, hairy chest and pink nipples. Steve can't help but sigh as he touches the freckled skin and rubs at the planes of muscle.

He's always gone for big guys, the few other times he's done this. He wants Frank's tall, powerful body, wants his strength and his easy grace, wants the force behind his fists and the thew of his chest, his neck, his thighs. Frank wouldn't lose in a fight to some street tough. Frank could haul crates for days, muscles singing with pleasure at the work. Pinned beneath all that raw power, Steve shivers, and kisses him again, desperately, wanting Frank's tongue in his mouth, Frank's body inside his.

"I have Vaseline," Frank says, after a few more minutes of kissing and squirming out of clothes. Steve's never used it for this before, but he's heard about it and nods. He's out of breath again, so he takes a minute to rest while Frank reaches over to a little night table and pulls out the jar.

"You okay?" he asks, when he notices Steve breathing heavy.

Steve almost lies, then remembers that he has no reason to, not here. Frank doesn't mind if he's . . . delicate. "I have asthma," he says, after a little pause. "Means I get out of breath sometimes."

Frank doesn't look disgusted, or call him weak; instead, he smiles softly and crawls back up the bed next to him. His big hands make quick work of Steve's pants and drawers. "Have you considered
that you might be out of breath because I'm such a great kisser?” He kisses Steve's lips softly for emphasis. Steve laughs, kisses back.

"That too," he admits. Frank presses a kiss to Steve's hot cheekbone, then bends his head and kisses Steve's neck, too.

"I like how it makes you flush, though. So pink and pretty, all the way down your chest." He runs his hand over Steve's sternum and then down to wrap around his cock. "Pretty as a girl."

Steve shudders and rolls his hips up to meet Frank's grip.

"You gonna fuck me sometime soon, Frank?” he asks archly, when he's got enough breath back to do it. Frank's jacking him slowly and it's great, amazing, to be caught under his big body and loved by his thick hands, but Steve wants more.

Frank chuckles against his skin. "You bet." He coats his fingers with the Vaseline and uses them to open Steve up a little; the stuff is cold at first, but warms before too long.

"Oh," Steve says, at the feeling of those blunt fingers inside him, the obscenely wet slippery feeling of the Vaseline in his ass. It's way better than doing it with spit.

"That good?"

"Yeah, yeah, feels so good." Steve grips Frank's bicep as he curls his fingers up and strokes slowly. "So good."

"My cock's gonna feel even better, doll, you ready?"

"Yeah," Steve pants. "Yeah, do it." He rolls over to get up on his hands and knees, even though the position is a little uncomfortable on his joints. Frank comes up behind him and runs his hands up Steve's thighs and over his ass, then against Steve's sides. Steve squirms and laughs uncontrollably.

"Sorry." Frank laughs behind him, dropping a kiss to Steve's spine. "Ticklish?"

"Yeah," Steve giggles, and he's still grinning when Frank's dick goes in him, big and wide and exactly what Steve needs.

"Makes me wanna tickle you more," Frank says, rubbing Steve's ass with one hand and holding him open with the other while he pushes in. So big, Steve thinks.

"Don't – don't you dare," he replies, his laugh turning into a groan as Frank is finally pressed tight against him, all the way in.

"Oh wow, you feel good," Frank says, and after a moment he starts to thrust slowly, in and out, building up a rhythm. "You're so tight. Hot." His hand rubs restlessly up and down Steve's leg. "So beautiful."

Steve groans and digs his fingers into the bedsheets; with Frank's weight on top of him he doesn't think he can get an arm free to bring himself off.

"When I saw you at the bar, I knew you'd be good. So quiet, with that pretty face, and your soft hair." His hand trails up to Steve's head and gives a light tug to his hair; Steve feels it like a shock through his body, and lets out an involuntary moan as he pushes back again to meet Frank's thrusts.

"Please," Steve says, "please touch me, please – "
"Yeah," Frank's hand slides immediately around Steve's hip, and he starts up a steady stroke to match the pace of his fucking. His other hand goes up to Steve's shoulder, to hold him in place, and squeezes. "Yeah, I got you, sweetheart, I'll take care of you."

"Oh, that's so good," Steve says, overwhelmed by the sensation of Frank's hand on his dick, Frank's dick in his ass. "Oh, oh, oh, Holy . . . God."

Frank leans down over him, getting them closer together, his skin hot and sweaty against Steve's. He's surrounded, covered in Frank's strong, heavy body, inside and out, and that's when he comes, gasping, his arms shaking with the strain, his mouth open in a wordless cry.

Steve's coming back to himself, little shocks still running over his skin, when Frank bites down on Steve's shoulder and goes quiet, twitching against Steve's back for a long moment before pulling back out. Steve feels like a sticky mess back there, what with all the Vaseline and all, but it was worth it. He rolls over onto his back, pain in his knees and wrists making itself known now that the heat of the moment has passed.

Frank crawls up and settles in next to him, on his stomach, and shyly puts an arm over Steve's belly. His fingers play along Steve's ribs, touching soft and gentle, sliding up to his nipples and then back down again.

Sighing, Steve closes his eyes to bask in the sensation.

"Hey Steve," Frank asks softly. Steve opens his eyes and turns his head to look at him. "You Irish?" Frank asks.

Steve rolls up on his side to face him and frowns. "Yeah, what's it to you?"

Frank buries a giggle into the pillow. "Nothing, 'cept my last name starts with O. And my first is really Frances." Steve relaxes, astonished that Frank would share those details so easily. "I just was thinking – you know, my Ma, she's always telling me to bring home a nice Irish girl." Frank's fingertips continue to trace over Steve's body, his arm from shoulder to wrist, his thigh, the soft hair on his belly above his cock. "I sometimes think – nah, it's stupid."

Steve licks his lips. "Go on," he says. "It's not stupid."

Frank gives him a wry smile. "I sometimes think, when I meet a sweet pretty fairy like you, I think, hey, there's nothing my Ma could object to if I brought this one home."

Steve laughs, because Frank's knuckles are only a couple inches from a part of Steve that Frank's Ma would object to pretty strenuously. Frank grins, maybe hearing that Steve's not laughing at him, but with him.

"I like that," Steve says, imagining how it'd feel if he were someone's girl, if he were supposed to be small and thin and delicate.

There'd been a lady, Mrs O'Keeffe, who used to come over for coffee and gossip with his Ma, back when he was little. One day, the last time that his Ma had ever had her over, Steve had overheard her saying that Steven was a sweet boy, and that it was too bad he'd do so much damage to the race if he married an Irish girl.

Steve had never heard his Ma's voice go so cold and hard, not even when he and Bucky and their pal Arnie got in the worst trouble. "Steven was my gift from God," Sarah Rogers had replied. Mrs O'Keeffe had smiled and said, of course, of course, so long as he kept his own gifts to himself, and away from her daughters.
Frank bends almost double and kisses Steve's belly. Steve strokes his hair and thinks about how it would feel to have someone's Irish Catholic mother welcome him to the family.

"My family's gone," Steve says, quietly. "But I dunno, it seems like no one should mind if I find a big strong fella to take care of me."

"They should congratulate you. I'd be a good provider," Frank says, playing along. "Got a steady job and all."

"You work down at the docks?" Steve guesses. Frank nods. Steve leans forward and kisses him once, softly, on the mouth, before getting up and finding his trousers.

"Well, if you hear of anything a little guy like me could do down there, let me know, huh? I got fired today."

Frank winces in sympathy. "I'll do that. You down at Vincent's a lot? Maybe I'll see you again."

"I dunno," Steve says slowly, buttoning his soft red shirt over his chest. It feels good to put it back on, like putting on a part of himself. Like he's still just wearing his skin even if he's clothed.

He looks around for his jacket to cover it up. It'd been so nice, to wear the shirt and the makeup, and to joke with Betty and Marlene, and to flirt with Frank. He could get used to that feeling.

"Maybe I'll go again sometime soon," he says. "Not that I can really afford it."

"Oh, that reminds me," Frank says, and rummages again in the little table next to the bed. "Here."

He stands up and hands over a quarter, which Steve takes with a smile. "Thanks," he says, tucking the coin in his pocket. "All I got," Frank shrugs. "You leaving?"

"Yeah." Steve leans up and kisses him one last time, letting himself bask in the presence of his big, powerful body. Frank kisses back. When they break apart, they shake hands warmly, like friends, and Steve slips out the door. In the front room Bartie and George are curled up sleeping together on the couch, and don't even notice him going.

There's a bathroom in the hallway, where Steve stops long enough to clean himself up and scrub the makeup from his face. When he's finally got most of it gone, he looks at himself in the cracked, cloudy mirror and shakes his head ruefully. He's only been wearing the makeup for a few hours, but all of a sudden, the same old face he's used to seeing in his reflection doesn't feel like his own anymore.

He will be going back to Vincent's, he knows that for sure. And he'll be asking Marlene and Betty to doll him up again, too. He wants to look in the mirror and see the girl from before, the pretty fairy with the long eyelashes and delicate cheekbones.

He looks away from his reflection, the same old boring Steve Rogers who can't hold down a job.

When he gets back home, he listens for a moment at Marlene and Betty's door, but doesn't hear anything. He grins to himself; maybe they lucked out like Steve did, and found trade at Vincent's to leave with.

His apartment is dark, but Bucky's snores alert Steve to his presence before Steve has to wonder if he's home. He crawls into his narrow bed, trying to be quiet, but a moment later he hears Bucky's
"You're out late," he murmurs, sleepily. "Meet any girls?"

For a moment Steve is bizarrely tempted to answer *Yes, one*, but he shuts down the impulse. Instead he says, "Nah. Just having a drink." Then, because it'll be an easier confession in the dark, while Bucky's still half-asleep, he adds, "I got fired again, Buck."

Bucky sighs in a slow, sleep-addled way. "You'll get another job," he says, like he always does. Bucky could probably have this conversation in his sleep. "And anyway, I'll take care of you, Steve. You know that."

"Yeah," Steve replies, warm now under his blanket, listening to Bucky's breathing as it evens out again. "I know."

* 

At their Catholic Worker meeting that Sunday afternoon, Danielle convinces everyone that they ought to be supporting the workers at Tillman's, and so they plan to join the protest on Tuesday. Steve starts making the signs; at least now that he's out of a job his hands aren't shaking so bad.

"I know you gotta look for work," Danielle tells him, after. "I get it if you can't come out for every cause."

"I liked stumping for Thomas," Steve says, shaking his head. "And you're right, about Tillman's. They're taking bread out of the mouths of the poor, people we've been working hard to feed. It makes sense to go to the root of the problem."

She sighs, nodding. "I get goddamn sick of all the palliatives," she says. They're five steps off church property, but Steve frowns anyway, making her laugh.

"Never in the house of God!" she promises. "But a gal doesn't grow up in a mechanic's shop and not pick up a thing or two." She pats at her hips, realizes she's wearing a dress and doesn't have any pockets, and sighs. Steve thinks he can guess what she was looking for.

"Come on, I'll buy you a smoke," he says.

"My Ma has me convinced I can't wear trousers to church," Danielle says. "Like it'd shock the priest, I guess."

Steve gets her a cig and a book of matches with some change he finds deep down in his pockets, and she lights it immediately, inhaling gratefully.

"You'll bring the guys from the rooming house, on Tuesday? Any bodies we can get will help. Valentine's got contacts with the Negro papers, they're gonna be there to cover it since there are so many Negro workers in the lockout."

"I'll try. The guys at the rooming house don't care for me much."

Danielle shrugs. "Don't gotta like you. Just gotta show up."

Steve does his best, but the only bodies he manages to get to the Tillman's protest on Tuesday are his own and Bucky's, and Bucky complains about it the whole way.

"I'm not saying it ain't important, I'm saying I got work tonight," Bucky says, rubbing his eyes and
almost dropping his sign.

"Yeah, well, we all gotta make sacrifices, Buck," Steve mutters. "You wanna build a better world, don't you?"

"Yeah, Stevie, I do," Bucky murmurs, and puts his hand on Steve's shoulder, squeezing lightly before pulling away again. Steve's reminded, viscerally, of Frank's hand on his shoulder while he fucked him, and has to shake the image away.

It's not like he doesn't have practice keeping his thoughts in check around Bucky. You'd think he'd be better at it by now.

He hoists his sign – hand-drawn with a cartoon of the Tillman's bosses as actual fat cats – a little higher on his shoulder, and sets his jaw, forcing his mind back to their conversation. "Then it doesn't matter if we hurt, or we're tired. We got a responsibility to help."

They're almost there; Steve can hear the protesters chanting from a block away.

"What, like, a responsibility to God?" Bucky asks. "Like Father Calhoun used to say?"

Steve shrugs. It's hard for him to think of it that way, in the abstract. "If you want. Or at least – a responsibility to each other."

Bucky nods. "I'll try to think of it that way," he says. "But you might have to keep dragging me out to these things. I don't think I'm good enough to do it on my own."

Looking up into Bucky's face, Steve has to shake his head. "You're plenty good, Buck," he says, softly. "You look after me."

With a chuckle, Bucky says, "Only because you're too busy looking after other people to do it yourself. I know this hurts your knees, and the shouting's bad for your lungs."

"Eh, it's not so bad," Steve says, playing it off. "At least this way I'm doing something. It's worse when I don't shout."

"I know," Bucky says, softly. "I can see that. It's what makes you who you are."

His hand lands on Steve's back again, this time just running over Steve's neck and down between his shoulderblades awkwardly, like Bucky wants to touch him but isn't sure what's the right way. Steve presses back into the contact, unconsciously, but it's gone almost before it begins.

He concentrates instead on the crowd that he can already hear, chanting fierce and loud.

They get to the protest, and Steve shouts until he coughs. Then he has someone hold his sign for a bit, and gasps for breath, and then gets up and shouts again.

When he comes back to the line, Bucky smiles at him so warmly that Steve has to look away.

* 

The next day, when Steve's spent hours pounding the pavement and looking for jobs, when he's exhausted and empty after hearing no a dozen times, there's a knock at his door.

It's Marlene.

"Come out with us again," she says, when Steve opens it.
Steve does.

*  
  
He starts going to Vincent's a lot more often, with Marlene and Betty at first, but then sometimes on his own as well. He doesn't always pick up trade, and he's given up on dancing after that first disastrous attempt, but he likes the attention, the feeling of belonging. Sometimes he just sits at the bar and has a drink, chats with folks, or flirts with a fella or two without it going anywhere. He gets used to the idea that when they look at him they see his painted lips and dark lashes, that when they touch him or kiss him it's because he's a sweet little fairy.

It makes him feel good, easier in his heart, so that he can face the next day that he has to spend looking for work and not finding any. No one at Vincent's thinks he's too small, or too weak, or looks past him. Behind that door, he's pretty, desirable; more than that, he's one of them, and gets treated like a friend.

It shouldn't come as a big surprise that Bucky gets curious about where he's been going. At first, Steve tried to time it to when Bucky was at work, or out on his own, but as the weeks have gone by Steve's gotten more daring, even leaving a couple times while Bucky was at home.

So when Bucky asks, Steve's already anticipating the question, but he still has no idea how to handle it. They're walking down the street together, and Bucky's on his good side, so Steve can't pretend not to have heard. He shrugs.

"Nowhere," he says, completely unconvincingly. He's not a good liar to begin with, and Bucky knows him way too well. Bucky's never been anything but polite to Marlene and Betty and the other queers and fairies who live on their street, but that's not the same as sleeping in the same room with one.

Bucky's eyes narrow. "You got a girl you're not telling me about, Steve Rogers?"

In a way, Steve does; she's Steve's height and build, pretty and pale, and a really easy screw. For a second Steve considers actually saying so to Bucky. Of course next thing would be Bucky wanting to meet her.

"No, I don't," he says, and at least this time he sounds honest.

"Got a new best friend?" Bucky nudges him with his shoulder. Steve laughs.

"No. I'm just blowing off steam, I swear. It's been rough, looking for work."

"So long as it's not the kind of blowing off steam where I have to stop your face from bleeding later on."

Steve points at his face, which is completely unmarked at the moment. There's a suck mark under his collar, though, that Bucky can't see.

"Good enough, I guess." Bucky slings a big, warm arm around Steve's shoulders, the way he's done since they were kids together. Steve lets himself lean into the touch, lean in towards Bucky's strong shoulder and wide chest. Bucky holds him close for a second, squishing their sides together in half a hug. His body gives off heat like a furnace.

"Jeez you're cold," Bucky laughs, rubbing his hand up and down Steve's arm to warm him.

"I'm always cold," Steve points out, because Bucky already knows this about him.
"We gotta find you someone to warm you up," Bucky says.

"You're doing fine," Steve says, unable to help himself. Bucky doesn't laugh or push him away, though; just gives him another one-armed hug, then keeps his arm slung over Steve's shoulder, easy and friendly, for the rest of the walk.

*

Election day rolls around, Danielle and Valentine knocking on their door early in the morning, both dressed to the nines and proudly displaying their "Vote Norman Thomas – Socialist" buttons.

"I got buttons for you and Bucky if you want them," Danielle says. She holds out a couple more, and Steve shakes his head.

"I made myself a sign instead," he says. He grabs it from where it was sitting beside the door and holds it up. VOTE TODAY!, it reads, with a big cartoon of New Yorkers lined up to put their votes in the ballot box.

"I love it," Valentine says. Steve, not wearing his hat, mimes a hat tip to her anyway.

"What's going on?" Bucky calls, from the other room. Steve rolls his eyes.

"Bucky's not awake yet," he informs them.

"Well, tell him that he better wake up and participate in democracy!" Danielle yells. Valentine shushes her.

"You know I'll kick your ass if you don't come vote with us, Buck," Steve says. Bucky emerges from the bedroom, rumpled but presentable.

"I gotta get to work by ten," Bucky says.

"You're supposed to get two hours off to vote," Valentine says, narrowing her eyes. "They passed a law."

Bucky shrugs. "No one told the guys at the warehouse."

"We're gonna be hearing that a lot today," Danielle says to Valentine. Valentine nods.

"We can try threatening to report," she says, grimacing.

"It's not gonna do much to convince my boss," Bucky says.

"Then you'll just have to vote early," Valentine says. "Come on."

Bucky wears one of the Norman Thomas pins on his left lapel and the Roosevelt one that Steve got for him on the right.

"You're gonna confuse people that way, Buck," Steve says, but grins as they march together down the street, knocking on their neighbors’ doors to get people up and moving. Their little group gets bigger, people linking arms and laughing as they all walk to the polls.

"People ain't that easily confused," Bucky shrugs. "A guy can support lots of things. It just means I'm intellectual."

Steve pushes at his shoulder, and Bucky sways alarmingly far to the left, as if Steve's strength is
triple what it really is. It makes him light up a little, inside, when Bucky does that: treats him like his touch has more effect on him than it really does.

It's funny, but walking side by side with Bucky and Danielle and Valentine like this reminds him a little of walking in to Vincent's with Marlene and Betty: he's anonymous in the crowd, one among many, but visible and important too, part of something bigger and more powerful than he is.

There aren't that many Norman Thomas buttons to be seen, but there are more than Steve would've thought, and plenty of Roosevelt, of course. Maybe all of Danielle's campaigning did some good after all.

Norman Thomas has good ideas, and the courage of his convictions; Steve just isn't sure he's the man to lead them during a war.

Valentine goes off for a while, to meet up with a group of Negro activists coming up to vote; there's no polling place in their neighborhood, and some of them are walking almost twenty blocks. She hurries everyone along, though, making neat checkmarks on her clipboard, and before long there's a strong Negro contingent walking behind the white group. Steve shakes hands with a few guys Valentine introduces him to, and promises to show up for the anti-segregation protests they're having in front of local businesses next week.

"If I have time," Steve says, thinking of his rapidly shrinking savings, the collection of bills and coins in an empty soup tin under his bed. He doesn't want to go back to slinging newsprint, but it's gonna be his only option pretty soon.

Danielle gets up a round of The Internationale, and a bunch of people join in. Steve's voice isn't much, but he tries to make up for it with enthusiasm. As they sing, a few people throw stuff at them, which Valentine, for the most part, fends off with her clipboard.

There's a group of white guys who are a little more aggressive about it, though, and once they see Valentine batting away the bits of newspaper they throw, start aiming directly for her.

"May we?" Steve asks her, and she narrows her eyes and nods.

"Be my guest."

Steve nudges Bucky with his elbow, and the two of them move in perfect synch to take a position between Valentine and the guys. They manage a pretty synchronized glare, too, Steve thinks.

One of them is carrying a sign that says WILLKIE, NOT THE WEAKLING. Steve curls one hand into a fist.

A few bits of crumpled-up newspaper and trash hit them, and Steve takes his cue to turn towards the nearest guy. The secret, with a group, is to pick out one guy and focus on him.

"You," he says, pointing. "You want one in the nose, pal?"

The guy tries to laugh, but looks confused at Steve's insistence and vehemence.

"I don't think you can reach," the guy yells back, after conferring anxiously with his fellows.

Next to him, Bucky laughs. "Wrong answer, kid," he mutters, as Steve runs over to him, grabs a handful of his shirt, and yanks as hard as he can to bring him down to Steve's level.

He makes a fist and brings it up to show the guy. "You throw one more thing at my friends and I
will pop you one," he says, calmly and quietly. Being calm and quiet usually makes 'em freak.

"Let go," the guy says, squirming away. "Jeez."

Steve smiles, releases him, and jogs back over to Bucky's side. Bucky claps him on the back.

"Not so hard, Buck," Steve mutters, trying to catch his breath. Bucky smiles down at him.

"I wish I could vote for you, Stevie," he says, fondly. "It'd made the whole process a lot easier."

Steve laughs.

"For the record," Valentine says quietly, "I wouldn't really want you to hit anyone on my behalf. The chivalry was plenty."

"Sorry," Steve says, frowning. "I was trying to scare them off."

"I know," Valentine says, sighing. She glances over at the group of guys, who are talking amongst themselves and pretending like some little guy didn't just intimidate them. "It did work, in this case. Other times, they might've gotten more violent."

At the polling station, Valentine stops, turning to Steve, so he stops too, Bucky and Danielle walking on in front. She gives Steve a serious look. "Don't vote for the war machine, Steve. Roosevelt is already conscripting young men to fight for big business overseas."

"Why's it matter?" he asks, watching her carefully. At her horrified look and confused glance at the sign in his hands, he clarifies, "I mean, why's it matter to you who I vote for, in particular? Thomas won't get in."

She shrugs. "You're a friend. It's important to tell friends what you think the right thing is. And stand up for them when you can."

He smiles, and offers his hand. She shakes it firmly.

"Then thanks, Valentine," he says. "For standing up for me."

"Val?" Danielle calls, from up ahead, where the crowd is getting thick. "Come on up here with me."

Valentine nods at Steve once, then walks over to stand next to Danielle.

"Who are you gonna vote for, Steve?" Bucky asks. Steve frowns, and puts his VOTE TODAY! sign back onto his shoulder, sighing.

"I dunno," he says.

"Everyone says Roosevelt saw us through the Depression, and he'll see us through the war, if it comes," Bucky says, uncertainly.

"If it comes," Steve agrees. They'll end up fighting fascism in Europe, won't they? They already are. Steve doesn't know if all the pacifism in the world can stop it.

In the end, Steve votes for Roosevelt, just like his Ma did in '32, and tries to feel good about it. If there is war, Roosevelt is the one they want in charge, he thinks. He's strong, no matter what the Willkie supporters say to discredit him.
Afterwards, he says goodbye to his friends and walks ten blocks to talk to a factory foreman about a job, but the guy gives him one look, sweaty and breathing hard from all the exercise, trying to hide a limp from the pain in his knees, and tells him to go home.

* 

He sees Frank around Vincent's now and then as the weather gets colder, and even goes home with him again a few times, so they get to be pretty friendly.

"You still looking for a job?" Frank asks one night, after they've sucked each other off. Turns out Frank likes playing the pansy too, sometimes. Steve doesn't object.

Steve wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and nods. "Nobody's hiring. Might be some temporary work at the slaughterhouse as it gets on to winter, though."

"You ain't gotta go that far, I hope," Frank says, wrinkling his nose. "I mention it cuz I might have something for you. At the docks, we need someone to supervise shipments, someone good with numbers maybe. I thought you might be."

Steve finished ninth grade and was always a fair hand at math, but it's not like he knows anything about shipping. "I've never done that kind of thing," he objects.

Frank shrugs. "So I tell my foreman you were the supervisor at a job I used to do. You tell him you're 25. He'll never follow up to check. You want the job or not?"

"Yeah," Steve says, "though I don't like lying about it."

Frank smiles and kisses his forehead, the way his Ma used to do. "You're such a sweetheart, Stevie," he says. "Okay, tell you what: I'll tell him you're smart and hardworking and you'll do a great job. How about that?"

"So long as you don't think of that as lying," Steve grins.

Frank tilts up his chin with two big strong fingers and takes his mouth, hard and domineering, confident by now that Steve will like it that way.

Steve does.

"You fishing for more compliments or what, doll?"

"Maybe I was just fishing for you to kiss me like that again," Steve teases.

Frank doesn't hesitate.

When he gets to the site on his first day, he realizes that he's probably not the first queer Frank's set up with a job. There are a few guys, even some big tough-looking ones, whose hats are pulled down suspiciously tight over their eyebrows, and a couple other faces he recognizes from Vincent's or the St. George. He notices one guy in particular, and stares at him for a long, confused moment before the guy rolls his eyes and bats his eyelashes pointedly; Steve suddenly recognizes Betty. With a start, he realizes that he's never seen her out of makeup before.

"Arthur," she says, offering her hand to Steve. Steve chuckles.

"Steve," he says, with a twist of his lips. "I didn't know you knew Frank."

"I don't let my precious Stevie go with any old lout," she grins.
"Just the louts you know, huh?" Steve asks. It's a little embarrassing, but it also makes him feel warm inside to think that Betty was setting him up with Frank, that first night out, to make sure he'd find someone sweet and have a good time. He doesn't know why she'd want to look out for him like that, but it's nice.

Frank nudges Steve with his elbow; there's a harried-looking middle-aged guy with a paunch and a clipboard coming towards them, probably the boss.

"This your new man, O'Malley?" he asks, without addressing Steve directly.

"Steve Rogers, sir," Steve says, putting his hand out. Looking surprised, the foreman takes it, maybe out of pure reflex. He gives Steve the hairy eyeball, looking him up and down, then up and down again as if he's hoping there'll suddenly be more of him.

"You're a little scrawny," he mutters.

Steve does his best to keep smiling. "I'll work hard," he promises. "Anyway, I heard you needed someone to use their brains more than their brawn."

"Well, I ain't gone wrong with one of Frank's boys yet. You bring in the best catch, ain't that right Frank?"

Beside them, Arthur coughs into her hand. Steve tries not to look at Frank directly, afraid he'll start laughing.

"That's right, sir," Frank agrees wholeheartedly. Steve would never have suspected that the wholesome freckled Irish boy was so good at bullshitting.

That night, when he heads home from the docks, Steve doesn't have any aches and pains beyond the usual, and he knows he did good work; the boss had been grudgingly impressed. He's on top of the world, and even if he hasn't got any pay in his pocket yet, he wants to celebrate.

"Let's go out," he says to Bucky, grabbing him by the arm. "My treat."

"Hey, you don't have to twist it," Bucky laughs. "I'm happy to let you buy me drinks."

Steve flushes, thinking about the guys who buy him drinks when he's out on the scene. He pushes the thought away.

On the way down the stairs, they run into Danielle and Valentine, who are just on their way in.

"Ladies," Bucky says, smiling. Steve doesn't think Bucky's ever gotten the message about them, or else he really can't help but flirt with any dame he sees. Steve smiles ruefully.

"Mister Barnes," Valentine says, then turns her attention to Steve. "How's it going on the job hunt, Steve?" she asks. "If you haven't found anything, I heard of a guy who's looking for part-time help at a shoe store."

"I just got a new job down at the docks," Steve says, unable to help himself from smiling. Bucky's watching him, and he smiles too, when Steve smiles, like he's glad to see him happy.

"The docks?" Danielle asks, and Steve can't blame her for the doubt in her voice.

"Steve's supervising now," Bucky puts in quickly. "Bossing everyone else around."

"I had my first day today," Steve says. "We were going out to celebrate, if you girls wanna come along."

He can feel Bucky looking at him, and Steve almost wishes he hadn't said anything; Bucky's always thought he was sweet on Danielle.

He isn't, not really. He admires her, that's all; she's strong and brave and when she yells the beginning of a chant there's nobody around who doesn't join in, swayed by the power of her voice. Valentine's a lucky lady. Bucky never seems to take this explanation seriously, though.

"Yeah, come along," Bucky says, too quickly. Steve blushes, even though he can't quite figure out why.

"Love to," Danielle says easily, "but we're just stopping in for a second before heading up to Harlem. Valentine's cousin is singing in a club there, we're going to support her."

Steve doesn't get up to Harlem much, but the guys at Vincent's say it's a real lively scene. Maybe he'll go one day when he's got extra time to spend on the 8th Avenue Subway.

"Sounds fun," Steve says. "You can tell me all about it tomorrow, maybe."

"Will do," Danielle agrees, and she and Valentine head back inside while Steve and Bucky continue down to the street.

"She likes you," Bucky points out. Steve tries not to grimace. He knows Bucky just wants the best for him.

"She likes Valentine better," Steve points out, and Bucky laughs. Steve isn't sure if he gets it or not, though. There's a long pause, and Steve isn't sure what to say.

"Lots of people like lots of things," Bucky says, after a while. He sounds a little unsure, not like his usual confident bravado. "They – you never know. You should ask her out."

"I guess," Steve agrees, and then Bucky lets the subject drop. They talk about the Dodgers the rest of the way there. Steve's got a great new job, he's got Bucky and Danielle and Marlene and Betty and Frank, and for the first time in his life he feels like he might be going somewhere. Maybe it's not too much to hope for the Dodgers to win the series next year, too.

They head to one of the better local joints, a place down off Tillary that's at least a step above their usual dives. After a few drinks and a game of pool together Bucky takes up flirting with a couple of girls, and Steve plays pool with some other guys in the meantime, fellas he knows from around the neighborhood but whose names he mostly can't remember. When Bucky comes back over to him, the group of girls has apparently been narrowed down to one; Bucky has his arm slung over her shoulder, the way he puts his arm around Steve all the time when they're walking together. Steve suppresses the irrational surge of jealousy and gives him as bright a smile as he can manage.

"We're gonna head out of here, Steve," Bucky says. It's his way of saying that he wants their rooms to himself for a little while. Steve nods.

"Sure thing. Have a good time." Bucky grins his thanks and leaves, leaning down to whisper something in the girl's ear. Whatever it is, it makes her throw her head back and laugh, full-throated and rich. She's very beautiful, maybe a little older than Bucky, even.

He misses his shot, and the guy he's playing against takes advantage, sinking the last two solids and the 8-ball. "Good game," the guy says with satisfaction, scooping up the money from the table.
"Go again?"

"Nah," Steve says, and smiles. At least if he's losing, nobody's beating the hell out of him in the alleyway for having the temerity to win. "You cleaned me out."

He thinks about walking around for a while, even though it's pretty cold out. They're a good ways from the shore, but it's still not the safest neighborhood. Steve's tempted to do it anyhow. Leaving the bar, he sticks his hands in his pockets to warm them up, considering his options. He feels his keys, a couple wadded up pieces of paper from work, and the bent stick of chewing gum that's been riding around for a week or so, nothing useful, but then his fingers bump against something strange. Frowning, he pulls his hand out of his pocket and sees that he's holding a little silver canister of rouge. He blinks in confusion for a moment before remembering that Marlene stuck it in his pocket two nights ago, asking him to hold it for her while they walked. She'd forgotten to get it back.

Steve was carrying it around all day at work without even knowing.

"Well, maybe it's a sign," Steve sighs to himself, and, half-smiling, holds tight to the little object until he gets to the right neighborhood. He rubs a little on his cheeks and his lips, checking his face in a tattoo shop window, and heads into a club on Sands Street, still a couple blocks away from Vincent's. He's never been to this place before, doesn't know if it's rough.

Something makes him feel reckless, dangerous, like a predator in rouge. He's wearing his usual guy clothes so when he gets into the nightclub he puts it all into the way he walks, the way he lets himself look at men, like he's sampling from his own personal buffet table.

He grabs the first likely-looking fish he can find (big, strong, dark-haired, dark-eyed, just his type) and sucks his dick out back without even bothering to get his name. The guy's dick is big, too, long and thick and exactly what Steve needs in his mouth. He holds the guy's hips against the cold brick wall and gives it all he's got, sucking ruthlessly, relentlessly, the same way he'd punch him if this were a fight. The guy groans, fucking his mouth in short sharp thrusts, and Steve takes it all. When the groans finally stop and the guy spills hot into Steve's mouth, Steve is almost disappointed. He wanted more, wanted it to go on forever.

He spits, wipes his mouth, and looks up. Big, gentle hands card through Steve's hair. "You're sweet," the guy says, out of breath. "What's your name?"

"James," Steve says, without thinking about it. "Jimmy."

"I'm Dick," the guy says. Steve can't quite suppress a laugh, and Dick grins down at him, sheepish. "I know, I know. But it's my name."

"It does draw attention to your best feature," Steve agrees, standing up to his full height, such as it is.

"You wanna get to know my best feature a little better?" Dick is fistig his dick, which is already starting to fill out again. It's pretty impressive.

"Right here?"

"Right here in this dirty alley," Dick says, breathless.

Steve doesn't let himself think, just undoes his belt and buttons, shoves down his trousers and shorts, and then turns to brace his arms against the wall.
"Do me hard," he says, and Dick chuckles.

"No worries about that, buddy," he says. Steve hears him spit into his hand a couple of times, and then he's pressing up against Steve's hole, his huge prick shoving Steve open wide.

Steve grunts at the first full thrust. It hurts, but he waits through it, and after a minute it gets better, and then gets perfect: the perfect, completely distracting sensation of Dick fucking him hard and rough, taking what he needs from Steve's body.

"Harder," Steve says.

"Yeah? You want it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Steve pants, resting his forehead against the wall. It's cold out, not below freezing yet, but enough that his bare thighs are shivering against the air, and that Dick's body against him feels like fire, burning Steve up from the inside out. Dick starts to thrust faster, shoving Steve's body forward so that he has to catch himself with his arms to keep from being pushed into the wall. It's brutal, unforgiving, halfway between getting fucked and getting beaten up. The alley setting is perfect either way.

"You like that? Hard like that?"

"Yeah, fuck me, c'mon," Steve gets out through gritted teeth. He's forgetting the cold, forgetting the little flares of pain in his wrists, lost in the fullness he feels, the rough pace, the friction, the desperation. Dick reaches around and takes him in his hand, and the two sensations together make Steve want to scream, to just throw his head back and bellow with it, how good it is to feel used like this. He doesn't make a sound, but he does throw his head back, unable to suppress a dark chuckle as Dick pounds him harder and harder.


Steve comes to the sound of the wrong name, helpless and groaning in the dark, wrung out and spread out and held up against the brick so he doesn't fall.

Dick fucks him for a while longer, still hard and rough, and the aftershocks go back and forth from amazing to painful, setting off unpredictable sparks of feeling throughout Steve's body. Steve doesn't say anything or ask him to stop, just takes it, every rough thrust that shows him what he's good for. When Dick's finally done he pulls out slowly, and Steve groans at the friction as the prick leaves his ass.

He gets his pants back up and his belt buckled before he turns around. Dick kisses him as soon as he does, and Steve kisses back eagerly. He's euphoric, almost drunk with the feeling of pleasure and abandon, so that he doesn't see the cops at first, walking up the sidewalk toward the club.

"Oh, shit, it's a raid," Dick whispers. He's still staring stupidly at the mouth of the alley when Steve grabs him by the wrist and drags him back into the shadows. They run together for a few blocks, until Steve's chest starts to feel tight and his breath starts to rattle even in spite of the adrenaline coursing through him. He waves at Dick to go on without him, stopping to bend over with his hands on his knees, but Dick slows and turns around to wait by his side.

"I think we're all right," he offers hesitantly, as Steve works and works and works to breathe. His lungs won't draw air, so every attempt at a breath is a harsh useless pull, a gasp that sticks in his throat and leaves his lungs flat and empty. He squelches the panic that looms up inside him,
knowing that it's not going to help, and focuses on getting one good breath.

"Um, are you okay?" Dick asks, looking around. They're on a pretty quiet street, no clubs or bars to draw people at this hour, and no one's nearby. Hesitantly, he puts a hand on Steve's back and rubs slowly, up and down, between his shoulderblades. The feeling reminds Steve of how his mom used to touch him when the asthma got bad, to soothe him. He tries to focus on the touch instead of on his lungs.

When Steve finally manages to get air into his body again, he lets himself have five good breaths before he finally answers Dick's question. "Yeah." He coughs the word out. "I'm fine."

Dick doesn't take his hand away. It feels nice. "You got somewhere you can go? You're welcome to stay with me if you don't."

Steve glances up at that; he didn't expect that kind of offer from a stranger. But then, Dick probably isn't afraid that Steve's gonna roll him, and – more than that – they're not exactly strangers anymore. He feels guilty for lying, for giving him a fake name; he wishes he'd told Dick who he really is. "Yeah," he says again. "But thanks, Dick."

Now Dick takes his hand away, stepping back so they're a normal distance from each other. "Hey, no problem. It was fun running from the cops with you." His grin is broad and bright, enough like Bucky's that it makes Steve's heart hurt as it hammers in his chest.

Steve stands up straight again and smiles back. Dick takes another glance around the street; seeing no one, he leans in briefly and plants a soft, gentle kiss to Steve's lips.

"Maybe I'll see you around again, Jimmy," he says.

"Maybe," Steve agrees.

With a last apologetic smile, Dick darts off into an alleyway, and Steve starts for home.

*

It's late enough that Bucky should be asleep, even if he had company over for a while, so Steve doesn't really worry about the state he's in – rouge still on his face, hair a mess, mud splashed onto his cuffs, the back of his pants wet with spunk. Their suite is reassuringly dark and quiet. But when Steve heads towards the little standalone water tap in the front room to get himself cleaned up before bed, suddenly the shadows shift and Bucky steps out of the corner, wearing his pajamas and ratty wool socks, holding a glass of water.

"Oh, hey, Steve," he says, yawning. Then he blinks and takes in Steve's appearance. "Hey," he says, more seriously, "hey, Steve, what happened to you?"

"Nothing," Steve says, and curses all the times he told Bucky it was nothing when he had a black eye or a split lip from fighting. Bucky frowns and walks right up to him.

"Shit, are you bleeding?" Bucky's hand comes up to Steve's face and he rubs his thumb gently against Steve's lip; Steve is so caught up in the touch that he doesn't think to back away until it's too late.

When Bucky sees that what he's got on his thumb is rouge, not blood, his expression changes.

"Hey, you sly dog, you were out with a girl, weren't you?"
Steve sighs, all of the night's events crashing in on him at once, and suddenly he's too tired to pretend. He doesn't want to lie to Bucky like he did to Dick. Born on a sudden swell of emotion – anger, recklessness, bravado – he comes to a decision.

"No," he says, reaching up to pull the cord for the lightbulb. "No."

In the light, Bucky can see the rouge on his cheeks, as well as his lips; he frowns in confusion.

"I was out . . . well. Out being a girl, I guess you could say." Steve clarifies. "I'm sorry, Buck."

He wishes he knew what he was apologizing for.

Bucky's expression of shock is gone in an instant, replaced by something darker: confusion, maybe anger. Steve braces himself.

"What, like – like the two down the hall?"

"Maybe not quite the same," Steve allows, "but like that. To – to meet men."

"You're a fairy," Bucky says slowly. Steve bites his lip, but nods.

"Shit," Bucky breathes. "I don't – Stevie, how come I didn't know?"

Steve shrugs. He might as well go all in now, since he's committed. "I hid it," he admits. "I didn't want to see that look in your eyes."

"What – Jesus, Steve, you spring this on me in the middle of the night and you expect me to just –"

Steve puts up his hands, surrendering. "I know. It's fine." He feels his stomach twist into knots, but forces out his next words. "If you want me out I'll understand. I'll find a place." He's already thinking that he could ask Frank; he knows that Bartie and Georgie are only there part time.

He'll miss Bucky like a part of himself, but he'll do it if Bucky wants him to.

Bucky looks away, like he can't stand the sight of Steve, and then scrubs his face with his hands. "Come on, come talk to me." He walks over to the low broken down couch and takes a seat. Steve collapses down next to him.

He waits for Bucky to talk, and it takes a long time. His palms sweat.

"Is this – is it because you don't get so many girls? Because there could be a girl out there for you, Steve, it's just a matter a time."

Steve thinks about this. It's not that he's never liked a girl, it's just – he's always liked men more.

"The way you put it, it makes me sound pathetic," Steve says bitterly. "Rejected and . . . and desperate."

Bucky shifts on the couch, uncomfortable. "Isn't that – I mean, isn't that how it is with guys? Like sailors off at sea. When there's no other option."

Steve shrugs. He hates having to put it in words, and hates being asked to explain himself, but he doesn't see any other way to keep Bucky here and keep him talking, so he tries again. "I've – I've always wanted it. I want it more than anything else."
This is worse, much worse, than taking a beating. Steve wishes that Bucky would hit him instead. When he's dared to imagine this happening, he's always imagined that Bucky would hit him. That made it easier, put it in terms Steve was used to. Steve isn't used to this uncomfortable curiosity, especially not from Bucky.

"So every time I tried to set you up with girls, you were pretending. To make me happy."

Steve crosses his arms defensively. "Yes," he says, then, to be honest, he says, "No. I don't know, Buck, I – maybe, one day, I could find the right girl, someone I like, who'd like me back. But I know I like this." He tries a wry smile. "I know it feels better, most of the time, to be a girl than to go on a date with one."

Bucky bites his lip for a second, then sighs. "You always gotta be difficult. You know that? Can't just go along and get along, no. You make me crazy sometimes, Steve."

This has such a familiar, exasperated, teasing tone that Steve glances up at Bucky hopefully.

"You're not mad?"

Bucky shrugs, and looks down at his feet. Without looking up again, he says, "I ain't mad, Steve."

Steve ought to be satisfied with that, he knows it. He oughta take the win and leave it there. But he's never been good at that, and even that little encouragement makes him want to push.

"And you don't think – you know, with what Father Calhoun said and all. You know it's a sin."

Steve swallows hard, and asks what he has to ask. "Are you disgusted?"

Bucky shakes his head, but not in a way that looks like a no. "It's weird, I'll say that. It's not what I . . . it's not what I thought you were like."

At Steve's stricken expression, Bucky adds, "But the Father – he always said that the right thing was, was, raising up the poor, and fighting for our rights, and helping others. And you do all that. More than anyone I know."

Steve remembers those sermons, all about how Jesus would've supported the trade unions, or how it was their duty as Christians to fight for fair pay and fair treatment. They always used to get Steve fired up with the idea that he could do God's work here on Earth, right down the street where someone was getting evicted or where a factory owner was working hard to keep people in poverty. There had been comparatively few sermons about sex of any kind; mostly some confusing private talks about the Sin of Onan and the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah and the temptations of lust. When he was eleven, Steve had spent a terrified summer completely sure that jerking off could turn you to a pillar of salt.

It'd been Bucky who'd explained to him that it couldn't. They'd been sleeping on the couch cushions at Bucky's parents' place, and Steve had woken confused in the night to the sound of Bucky masturbating. Steve had shaken him to get him to stop, and when he'd explained why, Bucky had laughed.

"It's fine, you'll see," Bucky'd said. "You can confess it to Father Calhoun on Saturday."

So Steve had lain in the dark, worried, listening to Bucky touch himself, utterly surprised when nothing bad happened afterwards.

Now Bucky looks to the ceiling, as if searching for God in the cracked yellow plaster. "I'm not disgusted, Stevie," he says, softly. "If anything, I'm more of a sinner than you. I can't imagine God not wanting you, Steve, I just – I can't."

"It's true you weren't much of an altar boy," Steve points out, daring to make a joke. Bucky had
once accidentally set Father Calhoun's vestments on fire.

Bucky's gaze falls to land on Steve again, and he frowns. "Do you – did you ever confess this stuff to a priest?"

Steve takes a deep breath. "Yeah. When I was . . . after the first few times it happened. It was okay. He gave me penance, and told me to resist temptation."

"How come you didn't?" Bucky asks. He sounds surprised, like it never occurred to him before that Steve might go against something a priest told him to do.

Steve hasn't been to Mass or to Confession in six years, not since six months or so after his Ma died. He doesn't think Bucky's been in a long time, either. It's strange, but at this moment he misses it, opening his mouth for the body of Christ, the cool privacy of the confessional, the knowledge that Jesus, or the priest, could give you absolution. It was so much simpler than this, the torture of explaining and hoping that Bucky can still see him as a good man.

"I did for a while. I don't know, maybe I should've tried harder. But I couldn't – I couldn't ever convince myself that it was evil. In my heart. I know Father Calhoun would say that evil things feel good sometimes to tempt us. To make us evil."

"God," Bucky says, apparently unconscious of the blasphemy. "What the hell kind of evil could you ever be?" he asks, like it's beyond anything he could imagine. Steve shrugs, uncomfortable.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm the kind of sinner who tries to make up for it with other good works. Maybe that's why I do all that Catholic Worker stuff, to convince myself I won't go to hell."

Bucky starts shaking his head before Steve even finishes talking. "No," he says, and he sounds sure now. "No, you do that stuff cuz you want to make peoples' lives better. I know you, and I know that for sure."

"Thanks, Buck," Steve says, softly, and wishes he could hug him.

"Yeah, so I don't care what those guys say about, about evil. You've always been the one I looked to. To know what was right. I can't – if you were evil, then I don't know what I would do anymore. I kinda always thought – you know, with heaven and hell and stuff, I thought you'd be the one putting in a good word for me."

Steve's heart begins to slow. He takes a deep breath and throws himself forward, asking the question. "You still think that?"

"Yeah. I do." Bucky sounds increasingly confident, as if he's still figuring it out himself. He sighs again. "I dunno, the fairy stuff – you really like that? Being, uh, girly?"

That's the hard part for Bucky to get past, Steve realizes. Not the part about sin, or even the part about fucking men. "I know you always wanted me to be . . . more like you. Manly. But I'm not, Bucky. I mean, look at me."

Bucky bites his lip. "I think you can be anything you want, Steve," he says softly. Then he fidgets, as if to reach out and touch Steve's hair or his face, but he pulls back before the gesture can get very far.

Swallowing hard, Steve asks, "Even if I want to be a fairy?"

Bucky takes a long time to answer, but then he shrugs. "Yeah, you know, I guess so." They both
stare at the floor for a little while. Steve wishes he knew what else to say.

Breaking the tension, Bucky punches him in the arm, rocking him gently sideways. "But Good Christ, why do we gotta have this talk at three in the morning? Go to bed already, we can talk tomorrow."

"All right," Steve says, smiling at the warm proximity of Bucky's body. Maybe this isn't the disaster he thought it'd be.

"And go wash up or something, will you? You smell like – " Bucky pauses, perhaps in that moment realizing exactly what Steve smells like. Steve flushes and ducks his head.

"Uh, yeah," Steve says.

"Right," Bucky says, blinking once or twice. Maybe in his head being a fairy had been one thing, and walking around with another man's spunk in your pantleg from an hour ago was something else. "Um, I'm going back to sleep."

"Okay," Steve replies inanely, as if it's any other day, and heads over to use the tap.

There's a little shaving mirror hung on the wall above it. Steve stares at the man reflected there for a long time.

Whatever else that man is, at least he's honest. At least he doesn't have to lie to his best friend. That's gotta be worth something.

* 

He expects it to become a problem, maybe the next morning when Bucky's had some sleep, or in a week when Bucky doesn't think he can be polite about it anymore, or in a month when Bucky decides he can't live with Steve in a tiny two-room suite, knowing what he knows.

Bucky doesn't talk to him much for the first couple days, just the usual stuff about work or baseball, the safe stuff. Steve wants to talk to him again, maybe try to explain himself better, but he doesn't know how to start, or if that would drive Bucky further away.

After a while, Steve gets annoyed, waiting for the other shoe to drop. He watches Bucky being extra courteous to Marlene and Betty in the hallway, watches Bucky very carefully not offer to introduce him to any of the girls he meets at the dance halls, and doesn't know whether to feel respected or left out. He gets bold, full of a perverse desire to push his luck, to see how far Bucky will go before he snaps. He starts putting on makeup before he leaves the apartment, or wearing the little scarves or blouses he borrows from Betty even after he comes home from the clubs. Bucky doesn't say a word about it, though he always looks at Steve carefully when he's dressed up, as if trying to figure out how to treat him when he's in partial drag, not the man he thought he knew but not a woman, either, quite.

Steve is filled with a feeling that's half relief and half embarrassed frustration, and he doesn't know how to live in it.

"You look . . . nice," Bucky says, one night, as Steve gets ready to leave, and Steve can't help but blush as Bucky's eyes take in his red lips, his scarf, his darkened eyelashes.

"Thanks," he says, pulling on his coat and cap to cover himself up. When Bucky looks down at the floor again, Steve frowns. "But you don't have to be polite about it, Buck. It's okay if you . . . don't like it."
Bucky purses his lips, looks away, and doesn't say anything, and Steve leaves it at that.

All in all, it's more than he ever could have hoped for.

* 

"All right, be honest," Betty says, one night when it's just the two of them at the bar in Vincent's, a slow night when hardly anyone's dancing or singing. "Did you make that James Barnes into your man, or what? Because I seen you going to and fro all pretty, and he don't look like he minds much."

Steve rolls his eyes. "Just because I live with him doesn't mean I'm letting him screw me. Bucky's just... Bucky."

"Uh huh," she says, tapping her cigarette against the ashtray. "What does that mean?"

"It means – I don't know. We've been friends since we were kids. I guess – it seems like there's not much I could do that would make him – you know. Leave me." He feels a soft confidence in the words as he says them. He never really expected that they could be true.

"You don't think he wants you, now he knows? I seen him with lots of girls, it's not like he's not horny enough."

Steve tries to laugh, but it comes out more bitter than he means it to. "Bucky's real manly," he says. He's always looked up to Bucky, who was strong and handsome but still kind to Steve, even when they were little kids. Even then Steve always wanted Bucky's big, solid body, always looked at him with envy and desire.

Betty laughs like Steve's just made a joke. "Oh honey. What would you call Johnny? Or Hyam? Or your boy Frank?" Hyam's sitting a ways down the bar from them, chatting with some fairy Steve doesn't know. Even sitting down, he towers over the guys standing near him, tall and broad as an oak tree. His full bushy beard and booming laugh fill the space around him.

"For that matter, you should see Helena during the day. Walks around with five o'clock shadow at nine in the morning, all denim and biceps." Helena's got a beautiful prancing walk and the sweetest little giggle, but Steve hasn't missed that she's six foot four even without the heels. She could bench-press Steve with one hand, but still plays the pansy to a T. In a way, Steve's lucky that he's small and fine-boned; no one here's ever mistaken him for anything but a sissy. He doesn't have to work at it, the way some of the bigger guys do.

"I know, I know," Steve grumbles. "It's more that – Bucky's different."

"Yeah, because you want him," Betty says kindly.

If he can't admit it here, where can he admit it? It's not even a new feeling, or something he doesn't know about himself. Just an old painful truth that's been worn smooth by time.

"Because I want him," Steve agrees. Betty pats his hand.

* 

The other shoe never does drop, and while Bucky's hesitant around him for a while, eventually they get back into their old rhythm. Christmas comes, and they spend it together like always, drinking the eggnog that Mrs Ryan, from upstairs, dropped off for them. They have added a special ingredient of their own, though.
"Young boys all by themselves at Christmas, I shudder to think," she'd said, giving them a tin of ginger cookies as well. "Be sure you bring my things back, now."

"Yes, ma'am," Steve and Bucky had chorused.

Pooling their resources, and with Steve's new job, they actually manage a decent spread of food. Steve is particularly proud of the gift he'd managed to get for Bucky; the year before he'd been too poor to even consider it.

After they eat, and after most of the eggnog and bourbon is gone, Bucky opens it. Steve can't help but grin at the look on his face. He pulls the baseball card slowly out of the box and stares at it.

"Steve, you can't afford this," are the first words out of his mouth.

"Eh, I know a guy." Technically, Steve knows a drag queen who's also a big Dodgers fan, but he decides not to tell Bucky that part. "It wasn't too expensive. And anyway, I know you still have your collection from when we were kids. Your 1920 team roster wouldn't be complete without him."

Bucky stares back down at the card for a long time: 33 Zack Wheat, it says, below the picture of the smiling, broad-featured man in his Brooklyn Robins hat. "It's in really good condition, too," he points out, running his finger lightly along the edges. "For a twenty-year-old card."

Steve remembers going with Bucky and his family to see a game in '26, Zack Wheat's last game with Brooklyn. Bucky'd nudged Steve every time he came up to bat, fascinated by the way he turned at the plate and batted left, even though he always threw right.

"That's a real talent," eight-year-old Bucky had pronounced, and Steve had nodded wisely. They'd called Zack "Buck," because of his last name, and it'd made Steve feel like he was cheering for Bucky, like it was Bucky out on the field running for first with the warm brown earth under his shoes and the sun on his shoulders.

Now, Steve clears his throat and nods, trying for a casual tone. "Yeah," he agrees. "He'll look all bright and shiny when you put him in the box next to McKinley. I bet his brother's been lonely in there without him."

McKinley Wheat was never the talent that his brother was, but Steve had always liked the idea of them together, teammates, sharing a dugout and a locker room, good to each other even if only one of them could ever be a star.

Bucky, still looking down at the card, blinks rapidly. "I don't know what I'd ever do without you, Steve," he says, after a while. Steve is surprised by the shakiness of his voice. "Nobody knows me like you do."

"Hey, you too, Buck. You know that."

Bucky rubs one eye with the palm of his hand. "Go on, open the one from me," he says. His voice sounds steadier now.

Steve lifts the lid, and for a moment he can't even tell what he's looking at. It's so far from what he would've guessed Bucky would get him that his eyes refuse to see what's sitting right in front of him.

"You got me makeup?" he asks. There's a lipstick, and a tin of rouge, and other stuff too, good stuff – eyeshadow, mascara, the works. Steve doesn't even know how to put half of it on, but he's
already planning on begging Marlene for a lesson or two.

"I, uh, hope it's okay. The lady at the store seemed to think that you'd be real specific about the colors you would want."

"Who'd she think you were buying them for?" he asks, already knowing the answer.

"She thought you were my girl, of course. Look underneath."

Steve furrows his brow, then pulls up the little piece of tissue paper that was sitting under the makeup. At the bottom of the box, gleaming with the shine of real silk, is a pair of stockings.

"Oh," Steve says. He reaches down, almost afraid to touch them. They're soft and smooth against his fingers, catching a little on his calluses. "They're beautiful."

"Yeah? I didn't know if you'd like them or not. But Betty said I should get them for you."

Steve flushes, embarrassed that Betty would try to push him and Bucky closer like this. "Betty is a busybody," he says, before he can think about it. Bucky cocks his head, not understanding.

"No, I went and asked her about it," Bucky clarifies. "I never – I don't know what to get girls for presents, I guess. Not that you're – I mean. I've gotten you lots of guy presents before, but I wanted you to know that I – that your girl half is my friend too." He looks awkward and shamefaced, like he's sure he's said something wrong. Steve is still feeling the silk against his fingertips.

"Thank you," Steve says. He's never worn ladies' stockings before, never even thought of it, but now he wants to roll these gently up his legs and see how they feel. It's such a strangely intimate gift; he wonders if Bucky even realizes how intimate.

"And anyway, Betty said she was sick of you using all their stuff, and you needed some things of your own. Said it'd be as much a gift to her and Marlene as a gift to you."

Steve laughs, and then he can't help it: he leans up and hugs Bucky tight. Bucky, to his relief, hugs him back just as hard. There's no more space between them now than there used to be, and Steve melts a little to know that, to have that confirmed.

After they pull apart, Steve has to glance away. He fiddles with the lipstick for a second; when he opens it to look at the color, it's the most beautiful shade of red he's ever seen.

"You want a mirror?" Bucky asks, almost eagerly.

Made bold by the gift, by the hug, Steve follows a sudden whim and holds the lipstick out to Bucky. "Will you do it?" At Bucky's surprised look, he tries to justify the request. "I mean, it's your present, after all. You should do the honors."

Bucky takes the lipstick from him. Their fingers brush. "I don't know what I'm doing," he says, with a nervous laugh.

"You've seen dames do it," Steve points out. "Just touch it to the – to my bottom lip."

Bucky gets an intense expression on his face, the way he always does when concentrating on something difficult. He sticks his tongue out between his teeth, like he's focusing on a tricky shot in pool or something, and Steve has to hold back laughter. It's comforting to know that Bucky, regardless of the situation, will always be Bucky.
The touch of the lipstick is light, almost unnoticeable, and gone as soon as it arrives.

"There," Bucky says doubtfully. Steve rubs his lips together, and Bucky lights up. "Oh, yeah, that's better!" he says.

"How's it look?"

"It's a good color," Bucky says softly. "But you've got a little – here – " reaching out, he rubs his thumb against the skin above Steve's upper lip, removing a smudge. Steve waits through a long moment while Bucky touches him, grappling with what to say next.

"So I guess the lady at the department store where you got the stockings thought you were buying for your girl too, huh?" Steve asks. He can't get the image out of his mind, Bucky looking over rows of stockings, wondering which ones to buy for him.

"Yeah, and she didn't think much of it," Bucky laughs, still fixing Steve's lipstick. "Guess there's a lot of that going around, fellas buying stockings for their girls without buying rings first. I almost told her it was for a guy, I think she'd've looked less sour if I had."

Steve nods. He feels it again, the soft quiet tension between them, and he wants to break it by reaching out, touching Bucky's face, kissing his mouth.

He imagines what Betty would say if she knew he'd had this moment and let it go by. Bucky always said he was brave, and damned if he wasn't going to live up to Bucky's good opinion of him, whatever the cost.

"What if I want to be your girl?"

It comes out softer than he means it, huskier, more demanding. Bucky's eyes widen, but he doesn't back away.

"What – what do you mean?"

Steve flushes, annoyed. "You know what I mean." He glances down at the little pile of makeup and stockings in his lap, as if for reassurance. Bucky had wanted him dressed up and painted pretty, had thought about it and spent his hard-earned money on it. He looks back up, looks Bucky in the eyes. "Do you want me?"

Bucky opens his mouth, then closes it, then opens it again. "I don't know," he says. He sounds honest, painfully so, like he's telling a secret. "I don't know, Steve, lately you've been so pretty, and so confident, and it – honestly, it kind of burns me to think of you with other guys. But I don't know if it's just because you're my best friend and I've known you so long. And because – well."

He blows out a breath, and meets Steve's eyes. "Because, to be honest, it's not like I haven't . . . been with a fairy before."

Steve tries a smile, even though the idea makes him feel – not jealous, not quite, but regretful, the feeling of having missed out on something he could've had. "Anyone I know?" he jokes. Bucky doesn't laugh.

"Uh, it was Marlene, actually," he confesses. Steve's eyebrows shoot up into his hair. At least that explains why Betty had been so insistent on him going after Bucky. "We were both drunk, and she was – it was really nice."

"I'm a little jealous," Steve says. Daring, he reaches down and takes Bucky's hand. Taking a sharp breath, Bucky opens his palm so that Steve can lace their fingers together. "But then, I'm jealous of
all your girls."

Steve kisses him then, which isn't that ladylike but it's not like Bucky was ever gonna make the first move. Bucky kisses him back, maybe just out of reflex at first, but then he sinks into it, and Steve finally understands why all the girls like Bucky so much; he's a great kisser, slow and gentle and considerate, so that when he does filthy things with his tongue it still seems gentlemanly and chaste. Steve is filled with this new knowledge, his skin buzzing with it. It's absurd that he could've known Bucky this long, known so many things about him, but still not known something as simple as how he likes to kiss, or what his mouth feels like pressed to Steve's.

Bucky cups Steve's jaw with one big, broad palm and tilts his chin up, holding Steve in place and deepening the kiss. Steve groans into his mouth, and Bucky pulls back abruptly.

"Sorry," he says. "I, uh, I don't know a lot of girls who make noises like that."

Steve brightens. "You mean I can still show renowned lothario James Buchanan Barnes a thing or two?" he laughs. Reaching out, he rubs at the lipstick that's now smeared all over Bucky's face.

"Oh, well, I doubt that," Bucky demurs. "But you did surprise me." He looks shy all of a sudden, and his teasing demeanor melts away. "Do you mean this, Steve? You don't -- I don't know, you're not going to regret it tomorrow?"

"No way in hell," Steve breathes. "I just worry that you'll regret it tomorrow."

Bucky shrugs. "I don't think I will. I don't know. But I know I'll still want you here, no matter what. That's never gonna change, Steve."

Steve nods, and kisses him again, soft as he can. He's trembling a little with repressed desire, the urge to go faster and harder, but he thinks he manages to cover it. When they break apart a moment later, Bucky glances down at the stockings in his lap.

"So, you gonna try those on, or what?"

Steve feels a wash of relief, though he doesn't know why. His hands are shaking as he picks up the stockings.

"They're your present. You should do the honors," he says, just like before.

There's a dark gleam of desire in Bucky's eyes. Biting his lip, Steve undoes his trousers and pushes them off, leaving his shorts on. He gets rid of his socks, too, and has a moment to be embarrassed by the calluses and hair on his feet before Bucky takes his left foot in his hand.

Slowly, he rolls the stocking up his foot, up past his knee, until it rests tight around his thigh, right below where his shorts end. Steve could wear these in public, if he wanted, under his clothes, and no one would know.

"Just gotta get the garter belt and straps for them," Steve says, admiring the look of them against his skin.

"Yeah, I wanted to get those too, but -- maybe next paycheck," Bucky says, frowning.

"I love 'em, Bucky," Steve says firmly, making him smile.

Bucky does the other one with equal care, and Steve raises an eyebrow. "You seem to know a little bit more about these than you did about lipstick," he says, and Bucky grins. His fingers brush the
inside of Steve's thigh, slowly smoothing the edge of the stocking. Steve lets his legs fall a little further apart, revels in the shivery feeling of Bucky's thumb only an inch away from his bare skin.

"Putting them on ain't so different from taking them off," he says. "Look at that, a perfect fit."

"Well, never let it be said I can't fit a ladies' size medium," Steve notes dryly.

"You look amazing," Bucky says softly. Steve blushes, because he can't really see how that could be true. "I mean it, Steve, you – ever since you started wearing stuff like this, makeup and stuff, I can't stop thinking about you in it. It's like once I started seeing how pretty you were, I couldn't stop."

"Kiss me again," Steve says, dry-mouthed. Bucky does, and it goes on for a long time, until they're tangled together on the low couch, Bucky on top, his weight a delicious pressure on Steve's body. He can feel Bucky's dick, hard against his hip, and he can't help the pride he feels. I did that, he thinks. I made him want this. He slides his silk-covered ankles up under Bucky's pantleg, brushing soft against his skin, and Bucky makes a low, involuntary moan at the sensation.

"I hope you know," Steve murmurs into Bucky's ear, "that there's no way I'm letting you fuck me while I'm wearing these. They'll get runs for sure."

Bucky blinks at him, sex-addled. It's a look Steve's never seen on him, not up close, anyway, and he files it away with the rest of his new knowledge of his old friend.

"But you're letting me fuck you if I take them off again?" he asks, eventually.

"Yeah," Steve says, breathless. "Yeah, I am. You wanna do me, Buck?"

Bucky takes his mouth again in what Steve assumes is an exuberant yes. Together they work their way out of their shirts, and Bucky runs his hands over Steve's chest, up and down, hesitating over his nipples. "I like it," Steve says, to encourage him. "Do it." Bucky rubs his thumbs against Steve's nipples, slow perfect circles, and Steve sighs and arches up into the touch. In return he wraps his hands around Bucky's waist, starting a slow massage with his fingertips just above Bucky's ass. Dipping his head back down, Bucky mouths at his throat, then sucks hard at Steve's collarbone, enough to leave a mark.

"Yeah," Steve says, mindlessly. "Please." Bucky does it again, on the other side, then licks and kisses his way back up, sucking gently at Steve's Adam's apple, his earlobe, the soft underside of his jaw, before kissing him again.

Steve almost wants to protest, to tell Bucky that he's not actually a girl, that he's hard and ready to go and can they get to the screwing please, but there's something in Bucky's demeanor that stops him. He's so reverent, so tender, that he inspires an answering tenderness in Steve, inspires him to accept his attentions gracefully. He kisses Steve slowly, and gently, in the way Steve's always imagined him with the girls: a passionate lover, but also considerate, adventurous but kind.

It should make Steve feel like just another notch on the bedpost, but instead it makes him feel special, or even loved, like something precious that Bucky has to take care to keep from breaking.

So Steve lies back, and gasps as Bucky sucks his nipples, as Bucky caresses him and makes love to him. He's always been embarrassed to stand next to Bucky, Bucky who was so tall and so strong, Bucky whose body didn't betray him at the least provocation. But now, as Bucky presses his lips to the soft, pale skin of Steve's neck, he finally feels right, like his body is finally right. With Bucky
kissing him and holding him and going so slow, Steve doesn't feel ashamed to be naked in front of him. He feels beautiful, and he feels sure that Bucky, looking at him, will find him beautiful.

With a nervous little smile, Bucky takes off Steve's new stockings, his fingers brushing ticklishly against Steve's skin as he rolls them down and off. He sets them carefully on the floor, then comes back to Steve, who's just in his shorts now.

"You should take those off," Steve says, trying to sound confident. "I'm feeling underdressed."

"You are a little naked for the front room couch," Bucky agrees. "If you were a girl, I'd pick you up and carry you to my bed."

Steve suddenly wants nothing in the world more than that. "Yes," he says, stupidly. "You should."

When Bucky solemnly lifts him into his arms, Steve is struck by a memory: the time he broke his leg in a fight and Bucky, all of fourteen at the time, carried him to the doctor. Bucky smells achingly familiar, like a million different memories that they've made together; Steve buries his head against Bucky's chest and lets himself drift among them.

When they get to their shared bedroom, Bucky shucks off his pants, and then, after a moment's hesitation, his shorts as well. Steve's heart begins to race. It's not that Steve has never seen him naked before, and it's not even that Steve has never seen him hard before; it's that now, in this moment, Steve gets to touch him, gets to feel the heat of his skin and the power in his hands.

"You too," Bucky says, softly, and Steve unbuttons and then pushes off his drawers, lying back on the bed completely exposed. He doesn't have anything that Bucky hasn't seen before either, but it makes him want to squirm and preen when Bucky looks anyway, when Bucky takes in the whole of Steve's small naked body with hunger in his eyes.

"C'mere," Steve says. Bucky crawls on top, his hair falling into his eyes as he looks down at Steve.

"Can I do you like this?" he asks, running a broad palm up Steve's thigh.

Steve's only done it face to face a couple times before, and it wasn't very comfortable, but he knows why Bucky wants it. He wants it too.

"Yeah," he says. "Get the Vaseline, though."

Bucky grabs it from the nightstand that they share. Usually, as far as Steve knows, its only use is to heal winter-cracked knuckles and abrasion burns from Bucky's job at the warehouse.

He figures that Bucky won't want to do the next part, so he gets his own fingers slick and lifts his hips to give himself access, pushing inside with a little grunt of pleasure. Bucky watches, eyes wide, and places a soft kiss on Steve's bent knee.

"Can I?" he asks. "I mean, is that okay?"

Steve nods, and Bucky slicks his fingers up and takes over, pressing into Steve up to the second knuckle.

"I'm inside you," Bucky whispers. "Oh, God, Steve."

Steve rolls his hips, pushing down further onto Bucky's fingers. "Imagine how it'll be when you stop screwing around and take me already," he says.
"God, God, are you ready? Jesus."

"I'm ready, I'm ready. You know Sister Mary Catherine would be shocked to hear you blaspheme like that."

"Probably isn't the best time to bring up Sister Mary Catherine," Bucky laughs, as he slides into Steve's body for the first time.

"Oh," Steve says, a long, drawn-out syllable. "Oh, yes, okay, whatever you say, Buck, just do that again."

"This?" Bucky grins, pulling out and fucking into him again, slow, rocking his hips at the end.

"Yeah," Steve says, feeling desperate now. "Yeah, c'mon, again." The pressure and the motion hurt a little, but Steve wouldn't change this moment for the world. He tries to lift his hips higher on the bed, give Bucky better access, and it works; on the next thrust they're lined up perfectly, so Bucky sinks right down into him. Steve groans at the sensation, full and stretched on Bucky's cock.

"You're amazing," Bucky says, "amazing, Jesus. Steve. Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

Steve grins up at him. "I can do this all day."

Bucky grins back. He speeds up a little, and Steve meets him thrust for thrust, rocking upwards as Bucky rocks down into him. Bucky's hot, giving off heat just like he always does, and Steve wants to arch into that too, up into the aura of warmth that Bucky carries around with him. He pushes in and out of Steve's body, in and out, over and over until Steve can't bear it anymore, until he needs to cry out with the slow rolling pleasure that shudders through his body on every thrust.

"Bucky," Steve says, his dick hard and aching against his stomach. He's full to the brim with the feeling of Bucky inside him. "Bucky. Bucky."

"You're so beautiful," Bucky says, looking down into Steve's eyes. "So beautiful."

"Yes," Steve says, tension building within him, cresting. "Yes, Bucky, yes – "

Bucky's smile, in that moment, is so familiar that it makes Steve ache to see it: he tosses his hair up out of his eyes, and flashes his teeth, and it's everything about him that Steve loves: his confidence, and his masculine beauty, and his easy, graceful charm. It's the smile that says, the smile that's always said, I know you.

"Such a beautiful girl," Bucky whispers, his voice breaking.

Steve groans and grabs his own dick, coming over his stomach and chest, coming and coming until it feels like he's never going to stop, while Bucky fucks him through it, thrusting long and slow to draw it out. A minute later, while Steve's trying to catch his breath, he goes still, his prick all the way inside, burying his face against Steve's leg as he cries out silently.

A minute after that, it's over, and he and Bucky are lying next to each other on his narrow bed the same way they did last February when the building's heat broke down, shoulder to shoulder, sharing space and heat. Steve is struck by the dizzying overlap of feelings: the familiarity of Bucky's body pressed against his own and the complete strangeness of it, too, that they're naked together, breathing hard together, with the smell of sex filling the air around them. Even if he and Bucky don't do this again, Steve thinks, he'll remember the way he feels in this moment: the swollen feeling of his lips where they were pressed to Bucky's lips, the suck marks on his collarbones, the wet sensation of Bucky's spunk in his ass. All the residue.
"C'mon," Bucky laughs, after a minute, standing up and reaching out a hand for Steve to take. Steve remembers belatedly that he's always like this after he gets laid, jovial and easygoing. He smiles in spite of himself. He takes Bucky's hand.

"C'mon c'mon, you're getting my sheets all messed up."

"I think the sheets are a lost cause," Steve replies, as Bucky pulls him to his feet.

They clean up together at the tap, using a couple of washcloths they keep around. Better than trying to sneak down the hall to the communal bathroom, even if it's not the greatest solution. Steve feels awkward at first, avoiding Bucky's gaze as he wipes himself off, but then Bucky starts cracking up, and Steve follows after him, till they're both snickering and trying hard to keep the giggles under control.

"Here, here, here," Bucky says, still laughing under his breath. "I can't even tell you what a mess your lipstick is."

Steve glances in the mirror and has to laugh at himself: the red smeared over his mouth, the hair sticking up, the big swollen lips. No doubt what he's been doing.

"Oh jeez," Steve says, as Bucky uses a fresh cloth on Steve's face, rubbing away the lipstick. "Not so beautiful now," he mutters.

"Hey," Bucky says awkwardly. "Still beautiful." He kisses Steve again, with less heat now but with a lot of determination, giving Steve time to sigh and sink into it.

"Always beautiful, Steve," Bucky says again, with more certainty, when their mouths part.

Steve shudders – from the compliment, from the cold air on his naked skin, from the utterly, deliciously vulnerable sensation of Bucky looking at his skinny messy body in the stark light of the bare bulb and wanting him still. Bucky kisses him, and kisses him, and Steve clings to Bucky's heat as long as he can before he breaks away.

"It's freezing," Steve says. "And your bed's a mess."

"Guess I'll have to sleep in yours, then," Bucky says. Steve takes his hand shyly, and together, hand in hand, they walk back to the bedroom.

It doesn't take long for them to warm up the cool fresh sheets, not with both of them huddling together under the blanket, with Bucky's human furnace act, with their limbs rubbing together, hot friction between their bodies.

"Merry Christmas," Steve remembers to whisper, as he starts to fall asleep.

"Merry Christmas," Bucky replies. His words are already slow and drowsy, and a moment later he's snoring softly on his half of the pillow, the same snores that Steve's fallen asleep to for years.

* 

The next day Steve has to go back to work early, and leaves Bucky sleeping, since he doesn't have to be back at work until the day after. Bucky's sprawled out on the bed, unselfconscious and naked, and Steve wishes that he could stay with him, kiss his chest, make him come again and again and again. But he doesn't dare waste a day when he feels like he does now, strong and awake and ready to move mountains.
He runs into Danielle on the way out of the building.

"Steve! Just the man I wanted to see," she says.

"Oh yeah?"

She puts one hand on his shoulder lightly for balance as they head down the stairs. "I need warm bodies to do some doorknocking this evening. Union stuff, up your alley. It would be after your shift. Do you think you and Bucky could take some flyers and go up and down Jay Street?"

"Well, I can't speak for Bucky," Steve begins, "but I'll do it."

Danielle laughs, skipping a little as they step onto the last landing. "He'll go wherever you go," she says confidently. "He adores you."

The idea is completely new to Steve and so overwhelming that he stops walking for a moment, making Danielle turn around, a couple steps later, to see why he's not with her. That Bucky loves him, would forgive him anything, would do anything to help him, Steve already knew; but for some reason, he's always thought that those feelings came, at least a little, out of obligation or pity or just the fact that they've been friends so long. It's honestly never occurred to him that Bucky might . . . might adore him.

"Are you all right?" Danielle asks. Steve nods, and catches up to her.

"And where Bucky goes, so go the eligible ladies of the neighborhood," Steve adds.

Danielle looks at him shrewdly. "And the men of the right persuasion," she adds, winking. It's not like Steve's been keeping his new look secret from her, not really, but it's still a little embarrassing.

"You're not wrong," Steve admits. "We can probably recruit a few warm bodies for you."

Danielle nods. "Good. Come find me when you're done work. Valentine is making cookies for our volunteers!"

"Don't let that get out, or you'll have more volunteers than you can handle," Steve jokes. Danielle smiles, the extra-bright smile that she always gets when anyone says anything nice about Valentine. With a shock, Steve realizes that that's probably how he looks when people talk about Bucky.

The streets are covered in grey muck and his shoes get pretty thoroughly soaked before he gets to work, but the sun is shining and it feels like there's still something of Christmas in the air, people smiling at each other for no reason and laughing as they step carefully over patches of ice. Steve wraps his scarf over his face so that the cold won't bother his lungs too much and turns his eyes to the sun, letting the warmth sink into his skin. He feels good, even with his cold wet feet, even with the prospect of a long day of work ahead of him, even having left Bucky behind, warm and asleep in his bed.

After he gets in, he starts organizing the shipping manifests for the day, and keeps catching himself whistling as he does it. He flushes each time, self-conscious, and makes himself stop, but then a few minutes later he finds he's doing it again, whistling a tune he can't quite place but that sounds happy.

"Have a good Christmas?" It's Betty's voice, behind him, and Steve whirls around, feeling caught in the act even though he's only whistling over paperwork.
Arthur is standing there, but it's definitely a Betty type look on her face as she tilts her cap back and arches one perfect plucked eyebrow.

"Hey, B – Arthur," Steve amends. "I did have a good Christmas, yeah."

Frank comes up behind her and almost knocks into her.

"Hey, Art, what's the big deal, you're blocking the door."

"I was just noticing something different about our pal Steve," Arthur says, with Betty's lilting intonation. Frank looks over his shoulder.

"He does look kinda red in the face," Frank says. Then he winks. "Not that I haven't seen that before."

"He was whistling," Betty pronounces, as she saunters into the room, letting Frank lumber in after her. The door shuts behind them, and since it's the only door, Steve sees no way to escape.

"Can't a guy whistle to himself on the day after Christmas – " Steve begins, but Frank shakes his head.

"Nope. Spill. What, did you have a hot date last night?"

Steve looks down at his shoes. He wants, desperately, to tell his friends about what's happened, to throw his arms up in triumph, to shout it from the rooftops, but it's not really his job to go telling people about Bucky if Bucky wouldn't want it known.

"I – maybe," Steve allows, and Betty and Frank glance behind them to make sure no one else is coming, then run up next to Steve.

"Tell us all about it," Betty insists.

"Yeah, like, who was the gent? Anyone we know?"

Steve hesitates again. "I – look, I don't know if I should say."

"Bucky," Frank says, nodding to himself. Betty grins.

"Definitely Bucky. Whew, well, that took a good long time, didn't it?"

Steve realizes that his mouth's fallen open. "I – what – I didn't say it was Bucky!" he insists, in a fierce whisper.

"Why oh why wasn't I at home last night," Betty implores the heavens. "I might've been able to press my ear up against the wall and hear the long-awaited consummation of their deep, star-crossed – "

Steve throws a pencil at her, and she ducks, laughing.

"Really, that's great," Frank says. "I know how you were pining."

"I wasn't pining," Steve insists, nettled.

"Oh, young love," Betty sighs. "I do remember it well."

"I'm older than you," Steve says.
"Back in the misty days of my golden youth."

Frank looks sheepish, biting his lip and shuffling his feet. "So I guess you guys are – you're an item now?" he asks. Steve feels his love for Frank bloom up unexpectedly, and he's surprised how badly he wants to say *no*.

"I dunno," Steve says. "It's really new."

"In other words, they fucked their brains out and fell asleep right after," Betty summarizes. Steve can't really deny it.

"Well, I – I guess we'll find out," Frank says. Steve looks out the ramshackle building's little window; there's no one coming. Moving as quick as he can, he tilts back his cap, lifts up on his tiptoes and gives Frank a soft kiss on the mouth.

"Doesn't mean I'm not still head over heels for you, ya dolt," Steve breathes. Frank smiles.

"Foreman's gonna miss me pretty soon," Frank says.

"So get in gear already," Steve replies. For good measure, he smacks Frank on the ass, which makes him blush all pretty under his freckles.

When he goes, Betty sticks around for a minute. "So did Bucky tell you?" she asks, waiting for Steve to fill in the blanks.

"Tell me? About Marlene?"

Betty nods.

"Yeah," he says.

"You know she's in love with him," Betty says. "Has been for ages."

Steve leans against the little folding table. "Is she – jeez. Is this going to break her heart?"

Betty shrugs. "We all get our hearts broke eventually. Marlene's a tough kid, she'll do okay. You should just be gentle with her, is all. You can gossip about Bucky's bedroom prowess with others. Me, for example. I will happily hear stories about the size of his –"

Steve smacks her on the arm, encountering only hard bicep and rough cloth. "I'm not gonna gossip about anyone's . . . prowess, come on," he says.

Betty shrugs and offers him an insouciant grin. "Worth a shot," she says. Then she pulls her cap back down her head and hunches her shoulders forward, and it's Arthur who heads back out the door.

Steve thinks about Frank's question for a long time, though, and he can't find an answer to it no matter how hard he tries.

*

When he gets home from work that evening, Bucky's no longer splayed across the bed, naked and vulnerable like Steve left him; instead he's sitting on the couch, reading one of his *Amazing Stories* magazines by the light of the bare bulb by the sink.

"Hey, Buck," Steve says softly, like it's any other day. Like he hadn't woken up this morning with
Bucky's skin pressed warm to his, Bucky's body still bearing the marks of Steve's kisses. 

"You gotta read this one, Stevie," Bucky says, not taking his eyes from the page. "It's all about a secret robot conspiracy."

"Eh, I'll let you tell me about it," Steve says, sighing. "Those stories are better when you tell them, anyway. You should write them."

"Yeah, sure," Bucky laughs. "Not me. But maybe you could draw the covers," Bucky says, finally looking up at Steve. Steve smiles at him, unsure. He hangs up his jacket on the peg by the door and goes to sit next to Bucky. 

"I don't know how to draw robots," Steve says, softly. Bucky looks sideways at him and smiles. 

"Well, it's like drawing people, but shinier," he explains, and Steve chuckles. Bucky leans back against the threadbare cushions, magazine lying on his lap, and he looks thoughtfully up at Steve. "You have a good day?"

Steve shrugs. "Like any other day, I guess," he says. He's still leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, keeping some space between him and Bucky. 

"C'mere," Bucky says, low and quiet. 

Steve moves closer and leans back, breath catching in his throat as his shoulder rubs against Bucky's. He's done it a thousand times, stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Bucky, so much that he stopped noticing, but now it feels daring, and new, and strange. 

"I been missing you all day," Bucky says. He watches Steve steadily, all dark-eyed temptation, and Steve feels his heart start to thump hard in his chest at Bucky's words. "You miss me?"

"I missed you," Steve says. 

Bucky reaches out and strokes his cheek. Steve closes his eyes and swallows hard. 

"I couldn't stop thinking about how pretty you looked in your lipstick I got you."

Steve opens his eyes again. "Want me to wear it for you again, Buck?"

Bucky nods, breathless, so Steve finds the lipstick and puts it on. When he does, Bucky kisses his neck, and his cheeks, and down to his collarbones, but not his mouth. 

"You don't wanna kiss me?" Steve asks. 

"Don't wanna mess up your work," Bucky confesses. He shrugs, and looks away, and it strikes Steve suddenly that he's shy. 

"Let me mess it up, then," Steve says, grinning, brazen, determined. He gets down on his knees on the floor, between Bucky's legs, and opens his pants. 

"Jesus Christ," Bucky groans, as Steve takes out his dick. "Jesus Christ, Steve."


They're just getting into it, Steve's head bobbing and Bucky's hips shifting restlessly and little lipstick smears finding their way onto Bucky's dick, when there's a knock at the door.
They both freeze in place. Steve looks up, his mouth still full, and sees Bucky blinking and obviously struggling to concentrate.

"Yeah, who's there?" he manages, after a minute.

"Bucky?" comes Danielle's voice. "Is that you?"

"Yeah?" Bucky says. Steve pulls off Bucky's dick and grimaces; he forgot that he promised Danielle some door-knocking.

"You and Steve still coming out with us tonight?"

Bucky glares at Steve, wild-eyed, and Steve opens his mouth to reply only to find his voice hoarse and broken. He coughs and tries again.

"We'll meet you downstairs in a few minutes, Danielle," he promises.

"Okay," Danielle calls back. She sounds a little confused. Steve holds his breath until he hears her steps retreat back to the stairwell. He breathes out, and Bucky does too, and then they laugh quietly and desperately together with Steve's head on Bucky's thigh.

"What the hell, Steve, why didn't you tell me we were gonna get interrupted!"

"I forgot!" Steve protests. "I told her we'd help her canvass the neighborhood tonight." He looks up at Bucky, who's laughing and beautiful and half-naked spread out in front of Steve, his dick still hard and red between them. "But you were so tempting."

"Tell me you're not going to make me go canvassing right now," Bucky groans, throwing his hand over his eyes.

"I am," Steve says. "I promised. But I'm gonna finish you off first."

Bucky looks down to meet his eyes. "Yeah?" he manages. Steve nods solemnly.

"Yeah. Gonna make you feel real good, Buck."

Bucky's hand finds Steve's head, his big palm curling around and cupping Steve's neck. "So do it, then," he says, and draws Steve forward. Steve goes along, bending his head back down and taking Bucky in again.

He comes fast, with Steve sucking and lipping him hard, comes up into Steve's mouth with a soft cry and a push of his hips. Steve takes it all.

He makes as if to get up, but Bucky stops him with a hand on his shoulder.


So Steve maneuvers himself back up onto the couch, and lets Bucky open his pants, and then Bucky's big hand is wrapped around him, squeezing hard and pumping fast and making him come in a few seconds flat. Steve finds himself gasping for a long time afterward, his chest heaving up and down. Bucky gets up to wash himself at the sink, and Steve collapses back on the couch, his pants still undone, trying to catch his breath.

"Come on, get moving," Bucky says, nudging him with his toe. "Unless you want Danielle in here, seeing you look . . . seeing you look like this," he finishes, shrugging.
Steve washes up and buttons his pants, and he's turning to put his jacket on when Bucky stops him with a hand on his shoulder. Bending down, Bucky takes his mouth softly, sweetly, his tongue pressing at Steve's lips. Steve sinks into the kiss and grips hard at Bucky's shoulders, his arms, his chest.

"Wash your mouth, doll," Bucky murmurs, when he pulls away. Steve glances over his shoulder, at the mirror, and sees his lipstick-red mouth, no longer pristine but still painted enough to get noticed.

"Aw, jeez," Steve says, while Bucky laughs. He washes it off as best he can, though it leaves his lips looking puffy and pink anyhow.

"Shame to make you take it off," Bucky says, bumping his shoulder into Steve's as they leave the suite.

"Shut up," Steve says, but feels himself blushing.

When they get downstairs, Danielle is leaning against the brick wall of the lobby and counting leaflets.

"Took you two long enough," she says, her eyes traveling over them. Steve feels exposed, ashamed, like his pink cheeks and mouth are way too obvious to her.

"We're here, ain't we?" Bucky grumbles.

"Sorry, I didn't have time to get anyone else," Steve apologizes. "I got home late."

"No problem," Danielle says. She hands them each a stack of leaflets. "So long as you fellas don't mind knocking on a few extra doors yourselves."

The weather's not too cold, so time passes quickly as they canvass. Bucky's sweet and charming to every neighbor who opens their door to him, and Steve can't help but watch, taking in his soft smile and his slow blink with growing fascination.

Danielle nudges his shoulder when they regroup, a few blocks in, and he looks up at her in surprise.

"Eyes front, Rogers," she murmurs, and Steve flushes in hot embarrassment.

"It's not what you –"

"Ain't gotta explain nothing to me," Danielle says, cutting him off, and Steve can't help but huff out a laugh.

"It's new," he says, more quietly, and Danielle nods.

"Then I wish you all the luck in the world," she says. It's the kind of thing people say at weddings, or engagements, and it's shocking and pleasing to hear it said about him and Bucky.

"Thanks," he says. "Thanks, Danielle."

They move on to the next door. Bucky smiles at the lady and charms her, and then Steve shakes her hand and looks her in the eyes and asks for her support. She takes a leaflet.

They give out a lot of leaflets together.
Together, he and Bucky slowly settle into their new arrangement. A lot of the time it's the same as it always was, two guys sharing space, laughing together, going out together. But every now and then Bucky's gaze will turn hot, and he'll touch Steve's hand or run his fingers through Steve's hair, and Steve will shiver happily in response. They fuck a lot, at first, so that by the end of the second week Steve's had more sex with Bucky than he's had with anyone else. He likes it, the way he gets to know Bucky's body so well, that he can find every sensitive spot, every way to make Bucky tremble and shudder against him. He gets to know the weight of Bucky's cock on his tongue, the thickness of it in his ass, the smoothness of it in his hand. He gets to know how Bucky breathes when he's really close to coming, and how he grins when he wants Steve to come, and most of all he gets to know the feeling of Bucky's hands on his body, surrounding him, covering him, making him warm and safe.

"Beautiful," Bucky whispers into his ear, as they fuck their way through one dark evening, a week or so after New Year's, hardly noticing the cold apartment with all the heat they're generating together. They've both come once already, and now Bucky's just fucking him slow, all the tension gone, easing into him and back out, over and over, like a fuck that doesn't even need to end. Steve loses track of how long they've been doing it, that slow, easy motion, how long he's been filled full of Bucky's prick.

Steve groans, stretching against Bucky's body behind him, feeling the pleasure all the way down to his toes. "You're fucking me so good, Bucky," he says, "you're so good to me."

Bucky kisses his ear, and trails his left hand down Steve's waist to his hip. His hands are so big that Steve can almost get lost inside them when Bucky touches him like that. He shudders.

"That's cuz you're my good girl, Stevie," he whispers. "You're so pretty when you take my prick like this."

He pulls out even more slowly, pushes in inch by devastating inch, then stays buried deep for a few seconds, rotating his hips to open Steve up a little more. Steve hooks his leg back over Bucky's, giving him better access.

"Oh, yeah," Bucky says, "that's right, baby, just like that."

When Bucky calls him those names, calls him baby or beautiful or tells him he's a good girl, it sets something loose in Steve, some wild bright feeling of finally being where he should be. Steve can't help the fantasies he gets sometimes, of being Bucky's girl forever, his sweet little fairy in lipstick and a dress, his to fuck and use whenever he wants.

"Bucky," he says, "Bucky, God, don't ever stop fucking me like that," he gasps. "Just like that, oh –"

Bucky bites his shoulder, then licks where he's bitten to soothe it. "Good girl," he murmurs. "Good girl, Steve, so good for me."

Much later, when Steve finally comes, he almost doesn't notice; he's been on the edge so long, fucked for so long, that the orgasm is nearly indistinguishable from the warm, easy pleasure that's already coursing through his body. He hears himself cry out, feels a little ways outside of his body even, like he's lost his tether to the earth.

He feels Bucky press his forehead to Steve's shoulder, hears his heavy breathing, and rocks himself back harder, squeezing on Bucky's cock.
"Come on, Buck," he whispers, before he feels Bucky shuddering against him, shuddering all over and groaning helplessly.

A minute or two later, Bucky pulls out of him, and Steve rolls over so they're face to face. His asshole kind of hurts, after all that, and his right knee is a little sore, but it was more than worth it.

"You're really really good at that," Steve laughs, stroking Bucky's face.

Bucky smiles and kisses Steve's palm. "You bring it out of me, baby," he says.

*  

After his next paycheck, Bucky does get Steve a garter belt to go with the stockings, simple and black, and they fumble together to get it on.

"Don't tear the stockings," Steve says, as Bucky pulls them too fast up his legs in his haste.

"I won't, I won't," Bucky insists, nettled, kissing the top of Steve's thigh before he starts fastening the straps.

One by one, the straps hook onto the stockings, holding them in place.

When Bucky's done, Steve's hard, his cock standing up between his thin, feminine legs.

Panting, Bucky wraps a slow hand around Steve's dick and starts to stroke; Steve groans and falls against him.

"Let me give you a hand with that, Stevie," he says.

"Please," Steve says, "Bucky. Please."

It doesn't take him long, like that, with Bucky's rough callused hand holding him tight, with the stockings on his legs making him look so small and delicate.

"You could wear 'em whenever you want," Bucky says, after. He's still running his hands up and down on Steve's thighs, over the edge where the stockings end and Steve's skin begins, like he can't bear to stop touching him.

"Yeah," Steve breathes. He's already imagining it, how they could go under his trousers, could be his to wear in secret to work, or around town.

How he could be a fairy all the time, if he wanted to be.

*  

A few days later, Steve finds himself sitting at home on his day off, wrapped up in a blanket on the living room sofa, and drawing for fun, for the first time in months. When Bucky fell asleep next to him, his fingers had itched with an old familiar longing, and for once he wasn't too shaking and exhausted to answer it. He'd managed not to wake Bucky when he got up to get his sketchbook and some pencils. As he traces the shape of Bucky's strong jaw, the dark fall of his eyelashes, the soft curl of his ear, Steve wonders if he'll ever have another moment this peaceful, this perfect. He can't imagine what more he might need in life.

Of course Bucky ruins it by waking up suddenly, snorting and blinking and looking around.

"I was just thinking how much more peaceful the place was with you sleeping," Steve teases.
"Good morning."

"God, I can't believe I fell asleep. What time is it?"

"Relax, it's only eleven. You don't have to work until five tonight, remember?"

At this Bucky sighs and relaxes back into the couch. "Right. Good." Looking around slowly, he finally notices the paper and pencil in Steve's hands. "Hey, you're drawing," he says.

Steve shrugs, not really ready to talk about it. It's been so long since he's picked up his pencils, and he doesn't know how long this creative feeling is going to last. "A fairy's gotta have some artistic pursuits, and we both know I'm no dancer. Besides, you looked so cute all sacked out there."

Bucky gets up and shuffles over to sit next to Steve, looking over his shoulder at the drawing. "Not bad," he says, his fingertips reaching toward the soft pencil lines. "Though you neglected to draw me as handsome as I truly am."

Steve rolls his eyes and elbows him. "You're lucky I don't cover you with warts."

"My handsomeness would prevail." Steve laughs. Bucky reaches out a hand for the sketchbook. "Can I look?"

Steve hesitates, knowing what's in the sketchbook, but then figures he's got nothing to hide. "Sure," he says.

Bucky flips through, looking at each picture soberly, without the ribbing Steve would expect over the boring pictures of trees and mothers with baby strollers. "How come you haven't been drawing lately?" he asks, not taking his eyes from the pages.

"I dunno," Steve says, thinking of the days when he came home exhausted, shaking, emptied of his last resources. "I had more important things to do, I guess. It's not like I've actually managed to save anything up for art school."

"Hey, we'll get you there," Bucky promises. "It might take a couple years of saving, but we'll do it. In the meantime, why don't you submit stuff freelance?"

Steve sighs. "I should, I guess. Just hard to do, knowing that I'm such an amateur compared to some of the guys out there. I think my last paid commission was doing an educational comic for one of Danielle's flyers. The pros would probably toss my stuff in the garbage anyway."

"Well," Bucky says slowly, "they certainly might not understand this." He flips the sketchbook around so that Steve can see. Even though he knew that Bucky would probably find that page, Steve blushes to see it.

"Yeah, the proportions are all off in that one," he says.

"Forget the proportions, Steve, is that Arnie Roth? From school?"

In the drawing, Arnie's skinny and slight, no more than fourteen or fifteen. He's leaning back on the old metal-frame bed he'd shared with his three brothers, and his hand, a mess of badly-drawn sausage-fingers, is wrapped around his dick. His other arm, mercifully, is tucked beneath his head so that the fingers don't show, but yeah, that bent elbow is really where all the proportions started to go wrong; Steve winces at the implied length of the forearm.

"Sure is," Steve says. He lets a beat go by between them before he says, "First boy I ever kissed."
Bucky whistles. "And here I thought you were a late bloomer."

"I was just a different kind of flower," Steve agrees.

"I think you mean fruit," Bucky replies, tartly. Steve laughs. "So did you and Arnie . . . ?"

Steve shrugs. "Yeah. Just schoolboy stuff, you know. Fooling around." It seems so long ago, but Steve still remembers how it had felt to him at the time, the breathless anticipation, their bodies warm and barely touching under the thin blanket, mouths and hands and the overwhelming pulse of recognition.

"So, I guess this is – " Bucky clears his throat. "It's not new, for you. It's been going on a while now."

Feeling his heart start to race, Steve nods. "Long as I can remember."

Bucky nods quickly, still looking at the picture. "You ever – when we were kids, and you were doing schoolboy stuff with Arnie, did you ever . . . " Bucky trails off, and Steve can see that he's blushing. It breaks Steve's heart and makes him brave at the same time.

"Long as I can remember, Buck," Steve says, softly. The words don't even stick in his throat. "I wanted you."

Biting his lip and meeting Steve's eyes, Bucky says, "I wish I'd known." And if Steve's heart wasn't broken before, it sure as hell is now.

"Me too," he says.

Blushing even harder, Bucky looks back down at the drawing and runs his fingers over the lines, up Arnie's bony shoulder, down his slim torso to his thigh. Steve winces again, noticing how weirdly shaped the left thigh is compared to the right.

"I wonder where old Arnie is now," Bucky says.

"Actually, I heard from someone down at Vincent's that he's settled down. Got himself a husband, an architect or something, living quite comfortably out in Queens."

"Bully for Arnie," Bucky smiles. He shuffles a little further down on the sofa, so that he's sitting with his head on Steve's knee. Tentatively, Steve runs his fingers through Bucky's soft, dark hair.

"Yeah, we'll see how long it lasts. Maybe I'll see him at the queer bars again before too long."

"Speaking of, you haven't been in a while."

"Yeah, I've been busy with you," Steve grins.

"I was just wondering," Bucky says, still running his fingers over the lines of Arnie's body. "I was wondering if you were going to go back."

Steve frowns. "Well, it's amateur night coming up soon, and Betty always does this act where she sings and tells jokes. I promised her I'd go. The guys all say she's pretty good."

"Right," Bucky says, too quickly. "Right. What I mean is, if you meet a fella when you're there, and you want to go home with him, you should."

Steve stops petting Bucky's hair. "Okay," he says. "Are you saying that because you want to go
Bucky rolls over a little and looks up at him. "Not other fairies," he clarifies. He looks nervous, worried about Steve's reaction. "Just girls, like I used to. Is that okay?"

"Yeah," Steve says, full of affection, "yeah, that's fine, Buck. You know I never expected you to go steady with anyone, least of all me."

It's funny, because Steve used to be so jealous of all the girls Bucky dated, but now he has what they had: he knows the taste of Bucky's lips and the sounds he makes when he's fucking and the feeling of his weight pressing downwards. And now that he knows, it's like the heat goes out of his jealousy, and he doesn't mind sharing.

Bucky's hand comes up to stroke Steve's jawline, and Steve leans into the touch. "If it were anyone, I think it'd be you," he whispers. Steve kisses his fingertips gently.

He knows that, if it's anyone, it really shouldn't be him. Bucky can have so much more. But Steve will keep him while he can.

"These last weeks have been nice," Steve says, "but to be honest I do kind of miss the scene. You can see other girls, and I'll see other guys. And we'll still have this."

"You'll still be my best girl," Bucky says softly.

Leaning down, Steve kisses him, a brief touch of their lips together.

"I've been thinking," Bucky says, when Steve pulls away again. "Do you want to draw me?"

Steve furrows his brow. "I just did. That sketch was pretty much done when you woke up, I don't need to do anything more with it."

"No, numbskull," Bucky says, exasperated, "I mean, like you drew Arnie."

"Ohhh," Steve says. "You just want an excuse to show off."

"Maybe I do. Can you blame me?"

"Okay, tiger," Steve grins, "strip down and lounge against something and I'll see what I can do." Taking back his notebook, Steve flips to a fresh page. Bucky starts skinning out of his clothes.

"Don't forget my handsomeness this time," he cautions. "I don't want to be misremembered by future generations."

Steve laughs. "If by your handsomeness you mean your prick, then I'm sure I won't be able to miss it."

"You bet your ass you won't, punk," Bucky grins, lounging artistically against the arm of the sofa. Of course he lounges like an old pro, loose limbs and an easy manner. His body was made for this, made to be seen: clean lines and solid muscle, his dick half-hard amid dark pubic hair, his face open and expressive.

The first stroke of Steve's pencil against the paper feels like a caress.

* 

The next morning, while Bucky's sleeping off his night shift and Steve's waiting around to head to...
work, Steve can't put the sketchbook down. He keeps opening it up to the drawings of Bucky he did the day before, adding little details here and there, putting in some shading, but mostly just staring at it. It's nice to be able to have the version of Bucky that he always sees in his head rendered on the paper in front of him.

He thinks for a long while, sharpening his pencils carefully with a knife and wondering what else he might want to draw.

Deciding that it's not anything currently in the apartment, he grabs his materials and his jacket and heads out the door. On the landing, he runs into Pauline, Danielle's roommate, coming down the stairs. She's in a smart-looking tie and skirt suit, her purse in her hands; she looks like she's headed out for her job in the typing pool.

"Hi there," Steve says amicably. "Off to work?"

"Yeah, Valentine is visiting, so." She trails off, obviously unsure if she should say I'm giving them some time alone. She smiles at Steve awkwardly.

"Huh, I was thinking of knocking on their door," Steve says. "You think they want, uh." He searches for a word other than privacy. "Quiet?"

Pauline shrugs. "They're reading the paper," she says. "I gotta get to work anyway, I just thought I'd head out early."

"Have a good day," Steve says, as she heads down the stairwell.

He walks up the two flights of stairs, breathing hard, and knocks on Danielle's door. He figures they'll tell him to buzz off if they want some time to themselves.

"Steve!" Danielle says, opening the door. "Come in, let us make you some tea."

"I'm not interrupting?" Steve asks.

"No, Valentine was just reading to me from the Catholic Worker. Did you hear about these miners organizing in Detroit?"

"Yeah, I hope they can make some headway," Steve says.

"So what brings you here on this fine morning, Steven?" Valentine asks, flipping the edge of the newsletter down and looking over her reading glasses at him.

"I've got an hour or so before work, and was thinking I'd like to draw something." He smiles. "Or someone."

"Huh," Danielle says. "And you thought of us?"

"Well you're only one floor away," Steve says, "so mostly it was easy."

"I didn't know you were an artist, Steve," Valentine says. Steve shrugs, not wanting to get into a long explanation. "I'm trying to get back to it. It's been a while." "Well, before I commit to having my likeness sketched, I shall have to see a sample of your work," Valentine replies, clipping her accent upwards like a fancy Manhattan lady. Danielle shakes her head and heads over to their hot plate to put the kettle on.
Steve turns to his recent portrait of Bucky – the clothed one – and holds it out to her. She gazes at it critically. "I did that yesterday," he says, to fill time while she looks it over. "I don't have a lot of other recent stuff, I haven't been drawing much."

"Did you know that my mother is an artist?" Valentine asks.

"I didn't," Steve says. "What medium does she use?"

"Oils," Valentine replies. "Though she has less opportunity for it since the family moved down here from Harlem. She's had to work a lot more."

Steve nods.

"This is really great," Valentine muses. "You've got a gift for capturing personality; it feels just like Barnes. Why haven't you been drawing?"

"I haven't had any models beautiful enough," Steve replies. "As you can see, I had to settle for my roommate."

"Yeah, he's pretty hard on the eyes," Valentine says, handing the sketchbook back to Steve.

"I can barely stand living with him," Steve agrees.

"That's not the impression I got," Danielle says, teasingly, bringing him a cup of tea. Steve takes it carefully in both hands before setting it on the battered little table next to the couch.

Steve grins and ducks his head. "So, what do you say, ladies? A free portrait?"

"Why not," Danielle says. "We've got nothing on till later today."

They settle together on the couch, with Danielle perching awkwardly at first on the edge of the cushions. After a moment or two, Valentine grabs her arm and pulls her backward so that they're lying back against the couch together, Valentine's arms around Danielle's shoulders.

"Who's gonna know," Valentine says, and kisses her on the cheek. "Steve won't tell."

Steve blushes to be allowed to see them like this, relaxed in each others' arms. He draws them like that, tangled up together.

"How still do you need us to be," Danielle asks, twisting around with a half a frown on her face.

"Not too still," Steve says. "You can talk."

"Well thank God for that," Valentine says, and they all laugh. Steve draws the corner of Valentine's mouth, tilting up in a wry smile. "Then let's talk about something desperately important to justify all this time we're spending doing nothing."

"They're about to start construction again on the Second Avenue Subway," Steve offers.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Danielle snorts, inelegantly. Steve draws her short, frizzy hair.

"Is that honestly the best topic you could think of, Steve?" Valentine demands. "I ask you for something important and you bypass politics and world movements for local construction projects?"

"Hey, providing cheap, easily-accessed transportation for everyone is part of raising up the
working class." He draws Valentine's arched eyebrows.

Danielle laughs. "He's got you there, sweetheart," she says. Valentine smooches her on the top of the head, hard, in revenge.

"I suppose so," Valentine smiles. "Local action for local results. Actually there are a lot of Negro women down in my neighborhood who would benefit from a new subway."

Their conversation passes on to the various local unions that are forming or trying to form, to the people leading those unions, and then eventually descends into pure gossip.

"No, I'm telling you, he made time with her sister," Danielle insists. Steve gave her permission to light a cigarette, which she did with obvious desperation, and she takes a slow puff now, considering the situation. She's careful to blow the smoke away from Steve, though, because she knows it makes him cough. "Not classy."

"And I'm telling you," Valentine argues, "you're thinking of the wrong woman. Alice's sister is Florence Reed -- "

"Yes, exactly, Florence -- "

"And Florence Reed has never gone out with a man in her life," Valentine concludes triumphantly. Meeting Steve's eyes, she says, "She's one of us."

Steve can't help but smile, pleased to be included in the "us." Danielle huffs.

"Florence Reed is the one who dated that Italian guy for a month and a half, they were practically going steady," she says.

"That's Florence Landon," Steve puts in. "And the Italian guy was Lorenzo Conti, who's with the Steelworkers, remember?"

"Florence Landon," Valentine says, slapping her hand on the couch. "I knew there was another Florence."

"Wait, is Florence Reed the one with the trousers and the cute suspenders -- "

"Yes!" Valentine says.

"Oh." Danielle wrinkles her nose. "Well, jeez, she's never gone out with a man in her life."

Steve laughs, and Valentine buries her face against Danielle's shoulder, and Steve draws the place where their hands touch, their fingers laced loosely together.

In the sketch, Danielle looks a little uncomfortable and long-suffering, and Valentine has a satisfied grin on her face, but they both look happy, glad to be in each other's arms and smiling for the portrait.

"I'll do some more shading and stuff before I give it to you," Steve promises. "Right now I gotta get off to work. But here it is." He holds it out to them, sheepishly, and Danielle takes it.


"Well, that's all right then," Valentine says. "I also think Steve captured the fact that you're a stubborn ass, look, you can see it in your eyes."
"It's lovely, Steve," Danielle says pointedly, handing it back to him. "When you bring it back, we're gonna put it right up on the wall."

"Pauline won't mind?" Steve asks, replacing the paper carefully in his book to work on later, after work.

Danielle winks. "Pauline'll be jealous. That girl can't keep a lady around long enough to sit for a portrait."

*

The spring passes on into the clear bright summer of 1941, and Bucky doesn't change his mind, or kick him out, or stop grabbing Steve up in the front room, every now and again, and kissing him soundly. Steve keeps on drawing, and he finds himself going out to the bars more and more often, laughing and clapping at the drag balls, getting squired by a series of big, handsome guys who treat him right, and coming home to Bucky and their shared bed.

He wears his stockings to work – not all the time, just now and then, and on the days he does he feels different, stronger and taller, gorgeous with every slide of the soft material against his legs.

The Dodgers do pretty good that summer, too, and look like they might even make it to the series.

Marlene and Betty start coming over, sometimes, so that they can all get ready together, and Bucky ends up acting as fashion judge half the time, a role he takes to eagerly and lasciviously. Steve never gets quite as dragged up as they do, staying mostly away from ladies' clothes and embellishing with bright shirts and scarves and flowers, but he wonders what it might be like to wear the stockings Bucky gave him under a soft little flower-print dress. Maybe one day he'll try it, when he can save up enough to buy something pretty to wear; both Marlene and Betty are way too tall for him to be able to borrow anything.

"We never should've prettied you up in the first place, Steve," Betty laughs, taking a pull of her cigarette. "We can't get noticed with you around. You should see him, James, there's no girl commands attention at the clubs like your Steve."

Bucky grins. "I'm sure that's true. I'll have to come along sometime."

"You'd just cramp my style," Steve says, punching him lightly in the shoulder.

"You'd be the center of attention," Marlene says, smiling softly at Bucky. Bucky smiles back.

"Any chance you'll be 21 sometime soon, Steve? Maybe we can get you drafted into the military and have the place to ourselves again."

Marlene frowns. "That's not the nicest thing to say, Betty," she says. "Anyway, won't you be 21 soon?"

Betty sighs. "Darn it, you're right. I'm getting too old for this life; I'll be 21 in December. But I'll make sure the Army doesn't take me; I'll just tell them I'm a faggot and they'll turf me out."

"Good luck ever getting a job again after that," Marlene says, furrowing her brow.

"I've been thinking about it," Steve says softly, and the rest of them turn to listen. "I think I'd like to serve, when the time comes. I'm already past 21, actually, though I haven't gotten a letter yet."

"You will. Roosevelt wants us to go to war, it's gonna happen eventually," Marlene says.
"I think we should be in it officially already," Steve replies. "It's not enough, to send supplies and whatever else. Roosevelt's right. Even the communists are fighting Hitler these days."

"But that doesn't mean you have to go," Bucky says slowly. "You're not – I mean, what if you had an asthma attack or something?"

Steve shrugs. "I'd have them whether I'm here or there. Seems like I could do some good there."

Bucky gets the look on his face that he's been wearing a lot, lately, the look he gets whenever Steve brings up the war. He doesn't know how to interpret it. He hopes it's just protectiveness.

"Anyway, this isn't helping us get ready for tonight," Betty sighs, cutting through the tension. "We're supposed to be putting on makeup and talking about frivolous, girly things, not dishing on war and presidents and such."

Steve nods, swallowing back what he wants to say.

That night at Vincent's Steve flirts and laughs and goes home with a new guy – Tommy – but for some reason he can't shake the gloom from his shoulders, not even in the warm summer air, the feeling that something isn't quite right. It's not until he's on his hands and knees for Tommy, waiting to get fucked, that he realizes what it is.

"Such a pretty, soft little ass," Tommy is saying, as he slides inside. Steve arches back into the familiar pleasure, but Tommy's words feel jarring and wrong. He recognizes, suddenly, the old feeling of misfit, the idea that his body isn't shaped right for the things he wants it to do. He hasn't really felt this way in over a year, not since he started going with guys regularly, not since he got his new job.

But it wells up inside him suddenly, the knowledge that wanting this fucking is inconsistent with the other things he wants, the other things he wishes his body could do. Tommy runs his big hands up and down Steve's sides, over his thighs, going on about how pretty Steve is, and Steve is caught between desire and disgust, between the compliments that he's always loved and the feeling that, even if his body is good at this, it's still not good enough.

"Harder," he tells Tommy, through gritted teeth, "do me harder," but it turns out that Tommy isn't much of a long-term prospect, and he comes in Steve's ass before Steve can get very into it.

He apologizes and jacks Steve off afterwards, which is pretty sweet of him, so Steve tries to be polite and lets himself come over Tommy's hand. Tommy kisses him, and it's nice, it's nice, it feels good, but the way Tommy cups his cheek and presses in with his tongue is also a reminder of how men see him: a pretty little fairy, not a real man, and never a soldier.

"You're real sweet," Tommy says softly, wetly, against his mouth. "Can I see you again?"

"Maybe I'll see you around the bar sometime," Steve says, getting up to leave. He doesn't even stick around long enough for Tommy to give him some money. He doesn't know if he does ever want to see him again.

There's a fire hydrant hissing water outside of Tommy's building, and Steve stoops down next to it and cups water in his hands, using it to scrub the makeup off his face. When he thinks he's gotten most of it, he pulls out his handkerchief and uses it to mop up.

There are a couple leftover smears of lipstick and eyeshadow on the cloth when he takes it away from his face.
Stomach rolling at the sight, he jams it into his pocket.

* 

When he gets home, Bucky is sitting on the stoop with some of the neighbors, drinking a Piel's and joking around in the late summer twilight.

"Hey, Stevie," he says, happily, as he sees Steve coming up the steps. "What's going on?"

"Looks like someone held him down and washed his face for him," some guy sitting next to Bucky – Charlie, maybe, from downstairs – cracks. "About time."

Steve wipes self-consciously at his mouth, and turns his focus on Charlie. "You got something to say to me, you say it," he growls, already feeling his fists curling up in rage.

"Hey, Steve, let's go upstairs and have a beer, whaddya say – " Bucky begins, standing up, but then Charlie stands up too.

"I'm not too proud to pound a fucking fairy like you into the ground," he says.

The unintentional double entendre makes Steve want to laugh, so he lets it out in a slow, seductive smile. "I bet you're not, honey," he says sweetly, and bats his eyelashes. It gets him the desired reaction.

As he hits the ground, Steve lashes out against the body on top of him, kicking and punching, feeling the blows from Charlie's huge fists but taking them easily. Twisting, he knees Charlie hard, in the groin, which gives him enough time to struggle on top and punch him in the face for good measure.

As he can hear people laughing and cheering around him, can almost pick out Bucky's voice in the din, calling his name, but his world is narrowed down to the big, strong body pressed up against his, the taste of blood in his mouth, the singing pain in his knuckles as he belts Charlie again, and again, until Charlie holds up his hands in surrender.

"Stop, stop, Jesus," he's saying, to the hoots and hollers of the crowd.

Steve gets up off of him and offers him a hand up.

"Okay, how about now we head upstairs," Bucky murmurs, taking him by the shoulders and pushing him forward. Steve lets himself be led.

"I'll wear whatever I fucking want," he/yells back, over his shoulder. Bucky grabs him by the collar and manhandles him up the stairs.

When they get to their rooms and close the door, Bucky gets a rag and cleans up his face and knuckles with cold water from their tap. Most of the bleeding stops right away.

"Take off your shirt," Bucky says, the first words he's said since they shut the apartment door.

Steve's tempted to make a joke, but he's not sure Bucky would appreciate it right now. Instead he does as Bucky says, unbuttons the shirt he was wearing and shrugs it off. It's bright green, so the little dots of blood on the collar look grey-black where the green has mixed with the red. He peels off his undershirt next, and sits half-naked in front of Bucky, skinny ribs and narrow arms exposed.

He doesn't feel beautiful, like he usually does when Bucky looks at him. He feels small.
Bucky pokes carefully around the edges of the bruises that are forming on his chest and belly, making Steve hiss in pain a few times.

"Sorry," he says, perfunctorily. As he follows the line of Steve's ribs, he says, "You know, you didn't have to egg that guy into fighting you."

Steve shrugs, though the motion hurts his shoulder. He thinks it hit the pavement when Charlie tackled him. "I gotta stand up for myself."

"You gotta prove something, it ain't the same thing," Bucky says, angrily. "Is this about what I said before, about you not going into the Army?"

"No," Steve says. Bucky doesn't ask again, just carefully runs his fingertips over Steve's wounded body, checking for breaks or unusual bruising. His touch is gentle and knowing; he's done this for Steve dozens of times since they were kids.

"Maybe," Steve corrects himself. "I don't know, it's all messed up in my head."

Bucky nods. "I'm sorry I said it. I worry about you, Stevie, that's all."

"Yeah, I know," Steve says, and he's suddenly tired: from the unsatisfying fuck, from the fight, from the long flights of stairs up to their rooms. "It's just sometimes that feels – like you don't see what I really am, or what I want."

Bucky snorts. "You're the one who picks fights with guys twice your size," he says.

"I'm the one who wins fights with guys twice my size," Steve corrects him.

"You're not wrong there," Bucky says. He gets to the last rib and finishes his examination. "Well, I don't think there's anything broken, which is funny because this is one time we could actually afford a doctor for you if you needed one."

There had been a time, a few years ago, when a guy had broken Steve's arm, and they were too poor to do anything but treat it themselves. Bucky had tied Steve's arm to the brace solidly, silent and frowning the whole time, and he hadn't said a word of blame to Steve's face.

It'd healed pretty good in the end. He still has some numbness in his pinky finger, but it's only his left arm, anyway. Steve sometimes thinks it was worth the pain, and the numbness, to see Bucky's face when he patched him up, solemn and careful, like Steve was something precious to be taken care of.

"Thanks for looking after me, Buck," Steve says, voice hoarse.

"It's what I do," Bucky shrugs.

Leaning forward, Steve kisses him softly, as a thank you at first, but it gets deeper pretty quick. Kissing Bucky half the time is so good that Steve plain forgets there's anything else he'd like to be doing; he searches for that feeling now, of getting lost in the lush press of Bucky's lips against his.

"You might wanna slow down, pal," Bucky says, against his mouth. "You got beat pretty bad."

Steve growls at this and pushes Bucky's shoulders down to the couch, climbing up over his lap and kissing him again.

"Or," Bucky says, breathlessly, between hot kisses, "you could," kiss, "do the opposite," kiss, "of
what I say."

Laughing low in his chest, Steve says, "That's pretty much my strategy."

He leans further down, kissing and biting at Bucky's throat, running his teeth against the stubble there. Bucky groans and squeezes his ass. It feels a little – odd, not like it usually does, but Steve pushes on. It won't be like it was with Tommy. It'll be good, and then Steve can forget about Tommy, forget about Charlie, and just focus on Bucky's body against his.

"I want you inside me," he whispers. "Please, Buck."

"Okay, okay," Bucky says. "C'mere." He wraps his hands around Steve's torso, spanning his ribs, then stroking up to thumb over his nipples. The weird feeling intensifies, and his stomach clenches as a wave of dizziness rolls through his head. This is too close, too claustrophobic, Bucky's big hands covering so much of Steve's small body, and he squirms away.

"Sorry, I hit a bruise?" Bucky asks, trailing his fingers more carefully over Steve's unmarked belly.

"No."

Steve backs up again, so he's straddling Bucky's knees right at the edge of the couch.

Bucky blinks at him, confused. "Steve, I can't really fuck you without touching you," he says reasonably.

"I know, I know," Steve grumbles. He hesitates; he wants the old familiar feeling of rightness that he gets from Bucky's hands on his body, but when Bucky touches him, he doesn't feel right. He feels like he did in Tommy's bed and held down by Charlie's body, small and weak and wrong.

"What's the matter, baby?" Bucky asks, and the nickname grates and scratches and doesn't fit inside Steve's head.

He stands up, putting some distance between them, and finds his undershirt. He feels a little better, pulling it on. "I dunno," he mutters, not meeting Bucky's eyes. "Maybe – is it okay if we don't fuck right now?"

"Yeah," Bucky says. "Of course."

Steve nods, picking up his green shirt. It's so soft, so delicate. He marches it into the bedroom and throws it onto the floor next to his bed.

Bucky comes in behind him, leaning against the doorframe. "Hey, Steve, can we talk about this? Did I do something wrong?"

Steve takes a deep breath and turns toward him. "No, I – " He grasps for the words. "I keep wondering when my conscription letter is gonna come. I keep wondering if I should even be a soldier."

Frowning, Bucky sighs. "I guess I've been feeling that way too," he says. "I'd worry about you, if you were over there fighting."

"I'd worry about you too, Buck," Steve says, crossing his arms.

"You know what I mean."

"You mean I'm weak," Steve says, and feels angry tears springing to his eyes. "You mean I'm small, and weak, and girly, and I shouldn't be – shouldn't be – "
"Hey, hey," Bucky says, coming a little closer, reaching out and then pulling his hand back before he can actually touch Steve's shoulder. "Whatever the hell else you are, Steve, I can't imagine anybody thinking you're weak. And I know you're a fighter at heart," he says.

Steve looks up at him. "But you don't think I should go to war."

"God, Steve, I don't know. It's hard to get my head around it, that you can be so sweet and soft and then such a scrappy little shit at the same time."

Steve nods, breathing out shakily. "I'm both of those things, Bucky."

"I know," Bucky says. "Hey, can you – will you come over here? Sit down with me."

He sits on the edge of the bed, and gestures Steve to sit beside him. Steve walks over and thumps down onto the thin mattress. He and Bucky have fucked here so many times. Bucky called him beautiful, and called him his girl, and it'd felt so good, like finding a part of himself in the way Bucky looked at him.

But now the war's on it feels like he's lost something, too, that he didn't think he'd need.

Bucky slings an arm around his shoulders and squeezes. "I've known you your whole life," he says. "You gotta remember that, Stevie. Doesn't matter how you change or what you decide you want, I'm still gonna know you. Even if I mess it up sometimes."

Steve nods. His head is bowed, and he watches two tears – one from each eye – fall down onto his pants.

"That means a lot, Buck," he says.

"You can tell me anything," Bucky says, "I'm always gonna listen."

"Okay," Steve says. It's true, he can feel the truth of it, that he could wear anything, want anything, do anything, and Bucky would be there for him. Would understand him, or if he didn't understand, would listen until he did.

Squeezing him again, Bucky says, "Can I do anything? Make it better?"

Steve smiles. "Maybe just don't let go, Buck," he says.

"Here," Bucky says softly, "here, Stevie, lay down with me."

Steve looks up at him, and nods, and they shift slowly down onto their backs, Steve lying mostly on top of Bucky on the narrow bed.

"I gotcha, buddy," Bucky whispers.

*

For a few days, Steve doesn't go out to the clubs, or put on any lipstick, or even look at his body when he changes his clothes; sometimes even the thought of seeing himself is enough to make him feel down.

Bucky's real nice about it, letting Steve hold his hand or kiss him when he feels up to it, so that after a while the feeling starts to go away, and he doesn't feel so on edge every day, just walking around.
He manages to shake the gloom off a while later, and before too long he finds himself back out with his friends, pretty and glad in the lipstick Bucky bought him, in the new shirt Betty lent him, shoulders back and ready to holler for the drag queens who sing the house down. He goes out and gets fucked and it's okay, mostly, it's okay. Except for the sick feeling of disgust that resurges, every now and then, and makes him want to avoid the mirror, the clubs, the interested glances of men. It makes him mad, that the thing he's loved most about his life lately, the thing that's given him such a sense of belonging, doesn't always belong to him anymore.

When that happens, Bucky holds him, and doesn't fuck him, and strokes his hair, and it's almost good enough.

* 

The Dodgers make it to the series, up against the Yankees no less, and even though they get pretty thoroughly trounced, he and Bucky manage to make it to a few of the games, and get to witness the trouncing themselves. The feeling of Bucky's thigh pressed up against his in the stands takes Steve back to when they were kids, when watching the Dodgers lose together was an uncomplicated pleasure.

But then again, the feeling of Bucky's mouth pressed against his, elation and joy spilling between them after the Dodgers actually squeak out a win in Game Two, is the kind of complicated pleasure that Steve doesn't think he could bear to live without.

* 

As the fall passes into winter, Steve tries not to think about the conscription letter that hasn't come, and focuses on his drawing instead: buildings, dogs, people he sees in the park. On days off, when he's not at his Catholic Worker meetings or picketing somewhere with Danielle, he sets up a stand on the street and sells a few portraits, which adds a little income as the weather starts getting cold again and heat starts getting expensive.

He tries to get better at drawing fast, so he can get the basic lines of a composition down in a few seconds flat, then fill in later if the subject's moved on. He mostly does the sketches on spare bits of paper that he finds lying around: old newspapers, candy wrappers, shipping manifests from work, that kind of thing, but he adds a few to his sketchbook, too, when he likes how the sketch came out.

One night, while Bucky's off having dinner with his folks, Steve sits and doodles random things from the apartment – the bare light bulb, Bucky's little row of pomades, his own foot – wondering whether or not he feels like going out to a bar. His knees are bad today, but he hasn't seen a lot of the guys in a while. Hyam and Helena are supposed to have started something up, at least according to Betty, and Steve would kinda like to check in and get the latest news. On the other hand, it's already late, and it's dark outside, and he might've missed the crowds anyway.

Just as he's trying to convince himself to get up, grab a lipstick, and get going – it's not that far to Vincent's – there's a knock at his door.

When Steve answers it, it's Marlene standing on the other side, her makeup smeared and running with sweat, her clothes in disarray. It's not like he's never seen her a little messed up after a night out on the town, but he's never seen this expression on her face: scared, shocked dismay.

A cascade of images runs through Steve's mind, of all the things that might possibly have gone wrong: rapes, muggings, and beatings are all common enough around here, especially if you're walking alone and wearing makeup.
"Hey, Marlene, you okay?" he asks, standing aside and gesturing her in. She's been in the apartment before, but never when it was just her and Steve. She moves easily enough, at least, and doesn't look hurt from what Steve can see.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she says, but she's holding her hat in her hands and worrying it around with her fingers. She steps inside, and Steve closes the door. "But everyone else isn't. Vincent's just got raided."

Steve's eyebrows go up. "Damn," he says. "Who got arrested?"


As she's talking, Steve's already shoving his shoes on his feet, doing up the laces hastily. "Okay, so we go down to the police station –"

Marlene puts her hand on his shoulder and shakes her head. "I already been. No one's getting out till morning, they say."

Steve takes a deep breath. "Is there something we can do, though? Get bail or something?"

Running a hand through her hair, Marlene purses her lips. "There is no bail. They haven't even charged anyone yet. The cops only rounded up a few of us, like an example. I think they're just being held long enough to scare them."

"Okay," Steve says. "Okay." That's the best-case scenario, really, if they're not going to charge anyone with Homosexual Solicitation. No charges means no names in the papers, none of their friends sent to Rikers this time. He fidgets, wishing there were something he could do, someone he could yell at, some way he could work to make this right.

"I know, I couldn't – it's infuriating, knowing they're all locked up and who-knows-what is going on and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Yeah," Steve says, "I guess we have to wait." Slowly, he unties his shoes and kicks them off. It feels like surrender. He sighs. "You wanna sit down? Or I guess we could go out and get a bite at Childs or something, if you're hungry."

"Can I hang around here a while?" Marlene asks. "I mean, it's been a long night, and I – I knocked on your door because I didn't want to go home by myself."

Steve nods. "Yeah, of course. Hang on, I've got a little tin of biscuits if you want."

He goes into the bedroom to fetch them off the shelf. When he comes back, Marlene is glancing over the sketches Steve was just making, the silly detail drawings.

"Not really my best work," Steve says apologetically, setting down the tin.

"Thanks, Steve," Marlene says. She takes a biscuit, crunching into it dryly. Steve wishes they had some tea or something he could offer her. "These are really good, actually."

"Thanks," Steve feels a little embarrassed, because they're not really much of anything.

"Do you have any others I could look at?" she asks. Steve smiles.

"Yeah, hang on." He fetches his sketchbook from under the tiny, rickety table. "Not all of these are
for a ladies’ eyes, you understand.”

This makes Marlene laugh, and Steve relaxes a little at the sound. "Honey, I may be a girl, but I ain't no lady," she says, sounding just like one of the tough dames from the pictures.

He doesn't show her the ones of Bucky, because it feels a little too personal and also he doesn't want to hurt her feelings, but he shows her all the clothed pictures, and then the couple of nudes he's done lately: one of Frank, laughing with his face pressed into disarranged bedclothes, blushing under his freckles; and one of Hyam, after the first of a few nights they'd spent together, his full lips smiling behind his beard, one leg drawn up on the bed, his dick lying quietly against his thigh.

"Gosh," Marlene says. Steve grins, embarrassed.

"I know it seems a little . . . you know, blue or something," he says, feeling himself flush when he says it. It's like he still worries his Ma's ghost is going to come down and slap him. "But it's – I mean, I always feel really close to the people I draw that way."

Marlene nods solemnly. Her thumb rubs against the corner of the page, right below the place where Hyam's right leg fades away at the ankle. Steve still gets annoyed trying to draw feet sometimes.

"Do you have one of Bucky?" she asks. She looks up at him, clear-eyed, and he shrugs.

"Yeah."

"Do you think he'd want me to see it?"

Steve huffs a laugh. "He specifically told me to mimeo some copies and plaster them around town. And gave me a list of names of particular people he thought I definitely ought to show it to."

"That flattering, huh?"

"I guess," Steve says, suddenly shy about what that drawing might reveal about how he looks at Bucky. Bitng his lip, he flips back to those pages, first to the drawing of Bucky asleep, which makes Marlene smile, and then the nude one.

"Wow," she says.

"So, it is pretty flattering, then," Steve says, trying to make a joke. Marlene doesn't reply right away, running her finger over the sketch, about an inch above the surface so she doesn't smear it, tracing the lines of Bucky's shoulder, his hip, his ankle.

"It's not really that," she says, eventually. "It's more like – the way you see him. The light around him, the look on his face. It looks just like him." Smiling up at Steve, she says, "You really love him."

Steve coughs against a sudden tightness in his throat. "Yeah," he says. Clearing his throat again, he says it a little more clearly: "Yeah. But Betty, uh, Betty told me about you and Bucky."

"Oh yeah? She tell you I was in love with him?"

"Yeah, she did," Steve says.

Sighing dramatically, Marlene flops back against the couch. "Hope you're not the jealous type, then."
"Nah," Steve says. "I think he's gorgeous too, after all."

"Good, because I'm wildly jealous of you two. All shacked up playing house, husband and fairy. Quite the dream." She smiles softly to make sure Steve's not offended.

"I'm – we're not – Bucky and I still see other people," Steve says, trying to get his head around that word, husband. People talk about it that way sometimes, when a pansy finds a guy to look after him, a wolf or a queer or someone like that, a little older, maybe, with some money. But he and Bucky aren't – Bucky isn't his –

"Still," Marlene insists gently. There's a long pause. Her eyes go far away for a minute, and her mouth pulls downward.

"Thinking about Betty?" Steve asks. It's weighing on him, too, the idea of his friends locked up all night, maybe being hurt or raped or humiliated by the cops. He clenches his fist, almost crumpling the sketchbook page with Bucky's nude. He lets go as quickly as he made the fist; there's nothing he can do right now. He can't start a fight with a whole station full of police.

It's a good thing he wasn't there when it went down, or he might've tried. He's been in and out of a bunch of different clubs, but Vincent's is where his family is.

Marlene nods. "I talked to Hyam, he was there but they don't arrest the queer men, you know, just the fairies and drag queens usually."

Steve nods.

"He said Betty – " Marlene looks like she might be about to cry, and Steve turns toward her in anticipation of those tears, shuffling closer. "Betty threw her shoe at the cops," Marlene manages eventually, breaking out into laughter.

"She – what?" Steve asks, as Marlene chuckles helplessly. "She threw her shoe?"

Marlene nods, still laughing, and Steve starts to laugh too, struck by the image.

"Like, she unlaced it, took it off, and – "

Marlene shakes her head, touching his shoulder to get him to stop. "No, no, Steve," she says, "tonight's amateur night. She was singing."

"She was in drag," Steve realizes, in awe.

"She threw a size eleven red high heel," Marlene says, eyes wide. "It hit a cop right in the face. Cut him pretty good, too."

"Jesus Christ," Steve says. He's amazed, but also, that's not gonna bode well. "Did they – is she okay?"

"Hyam says they didn't see who threw it," Marlene says, and a slow smile comes over her face. "And a bunch of the kids in drag all kicked off their shoes so they wouldn't be able to tell. Whole floor was scattered with heels and loafers and so forth."

"That's amazing," Steve breathes. "Oh wow."

"So I'm worried about her," Marlene says. "And also – sad that I missed it, too, y'know?"

Steve nods. He doesn't want to go to prison any more than the next guy, but damn, it sounds like it
Marlene toys with the edge of Steve's sketchbook again, and it looks like it's an unconscious movement, fretting with the paper as increasingly dark thoughts spin through her head.

"You want me to draw you?" he offers, the words popping out of his mouth at the same moment that the thought occurs to him. "Might take our minds off things."

"God, I'm a mess," Marlene says, running her hands through her hair. She keeps it a little longer than most fellas would. Usually she slicks it back with pomade, but right now it's falling forward into her eyes, making her look unkempt and rough.

"Well, it's not a photograph," Steve says. "I'll take artistic liberties. But if you want you can use my makeup and fix yourself up a little first."

She hesitates, and Steve moves back to make more space between them on the couch. "I mean, it's fine if you don't want to – "

"No, I want to," Marlene says, grinning at him a little cockily. "I was just thinking about what your husband might think if he came home and saw me naked in your rooms."

"He'd think I was getting lucky," Steve says, grinning back. "And he's not my husband, Marlene, jeez."

"If you say so."

"Lipstick and stuff's in the bedroom, on the little table," Steve says. "Use whatever you like. I owe you after all the stuff you guys have lent me."

"You're damn right you do," Marlene laughs. She pulls on the overhead light and takes a few minutes freshening up; when she comes back out, she's neat as a pin, hair slicked back, scarf tied in an asymmetrical knot in the open collar of her shirt, eyeshadow done in the bright blue that Bucky got him and that Steve hasn't yet been brave enough to try.

"Gorgeous," Steve says.

She strikes a little pose, then falls out of it, laughing. "I think I smell like Bucky now," she says. "Is this his pomade?"

"Yup," Steve says. "He's got a little fairy in him."

"Oh really," Marlene says, and Steve blushes bright red at what he's just implied. "Does he? Now and again? Well, no one's gonna ask what you two get up to behind closed doors, are they."

"I didn't mean it like that," Steve says, wishing he could erase what he said.

"It's okay, Steve," Marlene says, softly. She puts a hand on his arm, and in that touch Steve can feel a whole world of compassion. "I was teasing. I'm sorry. Maybe I shouldn't tease you, about him. I know I wouldn't like it if it were – if it were me."

Steve nods, and breathes out. "It's only that – you know. He's really not a fairy. He goes with girls a lot."

"Yeah, I've seen him." Marlene's hand slides down his arm until their hands touch, and she curls her fingers around his tentatively.
"He's not like the queer guys, like Frank or Johnny. He can get married. Be a real husband to someone. Have kids. I think he wants kids someday."

"Damn," Marlene says, softly, compassionately. Leaning down – she has three or four inches on Steve – she kisses his forehead. "You ever talk to him about this?"

Steve shrugs. "I don't want to make him feel obligated to me."

"Uh huh," Marlene says. She gives Steve's hand a squeeze, then walks backward, putting a few paces between them.

"All right," she says, "where do you want me? And what do you want me wearing?"

Steve lets out a breath. "Up to you," he says. "You can sit or lie down however you're comfortable."

"Comfortable, huh," she says, staring at the tiny couch shoved into the corner of the small room. She tries a bunch of different positions, adjusting her elbow or her leg awkwardly, trying to find a natural way to sit. "Why have I forgotten how sitting works?" she asks, exasperated.

Steve laughs. "Sometimes it helps to imagine a relaxing situation," he says.

"You'd think I'd be more relaxed without Betty around," she says, folding and then unfolding her legs. "All that peace and quiet, no one yelling dirty jokes in the street at two a.m. and threatening to get us beaten up and robbed."

Steve nods, flipping to a blank page in his sketchbook. "She's got a big personality, all right," he agrees.

Marlene laughs, her head settling on the arm of the couch, her left hand behind her neck to cushion it. Her right leg falls down off the edge, until her foot is planted on the floor. The position looks pretty comfortable.

Steve makes the first marks on the page, a few vague lines to get the general shape she's making. She turns her head to look at him.

"I ever tell you how Betty and I met?" she asks. Steve shakes his head, and starts drawing the bend of her elbow.

"Tell me," he says.

"I was new in the city," Marlene says. "I'm from Ohio, from a little farming town."

"I didn't know that," Steve says. "What was that like?"

"Not so bad. Good parents, good work. Good people. Had a boyfriend, too, and we'd meet to tumble around in the hayloft together."

"Maybe you should get Norman Rockwell to draw this," Steve jokes. Marlene laughs.

"Wait, that reminds me, I wanted you to do it with my clothes off," she says.

"Oh really," Steve says softly, mimicking her tone earlier, and she rolls her eyes at him. "Take off whatever you like," he says.

Slowly, she unbuttons her shirt and slides it off her arms, so that it's left on the couch beneath her
shoulders, trailing down to the floor on one side.

"That's nice, leave that," Steve says, when she moves to pull it out from under herself.

"Okay," she says. She takes off her pants and socks, kicking them off the end and onto the floor; then all that's left is her shorts and the brightly colored scarf knotted around her neck.

"What if I left my scarf on?" she asks, smiling up at Steve.

"I suppose that would be all right," Steve grins, as her strong tradesman's hands unbutton her shorts and push them off. Her cock isn't hard, but it isn't quite soft, either, just on the verge of filling and standing up.

Steve finds himself breathing harder at the sight of her, the way her arms are tanned from the elbow down but pale above, the bright red of her lipstick and the dark hair between her thighs.

"You're really pretty," Steve says. "You look pretty like that."

Marlene's smile is slow and sweet. "Thanks, Steve," she says. "Um, is it normal if – I have to say I'm kind of enjoying this."

"I can see that," Steve says. Marlene's prick is slowly getting harder against her thigh. He wishes he could film it, not just draw it. "You're not the first. It's fine by me."

"Good," Marlene breathes, laughing a little.

"So you were telling me about your idyllic upbringing in Ohio, queer boys falling out of haystacks left and right – " Steve encourages.

"Ha, not quite. But it was fine, for a while."

"Did you get found out?" Steve asks, because he's heard that story: Dad catches you in a clinch with another boy, you're beaten, run out of the house, living on the streets at fifteen. It's as old as the hills.

"No, nothing so dramatic," Marlene says. She keeps her head turned, facing Steve; Steve draws her bright lips and eyes, shading them in a little as he goes. "My boyfriend found someone else to fuck, and I longed for the glittering lights of the great queer metropolis, so I left home at sixteen and came here. Used every penny I'd ever saved to get here, too."

"You didn't hitch?" Steve asks. He's never been outside of New York, himself, but Betty's told him stories about the kind of wild times to be had on the road for a fella willing to pay his way. He's never been clear on whether they were Betty's stories or second hand.

"God, no, I was too shy," she says, and Steve can just picture it, Marlene but scrawnier and quieter in dull-colored boy clothes, sitting on her bus seat, waiting for New York to rise in the east and make her into all she ever wanted to be. "When I got here, you know, it was hard to find work, but I knew a lot of carpentry from the farm and that helped. But for the first three months, I never went out to a single bar or club, or even met guys in the park. On my big adventure in the big city and I was too scared to meet anybody."

Steve draws her chest, vulnerable and exposed, shading a little on her large dark nipples and the hollow beneath her ribs.

"One night I was sort of . . . skulking around the Village, you know. Holding up a lot of walls. I'd
heard that was where the action was, but I didn't go in anywhere."

"And Betty showed up as your knight in shining armor?" Steve guesses. The question makes Marlene grin, and Steve draws it, the shy delight on her face as she remembers the first time she met Betty.

"Knight in shining lipstick, more like," Marlene says. "She was in a red tie and a tailored suit and she was smoking a cigarette outside of some club." Marlene's prick is half-hard between her legs, and Steve decides to draw it like that, how it looks when she first starts to feel turned on. Marlene's hand is on her thigh, next to it, but she doesn't make any move to hold herself or stroke herself harder, just letting things happen.

"Up in the Village?"

"Yeah, this was back in – 1936, I guess, when the cops weren't cracking down as hard as they are these days. She lived up there for a while, but it got too expensive, and then she got that job in the Navy Yard, so she moved back down here."

"So she spotted you, this fresh-faced lamb, this diamond in the rough, and she said . . . ?"

"She said," Marlene screws her face up into an imitation of Betty's best unamused scowl, "'Kid, you're obviously a cocksucker, so get the fuck inside before you freeze to death.'"


"I was terrified!" Marlene screams, throwing back her head. "Lurking around a corner in shit-colored boy clothes and still spotted for a faggot! But of course the idea of not doing what she said was more terrifying, so I went in."

"I hope she treated you right," Steve says, lingering on the long lines of Marlene's legs, the thick muscles of her thighs.

"She made me come out, and introduced me all around, and by the end of the night I was, in fact, sucking cock," Marlene says, a fond smile on her face.

"Not hers, though," Steve says, only half a question. Marlene sighs and shakes her head no.

"It was some sailor. You know me and seafood. I never saw him again, but it's funny, I can still remember how he tasted."

"Salty?" Steve asks, making the old joke.

Marlene, who's a kind soul at heart, laughs. "Yes indeed."

Hesitating over the shadows of Marlene's thighs, Steve clears his throat and says, "Can I ask you something?"

"Do Betty and I ever fuck?" Marlene asks, staring right through Steve.

Steve nods. "You don't have to answer," he says.

"I don't mind. Yeah, sometimes it's a bit lesbian between us. Kiss kiss and all that. Kind of a thrill to kiss someone else wearing lipstick."

Steve's blood pulses a little hotter at the image, two pansies pressed together, painted mouths desperate against one another. He draws Marlene's knees, her long, inviting legs.
"And other times, well – sometimes you just want a dick inside you, you know? You just wanna feel good. And I like it best with someone I know, who knows me."

"You feel seen," Steve guesses, and Marlene nods.

"Yeah. Like right now." She gestures down at her prick, getting bigger all on its own, without even being touched.

Steve puts the last few lines onto the drawing; everything else is shading that he can do later. He puts the pad aside.

"All done?" Marlene asks, surprised.

Steve shrugs. "Mostly," he says. "I can finish up later."

Arching her eyebrows, Marlene rolls on her side to face Steve more completely, and brings her hand down to her cock. Her scarf flutters at the motion, and her red lips part wetly. "Yeah? What are you going to do now?"

Kneeling next to her, he bends down and kisses her belly. "I was gonna ask if I could suck you," he breathes. Her abdomen twitches at the feeling of his breath against the skin.

"Yeah," she says, wrapping her fist around her hard dick. "Please."

It's exactly what Steve needs – what they both need, he figures, to feel good on this dark night, to feel this simple and easily affirmed connection between their bodies. Steve uses his mouth and his hands on her, and she arches back against the couch, nothing that they haven't both done a hundred times before. Steve slides his hand up her thigh, then back down to stroke her balls and the space behind, to push his thumb up against her hole.

It's like all the blowjobs he's given or gotten, like the ones he's given Bucky, maybe like the ones Marlene has gotten from Betty. A language they can speak together, this exchange of touch and of vulnerability, as Steve takes Marlene's dick into his mouth, as Marlene takes Steve's fingers in her asshole.

They're both fairies together, and that counts for something. Steve hopes that the kids down at the police station are together, too, that they can look out for one another till morning.

Marlene groans, and grips Steve's hair in her callused fingers, and comes into his mouth, not so different from all the other times he's done this. He gets up and spits into the sink, then comes back over to kneel beside Marlene again. Her chest is heaving, her strong thighs shifting as she sits up.

"Thanks, Steve," she says, reaching out and touching his face. He leans down and kisses her, once on each cheek, softly. She kisses back.

"It felt really good," he says, and she nods, knowing just what he means.

"Wanna fuck me? I like it after I've come, it's like a whole nother level of existence."

Steve grins. "Yeah?" She's so pretty, in her makeup and her little smile, and Steve's belly flutters a little bit thinking about it: how she'd be so soft and giving for him, how he could sink down into her and smell her perfume, how she'd open up willingly beneath him.

He's half hard already, just from blowing her, but he also feels a low, lazy sort of contentment, and doesn't want to mess with it. Sighing, he goes from kneeling to sitting on the floor. He rests his
arms on the couch near Marlene's knees, and his head on his arms.

"Maybe a raincheck," he says. "Right now I think I want to sit here for a little while."

She nudges him with her knee. "Then pass me my shorts, Rogers, for God's sake, this building is colder than hell in the winter."

Marlene leaves a little while later, to go sleep in her own bed, and when Steve curls up in his he feels warm, and hopeful, and ready to fight tomorrow.

*

The next morning, Steve knocks on Marlene's door, and she answers still in her rumpled singlet and shorts.

"Hey, Steve," she says, confused. "I thought the police station doesn't open for hours."

"I got an idea for something we can do in the meantime," Steve says, grinning. "You know Helena's roommate, right? And where Jackie lives now he's left the Y? I've been by Benny's place, he lives with his family in a tenement house not far from here."

"I know Helena's roommate," Marlene says slowly. "And Jackie's living off of Flushing. Stevie, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we need more ammunition," he says.

*

They end up getting to the police station ten minutes late, but it doesn't make much difference; the cops make them wait for hours anyway, until they're both missing work with no good excuse. Steve figures they're gonna be shorthanded down at the docks, with Steve gone and a bunch of the others locked up, but right now there's nothing else to be done. Marlene is grimly determined to wait it out, in her suit jacket and smart hat with the blue feather carefully removed from the hatband, and Steve's gonna sit this quiet protest with her. At least he probably won't get fired over this, and he can afford to miss a day's wages.

When they finally come out, they all look shaken but relieved. Steve watches Helena as she ducks her head to get past the low doorway, and she gives him a little nod and a wink despite what looks like a nasty cut right below her eye.

"I think it's okay," he says. "They're being released."

Betty comes out still in drag, twirling around magnificently in her ballgown, a fresh shiner on her face and a lot of bruises on her arms and neck. Steve notices her feet, bare except for torn stockings, and all the others without shoes too. He smiles, unable to help himself.

Betty walks right up to Marlene and gives her the biggest, firmest, most manly handshake Steve has ever seen, which puts them all in stitches, right there in the middle of the police station.

"Okay, gorgeous, let's get out of here before they arrest you again," Marlene says, in an undertone, but Steve sees her glad smile and the way she spins Betty around, so that they can keep holding hands without the cops getting an eyeful.

They all troop outside together, and once they're a few doors down Steve stops and hefts the bag he brought with him.
"I got shoes," he says, "who wants 'em."

"Oh, me, please, Santa," Helena says, her laugh booming. "They made us march over icy cobbles and broken glass and all sorts in our socks, and my feet are killing me."

"I got something for everyone," Steve says, handing them out. "What we could find still on the floor at Vincent's and the rest as best we could."

"You're supposed to keep them on your feet and not commit felony assault with them," Marlene says sternly, handing Betty's nice brown dress shoes to her. "You scared the hell out of me."

Betty blows Marlene a kiss in exchange for the shoes and hops to get them on her feet. "I'm fucking sick of running from raids," she says. "It's getting worse and worse around here. Used to just be up in Harlem and the Village, but now the pigs are trying to shut us down too. We start running, they'll never let us stop."

"You're lucky they didn't break any bones," Marlene insists. "You think with a shoe in your hands, you're gonna stop them from – "

"Doesn't matter what you got in your hands," Betty insists, cutting her off. She's got her shoes tied, and is making an absolutely ridiculous fashion statement with the shiny brown leather over her torn stockings and under her glittering gown. She pulls herself up straight and looks them in the eye, more serious than Steve's ever seen her. "If you can stand up, you stand up, and if you can push back, you push back. Sometimes you just gotta, Marlene, you know that."

"I know," Marlene says. "But I'd have to get a new roommate if you were out on Rikers, and you know I don't like most people."

"I know, buddy," Betty says, wrapping her arm around Marlene's shoulders and pulling her close, the way Bucky does to Steve sometimes.

"We got you some pants, anyway," Marlene sighs. "You can change behind the trashcans like the whore you are."

"Perfect," Betty says, and takes the clothes from the bag to go change – behind some trashcans, as instructed. Steve shakes his head.

"These are my old shoes. From my house," Benny says, looking through the bag. "Steve, did you bust into my parents' house and hold them up for shoes?"

"We knocked," Steve says. "Your mom is really nice. She gave me cake."

"Hey, I don't think I know you," Marlene says, to one of the fairies Steve doesn't recognize either. He's still got a little smudged mascara around his eyes.

"Ira," he says, quietly. "I don't usually – I mean, I've never. Well. It was really nice of you guys to come pick us up." He finds a pair of shoes in the bag that fit his feet. "These aren't mine, but I'll wear 'em for now if no one minds. I'll try to find mine at the bar, I guess."

"That's all they had, I'm sorry," Marlene tells him. "Things got messed around in the shuffle and if it's not in there, it's long gone."

"Those are my old shoes for work, actually," Betty says, emerging from behind the dumpsters in a collared shirt and trousers, doing up her tie. She looks Ira up and down, taking in his patched trousers and frayed collar. "But tell you what, kid, you can have 'em."
Steve raises his eyebrows at this gift; he knows Betty can't afford a new pair of good leather shoes anymore than he can.

"I'll pay you back," Ira says, wide-eyed at her generosity. "I promise."

"Then we're fine," Betty declares, slinging her arm around him. Once everyone's got something on their feet, they all decide to head down to Childs for a bite.

"The food in prison is terrible," Helena declares, "especially in the sense that there was none of it."

"Hey, Ira," Marlene says, as they walk. She says it quietly, so that Steve, standing next to her, is the only one who hears. "Tell me this wasn't your first time coming out."

Ira swallows and nods. Marlene shakes her head. "Listen, it's not always like that. It's usually a lot more fun and a lot less getting beaten up, I swear."

"They said we could go with a warning," Ira says. "So we're not getting charged?"

"Nope," Marlene confirms. "Free as a bird."

"But they said next time . . . " Ira trails off.

Marlene sighs. "Next time they might charge you, try you, stick you in jail. I did sixty days for Degenerate Disorderly Conduct once," she says. "It was pretty bad."

"You did?" Ira asks, maybe confused as to how a convict like her could be out on the streets. Steve stays quiet, listening; he didn't know this about Marlene either.

"Yup. And you know what I did, when I got out?"

Ira shakes his head.

"As soon as I had a little money, I went right out and bought myself a lipstick," she says, her voice getting loud enough for everyone to hear. "You might not feel the same way, after this. You might wanna stay home and lock the door. But if you wanna come back out, there's a drag ball in two weeks. December fifth. You're invited."

Steve shoves his hands in his pockets, smiling and feeling strangely light; with everyone together like this, walking shoulder to shoulder, the police raid is fading away from their memories, turning into a story they can tell one another for a laugh.

"Wait," Betty says, turning around to frown at Marlene. "Is the drag ball still on? Is Vincent's closed down? The cops didn't tell us anything."

"I talked to Leonard," Marlene says.

"Who's Leonard?" Benny asks.

"Leonard is Vincent," Betty explains impatiently. "If there is still a Vincent's." She yells. "Is there still a Vincent's?"

"Leonard said they didn't take his license," Marlene says, then grimaces through the round of cheering and applause that follows. "But," she continues, "but, if he doesn't get rid of his disorderly clientele by the next time the State Liquor Authority comes around, he's done."

Everyone sobers up quick. "So, is Leonard gonna get rid of his disorderly clientele?" Betty asks.
Marlene shrugs. "He said he would hire a new bouncer, try to keep out the plainclothes," she says, "but that they were gonna have to come and take his bar from him because he wasn't gonna give it up for free."

The second round of cheers is even louder, a bunch of guys all hooting and hollering as they burst through the doors to Childs. Ira surreptitiously wipes his face on his shirt, and Steve gives him a thumbs up when the makeup's all gone.

"So, the drag ball's still on, then," Ira asks quietly.

Steve nods. "Take more than that to stop us."

* *

When the drag ball finally rolls around, Steve's held up at work, so he has to run straight from the docks to Vincent's without a chance to freshen up first, slipping on the icy sidewalks and almost falling twice. Still in his rough work clothing and without a lick of makeup on, he bursts through the doors right before the festivities are due to start. The running has put him out of breath but hasn't quite triggered his asthma, so that he's able to choke out a few words to the people who greet him on the way in, and give the password to the bouncer.

"Steve!" Helena says, taking his hand. "Marlene has been distraught, certain you wouldn't show up. She said you were supposed to help her pick out a lipstick for tonight."

"I know," Steve gasps, and then can't say any more. Helena, noting his distress, pats him condescendingly on the shoulder and points him toward the makeshift staging area, demarcated by a curtain.

"Steven, that had better be you," Marlene says, as Steve walks up to the edge of the curtain.

"It is," Steve says, a little disconcerted by her use of his full name. His Ma used to do that.

The curtain is yanked aside and Marlene revealed on the other side, in a full ball gown, wig, makeup, and very high heels. Steve whistles.

"Marlene, you look gorgeous," he says.

"Well, no thanks to you, you cad," she says, only a little placated. "I notice you haven't bothered to dress up."

"I had to run straight from work," Steve says. "I got here as soon as I could." Ducking his head, he smiles. "Besides, I figured I'd butch it up tonight, not take away from all you girls."

Marlene sighs. "We all know that you're the one all the boys will be after regardless," she says. "It's that blond hair and the big eyes and all those delicate bones."

Taking another step forward, Steve leans in to kiss her on the cheek. "You make it sound like I'm in a butcher shop," he laughs.

"Stand me up again, and you might be," she warns. "Now come in here and help me do my eyes, they're being difficult."

Steve steps in and takes the brush from her hands.

"Close your eyes," he says, remembering the first time she and Betty did this for him.
"It's been so long since I've done one of these," she sighs, as Steve carefully brushes a line along her upper eyelids. "I feel like such an old lady."

"You're gonna knock 'em dead," Steve promises.

Once Marlene is satisfied with her look, Steve heads back out to get himself a seat in the crowd. All the chairs are taken, but when he lays eyes on Frank, Frank stands up and offers Steve his chair.

Strangers offer Steve their seats all the time, on the subway or on the bus, when they see him panting or about to fall. Steve never takes them.

He takes this seat without hesitation, smiling warmly at Frank, glad to have the opportunity to sit and catch his breath after his run.

"You ever seen Marlene in one of these shows before?" Franks asks, crouching down beside him to speak in his ear.

"No," Steve says, "I missed Halloween, and she hasn't done it since."

"Hey, Steve," someone says, from a few seats away. Steve looks up, and sees Ira, wearing lipstick about as defiantly and nervously as Steve's ever seen.

"Hey there, Ira," he says. "Glad you made it."

"Couldn't disappoint Marlene," Ira says, and Steve nods ruefully.

"Know the feeling."

The first few performers are really great, and Steve claps and hollers his appreciation. They all have such poise and confidence, even though they've been told all their lives never to do exactly this. They take joy in it, and so does Steve, in their bravery, their willingness to stand up on stage in a dress in front of a hundred other people and feel beautiful.

He wishes he were that brave.

But when Marlene comes out on stage, it's something entirely different. It takes Steve's breath away. Even backstage, when she'd looked beautiful, she hadn't looked like this: like a dangerous femme fatale, like a striking snake of a woman who could eat any man in the place. Marlene is the quiet one, the sweet one, the one who smiles wryly at Betty's dirty jokes and scolds Betty for taking dumb risks; but now, on this stage, she's devastating.

She takes a drag from an unlit cigarette and mimes putting it out on the forehead of a guy from the crowd; she hikes up her skirt and shows off her strong legs in her spiked heels; she tosses her hair back over her shoulders and Steve could swear that the motion causes the seas to tremble.

"She's amazing," Steve breathes. He's not even aware that he's saying it out loud, at first, just can't help speaking the thought that fills his head and his heart.

"Yeah," Frank whispers. "It gives you hope, somehow."

Steve congratulates Marlene afterward, trying to express everything he felt and saw, and he must get some of it across because Marlene is blushing by the end of his spiel. He wishes he could give her back the feeling she gave him, of joy brought down to a single point, like she was the embodiment of every ounce of happiness inside him.
And later, when the party at Vincent's is winding down, Steve drags Frank back to his apartment and jumps him, desperate for the feeling of their bodies together, of Frank's hard prick inside him. Frank fucks him down into the mattress, both of them sweating and gasping, every sensation rough and perfect, and Steve laughs when he comes.

*

That Sunday Steve meets up with Danielle when she gets out of church, and they head together to their Catholic Worker meeting.

He smiles at the incongruous sight of her in a dress, and sticks his hands in his pockets. He can't get out of the habit of putting on his Sunday best for the meetings, even if he doesn't go to services.

"You never feel weird, going to Mass?" he asks her, as they head to Nelly and Robert's house, where the meeting's being held this week. She shrugs.

"Not as weird as I'd feel if I didn't go and my Ma whooped me," she says. "And I believe in most of it. Raising up the poor, turning the other cheek."

"Just not the part where you and me are unrepentant sinners?" he asks, with a smile. To his surprise, she doesn't make a joke.

"I don't know. Maybe. But maybe it's a kind of sin I can live with." She pauses, squinting up at the sunlight. "Or can't live without. But I couldn't bring myself to abandon God's work, no matter what."

Steve nods. "I know what you mean," he says. He wonders if Danielle confesses her love for Valentine every week, like it's a sin. That's what he couldn't bring himself to do anymore, but maybe Danielle feels differently about it.

They spend some time that day organizing bundles for the British War Relief Society, but not very much else gets done, except that they all agree to write a letter of support to the striking steelworkers out in Lackawanna. Steve leaves the meeting feeling frustrated.

"How much good does all this letter-writing do?" he asks Danielle. "It feels like we write and write and nothing changes."

"How did you feel, during the Sugar Strike, when we got letters of support?"

Steve sighs. "Yeah. Pretty good, I guess."

"Every little bit helps. Speaking of, Valentine's speaking at a rally this afternoon, up in Harlem. They're founding a new committee to protest segregated businesses and do other local work the NAACP isn't doing." She smiles over at him. "The subway ride's on me."

Steve smiles back. He'd like to rest, but Sunday's the traditional day for action, and he wouldn't want to miss Valentine speaking somewhere. "Sure."

He hasn't been up to Harlem in a while; he always wishes he could come up here for the nightclubs, but it's just a lot easier to stay close to home in case he gets suddenly tired, or has an asthma attack.

Valentine's standing on a crate, speaking to a small gathered crowd of white and Negro listeners. "Against the background of Hitler's treatment of the Jews," she is saying, "the Negro's fight in this country is an embarrassment to the war-mongers in Congress. Let us see Congress pass bills
guaranteeing our rights to organize as workers, to bargain collectively, to strike in defense of our hard-won standard of living. Let us see Congress pass laws against the willful oppression of Negro men and women in this country: let us see a Congress elected that represents our votes, given freely and fairly in the absence of these so-called Jim Crow laws.”

Steve glances over at Danielle, who glows with pride as Valentine speaks. Valentine's voice is clear and calm, carrying easily to all the people assembled. Her breath plumes out in front of her, but she doesn't seem to feel the cold.

"The common people across the world do not seek war. The common people seek instead an extension of democracy at home. And because we know that once again the Negro will be called upon to fight and die for a country that will not let him vote or live in peace, we oppose the war. We oppose the self-righteous rhetoric that calls on us to defend the freedoms of others, defend them with our lives, when we are given none ourselves. We oppose the self-righteous rhetoric that tells us we are fighting for freedom, when in reality we are fighting for the rights of rich nations to keep what they have plundered through conquest. We oppose the war, and we work for peace at home."

There's a round of applause, not that enthusiastic but not too bad for a cold Sunday afternoon in December. Valentine starts to wrap up, calling on the crowd to put their names down for the new committee. A lot of people do sign up, but just as many wander away, muttering about idealism or socialism. A few stay afterwards, chatting to Valentine, shaking her hand and listening to what she has to say. Steve doesn't know them all, but he assumes they're part of Valentine's Harlem activist community.

Steve and Danielle step up and put their names on the list.

"Committee for Peace at Home," Steve reads. "Is this your idea, Val?"

Valentine shakes her head. "An old friend of mine is talking about forming a similar organization in Chicago," she says. "Working for Negro causes, based on the principles of nonviolence. I talked to some people around here, and they thought it would be a good idea to try to do the same. Might take a while to get it off the ground, though."


"A little bit at a time," Valentine agrees.

"Well," Steve says, "if you need a cartoonist, you know where to find me. My pencils are at your service."

"Thanks, Steve, I'll probably take you up on that before long." She cocks her head at him curiously. "I thought you didn't agree with me on this, though."

"I do agree with you. After that speech, I agree even more. But I think we need to protect people in Europe as well as people here. Fascism's everywhere."

Valentine raises an eyebrow. "That's true enough, but there's nothing that supports fascism more than war."

"The posters," Danielle coughs, giving Valentine a significant look. Val is momentarily startled, then rolls her eyes. Steve grins at her, and she chuckles.

"But, yes, Steve, I would appreciate your artist's services. I wanted to make some posters for – "
She trails off, looking up the street; Steve and Danielle turn around to follow her gaze. All up and down the street there are people coming out of their front doors, hands clasped over their mouths, yelling indistinctly at their neighbors. One fella comes running towards them and up to Valentine.

"Tom, what's going on?" Valentine asks, grabbing the young man by the shoulders and holding him still.


Steve can't even put the words together to make them make sense.

"What?" Valentine asks, clearly struggling as well.

"It was just on the radio," Tom explains. "They bombed for hours, to destroy the naval base there. They don't know yet how many people are dead."

It takes Steve a few seconds just to process the words, and his first instinct is to say that it's not true, that Tom got it wrong, that someone's playing a joke. Then he blinks, and takes in all the people on the street: crying, gasping, shaking their heads. And it hits him, that people are dead, that Americans are dead, that planes are dropping bombs on America, just like London on the newsreels. He can almost imagine the explosions, destroying a beautiful island paradise with fire and flying debris.

Steve's been arguing for months that they ought to be in the war, ought to be doing a lot more than sending supplies, and now it's here. Now it's really going to happen. Roosevelt promised not to intervene in foreign wars, but this one isn't foreign anymore.

Steve feels cold. Hot tears spring to his eyes.

"Fuck," Danielle says.

*

They all take the subway back home together, none of them speaking very much. Valentine holds the list of potential Committee for Peace at Home members in her hand, and keeps accidentally crumpling it up, then smoothing it out, then crumpling it up again.

Everyone on the train is either subdued or talking loudly about the upcoming war.

When they get back to the rooming house, Valentine says, "Come up and sit with us a while, Steve. I know you don't have a radio. Bring Bucky if he's home."

Steve opens the door to their rooms to find Bucky sitting with Marlene, both of them on the couch, Marlene's head on Bucky's shoulder. It's always funny to see her in her rough carpenter's clothes, without any makeup; Steve figures she must've come here right after work.

She springs up guiltily when Steve walks in.

"It's okay," Steve says, immediately. "C'mon, Danielle and Valentine invited us up to listen to the radio."

Bucky and Marlene follow Steve up the stairs, and they all crowd into the tiny front of the two-room suite. Valentine sits on Danielle's lap, leaning back against her, holding her hand and rubbing her thumb against Danielle's index finger, over and over, the way she'd kept crumpling the sign-up sheet on the subway.
Marlene sits between Steve and Bucky, the three of them pushed together on the tiny couch. Bucky puts his arm around them both, his fingertips barely reaching the back of Steve's neck. Steve leans back, into the light, halting caress, and right, against the warmth of Marlene's arm.

They put on the radio, which is playing a bunch of different accounts of what's been going on, but doesn't really have anything new to say.

"Sounds like hundreds," Steve says, after a while. "Even thousands."

"Thousands of people dead in a few hours," Danielle says. "Seems impossible."

"This means we'll be at war with Japan," Marlene says. "But does it even mean we'll be at war in Europe?"

On the rickety table, Valentine is folding little scraps of paper and standing them up, the way Steve and Bucky used to do as kids, to play soldiers. At Marlene's question, she starts knocking them over one by one.

"Japan attacks the United States," she says, and knocks one of them down. "The United States declares war on Japan," another one. "Germany declares war on the United States." Another. "Italy declares war on the United States." Another. "The United States declares war on Germany and Italy." The last paper soldier falls. "And we all fall down," she finishes flatly.

"And no one gives a damn about peace anymore," Danielle says. "Or the needs of the common man. Or the exploitation of Negros at home."

"Guys out on the street are already out for blood," Bucky puts in quietly. "They're clapping each other on the back and racing to sign up."

Marlene nods slowly. "It's going to be all out war," she says. "We're all going to be drafted."

"Danny and I won't be," Valentine points out. "Unless they start taking women."

Danielle huffs out a laugh. "They should. Why should the men be the only ones to die?"

Valentine pats Danielle's hand. "I admire your dedication to equality," she says. "But do you really want to make yourself into cannon fodder?"

"Not cannon fodder," Steve says slowly. "But – if people will be drafted, if they're going over there to fight, if they end up trying to liberate Europe – "

"They need protection," Danielle finishes, smiling at him. Steve nods at her.

"It's a choice," Valentine insists. "It's a choice you can make, to be made into a weapon or not. Do you want to kill people, Danny?"

"No," Danielle says, "and I doubt I'll face that choice. But if killing is going to happen, I want to give my people every chance to live. If there's a way I can help with that . . . maybe I should."

"I don't want to kill anyone," Bucky says. His eyes are downcast, his lips pursed together, his skin pale.

"But if there are thousands already dead," Steve begins, then trails off, not sure how he can finish the thought when Bucky looks so goddamn scared.

"We have a duty," Marlene says, softly, finishing it for him. "We didn't ask for it, but we do."
Valentine shakes her head. "I don't know what to say. I don't disagree. But this is like... destiny, like we never had a choice at all. Like every day we spent working for peace was meaningless. Like violence really is the only driving force in the world."

Steve's never seen Valentine cry before, not in pain or frustration or loss, so it's only now he learns that she does it quietly, tears slipping down her cheeks almost invisibly. Danielle leans back and kisses her jaw, and as Valentine moves to meet the kiss a soft sob escapes her throat.

"You don't believe that," Danielle says softly. "I don't, and I know for sure that you don't, Val. What we did make a difference."

"It's always worth standing up," Steve says. "Even if they beat you back down."

"But when will the opportunity for peace come again," Valentine asks. She doesn't say it like a question. It sounds, instead, like something from the Bible; a lament.

"There are other forces in the world," Steve says. "Not just violence. There's action. They call us violent when we strike, and when we protest, but it's different."

"Putting your body into the line with your fellows," Danielle says. "Linking arms."

"Standing up for the little guy," Bucky adds, cracking half a smile. His fingers keep on brushing the back of Steve's neck. Steve meets his eyes and nods, but Bucky's smile falters.

"This is going to change everything," Marlene says. "It won't be for a week or a month, will it. It'll be years. Like the last one."

Valentine bites her lip. "Yeah," she says. Leaning forward, away from Danielle, she picks up her crumpled list of potential members for the Committee for Peace at Home and looks it over. "It will. If we can't stop the war, then we'll have to make another choice. Each of us will."

Steve watches her dash away her tears, her expression becoming businesslike again.

"Which means," she says, "that we've got a lot of work to do."

*

Steve thinks about what Valentine said for a long time, about the choice they have to make. It's all anyone talks about, wherever he goes: signing up, doing their duty, helping the war effort. And as recruiting stations spring up everywhere, and old factories are pulled back into production, and every shoulder gets put to the wheel, Steve feels again the old sensation of being the wrong shape, the wrong size, of being wrong. There's no place, in that kind of war, for a slim, short, pretty pansy like him, not when the girliest of dames is getting fitted for trousers and ready for factory work.

On a grey day in January of 1942, Steve gets to work to find a bunch of guys huddled around the back of an empty truck, sharing coffee from their thermoses and talking close together, white plumes of breath sticking and mingling in the air.

"Steve," Arthur says, grabbing him by the wrist and pulling him into the huddle. "We were all just talking about the war."

Steve isn't surprised. Looking around, he notices Frank and Johnny and all the other guys from the club – all of Frank's boys, all the queers and fairies and punks.

"Yeah," Steve says, nodding at them to go on.
"Some of us are going to go and sign up," Johnny says. "We thought we might go together. See if we can't get into the same squadron or something."

"I don't think that's how it works," Jackie pipes up. He's got his shoulders hunched and his hands shoved into his pockets like he's freezing cold, but Steve wonders if it's just nerves. "And I ain't sure the Army wants an all-queers squad anyway. Imagine us, prancing over the battlefield."

Some of the other guys laugh, but Steve doesn't, and neither does Arthur. She's grimacing, chewing her lip.

"I for one think it's a good idea," she says. "I never backed down from a fight and I ain't gonna start now."

"They won't let you throw your heels at the enemy, Betty," Frank laughs. Arthur hops on one foot, making as if to take off her shoe and throw it at him, and everyone joins in the laughter.

"But seriously," Frank says soberly, slowly. "I'm with you."

"Me too," Steve says. "We all got a duty to help however we can."

"Jeez, Steve, they'll spot you for a fairy for sure," Johnny laughs. Steve raises his fists and widens his stance.

"You wanna call me a fairy again, Johnny?" he says, to uproarious laughter. He isn't sure how funny it is, though.

"Steve can butch it up with the best of them," Arthur grins, clapping him on the shoulder. "You shoulda seen him back when I first met him, always with a black eye, and not cuz some fish missed his mouth with his dick."

"That happened one time," Jackie complains, as his pals nudge him with their elbows.

"I heard something else, too," Hyam puts in quietly. "From a guy I met in the park a while back. That Herbert guy, Frank, you met him."


"Yeah, well, he's a Jew," Hyam says, glancing around and daring anyone to say anything about it. "So he knows. And he says the Nazis are rounding up our kind, too. Fairies, homosexuals, whatever."

Frank frowns. "The newspapers don't say – "

"The newspapers ain't gonna say nothing, Frank, but it's happening," Hyam insists. He's a big guy, has a few inches on Frank, even, and when he crosses his arms he looks like a statue, immovable. "Herbert told me about the things that go on. It's horrible."

Steve clenches his jaw. He's been beaten up once or twice for the makeup, come pretty close to being grabbed in a police raid. He has no trouble imagining how easily it could go further and further until it came to camps, like they've heard about. Looking up at the tall, brawny dock workers standing around him, Steve takes a deep breath.

"We're none of us strangers to scrapping," he says somberly. "We all know what it is to stand up for ourselves, even when the odds aren't good. I bet those European queers know it too, and they
need our help. We got a duty to help our own kind, and it doesn't matter if all we got to throw at 'em is our shoes."

That shakes a few smiles out of them, and they wait for Steve to go on.

"My dad died in the Great War, and I know most of you fellas lost family to that war too. We got no right to do any less. I owe it to him, and to my Ma." Around him, the guys are looking at each other and nodding their agreement. "I say we sign up, and do our part. Let's go together. Today. After work."

"After work," they all agree. When the foreman comes over to yell at them for lollygagging, they all shake hands warmly before going their separate ways, confident in their new camaraderie.

After work, while all his queen and queer and fairy buddies enlist, Steve receives his very first 4F.

* 

"Rough day?"

Steve looks up from the bar; the guy who's just sat down next to him has a soft, inviting manner of speaking. He's handsome, almost what you'd call striking, with dark eyes and sharp features, and a network of red scars trailing down his face. He's wearing a shirt and jacket, but Steve can see that the scars continue, poking out of his cuff, and lead to a hand with fewer fingers than the usual.

"Yeah," Steve says, squinting through the haze and trying not to cough. "I tried to enlist, but."

He shrugs. This guy can probably guess why he didn't make it in.

Tom's Place is a lot smokier than Vincent's, because the ceilings are so much lower and there's no ventilation; it's one of the reasons that Steve started going to Vincent's in the first place.

But Steve hadn't wanted to be around the other guys, all their nervousness and excitement about basic training, their rock-solid surety that they were going to do something good. So he'd come here instead.

Nobody knows him here. He rubs his thumb against his glass of whisky. It's his third one.

"Ah," the guy says, giving him an evaluative look, probably the same look that Steve gave him a minute ago. Sizing him up for whatever it is that makes him too weak to serve. "I got drafted a while back," he offers. "Told them I'd go, that I had a way of holding things and could hold a rifle."

"They said no, huh," Steve says, tossing back his drink. The spreading warmth from his gut is comforting. He hopes it stops him thinking sometime soon.

"Turns out there's a finger minimum," the guy says primly. Steve laughs. He sticks out his right hand, then thinks better of it and offers his left.

"Steve," he says, almost forgetting where he is and giving his last name, too.

"David," the man responds, taking Steve's left hand with his own.

Smiling and a little drunk, Steve murmurs, "'Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.'" At David's surprised look, Steve adds, "Sorry, that wasn't a come-on line. I used to be an altar boy, and some stuff sticks with you."

"'How are the mighty fallen,'" David smiles, continuing to the next verse, "'and the weapons of war
perished.' I always liked that one. Not many Catholics know the story of David so well." He nods at the bartender, who starts pouring him something. He must be a regular here.

"Well. Just that part," Steve admits. When he was a kid, that verse had seemed miraculous, and he'd read it over and over, astonished by what it seemed to be saying. But he'd never really thought about the next part, or how David's love for Jonathan pours out at that moment, as a counterpoint to the great defeat in battle. Jonathan the lover and Jonathan the weapon of war, both the same person, both dead.

"I guess it's just as well not to become a weapon of war," David sighs, raising his glass to thank the bartender for the drink.

"Seems like they tend to perish," Steve agrees ruefully. "A friend of mine calls it the war machine, says we get used as raw material, ground up in the gears."

"Ha. That's how I got this," David says, lifting his right arm stiffly and wiggling his remaining fingers. "Steelworker."

Steve shakes his head. "Those plants are terrible. I marched with the steelworkers, years ago. Sympathy strike. Saw a lot of injuries like that."

"Unfortunately a lot of the reforms the union put into place were a little late for me," David says.

Steve nods. "So, you're not going to war, you gonna stay working here?"

David shrugs. "I figure my old job at the plant might be open again pretty soon, with so many guys shipping out. And this place is gonna be hopping. It could be worse."

"What do you mean?" Steve asks. David grins.

"An endless supply of fresh-faced soldiers and sailors, passing through one of the largest port cities in the world, all heading towards danger, burning with curiosity and virginity . . . "

"Wow," Steve says, laughing softly. "I never thought of that."

"Maybe we'll be grateful for those 4Fs," David suggests. He finishes his drink, and waves a no when the bartender holds up the bottle questioningly.

"Maybe," Steve says. He grips his glass a little harder, and tries to feel grateful, but all he feels is rejected and worthless, nothing more than a stamp on a government document saying unfit.

He turns on his barstool, facing his companion. David turns, too, so they're face to face. At this hour, the place isn't crowded, but there's enough clientele to make them invisible, two queers among many.

"Right now, it's just you and me," Steve says, and reaches out to run his thumb over David's left wrist.

David waves the bartender back over and gestures for that second drink after all, looking down at the place Steve's touching him.

He has to break the touch to toss it back, so Steve sets his hand on the bar and waits.

"I'm not a fairy," David says, when he sets the glass back down on the bar. "A lot of guys assume I am but I'm not."
"That's fine by me," Steve says, dry-mouthed. "I am."

"Yeah? You don't act much like it." This time it's David who reaches out, with his scarred right hand, to touch Steve's knee. Steve knows what he's doing, making sure that Steve isn't going to be disgusted by his arm before they get too serious. It's a test, a dare, and Steve's body flares into hot desire as he accepts it.

"I left my lipstick at home. Didn't think the Army guys would appreciate it."

"Yeah, I hear the Army's real particular about what shade you can wear," David says, making Steve smile. He runs his two fingers up Steve's leg, then back down to his knee, over and over.

"Okay to touch?" Steve asks, his hand hovering over David's on his knee.

"Yeah," David says. Steve strokes his hand up David's fingers to his wrist, over the rough, pebbled skin, then takes hold.

"Where can we go, David?"

"Rooms upstairs," David says, swallowing. Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a few dimes, more than he needs to pay for the whisky, and tosses them onto the bar. "We got an hour."

The bartender hands David a key, and they head up a rickety set of stairs in the back corner of the bar.

Once they get into the room, David seems a little more nervous than he had down at the bar. "Why didn't they want you? The Army," he asks, as Steve pushes him against the wall and kisses his throat. He's kind of short, maybe three inches taller than Steve, and it's nice not having to stretch up like he usually does.

"Not the sexiest line I ever heard," Steve says, using his teeth against the tendon in David's neck. David grabs him by both shoulders and pulls him back. "Really, though," he says, and he looks upset. Steve isn't sure why.


David snorts, and Steve realizes in retrospect that it sounds like a bad joke.

"Sorry," he says.

"S'okay." He frowns. "You know, I can't really hide my arm or my face," he says, "but you could probably hide most of that stuff, couldn't you? Enlist under a different name, if you want, so they can't get any medical records. Lie."

Steve looks up into David's eyes, surprised to find this much compassion from a guy he's just met. "You think?"

David's expression hardens. "Why not? If you know you can do it, what right do they have to tell you no?"

"Yeah," Steve says softly. "I guess."

Kissing him gently, David murmurs, "Bet you'd look real cute in a uniform."
Steve laughs, made some strange mixture of turned on and uncomfortable by the compliment. "Yeah?" he asks, swallowing back the tide of anger and disappointment that's been rising in him since he got his 4F. "Little fairy soldier?"

"Exactly." David smiles breathlessly. "C'mere, soldier."

Steve's gut clenches and his dick starts to get hard in his pants, and he closes his eyes as David takes his mouth.

They both scrabble at their belts and buttons, not bothering with anything inessential, both of them fumbling and desperate as the heat builds between them. David guides Steve down onto the mattress, which only has a few fleas and a few come stains, nothing too bad for a place like this. Steve buries his face against his arms and breathes in and breathes in, trying to get that list of his physical defects out of his mind.

His body is good for this, he tells himself. He can do this.

As David starts fucking him, Steve learns that he really has worked out some smart ways of using his bad arm; he holds Steve down hard and firm, keeping him still while he tries different angles and movements.

"Yeah, yeah, there, there," Steve pants, as he rubs against the sweet spot. "Like that."

"I got you, doll," David says, and Steve groans, caught between the sheer physical pleasure of the fucking and the sinking feeling in his chest, between the joy of his building orgasm and the deep, crawling self-hatred that's been stuck in his throat since he left the recruitment office.

He grits his teeth and focuses on the good feelings. The cock inside him feels good. This is what he is.

"Talk to me," he says, a couple minutes later.

"What do you want me to say?" David asks. He's really good at fucking, long full strokes that set off sparks throughout Steve's body, his hands roaming sweetly over Steve's skin.

"I want," Steve says, and then gulps, and pants, and closes his eyes. David's practically a stranger; Steve might never see him again. And he's just drunk enough to say what he really needs. "I want you to tell me I'm good," he chokes out.

David's fucking slows down a bit, and Steve feels the rough skin of his right arm trail down his shoulder, a slow, gentle caress.

David kisses him below his neck, between his shoulders, and in a very soft voice he says, "You're good."

It feels so genuine that it makes Steve sob with relief, his body flaring with deep physical pleasure: so deep it's in his bones, his blood, breathed out on the air from his defective lungs.

"Yes," he says.

"So good, Steve," David says, kissing his shoulders again, the base of his neck, the knobs of his spine. "A good little fairy."

It's exactly what Steve needs; he groans and pushes back against David's hard solid fucking, squeezing his ass rhythmically around David's prick.
The weight is already a lot for him to take, and if he lifts an arm to get himself off he'll collapse right down into the bed, but his cock is aching, leaking, desperate for touch.

"Can you – David, I can't – "

"Gotta be my right," David says, like a warning. "I'll lose my balance."

"Yeah," Steve says. "S'fine."

David does a lot with two fingers and most of a thumb, fluttering and squeezing and stroking over Steve's dick, and before long Steve's lost in it, in those gentle touches and in the simple joy of the fucking, coming over David's hand and around David's cock, biting off the cry that wants to tear loose from his throat.

"Hold still," David is saying, "hold still, hold still for me, Steve, please, oh – "

Steve stays as still as he can, letting David have him just how he wants, and after a few more shaky thrusts it's over, David's spunk leaking out of Steve's ass as David pulls out.

Not even caring about the dirty sheets, Steve collapses the rest of the way down and rests his forehead against his arms, groaning at the pain in his elbows and knees. It's been a long day.

"That was great," David says, and to Steve's amusement he leans down to kiss Steve's ass, a wet smack on his left cheek.

"Yeah," Steve agrees, finding the strength to roll over a bit, grimacing as he thinks again about the state of the bed.

He sits up instead, and starts pulling on his pants. He looks up at David and smiles, and David's answering smile is beautiful. He really is drop-dead gorgeous, like a movie star or something.

"I don't, uh," David says, scratching the back of his head shyly.

"I don't suppose I can see you again?"

Steve hesitates; he felt so exposed, when David was fucking him, when he said what he said, and the feeling is coming on worse now. But he gets that David maybe feels the same, and Steve doesn't want to make him feel rejected.

"I hang out at Vincent's sometimes," Steve says. "If you wanna come by."

"Huh. I don't usually go there," David says. He lifts his bad arm briefly, and says, "Had a bad incident the first time I went."

Steve frowns angrily. They all like the way Steve's delicate constitution makes him girly and breathless, but he can imagine how David gets treated, especially since he's not a pansy.

"I'd take anyone who did that outside," Steve promises, and David chuckles.

"Thanks," he says. "My little fairy soldier-protector. I could get used to it."

Steve's heart beats harder at the idea. "Maybe – I might try out again, like you said. For the Army. But if I don't, I'll find you."

It wouldn't be so bad, he thinks, to spend the war that way, kept company by someone like him, who understands him.

"I'd like that," David says.
They part ways amicably, and Steve sets out to walk home, trying to hold on to the good feeling he had while David was fucking him, trying not to get lost again in the resentment sickening his blood.

As he walks, it starts to rain, but he's far enough on his way that it's not really worth it to stop and get the subway. He walks through it instead, letting it soak his clothes and his hair and hoping he doesn't get a fever as a result.

When he gets back to his building, dripping wet, he hears loud voices behind the door to their suite and feels angry, overwhelmingly angry, that Bucky might be having a party while Steve's feeling this way. It's a stupid reason to be mad, but Steve can't help the snarl on his face as he opens the door, the way he slams it closed behind him.

Bucky's on the couch with Lizzie, one of the girls he's been seeing lately. Marlene and Betty are sprawled out on the floor, a record spinning on Betty's little phonograph in the corner.

"Steve!" Bucky says, as he comes in, "Come join us. We're celebrating."

Steve catches sight of the whisky bottle on the floor, half-empty and way beyond any of their means. "Celebrating what?" Steve asks, suspiciously. Glancing at Lizzie's face, and then at Marlene and Betty, Steve sees only dark expressions. And Bucky himself looks jovial, but it doesn't feel right.

Bucky laughs and says, "I got drafted."

*

Later, when their guests have left, Steve lies next to Bucky on the floor and caresses his thumb, his finger, the dip of his wrist. The room spins slowly above him.

"I don't want to go," Bucky says, hoarsely. It's what he hasn't said all night, all year, even, since they've been talking about the war. "I know I'm supposed to but I don't want to go, Steve."

"I know," Steve says. "It's okay, Buck. I know." He keeps up his slow caress, just that one point of their bodies touching, for a long time. When he finds the strength to roll over onto his side, he expects to see Bucky passed out asleep, but his eyes are wide open, staring at the ceiling.

"Hey," Steve says softly, and pulls Bucky up into his arms. Bucky's heavy and it's awkward, but Steve manages to get them positioned so Bucky's head is on his shoulder. "It's okay," he says again, helplessly. Bucky's embrace is loose at first, but then it tightens all of a sudden, Bucky's fingers grasping desperately at Steve's arms, and Bucky sobs a few times into his shoulder.

"I'm scared," he says. Steve holds him tighter, and kisses the top of his head.

A few minutes later, when Bucky's forced himself to take a few deep breaths, he lifts his head again to look Steve in the eyes. He looks terrible, red in the face and eyes, hair a mess, mouth open.

He kisses Steve, and Steve kisses him back with everything he's got. It makes the room start spinning again, but Steve figures he can take it.

He gives Bucky the slowest blowjob he can manage, right there on the floor, and when it's over he hoists him up and gets him into bed.

"I'll come after you, Buck," he says, softly, fiercely. Bucky's already asleep, but Steve says it anyway. "I'll find a way, and I'll come after you."
They fuck a lot in the three days before Bucky's report date, the mood desperate and angry, Bucky shoving him up against a wall and taking his ass, Steve dropping to his knees again and again to take Bucky's prick, every orgasm a balm that doesn't quite satisfy the low, painful itch they both feel.

"Steve," Bucky breathes out, when they do it, "Steve, please, please, please – "

Steve doesn't know what Bucky's begging for, all those times, but he kisses him and shushes him and takes him in his body, gives him the best he has to offer.

"It's okay," he says, over and over. "It's okay, Bucky, it's okay, it'll be okay."

After Bucky leaves for basic training, Steve tries to enlist a second time, under a different name, like David suggested. He takes the subway across the river to a different recruiting office and makes sure to go in on a good day, when he's not limping and hasn't had an asthma attack. But even though they don't have his medical records, he fails the physical. He's heard people in recruiting offices say that some of the Army doctors wave you through no matter what your health looks like; Steve tells himself that all he has to do is find one of those.

Until then he'll shiver in his drawers, lined up with men bigger than him on either side, holding still, keeping calm, and hoping that this time someone will let him pass. It's like protesting arm in arm with Danielle: he tells himself to be patient, and wait for his moment, no matter how much he wants to push his way past the makeshift walls of the recruiting center and grab his 1A stamp for himself.

He keeps himself busy, working double shifts now that half the experienced dockers are gone, replaced by new guys who are 4Fs like Steve or else by the burly gals who come with recommendations from Danielle. Steve ends up having to train a bunch of the new people, show them the ropes, and even though it means taking home extra pay he feels exhausted all the time, walking home long after sunset and lacking the energy to even slap on some lipstick and head to Vincent's.

It's just as well; Vincent's is full of new recruits, too, folks passing through from all over the country on their way overseas, and it doesn't feel the same without all the familiar faces. Instead, when he can find the energy and get his hand to stop shaking, he writes to all the guys he misses who've already gone off to Basic or shipped out: Bucky, Frank, Hyam, a couple others from around the clubs. He hears from Marlene that little Ira signed up for the Navy, so Steve takes the time to write him, too. Marlene herself had her report date pushed back, and Betty got held up for special training, so the two of them have a little more time before they leave. Steve has them over, more than once, so they can all write letters together.

"We oughta start putting together care packages, too," Marlene says, as she writes to tell Frank all the latest news around the neighborhood. It's probably the same news Steve put in his letter, but he's sure Frank would rather get two letters than one. "Little treats and such."

"Think Ira'd like it if I mailed him a lipstick?" Betty asks, pausing with her pencil over the paper.
"Maybe his commanding officer would," Steve jokes. The care packages are a good idea, though; he's got the dough for it these days, so he could send Bucky some of the candies he likes, and maybe some pomade.

"Will you write to us, too, Steve?" Marlene is scratching out a letter to some beau of hers that Steve only met a couple of times, Stewart or Stanley or something like that. "When we ship out?"

"You bet," Steve agrees. "What shade of lipstick should I send?"

Betty hmmms, looking down at her letter. "You know, we joke, but we could send a little lipstick along if we wanted to."

Steve blinks at her, and Marlene shakes her head in exasperation. "What terrible scheme are you getting up to now, Betty?"

Betty raises an eyebrow, meets each of their gazes in turn, and bends her head deliberately to press her mouth to the paper she's been writing on. She leaves behind a perfect red kiss mark.

"Betty, oh my God," Steve breathes, realizing how perfect it is.

"And I'll just sign it, 'Your Darling, Betty,'" she concludes, as satisfied as a cat with a canary. Marlene starts to laugh.

"I can definitely make my letter to Stanley a little less boring if I can sign it as a girl," Marlene grins. "Perfect."

"I'll get supplies," Steve says, and gets up to get his lipstick from the bedroom. He hasn't written Bucky's letter for today yet.

He writes mostly what he would've written anyway, about how he's feeling and what everyone has been up to, about how busy they are down at the docks, about how Lizzie's got herself a job in a munitions factory and is learning a lot about explosives. But at the end, instead of signing the way he usually does – 'Your Buddy, Steve,' – he writes what he wants to say most, what he could never say without the subterfuge.

At the bottom of the letter, he writes, "Missing you every day, your kiss, your smile, your voice, your strong hands. Please stay safe so I can feel your arms around me again. Love from your Best Girl." And, solemnly, he kisses the paper.

As he sits up again, he sees Marlene and Betty watching him quietly, and when they shuffle closer and hold out their arms, he can't help but hug them tight. The three of them end up all squashed together, there on the bare floor, and Steve doesn't know what he'll do when they leave, too.

When he puts his kissed letter into the mailbox with all the others, he whispers: "I'm coming after you, Buck."

*

Steve tries out for the Army a third time, and when he coughs against the first cold press of the stethoscope, he gets told to put his clothes back on.

He tries out a fourth time, and the doctor scowls at him as soon as he comes through the curtain. It takes Steve a puzzled moment to figure out why, but then recognizes him as the doctor who did his physical the second time through.
"I saw you in . . . Queens," the doctor says, accusingly. Steve feels his eyes go wide as panic floods his system.

"I – are you sure?" Steve asks. "You must see a lot of fellas."

The doctor strides closer to him. He's a big guy, grey hair, broad in the shoulder, a commanding presence.

"I don't see so many five foot two blonds with scars like yours, kid." The doctor sounds unimpressed, but he's not calling for military police or telling Steve to get his clothes back on, either; a little spark of hope ignites in Steve's chest.

"Look, I just want to serve," he says, switching to an undertone, pleading with the doctor. "I can do it, I swear. I know I'm not as big as some of the other guys, but I'll work hard – "

The doctor shakes his head, cutting him off. "This isn't a job interview, son. I'm not here to be convinced into taking a chance on you."

"But it's your decision," Steve insists. If he can get this guy, this one guy, to see him for what he is, it could change everything. If this doctor could just see that Steve may be small and pretty, but he's tough too . . . "I only want to do what's right. My duty."

"You got heart, I'll give you that," the doctor says, and the spark in Steve's chest latches onto that like kindling.

"Please, let me in," Steve says. "I want to – want to be a part of something, something important. This is what I should be doing, I know it. Please."

Sighing, the doctor shakes his head again. "I'm sorry. I remember your file. The asthma alone keeps you out, and there's no way you can hide that from a CO."

It's like a door being slammed in his face, like Mr Brown firing him without looking up from his clipboard, like the street toughs who think his makeup is an invitation to take his money. Angry, miserable, desperate, not even sure what he's doing, he hops off the examination table and takes a step closer to the doctor.

"Please," he says again, chest heaving with the force of his breath. He swallows down a sick feeling and whispers, "I'll do anything you want."

Trying to stop his hand from shaking, he rubs his palm firmly over the outside of the doctor's pants, up and down a few times, without much finesse but without hesitation, either.

"Anything," he repeats, and it's the worst he's ever felt in his life, worse than getting beat down with a billy club, worse than his worst fever, worse than being fired or rejected or called a weakling. He's had sex with lots of men, had sex for money, even, but this is different, a perversion of something free and joyful, the delight of his bright fairy lipstick made sordid and dull in this cold examination room.

The doctor blinks at him, his mouth falling open as he exhales shakily. Steve steps even closer, sure for a long second that his plan is going to work and he's going to have to go through with it.

A blowjob, he tells himself, or a dicking, it's not like he hasn't had both plenty of times. It's funny, he thinks, and has to bite back a pained laugh, that this is what it'll take to get the Army to see him as a real man.
There's movement then, someone walking by on the other side of the curtain, and the doctor backs up a step and shoves Steve away with one hand. Steve stumbles back against the rickety exam table.

"So that's why you want in so bad," the doctor spits. He looks shaken and paranoid, glancing out through the gap in the curtain to make sure no one saw. "After all that bullshit about doing the right thing."

Steve is torn into pieces by the accusation, caught off guard, wishing he could take it back.

This guy is going to call the cops on him. He's sure of it. This guy is going to call the cops, and then Steve will spend the war in prison.

"You think the Army is your personal faggot pleasure cruise, well, it's not," the doctor says, his voice getting louder. "You fairies disgust me."

"Okay," Steve says, holding up his hands, "okay, okay, please don't – don't shout – "

"And you almost convinced me you were soldier material," the doctor says. "That you wanted to serve."

Steve picks up his clothes as fast as he can and starts putting them on, determined at least not to be dragged out in his drawers. "I do," he says, gritting his teeth. "I do want to serve, that's what I want – "

"Get the hell out of here," the doctor growls. "You're lucky I don't call the police."

Pulling his shirt over his head, Steve narrows his eyes and stares at the doctor, recognition dawning on him in an angry wave.

"I know why you're not calling the police," he hisses. "I know why, and you know why, and you're a goddamn hypocrite."

The doctor doesn't have much to say to that, so Steve jams his feet into his shoes and leaves as fast as he can, shirttails trailing unbuttoned behind him. He ignores the looks of the men he passes on the way out, ignores their whispered comments and speculations.

When he gets out onto the street, he runs. He pushes himself, and ignores the pain in his joints, and he runs until he's in the right place, on the right street, as twilight starts to paint the city in rich, unreal colors.

It takes him a while to catch his breath, but that's okay. He settles in against a wall, taking the pressure off his knees, and watches the men walk by.

He doesn't have any makeup with him, or anything colorful to wear, not so much as a red tie or a lavender scarf. It doesn't matter, though; he knows what he is, and he can make sure other men know, too.

"Hey soldier," he calls, to a guy walking by himself, a guy who looks a little too uncomfortable in his uniform for it to be anything but brand new. The guy turns, and seems shocked to see Steve lounging against the wall, his shirt open, one leg drawn up against the bricks.

"Yeah, you," Steve grins. "C'mere, sweetheart, I ain't got all day."

"Uh, I'm not – " the guy begins, but he takes a few steps closer, and that's all Steve needs.
"I can see what you are," Steve says, laying it on thick. "Big strong soldier, out on the town, looking for some fun." Reaching out, he reels the guy in by his lapels, so that Steve's next words are breathed against his lips. "That's right, isn't it, fella?"

The soldier breathes fast, eyes darting down to Steve's lips and then up again to his eyes.

Steve pulls him back further into the alley, where they won't be seen. The kid comes willingly, step by step, as Steve walks backward.

"You want your dick sucked or not, pal?" Steve asks, pushing him up against the wall.

"Yeah," the soldier says, licking his lips. "Yeah, okay."

Grinning, Steve pushes his hand down into the guy's front pocket, rubbing up and down against his dick, making him groan and collapse back into the wall. Steve pulls out the two quarters he finds there.

"Fair?" he asks, holding them up. The soldier nods and gulps. Steve pockets them and does his best to kneel down somewhere dry and relatively clean.

The first taste of cock on his tongue makes Steve groan himself, the familiar hot salty stretch of it taking away the memory of the doctor's disgusted voice, the horrible feeling of the doctor's cock getting hard under his hand.

The kid can't be more than twenty, and Steve wouldn't be surprised if this is his first blowjob, so he doesn't waste any fancy tricks on him. He just takes him in and sucks hard, using his hands and his spit to ease the way. With every bob of his head he feels better, more in control, and when the soldier's hands land in his hair he feels the tension start to drain from his body.

"God, God, oh my God, oh wow," the kid is saying, and Steve chuckles as best he can around the big, hard cock that's filling him up. A few more deep sucks and it's all over, the soldier spilling into Steve's mouth and crying out way too loudly as he does so.

Steve spits onto the ground, smiling.

"How's that," he asks, standing up again. He tucks the kid back into his uniform pants and buttons him up, nice and neat.

"Good," the kid says, "Yeah."

Steve laughs, and stands up on tiptoes to give him a little kiss. The kid's mouth is loose and wet, and Steve sucks and licks at him greedily for a while before pulling back.

"Then off you go," he says. The kid grins and pushes away from the wall.

Steve watches him go, and as he does he notices another guy standing a few feet in from the mouth of the alley. He gets ready to run.

"Don't want any trouble," Steve says, warningly, and squares his shoulders.

"Maybe I do," the guy says. He's in uniform, too, but a few years older than the kid who's just left, taller and broader, with real muscle under his dress greens. Steve licks his lips.

Coming a step closer, the guy holds up two bits.

Steve shakes his head and lounges back against the bricks. "A dollar," he says.
"What," the guy laughs. "Are you kidding?"

"Nope."

"You know I'm serving my country," the guy says, doubtfully, like he's not sure if the usual soldier's discount applies for backalley blowjobs. Steve laughs, the feeling clear and good in his chest.

"So am I, sweetheart," he says, crossing his arms. "Just wanna do my part for the war effort."

"I could make you," the guy says, walking closer, still holding his quarter. Steve comes up off the wall and strides right up to him, getting into his space.

"You think so, huh?" he asks, waringly, puffing out his chest. The guy blinks in surprise, and for a moment Steve almost wants an excuse to hit him. Then he smiles suddenly. "Well, maybe you could try. But I don't think you want that."

Leaning upwards, Steve kisses him on his throat, under his jaw, up to his ear. "I think," Steve says, between kisses, "that you want a sweet," kiss, "little," kiss, "fairy. To treat you real nice." He pulls back a little. "Nobody sucks dick like a fairy. Isn't that right?"

Nodding, the guy gulps. "Yeah. That's right," he says.

"A dollar," Steve says, and the guy comes up with three more quarters.

This time, Steve doesn't bother trying to keep his pants away from the dirt of the alley; it's not really working, and anyway, who is he kidding? He gets down on his knees on the damp dirty ground and opens his mouth. This time he makes it last, going as slow and as sweet as he promised, giving the guy his money's worth. It feels so good, the smell of the uniform's wool mixed with sweat and musk, the press of cock against his mouth, the sounds he wrings out of the guy's throat as he sucks.

There's another guy after him, and then another, and another. Steve's jaw starts to really ache after a while, but he likes it, a kind of pain that he can choose to endure. The sixth guy offers him a buck if he can fuck him, and Steve, painfully hard inside his trousers, nods and agrees without even bartering.

He's a small guy, not much bigger than Steve, but he makes up for it in force and stamina, shoving Steve against the brick wall on every stroke, fucking into him over and over for what seems like forever. Steve groans and jacks himself off and comes twice before the other guy finishes, so that by the time he's done Steve feels destroyed, aching and gorgeous and well-used.

Steve turns around after, though, counting on the wall to hold up his exhausted legs, and grins at the guy as he does up his pants.

"Almost feel like you shoulda paid me for that one," the guy says, a self-satisfied grin on his face.

"No refunds, soldier," Steve purrs.

It takes him a long time to get back to the subway station near the recruitment center; his legs are shaking, and every step is painful. He can't help but think, though, that his newfound money will earn him more than a few subway rides.

When he finally gets home he collapses into bed and lies still for a long time. He hurts all over, aches and pains flowing up and down his body to center in his knees, his back, his neck, his jaw,
his hard-used ass. He holds still and revels in every last twinge.

* 

A few days later he gets a letter from Bucky saying that he'll be back from basic training soon, and Steve counts up what money he has, wondering if he could afford to take Bucky out on the town while he's on leave and still manage to pay for the two-room suite at the rooming house. It's tempting to go out fishing again, but now his blood's not up he recognizes that it's not the safest thing to do, really, so he decides to work a few more hours at the docks instead. They could certainly use him down there.

One day, coming back home after a long shift, there's a clattering out on the stairwell as Steve is walking in the door. He hears Danielle screaming, or maybe yelling, the sound of it echoing all over the building. He runs as fast as he can up the stairs to find Danielle storming down them. Valentine is trailing down the stairs after her, looking around fearfully.

Danielle's in her new WAAC uniform. Even worried as he is, Steve stops, breathless, to notice how well it suits her.

"Danielle, just come back upstairs so we can talk – " Valentine is saying. Danielle throws her hands up and continues down the stairs. She almost runs into Steve.

"Goddamn it!" she yells. "Sorry, Steve."

"Are you ladies, uh, okay?"

"We're fine, we just need to talk," Valentine insists. She's pitching her voice low, probably hoping that no other neighbors come running to see what the fuss is about. Steve grimaces; he doesn't know if Danielle always sees what she deals with, coming up to this neighborhood to visit.

"We're done talking," Danielle says, loudly, making Valentine wince. Sure enough, a door opens upstairs, and Gerald yells at them to keep the racket down.

"You let one in and the neighborhood goes to shit," Gerald fumes, apparently for the general public to hear, and slams his door.

Danielle turns back to look up the stairwell and blinks.

"I'll be gone when you get back," Valentine hisses quietly, furiously, and turns back towards the apartment, presumably to get her coat. She closes the door softly behind her.

Danielle looks like she wants to say something to the closed door.

"Can I help?" Steve asks.

Danielle furrows her eyebrows as if she's only now seeing him. "We fought," she says shortly, leaning back against the dirty, uneven wall of the stairwell. She looks about ready to collapse down onto the stairs.

"Yeah," Steve agrees, because that seems safe enough.

"Over this," she adds, picking at the crisp khaki lapel of her new uniform.

"She didn't want you to join up?" Steve thinks about this. "I thought Valentine supported you."

Danielle sighs. "No, it's not that. Or – it's not only that, I guess. She did say she supported me
signing up. She just doesn't think I should have to lie to do it."

Steve frowns. "They're asking the women too now, huh?" he asks, softly. Betty and Frank had told him the stories of their psychiatric evaluations, all the awkward questions about sex. He wonders if the questions are different for girls. Steve would've thought they'd want dykes and daggers in the Army, for the same reason they don't seem to want fairies, but it's not like the Army is known for making sense.

"That's what I hear."

"Well, it's not like she hasn't done it before, is it? Doesn't Valentine work at the typing pool with Pauline?"

Danielle gazes up again at the door: plain scarred wood that's seen better days. "Valentine's opinion, which is not wrong, goddammit, is that asking someone to serve or die for their country is different than asking someone to type letters." She pulls out a cigarette with shaking hands, speaking her next words around it while she tries to strike the match. "And, you know, no one at the typing pool ever asked. She never had to deny anything."

"I get that," Steve says, nodding. He's familiar enough with that fine line himself.

"She wants to stage a protest. 'Let Queers Fight,' that kind of thing. Mostly on behalf of our pansy brothers-in-arms, of course."

Steve whistles. "Is that dame afraid of anything?"

Blowing out a long trail of smoke, Danielle says, "I'm pretty sure she's afraid of me leaving her."

Steve nods. There's an awkward pause between them.

"They do say that the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps is going to be a hotbed of lesbians and prostitutes," Steve offers, trying a small smile.

"Fuck, then she oughta join up too," Danielle says, blowing out smoke. A couple of tears slip down her cheeks. "Sounds like a party."

"You – should probably go talk to her," Steve says. "She looked like she wasn't fond of the scene you were making."

"Shit. I know. We've even talked about this, and I promised to do better, and – she's gonna be so pissed now. Like it wasn't hard enough for her around here. Goddamn it. We shoulda moved up to Harlem like she said." She bangs her head against the wall a couple of times, and a couple more tears escape from her eyes, and she says, "Gimme a minute, though, okay? I need a minute. Talk to me for a minute."

"All right," Steve says. He tries to think of something else to say. "The uniform looks nice," he
"Yeah? It's not the best cut, I gotta say. But I do like the hat."

"Very smart," Steve agrees.

Danielle gives him a knowing look and raises an eyebrow. "You wanna try it?"

Steve flushes. It's not such a bad idea, actually; maybe one of the recruiters would take him if he put on some drag and signed up as a woman. If he walked right, if he dressed right, maybe they'd never even think to check.

He's never worn a skirt, but he has a few pairs of stockings that he wears under his trousers sometimes, and has always wondered how a skirt would feel, brushing against his calves. The WAAC uniform is olive drab just like in the regular Army, has the same tie and the same buttons, and if Steve wore it he would be girly and useful and able to do service for his country.

"It might be a little big on me," he says, swallowing hard.

Danielle searches his face for a minute; then, with her cigarette held between her lips, she unpins her cap and sets it on Steve's head instead. It fits perfectly, snug above his ears.

She brushes his hair up under it, then, dashing away her tears, she takes him by the shoulders to survey her handiwork.

"Your job," she says officiously, growling around the cig, "is to replace men. Be ready to take over."

"Yes, ma'am," Steve says solemnly, then breaks and laughs. "Is that really the WAAC slogan?"

"It's on the first page of the handbook!" Danielle says, laughing quietly and pressing the heel of her hand against her eye. "I couldn't have made that up. Damn, I've been ready to replace men in certain crucial jobs for ages now. I'm just glad the government has finally made it official."

There's a noise from upstairs, the door finally opening again, and Danielle's gaze swings towards it. Steve hastily takes off the cap and puts it back in her hand.

"You're both afraid," Steve says, in a low tone, as Valentine emerges from the apartment. "And you're both right to feel the way you do."

"I know," Danielle sighs. "It's fucking terrible."

"So stop being such a jerk," Steve says. "Don't take it out on her."

She starts up the stairs towards Valentine, sensible heels clacking against the bare wood.

Steve doesn't hear what she says to Valentine; she speaks softly, pitched for Valentine's ears alone. Valentine, holding her coat tight in one hand and a little valise in the other, listens, and gradually her grip loosens, and she nods, and they go back into the apartment.

Sighing, Steve stares at the door and wishes them well.

He doesn't know how it went until a few days later, when Valentine comes by to invite Steve and Bucky to Danielle's going-away party.

"You came around, huh?" Steve asks, leaning against the doorframe to take pressure off his knees.
Valentine breathes out through her nose, annoyed. "No. But what the hell else can we do?"

Steve doesn't think he's ever heard Valentine blaspheme before, and raises his eyebrows. "I know a lot of queers who signed up. Nobody likes it."

"Yeah. I know," she replies. "But if they're going to be forced to fight a war, nobody should have to do it without acknowledgement."

Steve thinks about all his friends, out in basic training or being shipped off; about Bucky, who'll be back from basic on Thursday and will ship out again soon after that. Danielle probably won't be near the combat, but who knows what could happen if the WAAC mechanics are called up near the front lines. And the rest of them could die easily, so easily, with nobody knowing how they loved, who their friends were, what life they chose for themselves.

He nods, unable to think of anything to say that might comfort Valentine.

"Is the Committee for Peace at Home organizing a protest for integration?" he asks. "For the armed forces, I mean."

"Right now we're just trying to integrate the YMCA," she says, crossing her arms. "You gonna come out and protest with us? It's for the Y here in Brooklyn this time."

"Sure. Tell me when," he says. "So long as I don't have to be at work."

"I will," Valentine says. "We need as many bodies as we can get."

"Bodies are gonna be thin on the ground, with everyone signing up," Steve says. "But you can have mine." He laughs ruefully. "The Army didn't want it."

"You know when the war is over, they're gonna make movies about it," Valentine says. "Like they did for the last one. All white men, no women, no Negros, no fairies, just square-jawed lily-white Protestants from one end of the screen to the other."

Steve can imagine it, all too easily. "The dumb thing is, I still wanna sign up anyway."

Valentine spreads her hands in frustration. "You and Danielle both, and I don't blame you. So here we are. Danielle is leaving on Monday, and I'm proud of her even if nobody else would be. And I want her to have some good memories to hang on to. So we'll have a little get-together down at my parents' place on Friday night."

"I'll be there," Stevepromises. "Bucky too, he wrote me he's coming back for a few days' leave on Thursday before he ships out."

She nods firmly. "Then we'll give him a sendoff too," she says. "Invite Marlene and Betty if they want to come."

"That's really nice, Val, thanks." Steve's caught for a moment, wanting to reach out to touch her, maybe give her a hug, but not sure if she'd appreciate it, or want the neighbors to see.

Valentine solves the problem by hugging him instead, briefly but really hard, before stepping back to put a decorous two feet between them again.

"Pauline's going to get a new roommate," she says, smiling at him sadly. "So we might not see much of each other after that." Steve nods, knowing that even though the building manager has turned a blind eye to Valentine's daytime visits, her money is never going to be good enough for
her to stay the night.

"Maybe after the war," Steve says.

"Maybe."

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"It looks good on you," is all Steve can think to say when Bucky comes home from Basic Training in his uniform. It does: it accentuates the breadth of his shoulders and the trimness of his waist, making him look even taller than he is. A part of Steve wants nothing more than to curl up in his arms, let his man take care of him and tell him everything's going to be all right.

Another part of him just wants to get inside it.

"It's pretty binding," Bucky says, pulling at the collar. "I don't know if I'll ever feel comfortable in it."

Steve shrugs. "Maybe your comfort isn't the goal. You represent something now."

"Guess so." He tugs self-consciously at the cuffs, flattens the lapels, touches the hat to secure it in place. Annoyed, Steve steps in and fixes the things that actually need fixing – the back of his collar, the flap of a pocket. As he brushes imaginary dust from the shoulders he smiles, and Bucky leans down to kiss him. It's their first kiss in over two months, so Steve figures it's all right to let it linger. He slides his hand up into Bucky's hair, so much shorter than Steve's ever seen it before. He might have to reconsider sending him pomade.

"Who's ever gonna look out for me when you're not around?" Bucky asks.

"I'll catch up to you. Just don't get yourself killed in the meantime and we'll call it good."

Bucky frowns a little. "You're going to try again? I thought the Army recruiter said – "

"I've tried a few times now. They all said no. But there are other Army guys in other cities, and someone'll take me. There's a war on."

Bucky's big, strong hands are moving slowly up and down Steve's arms, cupping his shoulders and then sliding down almost to the elbows. "How many times have you tried?" he asks.

"Four," Steve says. "Fifth time's the charm."

Bucky nods. "At some point, maybe it's time to start thinking about something else you could do."

Steve's boss had actually been delighted to hear about his 4F. Steve figures he could stick around his current job and be running the whole place in a year, maybe with no one but 4Fs and burly bulldykes for dockers.

"Maybe," he says. "Maybe all I need is to find the right recruiter."

Bucky frowns, stroking Steve's jaw with his thumb. "Or – okay, listen. I've been thinking. Maybe it's good. Maybe fairies shouldn't be in the fighting. Like girls. Steve, you're so . . . "

"So what? Weak?" Steve can't bring himself to step back out of Bucky's embrace, but he looks down at the floor, unable to make eye contact. They've been through this, Steve thought they were done with this.
"No," Bucky says firmly. "You're strong, I know that. But you're also, you know. Girly. Beautiful."

Steve doesn't feel beautiful. All he feels is longing for the rough khaki uniform that Bucky fills out so perfectly. "Maybe everyone needs to fight, if they can. Fairies and all. All the other pansies in my barbershop quartet signed up last week. Hell, maybe dames should be fighting too, you know what Danielle says."

Danielle's been talking about nothing but allowing women in combat since before she got her WAAC uniform. He figures if he can get to be girly when he wants, the girls should get to do manly things, too.

"I know. It's just, during training, I got to thinking. A lot of the guys, they have a girl back home, someone to hold on to. A lot of them showed me pictures, and I – it was funny, but I wanted to show them a picture of you. I thought – I don't know. If I could imagine you here, living the same life, pretty and happy in your lipstick and rouge, wearing that scarf I got you . . . maybe it wouldn't be so hard to go."

Steve can't help but reach up to cup Bucky's cheek, stroke his thumb along his cheekbone. "I get that. But I can't be that for you, Buck." He frowns. "Maybe one of your other girls, Lizzie or Gertie – "

"Hey, you're my best girl, you know that," Bucky says affectionately, giving him a little shake. Steve smiles up at him. "Even if all you want is to get inside my uniform pants."

Steve laughs. "You don't know how true that is." Affectionately, he slides his hand down the front of Bucky's uniform, over the stiff material and the wide cold buttons, until he's cupping his hand over Bucky's dick.

"Sometimes I wish the opposite, you know," Bucky breathes.

"Yeah?" Steve rubs slowly, his hand sliding up and down the khaki.

"Yeah. That you were going with me. I missed you in Basic. I thought about you."

"We could share a tent," Steve smiles. "Get up to all kinds of things."

Bucky laughs. "That's true. But it's not what I thought about." Leaning down, he kisses Steve's neck gently, as Steve keeps up the slow, teasing massage.

"What did you think about?"

Head buried against Steve's shoulder, Bucky says, "That you'd make me brave enough to go through with it. The way you always make me brave."

Steve brings both his hands up to Bucky's face, cupping his jaw so he can kiss him, slow and deep, trying to say everything he doesn't have the words for.

When he pulls back, Bucky smiles at him.

"You want to take this conversation somewhere a little more private, soldier?" Steve asks.

Bucky tosses off a salute – terrible, very disrespectful of the service – and lets Steve pull him by his short tie into their bedroom, towards the two single beds that Steve's kept pushed together, even in Bucky's absence. Bucky usually likes being in control, is usually the one to strip Steve down and lay him on the bed, but now he's uncharacteristically still, letting Steve slowly peel him from his
uniform. Steve undoes each jacket button slowly, thumbing it out from its buttonhole, until he works his way to the belt, which he unfastens and pulls from the loops. He unbuttons the uniform shirt underneath, then runs his hands down Bucky's undershirt, over his belly, until he gets to the edge of his uniform trousers. He lets his hand rest there, brushing the soft bare skin where Bucky's undershirt is rucked up, dipping his fingers under the waistband.

"You waiting for something in particular?" Bucky teases, and Steve grins.

"I just like this," he answers, letting himself move and undo the trousers. "Us."

"Me too," Bucky says.

The buttons on the trousers and drawers are next, so that Steve can finally reach in and give Bucky's cock a quick tug, just to get the feeling of it in his hand. And then Bucky is standing before him, open from neck to thigh, his skin flashing out beneath the olive drab. He looks like an animal being skinned.

"C'mon," Bucky says. "C'mon." And he puts his hands on Steve's waist like they're dancing, walks backwards toward the beds.

Steve ends up on top, nestled in among the folds of half-removed clothing. He wiggles down the bed until he's level with Bucky's cock.

Bucky runs a warm hand through his hair. Steve takes him in. It doesn't take long, not when they know each other so well. Steve knows exactly how hard to go and Bucky knows when he can start to thrust and together they build and build until Bucky's coming hard in Steve's mouth, crying out and gripping Steve's hair just right.

Steve gets up to spit, then lies back down again, resting his cheek on the soft skin of Bucky's belly, exposed where his undershirt has ridden up. He listens to him breathe for a while.

"You don't want to get off?" Bucky asks softly, after a while.

Steve's hard, but he doesn't know if he wants to come or not. This feels more important, this still moment with Bucky lying split open beneath him. He moves up Bucky's body, so that he can lay his head on Bucky's shoulder, and pushes his nose under the edge of Bucky's open uniform shirt.

"Just let me lie here for a minute," he says.

Bucky doesn't say anything, but he tugs up the edges of his shirt and jacket and pulls them up over Steve, wrapping them around Steve's arms and shoulders like a blanket. Steve sighs against the scratchy feeling of the wool against his skin, the weight of it on his shoulders, enclosing them both together in olive drab.

On his back, there's a strip of skin left uncovered, where Bucky can't quite get the edges to meet. There isn't enough uniform for two.

Curling his body up effortlessly, Bucky kisses the top of Steve's head. "Take as long as you need," he says.

*

Valentine's party is huge, way bigger than Steve anticipated, with so many people that they spill out onto the street, with folks rotating in and out of the neat tenement house as the night goes on. There are a bunch of people he recognizes from some of Val and Danielle's political events, a lot of
dapper dykes and daggers with their girls, and a lot of fairies and pansies, too, though they're a lot better dressed than Steve is in his makeup and green shirt; that makes Steve a little nervous, and he keeps checking to make sure he got the bloodstain out of the collar. There are a lot of people who seem to be artists of one kind or another, but from what Steve can tell it's modern art, or poetry, not the kind of commercial stuff he usually does.

Sensing his nervousness, Bucky squeezes his shoulder as they go in. "You all right, pal? It's just a party, we can go back home if you want."

Steve shakes his head. "I'm fine."

Once inside, Steve spots Valentine and Danielle near the door, arms around each others' waists, both of them with a glass of champagne in their hands. Danielle's in trousers and suspenders with a white collared shirt, her WAAC cap perched on her head, and Valentine's in a blue party dress cut daringly short, much shorter than she'd ever wear it up in Steve's neighborhood. It's nice to see them both so relaxed.

"Steve! Bucky!" Danielle calls. "What are you drinking!"

"We brought booze," Steve laughs, kissing each of them on the cheek in turn, then backing up so Bucky can do the same.

"Very good. You can deposit it in the kitchen, through there," Valentine says, pointing. Steve nods.

"So this is your folks' place, Val?" he asks. "What did you tell them was going on?"

Danielle laughs, and Valentine grins. "I told them I was having a party for all my queer communist activist artist friends," she says. "I think they're out on the stoop with Auden and Salvador Dali."

"Salvador . . . " Steve blinks. "Dali?" Did they pass Salvador Dali on the way in here, step over him maybe, and Steve didn't notice?

"Valentine's parents are kind of bohemian," Danielle explains.

"Give Steve a minute," Bucky says. "He likes that Dali guy."

"Auden's much nicer," Valentine smiles. "He writes for the Catholic Worker sometimes, you know. And he's one of your lot." She jerks her head towards the corner of the room, where two young Negro men are standing, holding hands, their heads bent close together. As Steve watches, one of them smiles slowly, and the other one laughs at whatever he's said and kisses him, easy as could be, before continuing the conversation.

It's not that Steve hasn't seen men kiss each other like that plenty of times before, in queer joints and even on the streets after dark, but the party is so big, and so full of mixed company, that it's still a little shock.

"You oughta have parties like this more often, Valentine," Bucky says, smiling.

Danielle kisses Valentine on the cheek. "She's usually too busy organizing more important things," she says. "But I don't disagree."

"Marlene and Betty are around here somewhere too," Valentine says. "In case you're in search of a familiar face in all the din."

"Thanks," Steve says, still wondering whether he can creep out on onto the stoop and hide behind
the railing to spy on Salvador Dali.

He and Bucky drop off the liquor they brought after pouring themselves each a generous serving, and of course they bump into Betty next to the booze.

"Steve, oh my God," Betty says. She's lovely in a light grey suit with peacock blue accents: handkerchief, hatband, cufflinks, and shirt. Steve's never seen the outfit before, and it must've cost her a fortune; he wonders if she bought it just for the occasion. "Can you believe this party? I was getting worried that we were invited as a curiosity, like the burlesque dancers or the monkey trainer. Or the monkey."

"There's a monkey?" Bucky asks. Betty looks around for it, then shrugs.

"Somewhere," she says.

"It's a little overwhelming, to be honest," Steve admits. Betty nods and tosses her drink back before pouring another.

"Well, stick with me, then," she says. "I want to meet each and every one of these fascinating people and I don't want to look like I'm desperate and here alone."

"Where's Marlene?" Steve asks.

"She found a very cute, very shy young painter to talk to, and they've been canoodling for half an hour now," Betty says. "I couldn't bear to interrupt."

Steve laughs. "Okay. Then let's go."

"I might mingle too," Bucky says, eye obviously on a group of pretty, laughing women in one corner of the main room. Some of them look pretty tough, and the ones who don't are cuddled up to the ones who do.

"Yeah, good luck with that," Steve laughs.

"Don't need luck," Bucky says. Steve snorts and starts to turn away, but Bucky's hand on his wrist stops him, turns him back.

"Hey," he says, and then, awkwardly, tilts up Steve's chin and kisses him. Steve returns it, bemused.

No one looks at them.

"Huh," Steve says, grinning.

"See you later, gorgeous," Bucky says, and then kisses him again, fast, before turning away with a mischievous expression.

"Huh," Steve says again, looking around. There's a couple sitting nearby, a dagger in a tuxedo and top hat, her girl curled up in her lap. They're watching Steve with amused expressions, and the girl raises her glass in a salute.

Steve smiles and nods his head in their direction, blushing a bit.

"Ain't it a hell of a thing," Betty says. "Never gets old."

They have a good time, chatting, laughing, telling stories, getting to know a bunch of new people.
A lot of them are actually talking about the war, about who got a 4F or a deferral for one reason and another. One guy, Alexander, tells them he took his 4F on morality grounds.

"Told them I was a punk cocksucker and that was that," he says, taking a sip of wine. "So I'm not moral enough to join the Army, as it turns out. But the joke's on them, because the Army isn't degenerate enough to join me."

Steve laughs and elbows Betty. "That's what you told me you were gonna do," he says. "Remember?" Betty and Marlene had both volunteered, in the end. They'll both be gone within the next two weeks.

"Yeah," she sighs. "I wish I had your balls, Alexander."

Alexander shrugs. "Anytime you like," he says, making them all laugh.

Much later, Bucky comes wandering back over with a couple of guys and gals in tow. He flops down into the chair that someone else has just vacated, then looks down at Steve on the floor and frowns.

"You wanna sit?" he asks quietly. Bucky's used to giving up his seat for Steve, but this time Steve doesn't think it's necessary. He smiles shyly.

"We could share," he says.

Bucky grins his goofiest grin and spreads his arms wide. "Come on then," he says. Steve curls up in his lap, tangling their legs together and getting comfortable.

"Your friend has been telling me that you're quite an artist," one of the new guys says. He's not quite handsome, but his pretty lips and sharp eyes, along with his British accent, make him striking. Steve smiles and ducks his head.

"It's commercial type stuff," he says. "Portraits, sometimes cartoons. Not much."

"But you do the art for Valentine's posters?" the guy presses. He gestures with his glass towards the kitchen, where a bunch of the posters are displayed on the walls. When Steve nods, he smiles. "I like those. Beautiful linework. And a lot of personality. You can feel how much you care about the causes you're drawing."

"Thanks," Steve says. "I'm Steve, by the way," he says, offering his hand.

The guy takes it warmly. "Wystan. Have you been drafted yet?"

" Tried to enlist," Steve says, as he has a bunch of times tonight. It's a pretty hot topic of conversation, especially with all of Val and Danielle's pacifist friends. "They didn't take me."

"They didn't take him four times," Bucky corrects, running his fingers over the back of Steve's neck softly.

"They wouldn't take me either," Wystan says. "Two different countries wouldn't take me, in fact, and I did offer. But now I don't mind. You and I can stay here in Brooklyn, Steve, and make art while everyone else makes war. If you need a place to live, I can rent you a room."

Steve nods. "That doesn't sound so bad," he says. Beneath him, Bucky kisses his throat, just below his ear.
They go on talking and drinking for a long while. Wystan tells them about his poetry, and Steve, at Wystan's insistence, draws a quickly sketched portrait of him, which he subsequently pronounces "grand." Bucky doesn't say much with words, but he keeps his hands and lips on Steve's body, making the whole room see the way they kiss and touch.

Later, when Wystan and a few of the others get up for new drinks, Steve leans his head back against Bucky's shoulder and sighs.

"You've been affectionate tonight," he murmurs. He's only been affectionate with Steve, though; he doesn't even smell like perfume or have lipstick on his collar, other than Steve's. When Steve had looked over, before, he'd been playing poker with the group of ladies he'd gone to talk to.

Bucky's hands still. "You don't like it?" he asks.

Every touch of Bucky's body has been lighting him up all night, making him feel so safe and so exposed at the same time, and he never wants to stop basking in the sensation. "I love it," he says, stretching a little to kiss Bucky's ear.

"I guess it's just – you know. I ship out soon. I don't want to miss out on anything I can have, before I go."

"In case you die," Steve murmurs, meeting his eyes.

"Yeah, asshole, in case I die," Bucky sighs. "I'm not you, I'm not brave like that."

"You are," Steve says. "You'd never stand to see someone hurt, not if you could stop it."

"Yeah, but change it from backalley brawling to huge armies with guns and tanks and it becomes fucking terrifying."

"It's the same," Steve insists. "The decision is the same. Don't be scared, Buck."

Bucky kisses him, soft but passionate, like a movie star kiss, like the last kiss before their clasped hands are pulled apart by the departing train, or the first kiss when they see each other again in a crowd after years of absence.

"You make me not scared," Bucky breathes. "Let's go home."

Steve nods. They say their goodbyes to everyone they've met, and to Marlene and Betty, and to Valentine and Danielle, once they finally locate them out on the stoop smoking.

To Steve's surprise, Danielle grabs Bucky up tight and hugs him firmly.

"I'm gonna light you a candle and say a prayer on Sunday," she says.

"Thanks," Bucky says, smiling softly. "You stay safe, huh? There's no knowing how close you might get to the fighting."

"Mister Barnes," Valentine smiles, and offers her hand. Bucky looks for a second like he might shake it, but kisses it instead.

"Miz Johnson," he replies. They all laugh a little.

"I'll light you a candle of your own, Danny," Steve says, hugging Danielle up. "I got time to say lots of prayers."
"Yeah?" Danielle asks, surprised. "Thought you didn't pray anymore."

Steve shrugs. He doesn't, but it's not because he doesn't believe in God; it's more because he couldn't live up to his end of the bargain. "I'll make an exception," he says.

"Good thing, too," Danielle sighs against his neck. "If there's anyone who could convince God to get on our side, Stevie, it's you. If nothing else, you'll wear him down."

She releases him, smiling, and the mood as he and Bucky walk home is melancholy. Steve wonders how many of the people he met tonight he'll see again, how many will be dead in a year.

"I want you to fuck me slow," he tells Bucky, when they get back to their rooms. "I want you to fuck me so slow tonight, Buck. Make it last forever."

Bucky smiles as he pushes Steve's jacket off his shoulders and lets it fall to the floor. "Dunno if that's possible," he says. "Gotta end sometime."

"Try," Steve says, and Bucky nods, and takes his mouth, and slowly, slowly, undoes every single button of Steve's shirt.

*

He ends up saying his last goodbye to Bucky in public, so it's just a hug and a few words. They can't kiss, and Steve can't say everything he means, so he tries instead to breathe in the familiar smell of him and keep the memory of this moment in his head for as long as he can.

Steve tells Bucky that he's planning on trying to enlist again, and this time Bucky lets it go, mostly, lets him go so he can make his own decision.

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

"How can I?" Steve asks, falling into their old familiar rhythm. "You're taking all the stupid with you."

Bucky's grin stretches his face as he says, "Punk."

Steve grins back. You bet I am, he wants to say, but there are a lot of people around, so he just says, "Jerk."

"Be careful," Bucky says, probably because he thinks Steve's more likely to get in trouble in Brooklyn than Bucky is in a war zone. Steve loves him hugely, outrageously, and wishes more than anything that he could go with him and keep him safe.

"Don't win the war till I get there," he calls.

He's always thought it would be something to sacrifice for another soldier, sacrifice time or health or comfort or even his life, but right now he wishes he could do anything, sacrifice anything, for that soldier to be Bucky.

Bucky salutes at him. Then he heads off with Lizzie and Gertie, and Steve heads off to meet one more recruiter.

Maybe this time he'll get a sympathetic doctor.

*
IA, the form still says.

Steve can't help himself; he keeps opening up his folder again, gazing at the stamp in the bottom right corner. The stamp that means he's worthy, good... or, good enough, at least. He still doesn't quite understand what Dr Erskine wants him for, or what he sees in him, but he doesn't care. All he cares about is the opportunity he holds in his hand: to serve, to do his duty.

To catch up with Bucky.

It turns out there are a bunch of tests and a lot more paperwork that Dr Erskine kind of skipped over when he gave him his stamp, and the rest of the Army guys are insistent that Steve should go through them. Steve fills out forms, gets measured for a uniform, and, after a couple of hours of being shuffled from waiting room to waiting room, he finds himself in a tiny, makeshift office with removable walls, sitting across from a bored-looking bald guy in his fifties.

"You like killing people?" the guy begins. Steve blinks; didn't he already answer this for Dr Erskine?

"No, sir," he replies.

"You ever killed anyone?"

"No, sir."

The guy actually glances up from the clipboard in front of him and gives Steve a glance up and down. Steve's acutely aware of the bruise that's breaking out on his jaw from the fight in the alley behind the movie theater. "You get in fights?"

"Yes, sir, sometimes. Standing up for myself. I don't start them, if that's what you mean."

"Uh-huh."

The guy scribbles on his pad of paper for a minute. Steve tries not to fidget.

"You like girls, Rogers?"

Steve likes girls fine, so he says, "Yes, sir?" The guy narrows his eyes.

"You don't go with men, I mean. Like those fairies."

Oh. He was so caught up in the idea of finally getting in that he'd forgotten about this question. Anyway, he's already thought this through. He's made his decision. He knows the right answer, and gives it.

"No, sir."

More scribbling.

"Does the idea disgust you, make you angry?"

For a second Steve considers faking disgust and anger, in case it's what they want, but he's never been a good liar and doesn't want to have to go through some elaborate charade. "Uh. No, sir? I figure it's not my business." He makes himself take a deep, slow breath, trying to look calm.

The guy nods. "Okay. You ever hurt an animal?"
Steve lets himself breathe out. "No, of course not. Sir."

All in all, the interview lasts three minutes. When it's over, someone measures Steve for his new hat.

*

Once he has a chance, he writes everyone he knows with the news: Bucky's mom and sister, Frank who's already overseas, Betty and Marlene who've just left for Basic, Danielle wherever her motor pool is right now, Valentine in Brooklyn, on and on down the list to Bucky himself.

*I've been accepted into some kind of special training program,* he tells them. They still haven't told Steve much about it, and Steve figures it'll be classified anyway, when they do.

On Bucky's letter, he writes a postscript: *Be there to see you soon, pal. Save me half a tent.*

*

On the day Steve meets Peggy Carter, she punches a guy, yells at a line of soldiers twice her size, and makes them all do pushups.

Steve never could manage much in the way of pushups, but for her he wants to try. She's not exactly the kind of drill sergeant he expected to find in the Army, but she's tough, and strong, and doesn't take any guff from the men. He's met tough dames before, got beat up by more than one growing up, but there's something about the way Agent Carter uses her strength – not to punish, but to protect, and to maintain discipline – that makes him take notice. When she hits Hodge she reminds him, a little, of Bucky, stepping in to end a fight that Steve had started. She hits him once, just once, enough to prove her point but no more.

She happens to be passing by, sensible shoes pressing down the soft springy grass, when Steve manages a half decent pushup, actually getting up in a reasonable amount of time.

"Good, Rogers. Another like that," Carter says. The simple praise makes Steve feel warm, confident, and he grits his teeth and manages to press out another good pushup.

"Good," she says again, before passing on to the next recruit. Steve gasps and lets himself take a moment before he tries for another one.

"Showing off for the lady boss, huh Rogers?" Hodge teases him, when they head for the showers. "I saw you saving up your strength to try to impress her when she came by. Too bad your strength is still pretty pathetic."

Steve frowns. He hadn't been saving up, it'd just been – Agent Carter had brought out the best in him, is all. "It's not like that," he says, and Hodge laughs. Steve knows a bully when he sees one, and walks away, not wanting to let him get another word in.

But he wonders about it, after, what it was about Agent Carter that made him want to work so hard, be what she asked him to be, why she could evoke that feeling that he usually only felt around big, strong men. Steve isn't too proud to admit he's been attracted to one or two bulldykes in his day, tall women in trousers with short hair and a bit of chew behind their teeth, but Agent Carter's nothing like that.

As time goes by, though, and he gets a better sense of what she is like, he finds himself liking her more and more. Maybe this is how it's supposed to be, he thinks, when you fall in love with a girl.
On the other hand, maybe he's still got it wrong, because much as he tries to imagine himself kissing her, just as a sort of experiment, all he can think of is her pushing him down and kissing him instead.

*

The training is grueling. Steve falls into helpless coughing fits on their runs, his breath emptying out of him for long minutes until he finds himself on his knees in the woods, woozy, gasping hard until he can get his lungs open again, then getting up and running some more. His joints scream at him when he lifts the first double-weight pack, and every time after that the agony of it increases until he has to grit his teeth and close his eyes just to get through it. And almost every night, when he gets back to barracks, he finds himself shaking hard, like he never has before, uncontrollably, so that he has to hold on hard to the sink, to the walls, to the bedrails, just to keep himself from shaking to pieces.

Agent Carter sees him shaking, once, after a particularly bad day, and calls him over to her while the rest of the men file back into barracks. He clenches his hands into fists.

"Ma'am," Steve says, doing his best to stay upright.

"Rogers, it seems to me that you are in bad shape at the moment."

It's stupid to deny it, but Steve does it anyway. "I can handle it, ma'am," he says.

Her eyes darken. "That was not my question, soldier. Are you in pain?"

"Yes," he replies, feeling a slow sick surge of humiliation roll through him.

"Are you in pain such that it is interfering with your ability to complete your duties?"

That one's harder, and Steve gapes for a moment.

"Answer me," Agent Carter says, her voice steely and quiet.

"Sometimes, ma'am," he tries. "But I can get through the training program, ma'am, I swear it."

"Oh, I'm quite sure you'll get through it, even if you kill yourself in the process," she says, and looks him over again. He knows he's chalky white, that his whole body is trembling, that he's still aching and gasping for breath after a run that ended half an hour ago. He wishes she couldn't see all that, all his weaknesses, all the things that make him not good enough to serve under her. He tries to stand up straighter.

"All right, Rogers," she says, after a minute. "I'm going to talk to Colonel Phillips about lightening your duties. And perhaps your pack."

He opens his mouth to protest, but shuts it again at her glare. "Dismissed," she says, in a tone that brooks no argument.

Steve clenches his jaw and takes himself off to the barracks.

A couple hours later, after he's got his breath back and his hands have stopped shaking, he's completely exhausted but still restless. He lies down, but he can't sleep. It's not quite lights-out; some of the guys are still up, talking or playing cards. He can probably catch Agent Carter in her office, if he's quick, and try to convince her not to talk to Colonel Phillips. The last thing he needs is special treatment.
He adjusts his cap nervously as he walks down the hallway. If he's pin-neat and pressed, maybe it'll help Agent Carter forget the image she has of him from before, sweaty and exhausted. A guy can hope.

Her door is ajar, so he knocks quickly before pushing it open and stepping inside.

It's not like he gets an eyeful or anything; everyone is fully dressed and buttoned up. And it's not even like he catches them in a clinch, either, because they spring apart quick enough that Steve only sees one bare second of them together, arms wrapped around each other, the woman's face in Agent Carter's hands.

"Private Rogers," Agent Carter manages, self-consciously touching her fingers to the edge of her mouth to check her lipstick, then hastily putting her hand back down again. The other woman turns around, and Steve recognizes one of the SSR secretaries.

"Agent Carter," he says, drawing himself to attention and saluting. "Private Lorraine."

"I'll prepare those documents for you, Agent Carter," Lorraine says, picking something up off of the desk and walking towards the door. Unlike Agent Carter, she seems completely unembarrassed, so much so that Steve would question what he thought he saw if he weren't so sure. He almost doesn't notice Lorraine stopping by the door, stooping swiftly, and picking up her shoes, and if he hadn't, he certainly wouldn't have noticed that she was in her stocking feet.

Agent Carter clears her throat. "What – what can I do for you, Private Rogers?" she asks, surreptitiously smoothing down her skirt, obviously trying to tough it out. "At ease," she adds, hastily.

"I won't tell anyone," he blurts out, before he can think better of it, then winces. He shifts awkwardly to parade rest.

She strides towards him then, tall and imposing. Her heels click on the floor. "You won't tell anyone what, Private?" she asks, glaring down at him.

"Nothing, ma'am. I – I didn't see anything." She's standing close enough for him to feel the heat from her body and see the fury in her eyes.

For a long moment, while she holds his gaze, all Steve wants in the world is to be the girl she was just kissing.

Agent Carter takes a deep breath and then tugs down her jacket and turns on her heel.

"So we're back to my question, then," she says, taking three long steps back behind her desk. "What can I do for you?"

"I – wanted to ask you for something," Steve begins, then thinks better of it. Anything he asks for, at this point, is going to seem like blackmail. He ducks his head for a second, then raises it again to look politely over her shoulder. "But I think I'd better go."

Agent Carter raises her eyebrows in surprise. "You're not going to ask me to let you keep your current duties?"

Steve smiles. "No," he says, with finality. "I'm not."

She looks at him, considering, taking her time. A flush of heat passes over Steve's skin, along his cheeks and up to his ears. He doesn't move. He allows her to look.
"You really want to continue doing the same tasks designed to test men twice your size?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am, I do."

"You're enduring a lot of unnecessary pain." Her eyes search his face for an answer.

He smiles at her. It's been a while since he felt this way, glad to be seen, visible. "It's my pain, ma'am. And I don't see it as unnecessary."

She returns his smile slowly. "Very well, Private Rogers," she says. "It's your decision."

"Thank you, ma'am," he says. "And . . . I hope this isn't offered in exchange. You don't owe me anything."

"No, I don't," Agent Carter agrees. She takes up a pen and begins writing something on an official-looking document. "You're dismissed, Private Rogers."

He turns to go, but is called back by her voice.

"And Private Rogers?"

He turns back. "Yes, Agent Carter?"

She doesn't look up from her papers as she clears her throat and speaks. "Thank you for your discretion."

*

When Colonel Phillips throws the grenade, Steve dives for it; of course he does. His body may not be strong, or quick, or skilled, but it's good for this, good for one battlefield tactic: getting between the shrapnel and his fellows. It's different than taking a hit from a cop's billy club so someone else doesn't have to, but only in scale.

In the long seconds while he waits for it to go off, before he realizes that it's a fake, he thinks that, if he has to die, at least Agent Carter might be proud of him.

*

After a few weeks, he starts getting letters from some of his friends, a few of them showing signs of having been routed all over the place before they found him. Marlene writes that she's learning a lot about seamanship in the Navy, and Steve can just imagine what her quiet smile looked like when she wrote that line; Danielle tells him that the WACs are all real friendly and they're having a heck of a time, but that she misses Brooklyn; Bucky's mom, Winifred, writes to let him know they're all thinking of him and Bucky, and sends along some hand-knit socks; and Valentine writes him a long letter full of socialist gossip with a partially blacked-out section at the end about the protests that the CPH has been working on lately. She sends along a tin of cookies, the same ones she used to bring along to protests and strikes.

He eats two immediately, and they taste almost as good as they do when they're fresh. They came from the oven in her parents' house, he thinks, from the same home where he and Bucky had drank and kissed and curled up together in a chair in front of God and everyone.

For the first time, he wonders if he made the right choice, to try to enlist that last time. They still haven't told them how many will be chosen for this procedure they keep talking about, or if their unit is ever going to join up with regular infantry. Steve's gonna do everything he can with this
chance he's been given to serve, to do something good, but there's a part of him, too, that wishes he'd stayed in Brooklyn, making art with Wystan and watching the ships go by with David.

*

That night he's out walking behind the building, trying to avoid the noise and hustle of the barracks before lights-out. Bucky'd make fun of him, probably, for wanting to avoid a room full of big burly half-naked men, but all Steve really wants, since he read his letter from Valentine, is some privacy. He nods at the MP who's guarding the gate, and strolls a little around the grounds. Mostly it's nothing but dirt pack and scrub grass, nothing too pretty, but in the dark it's not so bad.

He looks up just in time to catch sight of a window coming alight, and inside, silhouetted against a thin curtain, two men embracing. He's stuck, stopped, held in place by the suggestive image; for a few yearning seconds, as he watches the two figures kiss, he wants nothing more than to stay where he is and shove his hand down his pants. He shakes off the impulse almost immediately; it would be a terrible breach of privacy, and besides that, anyone could walk by here and see them. Counting windows, he figures it's the first floor visitor's washroom, and dashes inside before the MP can get bored and start looking around.

He has to pound on the washroom door for a while before anyone replies.

"Occupied," comes a strained voice, and Steve rolls his eyes. They're not in some queer bar on Sands Street, or some department store tearoom, for God's sake.

"I know it is," Steve whispers back harshly, "because I can see everything you're doing from outside."

There's a long pause, and then the door opens. Two of the guys from his squad are in there, clothes hastily arranged but obviously not far from a state of complete disarray. Before Steve can say anything, one of them reaches out, grabs Steve by his shirtfront, and pulls him in. The door shuts with a bang behind him.


"You're gonna get some trouble," the first guy – Smith, Steve thinks his name is – growls. He hasn't let go of Steve's shirtfront. "I don't know what you think you saw, but – "

Steve raises his hands in surrender and cuts him off. "Just what I've seen a million times, a couple of guys having a good time together. I'm really not gonna tell anyone. But I thought I should tell you that you were two minutes from being spotted by military police."

Slowly, Smith's hand unclenches, releasing Steve's shirt. Steve brushes at it, frowning; he hopes it won't wrinkle.

"Shit," the other guy says. Steve thinks his name is Stepnowski. "You tellin' me there are three queers in this program? We thought it was funny there were two."

Steve grins. "I thought it was funny there was one," he says, and the two guys chuckle.

"Maybe they only picked queers," Smith offers. "Maybe the Army thinks they can fix us with this, whatever, science experiment of theirs. And all the other guys are faggots too."

"Even Hodge?" Steve asks.

"Especially Hodge," Stepnowski laughs, and Steve can't help but laugh along. It would fit.
"I dunno, I've heard stranger theories," Steve admits, cold fear rolling suddenly through his stomach. "I wonder what'll happen if one of us gets picked."

"You mean, would we turn normal?" Stepnowski asks. Steve nods, and Stepnowski shudders dramatically, reminding Steve so much of Helena in that moment that he's filled with tender longing for his old life. "In that case, I'd have to turn them down." His voice rises to an arch, incredulous falsetto. "Me, give up dick?"

"Wouldn't work anyway," Smith grins. "There's no fixing you."

There's an easy sweetness between them, and Steve wants nothing more than to bask in it; he didn't even know how much he'd missed men of his own kind until this moment. But he can't help thinking that it's now the three of them who can be seen from outside.

"Anyway, fellas," Steve says. "I don't think we should all be in here. Remember, it's not a safe spot, least not in the dark – it's a perfect peep show from outside, in fact."

"Glad to hear we could be of service," Smith leers. Steve rolls his eyes again, stepping back out of the door.

"Just fix your collars, willya? You're making me embarrassed for you."

*

The next day, Smith and Stepnowski line up next to him for chow, and the three of them trot out to the morning's training all in a row, Steve in the middle, like they've decided to stick with him. This time, when Hodge comes by ranting and fuming and making a fuss, Stepnowski makes a quiet comment between one pushup and the next – "get her," – and Steve is too busy trying not to laugh and waste his breath to even notice the look on Hodge's face or the garbage that comes out of his mouth.

Later, when they're all running along the trail, Hodge passes them by again, and Smith elbows Stepnowski, making all three of them laugh out loud this time.

"Go easy, fellas," Steve says lightly, pitching his voice so the others can't hear. "The angry ones are always the best in bed."

This sends Smith and Stepnowski into gales of laughter, and Steve grins, able to ignore for the moment the pain in his ankles, and the burning in his lungs, feeling only the bright sunshine, the fresh, clear air, and the company of friends beside him.

Towards the end of the run, Agent Carter is standing with a clipboard, evaluating each of the men in turn. She's looking them all up and down, but her gaze turns sharper when she sees Steve with Smith and Stepnowski, smiling as he does his best to keep up.

"Good work, Rogers," she says, as he passes.

"She likes you, huh," Smith teases, elbowing Steve in the side.

"It's not like that," Steve says. It makes the other two laugh and make jokes, because of course it's not like that between a glamorous military lady and a fairy like Steve. But it also feels a little bit like a lie, because when Agent Carter looks at him, and when he earns her praise, it makes him feel warm inside like he always used to in Frank's arms or in Bucky's, worthy and beautiful.

And if he wonders, some nights, if a gal like Peggy Carter might ever look at a girl like him, well,
that's his secret to keep.

*

He knows he isn't gonna get picked, of course. The experiment is supposed to make whoever gets it a better soldier, but Steve knows they'll probably use a normal guy for the first time. Even if Dr Erskine seems to like him, and Agent Carter, that doesn't mean they think he's cut out for this. He hopes they don't pick a jerk like Hodge, but he knows they're not gonna pick him.

If he can get through Basic, though, prove himself, maybe they won't revoke his 1A. Then he could finally get into the Infantry, catch up to Bucky like he'd promised.

That's what's on Steve's mind when Colonel Phillips calls them together for a briefing: the idea that they're finally going to pick someone, or a bunch of someones, and Steve can get the heck out of here. But then Colonel Phillips starts a sentence with "Only one soldier has been chosen for this illustrious honor" and ends that same sentence with the words, "Private Steven Grant Rogers."

He's in shock while people shake his hand – Colonel Phillips, with a gruff "congratulations, son," and Dr Erskine, beaming and clapping Steve's hand between two of his, and Agent Carter, offering him a sly smile and then a brisk nod. Then Steve is surrounded by his unit, all the other guys shaking his hand, clapping him on the back, offering congratulations and smiling, being good sports.

Steve isn't sure whether to feel like he's won or lost.

Smith is one of the last to give him a hearty handshake and shoulder clasp, smiling knowingly at him.

"I guess we'll find out how much it changes you, huh?" he says quietly. Steve nods, his stomach sinking. Stepnowski squeezes his shoulder. "Let us know how it goes, if you can."

"I will," Steve promises. If nothing else, if it does – does make him normal, and they start giving the procedure to other guys . . . that's not something he'd want any queer soldier to do without knowing it in advance. If it makes him normal, maybe he can get the word out so guys can turn it down. Or volunteer for it, he supposes.

"You can send us a postcard. Stepnowski and me are hoping we'll be assigned somewhere together. Word is we're being pressed into regular infantry until they finish experimenting on you."

That's exactly what Steve always dreamed of for himself, to be in the same unit with his best buddy, his lover, fighting for their country. "You two look after each other," Steve says firmly. "I want to see you both at the reunions in twenty years' time."

Stepnowski steps up beside them, catching the end of what Steve's saying. "Like we'd miss getting to flirt with that many men in uniform," he grins, leaning his elbow companionably on Smith's shoulder.

"Just make sure you're one of 'em," Smith says, nodding at Steve.

*

"It will make you bigger," Dr Erskine explains, when Steve asks. "Stronger, faster. Maybe even smarter, we're not so sure about that. And it will make you healthy, if it works. No more asthma."

*Or heart palpitations, or joint pains, or poor hearing, or fatigue, or weak constitution,* Steve
thinks, almost incapable of imagining a life without those things.

He's struck by the memory of the time he came down suddenly with one of his fevers, when he was at work with Frank and the guys; Frank had taken Steve back to his place, tucked Steve in his bed, and taken care of him. It's the only time Steve can ever remember being grateful for a fever, but for some reason it's all he can think of now, faced with the prospect of not having them anymore: the way Frank had brushed his hair gently back from his forehead, and kissed his cheek, and wrapped him up in his strong arms when he got the shivers. Frank had said that it felt good to look after him.

"Will it – I mean. Will it change who I am?"

"Fundamentally, I do not think so." He pauses, as if trying to decide how much to say. "I hope not." Erskine pats him tentatively on the shoulder, and Steve allows himself to be reassured.

But as the date of the procedure creeps closer, he begins to realize that there's no way he can be the same man, afterward. He always knew he was a fairy, knew it from his own slim build and short stature, his mostly hairless body, even from his delicate constitution. He wasn't built to be the man in a relationship. He likes the feeling of being held and fucked by someone bigger than him, of being carried, of being treated like he's sweet. Even the two or three big queens he knows, like Helena or Jackie, will tell you about their soft, sloping shoulders or their small feet, the signs they've found on their own bodies that reveal them for what they really are.

Steve's pretty sure that, when he steps out of the machine they use to fix him, he won't be a fairy anymore. He'll have a real man's body, with a real man's desires. Frank, Hyam, Bucky, all the others, they all thought he was beautiful, small and girly. Bucky had taken care of him, and Steve had wanted him to, wanted to stay always in the safe, warm circle of Bucky's arms. But if the experiment works, and he gets made tall and strong – well, the one thing he knows for sure is that he won't be beautiful anymore.

The last night before the procedure, Erskine finally tells him what's behind the serum, what kind of risk he's really taking.

"Whatever happens tomorrow," Erskine says, "you must promise me one thing: that you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man."

Steve promises, though there's no way of knowing if he can keep his promise. I won't be who I am anymore, he thinks, then suppresses the thought. He just hopes that he can still be a good enough man for Dr Erskine.

After Dr Erskine leaves, Steve tries to sleep, wishing desperately that he could sneak off base somehow, find the right kind of bar in the right part of town and the right guy to screw him, just one more time before that part of his life is over. He imagines what it would feel like, knowing that it's the last time, how much he would crave that sensation of cock filling him up and splitting him open, of spunk wet against his thighs, of a big, solid man wrapped around him, holding him up, breathing hot and heavy into his ear. If they were still here, Steve thinks he'd ask Stepnowski and Smith, but they're long gone, their bunks neatly rolled up at the other end of the barracks, and Steve is alone.

Anyway, there are rules: he's supposed to rest up, and he's definitely not supposed to be carousing in some smoky club in the queer part of town. And also, he thinks, with a quirk of his lips, Dr Erskine just told him he has to avoid fluids.

So he lies in his solitary bunk, thinking about the procedure while he tries to get to sleep, wondering if it will hurt when he's made into somebody else.
Even if it does, he knows he can do it, live through the pain. If it's the price he has to pay for his uniform, for the right to serve his country, then he'll pay it.

*

"How do you feel?" Agent Carter asks.

"Taller," Steve replies.

Chapter End Notes

Valentine's anti-war speech in Harlem is drawn heavily (word for word in some places) from this summer 1941 speech by Richard Wright.

If you're interested, my headcanon castings for Danielle and Valentine are Laura Prepon and Jasika Nicole. :)


Women start looking at him. Agent Carter, surprisingly, is the first, her hand reaching out for Steve's muscles the moment he comes out of the machine. When she pulls back, Steve is struck by a pang of desire for her to complete the motion, to put her hands on him and feel his new body. But she's far from the only one who looks at him that way; even before he puts on the outfit and starts performing for crowds, there are women pausing mid-stride and turning to stare at him, blinking at him slowly, smiling at him in a way he's mostly only seen from men before. It's like being out at Vincent's and surrounded by trade, but constantly, every time he steps out onto the street.

At first he's spooked by it, wanting to glance around nervously for cops and tell the ladies to be more subtle about it, but then he realizes that no one's going to arrest him for flirting with women, or women for flirting with him. It feels illicit and way too public, and he has no idea how to deal with it. He wonders if this is how it always was for Bucky, being this conspicuous and desired all the time.

I'm different, Steve thinks. The experience of his new body is nothing like his old one: fast and smooth and strong, without a single ache or pain, responding perfectly to Steve's will. He can hear in his right ear, he can breathe without effort, and his heart keeps a slow, strong, steady beat.

There's not an Irish Catholic mother in Brooklyn who wouldn't want him to marry their daughters now, he thinks.

When he looks in the mirror, he sees the kind of body he's always wanted so badly, wide-shouldered and well-muscled, just like Bucky or Frank. He runs his hands over his arms, his thighs, down the backs of his calves and up over his thick, strong neck. He pinches, he rubs, he caresses, and still it doesn't feel right. Doesn't feel like him. Without the constant pain, without the spells of faintness, without the trembling, it's someone else's body, someone else's skin.

Steve has dreams where he looks back over his shoulder at the Vita-Ray machine and sees his old body still in it, an empty shell that's been exchanged for a newer, faster model.

When he's awake, it's just as strange. Sometimes he can't stop looking in the mirror, staring at the differences, poking at his muscles, feeling at his longer, thicker bones, pulling back his lip to marvel at the rows of perfect teeth, none of them missing or rotten anymore. The numbness in his left pinky finger is gone, and the crooked place where he broke his leg in a fight has been straightened out. You'd never know that he'd broken it, now, or that Bucky had carried him to the doctor afterward.

Sometimes he can't bear to look at all. Sometimes even the thought of it makes him dizzy and nauseated. Sometimes he looks down and the new distance between his eyes and his feet is too much, and he has to close his eyes.

No one is ever going to call him pretty, or delicate, or soft, not ever again.
But the body does work, that's the important thing. He can run fast enough now, jump high enough, be strong enough to do the work they want him to do. Just the absence of pain on its own is enough to make him feel euphoric for the first few days, like he's drugged, like he's floating up into the sky, freed from the grounding, grinding aches in his back and joints that had become a constant background in his life.

He feels so good all the time, in fact, that at first it doesn’t even occur to him to touch himself; he’s too busy performing feats of strength for the SSR scientists and gasping in delight at the exercise. The new muscles, bones, heart, and lungs all sing joyfully at exertion in a way that Steve finds fascinating, and strange, and fun. It must be what bodies feel like to other people, he thinks, what other men feel like when they move and work.

So it’s a few days after the serum before Steve tries it, in the shower one morning, watching water sluice over the new broad expanse of his chest and down his thick powerful thighs. His cock rises eagerly into his broad palm; in that moment, he can almost imagine that he's touching someone else. Bracing one hand against the cool shower wall, he keeps looking over his unfamiliar body, excited by the strength he sees, the smooth lines that define his shape. His arms tremble, and his abdominal muscles tense, and suddenly Steve wants badly to see himself, all of himself, as he fucks his own fist.

He wishes he had a mirror right now, so he could look at this man he's jerking off, this big, gorgeous, square-jawed man.

The water pours over him, outlining every muscle, every line of his perfect physique. His cock gets bigger as it gets harder, much bigger than it ever was before, and Steve imagines what it might be like to take a cock like his, how stretched he would feel if he could fuck himself. He thinks about how he could use his new dick to fuck someone deep and open, someone small and soft like he used to be, who would shake and squirm against the intrusion.

He gets caught up in that fantasy: his big cock sliding into someone slow and hard, someone's thighs spread beneath him, someone trembling as they take Steve into their body and come around his dick. Steve bites his lip to keep from crying out and comes up into his stroking fist, his whole body arching and shaking through it. Even his orgasm is bigger, he thinks, laughing through the end of it: brighter, and longer, and more intense.

The water has turned cold by now, though Steve hadn't noticed it happening; apparently this body, unlike his old one, takes fine to the cold. He soaps up, rinses off, and wraps his towel around his waist before drawing back the shower curtain. In the other part of the large communal shower room there's a mirror, a little wet and steamy but visible. He's due to meet with Colonel Phillips, so Steve can't linger, but the glimpse he does catch of himself – long powerful legs, broad shoulders, perfectly defined pectorals – makes him all hot and bothered again.

Maybe this is what it feels like to be normal, he thinks. Maybe this is what it feels like to not be queer.

*

In the meeting with Colonel Phillips and the other higher-ups, he's given a choice: he can stay with the SSR and let them examine him to figure out poor Dr Erskine's secrets, or he can get up on a stage and sell bonds.

Neither option means that he's going to be able to go after Bucky, or Frank, or any of his other friends who are off fighting somewhere. But Steve figures he'd be better off doing some good. And the thought of staying with the scientists, of having his new body poked and prodded and put under
a microscope, day after day, makes him feel sick.

Senator Brandt tells him he can wear a costume instead, something he can hide behind, and Steve likes that idea better.

"I'll go where I'm needed," Steve says, swallowing the feeling down.

"We'll make you a star, kid." Brandt tells him, wrapping his arm around Steve's broad shoulders. "And hey, I gotta tell you, there are plenty of pretty girls in the USO. A guy like you'll be in heaven."

Steve doesn't know what it means, a guy like him, but he gets the gist of what the Senator's saying, and it makes him feel strange inside, angry and unsure, to think that his new body might really want the USO girls that way.

"I'm sure you're right, sir," Steve says, and Brandt just laughs.

He'll have to try to play the part.

*

It turns out, though, that his new life isn't exactly the same as a normal guy's would be. A week later, right before their first show, the producer shoves him into the bustling staging area behind the curtains and points toward one of the empty stations: a lighted mirror above a little table, with a stool sitting in front of it. It reminds him, inevitably, of the little makeshift salon in Marlene and Betty's room, but much, much nicer.

"Get yourself ready, Rogers," the guy says, and before Steve can ask any questions he's gone again, yelling at someone else. Steve sits on the stool and shakes his head.

Faced with a fancy, fully-stocked makeup counter and every kind of brush and applicator he can imagine, Steve sighs. What he wouldn't have given to have had this back home. He'll have to put it in a letter to his friends – something that'll get by the censors, something like you wouldn't believe all the makeup they've got me wearing here! or I never knew there were so many colors of lipstick! They'll know what he means by it.

No one seems to be paying attention to him, and he wonders if he's expected to make do on his own. It's not that he wants all the chorus girls to know that he's a dab hand with a lipstick or anything, but it's also not something – something he wants done by a stranger.

He doesn't know if he can pretend like the feel of a tin of rouge in his hand means nothing to him. Maybe if he's quick, and does it while all the girls are focused on their own faces, no one will notice.

"I'll help you with that," Dorothy says, shoving her hips between Steve and the makeup counter and pushing him back a few inches. He blinks up at her, too surprised to stop her from taking the mascara brush out of his hands.

"Hush, big brawny fella like you, you'll mess it up with your huge sausage fingers," Dorothy replies, running the little brush against the bar of mascara and holding it up to his face. "Look up," she adds, impatiently.
Giving in, he looks up and lets her darken his lashes. She might be right, actually; Steve hasn't tried to put on any makeup since his transformation, and while his new body has so far obeyed every command he's given it, he doesn't know if it could handle this one. The makeup equipment laid out on the dressing table seems so small and delicate.

Most of his face will be covered, so he doesn't need pan-stick or any of the other usual stage makeup that men wear, but she does apply a little lipstick, "to make your smile pop, darling."

Marlene once said almost the exact same words to him. He presses his lips together when Dorothy tells him to and tries not to smile at her oversimplified instructions.

It only takes a minute, and then Dorothy is stepping out of the way and letting him look at his face in the mirror.

He doesn't look much different, just his newly square-jawed face with his eyes and mouth a little more visible. He's a man in a little makeup, not a fairy, not a girl, not a queen. It's disappointing, surprising, the old reliable magic no good anymore: where a little lipstick and mascara used to be enough to make him beautiful, make him gasp to see himself in the mirror, now it does nothing but paint a stranger's face.

"Gorgeous," Louise pronounces, from the next chair over.

"Nice to see a man having to go through what we endure," Carol puts in, glancing over at him while she applies her own lipstick.

Suddenly, as Steve looks in the mirror, what's left of his smile fades from behind his lips. He feels isolated, separated from himself, and the strangeness of it is too much to bear. He stumbles up from his chair and takes himself out back, out into the cool night air to calm down. Dorothy makes a little noise as he goes, as if disappointed to be losing his company, and that's too much too.

He wants to vomit, but he doesn't want to mess up his lipstick.

He gets himself under control pretty quick, which is a good thing, because there's someone else coming out of the stage door and walking up beside him.

"Stage fright?" she asks. It's Carol again. Steve sighs and nods, since it's the easiest explanation, and probably the closest to the truth that he can give.

"Got your costume," she says, holding up a bundle of material. It's red and white and blue, all in bright primary shades, the kinds of colors that can usually get a guy beaten up if he's caught wearing them in public. The red is almost identical to the red of the blouse that Betty and Marlene loaned him, that first night he went out as a real fairy, the one he'd kept for months afterwards. He can't help reaching out and touching it.

"I know, it's a gas, right? But if it sells bonds, I'll wear anything." She snaps the strap of her skimpy costume. "Do my bit for the war effort, you know?"

Steve nods. "I do," he says. Going through the experiment had seemed worth it when it was going to get him into the Army and back to Bucky; now, he's not so sure.

But he'll do what he can with what he's got, and hope that he can still get into the Infantry somehow.

The tights go on just like stockings. The boots even have a bit of a heel.
Once he's got the costume on and the makeup done, Steve feels strangely like his old self, dressed up, like he's about to saunter into Vincent's and flirt with men. Instead, all the chorus girls come up to him after he's dressed, cooing and squeezing his arms.

"You look real pretty," Dorothy says, winking at him, and it's that more than anything that makes him feel at home. He laughs, a genuine laugh, and it grounds him.

"Thanks," he says, nodding gratefully at her. "I just hope I'm cut out for this."

Dorothy shrugs. "Near everyone knows how to put on a show," she says. "We all do it every day."

Steve nods, taking a deep breath of air. He's still surprised, two weeks out from the procedure, to find that he can do it without the risk of coughing.

"Isn't there supposed to be a shield for this outfit, too?"

* 

Carol and Dorothy are right; once he's out on stage, reading the script he was given, he feels a lot better about it. He's never been in a drag ball himself, but he's been to enough of them that he knows the drill: confidence, smile, projection, don't let them see you sweat. He puts his heart into it, and tries to be as brave as Marlene, and he thinks he doesn't sound too bad.

After the first show, a few people come up for pictures with Captain America. Steve gamely shakes their hands and thanks them for their contribution to the war effort. They're mostly families, older men and their wives and children, but there's one guy, too, who's about Steve's age but with a missing eye. Steve looks into his right while he shakes his hand and thanks him.

"Least I can do," the guy shrugs. "Or, you know, the most."

Steve knows that feeling, of being not good enough, so he holds the handshake a little longer and clasps the guy's shoulder. "We're all just trying to do our part," he says, awkwardly.

The guy cocks his head slightly, evaluating Steve, then says, "Hey, I know some guys who're having a party later, if you want to come by."

Steve blinks, because while the invitation sounds innocent enough, he has a kind of funny feeling about it.

"Yeah? What kind of party?" Steve pitches his voice low. He knows all the steps to this dance.

The guy smiles. "A pretty small one. With a few friends who'd like to show their appreciation for a man in uniform."

Steve nods slowly, and the guy gives him an address and a parting wink.

He doesn't end up going, though. The way the guy had looked at him – looked up at him – Steve guesses he knows what might be expected of him in that situation. And even if he went in and acted the pansy . . . he almost can't face the thought. It wouldn't be the same. He isn't the same. He can't do it in this big lumbering body, all the delicate gestures and girlish manners that used to attract men.

After that invitation, though, he starts seeing other fellas paying attention to him: the quick once-overs, the slightly too lingering looks, the handshakes that last longer than they should. It's not unfamiliar, any of it, but since the procedure Steve hasn't been noticing it, like his body wasn't
tuned to the right frequency to hear it.

He hears it now, and it's pretty overwhelming. When they look at him, taking in his height and his muscles and the breadth of his shoulders, he just wants to yell at them: it's not mine.

*

The first time a girl asks him, though, Steve says yes. He figures he may as well give it a shot, see how far the serum's really taken him. It's Carol from the chorus line, who's sweet enough, with strong legs and blonde curls and – it becomes clear immediately – a lot more experience with this than Steve has. She pushes him onto the bed with a giggle, gives him a wide slow grin, and as she falls down onto him Steve thinks, yes, this. She runs her fingertips lightly along the perfect defined musculature of his upper arms, her touch making him want to squirm and gasp.

"I been looking at these arms for weeks," she murmurs, eyes roving over Steve's chest, eating him up like a meal. Then, daringly, she confides, "I always had a thing for big strong guys who could hold me down."

Steve feels the absurd urge to breathe out a sigh of relief and exclaim "me too!" in a tone of happy but unexpected camaraderie, the way Marlene used to whisper arch comments in his ear at the pictures, talking back to the actors on the screen. He doesn't, though, he holds himself back, and instead takes a deep breath and spreads his hands across Carol's back. A body made for service to the nation, he thinks, watching Carol's hands as they move over his government-issued physique, watching her eyes on him, and recognizing in her touch and in her gaze the same hunger he'd felt so many times himself, to be held, or held down; to be taken care of, or simply taken.

He can do this, he thinks, for her.

Steve moves quickly but gently, flipping her over onto her back and kneeling over her, not holding her or holding her down just yet; waiting.

"You want me to keep you still?" he asks, suddenly desperate to hear it from her. He licks his lips. "Tell me."

Carol's eyes widen and her breathing picks up. Steve swallows hard, waiting for the words to spill from her red, plump lips. They've only kissed once, he realizes, and that was with her in control, when she backed him up against a wall and kissed him first before inviting him to bed. He knows what he would want, in her place, and offers it to her: a hard, domineering kiss that steals her breath. He isn't sure if he's doing it right but he thinks it's okay, thinks the soft dazed expression on her face after is another one he recognizes from having worn it himself.

As he pulls back, her mouth falls open and the words tumble out, one after another, as if Steve's kiss has pulled them out of her.

"Fuck me," she breathes. "Fuck me. I like it – do it hard. Make me feel it, Steve."

When Steve nods slowly, she adds, more quietly, "I like it when there are bruises the next day."

Steve groans and buries his face in her neck, sliding his body down on top of her at last, covering her up and grinding down against her. Carol's moan of pleasure answers his, and the sound seems to race over the surface of his skin, bringing him alive all over his body. She arches up against him and presses her thighs to his, their skin sliding together with rough, hot friction.

"Tell me what to do," Steve demands. "Tell me what feels good for you." He speaks against her ear, his breath tickling against her neck.
"You like the talk, huh," Carol says softly. Steve closes his eyes tight and it's a relief that she can't see the raw desperation he knows must be showing on his face.

"I want to . . . to hear what you want," he replies, which is only half an answer, but even that much makes him feel uncomfortably exposed before her.

Gently, Carol presses her hands against his jaw and draws his face up, her eyes soft as she looks at him. It occurs to him, suddenly, that this is the position that he glimpsed, for an instant, when he interrupted Agent Carter and Private Lorraine: Agent Carter's hands cupping her jaw, holding her still as they kissed. Remembering that image makes Steve almost dizzy with lust.

"I want you inside me," she says, holding his gaze. "I want you to take me rough. Let me feel your strength."

She opens her legs around him, arches her hips up, and he can feel her heat, her hunger, even through their clothes – him still in the Captain America costume, her in her stockings and tiny stars-and-striipes themed skirt and vest. He slips his hand – so big now, with wide thumbs and strong fingers that still look strange – under her skirt and up over the tops of her stockings. It's eerily familiar, in a backwards kind of way, reminiscent of the sensation of Bucky's big hands curling up over Steve's stockings, stroking his soft skin before pulling them down and off.

Steve slides down the bed as he unclips and then pulls down Carol's stockings, bending his head to press a slow kiss to her thigh. He looks up at her, and she nods, her eyes hot.

"Strip me down and fuck me," she breathes into his ear. "I'm so wet, Steve, so ready, put your big cock inside me already, come on – "

Steve throws her stockings to the side, pulls off her panties, then wrestles for a moment with his own clothes while she pulls off her vest and shimmies out of her skirt. Then she unhooks her brassiere in one smooth motion and her hands are on him again, pulling him back down to her, back into a hard, desperate kiss. His cock is hot and sensitive, trapped between her powerful thighs as the two of them find a rhythm and begin to move together.

"I got – I got a pro," Steve manages, fumbling it out from the pocket of his discarded costume belt where he'd stuck it, weeks ago, after Senator Brandt had pressed it into his hand with a knowing, embarrassing smile. Carol nods, and he manages to roll it on without too much trouble. It feels odd. Even after a couple of months, his prick still doesn't feel like it's his; it's more like he's holding someone else's prick in his hand. He suppresses a momentary shudder of – something strange; disgust, loss. He puts the feeling out of his mind.

It's nothing, the moment when he pushes into her, just another thrusting motion like the rest but this one brings him deep into her body, brings her wet and clenching down around him, her heat engulfing him, swallowing him up. It's better, to be inside her. It feels good, on a purely physical level, and Steve can ignore the backwards way he feels inside. As if from far away, he can hear his own breathing, ragged and fast like it used to get during an asthma attack.

"Yeah, just like that," Carol groans. "Like that, baby, do me hard, c'mon, hold me down like you said . . . "

Steve pushes down against her shoulders, and it's almost like he can feel it from the other side, feel how it would be to have his own strength pressing him down into the mattress. He starts to lose himself in the idea, but is brought back immediately when he hears Carol gasp; he draws back in alarm, but she stops him.
"No, no, it's good," she says. "Do it again, come on. Let me feel it."

He pushes down again.

"Keep talking," he says. When she talks, when Steve can hear the desire in her voice, he can start to forget himself.

"I can feel you inside me," Carol says. "You feel really – really good, Steve, ah, that's perfect. You're so strong, so big and strong, oh – "

Almost as if a switch has been flipped, Steve comes rushing back to his own body, aware of his muscles working, the size and strength of himself. He feels immediately nauseated, dizzy. His cock softens and slips out of Carol's body.

He shoves himself up off of her and scrambles backwards on the bed, suddenly unable to bear the sensation of his own skin against hers. It's horrible, it's rude, but he can't.

"Hey, hey, what happened?" Carol says, sitting up next to him but not touching him.

"I'm – I don't think I can," he says. "I'm sorry, Carol, I'm really sorry."

"Well," she says, sounding frustrated. "I – wasn't that working for you? I thought it was getting good."

Steve can't think of a thing to say to her. The disgust roils in his stomach, disgust at his own inescapable body.

"Do you want to – we could wait a bit, maybe go back to kissing . . . ?"

He shakes his head no, curling in on himself a little. He hears her blowing out a loud sigh, the kind that might blow her curls up off her forehead.

"Well shit," she says primly.

"Yeah," he agrees. He glances up at her quickly before looking down again. "Sorry. I really am sorry."

"I got that," she says, sounding resigned.

Now he feels her touch, but it's just her fingers in his hair, stroking tentatively, and that seems okay. "Not often a guy stops when he gets to that point," she says. "You a queer?"

His stomach roils again and he drops his head down, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. *I don't know,* he thinks, but doesn't say.

"It's okay if you are," Carol says, sounding unsure. "I got experience with that."

He looks up at her. "Yeah?"

She twists her lips. "Tell me you're a queer, and I'll tell you how I know about it."

"I – " Steve hesitates. He's said the words before, back in his old life. *We queers,* he had said, about himself and Marlene and Betty and all the others, or *we fairies,* sometimes. He remembers Danielle and Valentine watching him, trusting him, while he drew their portrait, how Val had said *one of us,* and he remembers Hyam telling them about the camps in Germany. *Our people,* he had said then, but he doesn't know if he can say it now.
"Say it," Carol murmurs.

What is he? Not a fairy, or a pansy, not anymore. Not a girl or a faggot or a punk. And not normal, either. "I'm queer," he says, finally. It doesn't feel like it's worth anything. "Or I was. I thought maybe I'd changed."

She nods. "That's your secret, so I'll tell you mine. I got experience with that, because I used to do this," she gestures between them, "you know. Professionally."

Oh. "You're really good at it," Steve offers, thinking back on the things she'd said, how hot they'd made him. How she'd almost been able to make him forget. He should've realized that the average girl probably wouldn't come out with that kind of language, even if he is used to hearing it from dock workers.

"Yeah, I know. And in my professional experience, most people don't change that much, in what they want."

He doesn't say anything else. He can't think of anything else to say. Most people haven't gone through what he's gone through.

"Lots of guys think it's a good way to test if they are, getting a working girl to help. I gotta say, most of 'em don't get as far as you did."

"I was thinking about . . . " Steve trails off, unable to even begin to explain, not wanting to burden her with his story. "I was thinking about something else."

"Got it," Carol says, nodding. Her hand comes down to clasp his shoulder once, firmly. "Well, no point in going on, then. You've got a shameful secret, I've got a shameful secret, we can call it even. I'm pretty sure neither of us is gonna get the other one fired."

When Steve turns around, Carol's nearly dressed again. She tosses the bottom of his uniform at him. He catches it easily, by reflex, in his strong right hand.

"Carol," he says, holding the fabric over his lap and looking up at her as she re-clips her stockings.

"Yeah?" she's frowning down at a loose thread on her garter belt, not looking at Steve.

"I'm really sorry," he says again. "I really wanted to – I think you're beautiful."

"Yeah, like you think the Sistine Chapel is beautiful, right? It's okay. I've had worse nights." She smiles down at him, then bends to kiss the top of his head. "And worse lovers. Definitely less polite ones."

He tries to smile at her.

"See you for the show tomorrow," she says, stepping into her shoes and heading out the door.

Steve remains in the hotel room, naked, miserable, hating what he is and completely unable to cover it up.

There's no one for him now.

*

After he's punched out Hitler a few dozen times, Steve gets resigned to the job, and even comes to like it, a little. If this is what he can do, it's what he can do, and there's no point worrying over what
he can't have. He tries to put himself, and what he wants, out of his mind entirely. At least he can do something for the guys who've gone to fight.

"You okay, Steve?" Carol asks him occasionally. She does his makeup almost every day, now, a small kindness that means more given that she knows what she knows. Her hand holding the mascara brush is almost like Marlene's to him, since their night together, her touch the touch of a trusted confidant.

"I'm good," he always says.

"Anyone could tell that at a glance," she always replies. Sometimes, heart aching, he kisses her hand.

The night after their fourth performance in Pittsburgh, there's a party. The girls are all drunk on a bottle of whisky that someone smuggled in, and they call on Steve after a while to join them, cooing over him and petting him and telling very unladylike jokes that make them all bust out laughing. They ply Steve with whisky, too, and although it doesn't seem to have much of an effect these days, Steve feels drunk anyway, with all the beautiful girls laughing and drinking and smoking around him. A couple of the girls do try to kiss him, as the night wears on, and of course Steve pushes them away gently, but after everyone else goes to sleep it off, Steve and Carol are still awake, sitting on the floor of her motel room.

"You know Jenny is supposed to bunk with me," Carol says. "She went to room with Doris and Louise, because they're all convinced that we're lovers."

Steve smiles sadly. "Aren't we, Carol?" He wonders if Carol is the closest he'll ever get to having a lover again. He can't think about it without feeling sick, what they took away from him to make him into this . . . this . . .

Valentine's voice whispers in his head: this war machine. This propaganda machine. He wishes that he'd accepted Wystan's offer at the party, to stay in Brooklyn and make art, stayed small, stayed sick, stayed a fairy.

"Hmmm." She chews on her lip. "You got your pencils and paper?"

Steve does; he was commissioned, earlier in the night, to draw pretty much everyone, and dashed through sketches as fast as he could: Dorothy wrapping a squealing Jenny up in a hug, Louise smoking a cigarette, Janet with her eyes closed and her head resting against the wall.

"Yup," he says, dry-mouthed. Carol nods and peels off her sweater, quick as you please.

"Hey, wait, Carol, you're – you're drunk – " Steve began, but Carol waves him away.

"I only had a few sips," she says. "For courage. Are we lovers, or aren't we?"

Steve doesn't know what to say to that, but while he's not saying anything, Carol takes off her skirt.

"Help me with the rest?" she asks. When Steve nods, she stands up, so that his eyes are about level with her waist.

Reaching up, Steve unhooks her stockings; one at a time, she places her small feet on Steve's thighs and watches while he pushes them gently down her legs. He remembers, vividly, the first time Bucky ever did this for him, and keeps his fingertips gentle against her skin. He unhooks her garter belt while she takes off her brassiere, and finally, glancing up at her for confirmation, he pulls down her panties.
She steps out of them.

"I was watching you with all the other girls tonight," she says. "I wanted you to draw me, too. The way you look when you're drawing, it's – I like it. I want it on my skin." She's looking down at him, her hands on his shoulders, and he's looking up at her. She's so beautiful, the pink circles of her nipples, the hard lines starting to develop around her mouth, the daredevil light in her eyes. Steve takes her hand, turns it over, and kisses her palm.

"Most guys never see me," she says softly. "The real me, you know. I thought maybe – if you're queer – maybe it'd be different. Will you do that for me?"

He wants, desperately, to make her happy. And he knows what it is to want to be seen. "Sure I will," he says. "How do you – where do you want to be?"

She lays down on the bed and raises her arms above her head, keeping her thighs together, bending her knees. It's like the pinup poses that Steve's seen in magazines. He frowns.

"Is that how you feel?" he asks, before he can stop himself. Carol sighs.

"Not really."

"How do you feel?"

"Like having a smoke," she replies, smiling.

"So do that."

She rolls upright again, planting her feet on the floor and getting her cigarettes and a book of matches from the side table. Steve draws a quick sketch of her in that position, knees spread carelessly, breasts pillowed against her belly, shoulders hunched over as she holds the cigarette up to her mouth, a flame leaping from her fingertips.

Once she's got it lit, she tosses the matches on the short table and trails her hand down between her thighs.

"Is this okay?" she asks. She's watching him carefully, touching herself, holding her cigarette easily in her other hand. Steve turns to a new page and starts a closeup of her hand against her thigh, the shadows and light that play against her skin.

"You, uh, might want to put the cigarette out before it goes too far," Steve replies, mouth dry. "Other than that it's fine."

Her laugh is beautiful, rich and warm.

"This is just what I wanted," Carol sighs. "Just right."

Steve licks his lips. "Spread your legs," he says.

Looking down at him, Carol does. He draws her small fingers as they spread against her lips, draws her wiry hair and just the suggestion of the wet gleam of her inner folds.

From what Steve can tell, she comes before the cigarette is even down to the bottom. He doesn't stop, drawing the beads of sweat on her breasts and the backward arch of her neck. He flips the page and starts again, draws her relaxed and sprawled and smiling, then does another one of her propped up on her side while she lights another smoke and tells him some new chorus line gossip.
He gets half-hard, while he's drawing, while the pencil follows her every curve and renders it lovingly onto the page. He tries not to think too much about what that might mean.

Carol looks at the drawings after, gazing at each one for a long time before passing on to the next. Steve thinks she's not going to like them, the way the one shows a roll of fat at her waist, another the gleam of sweat on her face. Steve thinks she's beautiful in all of them, but maybe he should've been a little less true to life.

"They're perfect," she declares. She pushes her blonde curls back from her face and laughs. "Yeah, you know, this is perfect."

Steve begins to tear them carefully out of his book, intending to hand them over to her. She takes most of them, but she stops him, with a hand on his arm, before he can tear out the first one, of her lighting the cigarette.

"Keep it," she says. "I want you to remember how you see me."

"Don't think I could forget," Steve says, shyly.

She kisses him, full and soft on the mouth, and then kicks him out, because – she says – her reputation has already taken enough of a hit, and what will the church ladies think?

Before he falls asleep, safely in his own bed, Steve takes out the drawing again to look at it, tracing his finger gently over the lines, loving her for giving this to him.

* *

"I'll tell them we're going out, if you want," Carol offers, one day, while Steve zips her into her costume and pins her cap to her head. "I don't mind."

"Nah," Steve says. He holds out a lipstick. "Touch me up."

She stands on tiptoe to do it. Steve opens his mouth for her.

"You don't get tired of all the girls accidentally tripping and falling into your arms?" She draws back, surveying her work. "Press your lips together."

Steve does as she says. "Is that what they were doing?" he asks innocently. "I thought they were all really clumsy professional dancers."

Carol holds up a tissue for him to blot with, giving him a disbelieving glare. "Seriously, though, you don't want me to do it."

"Seriously. There's no reason to lie. And I don't mind all the girls." He balls up the tissue and tosses it in the trash. His aim is perfect.

"I'm starting to think this queer thing is just a ruse," she whispers, and punches him in the arm.

He smiles. "I figure, when you realize the power of your love for me, you'll date me for real."

Carol snorts as the curtain goes up. "Good luck with that, Rogers."

* *

When he gets to Europe a bunch of his mail catches up to him, and he finds himself with a pile of delayed letters from Bucky, as well as a few from Betty and Marlene, two from Frank, one from
Stepnowski and one from Smith, one from Danielle, one from Winifred and Becca Barnes, and a couple others from the queers he used to know down at the docks. It's like a pile of treasure, to have word from all his people in his hands, and he pores over them for hours, memorizing every line and dwelling on every loop and swirl of the handwriting. It's mostly routine stuff, training and troop movements, the weather, the food, what's going on back home, but Steve is hungry for every piece of information.

It makes it easier to keep doing the shows, which are much less of a hit with soldiers in a war zone than they were with the kids back home.

He writes back, so fast and so eagerly that he leaves smudges all over the paper. He tells everyone that he's in Europe now and hopes to catch up to their battalions at some point; that he's wearing a pretty funny costume and hoping it does some good; and, most of all, that he misses them and wishes they were here.

After mulling it over, he decides to add a postscript at the bottom of his letters to Stepnowski and Smith. It's not like anyone else is going to get the serum he did, but it still feels like something he ought to tell them. Or maybe it's just that he wants someone else to know, someone who understands. He writes: *P.S., still your pal, even after everything that's happened.* He figures that should be clear enough.

Trailing his fingertips over the hasty ink of Bucky's letters, he can't help but notice that there aren't any recent ones. He wrote every week, for a long time, but then a while ago, he stopped.

Steve hasn't heard about anything happening to the 107th, though. He tries to keep in good spirits. The mail isn't known for being on time.

* 

A couple weeks later, his niggling worry turns into horrified certainty: Bucky's lost behind enemy lines, and no one is going to go and get him.

"We'd lose more men than we'd save," Colonel Phillips says. "But I don't expect you to understand that, because you're a chorus girl."

Steve feels the words like a blow.

He knows how to take a blow. Steve decides, then and there, that he's going to be the first chorus girl in history to lead a mission to rescue prisoners of war.

He doesn't really think he'll find Bucky alive. He wants to, and he owes it to Bucky to try, but he doesn't allow himself to hope. Instead he keeps a quiet, dark space inside himself, an emptiness that he carefully doesn't look at. He tells himself that he won't have to look at it until he knows for sure.

He's so busy not looking at that empty space, so busy breaking in to the facility and freeing the POWs and then breaking even further in – aware the whole time that he could be trapping himself here, assigning himself a suicide mission – that he manages not to think about how he'll explain himself if he does see Bucky again. How he'll explain this huge, powerful body that he's wearing like a suit of armor.

This is why he wanted the serum, after all: to be enough to serve his fellow soldiers, to be able to rescue Bucky when he's the one knocked down in the dirt. But the moment he sees Bucky move on that table, alive and in one piece, it hits him like a right hook to the jaw in a dark back alley to think that Bucky is going to see him like this. Bucky is going to see his broad chest and square jaw and...
the unmistakably masculine lines of his body. Steve wishes that his costume weren't so tight, so revealing, that he could cover up what he's become even if only for a little while, so that Bucky could see him the way he used to be.

"I thought you were dead," Steve breathes, breaking the restraints that are holding Bucky down.

"I thought you were smaller," Bucky replies, and even though he's obviously still out of it, it's hard to hear.

As Bucky's eyes focus and really take him in, Steve is overwhelmed with conflicting feelings: raw joy, as Bucky comes to himself and starts to make jokes; and enveloping, sinking fear and shame as Bucky realizes exactly how tall and strong Steve has become.

"Is it permanent?" Bucky asks.

"So far," Steve says, bearing Bucky's weight easily on his shoulders. For the first time, he lets himself really imagine it, his body shrinking and deflating back – back to normal, once the war is done, once his need for it is over. He thinks about losing all his abilities, the speed and strength, the easy way his new body solves any problem set for it. He thinks about going back to five foot two, to wearing kid's clothes, to choosing between taking whatever shit anyone wants to dish out to him and getting beaten to a bloody pulp. Maybe his asthma would come back, too, his weakness, the pain in his joints. Maybe his scars would reappear and his leg would go from straight to crooked and his left pinky finger would go permanently numb again.

If it meant Bucky would look down at him again and kiss him softly, or that Frank would lift him up in his arms, or that a new beau would tell him how pretty he is . . . Steve knows he'd take it. Just the same way he knows that, right now, in this body, there's no way Bucky could ever love him.

*

It takes them two days to hike back to camp. During the day, Bucky is quiet around Steve, but acts like his old self around the others, joking around and talking about all the stuff he's going to do when they get back. Steve isn't sure which one is the real Bucky, or if they both are.

They camp at night, everyone making do with the best they have in terms of rations and bedrolls. Steve makes sure that the few blankets and tents they have go to the wounded, and assigns personnel with medical experience to look after them. No one's bleeding out, at least, or seems to have a fever, so Steve figures they'll be able to manage another day.

He finds Bucky bedded down on top of one of their stolen tanks, and speaks before he thinks about it, the way he used to, teasing and familiar.

"That doesn't look too comfortable."

Bucky shrugs. "I got a good view from up here."

Tentatively, Steve settles down next to him. "I found a few guys with medical experience," he says. "I can ask them to look you over if you want."

Bucky laughs hollowly. "There's no field medic's gonna be able to help what they did to me," he says.

Steve nods, anger and pain rolling through him. He doesn't know if he should ask more questions.
Eventually the words tear out of him: "Was it torture?"

Bucky shrugs, like it's not particularly important if he got tortured or not. "Felt like it, I guess. But no. I think it was . . . improvements."

Like what had been done to Steve. Like what Erskine had said Schmidt was trying to do. It'd make sense that he would need lab rats. Steve wishes he could blow up that base again, and again and again and again.

He can't; instead he has to sit here quietly, on top of a tank, and not touch Bucky, and deal with the consequences. If he'd been with Bucky, if he'd been fighting by his side instead of playing around on stage, maybe it wouldn't have happened.

"That's terrible," is all he says.

Bucky nods. He's still not looking at Steve.

"I was – do you want to be alone? I could bunk down next to you."

"Sleeping on a tank doesn't sound too comfortable," Bucky echoes, his gaze far away.

"I'm pretty resilient these days," Steve says. Now Bucky turns toward him, looking him up and down.

"Yeah, I noticed that," he says. Steve can't bear his scrutiny, and ducks his head.

"I don't mean – not like before, I know it can't be like it was before, between us." He pauses, hoping to God that Bucky will interrupt and contradict him, but he doesn't, and Steve's heart sinks. "But I thought maybe having a friend nearby would help."

"Yeah," Bucky says. "Maybe."

Bucky screams himself awake with nightmares that night. So do half the other guys in the camp. Steve rushes over to him, and Bucky doesn't recognize him at first, lashing out with fists and feet and struggling to get away. Steve holds on, afraid he's going to fall right off the side of the tank.

"It's me, it's Steve," he says, as quick as he can, and after a minute, Bucky stops struggling and wakes up.

"Steve?" he asks, confused.

"Yeah," Steve says.

"S'hard to recognize you." Bucky's already half-unconscious again, drifting back into sleep.

Steve rubs his back, and hopes around the sinking sense of loss in his chest that there's still something of himself that Bucky can recognize.

*  

They all get back to camp, and Colonel Phillips promptly orders everyone to take some R&R. They get clean, get food, and get proper medical attention. Steve reports to the quartermaster, hoping to find a real private's uniform, but the guy glances at his requisition form, shakes his head, and hands over a set of Captain's bars instead.

"What's this?" Steve asks, staring down at them.
"Field commission," the guy behind the counter says. "Colonel's orders."

Steve blinks. "But I haven't – "

"How it goes in war. Sir. Move aside for the next guy, please, sir."

Steve puts the uniform on. He polishes the bars on his shoulders until they shine like jewels, then goes in to show Phillips exactly where they've been and where the other HYDRA facilities are.

Phillips nods briskly. "It's your map, Captain," he says, and the rank isn't a joke anymore. Captains have men they protect, men they send to die. "Want to see if you can wipe HYDRA off of it?"

Steve nods, swallowing hard.

By the time they make it to London for their leave, Bucky seems almost back to his usual self: smiling, sharing low-voiced jokes in Steve's ear, and only occasionally lapsing into strange, uncharacteristic quiet. Steve feels a funny kind of relief, after they get to the bar where they're meeting the guys, when Bucky starts flirting pretty hard with Peggy. At least he's coming back to his old self.

Peggy has none of it, of course, and Steve can't help but find the aloof way she fails to be charmed by Bucky attractive in itself. Even done up in that killer red dress and heels, she's in control, in command, and it makes Steve want her even more.

"Actually, I'm quite fond of dancing," Peggy says, holding Steve’s gaze and making him feel at least a foot shorter.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Bucky asks. Peggy doesn’t look away from Steve.

"The right partner," she says.

She doesn’t give Steve the opportunity to ask her to dance, though; instead she gives him an order, tells him where she expects him to be the next day and at what time. Steve gets the feeling that, if he wants to dance with Peggy, he’s going to have to earn it first. The idea of that warms him up inside, makes him want to be worthy of her attention.

Bucky’s disappointed at being rejected, but Steve doesn’t think much of it until later, when Bucky’s had a few beers and hasn’t made a play for any of the other pretty girls in the room.

"You and Carter, huh," he says, morosely.

Steve's had a few beers too, but he's not feeling them like Bucky is. He's coming to the conclusion that alcohol doesn't work on him the same way it used to.

"Not really," Steve demurs. "I mean – it's very new."

"Lot of things about you are new, it seems," Bucky replies. Steve frowns; he's explained the serum to Bucky already.

"I just mean," Bucky goes on, "you got bigger and you got yourself a girl."

That's almost what happened, but so far from the truth that it hurts Steve to think that Bucky might see it that way. "I liked her from the start," Steve admits. "Before the treatment." He doesn't know how to say I still want you, doesn't even know how to begin to explain himself. So much has happened that Bucky wasn't there for, and more than anything he doesn't want to add to Bucky's
problems right now.

Bucky nods slowly. "That's great, then."

"Tell you what we'll do," Steve says, changing the subject. "We'll wipe HYDRA off the map, like Phillips said. Make sure they don't do to anyone else what they did to you. That's what I'm worrying about right now."

"Yeah," Bucky says, taking another drink. "Good idea."

* * *

Colonel Phillips told him that he can have his pick of trained specialists for his new unit, but the more time he spends with the men he rescued, and the more he watches that occasional shadow pass over Bucky's face, the more he knows that's not right.

The men who go in should be the men who've been there themselves, and know what it's like to be kept in a cage or strapped to a table.

He asks them all, and for the most part, they all say yes.

"Dunno what makes you think Jones and I are gonna be able to serve in the same unit with you and Barnes and Dugan, though," Morita says, swallowing back his beer. "I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm in, I'll do whatever it takes to stop those scientists and their disgusting experiments. But they're not gonna let you take me. They'll ship me back to the 442nd."

"I already got word that I'm headed back to the 92nd," Jones agrees. "And I don't think there's much a Captain can do to desegregate the Army."

"It's an experimental international unit," Falsworth says. "The British Army isn't segregated, or the Canadian, or the Free French Army."

"But we're under American command," Morita points out, gesturing at Steve with his beer, like a salute. "That's what those Captain's bars mean. That's what Captain Rogers is responsible for enforcing."

Steve frowns. It's upsetting to think that the uniform he wanted so badly, for so long, the symbol that lets him protect others, is also a symbol of so much that he hates. "I won't enforce that."

"Segregation is a general order in the Army," Jones says. "You'll disobey a direct order?"

Nodding, Steve stands up. "If I have to."

* * *

He finds Phillips the next day. "I don't want the specialists. I want guys who know what the situation is, who have been in those HYDRA camps and facilities."

"You want to recruit from a group of tired, tortured ex-prisoners of war," Phillips summarizes, shuffling papers.

"Yes. And I want them all. The British ones, the French ones, the Canadians, everyone."

Phillips gives him a hard look. "There's some limited support for specialized international units," he says. "I suppose we could --"
"And I want all the Americans," Steve interrupts. At Phillips' narrowed eyes, he adds a hasty, "Sir. I want the Negros and the Japanese."

"You don't do things the easy way, do you. Captain."

Steve tries to square his shoulders. It's still a new feeling. "No sir. It's not easy to wipe secret military facilities off the map with a band of guerrilla fighters, sir."

"That is true," Phillips says. "Are you trying to bargain with me, Captain? I do this or you don't lend your skills to the attack on HYDRA?"

"No, sir," Steve says quickly.

"And if I say no, what will you do? Call up your buddy Stark for a lift and go anyway?"

A sheen of sweat breaks out over Steve's skin. He doesn't know what he would do. Is the right thing to take what men he can and fight HYDRA, whatever the compromise? Or is it to make a stand for what he believes in? He has the power, right now, to do something that might be meaningful. He can't turn it away.

"It's hard to predict, sir," Steve says, eventually.

This makes Phillips chuckle humorlessly. "Hard to predict. That is exactly why I didn't want you for this program, Rogers. Soldiers are not supposed to be hard to predict."

"Yes, sir," Steve says.

Phillips looks at him for a long minute. Steve holds still, wishing he had Danielle or Valentine or Betty here with him, to stand next to him, to link arms with him, or to hold up a threatening shoe.

Phillips' squinting scrutiny is hard to take.

"You know that Negros lack the same intelligence and discipline as white soldiers. It'll be more work for you to keep them in line."

"I don't believe that, sir," Steve says slowly, working hard to keep his eyes fixed on the wall over Phillips' shoulder.

"Well, you'll learn soon enough," Phillips laughs. "Fine, go ahead. Take who you like, I'll work it out somehow through SSR so the higher ups don't get their panties in a twist. Your Jap and Negro friends might have to transfer to the Canadian Forces, though. Get your men to report in to me so I can approve their transfer to this new unit of yours."

"Thank you, sir," Steve forces himself to say.

"I assume they are all men, you're not taking the girls from the chorus line into the European theater."

Meeting Phillips' eyes, Steve says, "Pretty sure I'm the only chorus girl in the unit, sir."

Phillips laughs and claps him on the back. Steve misses the stockings he used to wear under his clothes.

Even if he had them, they wouldn't fit anymore.

*
The USO show had long since moved on by the time he got back after rescuing Bucky and the other POWs, so Steve had sent Carol a letter to say that he was sorry for leaving her in the lurch. While he's waiting for his next deployment, he gets one back, telling him that he's a terrible cad and should be ashamed for leading a girl on like that.

Steve smiles down at the paper. It carries her scent, a little.

*But seriously,* she writes, *towards the end, I could tell your heart wasn't in the song & dance routine. I hope you'll be happier being a soldier than you were being one of us chorus girls.*

She's kissed the bottom of the paper, leaving a pretty red lipstick mark, just like Steve's done himself. He touches it with his huge blunt fingers, and feels Carol's words like a weight on his chest.

* He's still got the letter in his pocket when he goes in to meet with Howard Stark about new field equipment for him and his men. He has to wait in the vestibule, though, and is struck by the still-strange sensation of being on the receiving end of a woman's attention, publicly and blatantly appraised by her eyes on his new body. Steve doesn't know if Private Lorraine remembers him, but he sure as heck remembers her, and the way she had looked in Peggy's arms for that split second before they'd jumped apart.

"You saved nearly 400 men," she says, and looks him up and down, her eyes flicking over him lasciviously. It's in that moment that Steve realizes, with a sinking feeling, that she doesn't remember him from when he was little, just recognizes him for what he looks like now.

"Really, it's not a big deal," he says, as she stands and strides towards him. He crosses his arms, and hunches his shoulders, and tries to protest, but she grabs him by his tie and he's too flummoxed to push her away.

Her mouth is strong and sure against his, and for a brief moment he relaxes down into it, thinking: these lips have kissed Peggy's lips. We could both be Peggy's girls.

Of course it's probably that thought that causes Peggy to appear from around the corner. She clears her throat, and when Steve manages to break away from Private Lorraine, he can see that Peggy's upset.

They haven't made any promises to each other, he and Peggy. Steve doesn't even know what those promises would look like. But he knows how he felt when he thought Peggy and Howard might be an item, and he can't blame Peggy for feeling the same. She turns on her heel to go, and he chases after her.

"You always wanted to be a soldier, and now you are," she says, as she sets a fast, angry pace. "Just like all the rest."

It cuts him deep, that accusation, and he stops in his tracks. "What about you and Stark?" he asks. "How do I know you haven't been . . . fonduing?" It's not how he means to say it, not at all, but once it's out of his mouth he can't take it back.

Her cold glare is almost too much for him to take.

Howard gets him a new shield, one that's lighter and tougher and so perfectly shaped that it sings like crystal when you run your finger along its edge. Peggy shoots it, four times, while Steve's holding it, and it's then, watching her in her fury, that he finds the courage to say the right words.
He finds her on her way into the war room.

"Can I talk to you in private?" he asks, desperately.

She slams the door to the war room behind her; they're all alone except for the map of HYDRA bases. "All right," she says. "Fine. What would you like to say?"

"I guess . . . " Steve shrugs helplessly. "I was wondering who you were jealous of."

Her eyebrows go up at his daring. "You don't know anything about that," she reminds him, carefully.

"Just like you don't know anything about me," Steve says, looking down at the floor.

Peggy uncrosses her arms and leans back against the table, considering him coolly. "I don't even know that there's anything to know," she replies.

Steve shrugs, because there's too much to say, too much to explain; he can't tell her that he'd like to be her girl, not anymore.

Even if he still feels it.

"I was jealous too," he says, slowly, trying his hardest. "When I saw the thing I didn't see. I was jealous. I let her kiss me because she had kissed – "

Peggy holds up a hand to stop him from talking. She doesn't say anything for a moment, then shakes her head. "I've never met anyone quite like you, Steve," she says, eventually. He looks up to meet her eyes.

"Know the feeling," he replies, a little breathless. He wishes, so badly, that he could be small again, could fit in her arms and look up at her face. He's on edge, wondering what she's going to say next, wondering what might be in store for the two of them. Her lips part and she takes a breath as if to speak, but just then the door opens and Howard strolls in.

He's holding Steve's drawings in his hands, and doesn't even seem to notice the tension in the room.

"Steve, good," he says. "I'm thinking we make this thing out of the new knife-resistant material I was showing you before."

Steve coughs and ducks his head, looking away from Peggy's wondering, assessing gaze. "Whatever you think is best," he says.

"I'll need to take your measurements, though."

Steve nods, and lets Howard shepherd him away. His conversation with Peggy didn't feel done, but at the same time, he doesn't know what more he could've said.

"It'll be functional, a whole new way of thinking about combat uniforms," Howard promises, measuring Steve's inseam. "We'll take you from chorus girl to war hero."

Steve swallows, and wishes desperately that he could go in the other direction.

"Okay," he says.

The uniform, when he gets it, doesn't have tights that feel like stockings, or boots with a bit of a
heel, and there's no reason anymore to put on lipstick when he wears it.

That part of his life is truly over, he supposes.

*

He doesn't know what to do about Bucky, about Peggy, about the mixed-up way he feels inside, about the strange waves of dizziness he still gets sometimes when he looks in a mirror or stands up to his full six foot two. It's not neat, any of it, not simple, and he doesn't see any way he can fix it.

But it's enough, it is, to be able to do what he can do now. He's doing what this body was designed to do, and it's making a real difference. He can protect people this way.

He leaps, trusting his body to follow through on his will, and tackles Dernier out of the way of a sniper's bullet; he takes Morita in his arms, when he gets shot, and his strength is more than enough to carry them both to safety; he lets a bridge fall on his back, on his shoulders, and he bears its weight while his men walk over it.

He kills a lot of people, too. His hearing works better than it used to, and his eyesight, and it's nothing at all, physically at least, to pull the trigger and watch the target fall to the ground. It's what he has to do to protect his people, so he does it. He's very good at it; he hopes that he never has to tell Valentine just how good. Don't vote for the war machine, she'd told him once, and then he went and became one.

Still, they have to get rid of HYDRA. Someone has to. It might as well be Steve; then it doesn't have to be anyone else. They're capturing a lot of prisoners, and blowing up a lot of bases, and seizing a lot of terrible weapons, too, weapons so powerful that the idea of them being loose in the world keeps Steve up nights.

The weapons get taken to Howard Stark, he knows, and he wonders if they shouldn't be destroying them instead. But he puts that thought aside: they need every advantage they can get.

One night in early March, they're all sitting together in the quiet dark, too deep in enemy territory to risk lighting a fire. The other Howlies are bundled up and huddled together, but Steve isn't cold. He doesn't get cold anymore. He's tending to a gunshot wound he got earlier in the day – it went all the way through his arm, so there's no bullet to dig out, but he figures it should be cleaned before it seals itself up, to set a good example to the men if for no other reason. As he covers it with a bandage, Dernier speaks up from beside him, breaking the silence.

"We all appreciate – that you do," Dernier says.

Bucky's lying on Steve's other side, snoring loudly. During the four months since his rescue, he's been strange, quiet, standoffish, and Steve still doesn't know if it's a reaction to Steve's new body or to what Zola did to him in that lab. At night, though, he lays close to Steve, and snores like he used to in their little two-room suite, and it makes Steve's heart ease a little to know that Bucky's body remembers how to take comfort from his best friend.

Listening to Bucky's snores, he says, "I do what I can. Just like everyone else." Then he smiles, remembering a communist saying that Danielle used to like. "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs."

There's a long pause, the kind Steve's learned to recognize as Dernier trying to summon his English. Steve furrows his brow and thinks back to the stuff Jones has been teaching him.

"Meme que – meme que vous," he tries, though he doesn't know if it's right. Dernier shakes his
head, whether in disagreement, incomprehension, or at his terrible accent, Steve doesn't know.

Jones, who's lying down on Dernier's other side, laughs a little, then says, slowly, "*De chacun selon ses facultés, à chacun selon ses besoins.*"

Dernier chuckles, too, then lets loose with a torrent of French, too fast and complex for Steve to follow much except for the occasional word: *je voudrais*, I would like, he knows that one, and *fraternité*, just like it is in English, and some conjugated version of *donner*, to give.

Steve frowns and shakes his head, uncomprehending. Dernier elbows Jones.

"He says that you care for us and look after us," Jones says, his face still pressed to his blanket. "He says that you keep us together, make us into brothers. And that he's had many commanding officers, but none who gave — " Jones pauses, considering the translation, maybe. "Gave so much of himself to see his men well."

"*Oui, c'est ça,*" Dernier says, nodding, satisfied. Then, slowly, he reaches out his hand toward Jones, and Jones reaches back without hesitation, so that they're clasping hands, like brothers, like lovers. In the Army, it's sometimes hard to know the difference.

"He's right about that," Jones says, for himself.

In the moonlight, Steve can just barely see the way their fingers move together, gentle and confident, a caress that's not new to either of them. Steve's heard them, of course, the quiet but unmistakable nighttime sounds that come from their tent or their corner of camp. Steve thinks maybe some of the other Howlies have heard it too, but they take their cues from Steve and don't say anything about it. It's not unusual, Steve's learned, for normal fellas to fall for each other out here, even if they're not queer back home. And most everyone knows that you take what small comforts you can when you might die tomorrow. He doesn't know what's between them exactly, or how long it might last, but he knows the only thing that matters: that, for right now, it's love.

He figures this is why the Army headshrinkers asked them that question about being disgusted by homosexuals. They knew that kind of person would have no place in a real war.

Bucky is still snoring behind him and Steve can't reach out for him. He reaches forward instead, towards Jones and Dernier. He can't help it; he's so lonely, and it's been so long, that he has to stretch his hand towards the warmth that glows between them. Dernier catches his outstretched hand and holds it firmly, so that the three of them are linked with Dernier in the middle.

Jacques. With Jacques in the middle.

Buoyed by a sudden, strange fit of daring, Steve bends his head and kisses Jacques's hand, like a knight or a prince in a fairy tale. It's the kind of thing that could be taken for a joke, something safe and playful, but Steve means it. He waits, agonized, to see whether the other two will recognize it for what it means. Jacques laughs quietly. Jones — or, no, Gabe — behind him, grins.

"*Fraternité,*" Steve says quietly, trying to explain.

"*Oui,*" Gabe agrees, and Steve relaxes, glad in the feeling of recognition.

They let go of one another, but throughout the night they lie near one another in the dark, shoulder to shoulder, sharing what warmth they can.
It takes Bucky a few more months to actually ask the question. In those months they break into, and out of, half a dozen POW camps and half a dozen HYDRA facilities, rescue a lot of soldiers and civilians, and capture a lot of weapons. It's good work, the work Steve was built for, and he's grateful to have it.

It takes his mind off everything else.

Bucky is a good soldier, and he never says a word about taking orders from Steve. Over time, he seems to come back to himself, too, cracking jokes and making friends like he used to, until all the guys think the world of him. It does Steve's heart good to see him laughing more often, even if it sometimes makes him feel cold to see the clean, easy work he can do with a sniper's rifle.

But whatever else is going through Bucky's head – his torture, their missions, Steve's new self – he doesn't ask the question until months after his rescue. By then it's hot in France, the trees green and lush, the sweat running down the backs of his men to darken the material of their uniform shirts.

He and Bucky are bringing up the rear, walking companionably together. It's almost like old times, if the trees were tenements and if Steve were a foot shorter.

"So, your – the procedure," Bucky says awkwardly. He's looking at the trees, scanning for danger, avoiding Steve's gaze.

"Yeah," Steve replies after a second, shocked. It's not a subject they've touched on at all, not since that night in the bar last November. All of a sudden Steve's wound up inside, coiled and tight and ready to spring. He waits for Bucky's next words to come.

"Did it – do you feel changed? Y'know. In – in your head?"

Steve walks a few more steps, working really hard to pull the words out of his mouth. If he's ever going to say it to anyone who can understand, it's going to have to be now.

"I don't think so, Buck." His voice shakes as he speaks, and he finds that he's dangerously close to crying. There's been no one else he could talk to, not for all this time. He's struck retroactively by the weight of the loneliness he's been feeling, and, at the same time, by the relief of being able to finally talk to Bucky.

He feels that relief even before he realizes that Bucky's hand is on his shoulder, squeezing gently, just like old times.

"Hey, hey, Stevie," he says. Steve takes a big gulp of air to keep from crying there in the middle of the French countryside.

"I'm the same inside," Steve says, finally admitting it to himself. "I'm the same guy inside and it's – sometimes –" He grasps for words, trying to explain it. "I feel like my mind doesn't match my body anymore, like I'm all twisted up and wrong and it's stupid because, I can, the stuff I can do is what I've always wanted to do, and I was so sick all the time and now I'm – but –" He cuts himself off as Bucky squeezes again, tight enough that it would've been painful if Steve were still in his old body, frail and delicate, skin and bones.

"Take it easy," Bucky says in an undertone, glancing ahead to make sure that the rest of the unit isn't listening to Steve's words or witnessing Steve's tears. His hand slides off Steve's shoulder, and Steve thinks for a moment that he's pulling away to keep up appearances, but then Bucky's arm is wrapping around Steve's neck, pulling him close to Bucky's chest. It's how Bucky always used to hold onto him, out in public. Nowadays he has to stretch up a little to do it.
"Take it easy," he says again, and Steve forces his breathing to slow and his vision to clear. In this, as in all things, his body obeys him. He has to be alert, has to be watching out for his men, and he can't do it when he's dwelling on this.

He reaches up and grabs Bucky's hand, squeezes it. "Thanks, Buck. I think – I need to think about the unit right now."

"Yeah," Bucky agrees, and now he lets Steve go. They're walking next to each other again, as if they were never touching at all. Then, quietly, he says, "We'll get you through this, okay? We'll find a way to make it all right."

When Bucky says it, Steve can almost believe it. "Okay," he says.

"I'm here now. I know you." Delivered in a quiet, confident murmur, and it hits Steve hard. The idea that he can still be known – that someone still knows him – is so comforting that he almost breaks into tears again.

"You know me," Steve repeats, because he needs to feel the truth of those words.

"Yeah, you're still an annoying little punk who gets into too much trouble for his own good," Bucky says, shoving him affectionately.

Steve outweighs him now, and has first-hand evidence that he can win a pushing match with a tank, but when Bucky shoves, Steve lets himself be moved.

He makes the choice to let himself be moved.

It feels good.

*

It's not until later that day that Steve thinks to wonder why Bucky asked the question in the first place, and he feels like a jerk.

"What about you, Buck?" he asks softly, while the other guys are setting up camp. "Do you feel changed? In your head?"


Steve nods, sensing that there's more to it.

"But sometimes it's harder to – I don't know. Feel things. Like I can see the memories, but I can't always touch them. I'm – you've seen it. I'm different, I can do things."

"Yeah, Buck," Steve says softly, thinking of Bucky's cold gaze through a rifle scope, the shots he can make that no one else can. "I know."

Bucky nods. "I'm faster than I used to be, and I don't feel the cold or the heat so much, and I worry that they took the feelings out of my head to make room for the new stuff."

Steve puts his hand on Bucky's shoulder, squeezing tight. Bucky looks up at him, and smirks, and in that warm bright expression it's hard to see anything but feeling.

"You look like the same old Bucky to me," Steve says. Bucky gulps.
"That's because when I look at you, it all comes flooding back," Bucky says. His head moves slightly to the right, a brief gesture toward the place where they're touching. "When you touch me, it feels like it used to."

Steve nods, thinking. "Is it still like it was right after the POW camp, or – "

Bucky shakes his head. "It's better. It's a lot better. But there are still some things – it's been months, and there are still some things I can't . . . find. In my head."

"Maybe you just need time, Buck," Steve says softly, squeezing a little harder on his shoulder and then releasing. "For all of it to come back."

Bucky nods. "I hope so."

Leaning forward, Steve comes up on his knees and pulls Bucky into a hug, not caring who sees them, just knowing, now, that it's something that makes Bucky feel better. Bucky hugs him back, squeezing hard, like Steve's a life raft he's using to keep his head above water.

They've never put their bodies together like this, not since Steve changed so much, and it feels odd, familiar and shockingly strange at the same time, to smell Bucky's old smell and be pressed up against the shape of him while also being so much bigger himself. He closes his eyes and hangs on, waiting for the sick, dizzy feeling to pass. Eventually it does, and the hug starts to feel good to him, too.

"We'll get you through this, okay?" Steve says, echoing Bucky's words to him earlier. Bucky huffs a laugh into his hair. "We'll find a way to make us both right."

"Yeah," Bucky agrees, burying his forehead against Steve's broad shoulder and squeezing a little tighter. "Okay."

*

A few nights later, after they resupply and head back out on a new mission, Steve comes back to camp to find that Bucky's buttoned their shelter halves together. That's not unusual, since all the shelters are two-man tents and he and Bucky have been sharing one, whenever they've had the supplies and time to camp, since the first official Howling Commandos mission. What is unusual is that the tent is set up a good way away from the rest of the camp, and that Bucky's left the front flap down, rather than pinning it up like he usually does. For privacy.

It's something that lots of the guys do, to have sex or just have company, to keep warm, whatever, but it's not something that Bucky's done in all the months they've been bunking together. Steve got the impression, after that first night on the tank, that he was having trouble with enclosed spaces, though he hasn't said why.

Steve crawls inside. It's after dark, and his watch is over for the night. Bucky is already lying there, tucked up in his blankets despite the warm air.

"Hey, Buck," Steve says, trying to be nonchalant, keeping to his side of the shelter. If he were still little, it'd be easy, and he could tuck himself up into the corner. He takes up a lot more space now, though, and Bucky's never been small, so their arms and thighs brush together no matter how hard Steve tries to avoid it.

He regrets all those jokes they made, before the war, about sharing a tent. They were stupid, and ignorant, Steve realizes now.
"Hey Steve," Bucky says, and his voice is low, and his callused palm slides roughly up Steve's arm. "C'mere."

Steve pulls away violently. "You don't – Bucky, you don't gotta do this. Come on."

"I want to," Bucky says, but he pulls back and takes his hand off of Steve's arm.

"So, what, you're gonna lie to me now? After all we've been through?" There's a sick pulse of anger bubbling up inside him. Bucky couldn't want this big strong body, couldn't want him when he's like this.

"Not lying," Bucky insists softly.

Steve takes a breath, and tries to believe him. "But you – look, I know you want to, to make me feel better, Buck, and that means a lot. And I know you want to feel better inside your head, too. But you can't tell me this is – what it used to be. Not after what we talked about the other day."

He's sitting up, pressed against the side of the shelter, curling himself forward to avoid pushing the canvas out of shape.

Bucky runs a hand through his hair; Steve can just make out the movement in the dark. "I didn't know till then whether you'd still want me, okay?" He looks down at the ground. "Some of the guys said they heard you had a thing with a chorus girl. And I saw you were carrying around Carter's picture in your compass."

"I – that's – " Steve sighs. "I look up to her. And she's – she's special." He thinks back to the image of Peggy's hands on Private Lorraine's face. Steve imagines that she held her still, kept her in place, put her where she wanted her.


Steve shrugs helplessly, trying to put it all together. It doesn't make a lot of sense to him, either. "I don't know if it is," he says finally. "I just – I've never really fallen for a dame before. Woman. A woman. But it feels the same as when I fell for you, or Frank, or anyone else."

Bucky doesn't speak for a moment. Steve wishes he could see his expression. "But you could – if you wanted to, you could marry her. I saw the way she looked at you. And it could be your chance for a real life. Kids. All that."

Steve almost laughs to hear this familiar speech, the one he's given himself so many times about Bucky, turned back against him.

"I guess I could," Steve says, turning the idea over in his head. "But – it doesn't change how I feel about you, Bucky."

"You fell for me, you said," Bucky drawls, almost teasingly. It's a tone that Steve's heard him use on ladies, and he's no more immune than they are.

"Sure," he says, reaching out for Bucky's hand. "You bet." If nothing else, Steve wants to make sure Bucky knows that he was loved. Is loved. It's no less than he deserves.

"I fell for you, too," Bucky says. He leans in and caresses Steve's jawline with his knuckles, and Steve can't help it; his eyes fall closed. Bucky's next words are a whisper. "My beautiful girl."

Steve opens his eyes suddenly and pushes his hand away. "Stop it."
Bucky blinks. "You don't like that anymore?"

"Well, c'mon, Bucky. Look at me."

Bucky does, as well as he can in the dark tent, and it's disquieting, the way he can feel Bucky's gaze sweep over his broad shoulders, his strong arms, his powerful thighs. "So you put on a little muscle," Bucky says, grinning his best lopsided grin.

Steve rolls his eyes. "A little muscle, a little bone, a little blood – "

Bucky shuffles closer, so that their bodies are inches apart, their mouths nearly touching. "What's a hundred pounds or so between friends?"

"Christ, Bucky, it's not like I got fat! Jesus, that would've been fine! I turned into – into this – " he gestures down at himself, at the obscene masculine form he's been forced into.

"I like it when you blaspheme," Bucky says, leaning forward and kissing Steve briefly before pulling back and smiling. Steve can feel the warmth of his breath against his face.

"I'm not beautiful anymore," Steve protests, and Bucky kisses him again, swift soft lips. "Don't say I am."

"You're the same," Bucky insists, kissing him over and over. "You're the same tough little guy, the same sweet girl, you're the same, you're the same – "

At that, Steve's held breath shudders out of him and he kisses Bucky back, bringing up his big, wide hand to cup Bucky's jaw as their lips meet again, and again, and again. Bucky's stubble rasps against Steve's face and the rough masculine feeling of it lights a fire deep down in Steve's belly. God, he missed this. He missed this so much, thinking he'd never have it again.

"Bucky," he says, helplessly, lost in the long-missed feeling of recognition.


Steve feels a pang of desire at the familiar sound of Bucky begging, and he knows what needs to happen next. Before he even says it they're both scrabbling at their clothes, pulling uselessly at the material.

"Fuck me," he breathes, just like he used to. "Fuck me, please, I want it, I need it – "

Bucky's response is a growl. "I'm gonna fuck you, Jesus, get your pants off."

Steve does, and strips Bucky down too, both of them twisting and tugging at their clothes until they're finally free of enough of them to get the job done. Steve flips over onto his hands and knees, and Bucky fits himself to Steve's back, sweaty and heavy on top of him. Steve drops his head down to hang between his shoulders and opens his mouth to pant.

There's a wet slurping sound, Bucky taking his fingers out of his mouth. "I bet you can take it really hard now," he murmurs, pushing into Steve with his wet fingers. "I bet I can fuck you so hard, Steve."

"Please," Steve groans. "Please, please, do it." There are more wet sounds, Bucky getting himself ready. Steve thinks he's going to explode from want, from waiting.

Bucky's hand grips tight on his shoulder and Bucky's thighs slide up behind his and then Bucky is
pushing into him, not taking it slow. Steve spreads his legs and falls forward so that his weight is on his elbows instead of his hands, and the sudden change in position makes Bucky cry out and shove further into him.

It doesn't hurt at all.

"Harder, come on," Steve grits out. Bucky's hands are all over him, caressing his back, squeezing his ass, slipping down to grab onto his thigh and hitch it up a little higher. He pulls out and then pushes back in again, hard like Steve wants it, shoving him forward and making his forehead brush the ground.

"You're gorgeous, Steve," Bucky pants. "You're taking this so good, so easy, God, I love how you can take me – "

Steve digs his fingers into the blanket beneath him and closes his eyes. "Yes," he hears himself saying, quietly, "yes, yes, yes, Bucky, please, I want to take it all. Give – give it to me, c'mon."

Bucky is fucking him hard and fast, each stroke opening Steve up and stretching him out, each stroke far more force than Steve ever could've handled before the transformation. His body is open, ready, eager, and it's a blessing, a blessing to learn that his new body is made for this, too: made to take dick, made to be fucked, made to be used by a man and brought to pleasure.

He wants to speak, to say this to Bucky, but when he opens his mouth he can't find the words, is too lost in the sensation; he groans instead, a low uncontrolled sound that tears from his throat as he pushes back against Bucky's thrusts.

"Shhh," Bucky hisses, probably louder than Steve's groan was, and Steve hangs his head down and laughs silently.

"You're the loud one," he says, then groans again as Bucky thrusts back into him.

"Jerk yourself off," Bucky says. "You can hold us both up with one hand, c'mon, jerk yourself off, I could climb you like a tree and you could take it, Steve, c'mon."

The truth of this hits Steve hard, and he shifts easily to rest their weight on one elbow, using his other hand to take hold of his cock and squeeze and stroke. He's missed this so much.

"That's it," Bucky says. "That's it, Steve, yeah, that's beautiful."

"I'm gonna come," Steve says. "God, Bucky, I can't last, please – "

"Yeah, yeah, I want you to come, I wanna make you come," Bucky moans.

Steve stifles a cry and pumps himself hard, his body trembling and shaking underneath Bucky's weight and bulk.

Bucky's hands clench, squeezing Steve's shoulder and his thigh, and he fucks wildly, driving into Steve in a series of fast, powerful thrusts. When he speaks next, it's in a whisper, so that Steve almost doesn't hear.

"My beautiful girl," he breathes. "My beautiful girl, Steve, my pretty little fairy, you're so beautiful, always . . . so . . . beautiful – "

Steve comes, and it's like being turned inside out.
Later, when they're lying tangled together, cooling off, Bucky lies behind him and kisses his shoulder, his neck, his hairline. A hundred tiny kisses.

"You'll always be my best girl," he says. His voice is hoarse. Steve closes his eyes.

He can't find the words, but he takes Bucky's hand and pulls it down over his belly, holding it firm, and he curls up so that he can fit small and safe against Bucky's front. Despite the heat, Bucky wraps himself around Steve's body and holds him tight, as if every square inch of their skin touching brings him closer to who he used to be.

For now, for both of them, it's enough.

The next morning, though, Bucky is up before him, and when Steve exits the tent he finds him sitting around with Falsworth and Dum Dum, laughing over thin coffee at some bad joke.

"Hey, Cap," Bucky says, as Steve walks up. He hands him a cup and pours him some of the swill they're drinking, but doesn't meet Steve's eyes.

Steve swallows, a sudden cold fear threading its way through his blood and wrapping around his heart.

Bucky's never been a fairy, that's the thing, never been interested in bodies like the one Steve has now. And maybe it's one thing in the dark, when Steve spreads his legs and gets to be Bucky's girl, but something else in the cold morning light, when Steve's tall, and strong, and in command again.

That's okay, Steve figures. He'll take what he can get. Be a man in the day, a soldier, and Bucky's best girl at night, and it's more than he ever thought he'd have.

"We make it to the landing area by tonight," Steve says, to the men sitting around the little fire. "Strike at dawn tomorrow."

They all nod, and Bucky finally looks up at him. "Yes, sir," he says softly.

Steve hesitates. "Thanks, Sarge," he says, and claps Bucky on the back. He turns away, and listens as Bucky starts organizing the men for the march.

They liberate twenty-five prisoners of war from the HYDRA facility, and destroy a series of machines that look, unnervingly, like the one they put Steve into back in Brooklyn. Steve tries not to think about how good it feels to see them burn.

The prisoners are mostly in good shape; from what Steve can gather, listening to them, whatever experiments they were doing at the facility pretty much killed people instantly. It's horrible, but it's also a relief not to have to watch men die slowly of things their medics have never seen before. The worst they're dealing with this time is a couple cases of infection, along with malnutrition and superficial wounds. Bucky orders the guys to hand out the extra rations they've learned to bring along, and get the two POWs with fevers onto stretchers. The medic administers some penicillin and keeps a close watch.

"Rendezvous point is twenty miles south," Steve tells them. "And every single one of you is going
to make it there. If you feel sick, or if you're injured, or if you get injured, report to Sergeant Barnes or Corporal Jones immediately. No reason to make it any worse when we've got medicine and equipment that can help. We all work together in this unit."

There's the usual muttering and surprise when Steve indicates who Corporal Jones is, but this time no one says anything. Bucky takes the white Americans aside to give them a talking to anyway, just to head off potential trouble. There were two Negro soldiers in the POW camp, and they head cautiously over to Jones and ask him questions in quiet voices.

Once all the men are settled into formation and marching together, Bucky jogs up to take his place on Steve's right. "I heard we're heading back to Camp Braxton," he says.

"Assuming our air support is there to pick us up," Steve nods. "We can take a few days before we move out against the next facility."

"Be nice to have some R&R," Bucky says quietly. Steve looks over at him, at the serious expression on his face that doesn't match someone looking forward to R&R, or someone who's just liberated a POW camp without any casualties, for that matter.

"Yeah," Steve agrees, watching Bucky carefully.

"Maybe you can get us bunking together," Bucky says. "We can have a game of cards like the old days."

Steve can't help the little smile that comes over his face; Bucky, when he looks up, has a matching one. "Yeah," Steve says, a little thrill of anticipation shivering through his chest. "Yeah, okay."

The twenty miles seems to take a lot longer than usual.

*

Camp Braxton is a pretty big place at the moment, with the remnants of three infantry divisions being brought together to reform into a new one. Everyone is running everywhere, everyone seems confused about what unit they're supposed to be with, and Steve has never seen so many junior officers and NCOs so red in the face.

They manage to find places for everyone to set up, though, and they get their resupply orders in.

"You see this?" Bucky says, pulling a hand-drawn notice down off the wall outside the mess.

Steve looks over his shoulder, and freezes in surprise. The notice advertises "FALL OUT FOLLIES – 2NITE IN THE MESS." Below the lettering there's a crudely drawn sketch of a soldier – in his helmet and mustache – in a huge old-fashioned dress, with big breasts and a folding fan in his hands. In the sketch, he's turning away from another more conventionally attired soldier and blushing.

Watching Steve's shocked face in amusement, Bucky says, "You never seen one of these before? I saw a few before we got captured. Always made me think of – you know. The kids, back home." He shrugs.

"I will never understand the Army so long as I live," Steve mutters.

"Should we go?" Bucky asks.

"Yeah," Steve says. "Definitely." He has no idea how close it'll be to the drag shows he used to
know, but just the idea of it wakens a hunger in him that he didn’t know he had. It’s like the hunger he’s learned to carry for sweet foods and soft beds, the things you get used to missing but that you crave on some deep level where you don’t even notice it most of the time.

Looking at the poster, Steve feels like a starving kid being shown to the window of a candy store.

Pretty much everyone in camp shows up in the mess that night, which isn’t too surprising given that live entertainment is hard to come by out here in the middle of nowhere. As a result, they're all packed in together, shoulder to shoulder, with the guys who came late standing along the edge of the tent, filling the aisles and crowding in at the back.

Steve himself is sandwiched between Bucky on his left and Dum Dum on his right. The room is full of the smell of bodies, sweat-rich and dense, as they all sit patiently and wait for the show.

The curtains go up – or, two Privates holding tent canvas walk away from the front of the mess – and the first sketch starts. This one's just guys in their regular uniforms, arguing over who has latrine duty, and the jokes get the whole crowd going laughing.

Steve gets caught up in the show, enjoying the sketches and the musical interludes, so that when the first guy comes out in a dress, he's almost forgotten to expect it. The sight makes him gasp: it's no butch soldier with a mustache, like in the poster. Instead it's a lovely little fairy, chubby and sweet-faced, wearing a blue silk dress and beautiful makeup.

As Steve watches, she prances out front and takes command of the stage, posing and preening as the mess tent erupts in cheers, catcalls, and whistles. It's like watching Marlene at Vincent's, in the way she utterly owns the whole space; and then, like Marlene, she starts picking guys out from the crowd. She chucks one soldier under the chin before putting her hand in his face and pushing him away; she bends down, in full view of the crowd, and makes as if to kiss another guy before pulling away at the last second.

The crowd eats it up, laughing and screaming and stamping their feet. Steve realizes, belatedly, that he's laughing too, that he's screaming and stamping too, caught up in the sheer delight of the moment.

When he dares a sideways look at Bucky, he sees that Bucky's cheering and grinning, an expression of pure, uncomplicated happiness on his face that Steve hasn't seen there in months. Bucky catches his eye and nudges Steve with his elbow before turning his attention back to the front.

"Take it off, doll!" he yells, which grabs the fairy's attention.

"Did someone say take it off?" she trills, outraged. At the positive confirmation from the crowd, she yells back, "If I took it off, honey, you might get a big surprise!"

The fairy-soldier introduces herself as Arnette, and goes on telling jokes and interacting with the crowd for a while; then she starts telling them a story, which turns into a series of funny sketches in which Arnette is sometimes a fairy, and sometimes a very pretty soldier standing in formation, and sometimes a normal girl. Some other soldiers turn up in drag, too, some of them butch hairy guys in dresses and some of them almost as pretty as Arnette, all of them playing and carousing to the delight of the crowd.

A bunch of musical interludes finish the show, and the performers manage to get the whole crowded mess tent of soldiers to sing along to a few numbers. As he lifts his voice to join in on "The Tennessee Waltz," Steve realizes that he's hoarse from all the shouting and laughing he's
done over the course of the night, and that his face hurts from smiling.

It's not until the performers come out to take their bows, and Arnette doffs her wig like a hat, that Steve realizes exactly what made her seem so familiar to him.

"Bucky," he says, elbowed him excitedly. "Bucky, am I seeing things, or is that – "


As the crowd disperses they shove their way up to the front of the tent, managing to catch Arnie – Arnette – right before he leaves.

"Arnie!" Steve shouts, and Arnie turns around. Steve's never seen him in makeup before – he and Steve kind of lost touch after Steve dropped out of school – but it feels familiar anyhow, like seeing the Arnie he's kept in his memory all these years.

"Hi!" he says. "Do I know – oh hell, is that Bucky Barnes?"

As Arnie passes right by Steve to wrap Bucky up in an enthusiastic, manly hug, Steve is hit with the realization. In all the excitement, all the fun of seeing a drag show at Camp Braxton of all places, Steve had somehow managed to forget.

Arnie doesn't recognize him.

"Arnie," Bucky says, turning so that they're both facing Steve. "You remember Steve Rogers, don't you?"

Arnie blinks. "Little shitstirring Steve Rogers?" he asks, doubtfully.

Steve swallows and opens his mouth to explain, not sure where he could even begin.

"Steve had kind of a late growth spurt," Bucky says easily.

"I'll say," Arnie says archly, sounding an awful lot like Arnette, and Steve takes a deep breath to ground himself against whatever assumptions Arnie might be making. "Come here, Rogers, Jesus, it's good to see you!"

And then Arnie's warm arms are wrapped around him, Arnie's face pressed against Steve's collarbones, and Steve can't do anything but hold on.

"Leave room for Jesus, there, boys," Bucky mutters, laughing, and Steve lets go as Arnie backs away.

"Wow, Steve, you're a Captain?" Arnie asks, finally catching sight of Steve's bars. "How'd that happen?"

"Field promotion," Steve says, the usual answer he gives. At this point in the war, he's not the only guy who got shoved up the ranks, so it's at least plausible.

"Sounds like a story," Arnie grins. His lipstick is perfect, a light and delicate pink that makes Steve want to kiss him just to taste it, to get some of it on his own lips. "Why don't you two come and tell me all about it? I'd love to catch up."

"Yeah," Steve says. "Me too."

Turns out Arnie has some decent hooch in his footlocker, along with a truly impressive supply of
dresses, hats, and makeup, and he pours them each a shot in a tin cup as they settle on the ground in the big performers' tent.

"Where the heck did you get all this stuff, Arnie?" Steve asks, running his fingers along the silks and satins poking out of the open footlocker.

"The Red Cross, mostly, if you can believe it," Arnie laughs. "And sometimes the ladies in towns we go through get up collections for us, give us their old things and such."

"That's amazing," Steve says.

"And better than our brothers over in the Pacific," Arnie says, sipping his drink. "I hear they've gotta make their own, out of parachutes and signal flags and coconuts."

Bucky laughs. "I suppose I shouldn't ask what the coconuts are for."

Arnie smiles at him, cocking his head. Then he glances over at Steve, making eye contact in a way that asks a very obvious question.

"It's okay," Steve says. He licks his lips, wanting to give more of Bucky's bona fides – *he bought me makeup* or *he's a little queer too* or *he's been my boyfriend for years* – but none of that seems quite right.

"S'okay to let your hair down in front of me," Bucky drawls, and Arnie laughs.

"Like that, is it?" he says. "Good to know. You two always were close."

Bucky grins at the implication, but Steve blushes and draws his knees up.

"I guess we kind of missed each other at Vincent's," Steve says. "I think you used to go there before I did, guys told me you'd settled down in Queens."

"Yeah, I did," Arnie sighs. "With an architect, he's lovely. I miss him terribly, of course, but he's with the 36th Combat Engineers, building barracks across Europe."

"You get much chance to write?" Bucky asks.

"Now and then," Arnie sighs. "Gotta be careful what you put in writing, though, so the letters are a bit boring."

Steve smiles. "But you love 'em anyway," he says, softly.

Arnie nods. "Of course I do."

They go on talking late into the night. Bucky tells the story of how Steve saved his life, and Steve, watching the others get a little drunk, finally tells the story of the SSR experiment that made him the way he is.

"What, like in the comic books?" Arnie demands. "That stuff's true?"

"Some of it," Steve says. "Not the part where I fought vampires, but I did get made bigger."

Arnie whistles. "That's so strange," he says. "Does it feel strange?"

Looking over at Bucky on the ground next to him, then up at Arnie sitting on the cot, Steve smiles. "Less and less," he says.
Bucky says his goodnights some time later, and Steve promises to meet him back at their tent.

He wraps Arnie up in his arms again, and this time he doesn't let go for a while. Arnie smells like every other soldier, like sweat and wool and smoke, but Steve imagines he can smell the chalky makeup smells, too, or even the perfume that he knows Arnie isn't wearing.

"Hey," Arnie says softly, when he lets go. "You all right?"

Steve gives him half a smile. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I'm fine. It's only – it's been a long time since I've been to a drag show. I forgot how much I missed that."

"I know what you mean," Arnie says, smiling and meeting his eyes.

"Thanks for everything, Arnie," Steve says, and turns to go.

Arnie catches Steve's arm. "Hey, buddy," he says. "Did you want – I don't know what kinds of things you like, but if you want some makeup or something, I got a little extra."

Steve's heart aches with temptation, wanting the tube of soft pink lipstick for his own, knowing that it wouldn't be right on his face anymore. It would be worse to have it in his pack somewhere, hidden and never to be used, than to never have it at all.

"I'll let you keep it, Arnie," he says, smiling down at him. "It was great seeing you."

"You too," Arnie says, and then, smiling, he leans up and pecks Steve on the cheek.

Steve laughs, holding back a couple of tears that spring suddenly to his eyes.

"Gave you a little lipstick after all," Arnie says, winking.

Steve doesn't bother rubbing it off as he walks back to the bunk he's sharing with Bucky.

*

"Nice night," Bucky says, when Steve comes through the big tent flap. As Captain and Sergeant, he and Bucky are entitled to pretty nice accommodations while in camp, and Steve can't find it in his heart to object when he sees Bucky sprawled out on his cot on one side, stripped down to his singlet and shorts in the warm summer air. His dick is hard under the white shorts, obscenely obvious as it pushes against the material.

"Nice picture you make," Steve replies, giving him the once-over. "What if someone else had walked in here?"

"Then I guess I would've fucked someone else," Bucky says, his eyes dark. "But I'm gonna fuck you." He drops his hand down onto his thigh, rubbing up and down over the thin white material.

"Right here in the middle of camp," Steve says, walking closer. "With everyone around."

"It's late," Bucky says, wrapping his hand around his cock through his shorts. "And we won't be the only ones."

Steve swings a leg over Bucky's hips, balancing on his knees on the cot and rubbing his ass against Bucky's dick. He's still in his rough wool uniform pants, and Bucky groans at the friction.

"You'd do that to your Captain?" Steve asks, perversely driven to press down on the hard knot of anxiety and desire he's felt since Bucky fucked him in their tent a few days ago.

Breathing hard, Steve starts unbuttoning his jacket so that he can squirm out of it. Bucky's hands on his still his movements.

"You can leave it on if you want," he says, softly. "I don't mind."

Steve purses his lips. "No, Bucky, I gotta – " he breaks Bucky's grip and tears the jacket off his shoulders, tossing it onto the ground. Bucky watches it fall with raised eyebrows.

"Help me," Steve says, and Bucky's hands are on him, unbuttoning his uniform pants, pulling off his tie, unbuttoning his shirt, and Steve skins it all off, all of it, even his Army-issue shorts, till he's naked and panting. It's not enough.

Bucky blows out the lantern, and darkness falls over them. Steve sighs.

"Get on your knees, Stevie," he whispers, and Steve does it, falling onto the hard ground with only a thin blanket under him.

Kissing a trail up Steve's spine, Bucky says, "You're always my girl," and Steve's glad he's facing away, glad that Bucky can't see the emotion on his face as he spreads his legs and asks for it harder.

*

After that, when Bucky and Steve share a tent, it's expected between them, that they'll fuck, or suck each other, or use their hands to bring each other off. Or, on nights when they're too tired or too sick at heart from what they've seen that day, Bucky will hold Steve in his arms, and Steve will curl up small in imitation of what he used to be, taking comfort in Bucky's hands on his skin and Bucky's breath against his neck.

Steve starts to get used to it, the idea of Bucky looking at this new body and seeing his old self. As they work their way across Europe, destroying HYDRA, freeing prisoners, and loving each other desperately in the dark, Steve thinks: this is almost what I wanted.

*

They rendezvous with SSR as often as possible, in order to stay updated on HYDRA's movements and strategies. When they do, Steve takes his sketchbook in to Peggy and shows her the drawings he's made, maps drawn perfectly to scale with his notes and observations: the state of the roads, the signs of habitation he's seen, the pockets of resistance they've encountered.

"This is great, Steve," she always says, taking what he's brought her and putting it into their big, official maps and charts. It gives him a warm feeling, every time, to hear her straightforward praise and know he's done well in her eyes.

After he and Bucky start fucking again, Steve starts to feel strange around her, like he owes her the truth, or should tell her he's taken, or something. But she doesn't treat him with anything but the professional indulgence of a superior officer for her favored underling, and it feels strangely presumptuous to break off a romance that he's not even sure is happening.

The other problem, of course, is that he's not sure he could bear to break it off, if it did exist. When he gets around Peggy, he feels right, like a planet falling into a predestined orbit around its sun. But he can't tell her that, and he can't tell Bucky, either, in case Bucky might think he should step aside, so he's caught between, in half of a lie, basking in her presence but keeping his distance.
When he meets up with her after Camp Braxton, she's got a dark bruise purpling over her jawline and her arm in a sling.

"Hey, Peggy, what happened?" Steve asks, rushing over to her. At her raised eyebrow and pointed glance at the assembled SSR guys, he stops himself.

"Sorry, Agent Carter." He feels like a heel, and knows he's done damage to her reputation without even meaning to. "Were you wounded?"

"There is an awful lot of intelligence out there to collect," Peggy says. "And there are various missions operating at any given time to collect it."

Steve nods, glancing anxiously down at her arm. "Gunshot?" he asks.

Peggy nods briskly. "Through and through. I will recover."

Noticing the small, satisfied smile on her face, Steve blooms with pride and asks, "And the person who shot you?"

"Not likely to recover," she says. "Though he may regain use of some limbs."

"Sorry I wasn't there to see it," Steve breathes.

"I'm sorry you weren't there to put your body in front of me and take the bullet," she jokes, crooking a finger at him to lead him into her temporary office within the command tent. "Those things sting."

She doesn't have a door, leaving them both visible to the rest of the SSR personnel. Steve stands at ease while Peggy sits. "I'd be glad to take a bullet for you," Steve says softly. He would take a bullet for any fellow soldier, of course, but for Peggy he thinks it would feel good, to be the shield that she wields to protect herself, a tool in her hands.

"Next time, perhaps," Peggy replies, with a wry smile. "For now, I need you to talk to me about what you've seen at the HYDRA facilities."

Nodding, Steve gives her the rundown while she makes untidy left-handed notes, trying to keep her right hand and sling out of the way while she does so. Something about it strikes Steve as strange, and he places it after a moment: Peggy doesn't usually take her own notes, not for an initial debrief.

"Where's Private Lorraine?" he asks, before he can think better of it. As she looks up from her notes, startled, he shamefacedly adds, "If it's okay to ask. Ma'am."

She breathes out a soft chuckle. "You're welcome to ask whatever you like," she says. Gazing frankly at Steve, she says, "Private Lorraine was moved up to Corporal, and transferred to another SSR station."

"Oh," Steve says. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Peggy nods, putting a few more words down on paper, then stands up and comes around the folding table that's serving her as a desk. She stands a good three feet away from Steve, reminding him of the people outside, able to see them but not hear their conversation.

"I was too," Peggy muses, watching him thoughtfully. "She was quite competent. Efficient."

Steve licks his lips, and Peggy's gaze drops down to watch him do it.
"I bet you miss having her around," Steve says.

"Well," Peggy says, still from a decorous three feet away, "it is always nice to have a girl, as my mother used to say. Someone to do for you." Her lipstick is her usual rich deep red, but Steve notices that it's not as crisp as usual, that it's smudged here and there. From having to use her left hand, Steve realizes.

He imagines being allowed to fix it for her, his steady hand holding the lipstick that would run across her full bottom lip. His thumb wiping away any smudges. Her assessing glance into the mirror, and her smile when he's done it right.

"Or take a bullet for you," Steve murmurs, breathless, and Peggy's eyes darken.

"Just so," she says, her eyes searching his. Steve wishes he could tell her straight out, what he is, how he feels, but it's all so mixed up in his head, and he doesn't know where to start.

He's still struggling to find the right words when an SSR analyst pokes his head in the door.

"Agent Carter?" he says. "We're ready for you."

Peggy's expression goes from soft and pleased to hard and alert in a moment, as she looks away from Steve and up at the analyst. "Very well, we'll be there in a moment."

The analyst nods and walks away. Peggy looks back at Steve, that alertness still in her eyes. "Well, Captain Rogers," she says. "Shall we go and make some more plans for you and your men? More targets for you to attack?"

"Yes, ma'am," Steve says, ducking his head as she walks past, then following dutifully behind her.

Peggy lays out her maps and charts, and points to the places where Steve will go, following her orders, wielded by her hand.

* 

Fall arrives, and then winter, and they switch out their gear for the cold weather stuff and keep going, ticking one HYDRA base after another off the map, capturing top HYDRA scientists and weapons, freeing prisoners who all too often have the same dark, distant look in their eyes that Bucky did.

Bucky's usually the one to look after those guys, now, rubbing a palm between their shoulderblades and speaking to them in low tones. What he says Steve doesn't know, but he's been on the receiving end of Bucky's care and compassion enough times to know how valuable it is, how likely it is to make a difference if anything can.

"You okay?" Steve asks, walking beside him through another military camp, after they've dropped off the latest group of POWs with the medics. Some of them didn't look like they were going to make it. Some of them didn't even make it back to camp, and they'd had to bear the bodies on stretchers for over a day to return them for a decent burial.

"Yeah, fine," Bucky says dismissively, eyes on the ground. He sighs and looks up to meet Steve's eyes; it's still strange, sometimes, to see Bucky's face from that angle. "It's hard, I guess. We get to these guys and it's too late."

"Yeah," Steve agrees. "It feels like we're playing catch up, chasing Zola around the country and cleaning up his dirty work."
Bucky nods, but doesn't say anything. They get to the mess tent and head inside, both of them taking a tray and accepting the gloop on automatic. When they get sitting down, Bucky stares at his food, picking at it but not eating anything. Steve would hold off too, out of respect, but his stomach is almost hurting with the lack of food. It's been a tough mission and a hard march back to camp.

"Me and Peggy have some new leads," Steve offers, after a minute or two. "We're narrowing in on Zola, I'm sure of it. We'll find him soon."

Bucky nods slowly. He fixes his gaze on the wall behind Steve's head. "Just to know that he's not doing it to anyone else," Bucky says. "It'd make me easier, y'know. In my head."

Steve can't hold him, or take his hand, so he reaches out like a soldier would, putting his hand on Bucky's shoulder and squeezing. "I know," he says. "I'm gonna make sure of it."

A tiny smile pulls at the corner of Bucky's mouth, then, and his gaze comes back to fix on Steve. "My hero," he says, eyes dancing.

"Jerk," Steve says, smiling.

"Punk," Bucky murmurs.

Steve gives him an infinitesimal nod and quirks his eyebrows.

Later that night, he sucks Bucky off as slow as he can, offering all the comfort that's in him to give, loving him with his mouth and hands and body.

Later that month, they get intel about a train that Zola's guaranteed to be on, and they get themselves ready.

* * *

It's so close: his hand is so close to Bucky's, Bucky's hand that he's held a hundred times, Bucky's hand that's touched every part of him, that touched every part of him even after he was transformed. His hand is very close but Bucky's fingers slip away before Steve can get a grip on them, this time, before Steve can touch him and save him the way he's always saved Steve.

Their hands don't touch, and then the metal collapses, and Bucky falls still reaching up for Steve's hand, still reaching for the last touch between them that will never come.

Steve holds on to the railing, and sobs against the uniform gloves, and it's only the thought that he still has work to do, that people are counting on him, that keeps him from letting go and following Bucky down, the way he's followed Bucky his whole life.

Instead he pulls himself up and goes on. As he makes his way to safety, a cold surety settles in his heart, the knowledge that now he's alone, truly alone, with no one left in the world who will ever know all of him.

* * *

Bucky's death doesn't only belong to him, Steve knows that. The rest of the unit is grieving, too, so he does his best to comfort them. They've been lucky; this is the first one of their own, of the original Howling Commandos, that they've lost in the years they've been running guerrilla ops.

"Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?" Jim asks him quietly. Steve knows that Jim's whole platoon was cut down by HYDRA while they were on special assignment for the 442nd, trying to
liberate some little Italian town.

"I guess," Steve says. "Other than my dad, you know." Jim nods.

"My brother was in my old platoon," he offers, sounding choked. "He, he died. I saw him die." Steve looks up in time to see Jim rub his palms on his knees and breathe out slowly. "I haven't told anyone that."

"I'm so sorry," Steve says. He rests his hand on Jim's shoulder, and Jim nods, blinking. "Your mom and dad . . . ?"

"I tried to write to them," he says, "but they're issei, they don't read English that well, and it wouldn't have gone anywhere if it'd been in Japanese. And they're in one of the camps, anyway, so I don't even know if the letter will get to them." He pauses. "I don't think they know that John is dead."

"That's terrible," Steve says. It's easier to free POWs from HYDRA than rescue the ones his own government has locked up. Maybe when he gets back to the US, Steve can start doing something about that. He'll find Danielle and Valentine and they'll find the people who are already protesting.

"I was standing right next to him when he got shot. John. My brother." Jim looks into Steve's eyes. Steve's heart empties out. "I can't imagine what that must've been like."

Jim sighs. "I guess I told you because I figured you can. You and Bucky were so close. Best buddies. Or that's how it always seemed."

Steve licks his lips. "Yeah. We grew up together."

"So I wanted you to know that I know how it is. To watch someone you love die. You can – it's okay with me if you want to talk about it, or cry, or whatever."

A couple of tears do fall down Steve's cheeks. His throat starts to close, and he wonders why Erskine didn't think to cut this weakness out of him, like he did all the others.

"Thanks, Jim. That means a lot." Dashing away the tears with the back of his hand, he adds, "And I'm so sorry about your brother."

Jim puts a hand on his back. "I'm sorry about Bucky. It was obvious you loved him like a brother."

Steve nods, then tips his head back to stop the next tears that want to fall. There's no way, even in the face of Jim's generous sympathy, that he can grieve for everything Bucky really was to him. "Yeah," he says, "I did."

*  

As soon as he has a chance, Steve writes to Winifred and Becca to tell them about Bucky. He figures that Colonel Phillips' long delayed form letter shouldn't be the only one to arrive. He tries to say that Bucky was brave, and that he did good things, helped a lot of people, but his head is swimming and his eyes are blurry, and he's not sure the words all come out right.

He does his best.

Then he writes to Marlene in the Fifth Fleet, because she loved Bucky and she deserves to know. Then he writes to Betty, who's serving with the 127th Airborne Engineers, somewhere in the
Pacific, because she can maybe write something more comforting to Marlene. Then he thinks of Lizzie, back in Brooklyn, who Bucky went out with the most, and he writes one to her too, though he doesn't know her address and has to send it general delivery. Each letter is easier than the last, and each time he writes Bucky's name Steve feels a little more in control. He can do this.

He doesn't ever write "it was my fault," not to any of Bucky's loved ones, because he's pretty sure it would only add to their pain to know that.

Once he's done that, and checked on the unit again to make sure they're okay, Steve takes himself off to find somewhere private, so he can be alone with his own grief.

*

Of course Peggy comes and finds him. Of course Peggy doesn't believe it was his fault.

"Allow Barnes the dignity of his choice," Peggy tells him. "He damn well must've thought you were worth it."

She allowed him the dignity of his choice, once. He wonders if someone once allowed her the same, letting her risk her life in military service. It helps, a little, to think of it that way, as Bucky's sacrifice, Bucky's decision.

But without penance, all he has left is vengeance. His body is a weapon, and he intends to use it up if he has to. "I'm going after Schmidt," he says. "I'm not gonna stop until all of HYDRA is dead or captured."

"You won't be alone," Peggy promises. It's enough to make him look up, finally, look at her for the first time since she sat down.

"You don't have to do this," Steve says, trying to understand why she would make this offer. "And there's not gonna be a lot of support for a risky attack plan. You – you didn't really know him."

"I know you," she says, covering his hand with her own. "I care for you a great deal."

"Didn't think I was your type," he says, because it's a blown-up bar in the middle of a war zone and Steve's tired of pretending. Whatever he feels for her, it's probably not what men are supposed to feel for women. And whatever she feels for him, it's probably not what women are supposed to feel for men.

She pulls away from him and leans back in her chair, sighing. "Funny. I thought the same of you, when we first met. Usually I have a good sense for these things."

"And now?" He throws back another drink, not that it's helping at all.

"Now – well, I think I'd like to take you dancing. Try something new."

Steve laughs. It still sounds hollow, but it doesn't feel that way, not completely. "Think you could dip me?"

"I think I could do all manner of things to you, Steve Rogers," Peggy says, her voice low. Steve snaps his head up to stare at her in shock. Reaching out, she picks up the bottle, pours a shot of the whisky into Steve's glass, and tosses it back. She stares at the glass for a moment before setting it down again. "But what I most wish I could do is keep you safe."

New tears slip down Steve's cheeks. "You know, Bucky used to say the same thing."
"So it's our last mission," Jim says, looking over the plans. It's complicated, and it relies on a lot of moving parts to all get into place at the right times.

"I hope so," Steve says. "I hope we can take Schmidt down once and for all." If he wins this one, maybe Bucky could be avenged. Maybe Steve could be at peace.

Dum Dum whistles appreciatively. "And then what?"


"And then what," Dum Dum repeats. "Are there more HYDRA installations to clean up, do we start going after the Nazi prisoner of war camps, do we move to the Pacific, what?"

Steve hasn't thought that far ahead. He's divided time up into Before He's Finished Off HYDRA and When He's Finished Off HYDRA, with no After category available. He can't imagine the future right now.

"We'll see what other targets remain when Schmidt is taken off the board," Peggy says smoothly, coming to his rescue. "It may be that his death or capture will bring some other rats out of hiding." She purses her lips, glancing at Steve, and he's reminded of what she said in the bar, about how she wishes she could keep him safe. "Or perhaps with Schmidt taken care of, the Howling Commandos' role in the war will be over."

"Seems like a shame," Gabe puts in. "Now we work so well together."

"Still, it'd be nice to go home, wouldn't it," Falsworth says. "They do say that the war ought to be ending soon."

"They've been saying that since it started," Dum Dum says.

Jim grimaces. "I don't know that I want it to end. I don't know if I have a home to go back to, anymore."

"I said you can stay with me and my family," Gabe says, in low tones. "My mom'll take you in."

"In North Carolina," Jim says. "That's really nice, Gabe, but I gotta get back to Fresno and figure out where they sent my folks."

"I haven't heard from my brother," Falsworth muses. "Not since last year. But I haven't gotten a telegram either. If I could get some leave, I could try to find out where he is."

Jacques says something that makes Gabe nod. "Jacques says he just wants to hug all of his sisters. They're all ambulance drivers. He says he made a promise to his mom to keep them safe, and he hasn't been home in a long time. His town was occupied months ago."

"What about you, Steve?" Dum Dum asks. "If you had a little time, what would you do?"

Steve tries to imagine a civilian life, and finding a job again, or even just a bit of leave, an opportunity to catch up with friends and neighbors. But no matter how hard he tries to think of something new, he sees himself in his old body, doing his old work, carousing at Vincent's with his old friends who are most of them fighting in the war right now.

Even when he tries to imagine settling down, after the war is over, marrying Peggy and having a
family, he sees himself again at five foot two, having to lean up to kiss her as they take their vows. What good is this body of his after the war ends?

"I can't think about it right now," Steve says. "I gotta get through this first."

Peggy nods at him. "I think we all feel that way," she says.

Steve keeps his eyes on the map. Schmidt's stronghold is impenetrable.

The plan is for him to surrender himself.

*

Peggy kisses him in Schmidt's car, stopping him with a word, hauling him down by the straps of his uniform. Her blood red lipstick is his last sight before her mouth is on his, before her tongue is pushing in just barely past his lips. Being kissed by Peggy Carter is an experience, a world unto itself, and it's a relief, exactly like the feeling when Frank used to pick him up in his arms and carry him. Steve feels small, and sure, and safe, and when Peggy pulls back a moment later and gives him an order, Steve knows that he loves her.

He carries the taste of her lipstick on his mouth as he goes to confront Schmidt.

*

As the plane dives towards the ice, Steve thinks about all that he's going to miss, all the things he'll never get to be and do; he thinks about how badly he wants to live, and try dancing with Peggy, and meet up with his friends at those twenty year reunions. But he also thinks, just for a moment, and to his own horror and shame: at least I won't have to live like this anymore.

He closes his eyes, hoping that his death won't take too long or hurt too bad.

The impact sends him forward, hurtling through the cockpit window in a shower of broken, jagged glass. He hits his head on the unforgiving ice and, mercifully, doesn't remember anything more.
Chapter Notes

In addition to the stuff I've tagged for above, I'd like to mention that this chapter includes discussion of an emotionally abusive, gaslighting relationship.

. . . apparently Chapter Three is too long to be a single chapter on the AO3. smh. So I'm going to have to split it into two chapters. BUT IT IS STILL ALL CHAPTER THREE IN MY HEART.

Steve wakes up.

There's a breeze on his face, the sound of city streets, a radio broadcast of a baseball game.

He opens his eyes.

The smell of the breeze is wrong – too clean – and as he sits up he realizes that the baseball game is wrong, too. The woman who comes in, a moment later, speaks good English but her accent's a little weird, her vowels all in the wrong place for any American Steve's heard before.

He realizes, all in an instant, that this is exactly what HYDRA would do: make him think he's safe, surround him with things that look like home, lie to him. Only HYDRA would think to construct this mockery of New York to plant him in.

He'll need to escape. He's alive, so his first duty is to escape. He'll escape, and he'll take his shield back up, and he'll find Peggy, and they'll finish their work. Obviously there are HYDRA installations still up and running. He'll destroy this one first. Then they'll find the rest.

Throwing his body, this indestructible body, against the flimsy wall of the fake room, he wonders if the work will ever be done.

*

"You've been asleep, Cap," Colonel Nick Fury tells him. "For almost seventy years."

Steve swallows, the implications of that beginning to swarm through his consciousness. "How am I alive?"

Colonel Fury explains something about Erskine's formula keeping him alive in the cold. He doesn't go into details, but Steve figures he means that Steve's body has been lying frozen in the Arctic for decades. The thought is horrifying, and as he thinks about it he's sure he can still feel the ice inside him, freezing him from the inside out, a deep cold that's had time to settle in his bones while he . . . while he slept.

Everyone he knows must be dead.

The Colonel has a nice speech prepared, about how there's work for him to do, how there's a place for him here, in a world where Forty-Sixth and Broadway looks nothing at all like Forty-Sixth and Broadway. Steve lets himself be shepherded back inside and accepts the coffee that Colonel Fury
offers him.

It's hot, and tastes better than anything Steve's had in months, but it doesn't touch that cold feeling deep down at the center of him.

"We'll get you a place to live, help you get set up. It won't be too bad, you'll see."

"Okay," Steve says.

"And you can take some time off, of course. No need to go right back to work."

Steve huffs a humorless laugh. "And what would I do with time off?" he asks.

Colonel Fury shrugs. "Whatever you want, Cap."

Steve doesn't say that he can't think of anything more terrifying.

*

There's no way to grieve for dozens of people at once. For thousands, millions, for a world that's gone. As far as he's concerned, Bucky died three weeks ago, and he had thought that grief for Bucky alone would overcome him.

This is too big to even comprehend.

Steve looks through the files they've given him of his friends: Peggy, the Howling Commandos, Bucky's family, a few others. The box the files came in had been labeled "STEWEN GRANT ROGERS, CAPTAIN – KNOWN ASSOCIATES, 1918-1945," and it's half empty, isn't that a laugh and a half. Every file he touches bears the echoes of dozens of others who are also dead. Dum Dum's brother and cousin in 110th. Jim's parents in their concentration camp. Jacques's four ambulance-driving sisters. Gabe's mom back home, knitting socks for soldiers in the Negro units. Every person they knew in the military, in their hometowns, in the world. Every lover, every friend, every chance acquaintance and distant cousin.

They're all dead. There's no one left.

Almost no one.

Steve spends a week taking himself around New York, drawing what he sees, drawing what he remembers. He reads a few books. He eats. He stays alive.

He stares at the phone.

Before he can bring himself to pick it up, aliens attack New York.

*

The preparations, the battle, none of it seems quite real. He's grateful for a problem, something to concentrate on, but it feels like going through the motions. It doesn't help that he's wearing something like his old chorus line costume; the whole thing feels like a performance, like a parody of what he was, one week and seventy years ago. He fights, listens, works hard, but he thinks that the moment he takes the costume off there'll be nothing left inside it anymore.

Or, there'll be a body, an indestructible body, but no Steve Rogers.

In the heart of the SHIELD helicarrier, he finds HYDRA weapons, terrible weapons that he seized
with his own hands a little over a month ago, grown and changed and developed into something worse.

He thought it was a mistake, at the time, to deliver those weapons to Phillips and Stark. Now he gets to see what seventy years' worth of interest on his mistake has gotten him.

When Stark's kid starts yelling at him, when Phillips' successor starts talking about security, Steve finds it all too easy to give in to the urge to yell back, to threaten violence, to step up to someone and ask them to fight him.

Later, despite Bruce's explanations, he never really believes that it was the effect of the scepter.

* 

Director Fury tosses a handful of bloody trading cards at him, and then starts talking.

Steve picks one up; it's the one of him saluting in his original costume.

He remembers posing for those cards, how awkward he'd felt, still new to his body and new to the interest of people with cameras. The director had told him to calm down, and think of all the kids he'd inspire, how much good it could do. After a while, it'd become kind of fun, and the suit had gotten more comfortable.

Looking down at the cards now, Steve thinks, this is my legacy: kids like Phil Coulson who grew up on Captain America comics and ended up just as dead as anyone else. He doesn't know what the point of it all was, if HYDRA weapons are still blowing up New York and the war machine is still grinding men and women up in its gears.

Director Fury talks about his dream, a group of extraordinary people all working together to do good, and Steve stays quiet, trying to reconcile that idea with the stockpiles of HYDRA guns beneath their feet.

"Phil Coulson died still believing in that idea," Director Fury says. Steve puts the bloody trading card back down on the table. "In heroes."

At that, Tony is up, out of his chair, and long gone.

Steve looks at Director Fury for a long moment; then, silently, he gets up and follows Tony.

* 

He finds him in the room that was built to hold the Hulk, the room that held Loki, the room that's now empty and echoing with absence. As an image, Steve thinks, it's not bad: a visual metaphor for loss. He leans against a pillar and wishes he could draw it.

Tony's agitated, and his anger makes Steve feel suddenly calm, like all of his own grief has been channeled into Stark's body instead.

"I'm sorry," he says. "He seemed like a good man."

"He was an idiot," Tony spits.

Steve insists that he was just trying to do his job, but Tony shakes his head before Steve even finishes the sentence.

"He was out of his league," Tony says, voice shaking, and Steve is shaken, too, with empathy for
him. Tony really knew the guy, Steve realizes suddenly. "He shoulda waited, he shoulda . . ."

"Sometimes there isn't a way out, Tony," Steve says, as gently as he can given how much he wants to shout it, how much he wants to grab Tony by the shoulders and scream this knowledge at him, how much he wishes that Erskine's formula hadn't found him a way out of the ice. His old body would've died so quickly there, in the cold, exposed to the elements. Steve Rogers from Brooklyn would've died for sure.

"Right, I've heard that before," Tony spits, and starts to walk away.

Steve doesn't plan to say it. It just comes out of his mouth. "Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?" Echoing Jim's words when they lost Bucky. Tony's reaction is predictably violent.

"We are not soldiers," Tony growls. "I'm not marching to Fury's fife."

Steve blinks in surprise. He remembers that the world only knows him as a soldier, that Tony might expect him to follow orders without question.

"Neither am I," he says, wishing that Tony could understand this. "He's got the same blood on his hands that Loki does." This seems to calm Tony down, and gives Steve a chance to marshal his thoughts. He starts to talk about ways to figure this thing out, but then something he says triggers an idea in Tony, and he's off and running.

Steve has to do his best not to laugh out loud when Tony figures out that Loki's as much a diva as he is himself. He raises his eyebrows instead, and chuckles under his breath as he and Tony run to get the others.

"I can hear you laughing, Rogers," Tony grumbles, which makes Steve laugh louder.

Since he woke up he's spent time safe and spent time in peril, but for some reason this is the moment when the cold place inside still doesn't feel warm, not really, but at least the current crisis is over, and his city is still standing.

"Can you?" Steve asks, laughing.

"Dad never said you were an asshole."

Steve shakes his head, thinking back to that trading card, wondering if it's all of him that survived into the future. "Then your dad never knew the best stories," he says.

*  

When it's over, when Steve looks around and sees New York still there, his new teammates still there, and Howard Stark's annoying kid cracking jokes and alive under his hands – it's only then that he feels awake again. The cold place inside still doesn't feel warm, not really, but at least the current crisis is over, and his city is still standing. He lets himself smile, and look up at the sun, and be glad, at least for a moment, to be alive and here in this time.

"Let's go try shawarma," Steve says, clapping Tony on the shoulder as they limp together towards the rest of the team. Thor walks slowly, probably just out of consideration for their human weakness.

It's actually a long time later before they can all sit down together; first they have to deal with Loki, and then help get the rescue workers to the places where they're needed. The Hulk gets sleepy while they're moving rubble, and curls up into a ball in a small crater before conking out; Bruce, waking up almost immediately afterward, is so exhausted that it takes him a long time to get up out of the crater, leaning heavily on his knees.
"Want a lift, Doctor Banner?" Steve asks, gesturing towards him, unsure of the boundaries.

Bruce is pretty much naked, but doesn't seem embarrassed. He yawns behind his hand. "Sure thing," he says, so Steve picks him up and holds him against his chest. The position suits his mood; he feels, surprisingly, close to his new team.

"Now can we get something to eat?" Tony asks. "I don't think there's much else we can do around here at the moment."

"I'm in!" Bruce says, pumping one fist in the air and leaning his head against Steve's shoulder. His eyes are closed. Steve laughs.

"Cap's got the giggles, so I think we'd better do something about his blood sugar," Natasha says. Steve likes her; he's liked her since the moment he stood still for her charge, let her climb him like a staircase and launched her into the air, since the moment he watched her rise fearlessly into the battle.

"I need pants first," Bruce insists, to Steve's collarbone. "It's polite."

"Yeah, you're gonna make Captain Rogers blush," Clint puts in. Steve rolls his eyes. They all think of him like an old prudish grandma, which is pretty funny. If they only knew the whole story. He decides to give them . . . if not all of it, at least part of it.

"I'm Army, Barton," he says. "I've seen more naked men than you've had hot meals."

This makes Thor and Natasha both laugh so hard that they don't stop until long after they get pants on Bruce.

* *

Steve likes shawarma.

He likes these people, too, even if their conversation lags after a while, each of them collapsing a little further into their food. Steve can't complain; he's exhausted and quiet too. Just as he's sure that he's going to fall asleep in a pile of tabbouleh, the bell over the door rings and someone new walks in, wearing a suit not unlike Tony's, if a little less flashy.

"Rhodes!" Tony calls, perking up. "Pull up a chair!"

The new guy gestures at his suit. "Somewhere I can park the armor?"

Tony points over to the corner where his Iron Man suit is waiting for him, an open, empty shell. Steve imagines what it would be like if he could take his superpowered body off the way Tony does, and feels a little twinge of jealousy.

"Where ya been, War Machine?" Natasha carols, and the new guy – Rhodes – spares her a smile before hitting some hidden release mechanism and shrugging off his armor as if it were a suit coat.

Steve blinks, trying to assimilate the apparent information that this superhero's call sign is actually war machine. He can't figure out whether it's grotesque or the best joke he's ever heard, that one man might be a war machine all his own.

"Hong Kong," apparently-War-Machine says, "stopping the Ten Rings from blowing up a Hammertech nuclear tank dirty bomb. I hear there was some excitement here, too."
"Nothing major," Tony shrugs.

To Steve's surprise, Rhodes isn't wearing casual clothes like Tony is; instead, he's in lightweight combat fatigues, and while the design is new, Steve can still read the insignia well enough to figure out his rank. He drags himself up and to attention, saluting as crisply as he can manage. As he does it, he realizes that it's the first salute he's given since he woke up; SHIELD doesn't seem to salute at all, and Steve hasn't met any military brass yet.

It feels good to put his body through the familiar motion, though: it's a physical connection to the past, just like the battle was.

"As you were," Rhodes says quickly, stunned. He returns the salute, so that Steve can relax and sit back down. "Jesus," he mutters.

Tony clears his throat and throws down his napkin. "Colonel Jim Rhodes, Captain Steve Rogers. Also Clint Barton, Bruce Banner, Thor the Norse god of thunder, and I believe you know Natasha Romanoff."

"Nice to meet you all," Colonel Rhodes nods at each of them and pulls a chair up to the table. "Sorry I couldn't get here any sooner."

"It sounds like you were doing something important," Steve says. Then, as a little experiment, to see the look on his face, he grins and adds, "Sir."

Colonel Rhodes trips over the leg of his chair. Steve snickers.

"Rhodey, darling, sit down before you sprain something," Tony says.

Steve's head turns at Tony's use of darling – he sounds exactly like the queens Steve used to know – but Rhodes doesn't seem to take notice. Neither does anybody else. Is Tony a fairy? Are he and Colonel Rhodes together? Do men talk like that in mixed company nowadays? Steve's mind whirls. What might have happened in seventy years?

Director Fury had given Steve a Wikipedia, but in the week since he was unfrozen he's mostly been reading about the end of the war and nuclear bombs. And anyway, that kind of stuff is pretty unlikely to be written down anywhere official. Steve recoils at the horrifying thought that he might have to ask someone, some stranger.

He wouldn't know how to find the right kind of bar, or recognize it if he found it. New York neighborhoods have changed so much. He hasn't even been down to Brooklyn yet; he's afraid of what he might find.

"It's just that it's an honor to meet you, Captain Rogers," Colonel Rhodes says, finally sitting down. "I saw you on the news reports while I was flying back here, but it's a little strange to be in the room with a – well. A hero."

Tony snorts. "What are the rest of us, chopped Chitauri?"

"Indeed," Thor laughs. "Come, Steve, I did not know you were such a legend on Midgard! Will you tell us of one of your great victories?"

"Yeah, grandpa, tell us one of your old war stories," Tony says, picking up a stray piece of lettuce and throwing it into his mouth.

Steve doesn't know what to say to that, and he's grateful when Natasha speaks instead.
"Not so old," Natasha says softly. "How long's it been since the war for you, Steve?"

"A week and a half," Steve replies, and shrugs, looking out the window at the ruins of Manhattan. "Or five hours, take your pick."

Everyone looks surprised, even Tony.

Colonel Rhodes meets his eyes; Steve finds himself surprised by his serious, understanding gaze. Rhodes nods at him. "If you need any help navigating, call me. I mean it."

"Thanks," Steve says, automatically. Colonel Rhodes narrows his eyes.

"No, for real, though. You got a phone?"

Steve does, in one of his little belt pouches somewhere. He pulls it out to demonstrate, astonished to find that it's not smashed.

"Hand it over," Colonel Rhodes demands. Steve's arm moves before he thinks about it, a conditioned reflex.

Colonel Rhodes types into it for a few seconds, then hands it back. "Now you've got my number in there. Call me soon, all right? I'll feel very rejected if you don't."

Steve cracks a smile. "Manipulation, sir?" he asks.

"Damn straight."

"All right, then." It feels – almost – like flirting, like the jokes he and Bucky used to share, or Frank and Betty, sometimes. Even Jacques and Gabe had sounded like this, albeit in French. But then, he's heard the same kind of teasing now, in the future, between Tony and Colonel Rhodes or Natasha and Clint. Steve starts to wonder if he's playing with an outdated rulebook. He clears his throat.

Ehsan, who had kindly agreed to open up her shop for them, notices Colonel Rhodes' arrival and comes over to wait on him. "Can I get you something to eat?"

"No, thank you. I try not to eat much if I'm going to be flying around in that thing."

Tony belches pointedly.

"A to-go box, then? Free of charge. One of you leapt in front of one of those aliens, and so we still have our shop. It's the least we can do."

"I wasn't even here, ma'am," Colonel Rhodes says, holding up his hands. She cocks her head.

"No? Where were you?"

"Uh," he replies. "I had to fight the Ten Rings."

"Hmm," she says, unimpressed, and walks away. Steve smiles.

"Looks like you'll be explaining that one for a while, Colonel," he says. "You might want to get better at telling the story."

Colonel Rhodes grins ruefully. "I guess you're right, Captain."
"All right, boys, keep it in your pants," Tony says, waving one hand in a startlingly feminine gesture. Steve freezes in shock, staring at Tony helplessly. Once again, though, no one else seems to notice, except for Colonel Rhodes, who just rolls his eyes. Gradually, Steve relaxes.

But he's got to find someone to ask about this stuff.

*

The next day they all reunite to help in the cleanup efforts. Having something to do, something he can actually help with and understand, makes Steve feel easier, less lost in his grief.

He works with Tony, Thor, and Colonel Rhodes to help move rubble and hold up collapsing structures; elsewhere, Bruce is acting as a medic for the teams of rescue workers while Natasha and Clint coordinate with SHIELD teams on the ground. It's a long, grueling day, but they do a lot of good.

"Come back to what's left of my place," Tony says to everyone at the end of the day. "Pepper says she wants to meet you all."

"Who's Pepper?" Steve asks.

"My CEO," Tony says breezily.

"And your girlfriend," Colonel Rhodes adds, exasperated.

"And my girlfriend. She's my CEO-slash-girlfriend."

Colonel Rhodes nods, and if Steve weren't so out of his element, he'd wonder if Rhodes is jealous. There's a way he looks at Tony that Steve feels like he recognizes, though he can't be sure.

"I'll come by," Steve says. "It's always nice to meet your friends' CEOs, I guess."

"Unfortunately, Clint and I have to get back to SHIELD," Natasha says, brushing masonry dust off her clothes. "This isn't the only kind of cleanup we're going to have to do."

Thor nods his reluctant agreement. "And I am meeting Jane in – what was the name of the city again?"

"London," Bruce says. "Remember you promised to ask Doctor Foster back to New York with you."

"I am sure she will appreciate your help working on the interdimensional gateway problem. We have to find a way to search for hotspots so that I can take Loki back to Asgard."

"Of course," Bruce says.

"Colonel Rhodes?" Steve asks, turning towards him. He finds that he really wants him to come; it's relaxing to be around a military man. Familiar.

"Sure," he agrees, smiling, "but only if you stop calling me that."

"Call him Rhodey," Tony says.

"Jim?" Steve asks.

"Perfect," Jim says.
"And we gave women the vote, did you know that?" Tony offers, pouring the wine.

"Women won the right to vote in New York in 1917," Steve replies, "but thanks for the update on the state of the American education system."

This makes Jim laugh, which in turn makes Steve warm a little inside.

Miss Potts – Pepper – leans over Steve's shoulder as she lays out the plates. From her name and Tony's fey mannerisms, Steve had half expected her to be a drag queen, and she is pretty tall, but she doesn't seem like any of the drag queens Steve used to know. There's no real way to be sure, of course. Everyone else calls her she, though, like everyone used to for queens in his day, so he figures that's all he really needs to know.

"Please don't assume that Tony represents the contemporary American," Pepper says. "Not all of us were raised in shameful ignorance."

"I am the pinnacle of contemporary America," Tony begins, but then Pepper, mercifully, shoves a piece of flatbread in his mouth.

"Not the 'pinnacle of contemporary America' speech tonight, please."

Tony rips off a bite and chews it. "Okay, okay, but it's true, you know. Let's see, more contemporary stuff that's changed . . ."

"We made poll taxes illegal," Jim offers, and Steve perks up, pleased. "Although," he adds, "actually, now they're using proof of ID as a new form of poll tax." Steve deflates again.

"Rhodey, we're supposed to be wowing Steve with all the great social changes that have happened since his time! Not filling his head with depressing facts." Pepper, Bruce, and Jim all roll their eyes.

"We demoted Pluto from planet status," Pepper says, grinning.

"We really overprescribed penicillin," Bruce adds.

"We made way too many Batman movies," Jim puts in. Steve starts laughing.

"Batman? From the True Detective comics? They made movies about him?"

"A lot of movies," Jim says.

"Sounds like there's nothing good to report," Steve says, joining in the ribbing.

Tony sighs. "Must you all be such killjoys? We walked on the moon! We cured polio!"

"We eradicated polio," Bruce corrects, gesturing towards Tony with his wine glass.

"That's a real achievement," Steve agrees. He's known plenty of people who died of it, or were paralyzed by it. Really, given that he had every other disease in the world, it was a miracle he never caught it himself.

"Oh, and gays and lesbians can serve openly in the military now!" Tony says, snapping his fingers. "That's in your house, Steve, you're a military guy."
Steve blinks. He hadn't heard this. "You mean –"

"Homosexuals," Jim clarifies, watching him carefully. "They're allowed to serve openly in the military. It's pretty recent, actually."

Steve is stunned. "What, even – even the fairies?"

There's a sudden silence around the table, and Steve looks around anxiously to see what he's done wrong. Bruce is gripping his water glass tightly, so tightly that Steve is worried it's going to break. Or that Bruce is.

When he sets it down, though, it lands on the tablecloth light as a feather, and his fingers release it easily.

"Don't use that word," Bruce says. His voice seems calm, but there's violence rolling underneath the facade. "Don't you ever use that word in my presence."

Steve is shocked, not sure how to take this. Does Bruce hate fairies so much that he can't even bear to hear the word? The idea of it makes Steve's stomach roil in anxiety and defiance. But Bruce is clearly angry, and Bruce when he's angry is priority one.

"Bruce, I –" Steve begins, ready to apologize, but Bruce cuts him off.

"I'll be in my suite," he says shortly, and gets up from the table and stalks away.

"Um. I think I'd better go after him," Pepper says, setting down her napkin and trailing along behind. "He's probably fine; I think he'd tell us if he were really . . . upset. Rhodey, would you come with me?"

Jim nods grimly, throwing down his napkin and following after Pepper. He looks upset, too, and Steve wishes he knew what he's done wrong.

Steve is left behind at the table with Tony.

"We have a little more respect for LGBT folks these days," Tony says. His voice is that strange, terrifying Tony Stark mixture of light and cold.

"I have no idea what that means," Steve snaps, rubbing his face with the palms of his hands. Tony continues to watch him blankly, saying nothing.

"I think I'd better go," Steve says.

"Yeah, good idea."

"Thank you for the invitation."

Then, because he doesn't know what else to do, he leaves the table and waits for the elevator to take him down. When he gets to street level and out the doors of the huge building, he starts walking towards the tiny, bleak Manhattan apartment that SHIELD has him stored in. At first, he walks at a normal pace, but with every step he goes a little faster until he's running, sprinting, moving fast enough that the world is a blur around him, unrecognizable and invisible.

* *

By the time he gets back to the apartment, he's decided to try to look something up on the computer so he can figure out his mistake. Maybe he can find the terms that Tony's using. He's sure he's
heard that acronym – LBGT? before, but he doesn't know what it means.

When he sits down and wakes the computer, though, he's surprised to find that he has an email from Bruce, dated five minutes ago. Subject line: (no subject). He opens it with no small amount of trepidation.

Dear Steve, it reads, I'm sorry that I got angry. I should have realized that you would need time to understand the way things have changed. A lot of words about sexuality and gender are different now than they were in your day. Here is a list of LGBT slurs (slurs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people); I would advise you not to use any of these words in company. Pepper says she'll answer any questions you have. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBT_slurs

Bruce

Steve clicks on the link, and scrolls down through the page with increasing anxiety. fairy is on there, and bent and fruit and pansy and mary and queen and queer. There are a lot of other terms and phrases that make Steve blush, mostly because he doesn't want to think that Bruce would ever believe him capable of using them. But these ones . . . he doesn't know how to deal with the apparent fact that his entire vocabulary on this subject has turned into derogatory, unusable words. It's not like Steve has never heard a guy spit the word fairy in his direction, never heard it weaponized, but this – this complete loss of language – this is overwhelming. His eyes keep coming back to one part of the page in particular, where it says, These are all considered slurs because they imply effeminacy in gay men.

Frustrated tears prickle at his eyes. He rubs them away angrily. He can't even imagine what words are okay to use. What words don't imply effeminacy. He checks, but there's no corresponding list of okay vocabulary. Homosexual? That's what Jim had said, but he doesn't want to call himself that. That's just a word the shrinks used. That's not what he is.

He clicks on "reply" on the email before he can overthink it. He hesitates for a moment, not sure if he should give Bruce this information or not. In his day, you put nothing in writing, not ever. But then he thinks about the way Bruce had reacted, like he was being personally insulted. Steve figures it's pretty safe to drop a few hairpins.

What would the Army do, if they found out? What would SHIELD do? Kick him out of being Captain America?

And anyway, if what Tony said was true, and the Uniform Code has been changed, then men like him can't be kicked out anymore. It's a strangely liberating thought; Steve feels lighter for thinking it, like he could float up to the ceiling, but he's still hot with anger and shame, too, and the combination of emotions makes him dizzy.

In the end, it doesn't really matter. Steve needs to talk to someone, and Bruce is his only option right now.

He types slowly, searching out each letter as he composes what he wants to say.

Dear Bruce, he writes, I'm very sorry to have hurt you. I admire and respect you, and I hope that you will accept my apology. I am having trouble adjusting to the modern era and finding the right language for things. But that list you sent me contains every word I've ever used for myself. Tony taught him about emoticons while they were having shawarma the day before, so at the end of his email he types a colon and a left parenthesis, : ( , because he feels sad.

He signs it – Sincerely, Steve Rogers – and sends it, then gets up so that he won't be tempted to
stare at his computer until a reply comes. He cooks himself some eggs and eats them in the kitchen, not really tasting anything. He does the dishes, and then sweeps the floors, paying careful attention to the corners, concentrating as hard as he can on the dust.

After an hour has passed, he gives in and checks his email. He still hasn't received an answer.

What he receives instead, a few minutes later, is a knock on the door. Bruce is on the other side.

"Uh, hi," Bruce says. "Can I come in?"

Steve stands aside and waves for him to enter. Bruce gets just far enough inside to allow the door to shut behind him and then stands there, hands clasped together nervously.

"Can I get you something?" Steve offers, after a minute.

Bruce shakes his head. "Steve, I'm really sorry, I didn't – I didn't know. About you, I mean. I thought you were straight." He laughs softly to himself, then adds, "In my defense, everyone else thought you were straight, too, including something like ten different major biographers."

Steve frowns. Straight, from what he's just read on Wikipedia, means pretty exclusively not queer, these days; he's figured that much out, at least. The news makes him feel strange; he worked as hard as any guy to keep his secret from his bosses and keep his name out of the papers, but the idea that the secret-keeping has been successful for almost seventy years, has passed into the history books, makes him feel smothered and airless.

"I – that's. I wonder if that's something I should be fixing," he says, eventually. Bruce's eyebrows go up.

"Um, I think that's probably something you should talk over with the SHIELD PR people. So you know what you'd be getting into."

"Right," Steve sighs. He's only been in the future for a couple weeks, but he's already getting damned tired of hearing about how the media will react to everything.

And it wouldn't just be correcting his historical record, he realizes. It would be telling everyone about who he is now.

Steve has no idea who he is now.

"Anyway, I wanted you to know that most guys wouldn't – wouldn't describe themselves as fairies, anymore. Maybe some would, among their friends. But it's definitely not a word for mixed company." He licks his lips, then adds, "because it's a word that's been used to hurt people a lot, since your day."

Steve nods; this is similar to the talk Director Fury gave him about words like Negro and colored. He can sense that Bruce has something more to say, so he waits to hear what it is.

"It's a word my father used to throw at me, for example," Bruce says quickly, "to hurt me. To scare me. Just another kind of . . . kind of beating. I guess a lot of fathers did it, maybe, in his generation. A lot still do. And some of those fathers have queer sons."

Steve is confused by Bruce's casual use of the word queer, which had been on the list of slurs, but he doesn't think it's the right time to ask. "I'm sorry," he says, instead. "I'm really sorry, now, knowing how I hurt you."
Bruce waves this away. "You had no way of knowing. That much was obvious even before your email, once I calmed down and listened to what Pepper and Jim had to say." He glances up, meeting Steve's eyes briefly before looking away again. "Tony's another guy whose father probably called him those words, by the way. Fairy, sissy, faggot." He passes his hand over his face. "Maybe Rhodey too, I don't know."

Steve winces. He doesn't want to think about Howard throwing abusive words at his son, but he can't deny that it fits with what little Steve knew of him, his aggressive lady-killer attitude, his womanizing. Steve wonders if he could find a way to ask Tony about it without making him angry.

"When I was . . . before," Steve says. "Before the transformation." Bruce nods encouragingly; Steve recalls that Bruce, more than probably anyone alive, knows about the super soldier serum and what was done to Steve's body. He takes a deep breath and says it. "Before that I was a fairy. And after that too, I guess. As it turned out. They never found out about it in the Army, probably because Doctor Erskine pushed me through the process so fast. I imagine if they'd done any real checking, they would've heard about it. Not sure why it's never come out since. I wasn't so careful to keep it secret as some of the other – the other folks. I didn't know I was going to be a national icon."

Bruce nods. "I remember there was one guy, Richard Cooper. When the basics of the serum were declassified in the eighties, along with your before and after pictures, he came forward and swore that he had, ah, been with you once, before the serum, when you were using a false name."

Steve furrows his brow; he didn't give out false names back then, not usually. And surely if they put out his before and after pictures in the eighties, lots of sixty-year-old queers should've come forward to recognize him.

Cocking his head curiously, Bruce continues, "He was dismissed out of hand, just some crank trying to make a quick buck, but it was all over the news for a while. I always – I mean, it was a nice idea, that Captain America had been gay. I used to, uh, think about that a lot. When I was a kid."

Steve tries to put this together in his mind. Little kids, little boys wishing so desperately that he, Steve Rogers, him in particular, had been queer. He almost can't make sense of it. "Really?" he asks.

Bruce nods. "It meant a lot to me, actually. In a way, it was weird to meet you in person. That Richard Cooper guy made you into a gay icon overnight. To this day there are Captain America themed floats in gay pride parades." At Steve's look of confusion, Bruce clarifies, "In public parades that queer people have to celebrate who they are. Their communities."

"Wow." Steve is going to have to look that up the next chance he gets. "Richard Cooper, huh," he muses. He can't remember ever having . . . "Wait, you mean Dick? Tall guy, dark hair?" Bruce shrugs, obviously unable to remember the details. "I think I ran away from a police raid with that guy."

The smile that breaks across Bruce's face dispels his nervousness like sunlight dispelling a storm. It's replaced with genuine interest, curiosity, eagerness. "I don't suppose you'd like to tell me that story?" he asks shyly.

Steve smiles. "I think I would, actually," he says. "Come in and sit down, let me get you a drink."

Bruce steps further into the room, his nervous hands dropping to his sides, his calm reestablished. Steve makes him tea and tells him the story, complete with the asthma attack, though he skips the
lurid details of the sex in the alleyway. At Bruce's encouragement, he then launches into the stories of other police raids he'd known, including the one where Betty had hit a cop with her shoe.

"High heel, very nasty in a fight," he says. "Betty used to say, doesn't matter what you got in your hands: if you can stand up, you stand up, and if you can push back, you push back. You start running, they never let you stop."

"She sounds like quite a lady."

Steve nods. His throat is closing on him; he hasn't looked, hasn't had the time or the knowhow, but he has no idea whether Betty's alive or dead. She hadn't been in his KNOWN ASSOCIATES file.

It's possible, he thinks, that his KNOWN ASSOCIATES file needs expanding.

He clears his throat and goes on. "But so, you see, I was walking into police stations to bail out drag queens and going to queer parties and wearing makeup around Brooklyn. Lots of people knew me. I can't think why biographers didn't find it out, unless the Army kept it quiet or something."

Bruce shakes his head. "Wouldn't the Army have found out before they did the experiment on you?"

Steve shrugs. "I guess not, or else they didn't say anything." He thinks back on Smith and Stepnowski. "We had a joke, me and a couple other guys in the special unit at Camp Lehigh, that the Army was picking out . . . picking out queens intentionally so they could butcher us up."

Bruce laughs at this, despite Steve stumbling over the word. Maybe it's not a bad word after all. Steve smiles, gaining confidence, and tucks his feet up under him on the couch.

"But you have to tell me, Bruce. What words can I use? It's so strange, it's like waking up in a world similar to mine but off by that much." He holds up his thumb and forefinger, an inch apart, to demonstrate. "Like I don't know the language anymore. I've been reading up since you sent me that Wikipedia article, but I'm not even sure how people talk or act anymore."

Bruce grins his self-deprecating grin. "Well, I'm not sure I'm the guy to take lessons from on that score. I've never really been part of the community. And, uh," he shrugs, as if to encompass his entire hulk-filled self, "I don't date much."

Frowning, Steve asks, "But what words would you use for yourself?"

"I say I'm bisexual, because I like women and men both," Bruce says. Steve nods slowly; it's not an unfamiliar concept, but Steve never really knew anyone who'd have said it like that. "But then, I believe that all humans are naturally bisexual. It's the most logical conclusion."

Steve can't help laughing out loud; the idea seems so strange. At Bruce's puzzled look, he explains. "I'm sorry, it's just funny." At Bruce's raised eyebrow, Steve has the decency to look apologetic. "I mean, I think a lot of people want to say that the way they do it is natural. When I was young, they said that – that queers who wanted men, you know, that they would naturally be more . . . feminine." It hits Steve, again, that this doesn't seem to be the case anymore, if implying effeminacy in gay men is a bad thing. And if men wouldn't want him to be girly for them anymore – there would be no need to be girly, ever. He could be – whatever, gay, bisexual – in this body without anyone thinking twice about it.

The idea is simultaneously freeing and terrifying. Being a fairy, figuring that out about himself, had meant so much. And Bucky had called him his girl, even after the serum, even after he'd gotten so big and strong. He doesn't want to think back on those memories like it was all one big mistake,
something that could be corrected by modern insights. He doesn't want anyone to think that he was just pretending, or doing what he had to do.

He was Bucky's girl, dammit.

"You might be right," Bruce allows magnanimously, oblivious to Steve's anxious thoughts. "The study of human sexuality goes beyond the realm of science, anyway. But yeah, there are a bunch of words you can use, if you want them. Gay, bisexual, homosexual, transgender, genderqueer. Queer has been a slur, and it still is to some extent, but a lot of people are taking it back, so you can use that if you like it. It's a pretty broad term."

This reinforces what Steve got from the internet, and what Bruce was saying before: that there aren't really fairies anymore.

He licks his lips, trying to figure out how to ask this. "But – it doesn't matter what kind of men you like? If you like effeminate guys or masculine guys, or if you – uh, depending on your position in the bedroom?"

"Not really. Not for general purposes. You can say top or bottom, I guess, but it doesn't mean the same thing."

"Seems like that might make it hard to find the right person," Steve says, trying to make a joke out of it while his mind reels.

"Remind me to introduce you to the hanky code, that'll satisfy your need for a complex system of sexual negotiation." He pauses to consider. "Though actually I think people mostly use apps for flagging these days."

"I have no idea what you just said," Steve replies, scrubbing his face against his hands and laughing at himself. Bruce smiles apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I promise I can explain more, though actually I don't know a lot about the – the history. But I," he pauses, obviously struggling for words. "I want you to know that you can be whoever you want. Call yourself whatever you want. I'm sorry I didn't realize before that that's what you were trying to do."

Steve smiles, wishing that Bruce were the kind of person who would be likely to take well to a sudden hug. He hopes that what Bruce is saying is true, though he's worried that it might not be, not really. How can he call himself a fairy if people will react the way everyone did tonight?

You can't be a fairy all by yourself.

"Thank you, Bruce," he says. "That makes a big difference. Maybe I'll have JARVIS queue up some reading material for me. It didn't occur to me before that there would be anything written down."

Bruce nods. "Yeah, there's a ton of written material you can pick up. Movies, too, if you want a break from reading. There are documentaries, and a lot of queer films. Some of them are historical fiction." As he speaks, he stifles a yawn, and blinks slowly.

"Good to know. I'll watch them." Steve says. "Did you want to stay the night on the couch? It's getting pretty late."

Bruce shakes his head. "Wouldn't want to saddle you with any rumors," he says, winking. Steve grins, but then thinks about what it means that those kinds of rumors are still bad to be saddled
"And you'll be okay getting back to the tower?"

Bruce nods absently, patting his pockets as he stands and moves toward the door. Steve stands too, and walks with him.

"Since they put my face on national media, muggers seem to keep their distance," Bruce says, shrugging.

When they reach the door, Bruce hesitates briefly before sticking out his hand. Steve takes it, shaking it warmly, but that touch isn't enough to express the sweetness, the tenderness he feels for Bruce in this moment. He wants Bruce to know how much it meant to him, being able to tell his stories honestly. Being able to have a friend, here in this strange new era. Gently, giving Bruce time to back away, he pulls him in by the shoulders and kisses him, once, softly, on the lips.

It feels good to do it, like reawakening a part of himself he thought was dead. Steve Rogers from Brooklyn, not Captain America.

"Thank you for this, Bruce," he says.

"Well, no one is ever going to believe me if I tell them that happened," Bruce mutters, obviously stunned. Steve chuckles.

"You send the doubters to me," Steve replies, feeling reckless and brave after telling his stories all night. "I'll tell them the truth."

Bruce blinks at him, a slow smile spreading across his face. "You know, Cap, I very much believe that you will."

The next day, Steve marshals his courage and heads back to Stark Tower, surprised, as he goes, by the number of people who take his photo or stare at him, whispering to their friends. It's a bizarre, nonsensical thought, but Steve can't help but think that they all know what he did wrong at dinner, that they're all watching him because they can see his shame as he marches himself back to apologize to Pepper, Tony, and Jim.

JARVIS directs him to Pepper, who's in her office, holding ten conversations at once with ten different women, all of them intense and fast and efficient like Pepper herself. Steve hesitates in the doorway while JARVIS announces him, not sure how he could apologize to Pepper while all these frightening, competent people looked on.

But the moment Pepper looks up and sees Steve, her expression softens, and she dismisses everyone else. Steve stands carefully aside so that the women can walk past him.

"Ma'am," Steve says, nodding at her. She raises an eyebrow.

"I said you could call me Pepper," she says. Steve nods.

"You did," he agrees, though he can't bring himself to do so. He takes a deep breath and dives right in; better to get to the heart of the thing before he loses his nerve. "I wanted to come and apologize for what I said last night. I – I didn't mean anything bad by it. I didn't know."

He wishes he could tell her what he told Bruce – *that's a word I've always used for myself* – but
Pepper's office, in the harsh light of day, is a long way from Steve's couch at one in the morning, and the easy confidence and reckless bravery he'd felt last night seem to be long gone.

He shuts his mouth on those words instead, like a coward.

She comes around to the other side of the desk. "It's okay," she says, leaning back against it. "Apology accepted. Bruce talked to me and Tony this morning."

Steve feels a cold wash of fear. "What did he say?"

Cocking her head curiously, Pepper takes a moment before she speaks. "Just that you and he had a long talk and he brought you up to speed on current language," she says, mildly. "And that you were very sorry to have said something hurtful. Was there something else?"

Shaking his head, Steve lets go of the breath he was holding. "No, ma'am. Pepper. I wanted – I wanted to make sure things were all right. With you, and Tony, and Jim."

"Tony and I are fine," she says. "I'm not sure about Jim, though, he had an early flight this morning and we didn't see him. Would you like me to explain this to him?"

Sick again with shame, Steve shakes his head. "I wouldn't want anyone to make my apologies for me," he says. The idea that Jim is still out there in the world, still thinking that Steve – Steve is hateful and cruel, like all the worst bullies in his neighborhood were hateful and cruel – it's enough to make his stomach clench painfully.

Pepper's eyebrows draw together and her eyes search his face, like she's trying to put together a puzzle that she doesn't have a picture for. Steve licks his lips, suddenly terrified that Pepper will see it in his eyes somehow, the truth about what he really is.

If her reaction last night, and Tony's, and Jim's, taught him anything, it should've taught him that these people wouldn't mind him being – being queer. But Steve still can't quite believe it. Even if it would be okay for someone else, it's hard to believe that it would be okay for Captain America.

And he finds that, deep down, he really doesn't want her to know.

He hardens his expression and nods once.

"Thank you anyway, though. I wonder if you know where I could find Jim?"

"I don't," she says, "beyond the fact that his plane touched down in Los Angeles two hours ago."

Steve frowns. He wonders if an email would work, like it did for Bruce.

Pepper watches him again, then asks, "But didn't he give you his number?"

* 

The phone rings in his ear for a while – three rings, four, five, six – and Steve is almost ready to hang up in defeat when Jim's voice comes down the line.

"Hi, Steve," he says, when he picks up. Steve remembers that Jim would've seen his name on the screen.

He wonders if Jim hesitated to pick up a call from him.

"Hi," Steve says. "Listen, I – I wanted to call and apologize."
"Yeah?" Jim's tone is light, like he wouldn't even know what Steve is apologizing for. But Steve thought – Steve saw Jim's face, last night at the dinner party, and he remembers Bruce saying *maybe Rhodey's dad too, I don't know.*

"For saying what I said at dinner last night. I didn't know it was a hurtful word nowadays. I'm sorry."

"Well, trust me, Steve, I've heard lots worse in the military. I'm sure you have too." Jim still sounds unaffected, like it's no big deal.

"Sure," Steve agrees, thinking back on the jokes and insults he used to hear from almost every soldier under his command, and every officer above him, too. He takes a breath. "But just because you've heard it before doesn't make it okay for me to say."

There's a long pause. Thanks to his enhanced hearing, Jim's breath sounds are loud in his ear – shallow and quick – and when he concentrates he can hear Jim's heartbeat, too.

It sounds fast.

"Yeah," Jim agrees, eventually, and now Steve thinks there's tension in his voice. "Yeah, that's true. Thanks. For saying something."

"Thanks for understanding," Steve replies. He hesitates, then, trying to think of a good way to end the call.

"Hey, Steve," Jim says, after a moment.

"Yeah?"

"The offer still stands. If you want some help navigating the future, try to stop this kind of thing from happening again, you can call me up. I'm here for you."

Steve's stomach starts to unclench. He breathes out. "Thanks," he says. "It's – I mean, there's a lot I don't know." He hesitates, but then adds the truly frustrating part of modern life: "Everyone seems to expect something of me and I don't know what it is."

"Yeah, I guess it's – people might sometimes have extreme reactions," Jim says, and his words sound carefully chosen, bland, the way a politician speaks. "I think sometimes some people got attached to thinking of you in a certain way. And it's a shock when that image gets disrupted."

Frowning, frustrated, Steve forgets to speak carefully at all. "Well, no offense to those people, but that's pretty hard for me to control."

Steve only barely hears Jim's soft chuckle. It makes him smile, knowing that he's regained some small part of Jim's trust.

"Fair enough," Jim says. "I can tell you what Tony would say to that, though."

"Yeah?"

"He'd say that the only way to control your image is to make it yourself. He's not wrong."

Blinking, playing a hunch still half-formed in his mind, Steve says, "You must be used to doing that. Keeping up your public image."

Jim's reply comes on an exhalation of breath, like a sigh escaping. "Yeah. I guess so. I don't usually
think about it that way."

Steve nods, even though Jim can't see it, and tries to say something back. He has a feeling that, if he could just find the right words, the key to fit in the lock, Jim might have a lot more to tell him.

"Must be hard," Steve says, softly.

Jim's reply comes fast and cheerful, and Steve knows that he's said the wrong thing. "It's not so bad. If you want some tips on dealing with the press, though, I can help."

"Thanks, Jim," Steve says. "I appreciate it."

They say goodbye and hang up. Steve taps his phone against the desk a few times, considering.

He looks down at the half-empty box on the floor. STEVEN GRANT ROGERS, CAPTAIN – KNOWN ASSOCIATES, 1918-1945, the label reads. He looks through it again. Peggy, Bucky, Howard Stark. Howling Commandos. Steve's family, Bucky's family.

This is what his image has been based on, he supposes, for the last seventy years: these half-truths about him that begin when he came out of the machine that made him good enough to serve.

He wonders what he'd have to do to fill that box up with the rest of his life.

*  

Over the next few days, Steve looks up the people SSR and SHIELD never thought to associate him with. He asks Maria Hill for help, and she gives him access to their databases and has one of her aides teach him how to use them, which makes it a lot easier to do the research.

With each record he finds, he makes another file to add to the box.

Marlene – Seaman Gary Ross – survived the war, but died in 1982. There's very little information to be found, but her death certificate lists her cause of death as "Kaposi's sarcoma (cancer)."

Betty – Sergeant Arthur Murphy – stayed in the Army for a long time after the war, which surprises Steve at first, until he remembers how she used to talk about guys in uniform. Her death certificate shows that she died in 1981, also of – huh – Kaposi's sarcoma.

Private Jacob Smith died in action in 1945, right before the end of the war.

Private Boleslaw Stepnowski was imprisoned in one of the queer stockades after getting caught committing sodomy in 1944. Steve reads the details anxiously, despite the fact that it's ancient history by now, and too late for him to do anything to help. Stepnowski was diagnosed as a sexual psychopath, kept locked up until he was turfed out, and eventually went back to Ohio. The record gets fuzzy after that, but Steve remembers guys who could never find work again after that kind of discharge, or after the newspaper printed that they were queers. He'd only heard rumors of the queer stockades, where guys like him got sent when they got caught, but what he'd heard had been terrible, enough to make you sick and ashamed to ever have worn the flag. Overwhelmed with sadness, he reaches forward, towards the incomplete record, wishing for all the details that it refuses to give him. His fingertips bump against the screen, and he feels like an idiot. He clicks to the next record instead, and it's Stepnowski's death certificate: 1969, heart attack, Toledo. No other information available.

Sergeant Frances O'Malley actually died in action a couple weeks before Steve did. There's something shocking about that, about the idea that he should've been grieving Frank along with
Bucky. Steve wonders if anyone even wrote him to tell him, if the letter was on its way while Steve was setting out on his last mission for SSR. Maybe no one sent anything; maybe Frank's mom was the only one who got a telegram. Frank never did introduce Steve to her, after all. Maybe word never reached Frank's other family, and his memory faded away at the queer clubs and bars until that part of his life was lost. Steve thinks back on how sweet Frank was, how domestic in his own way, how he dreamed of being someone's husband. It's sad he never got to set up house with anyone. Steve hopes he had somebody, before he died, someone in the trenches who knew him, or even loved him. Steve loved him.

Danielle Flynn is on record working with various unions up until 1990, and co-founding a New York lesbian newspaper in 1958 that she worked on for thirty years. Steve smiles at this, imagining her carefully removing curse words from the op-eds, cigarette between her lips. Her FBI file is so extensive that Steve can't even read it all, every page offering the record of another protest, another committee, another apparently "anti-American" activity that sounds like good old fashioned American patriotism to Steve, good works just like Father Calhoun used to preach. Danielle's been dead since 1995, of a stroke. The death certificate doesn't say, of course, but Steve likes to think she went out standing on top of a police car with a bullhorn. There's a picture of her from the seventies in pretty wild clothes, doing just that.

Valentine Johnson was arrested multiple times through the 1950s and 1960s for trespassing and disturbing the peace. Reading further, he finds that it was all protests for African-American civil rights, through a group called CORE that sounds a lot like the Committee for Peace at Home that she founded in Harlem. There's a picture, from her FBI file, of her continuing to yell, her fists raised, while a police officer drags her away from a protest in handcuffs. So there wasn't that much she was afraid of, after all, Steve thinks. She died recently, 2010, in Vermont. Steve thinks that's a little weird – her family was from Harlem, and before that from Virginia – until he finds her marriage certificate: issued in Burlington, Vermont in 2009, married to June Nelson, also recently deceased. Astonished, he finds – after trying a few different search terms – the Wikipedia page on same-sex marriage in America, and reads the whole thing through.

He keeps looking, trying to find more of the guys and gals he knew. He never knew the last names for a lot of them, much less their addresses or birth dates, but he keeps typing in what bits he can remember, finding some people, losing others in the mass of records.

When he thinks to type in Arnold Roth, and narrows it down to the right guy, born in Brooklyn, WWII service record, a file comes back with no listed date of death.

Arnie is still alive.

Arnie is still alive, Steve reads, with growing excitement. Alive and living in Queens.

* 

"I was wondering if you'd be by," Arnie says, while Steve is still checking house numbers. He gets up laboriously from the flowerbed where he'd been digging and waves toward the door.

"Hi, Arnie," Steve says. They sort of eyeball each other for a minute, then Arnie takes off his gardening gloves and they shake hands. Steve laughs nervously.

"Well, come on in," Arnie says.

Steve follows him. Arnie walks like an old man, lumbering back and forth, one knee pretty shaky. It's hard to see the boy Steve had known, who'd touched Steve haltingly under a thin blanket on the occasional Sunday afternoon, or the cherubic fairy who'd glided across a makeshift stage in drag.
"Am I the only one left alive, then?" he asks, lowering himself into a chair. "That you knew from before, I mean."

Steve ducks his head. He could take a train and get to D.C., where Peggy is, in three hours. It's been three weeks, and he hasn't done it.

"Sorry, wait," Arnie says, before Steve has to decide how to answer. "Can I get you a drink? Cup of coffee?"

"That sounds great," Steve replies, then regrets it when he sees how hard it is for Arnie to stand up again. "Can I help?"

"Don't bother yourself," Arnie says, smiling over his shoulder.

Steve stores up the words while he waits for Arnie to come back, because he has to say it to someone.

"You're not the last. There's . . . a woman, Peggy Carter."

"Your long lost love?" Arnie asks, putting a cup of tea down beside him.

"Is that what they say?"

Arnie settles himself again, sighing. "That's what all the comic books and biographies and movies and radio plays always said, yeah." Watching Steve through a heavy silence, he adds, "I never told anyone, you know."

"I know." It seems like nobody ever told anyone anything. That was how it was, back then, you kept the other guys' secrets if they needed keeping. But now it's been seventy years of official biographies and Steve's secret is still kept. It seems wrong, somehow. He clears his throat. "So how'd it work out with that guy, whatsisname, the architect you were planning on living with forever."

Arnie smiles, softening the harsh lines on his face. "I did. Michael. We both survived the war and a whole bunch else besides. He died a couple years ago."

"Wow!" Steve says, then flushes. "I mean – I'm sorry."

The smile shifts to a full-blown laugh. "It's okay. I don't think many of the guys believed me when I said I was set to play house for the rest of my life with a handsome older man."

"It's only, I should've put some money on it, is all," Steve says, returning Arnie's kind smile back to him. He can see it now, the connection to the Arnie he knew in 1933 and 1944, the way his grin tilts up the same way and his eyes are the same warm brown. Steve can see, suddenly, how time could've made that young boy into this old man, built him up and weathered him down again, filled him with memory and love and loss.

"We had a good life together," Arnie says.

Steve is overcome by jealousy, but only for a moment; he can't begrudge Arnie what he made for himself. "Yeah, I can see that," he says softly. The house is full of photographs, and now that Steve takes a moment to look at them he sees shot after shot of two men with their arms around each other, smiling and happy.

"But you – I guess you fell in love with a woman, huh? Like in the movies?"
Steve is at a loss for how to answer this. "I – well, sort of, but I'm not – it's still hard to know all the words people use nowadays. I've been working on that."

"What did you call yourself back then?"

Arnie is maybe the only person in the world he could say it to who would really understand, who knows the words, knows what he used to be and what he became. He gathers his courage. "A fairy. A pansy."

"Huh." Arnie sighs. "I remember when we called ourselves fairies. I did too, I'm pretty sure. Well, I'm not up on the lingo all the kids use these days. Michael and I sort of settled on saying we were gay and went on with things. A lot of that – you know, the girly-man stuff, effeminate manners and all, a lot of that went away with the AIDS crisis. We had to get respectable in a damn hurry, and men wanting to be like women wasn't respectable."

Steve blinks. The only crises SHIELD has briefed him on are Cuban Missile, subprime mortgage, and energy. "AIDS crisis?" he asks.

He sees the blood go out of Arnie's face, and feels a wave of trepidation come over him.

"No one's told you," Arnie says slowly.

Steve shakes his head.

"Well, it's – " Arnie sighs. "I don't know how to put it. God. We lost a generation." At Steve's frown, he adds, "Of gay men. Queer men. They died."

Steve's body goes cold, and he thinks of the police raids in Brooklyn, the queers in the German concentration camps, the pink stockades the American Army built during the war.

"Was it – was it killings, or – "

"An illness. A disease. It was – killer VD, I guess you could say. It – we were among the first victims, and it spread like a goddamn wildfire." Reaching out, Arnie sets his wrinkled, shaking hand over Steve's where it's resting on the arm of the chair. He squeezes briefly, then pulls away again.

"How many?" Steve asks, his tongue thick in his mouth. How many people would have to die before the first words Arnie would think of to describe them, the very first, would be a generation?

"God, I don't know," Arnie says. "Thousands. Hundreds of thousands in the US alone. Millions, across the world, and they're still dying. Michael and I, we lost almost everyone we knew, through the eighties and nineties. Every friend we had. Bathhouses were closed, queer joints got shut down, parks were empty. Everything changed."

Steve already knows exactly what it's like to suddenly lose every friend you have in the world, but this is – it's incomparable. The complete loss of a way of life. That Marlene and Betty are dead is devastating, and hard enough to wrap his head around, but that there might not be any Marlenes or Bettys at all anymore makes him feel torn into pieces. For a few seconds he's honestly sure that he's going to be sick.

Even in the days when he'd felt the least like himself, after the transformation, there had been some comfort in knowing that there were still fairies out there in drag, or that Vincent's was tough enough to survive another police raid. And that, if they closed Vincent's down, some other queer joint would take its place.
"So they all – it was a plague," Steve says, when he can manage to speak. "A plague, like in the Bible."

"Yeah. We didn't even know it was happening at first. The symptoms are strange, and people die of pneumonia or weird cancers, and – well. You can imagine how much funding was available to fight a gay disease. Lots of people figured it was just as well. The Reagans – the White House laughed at us."

Steve nods slowly. "Is it – I heard about Kaposi’s sarcoma – " Marlene and Betty both, he thinks. Within a year of each other.

Arnie grimaces. "A lot of them got that, yeah. Weird cancers."

"Jesus," Steve says. "Christ. F-fuck." The last word trembles on his lips as he buries his head in his hands.

He's aware of Arnie's heavy breathing and slow movement as he gets out of his chair and slides over to kneel next to Steve's. Steve figures kneeling is probably pretty hard on an old man's knees. Arnie gives no sign of discomfort, though, as he drapes an arm around Steve's shoulders and holds him close.

Steve can't remember the last time he was hugged. He can't help it; he cries for a while, in Arnie's neat little parlor, his tea going cold beside him.

"Hey, it's all right," Arnie murmurs, over and over. "It's okay." He hasn't seen Steve since the war, but even so he doesn't hesitate, or hold his body awkwardly apart. Steve can guess when he got so good at comforting other men's grief.

"This is dumb," Steve manages, after a while, "I'm sorry, Arnie, I'm a dolt, crying over people I already knew were dead – "

"It's different, though," Arnie shrugs, easing back a little to give Steve more space. "I know." He tilts his head and offers Steve a small smile. Steve rubs away his tears and nods back at him.

Quickly, far more so than Steve would've thought possible, Arnie darts in and plants a kiss on the top of Steve's head. It drags a laugh out from somewhere inside.

"You know," Steve says, offering his arm to help Arnie stand, "you were the first boy I ever kissed." Arnie struggles to his feet, and Steve stands with him.

"No kidding," Arnie says. He looks pleased. "Well, you were mine, too."

Steve leans in on impulse, tilting Arnie's chin up with two fingers and kissing him on the mouth. Arnie is surprised, but kisses back briefly, soft and real.

"I might be just a skosh too old for you now, though," Arnie says, pulling away. Steve laughs hollowly.

"I feel old," he says. "Arnie, I feel so old."

Arnie shakes his head fondly. "Trust me, kid," he says. "You're not."

* 

They talk for a long time, him and Arnie. They talk until Steve's throat goes hoarse and Arnie's
back starts to pain him from sitting so long, and then they talk a while after that, too, until Arnie declares that he's kicking Steve out and going to bed. He asks Steve for help up the stairs to his bedroom, ignoring the lift chair attached to the wall.

"There's not gonna be any funny business, though, Steve, don't worry." He takes Steve's arm, and Steve bears his weight easily.

"Well, not when you haven't even offered me a proper drink," Steve agrees, exasperated.

"In retrospect we should've had some whisky." They get Arnie to the bedroom. "So, after me, you're going to see Miss Carter?"

Steve frowns. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? Did you love her like in the comics or not?"

"I did," Steve says, feeling sure of it again. "I do. She was the girl I could've married."

Arnie sits down on his bed and makes a shooing motion. "Then go talk to her, already. I need a break. Lock the front door behind you."

"Okay," Steve says moving to go. "It was really good catching up with you, Arnie."

"You too. Come back and see me again soon, if you like."

"I will," Steve promises. He's already looking forward to returning to the calm, quiet little house, to Arnie's company. To a place full of memories that link the past to the future.

When he gets back to his Manhattan apartment, he looks up train schedules for the next day.

And in the morning, with the sun shining bright and clear over the city, he picks up the phone.

* 

Peggy still looks like the girl he could've married.

"Hi there," he says, coming into her room. She's dressed real nice, in a loose dress and pearls, lipstick freshly applied, and she has the same warm glow about her, the same sharpness in her eyes and gravitational pull to her presence.

"Steve," Peggy says, holding out her hands. "They told me, but I – I didn't think it could be true."

"It all still seems like a dream," he agrees, awkwardly, and goes to her bedside to take her hands.

They've never really held hands like this before. It's their first time.

She smiles, though tears are coming from her eyes. "I always dreamed of this. For years and years."

"I couldn't – couldn't stand up my best girl," he says, haltingly. It's been a little over three weeks, for him, since he's seen her. "I still owe you a dance."

"Oh, Steve," she sighs. "Still so sweet. You always wonder, you know, did I romanticize his memory. I suppose I didn't."

"You probably forgot all my bad qualities," he says.

"I certainly didn't." She squeezes his hand, and she's so weak that she barely exerts any pressure at
all. If things had gone differently, maybe he would be lying here next to her, just as frail, holding her hand with his old bones and smiling back at her from his own bed.

Or not. He still doesn't know if he's going to age. Maybe he'll see a lot more of his friends and lovers die before him.

"For example, I can still see you thinking, and it's still painful to watch," Peggy says sternly. "Just as annoying as I remembered."

Steve laughs, helpless. "I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," he says, both an apology and a statement of fact. He's missed her, these last three weeks and seventy years, and it feels good to be with her again.

She releases his hand to wave his apology away. "It can't have been easy," she says. "You must've felt so lost."

He shrugs. "Eh, it's not so bad," he says.

She shakes her head, smiling sadly. "I wonder if you would hand me that glass of water," she says.

He does, moving the straw so that she can take a sip. She swallows, and sits back.

"Please forgive my directness, Steve, but – I don't know if they told you. I'm not always – sometimes I forget things." She laughs ruefully. "Sometimes I forget myself."

He frowns and clasps his hands in front of himself. "Yeah. They said.

"So I don't know if I'll remember to say this later." She looks directly into his eyes, and her old fire is still there. It makes him feel small, the same way it always did, like she could envelop him entirely. "God help me, it was nearly the first thing I thought about when they told me you were back. I thought, maybe Steve will want to come out now."

Steve's eyebrows go up. *Come out* used to mean going with another guy for the first time, being brought to the queer scene, but Steve remembers that there's another meaning to it now. "Come out?" he asks.

"I always wondered about you. It's funny, but sometimes we – well. People like us, sometimes we gravitate towards one another, I think. And the men never said anything directly, but there always seemed to be something they weren't saying, about you and Sergeant Barnes."

Steve's heart hammers in his chest. He can't lie to her; he never could. Even if she had asked him the same question back then, with the rules and punishments in place, he couldn't have lied to her. "There was," he manages.

She nods slowly. "I thought so. I thought so. I never knew, not really, but. Oh Steve. I thought, when they told me about you being alive, I thought – I don't want you to have to pretend anymore, you know. It's been hard enough seeing it in all the movies and radio plays over the years." She pauses to shudder. "God, those horrible radio plays. But you could love men now, openly, if you wanted. I don't want you to sit here and act like we've lost out on some grand romance."

Anger boils up inside Steve; anger and stifled, suffocated loss. "But we did," he says, unable to keep the words from tearing out of his throat. "I did. Peggy, I was never pretending." Desperate, he takes her hand again. He needs her to grieve with him, grieve for the life they never had.

"I thought perhaps – holding onto my picture was a way of putting up a good front, you know. Or
that it was a, a wartime aberration."

"No," Steve says. Peggy holds onto his hand, her grip growing stronger. "Was it – were you? Pretending?"

She shakes her head, hard, side to side. "It was real," she says, then sighs deeply. "I would've married you, if you'd let me."

"We still could," Steve suggests, only half joking. "Get hitched."

Peggy looks at him so tenderly that Steve almost can't bear to see it. "No lady would accept such a casual proposal," she says, finally. "Good God, Rogers. You haven't even brought me a ring."

"I would if you wanted me to," Steve says softly. "I'd do anything you asked."

"Darling, my darling," Peggy says, and lifts his hand to her mouth, kissing his knuckles softly, an echo of all the small kisses they never shared. It makes Steve's chest ache to see it. "I know you would."

Neither of them says anything for a little while, sitting together with that truth between them. After a while, Steve coughs. "I heard you've been busy, though, while I've been gone."

She smiles again and tells him, a little, of how she's spent the last seventy years, starting with the early days of the post-war SSR, before it became SHIELD. She gets tired easily, and confuses the dates and the names, but it's fascinating, and Steve has always liked hearing her talk. Sometimes she takes little naps for two or three minutes.

Steve stays, holding her hand. Each time she wakes, she says, "Where was I?" and takes up a story, sometimes the same one she was telling before, sometimes not. Steve doesn't care; it's good just to hear about her life, even piecemeal and scattered.

"You keep mentioning this Angie person," he teases her gently. "Anything I should know?"

She looks at him suspiciously, and Steve can't tell if she's joking or confused. "You won't tell anyone, will you?" Her eyes dart around the room. "If the SSR boys knew, they'd – I couldn't – "

He swallows. "Shhh," he says, "I'll never tell. Never. Your secret's safe with me."

Peggy sighs deeply, closing her eyes. "You're a good boy, Steve."

Feeling himself flush at the praise, he reminds her of the topic: "Angie?"

"Angela Martinelli," Peggy says, her eyes opening again. "Oh, Angie. I adore her. I don't think I could even bear for her to know how much."

"Is she good to you?" Steve rubs his thumb against the side of Peggy's hand. "I hope she was – I hope she's good to you."

"She's kind," Peggy says dreamily. "She looks after me, Steve. I didn't – I wanted to wait for you, but you're lost, you're dead, and Angie is so kind. And funny. And she looks after me."

Steve smiles, dashing away a tear with his free hand. "Sounds like my kind of gal," he says. "All that and she's pretty too, I bet."

"Beautiful," Peggy agrees. "Her smile warms the whole room."
"She must've made you happy."

"Yes," Peggy sighs, satisfied, her eyes slipping closed again. A moment later she's asleep.

Steve feels happy, too.

This time, Peggy seems to be really out, her breathing slowing down gradually. After ten minutes or so, he lets go of her hand and stands as quietly as he can manage, but the motion seems to wake her anyway.

"Steve," she says slowly, her eyes flickering open again. "Are you leaving?"

"Just for now," Steve replies, heart breaking. "I'll be back to visit you soon, if you like."

"Yes," she says. "Come back soon." She reaches out her hand, and when he takes it again, she tugs him toward her. "Come here."

He steps closer, then leans down, and then he's kissing Peggy Carter for the second time in his life, their mouths pressed softly and sweetly together.

"I love you," Steve says against her lips as he pulls back, the words escaping as easily and unconsciously as the air from his lungs. She smiles.

"I always loved you," she says. "And I still do."

* *

When he gets back to his SHIELD-issued Manhattan apartment, there's a package waiting for him, with a note from Director Fury.

*Finally found this stuff in the archives. Howard Stark insisted on SHIELD keeping it. Said you might want them, after we found you. Everyone always thought he was nuts for saying it, but here we are. Anything that you don't want, the National Archives would very much like to have, which is to say, they've been hounding us about it day and night for seventy years.* –NF


Opening the box, Steve finds his personal effects, the stuff he'd kept in his footlocker with SSR and hadn't taken into the field with him. There are a bunch of odds and ends – funny that anybody'd keep a spare shoelace or a half-empty tin of boot polish in storage for seventy years – that Steve puts slowly aside, one by one. In 1945, they were just objects to him, valuable but not particularly important; now, though, they each carry a little cache of memories, in their familiar smells and in the feel of them in his hands.

There's the pot of Bucky's pomade that Steve had gotten for him as a present, that he'd never had a chance to give to him. Steve opens it, and the stuff inside is cakey and dry, unusable, but the smell still reminds him of Bucky.

There's the Captain America comic book that the Howling Commandos had given him, with their own commentary written over the text boxes and speech bubbles. Steve laughs softly, realizing how much this gag gift must be worth now.

And there's a blank postcard, a picture of the Eiffel tower, that he'd been meaning to send to Marlene. She'd always wanted to go to Paris, and Steve had thought he'd rib her about it a little, since she was out in the Pacific with the Navy and nowhere near Europe.

But underneath that stuff, there are all the letters: every letter Steve received during the war,
stacked in neat piles with bits of string holding them together. Steve opens each one slowly, careful of the way the paper crumbles where it was folded, and reads.

Marlene, Betty, Bucky, Smith and Stepnowski, Frank, Hyam, Winifred and Becca Barnes, Danielle, Valentine, a few others.

All of them talking to the Steve Rogers they knew, the kid from Brooklyn, the little fairy, the dock supervisor, the best friend and lover to Bucky, the queer soldier. Steve runs his fingers over the long-dried ink and remembers what it felt like, being known by so many people.

Underneath the letters, he finds an unexpected treasure: the hand-drawn poster for FALL-OUT FOLLIES, with the picture of the soldier in drag on the front. Steve smiles to see it; he'll have to take this to show Arnie.

He files the letters and papers neatly in the box that's still sitting in the corner of his apartment, the one labelled STEVEN GRANT ROGERS, CAPTAIN – KNOWN ASSOCIATES, 1918-1945. He doesn't think the folks at the National Archives would really want to meet the Steve Rogers in those letters.

*  

When Steve drops by Director Fury's office to say thanks for sending on his personal effects, it's almost like the Director was waiting for him; he ushers Steve into his big, windowed office and tells his secretary to cancel his appointments.

"We'd like you to work for us full-time," Director Fury says, once the doors close behind them, not wasting any time. "There's a lot of good work that still needs doing. We could use a man like you."

Steve comes to attention without even thinking about it. "I'll do it," he says, because he figures he might as well be of use to someone. And working for Peggy's SHIELD will mean carrying on her work, the work they used to do together, to keep people safe. That's valuable, he tells himself.

"There's compensation, benefits. We'll pay your living expenses. Medical care." Director Fury pauses, and Steve feels uncomfortably like the Director can see right through him. His voice gets softer. "Psychological care, if you want it. There are therapists here who are used to helping soldiers who've come back from a war."

Steve shakes his head firmly. Arnie told him about modern therapy, but he can't imagine it, sitting in a room and telling all your secrets to a stranger.

"A place to stay will be plenty," he says.

*  

He thinks about Fury's words, and wonders if it can really count as coming back from a war if you never actually go home. So he starts wandering around New York again, finally getting up the nerve to get on the subway to venture back to his old neighborhood. Almost the first thing he sees, as he jogs down the steps into the 23rd street station, is a sign claiming that the Second Avenue Subway is about to start construction. It makes him laugh so hard, and for so long, thinking of what Valentine would say, that he almost doesn't notice the moment the train dips under the river and takes him into Brooklyn.

It also gets him some weird looks from people on the train.

Nothing in Brooklyn is the same; his old rooming house isn't there anymore, and neither is the
building that Vincent's was in, both of them replaced by tall condominiums and concrete. The Hotel St. George is still there, to Steve's surprise, but it's student housing now, which should be funny but isn't.

Steve thinks about what Arnie said, about the queer places getting shut down, emptied out. He wonders if that's what happened here, or if it was just the natural progression of time in a city, buildings and people coming and going without much regard for nostalgia.

He touches his hand to the wall of the old hotel anyway. The stone is shaded and cold, and doesn't offer up any memories. He walks on.

Not really knowing what he's looking for, he turns south, walking past expensive-looking stores and restaurants, letting his feet move him where they will.

When he finally gets to some more familiar buildings, he stares at them in confusion for a long time; they're all restored and cleaned up, but that's not what seems wrong about them.

It's only when he walks up the steps to what used to be Hyam's family's house that he feels it: the height of the doorway, the size of the doorknob under his hand, the width of the door relative to his shoulders.

This part of Brooklyn hasn't changed; he has. It's enough to make him laugh again. If he'd ever come back from the war, if he'd returned here in his new body, the whole place would've felt like this, like a tiny dollhouse, something he was too big to fit into.

Someone peeks at him through the window, and Steve waves his apologies before getting off their stoop and continuing on his way.

Just then, his phone beeps at him, and he takes it out of his pocket.

Bruce texts him now and again, but normally he doesn't get a lot of messages.

This one says "Jim Rhodes" at the top, and below the message reads:

Hi Steve. Jim Rhodes here. I wanted to ask how you're doing, and let you know that I'll be in New York next week if you need anything.

Steve smiles; it's good to know that Jim's still willing to talk to him.

I'm in town too, Steve types in slowly, we should get something to eat if you're not busy.

Jim's response comes back a minute later, and Steve stops walking to lean against a telephone pole and read. Sure, maybe next Friday? Also feel free to text me anytime with any questions.

Steve chuckles at this. Like what? he writes back.

I don't know, what's hard about the future?

A million thoughts pass through Steve's mind: grief and wonder and finding out that all the people he ever loved have lived their lives already; the empty melancholy of Brooklyn and its forgotten secrets; his conversation with Bruce and the strange, confusing new map of sexuality; most of all, his desperate wish that there were more than two people in the world who knew, really knew, what he used to be. What he still is, somewhere inside, far below the Captain America costume that's been kept alive by comic books and trading cards for seventy years.

Velcro, he texts back, on a whim. There's some on his new suit, so he'd looked it up on Wikipedia.

Velcro?
Yes, why do we have velcro? Steve writes.

He doesn't get an immediate response, so he goes on walking; before too long, he comes to Valentine's parents' house, where Bucky had once held him in his arms in front of God and everyone, where he'd last seen Marlene and Betty, Valentine and Danielle. As he looks up at the building, a woman comes out, wearing a skirt so short it makes Steve envious. She's Negro – or, African-American, Steve corrects himself, remembering the lecture that Director Fury gave him on the subject – but she doesn't look much like Valentine. Still, Steve can't help but wonder. Valentine's parents had owned this house, he's pretty sure.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he says, stepping towards her. She looks up at him and her brows furrow, a look he's come to recognize from people who think they know his face but can't quite place him without the stars and stripes on his chest. "I'm looking for the Johnson residence? Relatives of Valentine Johnson?"

The woman shakes her head. "Sorry, I don't know any Johnsons who live around here," she says. Steve nods and thanks her, and she goes on her way.

It makes sense; if Valentine had ever had kids, it would've been in her FBI file. And she married a woman, after all.

Some of the buildings are still here, but with the people gone, it doesn't feel like Steve's Brooklyn anymore. It doesn't remember itself, the neighborhoods it used to contain, the tattoo parlors and cigarette sellers, the wild queer parties that used to spill out of these quiet, respectable buildings.

Steve's phone beeps in his pocket, and he takes it out. Grinning, he scrolls through the wall of text Jim sent him: a complete history of velcro and its uses. There's even a diagram, done with shaky lines that make Steve wonder if Jim drew it himself on his phone with a stylus.

Engineering miracle, Jim says, at the bottom. Highly underestimated.

I'm learning so much, Steve writes back, a little astonished to find that he is. What about microwaves? A man I met in the park said they'd kill me, but I'm hoping that's not true.

It's not what he wants to ask, not by a long shot, but as he walks north again, back to the subway, back to Manhattan, back to the plain, dull apartment that SHIELD set up for him, every text he gets from Jim – about electromagnetic waves and electrical fields, about 1970s radiation scares and the life of Jagadish Chandra Bose – makes Steve smile a little more.

*

Over the next couple of days, he keeps texting Jim silly questions, and Jim keeps replying with long, detailed, serious answers. He's particularly good at questions about technological things – how they work, what they're for, what their history is – but what surprises Steve is how good he is at putting the pieces together, explaining why people joke about one thing or are afraid of another.

Encouraged, Steve starts texting back in more detail, asking followup questions, even making jokes of his own.

Jim sends him a little smiley-face when he does that, not a colon-right parenthesis but a whole face, so Steve's next question is how to make those on his phone. His next question after that, when he's bought a pack of non-existent symbols for more money than his rent used to be, is why one of the symbols is a fried shrimp.

Getting up his courage, Steve asks some questions about the military, about the wars America has
fought since he went under the ice, and Jim's answers are long and detailed, with a lot of references to books he can read and places he can go to learn things that aren't the official narrative.

"I can't say it's a pretty history, Jim writes. There are a lot of things to be ashamed of."

Steve nods down at his phone and bites his lip. He's going to go down to the library tomorrow and see if he can find some of the titles Jim recommended.

"But you stayed in," he texts. Through all their conversations, Steve hasn't tried asking anything personal, and Jim hasn't offered anything.

Jim doesn't text him back right away, and Steve makes himself write a list of Jim's recommendations to pass the time. After a while, the phone beeps.

"Yeah, I did, Jim says. Too long a story to get into though. Goodnight. See you Friday for lunch."

"Goodnight," Steve types back. He tosses his phone down on the bed and runs his hands through his hair. Maybe when they talk face to face, Steve will be able to read him better.

It's not until he's drifting off to sleep, a while later, that it occurs to him how strange it is for him to have that feeling, how long it's been since he had this deep desire to get to know someone.

* *

They never do make it to lunch, though, because on Friday morning SHIELD calls them all in for a briefing; they've found a bunch more of the Hammertech nuclear tanks that Jim – Colonel Rhodes – dealt with in Hong Kong. When Steve gets the call, sitting alone in his Manhattan apartment, reading a book about Vietnam and making angry notes, he tries hard to quash the grateful excitement he feels at the prospect of something to do. The tanks are causing a lot of damage, after all, spread over three continents and currently in what Director Fury describes as "very bad hands."

"I can't imagine anyone who should have something like that," Steve says, double-checking his parachute straps. "It's like a HYDRA weapon, or Loki's scepter. It's too dangerous to be in any hands."

"Captain America, pacifist," Tony says, his faceplate closing his expression away. "Who would've thought."

"Not a pacifist," Steve says, bracing behind his shield and getting ready to jump from the plane. He couldn't presume to call himself that, not after the things he's done. "But I am pro nuclear disarmament, since you ask." He jumps.

"You'd let me keep one, though," Tony says, keeping pace with him, rocketing downwards. "A little one."

The parachute pulls Steve up by the torso, interrupting his freefall, the sensation exactly the same as it was seventy years ago.

"Don't let him fool you, Steve, Tony doesn't do nukes," Jim says, streaking down towards the ground and landing a few seconds before Steve's feet hit the dirt. "Never has."

Tony lands next to them. Steve unbuckles the chute and starts double-timing it towards the target. "Yeah, Rhodey took some Biology of War class in college and made me promise not to."

Steve glances back reflexively, wanting to get a look at Tony's face to see if he's joking, but of
course the faceplate is still down. "And you kept the promise?"

"Well, it was a pinky swear," Jim says dryly, and Steve laughs. He resolves to get the rest of the story out of Jim later.

Natasha's voice comes over the comms. "I'm in position, boys, what's your ETA?"

"Two minutes," Steve replies. He can see the storage facility ahead; with luck, they'll be able to find the tank and disarm it before anyone shows up to stop them.

"Well speed it up, because a bunch of heavily armed and pissed off dudes just showed up. Approaching from the west, five technicals, two ATVs. I count about thirty soldiers, with plenty of very big machine guns."

"Great," Steve mutters. "Stark, you wanna go on ahead and distract them?"

"I'm very distracting," Tony agrees. "Rhodey, watch over Captain America, we're not supposed to break him."

"On it," Jim says. "I got your six, Cap."

It feels good, like it did in New York, to have someone at his six. At least there's this, amid all the dizzying newness of the future, the loss and the changes: working with a team, saving people from harm. At least he can still be useful.

Maybe not that much has changed, after all.

"Thanks," Steve says, and smiles as a thought occurs to him. "Those of us on the ground doing the real work sure appreciate it."

Jim's laugh is tinny but genuine. Steve feels a little twinge of happiness that his joke was understood; it figures that the Army-Air Force rivalry is still alive and kicking.

"Pretty sure the ground is about all the technology you grunts can handle," Jim replies.

Steve laughs. "Then I guess it just remains to be seen what you can handle, Chair Force."

People are shooting at them; Steve and Jim dodge, and block, and roll through the gunfire like it's a light rain. This part still feels new, having someone at his side who can keep up. They take up the perimeter outside the storage unit, giving Tony and Natasha enough time to get in and take the weapon apart. Jim takes high, and Steve takes low, and together it feels like they're untouchable.

"Rogers, eleven o'clock," Jim shouts suddenly. Steve adjusts his stance and brings his shield up, but at the same moment he hears the gun start to fire he's off his feet, in midair. He thinks, at first, that he's falling – maybe shot – and it takes him a second to realize that Jim is carrying him.

"Jeez, I was fine," Steve says, cradled against Jim's metal chestplate. He's struck by sense memories: Frank sweeping him up that first night they met, Bucky carrying him to the bedroom on Christmas night, the physical feeling of being light and small and easily manhandled. A different kind of usefulness. He shakes the images off; he needs to be Captain America right now.

"Uh, just a precaution," Jim says, setting him down again and moving to provide cover. "You move fast."

Steve feels a wide grin spread across his face as he jumps, spins, deflects bullets. "You too."
The rush of the battle is the same as it ever was, making him feel glad and easy in his body, if only for a little while.

* 

Afterwards, Deputy Director Hill offers to send them a helicopter to get them airborne again, but Tony sneers.

"Ugh, that's going to take forever. Let's just rocketman it back up to the helicarrier, shall we?"

"As long as Steve doesn't mind being carried," Natasha agrees.

There's so much that Steve could say to that, it makes his mind reel.

"I don't mind," he says.

Tony holds out one robot hand to Natasha and bows ostentatiously. "My lady?"

"Shut up, Stark," Natasha says, and leaps up on his shoulders, into a piggyback. "I'm not afraid to use the spurs."

"Hot," Tony says, and blasts off into the sky.

Jim puts up his faceplate, which makes Steve smile reflexively; it's good to be reminded that there's a person under the suit. A pretty handsome person, as it happens.

"You want a piggyback?" he asks, and Steve busts out laughing.

"Is there any dignified way to be carried around by a person in a rocket suit?" Steve asks.

Jim's mouth pulls downward. "None that I've found so far. You got your piggyback, your full-body hug, your bridal carry, and the under-the-armpits-hissing-cat option. It all pretty much looks ridiculous."

Steve's heart is beating fast in his chest. His mouth goes dry, and he wants, suddenly, to experience it again, that feeling of being cradled close, small and easily lifted. It's been so long, and it's such a small pleasure, such a small thing. If Jim is offering . . .

"I think bridal makes for the best visual, don't you?" he says, trying to keep his voice light. "And it seemed to work for you during the battle." Forcing himself not to hesitate, Steve puts his arms around Jim's neck and leaps lightly into his arms. Jim catches him easily, laughing.

Steve considers it, the words on the tip of his tongue, and then says it, daring to make a joke. "And anyway, I hear they can't turf you out for this kind of thing anymore."

Jim's faceplate clicks down again and he takes off into the air. Steve buries his face against him, shielding himself from the wind. The metal suit is cold; he wishes, fleetingly, that he could press his ear against Jim's heart instead.

"Yeah, uh, I wanted to say," Jim begins. In his earpiece, Steve can hear him cough lightly. "I was glad that you were just using old-fashioned lingo before. At the dinner. That's – the change in the Uniform Code is so new, and that history is one of those things the military has to be ashamed of, you know? So it's – I think it's important for you to use the right words in public."

Steve's heartbeat ticks up another notch. Thank God his heart is artificially enhanced these days, by superserum and Vita-Rays, and can handle this kind of thing.
But God, he wishes he could see Jim's face. Although, he thinks, maybe Jim needed to be behind the mask before he felt comfortable enough to bring up this topic. Which would mean . . . something. Maybe.

"I – " Steve tries to think what to say, how much to reveal, how to be truthful without being painfully exposed. The helicarrier is in sight now, coming up fast. "I knew – there were a lot of guys who had to hide, back during the war, or who got put in the stockade or dishonorably discharged. Didn't make their service or sacrifice any less, but it did make life hard for them." He swallows. It's cowardly not to include himself in that group, it's cowardly and he knows it, but the habit is so long ingrained, and his new friendship with Jim is so delicate, that he can't bring himself to break it. "It's really good to know that nobody has to hide now," he finishes.

"Yeah," Jim says. His voice sounds strained. "It's good nobody has to."

They spend the rest of the ride in awkward silence. Steve's thoughts race, chasing each other around, as he tries to figure out what Jim might be telling him, what he might want to tell Jim.

When they arrive, Steve steps down lightly from Jim's embrace, but not before Natasha can start some whistling and catcalling.

"Hush," Steve says, half amused and half embarrassed. "He was a perfect gentleman the entire time."

Jokes aside, though, Steve can't quite bring himself to look at Jim while they head to the debriefing.

It's only been six weeks since Bucky died.

*

Steve can't stop thinking about it, though, the idea that Jim might have a secret, just like Bruce did, and that if he could learn the codes and the rules and the history he'd be able to tell. It's not even that he . . . wants Jim, he tells himself; it's that he wants a connection, the feeling he had with Bruce, of mutual recognition and awareness. He wants it again, and again, wants to repopulate his world with folks of his own kind.

He tears himself away from the books on war and goes looking, and Bruce is right: there are hundreds of books and movies on queer life and queer history, more of them than he could've ever imagined. Back in his day, guys passed around battered copies of Better Angel or Infants of the Spring, but there hadn't been that much out there. Now there are so many titles that Steve can't even begin to sort through them. He pulls up the access to JARVIS that Tony installed on his computer and activates the voice interface.

"JARVIS," he says, tentatively, mulling over this problem. "You're – uh. You're confidential, right?"

The pause is slightly too long. "I am programmed to preserve your privacy at all costs, Captain Rogers," the machine responds. "But I am somewhat vulnerable to attack from without, and of course Mister Stark could choose to reprogram me at any time, or to retrieve any information he desired."

"Could you erase this conversation afterwards?" he asks.

"Yes, absolutely," JARVIS responds.
"Okay." Steve thinks about it. "I want to figure out which – uh, LGBT movies and books I should get. Fiction, I mean, I already got some nonfiction books. But there are so many, it's hard to pick anything."

"I could narrow your search to those that have won high achievement in their field," JARVIS offers.

"Achievement?"

"Academy awards, Pulitzer prizes, and so forth," JARVIS clarifies. Steve nods.

"Okay," he says. "Let's start with movies, maybe." He's still reading a lot of books on the wars and American history, so movies will be a nice change of pace.

"I will make you a list of Academy award-winning films with LGBT-related content," JARVIS tells him. "Would you like it on hard copy or in email?"

"Hard copy," Steve says.

"Once it is printed, I shall delete this conversation in its entirety, per your instructions. The films are all available via the Stark shared media library."

"Okay, good," Steve agrees.

A couple minutes later, he has his list. He figures he might as well start at the top, so he settles in to watch Boys Don't Cry and Brokeback Mountain.

*

Thinking about what Jim said about making your own image, Steve braces himself and finally accepts the meeting Hill's been trying to schedule for him with a publicist.

The publicist he ends up with is a distinguished-looking white guy with steel-grey hair who pats Steve's shoulder in a condescending way that makes Steve want to grind his teeth. Steve instantly dislikes him, but knows he has a job to do, and gets on with it. So he finds himself speaking at a few veteran's organizations and doing some TV interviews, which Geoffrey – the publicist – refers to as "keeping up the brand."

On the surface, there's nothing wrong with developing some good will with the community, or in this case, the country. Steve still knows the drill, though it's been a while since he's been on stage: smile, confidence, projection, don't let 'em see you sweat. He speaks honestly about sacrifice and service, and no one seems to expect much more out of him. Steve develops a standard answer about what he likes about the future – the food's good, no polio is nice, the internet is helpful, he's still getting caught up. They never push him or ask him anything that isn't safe.

Well, except for that one question.

"So, is Captain America still the world's most eligible bachelor?"

Steve deflects. He's just trying to find his way around. He's not ready for modern dating. It's hard to find anyone with shared life experience. Steve faces the cameras and speaks clearly.

Afterwards he finds himself exhausted for no reason, barely able to keep the smile up until he gets back home.
Each time, when he gets through his front door, he takes off his tie and watches one of the movies from his list. *The Crying Game*, and then tries another, called *Dead Poets Society*. They don't make him happy, but he keeps watching, hungry for them in a way he can't explain, even to himself.

He gets to where he could do the TV interviews in his sleep, and sometimes does, in his dreams, the modern questions blending together with his old wartime USO schtick: *bullets and bandages, tanks and tents, yes the food's a lot better, we used to boil everything*. When he wakes up he has his usual high level of energy, his muscles in need of exercise, but he doesn't feel rested. Like his mind is in a fog and he can't get past it, no matter how fast he runs.

Despite Jim's advice, he doesn't feel in control of his image. He doesn't feel in control at all.

*

The Hammertech tanks keep popping up, week after week, and after a while Steve decides to get an apartment in D.C. to make it easier to scramble with Natasha and Jim for missions.

Or, that's the reason he gives Deputy Director Hill, at least. Since his walk around Brooklyn, living in New York makes Steve feel overwhelmed, disoriented and nostalgic all at once, and he figures it might be nice to go to a city he never really knew and get a fresh start. D.C. is where SHIELD headquarters is. Steve can be more useful there.

He watches *Kiss of the Spider-Woman* and *Midnight Cowboy*, sitting on the bare floor of his new apartment, waiting for his furniture to arrive, and neither of them is really the kind of film to offer insights into modern queer life. Steve turns the TV off, afterwards, and finds himself in low spirits.

It's nice to be nearer to Peggy, though, so he can visit her a few times a week. It's hard, every time she gasps in surprise and asks him how he could be alive, but it's good, too, to see her face, and to hear the bits and pieces of stories that tell him how she lived.

"So what are you doing with yourself these days, Steve?" Peggy asks, during one visit. Actually, she asks it during a lot of visits, and every time the question makes Steve feel uncertain.

"I'm working for SHIELD," he says. "Like I should've done after the war." It's the natural extension of his life's work, after all: be useful in ending war, be useful in maintaining peace. It should be enough to give anyone a sense of purpose.

"God, you would've hated SHIELD after the war," Peggy says, coughing a little. Steve gets her some water, and she drinks.

"Yeah?" Steve asks.

"Or maybe you would've hated the world in general after the war. We all stuffed ourselves back into our little boxes." She looks up at him, sighing. "In a way, it's good that you were spared that. We need someone like you, Steve."

"I don't know about that," Steve says, because he actually doesn't see a lot of use for himself in the world as it is. He can go on missions, and help stop the spread of these terrible weapons, but it's nothing that other people couldn't do in his place, given modern technology.

His body, so hard won, and at such a high price, is obsolete.

She grips his hand, hard. "SHIELD has always been a creature of compromise," she says. "They do good work too, but – well. We compromised." There's an old sadness around her eyes, when she says it, that takes Steve by surprise.
Before Steve can get her to say more, though, she's dropping off to sleep again. Steve frowns, uncertain.

There's a knock on the door and one of Peggy's nurses comes in. "I need to give Ms Carter her bath and her dinner soon, Captain Rogers," she says.

Steve nods and stands up awkwardly, releasing Peggy's hand. He's not Peggy's husband, and never was; the people Peggy did have in her life seem to be gone now. Strangers take care of her instead, and he leaves the room because he's only a visitor here, an old friend but nothing more than that.

"I'll come back soon," he promises, as he leaves. It's all he has to offer.

* * *

After he moves to D.C., he also happens to be nearer to Jim, who's officially attached to the Secret Service and lives near Dupont Circle, not far from Steve's new place. He could walk there, if he wanted to. If he had an invitation.

"I think my new place is pretty close to yours," Steve says once, after a mission, when it's just the two of them.

"Oh yeah?" Jim replies. He doesn't sound that interested.

"Yeah, if you ever want to . . . " Steve makes an awkward gesture and doesn't finish his sentence.

"Thanks," Jim says. "I'll keep that in mind."

Steve nods, angry at himself, certain that he's trespassing on Jim's patience. He resolves not to push it anymore; if Jim doesn't want to be near him, then he'll respect that.

They don't talk during the debriefing. When they took down this Hammertech installation, they found intel, leads to a bunch of other potential targets: weapons caches, suppliers, buyers. Steve tries to keep his mind on that, on all the missions they'll be able to run with this information.

But later that day, he gets a text from Jim: Did you get a chance to read the Wallace Terry?

Steve texts back to tell Jim that he's halfway through it. Jim replies with more in-depth questions about the book, and how it related to Steve's experience in a desegregated unit.

As their conversation goes on, Steve can't help wondering if he's accidentally texting with a different Jim Rhodes than the guy he runs missions with.

* * *

"We're glad to have you on the team, Cap," Director Fury tells him the next day, as they go over some of the intel gathered from the Hammertech mission. "How would you feel about following some of this up?"

"Sure thing, Director," Steve says, thinking of his quiet apartment, his lonely morning runs, the rich people in business suits who live in his neighborhood and look right past Steve like he isn't there. "Sounds like work that needs doing."

Director Fury frowns. "It's important work. I wouldn't trust it to just anyone. And you can call me Nick."

Steve raises his eyebrows at that. "You normally encourage your soldiers to call you by your first
"I've never been much of a soldier," Director Fury – Nick – says. "It's not my world. This is an intelligence organization."

"Lot of guns for people interested in pure knowledge," Steve points out, and Nick laughs a little.

"Too true," he says, and his expression turns serious for a moment. "You know, Cap, that is too damn true."

Puzzled, Steve asks, "What do you – "

"Nothing, just talking to myself," Nick says quickly, cutting him off. "I do that sometimes. You ever do that, Cap?"

"You can call me Steve," Steve says. "And yeah. Sometimes. There aren't that many other people for me to talk to."

Nick nods ruefully, like this is a universal truth of the human condition and not Steve's particular problem.

"I get the feeling that you're someone who needs to be working, Steve," Nick says. "Who likes to be useful."

"Yeah, Nick," Steve says. "I am."

"So we'll put you to work."

It's more than what Steve has now, so he takes it. Some missions – a lot of missions – at least half of the missions – are unambiguous to Steve, are good work that he feels good about doing. Destroying weapons, destroying facilities that make weapons, imprisoning people who make and sell weapons. Rescuing SHIELD agents being held hostage. There can't be anything wrong with that, inherently, he doesn't think. But some of the missions are different: rescuing intel, instead of people, from places that SHIELD isn't supposed to be gathering intel; apprehending criminals – they are criminals, Steve's sure of that at least – outside of SHIELD jurisdiction; fighting soldiers who Steve thinks are only trying to protect their own secrets.

After those missions, Steve goes home exhausted and tries to sleep, but finds himself kept awake by anxious thoughts swirling around his head. He tosses and turns, but can't get comfortable. He longs for the conviction he felt when he was fighting HYDRA, sleeping on the hard ground next to Bucky, freezing cold in the winter and boiling hot in the summer.

By comparison, his bed is too soft. Sleeping on it, Steve starts to feel like the mattress is almost insubstantial, like a cloud; he starts to dream that he falls right through it and finds himself drifting, untethered, through the sky. That dream, more than any dreams about war or death, wakes him sweating and gasping in the middle of the night.

But months pass, and the future becomes more like the present, easier to deal with. Steve tries to keep busy.

Bruce calls him up, every now and again, to have coffee or a meal, and at first it's a little weird to Steve, having a friend he only sees once a month at the most. But he gets used to it after a while, the slow, cautious pace of Bruce's friendship and the fond, reassuring smiles that mean Bruce really
does enjoy his company.

"The only problem with going out for a meal is that I can't get you to tell me any more of those old stories from your wild youth," Bruce says, one time, and the suggestion makes Steve feel pleased and self-conscious.


"I did, actually," Bruce says, tilting his head. "I wanted to tell you, I've got some more recommendations for you. You can read them and then send the authors angry letters if they've gotten it wrong."

Bemused, Steve accepts the slip of paper that Bruce slides across the table, which has a list of book titles on it: *Gay New York, Coming Out Under Fire, The Evening Crowd at Kirmser's*, and half a dozen more. Opening up that slip of paper, tucking it discreetly into his pocket, Steve is reminded viscerally of the time Marlene passed him a battered copy of a Walt Whitman poem in a brown paper bag.

He smiles. "This is great. Thanks, Bruce." It's not the first set of recommendations Bruce has brought him, and they've all been good so far.

"Here to help," Bruce says, shrugging, looking away. Steve tries to interpret his expression.

"Hey, you know you don't have to bring me stuff, right? I like just spending time with you."

Bruce quirks his eyebrows and shrugs again. "Seems a little strange, is all," he says. At Steve's confused expression, he sighs. "I don't know how much they told you. About what I did with Erskine's research."

"They told me," Steve says.

"So, you know how I was made," Bruce asks. His finger taps against the table, an overt sign of nervousness, the kind Steve hasn't seen on him since the first week they knew each other.

"Of course," Steve says. "It's . . . not a surprise, I guess, that so many people tried to replicate Erskine's serum." Steve thinks about the HYDRA weapons at SHIELD, about the Captain America trading cards, about a young, stubborn scientist absolutely sure that his experiment would work. "It's my legacy."

Now Bruce looks confused. Steve spreads his hands. On his plate, the few fries that are left are getting cold, but he finds he doesn't have much stomach for them. "I don't blame you for creating the Hulk, Bruce. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. Or Captain America's, at least."

Bruce shakes his head. "I can't work out how you could possibly take responsibility for what I did," he says.

"I can't work out how you could possibly take responsibility for a force you have no control over," Steve shoots back. Bruce purses his lips and looks down at his own plate, half of a grilled cheese sandwich still sitting there.

"I can't control the Hulk," Bruce begins, slowly, and Steve experiences a strange feeling of anxiety as he realizes that Bruce is about to say something he's never told anyone else before. "No one can. But it's a mistake to assume that the Hulk isn't me. He's . . . the dark part of me. The violent part."

Steve nods, not sure how to respond to that. Eventually, he says, "I don't know if that's all he is,
though. He saved Tony. He listened to me."

Bruce waves this away. "He's done a lot of damage over the years. Killed people, soldiers."

"Soldiers who were trying to capture him," Steve says, remembering the file. "I don't know, Bruce, I . . . " Steve pauses, trying to work it out. Bruce, looking down, eats another bite of his sandwich.

"Maybe I can tell you a story," Steve says, trying again.

Bruce looks up at him and nods, his eyebrows drawing together.

"I volunteered," Steve says, because that's the most important part, and the story has to start there. "I volunteered for – for this, for being Captain America." He waves a hand vaguely at his body, the shape that's become almost comfortable over the last few years he's worn it. "I wanted so badly to serve, and this was the chance they offered me, and I took it."

"Yes," Bruce says slowly, clearly not getting where this is going.

"I volunteered, but." Steve purses his lips; it's hard to say this without sounding ungrateful, or disloyal. "But I didn't really understand it, when I did it. No one did; no one could have warned me. So I did it to myself. And later, when I . . . when it was hard. To be this way, to be that person they wanted me to be. When that was hard, it felt like my mistake, like I'd done something bad to myself."

Shaking his head, Bruce interrupts. "But it was Howard Stark, and Erskine, and the whole Allied military. Hell, Roosevelt signed off on it."

Steve's never heard that before. For a dizzying moment, he wonders if President Norman Thomas would've signed off on it. He shakes the thought away.

"That didn't matter. I didn't . . . I didn't want that to matter," Steve manages, feeling his throat choke up a little. "If it was my decision, then I stayed in control of it. If it was my fault, at least I was the . . . it wasn't something that had been done to me. Do you see?"

Eyes widening, Bruce nods slowly. "I understand that, Steve, I do," he says, and Steve gets the feeling that if they weren't out in public, he might grasp Steve's wrist or shoulder in support. He's starting to be able to recognize the moments when Bruce holds himself back.

"But we're not the same. You were a recruit and they experimented on you. I really did do this to myself."

Steve shakes his head, sighing. "I'm not saying you didn't," he says. "What I'm saying is, you were a recruit too, and they experimented on you. Even if you were the one holding the needle."

Bruce breathes deeply, in and out. "I don't like any line of reasoning that takes responsibility for the Hulk's actions out of my hands," he says, meeting Steve's eyes.

"You – that's not what I mean by it," Steve says. "Any more than I'm not responsible for my strength, or the power of my public image." Sometimes Steve thinks his public image is a little like the Hulk, rampaging around randomly, doing harm in strange ways that he wouldn't have thought possible. "We owe the world control over what we are. You're responsible for the power you wield, but it's not – I don't like any line of reasoning that takes responsibility for our existence out of the hands of the people who made us."

Nodding, Bruce bites his lip. His finger is no longer tapping on the table, Steve notices. "Okay," he
says. "I'll think about it."

Steve eats his last few cold french fries dutifully, and Bruce finishes his sandwich the same way, and after they've paid they walk back out into the cool October air.

More often than not, walking around D.C. or Manhattan with Bruce is something of a reprieve; while he still gets recognized on occasion, almost everyone who recognizes him recognizes Bruce as well, and that tends to make them keep away. Photographers take pictures of them walking together, but always at a significant distance. It's almost funny to watch Bruce, shoulders hunched forward and hands in his pockets, make his way through a dense crowd with a five-foot personal bubble around him.

Not everyone is so worried about stepping on Bruce's toes, though, apparently, because as they stroll back towards the Tower, where Steve left his bike, a guy appears out of nowhere, runs up to Bruce, and punches him in the face.

Steve feels stupidly slow, helpless to prevent it: he let his guard down, talking with Bruce and walking in Manhattan, and all he can do is watch the blow land, watch Bruce's face whip to the left, watch as Bruce stumbles twice before finding his balance and keeping his feet.

But then Steve's in motion, putting his body between Bruce and his attacker, putting the guy into a ruthless arm-bar that keeps him from moving again.

The guy in Steve's arms – who can't be older than twenty, Steve realizes with a shock – starts laughing.

"Change, change, change," he chants, craning his neck as far as he can to watch Bruce as he rubs at his jaw. Steve realizes that there are a bunch of other young men, on the other side of the street, laughing and taking videos with their cell phones.

Pure, hot anger wells up in Steve, and he has to blink it away long enough to assess the situation. His first priority here is going to depend a lot on whether his big green teammate is going to show up.

"Bruce, are you okay?" he asks.

To his relief, Bruce nods. "Had worse," he says calmly.

Steve nods at him and reshuffles his priorities. He manhandles the attacker over to the other side of the street, shoving him up against his buddies, who are still laughing.

"You recording?" Steve asks. One guy, clearly delighted by the question, nods and holds his cell phone up a little higher.

"Good," Steve says. "Because I want everyone in New York to see this. I don't care if you think it's funny, I don't care if it gets you points with your friends, I don't care at all what you think or what you feel. The next person who hits Bruce Banner will get their own back, because I will give them one on the chin that'll send them into next week."

Steve focuses his attention on the original attacker, because with a big group the best strategy is always to pick one guy and get him to back down. "And you will be lucky," Steve growls, "because it'll be me hitting you, and not the Hulk. You will be lucky, because Bruce Banner has better emotional control than I do, and you won't be dead. But you will be in a lot of pain."

Steve turns to go then, not bothering to wait to see if the guys were scared or not. When he gets
back over to Bruce's side, there are an awful lot of people taking pictures with their phones.

"Nice of you to do," Bruce says, smiling a little and still rubbing at the bruise on his jaw, "but not necessarily the best strategy. That's gonna be all over the news, now."

Steve frowns, putting a hand on Bruce's shoulder and guiding him away; the quicker they get back to the Tower, the quicker Steve can start ignoring angry calls from Geoffrey.

"Sorry," Steve says, sighing. "I probably shouldn't have threatened him. Sometimes I lose my temper."

This makes Bruce laugh for a long time. They keep walking together, ignoring the gradually thinning crowd, and Steve hands Bruce a handkerchief for his split lip.

"Seriously, though," Bruce says, dabbing at it gently. "I'm glad you were there to protect those kids."

Looking over at Bruce incredulously, Steve rolls his eyes. "I was protecting you, dumbass," he says, just like Bucky used to say to him.

"Oh."

A little smile starts to bloom on Bruce's bruised face, and Steve smiles himself to see it.

Holding Bruce's gaze, Steve says, "We lab rats gotta stick together."

*

On Christmas Day, he goes to see Peggy; she's got a few family members, nieces and nephews, coming in and out all day, but she and Steve have Christmas lunch together, just the two of them. It's one of her good days, and there's no freezing rain for a change, so they go for a little walk together outside, with one of Peggy's attendants, Joyce, pushing her wheelchair.

"My father always insisted on this," Peggy says. "After lunch on Christmas Day the family took a walk outside, and it didn't matter what the temperature was or whether we were likely to enjoy it."

"We were usually too cold to do anything but huddle together in front of the stove," Steve says, remembering. "My Ma would run the stove all day, though, cooking up whatever we had that year, so by suppertime it was always warm in the apartment."

One year, Steve remembers, there hadn't been much food to cook at all; that was the year of sawdust bread and chicken feet soup, when they'd spent weeks eating corn mashed with water, if they ate at all. But Steve's Ma had kept the stove running on Christmas anyhow, even though it cost money, just to give them one day of warmth in the middle of winter. Steve remembers sitting next to the old hissing contraption with the heat filling his lungs and feeling able to breathe easily for the first time in weeks.

"In all the biographies I've read of you, Steve, the one thing I've consistently liked is your mother."

"She would've liked you," Steve says, smiling. She'd always liked Bucky, too, even when they'd come home with matching black eyes or torn clothes. She hadn't ever told Bucky off for getting Steve into trouble, knowing full well that it was usually the other way around, and always patched them both up. "She was a good judge of character."

"Undoubtedly," Peggy agrees. "Before I forget, Steve, I wanted you to know – I got you
something."

She gestures back at Joyce, who smiles and pulls a wrapped package out of her huge handbag. "Ms Carter had us all help get it together for you," she says, handing it over to Steve. Peggy already opened her present from Steve – perfume, as close as he could find to the kinds she used to use, that she'd complained about not being able to get anymore. It'd taken a lot of time on internet forums to figure out the kinds to buy, but they'd made Peggy smile when she smelled them. Steve's not sure she remembers them right now, but that's okay; she'll find them again when she goes back inside.

"Thanks, Joyce," Steve says, receiving the parcel. Looking down, he says, "Thank you, Peggy."

"You don't even know what it is yet," Peggy says. "Open it."

Steve does, careful to shove the paper into his pocket so it doesn't blow away. Inside the box are half a dozen framed photographs: him and Peggy, bent over a map together and smiling at each other; him and Bucky, laughing together in front of a barracks somewhere; him with Gabe Jones and Jacques Dernier, sharing beers at a bar; a few others of Steve and the other Howling Commandos, taken in the field or on base. It's his people the way he used to know them, the way they live in his memory, and it's startling to see them in front of his eyes.

"Peg, this is beautiful," Steve says, overwhelmed by the images of his own smiling face, of Peggy's, of Bucky's.

"Nobody looks good in those terrible photos in their SHIELD files," Peggy says, brushing her hair out of her face as the wind picks up. "I thought you'd like some nicer ones to use to remember people by. I – these are a few of the ones I use myself, in fact. To keep the memories working."

This last said with a small, uncharacteristic hesitation that lets Steve know how personal this gift really is.

Steve smiles, touched. "This is perfect." He's already thinking of his KNOWN ASSOCIATES box, with all its grim ID-badge pictures that he still digs out and looks through every so often; he's going to put these up and look at them instead.

"And we're not quite done," Joyce says. "Ms Carter?"

"What?" Peggy asks. She sounds worried.

"There was another part to the present, remember?"

Peggy blinks, obviously upset by her inability to do so. "No, I can't," she says. "I – I know there was something – "

"It's okay, you wrote it down so I'd remember it for you," Joyce says. She looks up at Steve, but keeps speaking to Peggy. "You wanted me to take a picture of you and Captain Rogers today, to add to the set."

"Oh," Peggy says, but Steve's not sure if she remembers the other pictures, or really understands what's happening. "All right."

Joyce comes around in front of them, pulling out a camera. "Captain Rogers, if you could just come down a bit," she says. Steve does, crouching down next to Peggy and taking her hand gently.

"We're taking a picture, Peg," he says softly. "So we don't forget this day."
"Well, thank God for that," Peggy says, exasperated, and Steve is laughing when the camera flashes at them.

*

He drives up to New York to see Arnie that evening; he'd said he was spending the day with a few friends, at a Christmas lunch for LGBT folk being put on by the local Community Center, but that he'd welcome company later. When Steve gets there, he has a glass of whisky already waiting.

"To make up for last time," Arnie says. Steve accepts gratefully.

"It goes with the gift I brought you," Steve says, and holds up the bottles he'd picked up for Arnie; one of them fancy and expensive, one of them the same cheap brand Arnie's father used to keep around. He and Arnie had stolen sips from the bottle once or twice, when they were fourteen, and Arnie had shown him how to replace them with water. It'd been after one of those secret sips that he and Arnie had kissed the first time.

Steve realizes that the memory might not be quite as fresh in Arnie's mind as it is in his. "Uh, I don't know if you remember – " he says.

"Oh, I remember," Arnie says, laughing. He pulls the cheap stuff out of Steve's hand. "You weren't the only boy I lured in with a sip of whisky, you know."

"And here I felt special."

"Well, you should." Arnie smiles up at him, and then moves forward easily, hugging Steve hard. Steve hugs back, letting himself close his eyes and enjoy it for a moment.

"I'm sorry I haven't been by," Steve says, when Arnie pulls back. "I've been in D.C."

"So you said in your emails," Arnie nods, gesturing him to sit down. "How are you doing, getting used to the modern day?"

"I like the funny cat videos you send me," Steve says, smiling. He wonders if Arnie owns a cat; he's never seen one around. For a moment he's tempted to say his usual spiel about how helpful the internet is, but he holds himself back.

"It's hard, though," Arnie says. "It's gotta be hard."

"Well," Steve says. "It's not so bad."

Arnie raises his eyebrows in disbelief, but lets it go. "You meet any young fellas? Or ladies?"

Steve sighs. "Yeah, lots of them, but as it turns out I'm ninety-four."

He takes a sip of his whisky, watching Arnie's face. After a minute, Arnie speaks.

"That's no excuse," he says.

"No? You telling me you're out there dating?" Steve teases, trying to lighten the mood again.

"Actually," Arnie says, "there is this young guy I met down at the LGBT lunch today. I've seen him around before, too."

"Young guy, huh," Steve says.
"I think he's seventy," Arnie grins. "What the hell, though, you only live once."

Steve laughs with him, then nods. "So you – I guess it's been a while since Michael passed away, and you feel ready to go on." He doesn't say it as a question, can't bear to ask it the way he wants to.

"No," Arnie says.

Steve raises his eyebrows in surprise.

"I still feel like shit every day he's not here," Arnie sighs. "I miss him. I turn to him to tell him stuff. I start yelling at him for not taking out the trash, then realize he's not going to yell back. And he's been dead three years."

Slowly, trying to mimic Arnie's ability to offer comfort, Steve reaches out and rubs his shoulder. Arnie reaches up gratefully and puts his hand over Steve's.

"Thanks, Steve," he says. "But anyway, even though he's gone, I still like my reading and my gardening and my cat videos. No reason I couldn't like a boyfriend, I guess."

Steve licks his lips. "So, did you get this guy's number?" Remembering himself, he adds, "And is he cute?"

"They say seventy is the new sixty," Arnie says, waggling his eyebrows. "So yes, he's cute. His name is Tom, it's even a handsome name. He said I should call him. For backgammon."

"Do you like backgammon?"

"Hell, he's got a full head of hair and a voice like caramel, and they make those pills these days. I'll learn to like it."

They laugh, Steve sitting back in his chair and tilting his head back to let the good feeling tumble through him.

"So, what about you, you gonna call somebody?"

"I haven't really thought about it," Steve says, thinking about it.


Steve chuckles. "Okay, fine. Deal. But I gotta warn you, I don't even know if my – my guy is interested. Or queer." He watches Arnie for a reaction.

"Well, if he's queer, I bet he's interested. You know you were the year's most eligible bachelor."

"I know," Steve groans. He wishes Geoffrey had consulted him about that; he hadn't known, when he let them take the pictures, that he'd be on the cover of the magazine. Seeing his face on the rack at the grocery store had been a shock, almost like the first time he'd seen his new face in the mirror. Like looking at someone else, the person he was supposed to be.

He tries to think of a way to change the subject. "You know, I brought some pie, too."

"You've been holding out," Arnie says. "Go get it, kid, I go to bed early these days."

"Not if Tom has anything to say about it," Steve says, stepping back out the door to get the pie from the car. Arnie's laugh follows him out into the cold and dark.
It’s not until the next day that he sees the headlines: Tony Stark declared dead, his Malibu house destroyed, the President kidnapped by hostile forces. He checks his phone, horrified, and sees that he left the volume turned off all day yesterday. He finds he has a few texts from Natasha – telling him that SHIELD is monitoring the "current situation" and will bring him in if need be – and two from Jim.

The first one says, *Tony's not dead. I'm on it. You'll be too visible here, hang back.* Steve grimaces at it; like Natasha's text, it assumes that he wouldn't be of any use in helping defeat a superpowered evil organization, which seems a little unfair.

The second text from Jim says, *Situation resolved. No need for assistance.*

Frowning, Steve goes to the internet to figure out exactly what's happened since the papers yesterday. As Jim said, though, everything's been resolved: the President has been rescued, Tony and Pepper are both okay, and Jim himself is being called a hero.

Steve smiles a little at that.

Looking down at his phone, he hesitates; he could call Jim directly, but he might be busy in a meeting. He calls Natasha instead.

"Hey, Cap, finally hear the news?"

"I guess I did," Steve says. "How come SHIELD wasn't out there helping with the AIM situation?"

"Eh," Natasha says, the verbal equivalent of a shrug. "It all went down too fast for us to get on the ground, and Stark wasn't keeping us apprised of his movements. By the time we located him each time, he was already gone."

"So SHIELD isn't all-powerful after all."

"Nope. You can bet they'll want their fingers in this pie before it goes any further, though. There are all kinds of briefings and meetings being called on the Hill, and if Stark doesn't show up, Rhodes is gonna have to explain it all."

"It says here that Colonel Rhodes is bringing charges against the Vice President," Steve says.

"Yeah, that's tomorrow. I think Rhodes landed in D.C. today, and tomorrow is all the bureaucratic bullshit and paperwork. Poor guy."

"Huh," Steve says. "Do you think I can be of any help? If I show up at the meetings, in front of the news cameras, give them some backup . . . ?"

"I'd ask Rhodes before just showing up," Natasha says. "But my guess is that your presence wouldn't do anything but muddy the issue. Maybe you could give a separate statement when asked to comment on the situation."

"Yeah," Steve muses. "Well, maybe I'll ask Colonel Rhodes, then."


"And Geoffrey," he agrees.

He hangs up with Natasha and bites his lip, considering his options. In the pictures in the news, Jim
looks pretty banged up, and even working from the limited, censored descriptions of what went on out there, Steve can guess that it's worse than it looks. Jim's house is really not that far away, and Steve still has a bunch of SHIELD-issued supplies that he hasn't had use for.

Better to try than to sit around wondering, he tells himself, but he's already up anyway, shoving anything he thinks could be useful into a paper grocery bag and getting his ass out the door before he can talk himself out of it.

He did make a promise to Arnie, after all.

When he gets to Jim's house, he wipes his palms on his jeans, shifting the bag from arm to arm, before ringing the doorbell.

The door swings open a minute or two later, revealing Jim on the other side. He's in a t-shirt and sweatpants, barefoot, and his face looks like it's gone a few rounds with . . . well, with his own mechanical suit, for a start. There's a burn mark going down his neck, too, red and angry, and Steve imagines that it doesn't stop there.

"Steve," Jim says. He sounds measured, not surprised at all, but then, Steve figures he probably checked who it was before opening the door. "What're you doing here?"

"I heard about the whole situation out in California," Steve explains. "Thought maybe you could use some supplies." He hefts the paper bag by way of demonstration. Jim nods thoughtfully.

"That's really nice," he says. A moment later, he takes a step back, opening the door a little further. "Come on in."

"Are you sure?" Steve asks. "I thought I could just drop the stuff off and head back, if you're not up for company. I know how it is after a rough mission."

Jim shakes his head and holds the door open a little wider.

Stepping inside, Steve finds a place for the bag on a table right inside the door. "It's just some medkit stuff, prepackaged food, things like that. I figured you'd be worse for wear after the battle yesterday."

Steve pulls the things out of the bag and hands them over: heat packs, ice packs, burn ointment, pain relievers, canned soup, protein shakes. Glancing through to the living room, he sees wrappers from similar med supplies scattered around.

Following his gaze, Jim smiles. "I actually was running out of these," he says, hefting some of the hot and cold packs in one hand. "I was just thinking I didn't want to go out for more."

"Glad I could help," Steve says, smiling back. It occurs to him that he hasn't often seen Jim smiling. It makes Steve feel good to see it, lighter in his heart, like confirmation he's done the right thing.

Jim clasps his shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze, and Steve feels himself smiling a little bigger. Then Jim lets go, and walks back into the living room. His movements are so slow and so stiff that Steve can't help wincing in sympathy. Jim gets himself settled down on the couch and starts applying the self-sticking heat packs to his shoulder, his back, and his ankle.

"Anything else I could help with?" Steve asks, emboldened. "Fix you some of this soup?" He's never been much of a cook, but he might find it easier to stand at a stove than Jim does right now.
"Nah, I already ate. Appreciate it, though." Jim is looking down, concentrating on rolling up the leg of his sweatpants past the knee; once he does it, Steve sees the reason why. From the swelling, and the bruising that stands out even against Jim's dark skin, it looks like he landed on it hard.

"Ouch," Steve says, frowning.

"Yeah, I fell from a high place onto a hard place," Jim sighs. He starts to wrap one of the cold packs around the knee. "I'm really getting too old for this shit." He glances up at Steve again, and cocks his head. "Hey, man, you can come in all the way if you want. Sit down. Sorry I'm not much of a host right now."

"That's okay," Steve says, taking the chair opposite him. "It looked from the news like you did enough yesterday. Everyone's calling you a hero."

Jim laughs shortly. "Yeah, well, that's great, but I had no intention of doing any heroing yesterday. It's Tony who always drags me into that stuff."

Steve smiles, clasping his hands between his knees as he leans forward. "But you look after him. He'd be dead now if it weren't for you."

"Now how do you know that?" Jim meets his eyes, half of a smile on his face. Steve shrugs. "Lucky guess."

Jim laughs, then winces as he jars his bad knee.

"You see a doctor about that?" Steve asks.

"Yeah, yeah, I got the whole treatment, x-rays and all. Nothing broken, just a lot of bruises and strained ligaments and first degree burns. The worst part is that this landing tore out the knee of my favorite jeans."

"Well, they're probably more easily repaired than you are, at least," Steve smiles. Jim looks surprised.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that. I was gonna get new jeans."

Steve shakes his head. "Wasteful," he says, and glows when he makes Jim smile again. "Where are they?"

Jim watches him for a long minute, eyebrows drawn together, then lets out a breath. "In the bedroom. On the bed. Ignore the mess."

Steve nods and finds his way through the house, which has the appearance of a place that's usually kept spotless but has suddenly seen a deterioration in discipline: dishes in the sink, towel left on the bathroom floor, clothes on the bed. He finds the jeans, which are indeed blown out at the knee, but thinks there's still enough material to make a pretty easy repair. He gets his emergency supply kit from the front table and finds some thread about the right color.

"I'll have 'em fixed up good as new," Steve promises, as he sits back down and starts to thread the needle.

"Thanks, Steve," Jim says softly. Steve nods at him briefly, concentrating on the job; the end of the thread is frayed, so he unthinkingly pops it in his mouth to get it wet and stick it together. He realizes that it might seem unsanitary partway through, and glances up again, chagrined.
"Sorry, I – that's how we always did it."

"That's okay," Jim says, laughing a little. "This is amazing. I like seeing a national military icon turned into a seamstress."

Steve chuckles and knots the thread. He arranges the jeans so that he's got proper access to the hole, picks a spot, and starts sewing. It's been a while since he's done it, but the movements come back quick enough.

"I guess you learned how to do that in the war?" Jim asks, softly.

Steve shakes his head. "Long before that. My Ma used to take in other peoples' sewing for extra money, you know, darning and repairs and stuff. But she worked long hours, and I was laid up in bed a lot, so I started taking it over."

"Seven or eight, maybe?" Steve replies, concentrating on his work. "When I was sickest, after the scarlet fever. It was handy during the war, though, you're not wrong about that. I used to darn all the Howling Commandos' socks when we made camp at night. I didn't need much sleep anyway."

"That's not in the history books," Jim laughs. "Or at least they don't teach it in AP History."

Taking a deep breath, stomach roiling at the potential admission, Steve says, "Lotta stuff about me that no one seemed to want to remember." He looks up to meet Jim's eyes, but Jim's already looking away. Steve frowns back down at his work.

"Well," Jim says, after a long silence, "well, maybe I ought to start getting to know you a little better."

"I'd like that," Steve agrees.

They chat a while, about the stuff Jim's just been through, about the Vice President, and Jim brings him up to speed on some aspects of American politics that Steve was finding confusing. It's a nice chat, but for the most part it's like their text conversations: friendly, interesting, and not too personal.

He leaves Jim's place an hour or so later, after the jeans are fixed and the dishes are done and Jim insists that he'll be fine for the rest of the day.

"You're sure I can't do anything else?" Steve asks, before he leaves. Jim shakes his head.

"You've done plenty. I really appreciate it."

"Hey, anything for a national military icon and war hero," Steve replies, and this time Jim's smile is big and bright. A chuckle spills out of him. He takes Steve's hand and shakes it.

"Thanks," Jim says. "Really."

"Anytime," Steve nods, and remembers a little too late to take his hand out of Jim's warm grasp.

He barely manages not to stumble down the stairs on his way out to the street.

It may not be exactly what Arnie had in mind, but from the warmth of the blush on his cheeks and the giddy feeling that makes even his superpowered body want to trip over its own feet, Steve figures it's a step in the right direction.
The problem is, Steve doesn't really know where to go from there; he's gotten his hopes up, somehow, that Jim might be . . . interested, but without a next move, he’s left floundering and confused and hopeful. They keep running missions together, and Steve gets increasingly used to having Jim watching his back and hearing Jim's voice over the comms, but he has no idea how to ask. In the old days, he'd bat his eyelashes, or there was a particular suggestive lean he could do that had the side benefit of taking weight off his knees. He doesn't think those would work now.

He wishes he had Marlene or Betty, or maybe Helena, someone he could talk to about this. He's not really ready to ask Arnie for tips on the queer dating life. For one thing, he's a little concerned that Arnie might be way better at it than he is.

Usually, when he has a question about modern times, he goes to Jim, but it seems a bit much to ask somebody how they want to be asked out.

In desperation, he texts Bruce.

Are you sure you can't help me learn how to flirt in the modern era?, he writes, trying to make a joke of it. Bruce texts back right away.

My skills are limited to kissing people in celebration when lab results yield good data. Then, a minute later: Did you meet somebody?

Maybe, idk, Steve texts back. I don't even know if he's queer.

Can you ask?

Steve sighs and stares at his phone. Can he, that's a really good question.

Isn't that intrusive?

Hard to know. I don't really know how anyone gets together with anyone when there are no lab results involved.

Steve smiles. Even if Bruce can't give him any useful advice, it's good to have someone to talk to.

I guess you could ask him on a date? :) Bruce texts.

Yeah, Steve texts back.

Sorry I'm not more help, Bruce texts. You wanna get together for coffee and talk about it? I'll be in D.C. on Friday.

Steve smiles. You sure you can be friends with someone without lab results being involved? Should I wear some rubber gloves?

I make an exception for you, Steve, Bruce says, and then follows with a happy face. Bruce himself rarely smiles, but in text he uses a lot of happy faces. Steve guesses that he must feel them more than he shows them.

Then I'll see you Friday, Steve tells him, adding a happy face of his own and the little coffee cup emoji. He's already looking forward to it.

In the meantime, he decides to watch another movie off of his list. Next up is Milk.
"So, is it a SHIELD agent?" Bruce asks, before Steve's even sitting down with their drinks.

The cafe is the kind of place where big-name government people come for ten minutes of peace and quiet in the middle of their busy schedules, which means it's comfortable, has lots of hidden little alcoves, and more often than not has Secret Service personnel lurking somewhere around. Even so, Steve feels the itchy risk of exposure.

"Your coffee," Steve says, setting their cups on the table. Bruce immediately starts ripping into sugar packets and pouring them in.

"What are you drinking?" he asks, peering over at Steve's cup.

"Iced cold brew with muddled basil and coconut milk," Steve says, taking a cautious sip. "It's the special today."

Bruce blinks. "What's it taste like?"

Steve offers him a sip, but Bruce shakes his head. Steve shrugs. "Weird. But everything in the future tastes weird, so I figure, might as well try interesting things."

"And this adventurous spirit has also led you to wonder about the best way to flirt with men in the 21st century," Bruce says.

"Nice topic change. Very smooth."

"I thought you'd like it." Bruce lifts his coffee cup from among the scattered corpses of sugar packets and takes a sip.

"You know they have simple syrup here," Steve offers. Such a thing being provided for free during the Depression, or during the war, would've been unheard of, but he's getting used to it. Bruce shakes his head.

"I like keeping count." Fingers moving swiftly, he lines the used packets up on the table, three lines of three making a square.

"Ah."

Setting the cup back down again, Bruce asks, "So is it a SHIELD agent?"

"Are you implying that the only people I know are SHIELD agents?"

"Kind of," Bruce smiles. "Am I wrong?"

Steve talks to a lot of people – Amelia at the library, Ben who works at the bakery on Saturdays, all the folks who come up to him on the street, not to mention the TV interviewers when Steve can't avoid Geoffrey – but Bruce still isn't wrong.

"Not really," he sighs.

"So they know who you are, and what you've been through," Bruce says. "What's making you nervous?"

Steve's pretty sure that Howard used to do this: isolating the problem. Eliminating the variables. Very scientific. Steve should've worn some rubber gloves after all.
There's still a lot they don't know about me." He purses his lips. "That he doesn't know about me."

"Okay," Bruce says. "So you're afraid he'll – what?"

Suddenly parched, Steve takes a long sip of his drink. He likes the basil, actually. It's different to have something savory-tasting in your coffee.

"That he won't want what I – what I really am, I guess."

He stares down at the table. He can't believe he's saying this in a coffee shop, out in public; he glances around, but there's no one nearby, and no one is paying attention to them.

He doesn't even voice the deeper fear: that Jim would not want him but would date him anyway out of some sense of obligation to Captain America.

"What are you?"

"Okay."

"It's okay." It's the same question he's been asking himself ever since he got this body, after all.

"You don't have to tell me anything, Steve, it's okay."

Steve sighs. "I wanted your help. It's just hard sometimes – I don't like to burden you with my problems."

"It's not a burden," Bruce says easily. "Trust me, hearing about your problems is a nice distraction from my usual burdens."

This is almost a shock; despite having seen the transformation with his own eyes, Steve always finds it hard to remember that sweet, polite Bruce Banner is also The Hulk. The two parts of him don't always seem to gel, like he's two different men in one body.

Steve thinks about that for a minute, and Bruce doesn't say anything, waiting patiently.

"After you – when you first became the Hulk, can we talk about that?"

Bruce's brow furrows, but he nods. "Sure."

"After you changed, did you feel different about your body, or, or strange?" He frowns, trying to think of a better way to put it, but Bruce is already nodding.

"Hard to figure out what part was me, and what part wasn't," he says. "Yeah, I felt like that. Like my body didn't belong to me anymore."

It's not quite how Steve felt, but it's close enough to give him a twinge of recognition. He nods gratefully. "Yes. And I've had – a lot of time, to adjust to it, and if I could do it all over again I would do it the same, but. It made it hard to know who I was, or how to act. Uh, around men. Hard to know what I was, I guess. If I wasn't a fairy anymore."

Bruce's eyes narrow. "You didn't know any big strong men who were queer like you, back in your day?" Trust Bruce to cut to the heart of it.

Steve shakes his head. "I did. I did, but I wasn't one of them. This – " he taps his chest – "this was a weapon, a tool for war, and there was . . . only one guy who looked at it and still saw the old me."
My beautiful girl, Bucky had called him, and how can he explain that to someone now, who only knows him in this shape? "I don't – maybe that doesn't make any sense."

Though he's obviously sympathetic to this, Bruce doesn't seem to know what to say. Eventually, fiddling with the empty sugar packets, he says, "It makes sense. I just don't know how to help with this, Steve. Maybe you need to talk to someone who's trans, or genderqueer or something."

Trans is the T in LGBT, Steve knows that one. He read about it, but it didn't seem to describe him, really. Though he thinks it might be what Marlene would've called herself, if she had been born later; reading peoples' stories about being trans had reminded Steve of her. Genderqueer is something that Bruce mentioned before, he's sure, but Steve hasn't come across it in his reading, or in his movies.

"Who could I possibly talk to? Where could I go that wouldn't get me reported?"

After a short pause, Bruce asks, very softly, "Reported to who, Steve?"

"In the news, or whatever, you know." Steve scrubs his face with his hands.

His head comes up again when Bruce speaks. "Is your apartment near here?"

"Yeah," Steve says. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to check and make sure that your computer is secure."

Steve lifts an eyebrow. "SHIELD checks that computer all the time."

Bruce snorts. "Yeah, and that'll be part of the work I'll do, making sure SHIELD stops tracking you and can't access that computer."

"I didn't realize they were doing that," Steve says carefully, anger and shame rolling through him, thinking about what they might have already seen him accessing.

"We'll fix it. Or you know what, maybe we'll get you a new computer and start with that. We'll make you completely anonymous on the internet. And then we'll find some people you can talk to."

* Everyone on the internet is really, really nice. Bruce shows him how to find social media discussion groups for people who are questioning their genders, or who have non-binary genders, and Steve is able to ask a lot of questions and get a lot of replies from all kinds of folks. There are lots of different terms that people use for themselves, and the more Steve reads the less alone he feels.

Over the next few days, between SHIELD missions and a public appearance Geoffrey scheduled for him, he spends as much time as he can meeting people online, reading their posts, watching their videos. A curious feeling comes over him, as he does so, and it takes him a while to recognize it. Once he does, it's startling: for the first time in a long time, he thinks that there are ways he could express what he is and be recognized, even in this modern world.

But what's really surprising is how many comments he finds himself leaving for other people: people whose parents have tossed them out, or who are struggling to find a job or a doctor, or who are just down in the dumps. He writes I think you're great and that dress looks amazing on you and <3, because he's learned that it means love and understanding, like giving someone a piece of your
heart. Steve figures he's almost the same age as a lot of these people, and their problems are problems that Steve remembers from his time. He really does feel like his heart goes out to them.

Sometimes there are even some questions he can answer, and people seem to like his answers about queer people in the past, and get excited about them, even. As Steve recognizes himself in his new internet friends, they start to recognize themselves in Steve too, in a way. His new friend Tara says zie'd like to have seen queer Brooklyn in the 30s, and Jelani says that he's inspired to try some pre-war fashions.

As it turns out, Steve isn't alone in the 21st century, and – what's more – all the young people of the 21st century aren't alone in history.

He gets a text from Bruce on Sunday: *How is the online stuff going?*

*I'm learning a lot,* Steve texts back. Then, grinning, he adds, *Getting a lot of good data here.*

Bruce's response is a whole bunch of smiley faces.

*

Director Fury calls him in for a briefing, which is strange; usually, if there's a mission they want him for, Deputy Director Hill is the one who tells him about it. He shows up to the Director's office in the Triskelion – a big, bright, windowed space – and, out of long habit, falls into an 'at ease' posture in front of his desk.

"Hey, Steve," the Director says.

"Hey, Nick," Steve replies. "I have to admit I'm curious about why I'm here."

"You're here because I need you to retrieve some lost SHIELD property," Nick says, and hands over the file. Steve glances through it; everything looks pretty standard, weapons prototypes stolen from a SHIELD facility in Brussels, to be recovered at all costs. Too many of SHIELD's weapons still look like HYDRA tech to Steve, but he figures they're better under lock and key with SHIELD than in unknown hands.

He doesn't feel sanguine about it, but it's nothing that Hill couldn't have briefed him on.

"All right," Steve says, looking back up at Nick. Nick stares at him levelly.

"The reason you're here, talking to me," Nick says, "is that Deputy Director Hill is not aware of this mission."

Steve can't hide his look of surprise. "Your own second in command?" he asks.

"I'm currently investigating Deputy Director Hill to ensure that her loyalties remain with SHIELD," Nick says evenly. "Part of that is cutting off information flow to see what she finds out on her own, and from where. It's not unusual."

Steve drops the folder back onto Nick's desk and puts his hands on his hips. "It's not a good sign," he says, finally.

"Will you do it?"

"I suppose next week you'll have Deputy Director Hill investigating me," Steve says.

"Probably," Nick agrees.
The weapons need to be recovered. Nick's designs are his own. "Fine," Steve says. "Let me take Romanoff."

"I was going to suggest just that," Nick smiles, spreading his arms in a gesture of openness, silhouetted with light from the windows behind him.

Steve takes the file and gets the hell out of there.

*

"We have another mission later in the week," Natasha says, as they fly toward Belgium and the missing SHIELD weapons cache. "Another one of those tanks popped up in Ukraine."

"God," Steve says. "That makes over two dozen of them now."

"Yeah," Natasha agrees. "Got any gum?"

Steve pulls some Juicy Fruit out of his belt pouch and hands it over. Natasha pops it in her mouth and chews with satisfaction.

"Anyway," she says, "SHIELD analysts are on it. They'll figure out where they're coming from eventually."

"Yeah," Steve says. "I've been tracking some of the supply routes and stuff, keeping maps, trying to find patterns. There's some good intel, it should lead somewhere."

Natasha raises her eyebrow. "Look at you, Captain America, doing analyst work. I didn't know you had it in you."

Steve's embarrassed; he knows what he's been doing is probably ridiculous compared to their new analysis programs. "I know the SHIELD analysts can do it better, with computers and things," he says apologetically. "It's just an old habit I can't quit."

"Well, we all have those," Natasha drawls. "That how you found all those HYDRA bases in the forties?"

"Yeah, me and Peggy – Agent Carter." Natasha nods. "We found a lot of secret bases and camps that way. We'd watch for the movement of construction materials or troops, we'd look for roads or shipping routes that showed signs of too much recent traffic. We got a sense for where and how HYDRA liked to build, so we could almost intuit where they'd be next. It worked well."

"Sounds like it," Natasha says. "Well, who knows, maybe you'll find something the other folks miss."

"It keeps me busy, anyway," Steve says. He smiles, to sell it as a joke, but he doesn't think Natasha's buying.

"So what do you do in your spare time, Captain Rogers?" she asks in a funny voice, pretending to be a TV interviewer. Then she drops her voice down and flattens her accent to imitate him. "'Oh, not much, I sit alone in my apartment and draw maps of enemy bases.' That doesn't sound weird at all."

"Well, I wouldn't say that on TV," Steve objects.

"Yeah, I noticed. You always talk about reading books and listening to music."
"I do those things too," Steve says.

"Such a square, Rogers," Natasha grins. She chews her gum for a while, and Steve tries to figure out a way to tell her who he used to be, before the war, how much the shape of his life differs from what they've all been told.

He doesn't have the words, though, and this isn't the place. It doesn't matter too much, anyway, since he's not that person anymore.

"I guess I am," he says.

* 

They get back the stolen SHIELD weapons, which turn out to be previously stolen by SHIELD from someone else, and definitely related to HYDRA tech before that. Steve comes back from the mission sweaty and bloody and frustrated, throwing his helmet down on the bench when they get back to the jet.

"It's pretty standard in this business," Natasha says. "Stuff gets passed around. Like secrets."

"Yeah," Steve says, because he's sure she's right. "It's just – what does SHIELD think they're doing with half this junk?"

Natasha shrugs.

Steve wonders how many of these weapons were developed based on the HYDRA tech that the Howling Commandos captured during the war. How many of these proliferating killing machines once passed through his hands. He should've burned them, back then, should've seen them all destroyed. Now they're his mess to clean up.

When they get back to the Triskelion, Nick doesn't look up from his desk when Steve comes in. "Mission go okay?" he asks.

"The mission to recover more of your HYDRA-inspired ray guns?"

"Yes. That mission."

Steve tosses a blast grenade at him; Nick catches it neatly. "Went fine," Steve says. "You can keep developing better people-killers."

But the next time Director Fury calls him, a couple weeks later, and tells him there are hostages who need to be rescued, Steve agrees to the mission.

It's all he knows how to do.

* 

Tony emails everyone to ask them over for a strategy meeting, and Pepper emails right after asking them all to a meal and an evening of good company. Steve hasn't done much in public in the last couple weeks, so Geoffrey has been emailing, texting, and leaving voice messages with increasing frequency. We need to develop a long-term strategy for your public appearances, Geoffrey had said, in one message. It'd sounded like a lot of time Steve would have to spend telling people that he likes the internet and that he's not looking for dates right now, and he hadn't felt up to it.

It'll be nice, Steve figures, to get out of town and have a reason to ignore him, rather than making
excuses, and it'll be good to compare his notes with what Tony and the SHIELD analysts have figured out.

The day before the dinner party, Steve gets a text from Jim. Since that day in Jim's house right after Christmas, they've been texting more and more, and even if Jim still doesn't talk about himself much, they have gotten more comfortable, joking around about the questions Steve asks and the friends they have in common. But Steve still hasn't taken Bruce's advice and asked him for coffee or a meal, because Steve staring at Jim's number on his phone screen doesn't actually make the thing dial.

Need a ride to New York tomorrow?

Steve smiles, thinking of the last ride Jim gave him, held tight in his arms. He texts back. *I'm afraid I'll get windburn.*

_Haha. I meant in my car. It has windows and seat belts and everything._

Four hours in a car, alone with Jim Rhodes. Well. Nothing ventured.

_When do you want to pick me up?_ Steve asks.

They decide on a time, and Steve sits with butterflies in his stomach for a while before deciding he needs a distraction. He settles in to watch the next movie from his list, which is called *Monster._

* Jim's car is a thing of beauty. When he steps out onto the curb, dressed smartly in civvies, with his sky blue dress shirt emphasizing his broad shoulders and his wide sunglasses perched on his face, he and the car together are a vision.

Steve only hesitates for a moment before he whistles his appreciation.

Jim's eyebrows, above the sunglasses, go way up. "That for me or the car?"

"Both," Steve says. Since he can't touch Jim, he runs his hand down the hood. Bright silver, like a bullet. "What kind is it?"

"Tesla Roadster Sport," Jim replies. "It's electric, it doesn't use gas."

Steve's mouth drops open. "Does it hover?"

"We're still working on that," Jim sighs. "Everyone's just as disappointed as you are."

Even so, it's a hell of a ride. The top comes down, and they drive for a while with the car open to the air and the breeze on their faces. When they get to the highway, Steve mentions that he might be getting windburn after all, and Jim looks at him over the top of his shades before pulling over to put the roof back up.

"You want some music?" Jim asks, after a little silence.

"Uh," Steve says. "Actually I'd like – there's something I've been thinking about. I wanted to ask you about it."

Jim takes his eyes off the road for a few seconds to look over at Steve. "Okay," he says.

Steve clears his throat. He can do this. He said it to Bruce, right after he came out of the ice. He
can say it again.

"I read up on the new Uniform Code, you know, for, uh, gay soldiers. And on transgender soldiers still getting turfed out."

Jim's grip on the wheel tightens, and Steve resolves to talk faster and spare him the anticipation.

"I – I read about what the regulations are, and who is and isn't officially classified as a sexual deviant now, and about Chelsea Manning . . . but it's hard to know what people really think, you know. About queer soldiers, or transgender ones. What military people think. How they work together."

This time Jim keeps his eyes forward, so that Steve can only see half of his frown. Steve hopes it's confusion.

"Why are you asking this, Steve?" Jim's voice is soft. His fingers are still holding tight to the wheel. Beneath them, the car goes a little bit faster.

Steve gropes for the words, and in his silence Jim speaks again. "Are you trying to figure out how you should treat people?"

Nothing ventured, Steve thinks, and jumps to take advantage of the opening. "No," he says. "No, I'm trying to figure out how people are going to treat me."

There's another silence. Steve doesn't fidget. At the end of it, Jim says, "Oh."

"Yeah, I – it seemed like you might be sympathetic, and I think I'm going to have to say something in public eventually."

He watches Jim's throat work. There's a tense line of muscle running from just below his ear down to his shoulder, exposed by his open collar, and Steve wishes he could touch it. Gradually, the car slows down.

"You know you don't have to, right?" Jim says, after a while. "It's not – you don't owe anyone anything."

Steve frowns. "That's not quite what I mean."

"There are lots of reasons to stay closeted. I mean, not tell people you're – whatever you are."

"I know what closeted means," Steve says, sighing. "Though I haven't quite figured out what words to use for myself, nowadays. Everything's different."

Jim stretches out the fingers of his right hand, letting go of the wheel briefly, and his knuckles pop. "You, uh, mentioned Chelsea Manning."

"Yeah." Steve tries to think how to explain. "When I was a kid, it was like, the thing where you went with guys and the thing where you were sort of like a girl were more linked together."

Jim nods.

"So do you think they'd dishonorably discharge me for being a sexual deviant?"

Jim laughs dryly. "What, retroactively? Aren't you working for SHIELD now?"

"Yeah," Steve agrees. They'd let him out of the rest of his Army service, and now he's technically
an independent contractor for SHIELD. "But the American branch of SHIELD operates under the American Uniform Code."

Jim whistles. "I did not know that," he says slowly.

"So you don't know if they'd . . . " Steve spreads his hands, frustrated.

"It's hard to say," Jim offers, thinking it through. "I think they'd try their damnedest to keep it quiet. But you have a lot more leverage than any other – any other LGBTQ person in the entire military."


"Is that the only reason?"

Steve thinks about this.

"I mean, I've seen your interviews," Jim says softly. "You don't seem – well, you really don't seem to be enjoying yourself. For some people, I think, the hiding is more wearing than the consequences of coming out. For others it's the opposite."

"Yeah," Steve says. "God, are the interviews that bad? I thought nobody enjoyed doing them."

Jim snorts. "Tony does. Though I'm sure you're right, most people don't. But most people also don't look like they're trying to smile through their own vivisection."

Steve buries his head in his hands and laughs helplessly. "Christ," he moans.

"I'm sure it's only really visible to people who know you," Jim offers. Steve looks up at him. His expression isn't selling it.

"No wonder my publicist hates me," Steve sighs.

"Fuck your publicist," Jim says vehemently. Steve grins.

"I'd rather not. He's kind of a jerk." This surprises a laugh out of Jim. It feels good, being able to do that.

"Seriously, if it would make you happier, or easier, to make some public statement, then do it. Or hold hands with a guy somewhere public and let them figure it out, whatever. But don't do it because you feel responsible to the cause."

Steve tries to get his head around this. He's pretty sure he once stood next to Danielle holding a sign that said LOYALTY TO THE CAUSE on it somewhere, right before they'd gotten beaten by cops. From each according to his abilities, and Steve is able to do this in a way that almost no one else is.

How could he not have a responsibility?

He puts this thought aside for a moment to concentrate on the other part of what Jim's said. "Well," he coughs, "that's kind of the other thing. I don't have a guy right now to hold hands with, in public or anywhere else." He pauses, wondering if Jim might jump in, but he doesn't, so Steve continues. "So I guess it'd have to be some kind of public statement."

Jim nods. They ride along quietly for a while, the road passing underneath them at speed. Steve's mind begins to wander as he looks out the window, thinking how little the countryside itself has
changed since he went on tour in the forties. Some of these trees were probably here back then, are even older than Steve is. It's a comforting thought.

"Are you, uh, looking for a guy to hold hands with?"

Jim's hoarse question draws Steve back to himself. He's got his eyes on the road, hands on the wheel, and Steve's pretty sure they're speeding again.

He searches for the right words. "Well, I was kinda hoping I'd found one," he says. "But I couldn't figure out how to ask the fella."

Jim's laugh starts off sounding choked, but gets easier a moment later. "Huh," he says, mock-contemplative. Steve grins helplessly in anticipation. "That's a tough one. Have you tried asking him about the current state of homophobia and transphobia in the US military? I find that's usually a good pick-up line."

Steve's grin breaks into a laugh. "Shut up, it was an honest question."

"And really romantic, too," Jim says. When he looks over at Steve, his eyes are warm.

"All right, all right," Steve says, nettled. He takes a breath. "Jim, would you like to go on a date with me?"

Jim clears his throat, like it's hard for him to get the words out. When he speaks, his voice is soft, almost wondering. "Yeah, you know, I would love to."

"Okay," Steve says, a little dizzy at the thought. "That's great."

"Yeah," Jim agrees, and they drive on quietly for a while after that.

They stop for a recharge about three-quarters of the way there. Steve watches the process with interest, and at his request Jim pops the hood and explains some of the inner workings of electric cars.

He's onto how a lithium-ion battery works, compared to a standard car battery, when Steve takes a chance and sidles up next to him, letting their shoulders touch. Jim glances up, startled.

"Sorry, didn't you want to learn about this stuff?" he teases. "You don't seem to be paying attention."

"I'm paying attention," Steve says earnestly. He leans over Jim's shoulder to peer intently at the engine. He rests one hand on the frame of the car, incidentally bracketing Jim's body and bringing them closer.

Jim sidles a little closer still. His breathing seems fast. Who says Steve is hopeless at modern flirting.

Jim's hand lands on top of Steve's, his fingers sliding between Steve's fingers. They're shielded by the hood of the car and there's no one else around, but it still feels daring. Steve lifts his thumb and slides it against Jim's.


"I've been wanting to do this," Steve says, swallowing.

"But – maybe this is a little fast," Jim says.
Steve nods, ducking his head. Jim pulls his hand back, and Steve stands up again. "I do – I do want to go slow, I think," he says awkwardly. "Sorry, it's not fair to lead you on like that."

"It's okay. I don't – it's been a while, I guess. I kept thinking about you, and wondering, but I wasn't . . . I don't want to rush into anything."

"No, me neither," Steve agrees. He misses the sensation of Jim's skin against his, but he's not really sure how much he could take. How long he could go on touching Jim before he started to feel strange and unsure in his body.

He's going to have to find some way to explain what he wants to Jim, but the feelings are still all tangled inside his head, sensitive and tender to the touch, new and old and disorienting.

Which is probably a good sign that they shouldn't jump into anything. No matter how desperately Steve might want to jump.

"Okay," Jim says. He clears his throat. "But if that's what we want, maybe we should get back in the car."

"Yeah. Okay. Maybe you can teach me more about cars some other time."

Jim laughs. "I know that's a line, but don't tempt me, I love talking about cars."

Steve grins, and a few minutes later they're back on the highway.

It's hard to think about anything but that moment, Jim's skin against his, his breath on Steve's shoulder, his warmth. It brings back memories of all the guys Steve's known, all the guys who'd wrapped him up in their arms and kissed his neck, or held him, or fucked him.

Bucky's the only guy who's fucked him since he got his new body.

"Maybe we oughta have that music now," Steve suggests.

"Yeah," Jim agrees.

*

The strategic planning session at Stark Tower goes pretty well; once Tony's gotten over rolling his eyes at Steve's paper maps and printouts, he grudgingly admits that there's some good data there.

"This is really detailed, Steve," Bruce says, looking over one of the maps. "Did you draw these yourself? The scale is perfect."

"It's not a serum side effect," Steve says. "Though my memory is."

"I didn't suggest that it was," Bruce smiles. "I knew you were an artist before the war."

"I didn't know that," Pepper says. "Steve, were you involved in the modern art scene back then?"

Steve shrugs. "Not really," he says, thinking back on the party Valentine had hosted, right before Bucky shipped out. He never did meet Salvador Dali. "I did some commissions for comic books, and art for posters. Sometimes did portraits on the street for dimes if the cops didn't chase me off. But I really liked the muralists, when I got to see their work. Always wished I could do a whole wall like Diego Rivera. Say something important that would make people stop and take notice."

Pepper grins. "Maybe next time you're in town, you'd let me take you to a gallery," she says. "I'd
love to hear your opinions on some of the more recent stuff."

"That sounds wonderful," Steve says.

"Also maybe you could take some reporters and get your fucking SHIELD publicist off my back," Tony says.

"Oh, jeez, I'm sorry, Tony," Steve says. "I didn't know he was calling you."

"Eh. It's not like I had to talk to him. But you know you can fire those guys, right? You don't have to keep one you don't like."

Steve hesitates.

"Or your current strategy of ignoring him until he quits might work," Tony admits.

"Sir, I have finished analyzing the data," JARVIS says, sparing Steve from having to answer. "With Captain Rogers' additions, it is now possible to limit our list of thirteen likely bases of operations down to three."

Steve smiles. "Pen and paper not doing so bad after all," he says.

"Yes yes, Grandpa, you helped, we're all very proud," Tony says. He tosses back his drink and stalks toward the holographic display that JARVIS is bringing up. The rest of them follow, lining up around the images. The three potential targets are all tiny Polynesian islands, privately owned. Even SHIELD doesn't seem to know who they're owned by.

"Looks like they're all fairly close together," Jim says. "If we can get approval from the various governments nearby, we could mount a simultaneous strike against all three targets."

Natasha snorts. "Or we could gather more intelligence before we send forces against two civilian sites."

"Trust a spy," Jim says.

"Trust a flyboy," Natasha shoots back. They smile at each other.

"Children, don't fight," Tony says, sliding his hand onto Jim's shoulder and squeezing. Jim tenses at the touch, but leans back into it at the same time. It's a strange sort of reaction, and one that Steve recognizes as a memory he carries in his body, in his own shoulder, before he can place it in his mind.

After a moment, the memory comes back: leaning into Bucky's touch, when Bucky used to put his arm around Steve, when they were buddies and not lovers. Leaning in, but wishing you could keep yourself from leaning in; wanting it, but hoping he doesn't know why you want it. Steve's heart aches with recognition.

By now, Steve's read a lot of Natasha's pre-mission intelligence reports, and knows that she's very good at reading body language; right now, though, she's looking right past Tony and Jim. Which either means that Steve just saw something she didn't, or that she already knows.

Steve swallows hard, wondering what Natasha might already know, what might have been so obvious for so long that she doesn't even pay attention to it anymore. About Tony and Jim together.

Suddenly that date doesn't seem like such a good idea.
Pepper comes up behind Tony, who's still holding on to Jim's shoulder, and bends down to kiss Tony on the top of his head. Tony's hand slips away from Jim as he turns around to hold her loosely.

"Whaddya think, Pep, go in guns blazing while we can, or wait until we know more and risk them moving?"

"Knowledge is power," Pepper says. "And Natasha has been doing this a lot longer than you have."

"And so have I," Jim puts in. Steve hasn't missed how his eyes follow Tony and Pepper, the places their bodies are touching, the way they look at each other.

"Actually, you and Bruce are the junior men on the team, Tony," Steve puts in.

"Then I guess I'll have to take my incredibly advanced analysis software and go home, won't I?" Tony says. "But in this case I do happen to agree with Natasha. We need to know what we're up against, how the components are still being manufactured, and how they're being smuggled into other countries."

"So long as it's done in a way that doesn't scare them underground, or set us up to walk into a trap, I'm all for it," Jim agrees.

"There are still other vectors of potential investigation," Bruce points out. "Unexplored avenues that might yield the data we need."

"We'll have to hit some more Ten Rings sites up for intel," Natasha translates.

Tony turns to look at Pepper questioningly. "Do you want — " he begins.

"No," Pepper says firmly. Whatever Tony's asking, Pepper seems sure of her answer.

Jim looks puzzled too, so it must be something personal between the two of them. Steve lets it go.

Working together, they settle on their next moves, a few surgical strikes aimed at getting more intel on the three potential bases. At Natasha's insistence, they select each strike carefully, making sure they all have obvious targets that should cover their real objectives.

"Okay, let's eat already," Natasha says, when everyone's got their next assignment. "We can't do much more till we get SHIELD approval."

The meal goes pretty smoothly. Steve hasn't been back to Pepper's dining room since his last disastrous attempt at socializing with them, and even though he's managed to make amends to everyone since then, he still feels a little nervous sitting back down at the same table. But it turns out he has nothing to be nervous about, and they all have some laughs together. The food is amazing, even if there is way too much of it and Steve feels guilty seeing the waitstaff take half-full plates back to the kitchen.

He keeps his mouth shut about it, though, because it's not polite to criticize the people feeding you.

They tell a lot of stories: Pepper about her CEO work and the ongoing projects to rebuild Manhattan and help its residents; Tony and Bruce about their latest lab discoveries; Jim about the not-secret parts of his Secret Service duties, which also seem to include a lot of behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing.

"The Secret Service work is the official job, but unofficially I'm also liaising between SHIELD, the
president, and the military," Jim explains. "Otherwise there'd be no real communication at all; it all gets tangled up in bureaucracy and politics." Steve nods, thinking this through, wondering where SHIELD's interest and the interests of the military might clash.

Natasha tells some old stories, too, but hers are all still so classified that they end up sounding bizarrely vague, like fairy tales: *Once, when I was in a faraway place, there was a man who was unkind to children*, that sort of thing.

Steve listens, and nods along, but doesn't contribute much.

"What about you, Steve?" Pepper asks. "You've been quiet this evening. How is modern life treating you?"

Steve blows out a breath. "I haven't really been up to very much," he says.

"Except all those secret daring raids on the Hammertech installations and the dismantling of an arms-dealing empire," Pepper puts in.

"Yeah, except for that," he says. "I've been visiting some old friends."

"Catching up with Aunt Peggy?" Tony asks, looking down into his glass of scotch and swirling it carefully. His other hand makes a particular limpwristed gesture that Steve finds distracting. He's been in the future for a while now, and had the opportunity to meet a lot of straight people; Tony and Pepper still strike him as weird. There's got to be something queer about them.

"Aunt Peggy, huh," Steve says.

It's a shock, like it is every time, to think about how close Tony is to being family. That, if Steve had lived through the intervening decades, Tony might've called him Uncle Steve. In an odd way, it feels like another loss.

Tony shrugs. "You've been going to see her?"

"Yeah." He tries to think of something else to say, but there's no way to pretty up his complicated feelings when he thinks about Peggy. "She sends her love."

Tony laughs a little bitterly. "That woman once hit me with her cane," he says.

"She always was sensible," Steve says, smiling at the idea.

Not too much later, the party breaks up. Natasha claims an early SHIELD briefing, and Bruce a Skype meeting with some colleagues in Tokyo about the Chitauri technology, and Pepper says she has CEOing to do.

"On a Sunday?" Steve remembers when he was a kid and his Ma used one of her rare days off to take him to a protest: *GIVE OUR PARENTS A 44 HOUR WORK WEEK*, his sign had said. She hadn't lived to see that implemented. It's distressing how many people work twice that, nowadays, though he supposes he shouldn't cry too many tears over a CEO doing it.

"Someone's got to make the money to keep you all in toys and space suits," Pepper sighs. Smiling, Steve bends and kisses her cheek goodnight.

"Then I'll try to stitch up my uniform myself from now on, maybe earn you a day off," he promises. Glancing over, he sees the shadow of a smile on Jim's face, and makes bold enough to smile back at him.
Pepper nods somberly. "Thank you, Steve."

He shakes hands with Tony and Bruce; Natasha stands on tiptoe to grip his arm and kiss him quickly.

Tony grabs Jim up in a hug goodbye, arms locked tight around his shoulders, murmuring something in his ear. Tony's lips are pressed against the skin of Jim's neck as he speaks, like a kiss in motion. Jim nods against Tony, at whatever Tony's saying, and slaps him on the back exactly the right number of times to keep things friendly.

Throughout the exchange, there's a line of tension running across Jim's shoulders that's hard for Steve to watch.

"Are you sure you want to head back tonight?" Steve asks doubtfully, as they take the elevator back down to the parking garage. "I don't have anything planned for tomorrow, and it's a long drive."

"Unfortunately I have a flight out of Dulles early tomorrow morning," Jim sighs. "But you could always stay here in the Tower and catch a plane to D.C. tomorrow if you don't feel like coming with me."

Steve finds himself reluctant to give up more time alone with Jim, even knowing what he now thinks he knows about Jim and Tony. "No, I – um. I don't really need to sleep much, so I don't mind." An idea occurs to him. "I could drive, though, if you wanted to sleep on the way back."

Jim gives him a dubious look. "You ever drive a car like that before?"

"An electric car?"

He rolls his eyes. "A fine, delicate piece of machinery."


"That makes you qualified to star in a Vin Diesel movie, but not necessarily to drive my baby," Jim says.

Steve makes a mental note to look up Vin Diesel when he gets home. He really needs a notebook to write this stuff down in.

"Trust me," he says, shooting for a joke but finding that the words come out of his mouth soft and genuine. Jim's answering smile is slow, with intent behind it that makes Steve's skin hot.

"Okay," Jim says, just as soft. Steve thinks about leaning forward and kissing him, about making their first kiss happen here in the elevator at midnight in the middle of this hushed building. He lowers his head slightly. Jim angles his chin up an inch.

They reach their floor, and the elevator dings stylishly. Steve seems to remember elevators being a lot slower.

"Uh, I guess we should go," Steve says.

"After you," Jim says, waving Steve ahead. Steve knows, he knows, that Jim doesn't mean anything by it, but just that one little gentlemanly gesture feels good, makes Steve's breath catch a little as he walks through the elevator door. Jim politely walks out behind him.
They get situated in the car, Jim going over its operation in increasingly anxious detail. Steve grins.

"Let’s see how she handles, shall we?" he says, and makes sure to squeal the wheels as he backs out. Jim rolls his eyes and relaxes instantly.

When they get outside of the city, Jim is still sitting up, yawning furiously.

"You gonna catch some sack time or what?" Steve asks.

"All right, yeah, okay," Jim says. "Are you sure about this?"

Steve waves him off. The highway is wide and black, not too crowded, and Steve's always found driving to be soothing. "I like making myself useful."

"I noticed that," Jim says, putting his seat back as far as it goes and lying down. "Well, wake me if there's a car crash."

"You got it," Steve says, sparing a glance at Jim's closed eyes and relaxed mouth.

Going by Jim's instructions, Steve stops in at the same recharging station on the way back; by then, Jim's so out of it that the car stopping doesn't wake him up. Steve runs his fingers along the hood as the car recharges, thinking about the moment earlier today when they'd stood here together and touched each other, breathing each other's air.

Steve looks at Jim sleeping in the car and thinks, this fella is going to go on a date with me. We're going to date.

He takes a deep breath, leaning down to rest both palms on the car. He's careful about it; he doesn't want Jim to wake up to handprints on the hood.

It's been years since the serum, and Steve's not so lost in his body anymore. It's been decades since the forties in New York, and big strong guys expect to get fucked all the time now, or so the pornography on Google seems to say. It's been thirteen months since Bucky died.

Steve thinks he'll be okay. He's pretty sure.

*

The car coming to a full stop doesn't wake Jim up, and neither does the streetlight in front of Steve's building, so Steve has to call his name. He wishes he could reach over and touch him – run a finger against his jaw, or maybe place a palm against his shoulder, the way Tony had, but Steve knows better than to wake any kind of military man that way.

For all his caution, though, Jim stirs gently at the sound of his name, coming into consciousness with a slow-eyed smile.

"Wow, I was out," he says, blinking out at their surroundings.

"You slept the whole way," Steve agrees, unclipping his seatbelt, taking a little pleasure as he always does in the swift zip of it retracting. Such a neat device.

"I swear this isn't a preview of how I am on a date," he says, sitting up.

"Yeah? You promise to stay conscious the whole time?"

He cracks his neck. "There's a reason I'm in such demand with all the boys."
Steve licks his lips.

Jim starts to reach out, then draws his hand back.

"I'm out of town until next Friday," Jim says. Steve blinks at this for a second before realizing that they're scheduling.

"How about next Saturday, then?"

"Deal," Jim says.

They sit together for another long moment.

"Guess I'd better get home." Jim almost sounds like he's asking a question.

"Okay," Steve says.

When they get out of the car, Steve puts his shoulders back and his hands in his pockets while he stands back to let Jim get into the driver's seat. Jim stands next to the door, but doesn't sit down, so that they're standing close with the car door between them.

"I'll call you Friday," he says, "and we'll set a time. Figure out what we want to do."

"Sounds good." Jim's hands are draped over the top of the door. Steve puts his hands there too, next to Jim's, so that his thumbs brush Jim's pinkies.

"Is it the car?" Jim asks.

"The car?"

"The car that gets you excited? I'm not sure if you're more interested in touching me or it."

Steve takes a step back, smiling, ducking his head, and puts his hands back in his pockets. "It's you," he says. "It's definitely you."

"All right then." Jim's lopsided grin seems to get more beautiful every time Steve sees it.

*

When Steve gets inside it's almost four in the morning, but he's still keyed up; he decides to go online for a while instead of taking a book to bed like he normally does. He finds Tara's little icon and sees that zie's available. He messages hir, and they chat back and forth a bit before Steve confesses his conversation with Jim.

Not till next Saturday, but we're definitely going to go on a date, Steve writes.

yay!!!! u shld get s/t awesome 2 wear, Tara says. Steve feels a sudden sinking feeling at the thought. His stomach turns over in a way that's utterly familiar but that he can't quite place.

I guess, he says. Licking his lips, he adds, I haven't been out with anyone in a long time.

like, not since u started feeling nb/gq?

It's not quite right, but it's as close as he can get without explaining how they added a foot of height and over a hundred pounds of muscle to his body, then put his picture on posters across America. Yeah, he says.
well what do u wanna wear?

He thinks about it. Before his transformation, he'd worn makeup, or scarves, or sometimes stockings under his pants. Ladies' blouses, bright flowers. But it'd been just for fun, to bring out what he already knew he was. This feels different; makeup on his new body would be different.

Maybe something girly? he writes. Makeup or something?

omg my buddy Sage is gr8 at makeup, Tara says. theyre online rn, ill get them & we can find u some colors n stuff.

Steve feels himself blushing at the suggestion. This is his Bruce-approved computer; anything he orders on here will arrive anonymously. But the idea of buying makeup for himself seems dangerous, and he doubts he'd be able to put it on and wear it in front of anyone if it came. Least of all Jim.

It's just been so long.

ok can u send a pic? or else tell us abt ur complexion I guess?

Steve doesn't send a pic, because it would pretty much defeat the point, but he does tell Tara and Sage about his skin, hair, eyes, and lips, and then answers a lot of questions about his cheekbones and chin. They recommend some color combinations and strategies, but ultimately leave the decisions up to him.

theres so many options, Tara writes. if ur able ($$) u can get a bunch& experiment.

Okay, Steve writes back, and then says it out loud, shakily, to reassure himself. "Okay."

He does have money now, after all. It's not too big a waste, really, if the makeup comes and he never gets the nerve to put any on. He could always donate it to one of the local women's centers.

*

The next day, with Jim out of town and no SHIELD mission on the horizon, Steve decides to work through his movies some more. He's getting to the end of the list and also to the end of his patience, with Philadelphia making him cry in a way that, after his conversations with Arnie, he kind of resents.

At first it was something to see queer characters on the screen, kissing each other, dancing with each other, and even having sex with each other. He had sat forward on his chair at the endings of Brokeback Mountain and Boys Don't Cry. He felt like those films were documenting something that he knew from his own life. He felt like his history hadn't been forgotten after all. They were tragic, but they were also sympathetic, and that was something to see.

But now he's moved through appreciation to restless frustration, and finally to anger.

"JARVIS," he says, finally, pulling up the voice-interface app while the credits to Silence of the Lambs are still scrolling by, "are there any LGBT films where the LGBT people are – you know, happy? And not murderers? And not dead?" He tosses the remote up in the air and catches it, resisting the urge to throw it against the wall. Or through the wall.

"Certainly, Captain Rogers," JARVIS replies, after a moment. "Though that is sometimes difficult to determine. Can you specify your criteria for happiness?"
"Let's start with the ones where the queer characters aren't dead. Or murderers," Steve says darkly.

The second list is a lot better. Over the next few days, Steve watches *Kinky Boots*, and *The Birdcage*, and *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*, and he really likes them. In a way, they feel closer to his own life. The characters still get beat down, in those movies, but they always get up again, and they always have other people; Steve can recognize himself in that.

Or, well. He can recognize his old self, anyhow.

* 

On Tuesday he's feeling his cabin fever, and goes for a longer-than-usual run around the National Mall. Each step drains a little more energy away from him, but even all put together they don't lessen his anxiety. Instead it feels like he's running ever closer to Saturday night, to his date with Jim, to a time when he'll have to wear something for his date, and act appropriately for his date, and be a – be a modern-day gay man.

He has no idea how to do that.

There are two simple brown cardboard boxes outside Steve's door when he gets back from his run, just unmarked boxes like all the others he's received since he discovered internet shopping. He gets boxes of books, and CDs, and vinyl records, stuff he can't find around the neighborhood, and really this is no different as far as any of his neighbors are concerned, he's sure. Steve knows what's inside, though, knows that at least one of them is bound to be one of the special orders he made online the other day, and he picks them up with big shaking hands and takes them inside as fast as he can.

He throws the deadbolt behind him, and puts on the chain.

He makes himself take a shower and get dressed. Then he makes himself drink a few protein shakes from the fridge. He keeps an eye on the boxes while he drinks, to make sure they don't go anywhere.

The smaller box is the makeup.

He knows, immediately, that he was kidding himself when he thought he might not put it on. He bites his lip as he looks at all the components he's bought, and he's overwhelmed by shaking, hungry desire: he wants the stuff on his skin, and doesn't know how he waited this long in the first place. All that's holding him back is having to decide which one to use first.

Liquid mascara, an amazing idea that Steve can't wait to try. They even make it in brown now, which is wonderful for the blonds of the world. Powder blush, eyeliner, eyeshadow, lipliner, lipstick. Lipstick in *eight different colors*, a luxury Steve has never known before, from a delicate pink that Sage recommended for his complexion to a rich red that reminds him, inevitably, of Peggy.

If they'd ever married, maybe he and Peggy could've shared a lipstick sometimes, kissed each other with matching red lips. The image makes him ache with stifled desire, but he puts the thought aside. He'll never know.

He takes each item out of the box individually, touching it to experience the smooth, cool feeling of the new containers. They all have beautiful names, too, *petal pink* and *moulin rouge*, *adora* and *plumful* and *winter afternoon*.

He can't help but open one of the lipsticks, just to watch it push up past the holder obscenely, its
edge perfect and sheer like the sharpened blade of a sword. He runs it over his lips quickly, relishing the sensation of it against his skin, the sensation he's missed for years. It's hasty, just a hint of what he wants to do to himself, but it's enough to make him close his eyes in relief.

During their conversation, Tara had said that zie likes makeup because it makes hir feel in control of hirself and able to choose how the world sees hir. When he'd read that, Steve had liked it, and it's stuck with him since, in the days he's spent waiting for the stuff he ordered to arrive. He presses his lips together and feels the lipstick spread to his upper lip. It makes his big, square-jawed face his own in a way he hasn't ever really felt before.

Sitting in a little pile, his makeup seems an embarrassment of riches, far more than Bucky could ever have afforded back in Christmas of 1940. Back then, each and every item would've been a treasure. He used to carry them around in the pockets of his unassuming beige coat, or dab them on in the apartment before putting on his hat and ducking his head to hide the color. He used to look at himself in the mirror and love what he saw, he remembers that, loving the delicate girlish face that the makeup always brought to the surface. He used to love the person that the makeup revealed.

This package feels like a gift from that man, from that girl, sent miraculously across the decades, sent from the Steve Rogers with rouge on her cheeks and a scarf around her neck and freshly painted lips that begged men to kiss him. Steve treats it like a gift, trailing his fingers over every little pot and pencil.

The other package could have been books, he's ordered some new books that he couldn't find in the library or the local bookstore, but it's not heavy enough. He gets a knife from his Captain America belt and opens it carefully, mindful of the potentially delicate contents inside.

It's not books.

He picks up the skirt with reverence and joy, as he once did with his altar boy's robes and then later with his Army uniform. He delights in the soft silk fall of the material, the rich greens and yellows of the pattern, the cute little flippy bits at the bottom of the hem that are going to dance over his calves.

Below the skirt, nestled in tissue paper, are stockings, panties, and garters, perfect and gorgeous in white patterned lace.

His dick is getting hard at the idea of putting this stuff on, at just the imagined sensation of these stockings against his skin.

The rest of the makeup will wait. Steve's hands are shaking far too much, now, to apply it with anything approaching skill. He pulls off his shirt, fumbles his watch onto the table. He takes off his pants and underwear, then holds his breath while he steps into the garter belt.

It fits perfectly.

Steve will have to remember to thank Jelani, who'd told him about the online lingerie stores for men.

He pulls the stockings up over his legs and fastens them to the garter belt around his waist.

Each little clasp that he attaches feels like a part of his body being carefully, sensually, rebuilt. Like when they put him in the Vita-Ray machine, when all his bones and organs got pulled apart and rearranged, but without it hurting even a little bit. Steve shivers.
He hasn't worn stockings since 1942. He hasn't worn stockings since Abraham Erskine made his body ready for war and too big for almost all the ladies' sizes.

It feels like coming home.

He doesn't put on the panties or the skirt, not yet; instead he walks in front of the full-length mirror in his bedroom wearing nothing but stockings and the garter belt, his cock hard and leaking, and Steve in that moment loves the person he sees.

His powerful legs, turned soft and feminine.

His dick, vulnerable and red, aching for touch, pressed against his belly. His lips the same red from the hasty slash of lipstick that marks his mouth. His nipples already tight with desire.

His ass, above the garters, set off by the white straps, round and pink and so ready to be fucked.

Desperate, aching, Steve drops to his knees on the bedroom floor in his stockings and takes his prick in his hand. Even that first touch is enough to make him gasp and stutter his hips forward. He grips hard, squeezes, pumps into his fist, but it's not enough; in these clothes, he needs to be fucked. He sucks the fingers of his other hand and puts them inside his ass, groaning aloud now as he pushes hard and sure into himself. He rocks back and forth, back and forth, and it's not long before he comes, still staring into the mirror, still loving what he sees, still beautiful and girlish, his open panting mouth red and ready.

When he's done he cleans up with still-shaking hands and lets himself calm down a bit. He might have to wait a while before he can try the skirt.
Thursday is his intel-gathering strike op with Natasha, and Deputy Director Hill has asked him to come up to the Triskelion a little early. Steve wonders if there’s new intel, some change to the plan they’d worked out. He pulls on the Captain America suit that Agent Coulson designed for him when he was first brought out of the ice, the one he's been wearing on all his missions.

After his adventure with his new stockings the other day, though, it feels a little different to put on the now-familiar uniform. He's alive once again to the strange, joyous, upside-down feeling he used to get when he was on tour with the USO: alive to the way the tights can feel decadent as he pulls them up his legs, to the way the protective cup that goes over his genitals can feel obscene, to the way the star on his chest can feel like the kinds of shining, sparkling clothes that he used to watch the drag queens model down at Vincent's. The new uniform is a good combination of his two previous ones, actually: functional and tough, but decorated in bright primary colors, clinging gladly to his body. Today, it makes him feel like the makeup, or the stockings: confident, elated, and . . . well, shielded.

It's been a long time since he felt this way about the uniform, like it was anything more than a tool that he used in order to do his job. He walks into the Triskelion smiling.

"Your publicist quit," Deputy Director Hill says shortly, when he gets to her office. "Something about you making excuses to never have to do anything he suggested."

"Yeah," Steve sighs, a little deflated. "Sorry. It's not that I don't appreciate why it's important, it's just –"

She holds up a hand, and he stops talking. "I don't care, Rogers, honestly. You've been assigned a new one, see if you get along with him a little better. He's a younger guy, maybe that'll work better for you."

"Okay," Steve agrees.

"The first thing your new publicist has suggested is a wardrobe change," Hill continues. "To get away from the idea of you as a comic book character, make you seem a little more like a realistic modern-day hero."

Steve blinks, groping for something to say. "I – I did used to wonder if the nostalgic uniform was a little old-fashioned." He rubs his thumb against the hidden zipper at his waist, the place he would pull to take the thing off.

She gestures at a cardboard box on the briefing room table. Steve wonders, for a wild moment, if it has a skirt inside. That would certainly be a modern touch.

The material inside the box is a dull navy blue. Pulling it out, he sees that there's a silver star on the chest, but no other colors present. There are matching boots and gloves in sturdy brown leather. "Wow," he says.

"You have veto power. You don't have to wear this if you don't want to."

Frowning down at the suit, he struggles against the sinking feeling in his chest as he says, "I'm sure
I'll get comfortable with it."

"Rogers, looking good," Natasha says appreciatively. "It's still not subtle, but it's a step forward."

"One day I'll get you to explain how a catsuit with built-in shiny blue tasers is appropriate for a stealth operative," he replies, shrugging to settle the shoulder seam of the new uniform in place. It itches a little. The padding is different. He doesn't like the shape of the star.

"My super secret spy training prevents me from telling you," she deadpans. Steve smiles; he likes Natasha. Strangely, given her line of work, she strikes him as the most honest person he's met in the future so far.

"So they have you babysitting me again, huh, Romanoff?" Steve's requested Natasha a few times, and likes working with her, but he's pretty sure her usual missions are a lot less smash and grab, a lot more intelligence-gathering.

"More like the other way around, probably." She smiles without meeting his eyes. Steve thinks for a moment, then asks again.

"Really, though. Aren't you supposed to be abroad with Clint, doing spy stuff?"

Now she does meet his eyes. "That's normally what I'd do, yeah. And you're right, Fury and Hill assigned me to babysit you, back when you first woke up."

Steve nods. "And now?"

Natasha shrugs. "And now, maybe I'm content to let Clint be the one sitting in the same room for two weeks, surrounded by Lebanese candy wrappers and the smell of his own body, waiting for a target to move."

He chuckles at this, but he doesn't miss the deflection, so he asks again. You can't be circuitous or polite with Natasha, he's learning, but maybe a direct question will get a direct answer. "Do you like working with me? Doing the more hands-on, physical stuff?"

"I do," Natasha answers. Then she punches him on the arm. "So stop fishing for compliments, Rogers, and let's go do the work that we both enjoy so much."

Steve punches her back, lightly. "You've got all the materials?"

She nods, handing over the map for him to study and memorize. When he hands it back, she provides him with a handful of USB sticks.

"Any computer you see," she instructs.

He nods. "Yes ma'am."

"And keep on calling me ma'am, I like it."

He grins down at her as they walk for the hangar together. "Yes, ma'am."

The mission goes smoothly, at least at first; they scale the wall of the facility and manage to enter without anyone noticing. Natasha does the complicated alarm systems, Steve picks the locks, and before too long they're in the server room and downloading everything they can get their hands on.
"Natasha," Steve says, starting to feel uneasy. "The layout doesn't match what we had on our maps." The bones of the building are the same, and the server room is in the same place, but that's all. The technology and signs of habitation that should be here aren't. Most of the place looks deserted, in fact.

She frowns. "I know."

"So if they're not using this space the way they used to, what are they using it for?" This building is supposed to be a data bank and strategy center for one of the Ten Rings' private armies, but it looks nothing like that.

She thinks for a moment, then nods. "I'll check the security feeds."

She piggybacks on the in-house camera system and brings up an image of a room with very heavy protection.

"That's where the real intel is," Steve says, taking in the number of people and the orderliness of their actions.

"No," Natasha says slowly. "Or, well, maybe. But they're not guarding a computer or a science experiment. It's a prisoner."

Natasha doesn't usually make that kind of statement unless she's sure. "How do you know?"

She points at the screen. "The locks on the doors. The positions of the cameras. Those dots of spilled soup on the ground – these guys are way too disciplined to eat on duty, so who's the soup for? But mostly it's that men guarding computers or petri dishes don't feel guilty. Or ashamed. These ones do."

Steve squints at the fuzzy black and white image, trying to see what she does in the turn of their shoulders, the position of their heads, the motion of their eyes. He can't do it. He's reminded, again, of the way she looked away from Tony's hand on Jim's shoulder, just as if she hadn't noticed it.

He brings his focus back to the job at hand. Guilt. Shame. "Not a combatant, then," Steve reasons. "A civilian."

"Most likely," Natasha agrees.

"I guess we've got a secondary target," Steve says. Natasha raises her eyebrows.

"It's not in our brief," she says neutrally. "And those are a lot of guards."

"You know more about this than I do, but doesn't a lot of guards imply that they don't plan on keeping this prisoner around for long?" Steve asks.

"Yes."

Steve feels determination settle over him. "Then we've got a secondary target," he says. He watches Natasha carefully. She nods, and doesn't say another word about it.

Instead she moves like lightning at his side and takes down as many guards as he does. Where he can, Steve holds himself back from killing, but it's not always possible.

Eventually, one way or another, they've got all the guards down on the ground, and they're still standing.
"You gotta teach me that thing with the ankles," Steve says, breathing a little hard, while Natasha fiddles with the keypad and thumbprint scanner.

"We should train together," she agrees.

Inside the room is a young girl, no older than eight, tied to a chair. She has no obvious major injuries. Natasha moves faster than Steve does and crouches in front of her.

"Hey, it's all right," she says, more softly than Steve has ever heard her before. "We got you now. You're safe."

Steve hopes to God that's true.

Natasha's knife slices through the ropes. When the girl puts her arms up imploringly, Natasha lifts her right up, holstering the blade.

"Science experiments," she says, low and furious.

There is a lot of lab equipment around. Looking more closely, Steve thinks he recognizes some of it, like an updated version of the machines they used on him. And there are needle marks along the girl's arms, into her major muscle groups. Steve remembers the sting of those needles like it was yesterday.

"That fucking serum," he curses.

"Yeah, no shit. She's not the first, Rogers."

He knew that, he'd been briefed on that, and Bruce is living proof, but it's still a terrible thing to see and to know, that what he did in the war had this as a consequence. That his missions had set free the technology capable of doing this, that his victories made people want to experiment on others.

A recovering guard is waiting for Natasha when she comes out the door. Natasha punches him out with her right fist, not even jostling the child held in her left arm.

When they get back to the Triskelion, the girl – who hasn't said a word since she was rescued - is put into what Natasha calls "SHIELD protective services," because apparently this kind of thing happens more often than anyone's told him.

"It's good," Natasha reassures him. "I've been there, they're good people. They'll make sure she doesn't have any lasting effects from whatever was done to her. Stuff the normal social services can't handle. And they'll help her recover psychologically."

"What if she does have lasting effects?" Steve asks, dry-mouthed. He doesn't know if he means physical or psychological. Both seem likely.

Natasha shrugs, glances down the hallway at the girl being led away. "We both found a place in the world, didn't we?"

Steve's read Natasha's file, and knows what she means by that "we." *We scientific experiments.* It occurs to him, suddenly, that what was given to Natasha in the Red Room might've been a descendant of the supersoldier serum as well. He doesn't say anything.

"How many of us are there?" Steve asks.

He breaks his gaze away from the hallway the girl had disappeared into, and meets Natasha's eyes
instead. She doesn't blink.

"Not so many anymore," she says. "To be honest, I thought SHIELD had shut down all the . . . organizations doing research into making more." She juts her chin at the hallway, at the afterimage of the little girl she'd held so carefully in her arms. "She's the first in a long time."

"But probably not the only one," Steve says. "Sounds like something we'll have to look into." If there are supersoldier experiments being done on children, on anyone, then Steve has to stop it. "We don't – the world doesn't need any more of us."

Natasha looks briefly surprised, but then nods. "I'm in. But we'll have to wait for the data we seized to be released before we can start."

"Okay," Steve says, looking down the hallway again, towards the spot they last saw the girl.

Natasha looks too, for a while. "Come get a beer with me, Rogers," she says.

There's only one thing that Steve can say to that. "Yes, ma'am."

*

The bar Natasha picks is dark, a little grungy, and has more beers on tap than Steve has ever seen. It reminds him a little of the dive bars down near the Navy Yard, back in the forties, and Steve feels suddenly too-conscious of his civvies: man's loose black t-shirt, man's jeans, man's shoes. Women up and down the bar give him the once-over when he walks in, and at least one man does as well, taking in his height and the breadth of his shoulders approvingly. He wishes he could shrink down a few sizes. He wishes he had his new makeup, even just a little tin of it that he could keep in his pocket and not put on.

Natasha makes him grab a table and brings back a tray of alcohol from the bar: two huge glasses of beer and a bunch of shots. She plunks them down, licks a spill of foam from the outside of her thumb, and sits down backwards on the chair, splay-legged, crossing her arms and resting them on the back. In her brown leather jacket, dark blue jeans, and combat boots, she looks dangerous.

There are times when Steve feels like he could fall for Natasha.

"You wanna talk about what happened today?" Steve asks.

"No. Do you?"

Steve laughs bitterly. "About atrocities carried out in my name? No."

"Then let's gossip, Rogers, whaddya say?"

"I say that sounds fine to me." He takes a sip of the beer; it's dark and rich, a bit like a beer he remembers having in Austria, when the Howling Commandos had made a deserted bar their base of operations for a couple of weeks.

"So, how's your love life?"

Steve is tempted to respond to the question with a spit take. "I thought we weren't talking about painful subjects tonight," he says, fast as he can. He doesn't feel up to telling her about his date with Jim, or about the growing trepidation that he feels about it.

"Ouch, well, that answers my question." She does one of the shots, and Steve, to be polite, does one
"You do two for every one of mine, Rogers, it's only fair."

Steve obediently throws back another shot. "You know it's not going to work."

"That's what you tell people. We'll see."

Seeing an opportunity, Steve asks, "What about everyone else's love lives? Surely there's gossip there that I'm missing."

"Hmmm, good question."

"Like," Steve prompts, "what's the deal with Tony and Pepper and Jim? They're awfully close."

"Rogers, you do two for every one of mine, it's only fair." Natasha is at least kind enough to give him a quirked eyebrow that tells him she's rumbled his attempt at subtlety.

"Which one of them are you interested in?"

"I don't – "

"No, it's okay, I can figure it out. Pepper's pretty classy, and if Peggy Carter is anything to go by you like classy dames. But she might be a little – " she grins – "feminine for you, hmmm?"

Steve folds his arms on the table and lets his head fall down onto them. He's mortified that Natasha can see him, and see him so easily, but at the same time the exposure feels good, like coming up out of water to a breath of clean air. She knows, and he didn't have to tell her.

"Right," Natasha says briskly. "You and Tony have a weird energy that is weird to be around and it's not necessarily non-sexual but it is weird. Too weird for you, maybe. And you did spend all that time in the car with Rhodey – or sorry, I mean Jim – last weekend."

Steve lifts his head, a furious blush making his neck and ears burn. "Please tell me it's not this painfully obvious to everyone," he begs.

"Pffft," Natasha says. "I'm highly trained in the secret art of knowing which of my coworkers are boning."

"That's a comfort."

"Jim's had a thing for Tony for years. Tony loves him like a brother and is deeply, deeply sexually attracted to him. Tony doesn't notice because he's deeply sexually attracted to most people, he just tunes it out."

"I do not understand that guy," Steve mutters, frowning as he takes this in.

"Jim also adores Pepper," Natasha continues, after a moment, "and the two of them are really good
friends. I don't know if they're into each other or what, which usually means that they don't know either. Tony thinks Pepper is the best thing ever to happen to him and would do nothing to jeopardize that.

Oh. That actually makes the whole situation more confusing. "Okay."

"So if you and Jim are hooking up, it's probably best to get over those jealousy feelings early on. I don't think he's going to stop being into Tony anytime soon. That kind of crush is a really old habit, and hard to break."

"Well, all right then," he says, feeling a little disappointed, and a little like he has to google the phrase "hooking up." It's not like he hadn't seen it himself, the way Jim looks at Tony, but he was hoping Natasha would have something to tell him other than 'the guy you like has been in unrequited love with someone else for years.' "Thanks." He tosses back the rest of his beer. It's not making him drunk but it is making his skin feel hot and sweaty, or maybe that's just him, feeling too-conscious of all the space his body takes up in the crowded bar.

"Hey, it doesn't mean he can't fall in love with you. Or hasn't already," Natasha says. "Hell, if he's like most queer military guys, you were probably his boyhood crush."

Steve laughs. "I'm not sure if that helps or not, honestly."

"You two would be cute together. I'm all for it."

"Thanks, Natasha." It's no more or less than he should've expected from her: brutal honesty followed by unflinching support. He nudges her with his arm. "So what about you? How's your love life?"

She winks. "Hill won't let me take her dancing."

This surprises Steve into a smile. "Really?"

Natasha's smile disappears and she looks away. "Yeah. Really." She takes another shot, so Steve takes two. It polishes off all the alcohol on the table.

"SHIELD doesn't have fraternization rules?"

Natasha's face doesn't betray anything, a sure sign that there's something underneath to betray. "Nope. But maybe Hill does. She doesn't even notice me."

Steve can't really imagine anyone not noticing Natasha. "Well, have you tried not calling her by her last name?"

"Girls do like that," Natasha agrees.

"And you could talk to her about how you feel," he says, knowing he's a huge hypocrite.

"Look at you, full of good suggestions."

"Here to help," Steve sighs.

He keeps thinking about it, though, after their conversation moves on to who Nick Fury might be dating and what kind of beer they should order next. He still doesn't know how to fix his problem, but letting Jim in on it might be the best first step.

*
When Steve gets home that night, he's restless, so he does some calisthenics while he watches *Saving Face* and *Big Eden*; each one has such a sweet ending that it makes him want to watch it again. The movies from his new list aren't always as polished as the award-winning ones, but Steve likes them better. In these movies, people are awkward or don't necessarily know themselves that well, but they all get brave in the end, finding the people they love and who can love them back.

There are a bunch of TV shows at the bottom of JARVIS's list, which Steve hasn't looked at yet, but he might skip the other films and give them a try. The first title appeals to him; he has no idea who RuPaul might be, but he's pretty sure that "Drag Race" is a pun, and a pretty funny one too. He'll watch that one next, he decides, as he gets ready for bed.

But before anything else, first thing in the morning, he's going to call Jim. He needs to. He learned tonight that he can't even sit in a bar with a friend without feeling uncomfortable, and any kind of date is going to be ten times worse. He needs to tell Jim.

* The next morning, he puts off calling: instead he takes a run, takes a shower, eats breakfast, cleans up the dishes. Eventually he has to mutter "coward" at himself to make himself pick up the phone. He takes a deep breath, braces himself, and dials the number.

Jim picks up on the second ring.

"Hey, Steve," he says warmly. "I'm in the airport, what's up?"

Steve gets up from his couch and starts walking around the apartment, neating his books and newspapers, brushing away a bit of dust on top of the TV. "I can call back if it's a bad time," he says.

"Nope, it's a great time. I'm twiddling my thumbs here, waiting for the pilot. I'm tempted to go out there and fly the plane myself."

Steve smiles. He never liked waiting around for flights either. "But the flight's still gonna be on time?" he asks.

"I'll be there for our appointment tomorrow, if that's what you're asking," Jim replies. He says *appointment* instead of *date* because he's sitting in a military airport, probably surrounded by soldiers and airmen.

"It's a little bit private, I don't know if you're in a good position to talk – "

"Hang on, I'll go somewhere more quiet," he says. *Quiet* instead of *private*. In a way, it's comfortingly familiar; Steve can understand this language.

"All right," Jim says, "Now we can talk freely. What's up?"

Steve can hear the nervousness in his voice, though whether it's because of where he is or because he's afraid of what Steve might say, he doesn't know. He doesn't want to cancel, but he's also increasingly sure that he's not going to be able to handle a date when he doesn't feel like himself, or when he feels like he's pretending. *I don't want you to have to pretend anymore,* Peggy had said to him, and Steve feels it too, the deep desire to have at least a few people he can be honest with.

He wants Jim to be one of those people.

And he isn't a modern gay man like he's seen in the movies; he just isn't.
"I was – well, I guess I was wondering," Steve says, trying to remember the words he'd practiced in the mirror. "I was wondering whether you'd still be interested in dating me if I were a little different than my usual image."

There's a little pause. Steve picks up his socks off the floor and puts them in the hamper. He walks to the bedside table and starts dusting the electronic alarm clock with his fingers.

"Well, you're interested in dating me," Jim says slowly, "so that already goes against your popular image."

"Yeah. I guess I meant – more like, the popular image of me as a man." 

"Oh," Jim says. Steve wishes he knew what expression was on his face. "Well, you talked about Chelsea Manning before, and I guess I kind of wondered . . . "

"Yeah?" Steve swallows.

Jim's voice drops a little lower. "I'm bisexual, Steve, so if you're a, a woman, I'd still want, uh, to date you."

Steve's glad that Jim can't see him blush. "I'm not really – I'm not trans like Private Manning," he says. "I'm still figuring out how I feel."

There are a couple of clean collared shirts waiting to be hung up. Steve tucks the phone against his shoulder and puts them in the closet.

"Okay," Jim says. "Okay. Well. It's obviously something you want me to know about before our date, or you wouldn't have called," he reasons. "So we can start with that. What is it that you want me to know?"

Steve breathes out. That's much easier to answer than the bigger question of what words he's going to use to describe himself, or what his body might mean in this modern era. "I guess I was wondering how you'd feel if I wore a little makeup. Or maybe – maybe sometimes, you know, girly types of clothes."


A giddy bubble of laughter starts in Steve's belly, but he holds it back. "Really? Because it's okay if you don't – "

"I would love to see you in makeup," Jim insists. "Oh God. I bet you'll be so pretty."

This sends a wave of heat over the surface of Steve's body, shivering the skin on the back of his neck and making his dick heavy between his legs. "Yeah?" he says.

He sits down on the bed.

"Yeah," Jim says. "Definitely. Wow. Okay. Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Steve licks his lips. This is already so much. "No," he says.

"Do you want me to treat you different? Like a . . . I don't know, a lady?"

"Maybe sometimes," Steve admits. "Maybe we could – work up to that, you know. Feel it out."

"That sounds like it could be fun," Jim says, hesitantly. Steve can hear his breathing through the
"Yeah," Steve says, surprised. It hadn't really occurred to him that the figuring out parts and the playing around parts could be fun in themselves. They always were with Bucky, and with Frank, and with Marlene and Betty, but for some reason he got the sense that these days, everyone had to be completely sure of who they were and what they wanted for it to be real.

He likes Jim; playing around, with Jim along for the ride, could be a lot of fun.

"All right, then, I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven, is that okay? I've got an idea where we can go, if you don't want anyone to see us."

"Okay," Steve says, smiling and blushing. "That's a good idea. Don't be late."

Jim laughs. "Not much chance of that."

They say goodbye and hang up, and Steve is left feeling lighter than he has in over a week.

"Could be fun," he says out loud, testing the concept.

His skirt is still sitting in its box.

He takes off everything he's wearing and folds it all carefully, leaving it on the bed.

Walking naked from his bedroom to the front room feels daring in itself, but it's nothing compared to the feeling of stepping, as delicately as he can with his big feet, into the skirt.

It feels good against his skin. Soft.

It swishes around his knees when he walks.

It's brightly colored, green and yellow in a swirling pattern that's almost floral. Steve hasn't had much opportunity to wear these colors, not in a long time, and it reinforces the feeling that this is his decision, his choice for how he should look.

He doesn't look in the mirror at first, just looks down and walks around the apartment, loving the flow of the pattern as he moves. He's almost afraid that looking in the mirror will ruin it by making him conscious, again, of his huge, masculine body.

There's no way he can avoid it forever, though, so the next time he walks into the bedroom he forces himself to look up.

His chest and shoulders are as broad as ever, but now that's offset by the way the skirt exaggerates the slimness of his hips and the way the flare at the bottom feminizes his legs. The combination is good. Almost right. He still misses his small body, his sloped shoulders and soft jaw, but this – his new body in his new clothes – feels like it might be him, too.

There's a faint sheen of moisture on his upper lip in the mirror, and he realizes with a start that he's sweating, from nothing more than walking around his apartment a couple of times. He walks back out to the main room.

The door's locked. He's all alone. SHIELD fixed it so that the windows are one-way, so that no photographers can see in. Bruce fixed it so Steve can jam the listening devices that SHIELD installed if he wants to. He tells himself to calm the heck down.

While wearing his skirt, he makes himself a cup of tea, then drinks it, standing in his kitchen, still
in his skirt.

With his skirt on, he sits down at his computer and checks his messages. His skirt swirling around his legs, he walks over to the couch, grabs a book, and sits down, his skirt settling prettily under him.

Eventually, he stops checking the deadbolt, and he stops sweating.

*

He starts putting on his makeup hours before Jim's due to pick him up, and it turns out it's a good thing he does. The liquid mascara – while a lot smoother and faster to apply – gets clumped in his lashes and then all over his face and eyes, so that he has to wash everything off and start again.

And it's actually really hard to wash modern makeup off.

He starts again with the eyeshadows and eyeliners, trying to blend the colors together like it showed in the tutorial on Youtube. It works pretty well, and when Steve pulls his focus back a little and really looks at his eyes in the mirror, the change is powerful, dramatic.

The eyeliner and mascara – which he is finally getting the hang of – make his eyes even more visible. He's always had long eyelashes, but now they stand out startlingly from his square-jawed face. When he bats his eyes he looks . . . sexy. Feminine.

He doesn't want to overdo it, so he decides to start just with his eyes and his lips. He adds a little color to his eyebrows, too, as lightly as he can, and then looks over his lipsticks. *Moulin rouge* is the one he bought because it made him think of Peggy, of the deep rich red she always preferred. He thinks it's a good shade for bravery. He picks it up, opens it, and watches it curl up out of the tube.

Yes.

As the color goes on his mouth, it's like he becomes another person. Or – more like, he becomes another kind of Steve. He hasn't ever done his own makeup on his new face; Dorothy or Carol always did it for him for the tour, and it was never as elaborate or colorful as this. His eyes are smoky and dark, his lips are full and red, and the overall effect is so, so pretty. His jaw is still square and his face is still wide but no one looking at him could possibly see that first: they'd have to see his mouth, and his darkened eyelashes, and the high natural blush in his cheeks that just wearing this stuff brings out of him. No one looking at him could mistake what he is.

"Hi," he says into the mirror, like a dolt. It's been so long since he's seen himself reflected there, since he's really felt like he and the mirror-Steve were one and the same. It makes him feel light, as if all the cells in his body are filled with helium and straining upwards.

"Hi there, beautiful." He says it in a low whisper, all he can manage, but it still feels good, even if it is silly.

No one's called him beautiful since Bucky, not like that. But he feels it now, the possibility that he can be this again. There are tears welling up behind his eyes, but he blinks them back ruthlessly; he hasn't done all this hard work to see it ruined now.

Before, going out on a date with Jim seemed daunting, a wall too high for him to scale. Now he feels like he can take on the world, and he can't wait for seven o'clock to arrive.
His only regret is that he can't take a selfie to show to Tara and Sage on the internet.

*  
Jim knocks on his door at seven exactly. Steve's just wearing his regular guy clothes, after all, not feeling ready for anyone to see him in his skirt. Also, he realized belatedly that he doesn't have the shoes for it.

Anyway, the makeup feels like more than enough. He peeks out his door, but none of his neighbors are around.

Jim has a flower in his hand; a yellow rose with its stem cut short. Yellow for friendship, Steve recalls, not at all presumptuous.

"Hey," he says. Steve is really relieved to see that he looks nervous, too. "You look amazing." And he leans up to brush a light kiss onto Steve's cheek.

Steve clears his throat. "You too," he says. Jim does: he's in a soft-looking yellow shirt, a perfect match to the rose, and fitted grey slacks. Steve can see a hint of dark chest hair peeking out from under his shirt.

"Is that for me?" Steve asks, pointing at the flower.

Jim hands it over. "You could wear it in your lapel, if you wanted," he suggests, gesturing at Steve's suit jacket. Steve startles at the idea, remembering the carnation that Betty and Marlene had given him, all those years ago.

"Perfect," Steve says, doing just that. He stands aside. "Do you want to come in?" He figured there weren't many places they could go together, not with Steve done up like this.

But Jim shakes his head no and leads them, not down the stairs, but up, towards the roof. Steve's checked it out himself, and the door to the roof is usually locked, but Jim pushes it open easily and then they're climbing out into the warm evening air.

The space is all concrete and dust, except for an oasis near one wall, where carpeting has been laid down and umbrellas put up for shade. There's a table with an elegant white tablecloth flapping gently in the breeze and with plates and glasses and silverware set up on top.

There are more yellow roses: on the table, along the edges of the oasis, along the fabric-covered edge of the roof, on the poles of the umbrellas.

"I know it's a little much for a first date," Jim says, apologetically. "But I figured – I didn't know when you'd last been on a real date, and wanted to do something special."

"This is beautiful," Steve says solemnly. "I love it. How did you even do it?"

"You hang out with Tony Stark long enough, you learn how to organize a surprise rooftop rendezvous in complete secrecy," Jim says, satisfied.

*Did you and Tony have a lot of rendezvous?*, Steve wants to ask, but doesn't. Instead, when Jim cocks his head at one of the chairs, he walks over to it and lets Jim hold it out for him.

"Now, there are two options," Jim says. "I hired a staff to cook for us and serve the food, but if you're not comfortable with anyone seeing us, they won't come up here."
Steve tries to get his mind past the hired a staff part to the actual question Jim's asking. "Aren't you worried they'll see us, too?"

He shakes his head. "These are Tony's people. They have non-disclosure agreements and are very, very well compensated for their silence. Have been for many years, for things more scandalous than this."

Steve thinks about it – not about his fear of being outed, not really, but about the idea of any person, other than Jim, seeing him wearing lipstick and mascara.

"I'd like them to come up here," Steve says. "I don't mind."

"All right," Jim says. He walks over to the door and knocks three times before coming back and sitting down across from Steve.

Two middle-aged women in white aprons come up a moment later and start pouring wine and water. Two more women follow, setting little plates of food down in front of them. At first, Steve ducks his head, but the servers are kind and unobtrusive, not even seeming to care about his makeup, so Steve looks up again.

That's when he notices that the food looks very, very fancy.

"I – this is too much, isn't it," Jim says, watching Steve's expression.

"No, no, it's really nice," Steve says. "I just – I can't imagine what this cost." The roses alone, he thinks.

Jim shrugs. "I wanted to spend money on you."

Steve picks up his fork. "Then I guess I'd better enjoy myself," he says bracingly. The appetizer is a delicate-looking seafood dish with brightly colored vegetables he doesn't recognize. It's nice, he thinks, that Jim would set this up so that Steve could try new things, rather than trying to feed him what he thinks he might've eaten in the forties.

"You're very brave, Rogers," Jim grins, watching him. "Doing battle with that shrimp."

"Not all of us can storm a beach, or drive a tank," Steve recites, taking his first experimental bite and smiling at the taste, smiling at the sound of Jim's full laughter.

* 

They eat and talk through the sunset, then on into the dark as the servers light candles around them. After a while they move to the comfier chairs nearer to the edge of the roof. For the first time since Steve's known him, Jim opens up a little, talking about his childhood and his family. It turns out they have a lot in common; Jim was an only child, like Steve, and his dad was in the military.

"A vehicle mechanic," Jim specifies, "with the Army. He's retired now."

Steve nods. He wants to know more, but doesn't want to break the spell, whatever magic is making Jim comfortable enough to talk about himself. "Is that why you went into the military?"

"Yeah. And it's why I became an engineer," Jim says, smiling. "I grew up fixing things with my dad. Wanted to be just like him."

Moved, and thinking about his Ma, Steve asks, "What does he think of your career now?" It makes
Jim smile softly.

"He's proud. He doesn't say it, but every time I'm in the news he calls me up to tell me about it."

"That's good," Steve says. "He should be proud of you."

Jim nods, then looks away for a moment, and the smile slips off of his face. He doesn't say anything for a while, and the silence feels a little awkward to Steve. Eventually Jim picks up the conversation again and changes the subject.

"Yeah, he was worried for a while when I became friends with Tony in college, but now that it's all worked out, he's fine with it," Jim says. He goes on to tell a few stories, all of them fun and light: about his time in college with Tony, about building things with Tony, about his superheroing with Tony. It's a little bit like hearing Peggy talk about Angie, and makes him feel the same combination of jealousy and fondness. But, Steve reminds himself, Jim is here with him right now.

It occurs to Steve that maybe Jim's nervous about this date, too.

When Jim asks, Steve talks about his life before the war, sharing a few of the good police raid and bar fight stories he'd told Bruce. They're starting to become familiar to him again, like they were back at Vincent's, as stories he can tell, and he feels a sense of pleasure dwelling over the names of everyone he knew back then. They're all long dead, but they feel alive when he speaks their names: Frank, Betty, Marlene, Hyam, Johnny, Helena, Jackie. Little Ira. George and Bartie, Frank's roommates. Benny, whose mom once fed Steve cake.

He realizes after a while that he's not much better than Jim, telling stories about old lovers on a first date. But he's starting to wonder if that's part of what he sees in Jim, or what they see in each other: a sense of longing that's recognizable even across the decades.

For all his reminiscing, though, he doesn't mention Bucky.

Jim is a good listener, asking interested questions and making funny comments that give Steve new ways of looking at his own past.

Part way through, Steve reaches over to take Jim's hand; Jim looks startled, but then, after a moment, he opens his fingers to accept it. They stay there like that while a few of the brightest stars struggle into existence above them, fighting against the D.C. light pollution.

As the evening winds down, Jim walks him back down to his door. They're still holding hands; now they've been doing it a while, it feels almost like an old habit. With a small sense of shock, Steve realizes that he hasn't thought about his hands – their size, their strength, their lack of delicacy – all night, not even when he reached out for Jim's hand in the first place. Maybe that's a good sign.

"It's a really short walk to your door, unfortunately," Jim says.

"It was a nice walk, at least," Steve says. Jim smiles and as they step through the apartment door Steve pushes it closed behind them, tugs Jim in by his hand, and kisses him, full, on the mouth.

Jim's surprised at first, but quickly melts into it. His lips are soft. His mouth is hot. Steve kisses him for a good long while, keeping his mouth mostly closed but tasting Jim's lips eagerly.

It comes to a natural end, and they both pull back, blinking. "Yeah," Jim says, as if in answer to a question Steve didn't ask.
"I agree," Steve says, grinning. Jim rolls his eyes.

"I like your lipstick," Jim says. "Did I tell you? It's pretty."

"Thanks," Steve says. He swings their hands together lightly.

"You're pretty," Jim says softly. He sounds a little nervous, like he's not sure it's the right thing to say. He has said it before, but not while he was standing right in front of Steve, not while the taste of his mouth was still on Steve's lips. The effect is electrifying.

"Thank you," Steve says hoarsely.

"Can I kiss you again?"

"Yeah," Steve says, already leaning in.

It takes them a while to pull apart this time. "I should go, huh," Jim says, his breath tickling Steve's lips. Steve's cock is getting hard and his body is waking up, coming alive to the solid presence of Jim's broad shoulders and strong arms and perfect wide smile.

As much as he's turned on right now, though, when he thinks about getting fucked – the reality of it, someone touching his body like that – it's hard to deal with. Just imagining it makes him feel disoriented and sick, almost the way he did when he was first transformed. He's really not ready to get in bed with someone.

"Yeah," Steve says, "you should go."

Darting in quickly, he presses one more kiss against Jim's mouth.

"Should we go on another date?"

"Eh, why not," Steve says.

"Maybe you should plan the next one," Jim suggests, and Steve smiles.

"I could do that. Next weekend? Barring international superhero emergencies?"

"You're on."

They sort of stare into each other's eyes for a long minute, and it gets pretty goopy.

"Okay, I'm going," Jim says.

"Right. Thank you for a lovely evening, Jim."

"I had a great time," Jim says, then drops Steve's hand and heads out the door and down the stairs, looking back over his shoulder every now and again and smiling.

* 

Steve texts Bruce – went on a date! didn't even die of it! – and Natasha – Jim is amazing and my love life is now more exciting than yours, Romanoff, lnk if you want tips – and, once he's calm enough to sit down, sends messages to Jelani and Tara online – turns out he's really into me wearing makeup and experimenting! SUCH a relief!.

He emails Arnie, too, to tell him that not only did he finally call his guy, he had dinner with him.
He gets various replies, most of them with lots of exclamation marks and congratulations, Bruce's with about seventeen happy faces, Arnie's with a comment about him being the slowest man alive, and Natasha's with a disparaging remark about his "game" and a question about whether the handholding had gotten explicit.

He texts her back. *Haha. I'm not gonna kiss and tell.*

*When people say that, it usually means they didn't kiss*, Natasha replies. Steve rolls his eyes, even though Natasha isn't in the room to see it. It's more of an ingrained habit.

*Your game isn't that impressive, so I don't know why you'd make fun of me*, Steve writes.

*Not that impressive?? I'm gonna wear this to our next briefing*, Natasha says, attaching a picture of herself in her regular uniform, but with the zipper pulled way down.

*That does send a signal*, Steve agrees. When Natasha mock-flirts with him it's always a little weird, ranging from too-aggressive to too-subtle. Steve figures she never really learned how to do it right either, not when she's being herself. Along with Bruce they make quite a group. *Did you call her by her first name yet?*

*Yeah, it turns out she really doesn't like that*, Natasha replies.

*Worth a try*. Steve bites his lip, then adds, *Any girl would be lucky to have you, Nat.*

*Awww*, Steve Natasha texts, along with a crying-eyes emoji. Steve rolls his eyes again. *If you want to talk me up with the ladies, feel free.*

Staring at the text, Steve feels a strange moment of dissonance; it's exactly the kind of thing Bucky used to say. Looking back over their messages, he realizes that he and Natasha banter a lot like he and Bucky used to, with the same kind of teasing. The realization makes him feel a pang of loss, but a little warm, too, at the idea that he has new friends. Real friends.

By the time Steve gets through all his little conversations, he's feeling calm again, no longer revved up from Jim's touch.

He writes a new post on the internet: *So what's a good place to take a guy on your second date?*

Five minutes later, there are already three responses.

* *

Steve can't wear makeup to the amusement park, where he's bound to be recognized by someone, and he and Jim can't hold hands or anything, but he figures the fun of a day out will make up for those limitations.

He starts to worry about it the day before, though, wondering how he's going to feel being in a date situation with just guy clothes and no makeup. He'd thought that maybe, on the second date, he could wear his skirt, but obviously that's not going to work if he doesn't want to answer questions about it on TV for the next two weeks straight. Or two years, for that matter.

Opening his computer, he checks to see if anyone is online, and finds Jelani is right there with his usual status: *come talk to me!*

*what's up?* Jelani sends, before Steve can even open the window. Steve smiles.
Second date tmrw, Steve sends back.

Yeah? You settle on going to the fair?

Yeah, but I don't know if it's the right choice. He bites his lip and types some more; Jelani isn't going to judge him. Not sure I can really handle a date when I can't wear my own stuff, he says. Not even lipstick or anything. I'm already a bit worried about it.

that sucks, Jelani says back. Steve nods at the screen, glad that he's not anxious over nothing. A few seconds later, another message pops up.

would other ppl have to see your non-guy clothes to make you feel better about it? or would it work if you knew and no one else did?

Steve raises his eyebrows, wondering if Jelani is suggesting what Steve thinks he's suggesting. He rubs his calves together, remembering the feel of stockings under his pants. What do you mean? he writes, to be cute. Did they invent invisible makeup when I wasn't looking?

lol, no, like, wearing something under your clothes. if you've got lingerie, or underwear, or a fancy shirt or something?

Steve smiles without even meaning to. I have stockings, he writes. Just the idea makes his stomach clench and his head feel light. It would be the first time he's done such a thing since 1942.

would that work?

I think so, Steve says. He starts to imagine what Jim might think if he knew that Steve was wearing lingerie, and he gets a little hot under the collar at the thought.

nailed it! Jelani says, which makes Steve laugh.

Thank you for the help. I'll let you know how it goes. He bites his lip a minute and then writes, How's it going at the new job? Jelani had said that some of the customers had made comments about his outfits, and Steve's been worried about him.

good! omg I asked the manager if there was a dress code, like to come at it sort of obliquely, and she said no, but that she loved the dress I wore on monday and I should tell her where I got it!

Steve shakes his head, smiling at the screen. He reads the words again, just to bask in the way they make him feel. That's great! he says. Was it the blue one?

Jelani proceeds to send him pictures of the dress he'd worn, and of some other dresses he's thinking of getting, and Steve spends a nice hour or so chatting with him about dress styles. Jelani's into vintage fifties stuff, which Steve likes too, though he suspects he's liking it from the other direction.

The next day, when he shows up at Jim's place in a SHIELD-issue car – since his motorcycle seemed a little too intimate for a second date – Jim looks him up and down with interest.

"No makeup today?" he asks, once they're in the car, then frowns. "Sorry, I don't know if that's okay to say."

"It's fine," Steve says. "I – it's been hard to sort of take control of what I am, you know," he gestures at himself, "and still feel like . . . what I was, I suppose. And it's even harder since I'm not ready for public questions."
Jim nods.

"But I am wearing something a little different," Steve says.

"Looks like a shirt and khakis to me," Jim says, doubtfully. Steve grins at him. After a second, Jim gets it.

"Really," he says, sounding a bit choked.

Steve's grin gets wider. "I've been doing some online shopping."

"Wow."

Steve drives them out to the amusement park, the nearest one he could find with rollercoasters. It takes a while to get there, because D.C. isn't like New York and doesn't have a convenient Coney Island, but it's a beautiful day and Steve doesn't mind the drive.

Jim catches him up on the strike missions he and Tony have been running and the intel they've gathered on the Ten Rings bases. Steve nods along and tries to piece the information together in his head, but he'll have to wait until he's home with his notes to really get anything out of it.

"Did you read the mission report from the op that Natasha and I ran last week?" Steve asks.

"Yeah. Messed up stuff. How's the girl doing?"

"Better, I think. She's talking. They're still looking for her family," Steve says. "Is that something you've seen before, with the Ten Rings? Attempts to replicate the supersoldier serum?"

"No," Jim says slowly, thinking about it. "Well. I mean, you know about the Extremis project, right? Everything that Tony and Pepper went through last Christmas?"

Steve nods. Given what he knows of that whole debacle, and his memory of Jim's injuries the day after, he finds it interesting, if not very surprising, that Jim doesn't think of himself as having gone through anything last Christmas. The way Pepper tells it, the way all the newspapers tell it, Jim was a big hero.

He brings himself back to the problem at hand. "I'm worried that it's the same people, and they've moved on. Or that they're trying to use Extremis to make what's left of Erskine's formula work."

"Jesus," Jim says.

"Natasha and I are going through the data we got from the facility where they were keeping the girl, but it's a mess. I thought maybe if you knew anything about it, you could come in on the project and help us out."

"Yeah," Jim says, "of course." He thinks for a little while. "There's a doctor, Helen Cho, she helped Pepper survive her exposure to Extremis, and she's working with Tony on removing his arc reactor. She's having to do a lot of planning before she can actually do the surgery, so she'd know the research we pulled from AIM better than anyone."

Steve nods. "Good. Because I have a feeling these experiments go further than this one girl."

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve sees Jim pass a hand over his face in horror at the thought. Steve grimaces in sympathy.

They sit in silence for a while, until Jim says, "Once again I have to praise you for your romantic
Steve laughs, surprised. "You're the one who started talking about work!"

Jim's hand lands on Steve's knee, squeezing gently for a moment before withdrawing. "I know."

Steve doesn't say anything, trying to get used to the aftershock-feeling on his skin where it remembers Jim's touch.

When they get to the park and get their tickets, Steve turns around so he's walking backwards, urging Jim to walk towards him. With every step he feels his stockings against his legs, sliding along the tops of his thighs, the garter straps pulling tight against his skin and then loosening. It's reassuring; it makes Steve feel daring.

"Now, I'm assuming that a zoomie like yourself can handle his rollercoasters," he says, teasingly.

Jim laughs. "Rogers, you do not know what you're saying."

"I think I do," Steve says. "I think what I'm saying is, I can spend more time upside down at a hundred miles an hour than you can."

"No super serum in the world is gonna make that happen," Jim says, starting to jog forward as Steve picks up the pace, jogging backward.

"We'll see, won't we," Steve says, and slows again, letting Jim catch up to him. When Jim gets there, he reaches out, as if to sling an arm around Steve's shoulders, but then draws back and awkwardly punches him in the arm instead.

Steve wishes he could hold his hand again.

It turns out, of course, that they're both pretty unflappable when it comes to rollercoasters, which isn't much of a surprise. Steve loves them, has always loved them, even when they used to make him throw up: the tense anticipation of the rise, the absolute terror of the stop, the pure delight of the fall. And rollercoaster technology has come a long way since the forties. He and Jim ride coaster after coaster, ascending high into the air and zooming back down, over and over, upside down and backwards until the world is a moving blur around them, a blur with Jim solid at the center, laughing and closing his eyes in the wind.

"I hate to say it," Jim says, when Steve's lost count of how many coaster rides they've done, "but I don't think either of us is ever getting tired of that."

"That sounds like surrender to me," Steve says. They fight over that for a while, teasing back and forth, getting into a rhythm. This time, Steve barely registers that it's the kind of banter he and Bucky used to have. And the fact that it's not so big a deal anymore makes him realize that he's really getting over his grief.

That comes with a pang of guilt, but Steve tries to put it aside. Bucky would want him to get a new fella.

"Buy me a cotton candy?" Steve asks, on a whim, as they walk past a booth for it. Jim does, and when he hands it over it's with a little bow that makes Steve feel warm inside, but nervous, too, tied into knots. He wishes he knew what he wanted, or that he could predict how things were going to make him feel.

"Wanna hit the Ferris Wheel?" Jim asks, when they get near to it.
"Yeah," Steve says. He does; but looking up, he thinks it looks a lot more intimidating than any of the rollercoasters.

At the top, when the wheel stops, Jim looks over at him. He looks as nervous as Steve feels, thank God, and that's all that gives Steve the courage to take his hand and lace their fingers together. He's already getting to know the way Jim's hand feels against his. Impulsively, he leans over and presses a kiss to Jim's neck, just below his ear, and watches as he shivers in the warm Maryland sun.

"Daring," Jim says.

"I'm a rollercoaster kind of guy," Steve replies. Jim's eyes darken at that.

"Thought you wanted to go slow," he says.

"Yeah," Steve breathes, not sure if that's true or not, anymore. He never used to go slow, with a new guy, and going fast could feel so good. "I don't know. What do you think?"

Jim frowns a little. "I don't know either," he says. But he squeezes Steve's hand in his, as if he wants to communicate something that he can't put into words.

Much later, when it starts to hit twilight, they drive back to D.C. The smell of the spring sun is still on Jim, lingering in his hair and on his skin. Steve holds his hand in the car, like they did on the Ferris Wheel, and when he lifts Jim's hand to his lips to kiss it, he tastes good, like sugary fair food and salt sweat.

"Yeah, you can stop that never," Jim says.

Steve chuckles, keeping his eyes on the road, but kissing each of Jim's fingers in turn.

"I really want to take you home," Steve says.

Jim doesn't answer for a while, and Steve starts to get nervous. When he does speak, Jim's voice sounds hoarse, like he hasn't used it in a long time. "I really want to see what you're wearing under your clothes."

Steve bites his lip. "You could come over for a movie," he says. "We could order a pizza."

"Okay," Jim says. They don't say a lot else for the rest of the ride. Steve feels too hot, turned on and restless, a little anxious. He tries to imagine it, to prepare himself: Jim peeling off Steve's shirt to reveal his broad muscled chest, taking off his pants to reveal lace and silk clinging delicately to his body.

They're kissing as soon as they get in the door to Steve's apartment, and neither of them mentions pizza or a movie. Jim doesn't push or shove but he's clearly aching for it; Steve can feel it in his touch, in the way his hands tremble, and he can hear it in the rough, cut-off noises he's making. Steve tugs Jim's polo shirt out of his waistband, exposing the first glimpse of white silk and lace. Just that is enough to draw Jim forward like a magnet. Steve takes his wrist as he comes closer. Meeting Jim's eyes, only for a moment, he guides his fingers in to touch.
"Yeah," Jim says, smoothing his fingertips against the material. "Oh God. Steve. And you were wearing this all day."

"It felt a little strange sometimes," Steve admits. Jim's keeping it polite, ghosting his fingers over the top edge of the garter belt at his waist. Steve tugs his wrist gently, so that his fingers slip lower, over the smooth surface of his panties, caressing Steve's dick through the thin material.

They both breathe in together. Jim's touch is so light that it's almost teasing, but the slide of the silk against Steve's cock is soft and enveloping. Steve is almost overwhelmed by the sensation.

"Can we take off some more clothes?" Jim asks. Steve nods, and pulls his shirt over his head at the same time that Jim crouches down, pulling down Steve's khakis. He pauses to take off Steve's shoes, and then Steve can step out of the pants and stand in front of him, stockings, garter belt, panties, and nothing else.

"Beautiful," Jim says, looking up at him. He places a kiss on Steve's thigh, below the edge of the panties, next to one of the garter straps. Steve looks down, taking in his own strong chest and broad thighs and his legs encased in stockings, expecting it to feel good, the way it did when he watched himself in the mirror, expecting to see his wartime body made into something he likes.

Instead, when he sees Jim looking up, all he can think is that Jim's turned on by a big guy in lingerie, that he's attracted to everything masculine and powerful about Steve and that the stockings and panties are just window-dressing. The fear crests fast, racing through Steve's mind, until he has to back away and close his eyes, shaking his head. It's not him, what Jim's seeing, it's still not him, not what he wants Jim to see.

"Steve?" Jim is saying. He sounds worried. He sounds far away.

He finds the sofa by sense-memory, managing to sit down without ever opening his eyes. It's too much, too much to try to interpret, to manage, to control, all the things that his body means and looks like and seems to be.

Maybe Jim does understand, though, because a minute later there's the sensation of a soft blanket covering him up from chin to knees. It's the comfy one from the back of the chair Steve usually sits in. He opens his eyes, but doesn't look down at himself, not even with the blanket covering him up.

Jim's crouching next to him. "Can I help?" he asks, obviously distressed. An immediate wave of guilt crashes through Steve's mind: Jim shouldn't have to deal with this. Jim, seeing this, is even less likely to see him as . . . whatever, as a fairy, as a queer the way he wants to be queer. Jim wanted to fuck him, and Steve wanted to get fucked, and there's no reason for him to get upset about that. It's not like he hasn't been fucked before.

"Sorry," he says. "Sorry, I'm being stupid."

The look on Jim's face is about equal disbelief and horror. "You really don't need to apologize," he says slowly. "I'm glad you stopped when you felt weird about it."

Weird is a very mild way of putting it. It makes it sound normal, like a feeling anybody might have.

"Yeah," Steve says, trying to go along with that. "I mean, we probably just went a little fast for me. I shouldn't have pushed myself."

"You love to push yourself," Jim says, smiling. "You're a rollercoaster kind of guy."

Steve can't disagree. "Yeah." In this case, rollercoastering really hadn't worked, and Steve doesn't
know why.

Jim frowns lopsidedly, the same way he grins sometimes, but backwards. "I just mean – if you want to tell me more about what happened, I'll listen. I'd like to know if I did something wrong that I could avoid doing again."

Steve nods, taking a deep breath.

"But you don't have to say it now," Jim adds quickly. "I could – do you want me to go?"

It's a hard thing to decide; Jim's his friend, and he feels like he needs his friend's support right now. But it was Jim's gaze, looking up at him, that set him off in the first place. He still can't tell if what he thought he saw in Jim's eyes was real or not.

"Maybe give me a little time? Come back in half an hour?"

Jim nods. "I can do that. You want me to get you anything before I go?"

"Maybe just – toss me my clothes?" He doesn't want to have to walk too far without them.

Jim grabs the shirt and pants from off the floor and sets them gently next to Steve. "Okay. I'll hit the buzzer to come up."

"Half an hour," Steve says.

"Half an hour."

*

It only takes him about ten minutes to get his clothes on under the blanket. Most of that time he spends feeling like an idiot and a coward.

He thinks back on Carol, that one night when they'd tried to have sex, when he'd still been so new to this body. He thought he was beyond all that. He thought that Bucky fucking him made it okay, or that wanting Peggy did, or that wearing makeup and women's clothes put him in control.

All this time, all these battles, all the things he's been able to do with this body, and he still feels so goddamn fragile sometimes.

He's lost in thought when Jim gets back and rings the buzzer, startling him into awareness.

Steve meets him at the door.

"Don't you dare apologize to me again," Jim says sternly. Steve chuckles ruefully.

"Sorry I apologized," he says, which makes Jim glare.

"So, do you want me to come in? Want to talk about it? Want to not talk about it?"

Steve takes a short breath. "Want to talk about it," he manages, eventually. He needs to know. He can't back down now.

"All right," Jim says, coming back in. He's rubbing his palms on his thighs, and Steve doesn't need Natasha's skill at reading body language to tell him that Jim's nervous. He's been so good through this whole thing, so gentle, and Steve had just wanted to give him something nice. He'd wanted to be able to fuck like he used to, carelessly, joyfully, knowing what he is.
They sit back down on the couch.

"Here's what I need to know," Steve says. Jim nods. "What do you see when you look at me?"


Steve hasn't heard that word applied to him in a very long time. He thinks Frank was the last one to call him that. It's nice, and he thinks that even the "boy" part feels fine. "Yeah, it's good," Steve says. "And that's sweet, but what I mean is . . . Okay. So, Natasha said that for a lot of queer military guys, I was like an icon."

"That's one way of putting it," Jim agrees, frowning. "There were always the rumors about you being gay, and I think a lot of people looked up to you for that."

"Yeah, but," Steve says, frustrated. "I don't mean that, the role model stuff. I mean more like, uh, Captain America leather fetish costumes."

Jim's eyebrows go very high up. "Oh," he says. "That stuff."

"Yeah," Steve says.

"Where did you – "

"It's the seventh result when you put 'Captain America' into Google."

"Huh." Jim looks thoughtful for a minute. "So the guys who buy the . . . Captain America leather fetish costumes, what do you think they see when they look at you?"

Steve takes a breath, because in a way, this is the heart of it. "A big, strong, national war hero who can fuck them stupid," he says. "Or else a big, strong, national war hero who gets fucked and taken down a peg."

Jim's laugh is resigned but genuine. "You seem to have done some research on the issue."

"Yup." There are quite a few porn films dedicated to not very accurate versions of his life story, he's learned. He'd closed that window very quickly, stomach churning at the sight of big buff blond men in skimpiest versions of his red, white, and blue.

"And you're worried that's how I see you? Like a uniform, or a – a fantasy, not a person?" Jim sounds like he's trying hard not to sound hurt by this.

"No, no. More like . . . I worry that the person you see me as isn't the person I am."

Jim nods encouragingly. Steve reaches out and takes his hand; Jim squeezes back.

"Go on," he says.

Steve breathes. "When they made me into Captain America," he says, "I thought it'd make me someone different. But it didn't, and I was still – I'm still the same little guy inside, the feminine guy."

"The fairy," Jim offers hesitantly. It makes Steve choke up a little.

"Yeah," he says, voice thick. He clears his throat. "Yeah. I mean, it's not like I don't – I'm so grateful for what they did, it did so much for me, and I got used to being like this. It's not like it was when I was first changed. I'm more comfortable now."
"The makeup and clothes and stuff help you feel that way? Like the person you are inside?" Jim asks.

Steve nods. "They help a lot." He sighs. "Not today, though, I guess."

"Hey, believe it or not, most people aren't perfect at stuff the first time they try it."

Steve smiles. It's what Tara would say. What Danielle might've said, a long time ago and in another place. "I guess so."

"So you asked me what I see when I look at you," Jim says. He sounds hesitant. "I feel like there's a lot of your self-image riding on that answer."

When you think of it like that, it's really not fair. "Yeah, you're right. I shouldn't put that on you."

Jim breathes out through his nose, frustrated. "Well, I don't know. It's about making you feel safe, isn't it?"


"So let's concentrate on what we can do to make you feel safe," Jim says.

Steve lets out a breath. "Okay. Yeah." He thinks about it. "Maybe taking off my shirt was a bad idea."

"You don't want me to see your chest? Or, uh. Be . . . be attracted to it?" Jim looks honestly worried at this.

Steve bites his lip. That's not quite it; he kind of likes his chest, now he's had a few years to get used to it. "No. I just – I want to be sure you're seeing me when you look at the, uh. The masculine parts."

Jim nods slowly. "I think I can handle that." They're still holding hands; Steve almost stopped noticing, he's gotten so used to the feeling over the course of the day. Jim lifts their joined hands and kisses Steve's knuckles, like Steve had done for him in the car.

"All the time out in public was kind of hard too, today," Steve admits, thinking back on it. "I was so glad I could feel the stockings on my legs, but it was – it was hard." Like he had been too visible and invisible at the same time.

"Maybe more dates inside, then. So you can wear what you want, what makes you feel good. We could hang out here or at my place. No expectations."

Steve sighs. "You know, speaking of, I could actually really go for that pizza now."

"Sounds good."

"And I've been watching this show, RuPaul's Drag Race, maybe you want to watch some with me?"

"Oh my God," Jim says, suddenly intense. "I love that show. What season are you on?"

Steve had loved watching Drag Race before, but watching it with someone else – with someone who understands – makes it even better. He and Jim laugh and dish on the various looks the drag queens go for in the challenge, and it's a little like the time he sat next to Frank and Ira at Marlene's drag show, but more intimate and quiet.
"You should try your makeup like that," Jim says, taking Steve's hand. "With the different colors blended together here." He touches his thumb briefly to the corner of Steve's eye.

Steve smiles, warmth spreading through his chest at the suggestion. "I don't know how to do it like that," he says. "I'd have to look it up on Youtube."

"Hang on," Jim says, and goes to get Steve's laptop.

Slowly, Steve relaxes against the couch. When Jim leaves that night, Steve kisses him again, desperate and full of promises he's not sure he can keep.

*

Their next Ten Rings strategy session is more formal, with Deputy Director Hill in a conference room in the Triskelion. Jim swings by to pick him up, and it's a shock to see him in his combat fatigues and military insignia, when just a few days before Jim had sat cuddled next to him on his couch and eaten pizza and talked hemlines.

He looks really good in uniform.

Steve's in his new blue Captain America suit, and it still feels strange, too much like the colors men used to wear in Brooklyn in the forties: dark and dull like a rainy day.

"Hey, Steve," Jim says, when he gets in.

"Hiya Colonel," Steve says. It makes Jim's whole face light up, joyous and incredulous.

"Is that what we're doing now? Military roleplay?"

"It's not really roleplay," Steve protests. As Jim pulls out onto the road, Steve leans over to give him a quick kiss on the jaw. "And I can't help it, I was in World War Two. If I didn't have a thing for military men, I wouldn't have had anyone to keep me warm at night."

"I see," Jim smiles.

They drive for a little while, and then Jim asks, "Did you have someone, back then? To keep you warm?"

Steve's heart aches, thinking of Bucky, all those nights spent together in their little two-man shelter, how Bucky had made his new body beautiful and bearable. He coughs.

"There were soldiers everywhere," Steve says. "There was a time – this was before I was, before I met Erskine." Jim nods, and he continues. "I was trying to enlist, and they wouldn't take me. But there was always a soldier on a streetcorner, you know, who was happy to accept my services."

"Wow," Jim says. "On a streetcorner?"

"Different time," Steve says. Then, feeling a little embarrassed, given how coy he's been around Jim, he adds, "Different me, too. It was easy, back then. Before I was . . . bigger."

Jim turns his head to look at him, and smiles. "It's okay. I get it. You don't have to, uh, justify? Anything you want to do or not do with me."

Steve sighs in relief. "Thank you," he says.

"And I think it's kind of hot to take it slow, anyway. I like going slow."

Steve bites his lip, taking in the easy, relaxed smile on Jim's face, and decides to tease him a little.
"So you wouldn't have been one of those guys in New York, back then," Steve says, slowly, "one of those beautiful men in uniform I sucked off in a dirty alleyway."

"Jesus, Rogers," Jim swears, making Steve laugh. "You wanna get us in an accident?"


"That was before you started telling me about all this patriotic service you did on your knees," Jim laughs.

"What about you?" Steve asks, feeling a flutter of trepidation as he says it. If Jim's been in love with Tony for so long, and closeted and military, what kind of experiences might he have had?

"I never sucked anyone off in an alleyway," Jim says, measured. Steve rolls his eyes.

"I guess I meant – what guys did you date? Were they in the service?"

Jim sighs and shrugs. "There was nothing as exciting as your stories," he says. Steve waits a minute for him to say more, then looks over at him when he doesn't.

"Don't wanna talk about it?"

Jim shrugs again, obviously uncomfortable. "Lots of guys in the Air Force are gay and just don't advertise it," he says. "It's – you know, you meet a guy on base, you look at him, he looks at you. There are signals. It's not complicated."

Steve nods wistfully. "Sounds a little like how we used to do it," he offers. "Secret codes and stuff. Ways of saying things. Casual invitations." In a way, it's a comfort to know that his kind of queer culture still exists, the hidden languages that may have persisted in some form, or been reinvented, after the eighties.

"Maybe," Jim allows. He coughs. "So tell me more about the war. Were there really a lot of guys hooking up?"

Steve, who's now looked up the term "hooking up," smiles. "Yeah," he says. "Kind of inevitable, in that environment. All men, everyone scared for their lives and desperate for . . . love, I guess. Companionship."

Jim nods again, licking his lips. "I can understand that." Then, in a hoarse voice, he adds, "I know what that's like."

Steve leans over and kisses him again, on his cheek, and the look Jim gives him in return is hot, and intense, and complicated. Jim doesn't say anything more, or explain himself, but Steve gets the feeling that even that much was hard for him.

He's starting to see it, the pattern, how Jim holds himself back and pens himself in.

When they get to the Triskelion, Steve has to remind himself not to take Jim's hand or kiss his cheek playfully as they ride up in the glass elevator. Those motions are starting to feel, amazingly, like habit.

In the briefing room, they greet Tony – snappily dressed as always in a three-piece suit, pacing around the edge of the room rather than sitting in a chair, and Bruce – wearing a lab coat thrown on over his sport coat and standing, as usual, by the door. Natasha and Hill come in together a few
minutes later.

They each take a little time to talk about the strike missions they've run, and what they've learned from them.

"So you're saying you've done four separate intel-gathering missions and you're still no closer to figuring out where the Ten Rings base is," Hill says, eventually. "It's still just a shot in the dark. I can't go to Director Fury with that."

"Well, I wouldn't say no closer," Natasha drawls. "We're a lot closer, actually. We have maps and shipping manifestos and we know all the numbers and codes to look for, now. We've broken their encryption. What we don't have is the address itself."

"We have reliable intel about the whereabouts of the intel we need," Jim says.

"And you want me to greenlight the mission to go and get it," Hill frowns, looking over the data they've collected.

"Ma'am, if I may," Steve says. "I think this is about more than just narrowing down the location of the base, now. We need to know what's going on there so we can be prepared if we need to do a rescue op."

Still pacing, Tony says, "I told you, Rogers, the Extremis project was wiped out —"

"So was the Supersoldier project," Steve replies, raising his voice a little. "And yet there's a girl in SHIELD custody who's the victim of both."

"I've seen the medical reports," Bruce puts in. "SHIELD asked me to consult. It's not conclusive that what was done to her came out of either Extremis or Supersoldier research."

Steve glares up at him. He knows what he saw. Bruce raises his hands in surrender.

"Not conclusive, but highly suggestive," he amends. "And any post-Hulk Supersoldier program is bound to be using my research as well. Put together with the equipment that Steve saw, I don't mind telling you it's got me up nights."

Tony stops pacing, frozen in his tracks as they all imagine the consequences of that, some poor nine year old Hulk who breathes fire and who none of them would want to have to kill.

"And, as you know, Deputy Director," Natasha comes in smoothly, "Doctor Banner is a man who really needs his beauty sleep."

Both Bruce and Deputy Director Hill chuckle at this. Steve lets out the breath he was holding, and Natasha smiles, satisfied. Steve shakes his head; nobody manages a room like she does.

Hill looks at each of them in turn. "So you're saying that this intel-gathering mission will do more than make us sure about the location of the base."

"We're pretty sure we'll be able to find out what kinds of work they're doing there. How they built the nuclear tanks, whether they're doing any research on humans as well," Natasha explains.

"Okay then. Rogers and Romanoff, this is your project; if we go ahead, I'd want you two to lead it."

"Yes ma'am," Steve says earnestly.

"Yes ma'am," Natasha says, with a trace more irony.
"Doctor Banner? Colonel Rhodes? Mister Stark? You all in on this mission?"

"Yeah, though I'd like to do it in an advisory or support capacity where possible," Bruce says. "Especially if there are kids involved."

Tony crosses his arms. "I'm in," he says. "If there are more Extremis experiments out there, it's my responsibility." He grimaces. "They're my responsibility."

"I'm with Steve, we need to know more about this," Jim says easily. "I'm in. And I think Tony should bring in Helen Cho, too, to consult with Bruce on the medical stuff." Steve smiles at him, fondness welling up inside.

Hill nods once. "Good call. Bring her in. You have a green light, ladies and gentlemen," she says. "Go get the intel, and if it's good we'll plan the strike on the base. I'll brief Fury."

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Steve wears his skirt for his next date with Jim. After an increasingly frustrating and bizarre series of online shopping sessions, he'd managed to find tights that fit him, and Jelani told him it's absolutely fine to then wear the skirt with tennis shoes.

no, with CONS, Jelani had insisted. converse sneakers. So Steve had googled that. He likes how it looks now, fun and cute, with the simple white shoes and a green t-shirt.


"Hi," Steve says.

"Hi," Jim says again.

"What do you think?" Steve asks, gesturing at his outfit.

Jim's hands slide slowly around his waist. "I think you look pretty," he says.

Steve hopes that Jim isn't just saying that. "You're really good to me," he says.

"I am, because I also brought fancy takeout."

They spend the evening together eating the fancy takeout and watching Velvet Goldmine.

"I'm learning so much," Steve says, partway through, as a very handsome young man jumps up and down naked on stage. "Especially about the music industry."

"Todd Haynes is always educational," Jim agrees. "God, I saw this movie in the theater when it came out. I had to sneak in."

"Breaking the law," Steve sighs, mock-saddened, "and at such a young age." Tentatively, he shuffles a little closer to Jim on the couch, so that their thighs are pressed together; Steve's skirt is pressed to Jim's trouser leg.

"Well, I was twenty-three," Jim says. "But I was in the Air Force, and it was during Don't Ask Don't Tell, and absolutely no straight men were going to see this film."

"Was it – did it get shown in a lot of places?" Steve is still overwhelmed not just by the queer content, but the naked bodies and explicit sex that's in a lot of movies. When he was growing up,
you had to go to one of the places with peepshow viewers or buy a dirty comic book for that kind of thing, and there wasn't often a story attached. It's weird that people these days sit in theaters fully clothed and calmly watch actors pretend to have sex.

In his apartment, with his boyfriend, though, it's quite nice. Steve takes a deep breath as the men kiss on screen, and tells himself to calm down.

"Ha. No. I think it hit a lot of film festivals, but it wasn't exactly showing at the big family-friendly places, at least not in Philly. I went in the back door of the Roxy in big sunglasses with a baseball cap on backwards."

Steve laughs gently, and kisses him. "I wish I'd known you at twenty-three," he says. "During your time as a master spy."

"Jesus," Jim says, as Steve moves down to suck just below his jawline. "I don't think I was ready for you at twenty-three, Steve."

Steve pulls back, grinning. "C'mere," he says, while on screen the boys wear makeup, and design elaborate costumes, and call themselves aliens. "Touch me."

He guides Jim's hand to his chest, then up to his collarbone.

"This ok? Sweetheart?" Jim asks, running his fingers along Steve's bare skin. He sounds as unsure about the endearment as he is about the touch. Both of them make Steve feel hot and restless, turned on.

"Yeah," he says, a little choked. "That's really good."

Jim's hand slips lower, and his thumb rubs over a nipple. Having Jim's attention on his chest still makes him feel a little anxious, but with his shirt on like this it's better, and the touch feels amazing.

"Mmm," Steve says. "I've always liked that." The discomfort he'd felt before, when Jim had looked at his chest, doesn't seem to be around right now, and Steve arches up against Jim's hands and sighs happily.

"Sensitive there," Jim says. "I'll remember that."

Steve likes the sound of that. "What do you like?" He asks. He feels selfish, always being the one to set the boundaries for what they can do.

"You," Jim says, bending and kissing the hollow of his throat.

"Come on," Steve insists. "It's always – it doesn't have to always be about me. I want to know you, too."

Jim goes on kissing his throat for a moment, like he's trying to delay talking about himself. Eventually, Steve pulls back.

"Hey," he says, softly. "You can tell me."

Jim swallows, then looks up to meet Steve's eyes. "My ears, maybe," he says, quietly.

"Really," Steve says, and kisses Jim's earlobe, then takes it between his teeth. He's pleased by the little gasp he elicits, so he keeps going for a minute or two, kissing and nibbling gently.
"Oh, oh, okay, enough, you're gonna make me forget all about the movie," Jim laughs.

Steve takes a breath; he's getting hard, his dick pressing up against the restrictive material of the tights, and it's a little uncomfortable but wonderful, too, a persistent reminder of the clothes he's wearing. He squirms a little.

"Those tights getting . . . tight?" Jim asks. There's a laugh lurking behind his voice. Steve gives him a glare, and the laugh comes right out.

"It's okay. It's – I don't mind it, actually." Steve's face gets hot, and he feels pretty dumb, but at the same time he's holding his breath in anticipation, waiting to see how Jim responds.

"Hmmm, I'll remember that, too," is all Jim says, and then his hand lands safely on Steve's knee, above the skirt, and he rubs slow circles there with his thumb for the rest of the movie.

Steve wants him, so badly, but he finds that he wants this too: this slow process of gaining trust, gaining understanding, so that they become more and more obvious to each other.

"You can tell me," Steve says, watching Jim's face. "If there's something you want. Or don't want."

"I know," Jim says, but he doesn't look away from the screen.

Steve's new publicist – Craig – calls while he's trying to put together his kit for the intel-gathering mission, and this time Steve doesn't have an excuse for not taking the call. Steve tucks the phone under his ear while he sorts through disposable pressure bandages for his utility belt.

"Hi," Steve says, when Craig introduces himself. "Listen, I don't know if I really have time right now – "

"I'm going to have to insist, Captain Rogers," Craig says, not impolitely. Steve loses count of his bandages and tries to remind himself that this guy's just trying to do his job. And Steve has no reason to dislike him. He'd disliked Geoffrey, but he still feels guilty over letting the guy swing in the wind.

"All right, okay," Steve says. "Go for it."

"I get that you didn't get along with the last guy," Craig says, and Steve gives him two points for sensitivity as he tries to find that tiny, compressible rope that Natasha gave him.

"True," Steve says.

"But whatever he was doing that bugged you, we can stop doing that. The goal is simply getting you out in public from time to time and creating goodwill. We can do that any number of ways."

"Has it occurred to you that getting me out in public from time to time and creating good will was the thing that bugged me?" Steve asks, amused. His lockpicks, at least, are in the drawer where they're supposed to be. He puts them in their usual pocket, but still can't find the damn rope.

"Yeah," Craig says. "So why don't we make the goal a little different? You like helping people, so we'll get you out there doing good where people can see you. It's good work and it's good publicity."

Steve narrows his eyes, thinking about how it might feel to do so-called good deeds while posing
for a camera. Not very good, he thinks. He has a suspicion that Father Calhoun would've
disapproved. He knows that if he saw someone like him doing that, he would get downright angry.

"You know that I do good work and help people in my job with SHIELD," he says. "It's just
classified."

"Yes, absolutely," Craig agrees. Steve is starting to dislike his agreeableness. "That's a big problem
for a lot of heroes. Iron Man, War Machine, even SHIELD itself has these publicity issues due to
classified operations. Heck, it's the same for the CIA and the FBI."

Steve stops in the process of stuffing his remaining Juicy Fruit into its belt pocket and his jaw
actually drops. "The FBI," he says, not quite believing what he's hearing. He's still got the FBI files
for Danielle and Valentine, among others, sitting in his KNOWN ASSOCIATES box. The FBI was
not a big fan of either of them. They were definitely not fans of the FBI.

"Right, the FBI, you know, people who do good work but in secret, so it's not visible to the public.
What we want is to get you doing good somewhere people can see it. It's a way of letting them see
who you really are, like any publicity campaign."

Steve stifles a laugh. He wonders what his publicist would make of it if Steve told him who he
really is, or who he's been in the past. He gets himself together and forces a straight face so that his
voice will sound normal. "You mean like, working at a soup kitchen, stuff like that."

"Sure!" Craig enthuses. "If you like. You can pick the charities. Veterans' Association, children's
hospital, a local recycling program, cancer research is a popular one . . . "

"Huh," Steve says. He figures that fighting for cancer survivors is a pretty safe position, the kind
of thing that never makes anyone uncomfortable. "Well, Craig, you've given me something to
think about. I've been in the twenty-first century a while now, and it's taken me a while to get
settled in, but maybe it's about time I got back to my old charity work." As a last resort, he gets
down on his hands and knees to look under the bed. Still no tiny rope.

"Fabulous!" Craig says. "I knew you'd be a reasonable man, Captain Rogers."

"Oh please," Steve says, "Craig. You can call me Steve."

"Steve," Craig says warmly.

"I'm gonna do some research, and I'll let you know about the public appearances I decide on,"
Steve says.

"Well, that's a good start, but I'll have to –"

"But now I have to go punch tanks," Steve finishes, talking over him. "Bye, Craig."

His rope is on top of the dresser, where he left it, coiled neatly in its usual spot but covered by a
fallen bandage. Of course.

Steve suits up.

*

"So how's it going with your great romance," Steve asks Natasha, while they wait for the drop.

"How's it going with yours," she shoots back.
"None of your business," Steve says, smiling a little to himself. She rolls her eyes at him.

"Does that mean you've progressed from handholding to longing glances? Have you even kissed anyone since 1945?"

"That's also none of your business," Steve says. "But I love how you masterfully change the subject, superspy."

"I love how you bludgeon your way into conversations, supersoldier," Natasha replies. She's testing her Widow's Bite carefully, the way she always does right before a mission. It's one of the first things he ever liked about her, when he saw her doing the same thing on the plane when they were on their way to stop Loki. She keeps her kit in good order, and has no intention of going down because of an equipment failure.

"Okay, okay," he says. "Go easy on an old guy, we like to hear the stories of young people."

Natasha smiles at him. He can never quite tell if that smile is genuine or not, but it sure feels like it is. "She ignores all my advances. I should give up. You saw how it was at the briefing the other day."

"Your . . . advances?" Steve can barely remember Natasha even speaking to Hill directly during that briefing.

"All that talk about 'getting closer,'" Natasha says. "I felt pathetic."

Steve scans back through the conversation in his mind. "You were talking about getting closer to finding a secret arms-dealer base of operations!" Steve says. He was so sure that he was the worst at flirting, but if that's what Natasha calls an advance . . .

"Relax, Rogers, I'm teasing. But I was pretty close to her. My body language was clear. She would've picked up the hint."

Steve doesn't reply, too caught up in wondering if Natasha has actually met blunt, gruff, ex-Navy officer Maria Hill. Steve would trust her with an encrypted signal station, but he's not so sure about body language.

"Thirty seconds to target," Rumlow calls.

"We're gonna talk about this again," Steve promises.

They jump together.

*

The strike mission is an unmitigated success: no casualties, no damage, and all the intel they need to pinpoint the location of the Ten Rings base. It's exactly what Steve wishes he were doing in his other missions for SHIELD: clean work that he knows he can be proud of.

In large part, the success of the mission is due to the way he and Natasha can work together now, knowing each other's moves and speeds, trusting each other to take out an attacker or clear a room. Some of the other SHIELD people are good too, like Rumlow and Jackson; Steve likes working with them. They're becoming a team, like the Avengers are a team, like the Howling Commandos used to be a team. No matter how hard it is to find himself in the twenty-first century, at least he always has this, the work.
Thank God, or Peggy, he supposes, that SHIELD is here. He'd be lost without it.

*

That evening when he gets home, Steve feels restless, still alert and full of energy from the mission, so he texts Jim to see what he's doing.

Working on the car, Jim texts back. Come on over if you like. I'm covered in engine oil though.

Enticing, Steve texts back, and then smiles at the series of emojis Jim sends him: heart car eyeroll heart shrimp tempura.

It's a nice evening, so he decides to walk, making an effort not to care about the photographers who are across the street today. He doesn't know why they're camped out this time – usually it's in reaction to something happening in the papers that they want his comment on – but listening to their shouted questions, he gathers that it's something to do with a political sex scandal.

They always come to him with those, it seems. Steve guesses that they want the old man to say something damning about modern morality and such. It's depressing, because Steve could give them an earful if he wanted to, but he doesn't even know where to start. Their image of him is so far from the truth that he can't even begin to correct it.

So, like usual, he ignores them and walks away while they take his picture and then follow him. He holds on to the lipstick in his coat pocket, a little tighter with every flash that goes off behind him. When he gets to Jim's place, he finds him underneath a cherry-red convertible with smooth lines and a low, dangerous profile; it's beautiful.

Jim rolls out from under at Steve's approach, and assesses their surroundings; of course he spots the photographers right off.

"Want me to discourage them?" Jim asks.

"I don't like threatening violence to journalists," Steve says, feeling uncomfortable. "Even if it's an empty threat, it's a bad habit to get into."

"Not violence," Jim says. "Trust me, I didn't stay Tony Stark's best friend for twenty years by taking potshots at paparazzi."

Steve nods. "Okay. I trust you."

Jim smiles up at him, and then holds out a grease-stained hand; Steve clasps it, pulling Jim to his feet. Another flash goes off.

Jim walks over to the reporters. Steve hangs back, leaning his hip against the car and folding his arms, but his superhearing means he can listen in anyhow.

"If you're not gone in the next two minutes," Jim says, wiping his hands with a rag, "I'll install the same privacy measures at Captain Rogers' place that I have here at mine. And I'll consider offering it to other celebrities and politicians, too. Free of charge."

Steve's eyebrows go up as he watches the photographers skitter away without a word.

"Okay, I'm curious," Steve says. "What kind of privacy measures do you have?"

Grinning, Jim digs into his pocket and pulls out a fob, like the kind you can use to unlock cars. He
presses the button, and a shimmer of light springs up around them, surrounding Jim's house and yard. At first it's like a heat haze, mostly transparent, but after a few seconds it starts to get fuzzier, and after about thirty it's light but completely opaque, like a wall of pearlescence.

"Arc reactor powered," Jim explains. "Uses repulsor technology. Not really feasible as a marketable product, even to the very rich, but Tony lets me borrow stuff from his lab to tinker with."

"And this is what you built," Steve says, stepping up to the barrier. "Can I touch it?"

"Uh, no," Jim says, frowning. "It wouldn't kill you, but it would hurt."

"Hmm," Steve says, looking at it. It seems to emit light, like a repulsor, so he doesn't feel enclosed, but it does cut off the view of the neighborhood.

"I don't like to actually use it because of the birds and squirrels and things," Jim explains. "Plus the neighbors aren't fond of it." He presses the button again, and the barrier doesn't disappear, but dissipates, like a mist on the breeze.

Outside of the barrier, the street is clear, not a camera in sight. Of course, in Steve's experience, that doesn't mean they're not there, but it's still better than it was.

"Is this kind of shield something you could work into the suit? Be able to project a solid barrier?"

Jim shakes his head. "It took ages to configure it for a fixed area here," Jim says. "It's not portable tech, not at this stage. Also it's not solid; aside from the slight jolt, a determined person can get through it. It's just a pet project."

Steve shakes his head in amazement. "I sometimes wonder what you see in me, Jim," he says, softly. "Smart guy like you."

Shrugging, Jim walks back over to the car and puts himself back down on the creeper cart. It's a vulnerable position, low on the ground with his body flat, but it only takes Jim a couple of seconds to roll away into the dark, shadowy space under the car.

"I think you're amazing, Steve," Jim says, accompanied by the sound of his wrench against metal. "You know that."

Steve smiles.

"And I've seen your file. Your IQ tested pretty high even before the serum."

"Yeah, well," Steve says, embarrassed. "Potential's not the same thing. I dropped out of high school after ninth grade."

There's a little silence between them. Steve runs a hand down the side of the car, testing the heat of the metal in the bright afternoon sun. It's just the right temperature, warm and alive but still touchable.

"Hand me the socket wrench, will you?" Jim asks, a moment later. "The little one."

Steve crouches down to hand it over, taking a look at what Jim's doing. He recognizes more of the parts on this thing than he does on Jim's Tesla, but it's still mostly new to him.

"Thanks," Jim says. Then, his hands still busy at their task, he says, "Bet you're a pretty quick
Steve nods. "Sure," he says, watching Jim as he changes parts, loosens bolts, tightens bolts. His fingers move quick and sure, and never seem to hesitate or make a wrong move. "Watching you is like watching those Vin Diesel movies, though," he says, smiling. "Like you don't even have to think about it."

"Hell," Jim laughs. Whatever he was doing seems to be done, and he pushes himself back out from under the car, wiping his hands on a rag. "I could teach you that, if you want. I know you were interested in my Tesla, but if you like plain old gas engines we could do those, too."

"I'd like that," Steve says. "Most of what I know is how to hotwire a World War Two-era tank."

Jim stands, and Steve stands with him. There's a light in Jim's eyes that Steve really likes. "Wanna learn how to hotwire some other things?"

Steve smiles, and Jim presses a button to raise the garage door.

Inside there's a sea of polished, gleaming metal; nothing like Tony's car collection, but impressive nonetheless. Steve whistles.

"Did you build all of these?" There are four cars that Steve can identify as vintage, all made before 1970, and two that look really modern, plus the Tesla.

Jim nods, looking pleased. "Well, the classic cars, I did. All of them from wrecked old husks. I've done a few more but I had to sell them to make room." He presses a button on the wall, and the garage door closes behind them. The overhead lights come on, casting everything in a warm yellow glow.

Steve walks between them, reaching out for the gleaming metal, not quite touching. "Where would we start?"

Running a hand slowly over the hood of one of the vintage cars – a mint green Buick convertible – Jim looks thoughtful. "So long as you promise to go easy and not leave a single scratch behind, you can show me your moves on this one. It's a '56, shouldn't be too far out of your experience."

"I don't know," Steve says, coming a little closer. He lets his shoulder rub against Jim's. "I want to be delicate, but I might not do it right. We didn't have time to worry about the paint job during the war."

Jim looks down at the car, frowning a little. "You gotta handle it with care," he says. He sounds . . . unhappy. Steve looks him in the eyes, surprised.

"Hey," he says. "What is it?"

Jim shakes his head, pursing his lips.

Steve takes his hand. He doesn't know what to say. "You can tell me if you want," he says, eventually, awkwardly.

Jim looks up at him. "I don't – it's not anything to do with you, it's nothing you did. I swear."

Still holding his hand, Steve nods. He's got stuff he hasn't told Jim, either. Hasn't told anyone. He wouldn't want it pried out of him.
"You've helped me out a lot, listening about my – about all the gender stuff. I don't mind listening to you."

Frowning again, Jim shakes his head. "But that's why I don't want to make it complicated. You have a lot going on right now, and I shouldn't add to it."

Steve shrugs, uncertain. "I don't think that makes any sense," he says, after a while. Jim laughs weakly, ruefully.

"Maybe it doesn't," he says, his thumb stroking over the hood of the car. "I guess – it's hard for me to talk about stuff. Especially if I'm worried you're not gonna like it."

"Okay," Steve says. Taking a risk, he steps forward and circles Jim in his arms, loosely, giving him space to turn or move. Jim's hands settle on Steve's forearms, though, and slowly, slowly, he pulls Steve's arms tighter around his waist. Steve rests his head on Jim's shoulder.

"So I just gotta handle you with care," Steve murmurs, and Jim laughs weakly, ruefully. "I guess – it's hard for me to talk about stuff. Especially if I'm worried you're not gonna like it."

"You think you're making a joke, but this metaphor is actually turning me on right now," Jim deadpans, and Steve stifles a smile against Jim's shoulder.

"It's okay if you don't want to tell me everything," Steve says, feeling it out. "Not that I don't want to," Jim murmurs. His shoulders relax and he rests his head back against Steve's shoulders. "It's more like . . . a habit."

"That, I get," Steve says. He feels Jim's sigh all through his body.

"You ever feel stuck, like you're stopped in one place and nothing you do seems to move you out of it?" Jim asks, lightly.

Steve swallows. "Yeah."

They stay like that for a little while, embracing each other carefully, not saying anything. After a couple of minutes, Jim pulls away and Steve loosens his grip, letting him go. Jim turns so that they're facing one another, and takes Steve's hand as he does it, so they don't actually lose contact. His half-smile looks awkward, like he's not sure what to say next, and Steve tries to think of something that might take the pressure off.

"Maybe you'd feel less stuck if we hotwired one of these cars and took it out on the road." Steve can picture it, the speed, the wind against his face, the sense of freedom he always gets from driving, flying, falling.

Jim's smile turns warm and genuine, and he shakes his head. "I've been thinking about that, and I've decided I don't want you experimenting on my babies for your first try since World War Two," he says.

Steve frowns, disappointed.

"So instead," Jim continues, grin spreading over his face, "why don't we put you in a flight suit, take the half-hour War Machine express to New York, break into Stark Tower and steal a few of Tony's cars?"

Steve laughs.
It's a hell of a way to travel, held up by the cool metal of Jim's back, the air rushing past and the ground below a swimming carpet of green and lights. By the time they get there, Steve's body is zinging with adrenaline and he feels great, invincible, untouchable. Jim's low voice guides him through each step of their little theft, and Steve doesn't make a single wrong move, his hands rock-steady and his mind focused.

He kisses Jim, fast and hard, once they're both in the car with the engine revved up, and Jim meets him with equal desperation, moaning into Steve's mouth as they celebrate their victory.

"Better stop kissing me and gun it," Jim says then, pulling away, "or the doors I rigged won't let us out."

Steve steps on the gas.

They get all the way to Queens in Tony's Audi R8 Spyder before he catches up to them in the Iron Man suit.

* 

Tony's still giving them dirty looks two days later, when they meet up with the team at the Triskelion to go over the intel from Steve and Natasha's latest op.

"Him, I expect it from, but you, Rogers?" Tony says. Steve doesn't even try to hide his grin.

"You expect your friend to steal your cars?" he asks, innocently.

"I've been doing it since he started getting cars," Jim says, folding his arms and smiling. "Remember that? Your sixteenth birthday present to yourself?"

Tony looks deeply unimpressed. "Uh, yeah, I remember you wrapped it around a tree," he says. Glancing at Steve, he says, "Ferrari F50. Not that that means anything to you, but it was a beautiful machine."

Steve smiles, feeling a little odd to be standing between them and all the history they carry, but glad to be included, too, in their strange little tradition. "I promise to be very careful not to crash any of the cars I steal in the future, Tony," Steve says seriously.

Tony rolls his eyes and huffs away down the hall to the conference room, and Jim squeezes Steve's shoulder fondly, chuckling.

The briefing begins with Deputy Director Hill explaining that, after yesterday's op, they finally have the data they need to take down the Ten Rings operation for good.

"Good job, Rogers, Romanoff," she says. "So when do we go against the island?"

"Best window is two weeks from now," Natasha says, leaning over Hill's shoulder in what she probably thinks is a seductive way. "They're going to be understaffed at the facility."

"Do we know where all those missing staff are going to be?" Hill frowns.

Steve grimaces. "Out collecting." He shoves that part of the report down the table towards the Deputy Director.

She opens it on the images they've pulled from surveillance records in the other facilities: people, all of them children, being brought in, processed, and shipped off. Her face doesn't change, but she
doesn't look away from the images, either.

"Do we know what they're doing to them?"

Bruce nods. "They're trying to make superheroes."

The idea still makes Steve sick to his stomach. His procedure had hurt so much, and he'd been of age and a volunteer. He glances up at Bruce, who nods at him in understanding. Bruce had taken his transformation on voluntarily, too, but Steve knows that he's still wounded by it.

Tony clears his throat. "I can call in the doctors Bruce and I have been consulting with on Extremis," he says. "Helen Cho, who's already up to speed, and a few others. They're good, they've been working on a plan to get this thing out of me." He taps his arc reactor, shining dully through his dress shirt. "I'll fly them in, and we can have a few teams standing by to tackle whatever these kids come in with."

"We should do that as soon as possible so I can start working with them," Bruce adds. "We can start going through the information we've got from all this intel and see if we can prepare for the possible interactions of my research and Killian's."

Hill nods. "Do it now. Use the fastest means available." She turns to Natasha. "We're going to have to stop all those units they're sending out from – collecting any more victims."

"We can pick them off one by one, now that we know where they're going. They target orphanages, homeless shelters, foster homes, poor neighborhoods where kids might be on their own. This strike will be multiple cities in multiple countries, because they're trying to disguise the pattern." Natasha leans a little further into Hill's space to point out the targets, spread across major cities throughout the world, and Steve can't help but shake his head at her. He can't imagine a less sexy situation than this briefing about orphans being kidnapped for medical experiments.

"That's going to commit basically every field-ready SHIELD strike team we have," Hill says, her eyes bouncing over the map in front of her. Naturally, because she's thinking about orphans being kidnapped for medical experiments, she doesn't seem to notice Natasha's proximity.

"And while they're doing that, the Avengers go in and take out the base. Rescue everyone inside, blow the place to shit," Tony says.

"I'll talk to my higher-ups," Jim says, "coordinate some air support and some helicopters for getting the kids out safely. This is going to be more people than Tony and I can carry on our backs."

"You two won't be the only fliers," comes a voice from the other side of the room. They all look up to see Pepper pushing in through the double doors, heels clicking authoritatively on the concrete. She looks amazing, as always, flawless in her magenta dress and pink lipstick.

Tony makes a weird surprised gesture with his hands and gets up quickly, walking over to her. She towers over him, but turns her whole body towards him attentively to listen to what he has to say.

"I thought you decided – " he says to Pepper, in an undertone.

"I changed my mind," she says smoothly. Tony nods, though he looks a little upset by this. Pepper squeezes his hand, and he goes up on his tiptoes to kiss her on the cheek.

Jim turns in his chair to look up at them both. Pepper puts her hand on Jim's shoulder, squeezing gently, and he smiles up at her helplessly. Steve's heart goes out to him; Jim's feelings for them both are becoming more and more obvious as Steve gets to know them all better.
"Miss Potts," Deputy Director Hill says, "care to explain?"

Pepper smiles. "Care to demonstrate, actually," she says, and kicks off her shoes, immediately dropping significantly in height as her bare feet hit the floor. Then she comes back up again, and for a moment Steve thinks she's standing on her tiptoes, or on one shoe, but then she goes even higher, and higher, until it's clear that she's – her feet seem to be blasting out fire.

"Potts, you're rocket powered now?" Natasha says, in a tone as close to surprise as Natasha ever gets. "How long has this been going on?"

"Since Extremis, but it's taken me a while to learn to control it," Pepper says, coming back down to the ground. "Especially the part where I direct the heat. Tony wanted me to come out with all of you, on missions and stuff, but it's not – for the most part, it's not something I wanted for myself."

"You singed my floor," Hill says, looking down at the spot Pepper took off from. Sure enough, it's thoroughly blackened. Steve has a suspicion that it might crumble right through if anyone steps on it.

"Send me the bill," Pepper says, making a finger-gun and shooting it at Hill. A line of fire shoots out of her finger about three inches, like a tiny flamethrower, and then subsides. "It was worth it."

"You didn't want to come on missions before," Steve says, watching her carefully.

Pepper meets his eyes. "I value what you all do, but since Stark Industries stopped making weapons, I've been thinking a lot about violence, and its use in the world. I was complicit in that for a long time. I didn't want to . . . add to it, I guess, more than I have, or become a weapon myself."

This last with an apologetic glance around the room, because Pepper understands how many of her friends are living weapons.

"But you changed your mind," Steve says. "Why'd you change your mind?" He thinks he knows why, but he wants to hear it from her; for some reason, he feels desperate to hear her say it.

She shrugs. "The Extremis research," she says. "Those children are like me. I'm connected to them, and responsible for them."

Steve nods slowly. "Yes," he says, "that's what I thought."

*

"It's gonna be hard to wait around for two weeks, knowing what we know," Jim says, that night. They're at his place again, sitting together on the couch, Steve's head on Jim's shoulder. He'd put on a little lipstick in Jim's bathroom, just enough to make him feel all right, and Jim had whistled when he came out. It'd made the whole day a little more bearable.

"I hate this part," Steve agrees. "This is always the worst."

They're watching baseball, or they're supposed to be, but it's not a very good game. Steve still hasn't decided on what team to follow, now that the Dodgers are in LA. He needs to watch more games, really, to get a sense of the teams these days. He's thinking of letting Jim talk him into watching basketball, too, so he can see what all the fuss is about; apparently it's a big thing now, and there's a team out of Brooklyn.

"Maybe we should come up with some stuff to do for these two weeks," Jim suggests. "I've got Secret Service duty here and there, and a couple of meetings, but it's all in the city, so I can be around otherwise. I can teach you some more hotwiring."
"That sounds good," Steve says, thinking it over. "Though, actually, I've already got some plans of my own."

"I hope they include coming over here and kissing me," Jim says. Steve smiles.

"They do now," he says. He finds himself craving Jim's touch, more and more, wanting Jim's hands on his body, under his clothes. It feels safer every time; soon, Steve hopes, it'll just feel safe.

*

The next morning, Steve calls a few of the organizations he's been in touch with over the last month or two, and lets them tell him where he can do the most good. Turns out they're all really excited to have him volunteer.

Because he's not entirely cruel, he does call and leave Craig a message before he heads out each day.

"Craig! Hi, just wanted to let you know that I'll be at the rally for the hotel workers' union this afternoon, passing out food and drink and signs. No need to worry about getting the message out, I've already put a post on Facebook and it's getting a fair amount of attention."

"Hey Craig, I don't know if I told you, but I trained last month as a clinic escort, so I'll be working down at the Planned Parenthood all day. I don't plan to give any interviews, though, as I'll just be focused on the job."

"Craig, sorry, I seem to keep calling when you're out of your office. Or is this your straight to voicemail number? I have trouble remembering. Anyway, wanted to let you know that I'm doing an interview today with The Socialist Worker. They say it's going to be a long piece, so I'm really looking forward to that. The TV interviews I did before hardly gave me a chance to talk at all."

"Hi Craig. I got your messages, but I wanted to let you know that I have no intention of waiting for my public appearances to be approved by you or anyone else. But in case you want an update on where I'll be, today's the day for the big protest outside Congress in support of the Bill to unionize sex workers. I'll be the tall blond holding a sign that says UNIONS ARE FOR EVERYONE."

"Craig, Steve Rogers. I wanted to let you know that I'll be sitting outside of Representative Miller's office today, along with a few friends. We're hoping to bring his attention to the issue of voter ID laws, and their impact on minorities in his district. It's the new poll tax, you know. Jim Crow laws for the twenty-first century. Come join us if you like."

After he hangs up, Steve glares at the phone. "The fucking FBI," he mutters to himself, shaking his head.

Jim's busy protecting the president and liaising with the Air Force for most of the week, setting up the backup for their big op, but he comes with Steve to the sit-in outside Miller's office.

"I can't believe I'm doing this, Rogers," he mutters, as they walk towards the gathering crowd. "I have a publicist of my own, you know."

"I know," Steve says. "And I'm glad you're here."

"Well, the voter ID laws are bullshit," Jim says, glancing at Steve sidelong, as if sizing him up.

"You were the first one to tell me about them," Steve says, nodding in agreement.
They spend that day shoulder to shoulder, and it's like it was on the rollercoasters and like it is in battle, Jim's body a warm trusted weight at his side. They talk to a lot of people at the sit-in, which is a pretty good time; they're mostly experienced activists, and Steve learns a lot. They also talk to the security guards who show up with mace and billy clubs, though that interaction is a little less polite.

"Mace doesn't affect me," Steve tells them. "Or, I mean, it stings a little. But it would hurt the other people here, so if I see you using it illegally, on peaceful protesters exercising their right to free speech, I will be forced to make a citizen's arrest."

A lot of camera flashes go off just then.

Nobody gets maced or dragged off. Jim punches him in the shoulder lightly when he sits back down.

"You'd almost think you'd done this before," he says. Steve picks up his sign and sets it on his shoulders again.

"Well, not since the serum," he says. This last week has felt good, like reclaiming a part of himself that he put aside the moment Erskine gave him the chance to sign on the dotted line and become a company man. "I think I tried giving that speech to a cop once in the thirties and he didn't think much of it."

Jim chuckles, his eyebrows going up. "You do a lot of protesting? Back then?" His tone is light, like it used to be when he and Steve were first getting to know each other.

"Yeah. Mostly union stuff, plus some student protests down at Brooklyn College, a few up in Harlem."

Jim nods, taking this in. "Up in Harlem?" he asks, after a beat.

Steve smiles, remembering the times he listened to Valentine speak. He's caught up, suddenly, in the feeling of missing her, struck again by the strangeness of the idea that she died at the end of a long, long life. "Yeah, I – maybe modern folks would think it's funny, but I had some pacifist friends. In the N – in the black civil rights movement, and in the socialist union circles, pacifism was a pretty big deal."

"I never, uh. I never asked before," Jim says slowly, pitching his voice low. "But you used to say Negro, huh?"

Steve nods. "Got a firm talking to from Director Fury about that one, right when I woke up. He said he didn't want any bullshit in his agency."

"Would've liked to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation," Jim says. "Wow."

Steve frowns. He's acutely aware of how important this topic is, and he doesn't want to mess anything up with Jim. But he wants to be honest, too. "It was a lot to learn. It is a lot to learn."

"But it's not the kind of question you ever texted me," Jim points out.

"I guess . . . I would've been . . . I couldn't ask that of you," Steve stutters, frowning. He gestures at the crowd around them, mostly black folks and other people of color. "I've been learning a lot in places like this, though, just by listening."

Jim nods. "Gotcha." He doesn't say any more, though, maybe because it's the kind of discussion
they ought to be having in private.

They head back to Jim's house after the protest, since it's closer, and Steve feels like there's still something unsaid in the air. He knows that Jim's the type to clam up tight when he's got something to say, and all the tighter if the something’s important. But Steve doesn't want to let this one lie; race in the future is so different than it was in his day, and he's starting to worry that he did mess up, somehow, back there.

They get settled in to watch Drag Race, Steve thinking again about how amazing it is to be able to see all these drag queens, almost none of them white, up on the screen. It never could've happened back in his day.

It's as good a start as any, so on the commercial, Steve mentions it.

Jim nods slowly. "Did you know any gay black men? Back in the day?"

Steve shakes his head. "Not well. A few of my friend Valentine's friends were queer, but I wasn't too close with them."

"I guess the communities were pretty segregated?"

"Down in Brooklyn, yeah. At the bars I used to go to, we had a few Jewish guys and then mostly Irish, Italian, other Europeans. Those differences meant a lot more than they do now, I think. But up in Harlem I used to see interracial gay couples. More than I ever saw interracial straight couples, actually."

"When I was coming up in the nineties in Philly there weren't a lot of really integrated gay hangouts," Jim puts in. Steve raises his eyebrows, surprised.

"You went out on the scene back then?" he asks. He tries to imagine it, Jim at eighteen years old, soft and vulnerable, dancing with men at the club, or flirting with men at a house party.

"Not really," Jim admits. "I lurked outside a couple of gay bars, though."

Steve laughs quietly. He remembers Marlene, holding up walls outside a gay club until Betty brought her inside. He wonders if there was ever a Betty for Jim, someone who brought him inside and showed him the ropes. Before he can ask, though, Jim changes the subject, puts the focus back on Steve.

"So you didn't make it up to Harlem for the night life that much?" he asks. Steve can hear the other question behind it, and shakes his head, turning on the couch to meet Jim's eyes. On the TV, the commercials are over, but neither of them picks up the remote to hit the volume button.


"It's really cute how you say 'dated' when it's pretty clear that's not what you mean," Jim teases gently. Steve lets out a breath. "I guess I'll say I was surprised when you – uh. Started flirting with me. I wasn't sure it was a great idea."

"Dating a racist old man?" Steve asks, thinking of the reporters.

"Dating a white boy," Jim corrects him, and kisses his cheek. "You're always more trouble than you're worth."

His tone is gentle, but Steve is reminded again of how much of himself Jim's let Steve see, how
vulnerable and kind he's been, and he's grateful.

"People do say that about me," Steve agrees. "I think I have a voicemail from Craig to that effect."

Jim nods, but doesn't say anything, gazing at the screen in front of them but not seeming to really see it.

"Will you tell me what you're thinking?" Steve asks, running his thumb gently up Jim's leg.

Jim purses his lips and turns his head to meet Steve's gaze.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, okay. So, you mentioned listening to folks. At the sit-in."

Steve nods.

"Not everyone – not everyone's always been willing to do that. With me. Especially when it was something about racism."

It takes Steve a few seconds to put all the pieces together, but when he does, he frowns. "A guy you – a boyfriend of yours," he says, slowly. "Who didn't listen."

Jim nods quickly, looking away.

"I'll listen," Steve promises, wishing it didn't sound so empty. It's easy to promise. Anyone can promise. "I swear, Jim, I'll listen. I don't always know what I'm supposed to know unless you tell me, but . . . " he trails off, frustrated. "I want to know. I want to be good to you. I'll listen."

"Okay, good," Jim says, and then lets out a breath and looks at the screen. "That's good to hear."

Steve, tentatively, wraps an arm around him, and Jim snuggles back immediately into the embrace. It's funny, Steve thinks, that Jim's more willing to talk about racism than about his own past, but he thinks he understands that, at least. Sometimes it's easier to think about big, universal problems than about yourself.

They put the sound back on just in time for the final runway. Whether or not the judges agree, Steve thinks that everyone looks beautiful. When he mentions this to Jim, Jim gets a sweet little smile on his face.

"Just the fact that they're up there is kind of beautiful," he murmurs. Steve holds him a little closer.

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A week and a half after Steve starts his charity work, as he's getting home from the soup kitchen, Deputy Director Hill calls him on his cell phone.

"Rogers, your publicist quit," she says.

"Did he?"

"So I'm officially assigning you the duty of hiring a new one. Anyone you want, just for God's sake get someone to manage your public appearances. I don't care if they're public appearances in support of vegan pacifist orgies, just get them coordinated and notify us in advance, okay?"

That seems fair. Steve actually remembers Danielle talking about a pacifist orgy she went to back in the 30s, but he's pretty sure there were animal products in use. "Yes, ma'am," he says. "Should I put an ad on Craigslist, or – "
"I will get you someone from HR to help you with the task," Hill says, almost a yell.

"Right," Steve says. "Sorry, ma'am."

"Go punch tanks, will you? Maybe we can get a picture of that."

"Anything you say, ma'am."

"And, Steve," Hill adds, sounding quieter.

"Yeah?"

"I – it was a little surprising, to see you working for Planned Parenthood. I'm – it's good you did that."

Steve grimaces. He hates how people assume that he could never have anything to disagree with the Church about. "I'm not the kind of Catholic they make me out to be on the news," he says, after a beat, wishing he could tell her everything, all of it.

"Yeah," Hill says. She sounds as hesitant as Steve feels, like she's navigating carefully around the words she really wants to say. "Well. I'm not either, but my family is. And I appreciate what you're doing."

"Thanks," Steve says, warmed by this gift, this insight into her life. He feels the muscles in his jaw loosen a little. "I guess . . . I just don't think screaming at scared women in trouble is doing God's work, no matter what anyone says. If my Ma could see what some folks do in the name of the Church, she'd be livid."

Hill chuckles. "I bet. Maybe you'd tell me more about her, some day."

"I'd like that," Steve says. He wonders if Hill would let him call her by her first name. And if Natasha would be jealous if she did. There's a little pause on the line, and Steve isn't sure what else to say. After a moment, Hill speaks, clearing her throat first.

"But if you don't get that publicist and get your shit together, Rogers, I swear to the Holy Mother I will find you a latrine to dig somewhere."

This surprises a laugh out of Steve. "Yes, ma'am," he says.

He can see what Natasha likes about her.

*

"Rogers," Tony says, when they meet up at the Triskelion a couple days later to finalize plans and practice working together. "I wasn't sure if the next time I saw you you'd be fighting evil or protesting my company."

"I have been reading up on criticisms of Stark Industries," Steve says. "And you know, the more open you are to change, the less likely you are to see violent protest."

"You're friends with him, did you know that Captain America was a socialist?" Tony demands, turning to Jim.

"Yup," Jim says.

"A socialist! The guy who drapes himself in the flag and punches the enemies of America!"
"Corporate oppression is the enemy of America," Steve says, reasonably.

"Were you a socialist in World War Two? Because I'm sure my dad never mentioned anything about it. And, like, not to give you a big head or anything but he talked about you a lot."

Steve grins, suddenly remembering the sound of Danielle's bright, clear voice every time it lifted up over a crowd, and he starts singing. "So comrades, come rally, and the last fight let us face! The Internationale unites the human race!" He lifts his fist at the end, like you're supposed to, and garners a small round of applause from Bruce, Jim, and Natasha.

"Oh God," Tony groans. "You have got to be fucking kidding me with this."

"I am a little," Steve admits. "I was never actually a member of the US Communist Party. Philosophical differences." And, of course, they hadn't let homosexuals join after 1933, though that hadn't been Steve's main objection at the time.

"Yeah, like you were too far left for them," Tony mutters.

"I liked your interview in the Socialist Worker," Bruce says thoughtfully. "You're right about adjunct professors needing to unionize. The corporatization of the academy is causing untold damage to our education system."

"I think so too," Steve says.

"We're ready to begin the training run," Pepper calls, from the door. She's in her new superhero outfit, which is apparently a black leotard with a sturdy backpack full of supplies. Her feet are bare. "And Steve, if you want to talk about Stark Industries' treatment of workers, you talk to me."

"I'll do that," Steve says, and follows her to the practice rooms.

*I*

"I don't want to hurt people," Pepper says, as they take their places in the gym. "I'm going as part of the rescue team."

"Well," Natasha says, "I know a lot of non-lethal ways to incapacitate enemy combatants, and I could teach them to you. But I don't know very many that work with a flamethrower."

"And it's not like I can get that kind of training overnight," Pepper adds, reasonably.

"Pepper, why don't you show us what you can do, and we can start factoring it into our strategy as a team," Steve suggests. Pepper nods.

She jumps up into the air, and at the apex of the jump she turns on the flames, rocketing up towards the high ceiling of the practice room at a speed that easily rivals War Machine or Iron Man.

"She's fast," Tony says. He sounds proud, which makes Steve smile a little. "And she's a lot more maneuverable than one of the suits, in part because she can – yeah, that."

As they watch, Pepper curls into a ball in midair, hugging her knees, and tumbles forward. Still propelled by flames from her feet and hands, she slips between two rafters. It's definitely a smaller space than Tony or Jim could fit into at that speed.

"And there's this," Pepper calls. She waves a hand in front of her, and a wall of flame springs up;
she spins in the air, and the wall becomes a sphere that surrounds her completely.

"Turn it up a little," Tony says. Pepper concentrates, and the flames get a lot bluer, harder to see.

"Ready, honey," she calls. Tony nods, pops a small machine gun up out of the shoulder of his armor, and shoots directly at his girlfriend.

It all happens too fast for any of them to react; instead, they stand there stupidly, watching the bullets disintegrate as they hit Pepper's fire-shield.

"Impressive," Jim says, though he sounds terrified. Steve can't blame him.

"How far can you extend that shield?" Natasha asks. Pepper swoops down nearer to them.

"I don't know," she says. "Hang on." She concentrates, and the sphere unwraps from around her, forming into a flat sheet that she extends in front of her, pushing the edges further and further until the barrier is about fifteen foot square.

"Open your eyes, babe," Tony says.

Pepper does, and grins. "Yes!" she says. "This could be helpful."

"You bet," Jim says. He's not wearing his helmet, so Steve can see his face from here, the way he's lit up just like Tony with pride for her. Glancing up, Steve catches Natasha catching him catching Jim watching Pepper, and Natasha's mouth pulls down a bit at the corner.

"So, Pacifist Flamethrower," Natasha says. "What'll you do if someone shoots something bigger than a dinky little thirty-eight at you?"

"Excuse me, those were fifty caliber bullets," Tony objects. Pepper turns off the flames and floats down to the floor, managing not to singe it by putting out the fire while she's still a foot above the ground and then thunking down on her heels.

"I was thinking of going with the call sign Rescue, actually. And what do you do when someone shoots something bigger at you?" Pepper asks Natasha.

"I duck," Natasha says, smiling.

"Then let's get some practice, shall we?" Pepper says.

They start working together, breaking down their moves and tactics into their component parts to demonstrate them for Pepper.

"What was that thing you and Natasha did in New York?" Pepper asks Steve. "When she jumped off your shield?"

"Huh," Steve says, "we haven't done that in a while."

"Shield up, Rogers," Natasha says, and is already running at him before he starts to crouch down and raise his shield. She steps on his knee, then on the shield, and he launches her upwards; she spins in midair, then shifts into position to come down again. Steve holsters his shield and catches her with his hands on her waist, her hands on his shoulders, like a ballet move, and sets her lightly on her feet.

"We should practice our aim," Natasha says. Steve nods.
They spend the afternoon experimenting, trying different combinations of people and powers. At one point they try using Pepper's fire to split and deflect the repulsor weapons in the Iron Man and War Machine suits, which works surprisingly well.

"From a physics standpoint, this makes no sense at all," Jim says, as Pepper wields her flame like a blade, splitting his attack in two and channeling it around her. "But it does look really cool."

"I'm sure we'll figure out the mechanics of it eventually, Rhodey," Tony says cheerfully. "It's not our fault that we're so far ahead of theoretical physics that they don't have an explanation for us yet."

Steve is so caught up in the vision of the three of them in motion, flying together, repulsor beams and fire flowing smoothly around them, that he lays himself wide open for a punch to the face, which Natasha promptly delivers.

"Eyes on the prize, Rogers," Natasha says, and Steve shakes his head to get past the punch. Natasha hits hard.

"Sorry," he says.

"It's kind of painful to watch, once you see it," Natasha says quietly, jerking her head towards the three of them.

Steve lets himself watch again, just for a few seconds; Jim is somersaulting in midair, halfway between Tony and Pepper, his laugh coming slightly tinny through the speakers of his suit.

"I don't know about that," Steve says. He's not sure exactly what he's feeling, but he doesn't think it's pain.

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The next night they're lying tangled together on Jim's couch – which, for two tall guys like them, took a bit of finagling – and flipping through auto manuals together. Jim's explaining a few new security features, and telling Steve how to get around them, and Steve is making plans for their next raid on the Stark Tower motor pool.

His attention isn't really on that, though, because he can't stop thinking back on what he saw in the training room the day before, the way Jim's face had looked after the practice: pleased, but tense, too, like the pleasure of the training session had only papered over his deeper sadness. Slowly, Steve comes to a decision.

"Hey, you know I love you, right?" he says, bending his head to kiss Jim's bicep. Jim rolls over a little, so he's more on his back than on his side, with Steve lying partially on top of him. He lets the manual slip down onto his chest and looks down to meet Steve's eyes.

"Yeah," he says, slowly, huskily. "I love you too."

Steve crawls up his body and kisses him thoroughly, not caring that he's messing up today's perfect lipstick. With one hand still cupping Steve's head, Jim slides the other down his body to grip Steve's hip over his new short denim skirt.

"That's good," Steve breathes, between kisses. He closes his eyes for a moment and lets himself feel relieved.
"Don't you want to learn more about anti-theft devices, honey?" Jim teases. Steve, impatiently, grabs the manual and tosses it up onto the table.

"We can become master thieves later," he says. Jim, pretty naturally, gets the wrong idea.

"Yeah?" His voice is low and sultry. "You wanna neck on the couch?" Jim made fun of Steve the first time he said "neck," and then started saying it like a joke, and now he just says it in earnest. Steve thinks it's pretty funny.

"No, I – well, okay, yeah," he admits, with a quick grin, because his skirt is so short and he's been turned on ever since he put it on this afternoon, not to mention that Jim's hands on his waist feel incredibly good, wide and solid and strong. "But no, I meant – I wanted to ask you something."

Jim licks his lips. "Okay." He sits up, scooting back on the couch so that his back is pressed to the armrest. "That makes me a little nervous," he admits. It's something he probably never would have said back when they started all this, or even a couple of weeks ago; he would've been too worried about stepping on Steve's feelings to have any of his own. It's a good sign.

"Remembering that I think you're aces," Steve says, because the thirties slang always makes Jim smile, "I wanted to ask you how you felt about Tony and Pepper."

Jim's mouth pulls down at the corners. "About my best friend and his girlfriend, you mean?"

"Yeah." Steve sits back on his heels. "I'm – Jim, the reason I'm asking is because sometimes, when we're around them, you seem . . . tense. Not very happy. And it's hard to watch you being unhappy."

Jim sighs deeply, looking some confusing combination of furious and deeply touched. "You have nothing to worry about with me," he says, eventually, and it has the sound of covering over a lot of other things he's not saying.

"Yeah, I'm not saying this right," Steve says, frowning. A moment ago, Jim was touching him, fingers in his hair, hand on his waist, and Steve wishes briefly that he'd just gone on kissing him instead. "This has been bothering me for a while, but it's not because I'm worried you're a cheat."

"Okay," Jim says evenly.

"You just seem sad. When Tony and Pepper are around."

Jim's nodding, but Steve can see that it's the fast angry kind of nodding. He winces.

"So, to make me happy, and not because you're threatened, I shouldn't be around them anymore – "

"Not what I'm saying," Steve says, using his firmest voice.

"You can't claim to be doing something for my own good when it's – when it's something that bothers you."

Steve nods. "I know, I know, Jim, listen to me. I'm not asking because I don't want you to be around them. I want – I thought – I thought you wanted them. Or Tony, at least, I don't know if you – if you ever date women, but you said you were bisexual, so I thought maybe – "

"I've never been anything but faithful," Jim says, his voice getting tighter and tighter. Jim's drawing in on himself, so his muscles get tight too, the same way they do when Tony touches him or Pepper smiles at him.
"Yeah, but," Steve tries to find the right way to say it. "But I don't need you to be."

Jim's head snaps up, his expression all confusion. Steve lets out a breath. At least now they're getting on the same page.

"What?"

"I don't need you to be faithful. Or – I guess I mean, faithful doesn't mean that to me. If you want to be with Tony, or Pepper, or both of them, and also be with me, then I think you should." He considers. "Or, um, try it, at least."

Jim blinks. "Damn," he says, but Steve can't interpret his expression.

"Damn?" he asks.

"Damn, I can't believe that Steve Rogers is so consistently so much queerer than I am," he says, laughing and pressing one palm to his forehead. "Damn."

Steve laughs. "You mean, you don't - want to have more than one lover?" he asks, as delicately as he can.

"I never have before," he says. Which isn't a no.

"So, can I ask it again? How do you feel about Tony and Pepper?"

Jim reaches out and takes Steve's hand. "Listen, Steve, I feel like – it's hard to believe that you're not jealous about this."

"I don't think I am," Steve says, glad for the physical contact. "It's mostly that it . . . it makes me sad, seeing you around them, watching you get all coiled up inside."

Jim sighs deeply, and doesn't say anything for a long moment. When he speaks, it seems like a non sequitur at first. "I had this . . . boyfriend, once. He was the jealous type."

Steve nods. Jim purses his lips, as if trying to figure out how to continue, so Steve asks, "What kind of jealous?"

This makes Jim huff out a bitter laugh. "Every kind. I – he would pick fights with guys if he thought they were flirting with me. And he used to say he was okay with my friends, but he really wasn't. He'd tell me bad things about them, instead, lies, trying to get me away from them. Men, women, single or not, hot or not, it didn't matter, he was jealous of . . . of everyone else in my life. And I'd try to tell him that nothing was going on, and he never believed me."

"I believe you," Steve says, automatically, because he trusts Jim deeply. "Your old boyfriend sounds like he was a real piece of work."

Nodding slowly, Jim says, "Yeah."

"Was it the same white boy you were talking about before?" Steve asks, gently. The pieces are beginning to come together.

"Oh yeah," Jim says. "I was with him for a long time. And then after, it kind of soured me on relationships. Before you came along . . ." he trails off for a second, but then swallows hard and starts talking again. "Before you came along, it was a lot of guys in a row whose names I never bothered to find out."
Squeezing Jim's hand, Steve says, "I'm sorry. I wish I'd found a better way to ask you."

Jim sighs. "You didn't know. I didn't tell you." He pauses, then says, "I've never actually told anyone."

Steve nods, feeling the weight of that. "I'm glad you told me."

"I felt like – an idiot, I guess. For a long time. For not breaking up with him." Jim laughs again, and then adds, "Not that he took the breakup very well either. He told me I couldn't leave him."

"That's terrible," Steve says, anger unfolding inside him at the idea of someone treating Jim that way. Like something to be owned.

"So when you said you thought being around Tony and Pepper is bad for me, it was like – "

He shrugs wordlessly. Steve bends and kisses his shoulder. "I get it," he says.

"I worked so hard, after I got rid of him, to get close to my friends again. So I guess – it hurts, to hear that it's a bad thing, y'know."

"I'm sorry," Steve says again. Jim shakes his head, dismissing the apology, and brings their hands up to his mouth and kisses Steve's thumb softly. "Just – have you ever told anyone about . . . how you feel? About Tony and Pepper? Do you not want to talk about it?"

"I've never had anyone even ask," Jim says, then considers the question more deeply. "I mean, actually, my old boyfriend was jealous of Tony in particular. Along with everyone else I knew. But me and Tony, we've never been – God. I don't even know how to talk about this, it's always been something I – I kept under wraps. It's always been a secret. Even from Tony." He gives Steve a wry, worried look. "Except to you, I guess."

Steve squeezes his hand, trying to be reassuring. He wonders what Natasha would say, how she would handle this situation. She'd probably make a joke, so Steve tries that.

"Well, my gaydar is also better than yours."

Running his thumb absently along Steve's knuckles, Jim smiles and says, "Don't say gaydar."

"If you want to talk about it, you can. I'm not the jealous type."

"You really aren't, are you?" Jim shakes his head. "It's hard to get my head around." Breathing deeply, he says, "It's – I don't know what the point is in talking about it. It's not like anything can ever happen."

"Okay," Steve says.

There's a little silence between them, and then Jim speaks again, contradicting himself. "You gotta understand that I met Tony when he was fourteen, and I was seventeen."

Steve's eyebrows go up.

"I wasn't – it wasn't sexual back then, it was just this intense friendship like I'd never had before. He was a lot younger than me but it was like – we had the same ideas, you know? Talking about physics, engineering, building things together. We had this rhythm. He was so brilliant at that age. Hopeful. I guess I was hopeful too, back then."

Steve's seen Tony and Jim flying together, and he has no trouble imagining them when they were
young, learning each other's moods, building the relationship that they have now. The way Jim talks about it, it makes Steve think of how he and Peggy used to work together mapping out HYDRA bases.

"Your love was pure," Steve murmurs, coming up out of his kneeling position to sit normally on the couch. He struggles for a moment to find the right words to fit to the image in his head of the two of them together, young and inseparable. "Chivalrous. Intellectual." After a moment's consideration, he lies down so that his head is in Jim's lap. Jim's hands settle immediately in his hair, stroking over his temple, and when he speaks next his voice is steadier.

Sometimes, Steve has learned, it's easier for Jim to talk if no one can see his face. Steve knows the feeling: wanting to hide and wanting to be seen at the same time.

"Kinda," Jim agrees. "And then I didn't see him for years, while I was off with the Air Force, and when I got back he'd – grown up. Physically, at least. Otherwise he was a mess. He was on a lot of drugs and making bad sex decisions and wasting money, and it was a long time before he got his life together. Meanwhile I'd been figuring myself out, coming to terms with the fact that I wanted men. More than I wanted women, even."

Steve makes an affirmative noise.

"I – it's funny, I had this fantasy, back then," Jim says, and then stops.

"Tell me," Steve murmurs.

Jim breathes in deeply.

"It was when I was carting him in and out of rehab. Three rehab facilities in six months, God. I imagined – I mean, it's stupid, but I imagined that I would be one of his experiments, having sex with a guy for the first time. It always went differently, like he would kiss me just out of stupid bravado and I would pin him down and kiss back, or he would find out about me somehow and ask me to fuck him, or . . . " he trails off, then clears his throat. "Sorry. You probably don't want to hear that."

"It's okay," Steve says, smiling against Jim's thigh. He used to have the same sort of fantasies about Bucky: wild, improbable situations that would lead to them kissing, or having sex. He can empathize with lusting after your best friend and having no idea what to do about it.

"Well." Jim says. "Well. Anyway. I certainly imagined that a lot." Steve laughs, and Jim continues. "And it was always, in the fantasy, it was always like I would save him, and he would clean up his act, and he would be happy. With me."

Steve can hear Jim's heartbeat, he realizes, the blood rushing through Jim's femoral artery. It's fast, but it's slowing down the more Jim speaks.

"I get that. The savior fantasy."

Jim grabs a handful of Steve's hair and shakes him lightly.


"Did you ever tell him you were bisexual?" Steve asks. That Tony would find out about me, Jim had said, like he always wanted the words spoken but didn't want to be the one to speak them. Like he'd worked hard to meticulously protect his secret and had always been disappointed when Tony didn't discover it.

"No," Jim sighs. "No, I never did. I don't know if he put it together. I still don't know. I don't know
if he ever did experiment with men. We don't talk about it. We talk about women, even though I haven't had a girlfriend in years."

"When I first got to this century, Tony really confused me," Steve says, thinking back. "He still kind of does. The way he acts would've been so queer in the forties."

Jim laughs at this. "You should've seen him in the late nineties," he says. "The drugs came along with some really interesting fashion decisions."

Steve resolves to look this up on Google image search later. It's good to know the important facts about your teammates.

"But there's how someone acts, and there's what they like to do," Jim continues. "And Tony's really good at . . . acting in a way that gets a reaction."

"That's true," Steve agrees. After a moment or two of quiet, he prompts Jim to go on: "So, Tony did get his life together, eventually."

"He did. And I was there, but it wasn't me who was the savior. There was a man called Yinsen, who got him through his kidnapping. Tony wouldn't have survived without him. And then after that, there was Pepper."

Steve plays idly with the seam of Jim's jeans, running his finger along it. "And you were jealous," he says.

"God, I was so fucking jealous." Jim goes silent for a moment, but his fingers are still stroking Steve's temple, and his heartbeat is still regular under Steve's ear. "But you know, Pepper was really good for him, and he obviously loved her a lot and was really happy with her, and – in a way, it was like part of my fantasy coming true, where Tony got to be that brilliant kid he used to be, and have someone who saw that and loved it."

Steve smiles, because this is one of the sweetest things he's ever heard Jim say. "But it wasn't you," he points out.

"It wasn't me. No," Jim agrees. "I wanted him to be happy so badly, and it was great when he was, but I kept thinking – I wish it could've been with me."

There's the sound of Jim taking a drink of his coffee, then setting the cup back down.

"That's hard," Steve says softly. "I'm sorry, that's really hard. Is it okay to say that I love you for being such a gentleman, though?"

Jim bends down and kisses Steve's temple. "Yeah," he says, then sighs. "And of course, all this time, I'm in the military, and Don't Ask Don't Tell is a big thing, people getting kicked out left and right, and the only guys I hooked up with for a long time were – you know. Convenient. Not boyfriend material. I wasn't boyfriend material."

"Nothing wrong with that," Steve says, because he's felt that way himself. "I know what it's like to have to hide. It takes a toll. Sometimes you take what you can when you can get it."

"Yeah," Jim says, and it sounds like the word is stuck in his throat. When he speaks again, he's a lot quieter. "I'm still really not interested in coming out, though."

Listening to Jim's heartbeat, Steve asks, "Why does that scare you to say?"
Jim pauses for so long that Steve thinks he's not going to answer at all. He's on the verge of turning over to look up at him when the words finally come. "I worry that you're going to want me to."

Steve takes a moment to put his words in order, because these are important ones and he needs to be honest. "I think I want to," he says. "Eventually. When I'm ready. When I've got it figured out." The specter of it is still confusing and frightening, but Steve knows he won't want to be silent forever. "But I've been thinking about what you said, about how it's not my responsibility to do it. That's really hard for me to think my way around, you know?"

There's no reply, but Jim squeezes his arm reassuringly. "But – I get it now. All the questions, the interviews you'd have to do, the scrutiny – you would hate that, wouldn't you?"

"I really would," Jim says softly. He pauses, and Steve waits. "That's not the only reason, though."

"No?"

"It's also that this, this is private, to me. My private life. I worked hard to get to where I am, and despite some shitty experiences, it's still a refuge to me. And inviting other people into it, having it scrutinized, having to behave in the way they would expect me to . . . it wouldn't feel like a refuge anymore. Or it wouldn't feel like it was mine."

"I get that," Steve says. He can feel it, what Jim's describing: the little world they've made together, the thing that's just theirs and no one else's.

"That's good," Jim says. Steve can hear the relief in his voice. "It's just – it's not their fucking business." He says this last so vehemently that Steve is startled into a fierce, protective instinct. He never wants anyone to take that privacy away from Jim.

"You don't have to make the same choices I do," Steve says. He thinks back on Valentine, so furious that Danielle had denied her community to get into the WAACs; he feels like he understands that better, now.

"Okay," Jim says, and goes back to petting Steve's hair. Steve lets himself get lost in the sensation for a while. When Jim tugs on it, Steve feels it all down his neck to the base of his spine, the sensation building slowly into a low, banked arousal.

"It's another reason that being with Tony was never going to work," Jim reflects. "He doesn't do subtle, and he doesn't do secrets."

"No? The same Tony who organized all those secret rooftop dinner dates?"

This startles a little laugh out of Jim. "He'd tell eventually. He wouldn't be able to stop himself."

Steve can't help but notice that Jim's moved on in the conversation, and they're no longer talking about whether he's in love with Tony, but just the logistics. He smiles to himself, a little sadly.

"You trust him with your life, in the air," Steve says. "I've seen it all the time."

"That's different," Jim objects.

"Yeah. Yeah, it is. But I guess I mean – you wouldn't have trusted him to wear a rocket suit and fly next to you when he was . . . " Steve tries to remember Jim's words for it. "When he was such a mess."

"Heh. I don't know if you know this, but I put on the War Machine suit for the first time to stop
him from hurting himself with Iron Man.”

Steve didn't know that. "So what changed?"

"Tony did," Jim replies immediately, then laughs when he sees what Steve's getting at. "You're a dick, Rogers."

Steve laughs, turning a little to muffle it against Jim's knee. "I just mean, you should ask yourself if the Tony you fly and fight with would be able to keep a secret. If it were a secret he kept for your sake. Because – because he's become the kind of man who can stop himself, if he needs to."

Jim thinks about this. "Huh."

"People change," Steve says, thinking it over himself. "People surprise you." His own grief comes rolling back, for the life he might've had with Peggy or with Bucky, the person he might've been. They'd surprised him, both of them had, with their ability to love him.

If only they'd had more time. If only they could've figured it out, found a way for the three of them to all be happy.

"What about Pepper?" Steve asks, after a long pause. "You said you were jealous of her." He's thinking back on how he's seen Jim treat Pepper, and all he can remember are warm hugs, low intimate conversations, and shared long-suffering looks when Tony is being a jerk. If Jim is jealous of her, Steve hasn't noticed it. And Jim isn't particularly good at hiding his feelings; people just usually don't look at him too closely.

"At first, but then – you know, they've been together for a few years now, and they're so good together. And Pepper is – it's hard to describe. She lights up a room, she's one of those people. There's something about her that's so easy to be friends with. Like Tony, for all that he drives me up the wall."

Steve makes an encouraging sound, and doesn't say what he's thinking: that he's found both Tony and Pepper to be welcoming people in their way, but hard to connect with. He suspects that Jim is the one who's really good at being a friend, the way Bucky was, a sweet guy with a giving heart who's good at taking people for what they are. Now that Steve knows how badly Jim's been treated in the past, he feels even more respect for him, that he would come out of a relationship like that determined to be kind and careful to his loved ones, and not pass on the cruelty that he experienced.

"She and I got close. And it was like – I got close to who they were together, as a couple. I'd never want to ruin that."

"So now you're jealous of both of them," Steve says softly.

"Yeah, I don't know, maybe. I always – when they're around, I want to be near them, you know? They're – they're something to see, when they're together."

Steve can't disagree with that.

"They're very beautiful, too," Steve says gently. He's thought so himself.

"Yeah." The word comes out as a sigh.

Steve bites his lip, thinking about what he's seen of Jim, Tony, and Pepper together. "But you don't look happy, that's what I was trying to say. When you're near them. You look like you're in pain."
"God," Jim says, after a breath. "I don't – I never thought of it that way."

Steve closes his eyes, because he's tired of hearing of all the ways in which Jim Rhodes has set himself aside for the good of other people. He deserves to have what he wants. Even if what he wants is – not Steve.

Jim says, "I thought it felt good to watch them. Like getting to share in what they had."

Steve remembers that feeling, walking in on Peggy and Private Lorraine, or interrupting Smith and Stepnowski in the bathroom. Wanting to borrow a piece of that happiness. He imagines how he would've felt if Bucky had gotten married, or if Peggy had picked someone else over him. How it would've raked him over the coals and made him glad at the same time.

For a long time, when he was young, he assumed he'd be best man at Bucky's wedding. He prepared himself for it, imagining it, trying to focus on how proud he'd be to hand over the ring and clap him on the back. Steve wonders if Jim's spent time imagining something similar: stepping up, and then stepping aside, and staying quiet.

Staying quiet, Steve figures, is one of those habits that Jim was talking about that night in the garage.

"I understand," he says. Taking a risk, he pushes himself back up to a sitting position and looks over at Jim. "I understand, Jim."

"Yeah?" Jim says. "You do?"

Steve presses his lips together. Jim gave him his whole story, and he hasn't ever told anyone else. The least Steve can do is be as honest in return. "I lost a lot of people when I went into the ice. Or when I came out of it, either way. And I sometimes think about – you know. The road not taken. What life would've been like if I'd been able to marry Peggy." He swallows. "Or – or stay with Bucky."

He's never told anyone, not even Bruce, that he and Bucky were lovers, though there's plenty of speculation about it in a certain kind of historical text. But he owes Jim the truth, and he's happy to give it, a secret for a secret.

"You and Sergeant Barnes, huh?" His tone sounds light, but Steve gathers that he's read those historical texts too. Steve wonders how hard he had to work to hold himself back from asking about it.

"Yeah. For a long time. I loved him so much, and he was the only one who – no one else in the world knew me so well. And he knew me before the serum, and then after it."

"He saw the little you inside the big you," Jim offers, hesitantly, and Steve sighs.

"Yeah. He did. I worried about it for a long time, but in the end, I know he did. My beautiful girl, Bucky had said, in the middle of a field in France, and Steve had felt alive again for the first time in a long time.

It occurs to him that Jim's made him feel that way, too. Brought him back to life.

Jim wraps an arm gently around Steve's shoulders, stroking Steve's neck with his thumb, and doesn't say anything, letting Steve find the rest of the words.

"He . . . loved me. He knew me," Steve says. "And he died. And then I died. Like one of those
dumb depressing gay movies. But if we hadn't died, what would we have been? Would he have gotten married? Would I? Or could we have, I don't know, stayed together? It's – it's a kind of ghost, I guess. Not a ghost of the person who died, but the person you could've been if life had turned out differently.

"Yeah," Jim says, nodding. "Yeah. That's it. It's – I don't mean to say it's the same for me, not at all, I just mean – "

"It's okay," Steve says. "You're allowed to mourn for what you lost."
The corner of Jim's mouth turns up at that. "C'mere," he says.

Steve does, letting Jim reel him into a long, slow kiss. It's not joyous, or sad, or desperate, like any kiss Steve's had before. It's as if that haunting that Steve used to feel inside has come out, and is something shared between them instead. Steve feels understood, but he feels a loss too, like he and Jim are kissing each other in consolation for what they've lost, or in understanding.

"I want you to fuck me," Steve murmurs into Jim's ear, because right now he can't imagine anything better than Jim's cock filling him up, making him forget his ghosts.

"Yeah," Jim says quietly. "Yeah, that sounds good."

Steve grins, and shifts a little closer to him, so that their bodies brush and slide together. It's electric, those brief moments of contact, like the connection between them has suddenly been powered up.

"I know you've been thinking about it all day," Steve breathes. He knows because he's spent the day loving the way Jim's eyes rest on his body.

Jim runs his hands over Steve's shoulders, down his chest to his waist, then over the denim skirt that's just covering Steve's lap. His touch never falters or hesitates, treating Steve's body as all of a piece with the clothes he's wearing.

"God," Jim groans, "You're not wrong. I've been wanting to push this little skirt right up your thighs, sweetheart. You don't even know how you've been driving me wild with this." Jim rubs his palms over Steve's knees, then up a little higher.

"So do it," Steve says. "I want you to."

Jim takes him at his word, shoving the skirt up Steve's legs.

"I've wanted your hands on me for so long," Steve says, as Jim slides his fingers into the top of Steve's black boxer-briefs. "Yeah, take them off."

"You're so gorgeous," Jim says, and kisses him while he drags the shorts down his legs. Steve kicks them off, and then Jim's hand is on his bare thigh, gripping the big muscle there. The sensation of Jim's skin against his own is so intense that it's like being tickled, or being in pain: Steve starts suddenly towards him, putting his arms around Jim's neck and deepening their kiss.

Jim moans under his hands, and Steve feels that old swell of pride: I did that to him.

Steve works his way down Jim's jaw to his neck, kissing eagerly, moved by the desire to give Jim everything, everything he wants, everything he deserves. He puts everything he has into his kisses, alternating gentle and hard, light and sucking, until Jim's hand tenses on Steve's thigh.
"How you doing," Jim pants, half-laughing. "You feeling okay?"

"I feel great," Steve says. He does, pressed up against Jim's body, made solid against his skin and under his hands. "I want you so much."

"Yeah? What do you want me to do?" Jim's hand is rubbing higher and higher on his thigh, dipping in between his legs. Steve spreads his legs, as much as he can with the skirt still wrapped around his hips.

"I want your hand on my prick, to start with," Steve groans. "Since it's clearly what you want to do."

Jim huffs out a laugh and slips his hand up under Steve's skirt, cupping his balls, stroking his dick. "I love that you say prick," he says. "It's hot in an old-fashioned kind of way."

"Much like myself," Steve says, his laugh turning to a groan as Jim gets a really good grip and starts squeezing him from base to tip, over and over, until the skirt becomes a much more pressing problem.

"Okay, how do we get this off," Jim asks, tugging at the material.

"There's a zipper – " Steve frowns, bending sideways to try to find it. The skirt's gotten twisted around his waist, so God only knows where it is.

Jim pushes himself up off the couch, pressing one wet kiss to Steve's mouth as he goes. "You work on that, I'll get supplies."

Steve nods, frowning down at the material. He finally gets the zipper down, and shoves the skirt off. Jim's still in the bedroom, and Steve's still in his t-shirt, which feels awkward all on its own. He pulls it off, but then he's naked on Jim's couch, which is worse. He hesitates for a second, then fishes his boxer-briefs up off the floor and puts them back on, wincing a little as they rub over his hard dick. They're not covering much, at this point, but they make Steve feel better.

"Just a second," Jim calls from the bedroom. "Don't go anywhere."

"I'm not," Steve says, but in his head he worries that he is, that he's going to lose it again. God, he wants Jim to fuck him so bad, but.

Seized by inspiration, he picks his skirt up off the floor; the lipstick he used earlier is still in the pocket. He pulls it out, and has it halfway to his mouth before he thinks of something better.

"Okay, I just brought everything," Jim says, coming back into the living room with his arms full of bottles of lube and packets of condoms. He drops a strip of condoms on the floor, and then looks down at it, devastated. Steve smiles, and all of his trepidation falls away.

He knows Jim. Jim knows him.

"Hey, c'mere," he says, kneeling backwards on the couch so that he can cross his arms over the back of it. The position makes him feel a little less exposed.

Jim comes over and dumps the remainder of his sex supplies on the couch. "This is not my smoothest moment," he admits.

"Hey," Steve says again, and Jim turns to look at him, expectant.
"Fix my lipstick, will you?" He hands the tube over to Jim, whose expression of consternation softens to raw, open love. It makes Steve glow to see it.

"Sure," he says, and takes the cap off. "Though it's just gonna get everywhere."

"Kind of the idea," Steve says, and drops his mouth open. Jim runs the deep sparkly red carefully along his lower lip, and then pulls back. Steve presses his lips together.

"Beautiful," Jim says approvingly, and Steve feels himself relax. Whatever words he ends up using for himself, he knows that Jim wants him, wants all of him, girliness and all.

"It's called Adora," Steve says, relishing the feeling of the lipstick on his mouth.

"Really," Jim says.

"Yeah." Steve moves fast, fast as he can, and grabs Jim's wrist, pulling him in towards the couch.

"Hey!" Jim says.

"Here," Steve murmurs, and leans up against the back of the couch to kiss Jim on the cheek. When he pulls back, he's left a perfect wet lip-print.

"Thanks," Jim says softly.

"What do you say we pick up one of those containers of lube and a few of those condoms and hit the bedroom?" Steve suggests.

"That would've been a better idea in the first place," Jim agrees.

Steve peels Jim out of his clothes and lays him on the bed. He's muscled and strong, wiry but broad in the shoulder. He has good feet, too, with long toes and high arches, pinkish-brown on the underside. Steve strokes the top of Jim's left foot gently, struck suddenly by the idea that it's a particular kind of intimacy, and that while he's sucked a lot of guys off, or gotten fucked by them, he's only seen a few pairs of feet in his life, outside of barracks showers.

Looking up to meet Jim's eyes, Steve smiles slowly, and Jim smiles back, hot and intense. His dick is half-hard. Jim wraps his hand around it and nods up at him.

"Can I suck you?" Steve asks, crawling up between his legs. Jim cups Steve's head in his hand.

"I really want to see your pretty red lips wrapped around me," he whispers. It makes Steve shiver with lust, and makes him bold with confidence. He opens his mouth and, finally, takes Jim inside his body.

It's been a long time since Steve's done it, but it comes back to him quick enough.

He sucks Jim for a long time, playing with his balls and pressing his thumb up behind them, until he's gripping the sheets and writhing back and forth. It's so hot that Steve has to slide his shorts down his legs and take his own cock in his hand, mimicking the tight, long strokes that Jim was doing before.

When they're both getting close, Steve pulls off. There are red smears of lipstick on Jim's cock. "Wanna come like this? Or you wanna fuck me?"

"I want you to ride me," Jim says, gasping. "I wanna see you fucking yourself on me."
It's shocking to hear Jim asking for what he wants like that; shocking, because he so rarely does, but gratifying too, that he trusts Steve to say no if he doesn't want to. Steve, conveniently, can't think of anything he'd like to do more right at this moment.

Steve preps himself with the lube, and Jim preps himself with the condom, and then Steve's not interested in wasting any time: he climbs up on Jim's lap and lowers himself down as fast as he can bear, filling himself up with Jim's prick.

"Oh, God," Jim says, his eyes widening as Steve sinks down onto him.

"I can take it," Steve assures him, grinning. "I'm gonna ride you hard."

They fuck rough and fast, no acclimation or warmup, just pure hard fucking with Steve straddling Jim and throwing his head back as Jim plows up into him. It goes on forever, or so it seems, both of them teetering on the edge over and over before coming back down again, panting, sweating, finding a new rhythm together.

After a while Jim takes control, pushes him onto his back and grips his thighs tight while he fucks in deeper, changing the angle just enough to make Steve cry out involuntarily. The noise he makes is inarticulate at first, but then he manages to say Jim's name and a few swears as well, which makes Jim grin wildly and go faster. It's trusting and rough and it rattles Steve's teeth, and it comes along with Jim saying things like *I love you, and you're perfect, and I want you so much.*

When it's over, Steve feels better than he has in a long time, emptied out and filled up, perfectly comfortable to lie next to Jim in bed and laugh senselessly as he tries to catch his breath.

"Fuck," Jim says, long and drawn out, mostly into a pillow. "Steve."

"Yeah," Steve sighs. "Yeah. God. I was so worried I'd be rusty."

Jim laughs helplessly with the half of his mouth not muffled by the pillow. It's really cute.

They lay together in silence for a while, or Steve thinks they do; time isn't passing normally.

When Jim does speak, he's quiet and serious. "Thank you, Steve."

Steve looks over at him, furrowing his brow. "You're welcome? You know, in the old days you'd have to slip me two bits at this point."

"I'll send you a quarter on Paypal," Jim promises. "But I mean it. It's been a long time since I've – since anyone has listened to me like that."

"Or fucked you like that," Steve murmurs, smiling.

"Or fucked me like that," Jim agrees. "You're very good to me."

Steve rolls over to face him and runs his hand up and down his arm, squeezing gently. "We're good to each other," Steve says. "We needed each other, I think."

Jim's smile is slow and a little sad. "We did," he agrees.

They fuck again later that night, a lot slower this time, with both of them on their sides and Jim covering Steve's body from behind. Jim kisses Steve's neck softly, over and over, and it's so easy and so sweet that Steve loves Jim even more, loves him with a tenderness that aches through his entire body.
Jim kisses him goodnight, and kisses him good morning, and gets a pound of bacon on the stove at dawn without Steve even having to ask.

They talk about the upcoming mission, and Steve's plan for his daily run, and then a bunch of little things: lipstick colors and parachute technology and their favorite drag race competitors.

When there's a lull in the conversation, Jim changes the subject, and Steve can see in that moment that he's been working himself up to do it all morning.

"So what would I do?" Jim asks. He's facing the pan with the bacon in it rather than Steve himself. "What would I do if I wanted – what we talked about, if I wanted to talk to Tony and Pepper?"

"You could . . . talk to them?" Steve suggests half-heartedly, leaning against the kitchen island with a cup of coffee in his hands and his skirt hanging off his hips. "You're asking me? Remember how you used to make fun of my romantic overtures?"

"Yeah, I do. Goddamn it." Jim turns around suddenly, and Steve is surprised to meet his gaze. "I don't want to lose you, Steve. I love what we have."

"Me too," Steve says, relieved. He reaches out and caresses Jim's face. "You don't have to."

"Thank God," Jim says. "I'll do – whatever makes you comfortable, we can do that. Don't let this get in the way of us."

"I won't," Steve promises.

"And can you – I need you to tell me, if you're ever jealous."

Steve frowns. "Wouldn't it just make you uncomfortable if I told you I was jealous?" he asks. It seems to him that his jealousy would be his problem to deal with, but Jim shakes his head no, emphatically.

"I don't think I could take wondering about it," he explains. "If I have to – watch you, and worry about it. Please say you'll tell me. For real."

"Okay," Steve says. "I will. I'll tell you."

"Good," Jim says, breathing out.

They kiss, softly, and then Jim turns back to the frying pan with a smile.

Steve thinks about it for a while, about the things Jim did, early on, that made him feel comfortable and wanted.

"Our first date," he says, later, when they're powering their way through a stack of bacon sandwiches, "you got me all those roses. And it was extravagant, but it felt – special. Maybe that would work, to break the ice."

"Roses wouldn't feel extravagant to Tony," Jim sighs, poking his sandwich unnecessarily. "Or Pepper, at this point, Tony gets her a hundred roses on the regular."

"So don't get a bunch of them," Steve says. "Or don't get flowers at all. Get them something small and meaningful. So they'll know you care."
"Hmm," Jim says.

*

Over the next four days, they spend every spare moment in bed together. For Steve, it feels like something’s broken free, like there was still ice inside of him somewhere and the river behind it has finally forced its way past. They fuck a lot, getting better at it, getting used to each other's bodies and moods in a whole new way, and they talk a lot, with a kind of openness that Steve hasn't known since Bucky died. It’d seemed so clear, in the days after Bucky's death, that no one could ever know him in that way again, but as Jim kisses his hipbones, or grabs his hair, or whispers fantasies in his ear, Steve starts to wonder if maybe that's not true.

On the second day, Jim has Secret Service responsibilities, and on the third day, Steve gets called in for a smash and grab mission for SHIELD – outside of SHIELD jurisdiction, which Steve doesn't really feel sanguine about, no matter how Nick Fury justifies it in the mission briefing – but on both occasions they find each other afterwards, barely closing doors behind them before they kiss soft and desperate, before Steve slides down to his knees between Jim's legs, before Jim bends him over the table and fucks him.

When they've taken the edge off, they do it again, taking their time, playing around. Steve puts on a skirt so Jim can rub him off through the material, gripping Steve's dick as it hardens and pushes the fabric out obscenely; Jim slides Steve's stockings up his legs and fastens them to the garter belt, planting a kiss to every last strap; and they go online shopping together, which doesn't really seem like a sexy activity when it **starts**. But it ends with Steve sitting completely naked in Jim's lap, Jim's pants pulled hastily down his hips and Jim's cock shoved up inside him, while they look at a picture of a man modeling a bra and Jim whispers filthy things in his ear.

Afterwards, Steve sort of collapses forward and falls off of Jim's lap onto the floor. His arms are still twitching with the effort of holding himself up on the arms of the chair. He's glad he doesn't have one of the office chairs with the rolly wheels.

"Wow," Steve says, because it's the first word that comes to mind when words come back. Jim laughs, tying up the condom and tossing it into the trash.

"Yeah," he says.

Steve turns over to look up at Jim, leaning back and bracing his palms on the floor. Jim's still wearing his **uniform** from his meeting earlier today, Jesus. He asks before he can lose his nerve.

"Would you really want that?"

"Want what?" Jim asks. He's still breathing hard. He reaches down to pull his pants back up and do up his zipper, but his hands are shaking a little.

"Me to wear a bra," Steve says. "I've never thought about it before."

"Well, obviously the idea turns us both on," Jim says, gesturing between them. They're both pretty sticky and sweaty. Steve grimaces; he hates a mess, but doesn't quite have the wherewithal to get up and get a cloth yet.

"Yeah, okay," Steve says. He frowns. "I guess I worry sometimes you're just going along with what I want. Especially all the girly stuff."

Jim gets up out of the chair and comes down to sit on the floor next to Steve. "That's not how it feels to me," he says, softly. A few seconds tick by, and he adds, "I like you all femme and pretty."
You know that."

Steve shrugs. "Is there anything you want, though?"

Jim doesn't say anything for a minute, so Steve figures there is. He wishes he'd asked earlier.

"Well, okay, in the interest of being honest," Jim says, "I do like being fucked. I kind of miss that."

"Oh," Steve says.

"It's okay if you don't want to," Jim adds hastily. "I assumed that you wouldn't."

"I used to," Steve says. "I mean, I tried it once or twice, a long time ago. When I first started experimenting, before I really knew I was . . . well, a fairy. And it was okay. But then I tried one time after the experiment, and it was . . . it was bad." He still remembers the wave of self-disgust he'd felt with Carol, remembers it as if it were still happening. He wishes he could blame that clarity on his post-serum memory, but he thinks he's always felt shame that way, ever-present and sticky no matter how long it's been.

"That's okay, honey," Jim says again. "I didn't want to lie, is all." Reaching out, he cups Steve's face; Steve leans into the touch.

"God, I love it when you call me that," Steve groans.

"Yeah? Honey?"

"And the other stuff. Sweetheart. Pretty. It makes me feel good."

"I wasn't sure," Jim says, and there's relief in his voice. "You seemed to like it, but I didn't know how to ask."

"Can I call you stuff like that? Or like – you know, call you powerful, or strong?"

"Yeah," Jim rasps. "I'd like that a lot." He seems to consider, then adds, "But, uh, it could get racist real quick. I wouldn't want to be – just your big powerful black boyfriend."

"Oh," Steve says, eyes widening. He hadn't thought about that. "I wouldn't – I don't know what's right to say, then."

"Maybe I could make you a list of words I'd like. And words I wouldn't like," Jim suggests.

"Sure," Steve says. "I don't want to mess it up. I wanna make you feel as good as you make me feel."

"Mmmm," Jim agrees, and leans in to kiss him. Steve kisses back, and then Jim kisses him again, and Steve kisses back again, and they do that for a while.

He's still thinking about what Jim said, though, that he likes being fucked; Steve wants to give him that. But he can't, doesn't think he could do it even for Jim's sake.

"Maybe your friend Tony could fuck you," Steve breathes, when they break apart for air. It startles a laugh out of Jim.

"Maybe," Jim agrees. He looks a little shy to be talking about it that way, but he's smiling, too. The tension he usually has when he's talking about Tony or Pepper isn't there at all. "Though I bet Tony would make me do all the work."

Jim's eyebrows shoot way up. "Really," he breathes. "And that wouldn't bother you?"

"I'm pretty sure that just the idea of that is doing the opposite of bothering me," Steve says, shyly. "I'd like to do that for you. It'd be like sucking your cock." He can already imagine it, Jim lying face-down with his legs spread, waiting for Steve to service him. He licks his lips unconsciously.

Jim swallows. "I'd like that. Yeah."

Steve watches his face carefully. "Is it something you'd like right now?"

"God, Steve. I'm fifteen years older than you and not a genetically engineered superhuman, so I'm gonna need a few minutes, but God. Yeah. Sure."

Steve grins and kisses him again.

"But take off the lipstick first, would you?" Jim asks. "It's hard enough washing the sparkles off my dick."

They both laugh, falling against each other on the floor. When they settle down again, Steve presses his hand against Jim's chest. Jim watches him with hot anticipation.

"Maybe I'll put on some panties and a skirt to do it," Steve breathes.

"To do it the way girls do," he says.

Steve takes a deep breath, holding his gaze. "Yeah."

*

A long time later, as they lie in bed together, Jim glances over at the clock, which reads 1:00 am. "Damn," he says, "I have to meet those Air Force guys at eight tomorrow morning."

"That's for the mission, right? I thought we didn't leave till after noon."

"Yeah, but the brass wants a last co-ordination meeting, to make sure everything's going to be in the right place at the right time. They get anxious when they're playing backup, not running the show."

"Still," Steve says, yawning, "it makes sense. Better to be prepared."

"Sure."

Steve shuffles over in the bed to rest his head on Jim's shoulder; Jim strokes his hair slowly.

"You worried about tomorrow?" Jim asks.

"The mission? We've planned every part of it that we possibly can. Nothing to do now but try to carry it out."

He can feel Jim nodding. "I guess I meant – because of the kids. The experiments. I saw how you were after you and Natasha found that little girl."

Steve runs his hand through Jim's chest hair idly, thinking about this. "It shook me up. Going
through what I did – it's horrible to imagine that being done to someone against their will."

Some days, having chosen this body is the only thing that makes it bearable.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah," Steve says. "I think I feel like Pepper does. I have to help these kids. I have a responsibility to them. It's like they're my – I don't know. Blood. Family."

Jim kisses the top of his head. "Is she doing okay? The little girl?"

"Zoe," Steve says. "Hill's been keeping me updated. They found her a foster family. Apparently she's doing a lot better. Still not talking much."

"Yeah," Jim says. "Well. Why would she want to."

They don't say anything more, but even so, neither one of them goes to sleep very quickly that night, with Jim's words echoing through the dark of the bedroom.

*

On the long plane ride to the Ten Rings base, Steve finds himself twitchy, filled with excess energy and no outlet he can use to expend it.

He tries talking to the other SHIELD agents, playing cards with Pepper, even kisses Jim secretly when no one's watching, but none of it scratches the itch.

He can't stop thinking back on what he told Jim last night, and how invested he is in this mission. Too invested, probably.

God, he needs to get out of his own head.

He watches Natasha hover creepily in Hill's personal space twice, ignore her presence three times, and frown down at the zipper of her catsuit, alternating between having it pulled up to her neck and pulled down past her breasts. Steve shakes his head. He recognizes what's driving her, the restlessness and anger, as easily as if it were the feeling burning in his own chest.

"All right, come on," he says, grabbing Natasha by the arm and hustling her away from what looks like yet another bad seduction attempt.

"Hey," Natasha says calmly, "What gives."

When they get to a quiet corner of the jet, Steve lets go of her, and she looks up at him curiously.

"I couldn't bear to watch you hovering around Hill anymore," he says, though even as he says it he knows that's only part of it.

"Just because you're bored doesn't make me your pet project, Cap," she says, staring at him evenly.

"Right, I'm the one who's bored. I'm not the one who's grimly hitting on my boss like it's a suicide mission."

She frowns and crosses her arms, letting him see her annoyance. "It's not really your business, Steve."

Steve takes a deep breath. She's right, of course.
"Fine. We don't have to talk about it," he says. "Do you want to go spar or something? Burn off some energy?"

Natasha shrugs. "Might as well. I'm bored too."

Steve laughs, surprised. They really are more alike than anyone might guess, from the outside. He turns, walking towards the practice room, and she follows him.

"We can, uh. We can talk about it, too, though. If you want." She glances up at him, vulnerable, and Steve blows out a breath through his nose.

"Okay," he says. "Okay. What's going on with you?"

"It's – you know. Trying to get a little workplace romance going. You managed it, if standing next to each other and sighing loudly counts as a workplace romance – "

"Natasha, please feel free to tell me off if I'm making assumptions that I shouldn't," Steve interrupts, "but I thought, based on your call sign, that your spy work involved . . . you know."

"Sex?" Natasha says, in a low murmur, cocking her head curiously so that her hair tumbles down onto her shoulder. Steve has no idea why she's so good at being sexy when it's not at all appropriate.

Though, actually, maybe that should be a clue.

"Yeah, sex," Steve whispers. "But when I see you around Hill, it's like you've forgotten what . . . sex . . . is?" He spreads his hands, unable to even diagnose the problem. Natasha presses her lips together.

"Okay, well, it's hard when I'm not – playing a character, all right?" she hisses. "I mean, sometimes I can sort of pretend that I'm a character who's really a lot like me, but – around her it's hard to stick to a persona. I get a little confused. She makes me – I get confused."

Steve smiles softly, in sympathy. They pass a couple of SHIELD agents in the hallway, and they both smile and nod. When they're past, Steve picks up the conversation again.

"You must really like her," he says, teasing her a little. "For her to have that effect on you."

"Irrelevant to negotiations at hand," Natasha mutters. Steve chuckles.

"I guess 'be yourself' is not going to be useful advice in this situation," he says, thinking about it.

Natasha snorts. "Yeah, no." She looks so transparently miserable, in that moment, miserable and ironic about her own misery, that it tears Steve's heart. He wants nothing more than to make her smile again.

"We could roleplay?" he suggests, trying to keep a straight face. "I'll be Deputy Director Maria Hill, former Naval officer, you be yourself – "

"This is making me uncomfortable," Natasha says, but she does have a little smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. It might be a pity smile, but at least she knows that Steve cares.

"Let me ask one thing," Steve says. "When you said she'd turned you down, had you ever – "

"No, I've never actually asked her out, and yes, I realize that that's stupid and ridiculous," she interrupts, speaking fast slicing the air with her hand in a gesture that would be lethal if anyone got
"You two are really different," Steve says. At Natasha's sharp look, he clarifies, "Not that you shouldn't be together! But you can't expect her to pick up on the kinds of stuff you pick up on."

Natasha snorts. "Clint gave me the same advice," she says. "I think I should fear any topic where you two agree."


She gives him an amused glance, but doesn't mention his awkwardness. "It's not a seduction," she says, eventually, sighing.

"Oh," Steve says, surprised.

"So I guess I should stop treating it like one," Natasha points out, miserably.

Steve reaches out and clasps her shoulder, as they walk, the only support he can think to offer. "I think so. Can I do anything to help?" he asks.

"No," Natasha sighs. "No."

"You know this means that my moves are officially a lot smoother than yours," he says.

This drags a low laugh out of Natasha's throat. She tilts her head back, looking up at him. "God, I'll never live this down, will I," she says.

"Nope."

"I bet you and Jim are spending your evenings kissing each other's hands and stuttering, and you're still ahead of me."

"Looks like it," Steve says.

"If you and Jim don't work out, I'm going to set you up with all the worst dates I can possibly imagine. We'll see how smooth your moves are then."

"Natasha, c'mon," Steve says. "That's taking it a little – "

"There's this guy who works in the labs making biopolymers who I think you'd really hit it off with," she says.

Steve pushes her shoulder before pushing the button to get them into the airplane gym. He goes in first, refusing to be a gentleman about it. "See if I ever offer to help you again, Romanoff," he says, over his shoulder.

"Thank God," she calls back.

Their sparring session is good, takes the edge off, at least. It's better because it's with Natasha, who's going through something like what he's going through, who's nervous and angry about the mission and taking it a little too personally.

"Work anything out?" he asks her, after. She's wiping sweat from her neck. They've still got four hours of flying to go.
"Nah," she says. "But I might be worn out enough to nap, so that's something, right?"

"Right," Steve says. He might try to catch some sack time, too, if he can. He's more likely to be able to sleep in one of the hard thin SHIELD-issue cots than he is in his own marshmallow bed at home.

Later, though, as he heads for the sleeping quarters, he glimpses Natasha and Maria behind a bulkhead, having a low whispered conversation. There's no way to tell what they're talking about, because Steve's Ma raised him better and he's not gonna take four steps closer so his superhearing will pick up on it, but he hopes it's something good.

* 

The facility is underground, which makes their air support, including Tony, Jim, and Pepper, less of an asset, but they were prepared for that. Steve and Natasha take lead, dropping in noiselessly through a disused maintenance entrance on the roof, just like they planned.

For the first ten minutes, everything goes great. They slide out of the maintenance corridor without setting off any alarms, and make their way through the halls seemingly undetected. There's one guard, who Natasha leaps on and stuns into unconsciousness before Steve even gets his shield up.

*Two more up ahead on the right,* Steve signals. Natasha nods.

But up ahead on the right there's nobody at all; the loading dock is empty. Steve and Natasha clear the room carefully, alert to any hiding places or doors that weren't on the plans they had, but everything is solid concrete.

"There were supposed to be guards here," Steve says, frowning.

Natasha shrugs. "Let's open it up."

With the loading bay doors open, the other three are able to fly in, and Bruce and Hill trail in after them with a dolly full of medical equipment.

"I'll set up here," Bruce says, locking the doors open and waving the rest of them on.

"I'll secure this exit," Hill says, confirming the plan they'd agreed on.

The rest of them move further into the facility. There are still not as many guards as there should be.

"Scans are showing that the base goes a lot further down than we thought," Jim says, a few seconds later. "And I'm guessing the valuables are stored down deep."

They make their way down a few levels, until they reach a forking corridor.

"Uranium this way," Tony says, pointing to the left. The area is well-lit, with short, wide staircases leading to what look like labs and research areas.

"Yeah, this is definitely where they were putting those stolen Hammertech parts together," Jim agrees. "There's a lot of stuff to take care of down there."

In the other direction, a door opens on a narrow, rickety staircase that drops steeply.

"We're not really going to fit in there," Pepper remarks, looking at it. Steve grimaces. This wasn't on their plans. There's supposed to be an elevator here. They must've taken it out to make it harder
for their victims to escape.

"What? Of course we will," Tony says, turning to peer down the stairwell.

"Not and leave the staircase intact," Natasha argues.

"About two hundred heat signatures, ten floors down," Jim supplies. "That's the kids, all right."

"Okay," Steve says. "Iron Man, War Machine, Rescue, get into the labs and get rid of absolutely everything that might be dangerous. Widow and I will get the kids."

"Two hundred of them?" Jim asks. The plan had been to use the elevator. The backup plan had been to use the elevator shaft to lift them out using harnesses attached to the rocket suits, which can carry ten or twenty at a time. That's not going to work now, in this narrow space.

"With luck, most of them will be able to climb the stairs," Steve says. He frowns, though, remembering a time when a single flight was enough to make him dizzy with trepidation. They'll have to do their best.

"On our way," Tony agrees, and they split up.

"Race you," Natasha says, and leaps over the handrail into the empty center space of the stairwell. Steve runs after her and leans over the rail, watching for a second as she works her way down, leaping from railing to railing without ever touching a stair.

"Show off," he mutters, and flips his body easily up and over the rail, following her down. They're at the bottom in seconds.

The moment Steve's feet hit the floor, he hears the sound of repulsor fire coming from above.

"Focus," Natasha says softly, and Steve does. The other three will call on the comms if they need backup.

Steve picks the locks while Natasha dupes the fingerprint scanner, and the doors click open. From the movement of the air, Steve can tell immediately that it's a huge space, the ceilings extending up several stories, the far wall so distant that it's hard to see from where they are.

And it's full of coffin-like contraptions that look disturbingly like the Vita-Ray machine Steve's body was made in. None of them have a top cover, though, and each of them has a person inside. It reminds Steve, grotesquely, of a plate of raw oysters, all of them cracked open and soft in the middle.

The moment they enter, a loud klaxon begins to wail, and red lights start flashing above their heads. It's the worst-case scenario; Tony and Jim thought they disabled all the alarms. There must've been a backup they didn't know about. Getting the kids up the stairs is going to be tricky.

"Bring their IVs, take samples of any medications," Steve shouts, reminding them both of Bruce's instructions. They're both already doing it, though, reaching the first of the victims and pulling apart the velcro straps that tie them down.

"We're here to help," Steve hears, over and over, in his voice and in Natasha's, as they help the kids – all of them kids, almost all under ten or so – up from the machines. A few of them have IVs, God knows what being pumped into their bodies. Steve tapes down the needles with shaking hands, reminded viscerally of the vials of super-serum that were shot into his body. There are bandages next to each station, laid out neatly on wheeled metal tables along with a host of other, less
palatable medical supplies. Steve does his best to make sure that any wounds he finds are covered, that nobody's bleeding or likely to get an infection.

But he can't help thinking that time is short.

Some of the kids have stitches holding together surgical scars. Some of them have a red glow in their eyes or under their skin, like Pepper gets when she turns on the fire, but it flickers unpredictably.

Steve hopes he's imagining the green tinge he sees on some of them.

"Where are we going now?" one kid asks. She sounds resigned.

"Home," Steve says, hoping that word means something to her. "Or the best place we can find."

Her expression hardens, and she nods. She can't be more than twelve, but she's one of the oldest ones here.

"Can you unstrap some of the others?" Steve asks. "If they have IVs, then call me over, but otherwise just try to get them up and standing."

"Okay," she says, blinking, but doesn't move. Steve watches her while he unstraps the next kid; after a moment, she seems to remember that she's capable of motion, because she starts stumbling from station to station, pulling at the velcro.

Some of the other kids do the same, following her example, and by the time the huge fighting force of heavily armed guards shows up, they've got the majority of the kids unstrapped and on their feet.

The huge fighting force of heavily armed guards is going to be a problem, though.

"I guess we found all the missing guards," Natasha yells. Steve's closer; he's already moving.

Steve sprints for the broken main doors where they're coming in, putting everything he has into each stride. He gets there in time to knock down the first four or five with one blow of his shield, then throws himself physically against the doors, holding them closed as best he can. The first wave of guards hadn't bothered with the fingerprint scanners, and now they're badly broken, unlockable.

"Hang on," Natasha calls, running up next to him. "Get away from the doors."

Steve doesn't say If I get away from the doors, they're all gonna bust in; he trusts Natasha to have a plan. He steps back as quickly as he can, and in the same instant Natasha steps forward, her right arm sparking bright blue as she brings her Bite into contact with the huge metal surface.

The doors light up, and the guys on the other side scream. There are a lot more guys behind them. A lot more than should even be on the base, according to their intel.

The alarms having an unforeseen backup, no guards in place at the loading dock, too many guards here now. Everything set up to lure them in and trap them.

Steve nods at her, once, panting for breath.

"Can you unhook that and leave it there?" Steve asks.

She shakes her head. "Built into the suit. That's why the power supply's so big."
"Okay." He leaves her standing there, holding the door, while he races around unstrapping and unhooking the remaining kids. Every second he spends feels like an eternity, another opportunity for the soldiers massing outside the door to entrench. But he can't leave anyone in these contraptions, these death machines that are as much his legacy as any good thing he ever did. He runs, and runs, and with the kids helping him, and helping each other, they're nearly done.

"My wheelchair," says one girl, as Steve begins unstrapping her, pointing towards the floor. Sure enough, there's a folded-up wheelchair sitting there. Steve snaps it open; then, when she holds out her arm towards him, he helps her down into it.

Steve scans the space desperately. It's so big, and there are so many of the machines, that his eyes play tricks on him; he can't tell if he's got them all.

"That's everyone," Natasha yells. "Get your ass back here!"

Steve does, running the length of the bunker, hearing the little girl's wheels zooming behind him.

The windows in the electrified doors are thick, but even through them Steve can tell that they're facing an army if they want to get out.

"All bottled up," Steve says, breathing hard. "I'm guessing this was a trap."

"You think? God, the perfect bait, too, for all of us." She looks angry, the kind of angry that points inward.

"Nicely designed, too. Force us to protect the kids while trying not to get killed at the same time."

"I'm betting they're under orders not to hurt the kids," Natasha says, meeting his eyes.

"Hell of a bet," Steve frowns, looking around them at the dozens of sick, tired, imploring faces.

"There was a boy who tried to escape once," says a short kid with a big voice. "They didn't taser him or anything, not even when he bit them."

"That's helpful, thank you," Natasha says to the short kid.

"Once we're through the doors," Steve says, looking at the ones in front, "you push them shut behind us, and you hold them." He waits to see enough of them nod grimly, and then he turns to Natasha.

"Okay," he says. There's no alternative, once you're in a trap, but to try to fight your way up from the bottom of it. "Let's do it."

Natasha drops her wrist; the moment the electricity stops arcing, they dive forward in perfect synch. Together, they manage to get through the doors before any of the guards can come the other way, giving the kids at least a little protection.

They fight.

They fight for a long time.

Steve loses count of the number of people he kills or incapacitates, keeping them away from that door; his body is in constant motion, lashing out in all directions. Beside him, Natasha does the same, a battle-cry tearing from her throat as she tasers, punches, kicks, and shoots as many of the soldiers as she can get her hands on. Luckily, they're shielded by the stairs above, and standing in a
bottleneck, so that they only have to take on twelve or fifteen guys at a time, and the others don't have clear shots at them. Still, a lot of bullets go flying around, and Steve thinks he feels one or two of them hit: a graze along his right arm and a through-and-through in his left shoulder. Most of the bullets the guards fire ricochet into their own men, though, which stops them shooting so much after a while.

At one point, through the haze of blood and pain, Steve hears Natasha yell a word, and it only takes him a moment to recognize it as his name. He spins toward her, sees her getting pinned down by five guys, and rushes in, shield first, to break through their line. Natasha steps up neatly onto his shield, just like they did in practice, and Steve throws her at the two on the left while he spins to kick the two on the right. It's effective as hell, and they stand shoulder to shoulder from then on, repeating the move a few times.

Overall, though, it's not going well; the stairways are crowded with enemy soldiers, Steve's starting to feel those bullets, and Natasha's bleeding pretty profusely from a head wound.

"Options," he says, as she puts one hand on his good shoulder and uses the leverage to launch herself into a sideways double kick.

"Be less terrible at fighting," Natasha grunts out, as Steve knocks down three guys at once.

In the wave of camaraderie that he feels for Natasha, Steve remembers that they're not alone. He clicks his radio to transmit.

He almost says Jim's name. "War Machine," he says, correcting himself. "We could use some backup down here." At this point, Steve's not too worried about the stairs; if they can't get past all these soldiers, the stairs aren't going to do them any good at all. Usually, with this kind of carnage, at least some of the enemy would be running away, but these guys are different. Like HYDRA soldiers. Calm. Deadly. Believers.

"On my way," Jim says, not questioning this change in tactics.

Pepper's voice comes on the comm. "Iron Man and I can handle the rest up here," she says. She sounds out of breath, but there's no tension in her voice to suggest that any of them are wounded.

A moment later, War Machine is dropping down the center of the stairwell, tearing out numerous handrails as he falls. He's tucked as small as he can make himself, but the suit is just a little too bulky, and a little too clumsy, to thread the needle perfectly.

He lands nearby, and his presence makes Steve feel safer, bracketed by his two closest brothers in arms. With the three of them, it's easier to keep the guards contained, and they actually manage to force their way up the stairs a little bit.

"Good to see you," Steve says, jumping in front of him and blocking a few bullets with his shield.

"You too," Jim replies, using his repulsors to clear the last guards off of the next flight of stairs. They move up.

"Enough mushy stuff," Natasha says. "I think we need to –"

She's cut off by voices on the comm: Tony's and Pepper's, both of them crying out at once. At the same time, there's a horrible sound of crushing, crushing metal, coming both over the comms and from the level up above.

Something up there is being torn apart.
"Iron Man is down," Pepper calls out. Steve takes a moment to be impressed that she used Tony's call sign, per SHIELD protocol. If it were Jim – God.

"Rescue, can you handle it?" Steve asks. "Do you need assistance?"

"War Machine, up here now," Pepper growls out. Steve's known her for over a year, and he's never heard her sound like that. Like there's a fire inside of her that has nothing to do with her superpower. "I'm relieving you down there."

Jim acknowledges and shoots back up the stairwell, the telltale scream of metal following in his wake. Steve knows when he reaches the top, because he hears the conversation the two of them have over the comms.

"He needs – you have to – " Steve can almost see her gesturing helplessly at whatever wound she thinks Jim can fix.

"I see it, I see it, okay. Go. Get everyone out."


"I will, I swear it." Jim's voice is choked. "Go."

And then Pepper descends towards them in a white-hot blaze, the air rippling around her.

"I'll make a wall," she says. "Get the kids moving. This shitshow is over starting now."

She stands at the bottom of the stairs and unfurls her flame in front of her, taking care not to let it touch the stairs and heat them up.

"Move upward if you want to live," she yells, fire searing beneath her skin and behind her eyes. "Move upward and then run."

The soldiers, who were unfazed by Steve's shield or Natasha's Bite or Jim's repulsors, move like the devil himself is at their heels, falling over each other in their haste to run back up the stairs.

"Everybody move!" Natasha yells, throwing open the double doors and gesturing the kids out. She repeats the command in a few other languages: Mandarin, Bengali, Russian, Arabic, some that Steve doesn't recognize.

"I'll take point," Steve calls. Natasha nods.

"It might take a couple of trips to get all the ones who can't climb," Natasha says.

"I can give a piggyback," says one girl, the tall one he'd gotten out near the beginning. She's surrounded by younger ones who've obviously latched on to her.

"Good, do it," Steve tells her. Then he raises his voice to address the rest of them. "If you can help someone else up the stairs, do it, but don't tire yourselves out. Your first priority is getting yourself up. Climb the stairs or get one of us to carry you. That is your mission."

Natasha repeats the instruction in the languages she has, then shrugs at Steve. They'll have to hope that the ones who don't understand will follow the others.

"And me?" the girl with the wheelchair asks, rolling up to him. Steve notices for the first time that she speaks English with what sounds like an Indian accent.
"I'm really sorry, there's no elevator," Steve says. "I think they took it out after they set up the lab."

"Typical," the girl replies.

"Hold on," Steve instructs her, and lifts the chair up with her still sitting in it, so that he keeps his other arm free for another kid. He balances the wheel on his shoulder and holds on to one of the crossbars, gripping tightly so that the girl doesn't get tossed around too much. His bullet wound aches, but he puts it aside. He needs to get to the top of the stairs, needs to make sure that Jim and Tony are all right. "What's your name, kid?" he asks.

"Siddhani," the girl says. "Are we really getting out?"

Natasha hands him another kid, who clings to his back, and a third one for his right arm. Steve starts up the stairs, following Pepper at a safe distance. The men in front of her are shooting at her, and she's dissolving every bullet into pieces.

"Yeah," Steve says. "We're gonna get you out of here."

"I want to stay," the kid on Steve's right shoulder says. Steve can't place his accent. He's very small. "They told us they were going to make us into superheroes."

Steve grunts as he runs upwards, his shoulder singing with pain. "We don't need more superheroes," he says, out of breath and gritting his teeth. "We need more fucking wheelchair ramps."

He's immediately ashamed for having sworn in front of the children, but Siddhani just laughs.

"Oh my goodness, Captain America," she says, "you sound just like my mother."

"I don't want to be a superhero," the kid clinging to Steve's back puts in, as Steve runs, and jumps, and climbs, following in Pepper's wake, as fast as he can go. "It hurts."

Steve remembers handing that kid his IV bag, remembers that he was one of the ones with the green-seeming skin. He grimaces. "Good choice," he pants.

Pepper manages to clear the remaining guards off the stairs and out past the corridor they need for their escape route.

"All the charges planted?" Steve asks, as he mounts the final stair.

"I can detonate them from a distance," Pepper says. Her voice is tight. "Tony and Jim got all the radioactive material out and loaded on the choppers before Tony got hit."

"Is he going to be okay?" Steve asks, in an undertone, as they run together for the loading dock. Siddhani's wheelchair bumps up and down on his wounded shoulder uncomfortably.

"I don't know," Pepper says. She stops at the next hallway. "I need to stay here to keep the escape route clear." She obviously hates that she's the best one suited for this job.

"I'll check on him," Steve promises. "You make sure all the kids get clear."

She nods firmly, putting up a barrier all along the corridor, blocking any access to the stream of children that's now running for the loading dock. Every ounce of her concentration is on the job, and from the way her arms tremble and her breathing speeds up, Steve can tell that it's not easy for her to maintain a barrier that size. Her under-skin glow is brighter than he's ever seen it.
She's going to get the job done. So is Steve. He reaches the loading dock a few seconds later, calling ahead so that Hill doesn't shoot him on the way in.

"Rogers, good," she says, letting him in.

"These three may need medical help, they're all getting something intravenously," Steve pants.

Hill jerks her head towards Bruce, who's set up with a few rolling cots and is already lifting kids up onto them.

"Steve," Bruce nods, not taking his eyes off his work.

"We have samples of the other meds they were receiving," Steve says, setting Siddhani down on her wheels and then putting the other two onto a bed.

"We're gonna need them," Bruce says grimly. Steve's eyes weren't deceiving him, after all; the kid who was riding piggyback is tinged with a rich, sick green. "God," Bruce says, his voice cracking.

"I know," Steve says. "Keep it together. Where's Tony?"

Bruce frowns. "Jim is working on him." He points to the other end of their triage station, where, for some reason, Steve hadn't seen the two men in rocket suits.

Or, in parts of rocket suits. Jim's still mostly in his, sans helmet and gauntlets, but he's got Tony pulled out of the Iron Man suit from head to waist. Scattered around him on the floor are dozens of tiny mechanical parts. Tony lies motionless, apparently unconscious; Jim kneels over him.

"Jim," Steve says, running to him and sliding to his knees. "Can I help? We need to get out of here, Pepper and Natasha are bringing the rest of the kids but there's not much time."

"I've almost got this," Jim says. His fingers are moving over the pieces of machinery in his hands, quick and deft. "I can do this." Then he says, "Help me."

Below them, Tony goes into convulsions. Steve glances at Jim, horrified, but Jim doesn't stop his work. It's the arc reactor, Steve sees; Tony's chest armor was partially caved in – by God only knows what – and it crushed the arc reactor in his chest. The convulsions stop. Steve wonders how many times Jim has watched him go through that.

"It was made for us. To attack us. Targeted the arc reactors. It destroyed the reactor in his suit, too," Jim says. "So he has no backup. He'll die soon if he doesn't get a replacement."

"So where are you – " Steve begins. Jim meets his eyes, only for a second, and Steve nods. "Oh."

"Any second now," Jim says. There's a soft mechanical snick as the parts in his hands coalesce into an arc reactor casing. When Bruce said Jim was working on Tony, he meant it literally: Jim is repairing the damaged housing for Tony's reactor.

"C'mere, hold this," Jim says, grabbing Steve's shoulder and pulling him closer to Tony's unconscious body. Steve does as he's told, holding wires and pins while Jim fits the housing into the gaping hole in Tony's chest. It's just like Jim teaching him how to hotwire a car, Steve tells himself, and keeps his hands steady.

"Should I get Doctor Banner – " Steve says, but Jim shakes his head.

"No one else knows the arc reactor like I do," he says. There's sweat dripping down his face. Steve
pulls his handkerchief out of his utility belt and wipes it away. "Except Tony, that is. Thanks."

"No problem," Steve says, and a moment later the housing is secure.

"Just one more thing," Jim says. Then he reaches into his chest, disengages his arc reactor, and pulls it out. It comes trailing wires and connections, as if, like Tony's, it was hooked up next to Jim's heart.

"Connect this one here," he says, pointing, and Steve does it, trying to keep his fingers out of the way while Jim connects the matching wire on the other side. "All right."

He lowers the reactor down into Tony's body, and when the last connections snap into place, the reactor lights up. Just as if he were nothing more than part of the machine, Tony lights up too, taking a sudden deep breath in and opening his eyes in alarm.

"You're okay." Jim is saying, pulling Tony up into his lap. "You're okay, you're okay now, Tony, you're safe."

Tony is breathing hard and blinking his way into consciousness, but from the way he's shifting, it looks like he can use all his limbs. Jim is still whispering into his ear when Steve shifts to a crouching position, getting ready to get up and help the others now that Tony's out of danger.

Jim's whispering stops abruptly, and Steve glances up to see that Jim's looking at him fearfully, his eyes wide as if he's exposed something about himself that Steve didn't already know.

"Hey," Steve says gently, "I think I said to get him something small. I'm not sure this counts."

Reaching out, he takes Jim's hand; Jim squeezes his fingers hard.

"Thank you, Steve," he says.

They let go.

"What's all this about now?" Tony says, trying to push himself up into a sitting position. Jim holds him tight.

"Don't move, idiot," he says, and drops a kiss onto Tony's temple. Steve smiles to see it.

"I get kissed, wow, it must've been pretty b – " Tony's words are cut off by Jim kissing him again, on the mouth this time. Steve snickers and gets up to go, giving them a little privacy.

He takes a deep breath to center himself and starts running. Switching to comms, he says, "Iron Man is up and making sarcastic remarks," because he figures that'll ease Pepper's mind more than anything else. "Report?"

"We've got most of them stabilized and on the choppers, just need another five minutes or so," Bruce says.

"Barrier's holding," Pepper reports. She sounds strained, but not exhausted. "Most of the personnel have vacated the building at my encouragement." Steve smiles darkly, wondering what Pepper's encouragement looks like exactly.

"They should be picked up by the Air Force units outside," Steve says. "Good work."

"Cap, I could use your help down here with the last few kids," Natasha says.

"Acknowledged," Steve says, and turns for the stairwell, making his way back down, careful of the
handrails that are now torn jagged metal from Jim's passage, or still red-hot from Pepper's. He
almost loses his grip a couple of times. His left arm isn't as reliable as it should be.

At the bottom, Natasha is doing a last check of the lab and shepherding a group of about twenty
kids towards the stairs. He thinks her head wound has stopped bleeding, which is something.

"A couple of these kids were doing fine, but now they're out of their machines I think they're
sinking fast," she says to him, in an undertone. She gestures at four kids who all look unconscious,
or nearly so. They won't be able to hang on in a piggyback.

"War Machine's out of commission," Steve says. At Natasha's eyebrow, he adds, "Arc reactor
donation. He's fine." Natasha nods.

"Rescue?" she says, touching the comm unit in her ear. "We could use an extra pair of hands."

"On my way," Pepper says. "Everyone, the barrier is coming down, so be prepared for any
stragglers who might come your way."

"Acknowledged," Hill says.

"We'll hold the perimeter," Jim adds.

Pepper rockets back down the stairwell. "What do you need?"

"I need you to do what it says on your call sign," Natasha says. She hands her one of the four kids,
an older girl who looks almost Pepper's size. Pepper lifts her easily. "Get her to Bruce as fast as you
can," she says.

Then Pepper's gone, leaving Steve to carry the two semi-conscious ones and Natasha the one
unconscious one. The rest of them are able to walk, for now. At least on the stairwell it'll be easy to
make sure that none of the kids get left behind.

"Move it!" Natasha yells, and they do, as fast as the kids can go, twenty flights up to where Bruce
and Hill are urging them on towards the last transport helicopter.

"These ones are in bad shape," Natasha yells, over the wind of the chopper blades. "They started
fading after we took them out of their machines."

Bruce grimaces, and nods. "I think I can manage until we get back to the Triskelion," he says.

Steve climbs on board the chopper, surprised to see Jim in the cockpit. Pepper is in the back with
Tony, holding him carefully around the shoulders; they're having what looks like an intense
whispered conversation.

"The regular pilot had more medical training than me, so I sent him to take care of some of the
kids," Jim explains. "Everybody strapped in?"

"Go," Natasha says, after double-checking the belt for the last one, a young girl with dark eyes, and
hot skin, and her breath coming way too fast, like Steve's used to when he was young.

Steve nods grimly. "Take us home."

Once all the choppers are in the air, with passengers and prisoners intact, they detonate the base
remotely. It explodes for a long time. In the dark of the pre-dawn, the flash is a too-bright shock,
burning afterimages into Steve's eyes.
He hopes to God that it's the last time he'll have to see superheroes being made.

Chapter End Notes

There is no longer a list of LGBT slurs on Wikipedia, but there was in 2012.

Polio is no longer considered eradicated, but it was in 2012.
They get back to D.C. in the afternoon, local time, and all go their separate ways. It's strangely anticlimactic, after the long, difficult battle. The kids get funneled into SHIELD medical.

Tony seems stable, but Jim decides to go back with him and Pepper to New York, so as to have an experienced engineer standing by in case there are complications with the new reactor casing. Steve thinks they probably have some talking to do, as well, so when Jim tries to apologize, Steve shoos him away.

"Go," he says. "Talk to them." He adds a firm nod, and Jim bites his lip. Seeing the anxiety on his face, Steve hopes desperately that Tony and Pepper will accept what Jim wants to give them. He can't imagine how anyone could refuse.

He stops by the medical bay himself, once he's got a moment, to make sure his shoulder's healing up okay. The nurse who treats him shakes her head and gives him some stitches.

While she's putting in the last knot, another woman comes up to them. She's short and pretty, wearing a lab coat and a messy bun. She glances over the nurse's work approvingly. "Almost not worth doing, for you," she comments, looking Steve in the eye.

"Heals faster this way," Steve shrugs. "Thanks," he adds, to the nurse, as she turns to go.

The woman in the lab coat smiles and holds out her hand. "Helen Cho."

"I thought so," Steve says, shaking it. "Bruce and Tony told us you'd be here to help."

She frowns, looking around at all the kids laid out on gurneys behind them. "Yeah. I . . . thought it'd be an interesting research opportunity."

Steve raises his eyebrows, surprised, and she looks down. Her pretty smile slips away, and she looks, suddenly, a lot older than she did a moment before.

"I guess – I wasn't thinking about what it'd actually be like," she says. "I mean, I wanted to help out, but I . . . " she purses her lips. "It makes me wonder how much more research into Extremis I want to do."

"Well," Steve says, not sure what to say. "I get the sense that if you hadn't already been researching it, these kids would be in a much worse situation."

"Yeah," Dr Cho agrees. She sighs. "You're not wrong." Then she shakes her head, and her sweet smile comes back, slipping over her face and dispelling the exhaustion and frustration that were there a moment before. "Anyhow, I'd better get back to it. Good to meet you, Captain Rogers."

"You too," he says.

"At least we can always count on you to be a medical miracle," she adds, as she walks away.

Steve glances down at the wound in his arm, already healing up, and thinks about that.

He gets up, meaning to follow Dr Cho and ask some questions, but a voice stops him.
"Hey, you're still alive." He turns, and sees Siddhani lying on a bed. She looks better than most, maybe because they got her to Bruce early. Steve should've been faster with the others.

"You too," he smiles, moving to stand next to her bedside.

"Yes," she says. "And of course there's also this." Reaching out carefully, moving very slowly, she picks up the EKG machine sitting next to her and lifts it a few feet in the air. Steve blinks. "Doctor Banner says it will be permanent. It's like yours."

He can't help it; he glances down at the wheelchair sitting next to her.

"It's only in the upper body," she says, probably a phrase she's going to have to say a lot in her life to come. Her life, which has just been drastically changed, and not necessarily for the better. "They were trying to see if they could . . . fix me, I guess. But I got this instead."

"It's quite the superpower," Steve says.

"Yes," she says. "They say there's an American academy that I can go to, for people who have powers."

Steve nods; he's heard of it from SHIELD personnel. "Do you want to go?"

"I don't know. It's a long way from home."

"You have family?" Steve asks. Most of these kids don't, but Siddhani mentioned her mother. Siddhani shakes her head no. "They passed away," she says, simply.

He swallows. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing we can do about it," she says, clenching her hand into a fist and then releasing it again.

Steve nods. She's right. "It's not easy, having that much strength. A lot of responsibility."

She licks her lips and nods, a tear slipping down her cheek. "I know," she says. "I broke the IV stand. I wasn't thinking about it."

Her IV stand looks fine, but there's one over against the wall that's torn in half, jagged metal poking up where the pole was severed. Frowning, Steve asks, "Did you cut yourself?"

She holds out her hand, and there's a pinkish line on her palm. Already healed. A medical miracle, just like him.

"I'll be fine," she insists, sticking her chin out.

Steve wonders how long she was trapped in that room, treated like a lab rat.

"Okay," Steve agrees softly. He doesn't know what else to say, what to tell her to make this easier. He fumbles in his belt pocket for one of his cards. "But if you ever need anything, you can always come talk to me," Steve says. "Or if you want to lift heavy stuff together."

"All right," she says. "Maybe I'd like that."

He hands the card over to her.

"Call me whenever you like," he says.
"I will." She narrows her eyes at him, and for a moment it's hard to believe that she's only ten or eleven. "You call me if you're ever in Mumbai and need some help."

He smiles. "Will do."

Dr Cho is long gone by then, but Steve finds Bruce instead. He's still moving fast, going from bed to bed and checking the kids' vitals, but he's not frantic like he was at the loading dock. Steve figures it's okay to interrupt him.

"Hey," Steve says. Bruce looks up.

"Hey," he sighs.

"How's it going?"

Bruce grimaces. "We lost four."

Steve wonders briefly if they were any of the ones he freed, or spoke to, or carried on his back. From long experience, he puts that chain of thoughts aside. It'll come back in the night, when he lays down in his too-soft bed, but it doesn't serve any purpose right now.

"I talked to Siddhani," he says instead. "Give her some time and training and I think she could give the Hulk a run for his money."

"I know," Bruce sighs. "There are about eight of them who are going to come out of this with new powers. A lot more are just going to be really sick for a long time. Maybe the rest of their lives."

"God," Steve says. Bruce nods.

"Yeah," he sighs. "I don't mind saying that if I ever run into the scientists who did this, I'm not that likely to keep my cool."

Steve nods sympathetically. Most of the scientists had been gone when they got there, but thanks to the intel they gathered, they've got good leads on them. SHIELD will round them up. Steve will round them up himself, if he has to.

"I wouldn't blame you," he says, exhaling slowly. He frowns, wondering if he should say what he wants to say. But Bruce is . . . he thinks Bruce can be trusted. "Would my blood help?"

Bruce glances up at him sharply. "What?" he asks.

"I'm a medical miracle," Steve says. "And you said this research is based off of . . . off of me, so, I'm asking, would my blood help?"

Bruce doesn't reply for a few tense seconds. "You've never let anyone . . . " he trails off, looking down at Steve's arm, at the crook of his elbow where the vein shows blue. "You've never let anyone, not since you woke up."

"Because I was afraid of this," Steve says, vehemently, gesturing at the rows of sick children in front of them. "And because Peggy told me not to. But if it could help now, I'll do it."

Breathing out, Bruce tears his eyes away from Steve's elbow and looks up to meet his eyes. "I don't know if it would help," he says, eventually. "Maybe your blood could show us how to make their conditions stabilize, if you have something that they don't, but . . . what was done to these kids is not the same as what was done to you. My blood would probably be closer."
"So, doesn't that mean . . . " Steve trails off. Bruce shakes his head, vehemently, then freezes into stillness for a few seconds, and then grabs Steve by the arm and drags him behind a curtain.

"No one can know," he hisses. "Just you and me, Steve."

Steve nods. "Not even Doctor Cho," he agrees. "Just – see if it can help."

Bruce gets a needle and a vial, and Steve waits while he taps his blunt fingers against the vein, punctures Steve's skin, and collects some blood. It's not much. Steve's sure he lost more of it when he got shot. Bruce's hands are warm and steady against Steve's sensitive inner elbow. It feels like an intimacy, of a kind the two of them have never shared before.

"Your turn," Steve breathes, when he's done. Bruce frowns.

"My blood is toxic," he says. "I'll do it myself."

Steve shakes his head and pulls on a pair of sterile gloves. "I'm guessing it's not toxic to me," he says, and Bruce blinks at him.

"Okay."

Steve's no nurse, but he follows Bruce's instructions and keeps his hands steady. Together they get the needle into his vein, Steve steadying it with his fingers and pressing in to hold it in place. Bruce's body is easily penetrated, porous and giving, like there's nothing to him beyond the soft pink skin Steve sees in front of him. Red blood fills the little tube. It's the same red as Steve's.

Once they get Bruce securely bandaged and dispose of everything their blood touched, Bruce picks up the two vials and heads back out to the main area, where he puts them into a machine of some kind.

"I'll dispose of it after," he says, as the machine begins to move. "I promise."

"All right," Steve agrees. He frowns; Bruce looks even more tired than he did before. "Are you okay?"

This whole thing isn't easy for Steve to look at, and he didn't develop any of this science. Some of those kids are literally glowing green with the results of Bruce's research.

Bruce takes off his glasses and pinches the brim of his nose. "Why do people keep wanting more Hulks," he mutters. "More of you, that I get, but more of me . . . ?"

"Hey," Steve says softly, wishing he knew what to say to that. "We need you right now."

Bruce nods and puts his glasses back on. "I know. I know."

"It might happen again," Steve says. "If people find out that there was success with Siddhani and the others. We might deal with this a lot in the coming years."

Bruce nods. "I'm worried it's going to get worse before it gets better."

Hesitating, Steve wonders what else there is to say. "We'll get through it," he offers, which sounds so empty, even to his own ears, that he's pretty sure it's worse than saying nothing at all.

"Yeah, all us lab experiments together," Bruce scoffs. He means it like an insult, like despair, but it makes Steve feel a little better.
"Maybe," he says. "Maybe that's all there is to it." There must be something in his voice, because Bruce looks up suddenly, squinting at him.

In the middle of the packed medical ward, full of children who are sick from the thing that made Steve well, Steve takes Bruce's hand.

Bruce looks down at their embracing fingers as if puzzled by the sight.

"That easy, huh," Bruce says. His tone is flat.

"No," Steve says, remembering what Natasha said to him last time. "But we found a place in the world, didn't we?"

*

On his way out of SHIELD, he runs into Maria Hill, literally, because she's looking down at her tablet and Steve goes around the corner a little too fast. The resulting collision isn't too bad, because Steve reacts fast and backs off, but it's enough to make Hill blink in surprise and look up at him.

"Oh, Rogers," she says. "Don't forget to file your mission report." Steve's never missed a mission report, but he figures that saying that to her subordinates is probably a reflex by now.

"I won't, Deputy Director."

Her eyes focus on him, like she's actually aware of him now, and she jerks her chin back the way Steve came.

"You just in medical with the kids?"

Steve nods. "They lost four of them," he reports. She purses her lips and looks down at the ground for a second.

"Yeah, I heard," she says. She pauses a moment, and Steve almost turns to go before she speaks again, calling him back with his first name. "Steve." He meets her gaze. "I was thinking of – there's a progressive Catholic church on S Street, where I go sometimes. I was thinking of going to Mass on Sunday and lighting a few candles for them. The kids we lost."

Steve's throat clenches; tears well up suddenly behind his eyes. He blinks them back. "That's – that's a good idea," he says. He wonders what a progressive Catholic church is, what that might mean.

"You can come with me, if you want," she says. "It's – not like other Catholic churches. The clergy can get married, women can get ordained, people can get divorced. It's very . . . LGBT friendly."

Steve is flooded with panic that Hill might know about him, might have heard from Natasha or guessed from watching him with Jim. But she just shrugs, undemanding, reminding Steve suddenly of the story Father Calhoun used to tell, of early Christians drawing half a fish in the sand and waiting for someone else to complete it.

It's not him she's exposing, right now. It's herself. Steve figures that's a gift.

"I'd like to," he says, eventually. "Maria. Thank you. But you're the one telling me I should have a publicist for organizing political appearances."
Maria laughs. "Fair," she says.

If he shows up at church, at any church, it'll be a big deal, make the papers, be the subject of gossip, and he doesn't want that. And he gave up on being part of the Catholic Church so long ago that it's hard to imagine going back, even for a progressive congregation where you might not have to confess your greatest loves like sins.

Looking at Maria's uncharacteristically soft, vulnerable expression, though, he doesn't want to leave it there. He wants to draw the other half of the fish for her.

"But – will you light some candles for me?" He furrows his brow, and adds, "On my behalf, I mean, for the kids, I'm not asking you to pray for me."

"Maybe I'll do both," Maria says, cracking half a smile but looking serious underneath it.

He huffs a laugh. "If you insist."

* *

Steve gets home that night exhausted, ready to drink down some protein shakes and go to sleep, but when he gets into his bed it's more of a marshmallow than ever. He can't shake the images behind his eyes, the rows and rows of children in little Vita-Ray-inspired coffins, the hesitance of Bruce's hands over the Hulk-green ones, the shallow breaths of the ones who were in pain. He wishes Jim were here, if only to distract him from the horror show on a loop in his brain. If Jim were here, he thinks, he wouldn't have this feeling of sinking, of falling into the soft surface and getting lost inside it.

He sleeps eventually, fitfully, and wakes up the next morning full of restless energy again. His bullet holes have started healing up, but they still hurt a lot; even so, he decides he'd rather pull a stitch or two than feel cooped up, so he laces up his shoes and goes for a run, trying to shake the jittery excess energy by pounding it out against the pavement.

He gets a phone call from Jim a couple hours later, right after he gets back, as he's drinking a few more protein drinks and stripping his shirt off for a shower. It's unusual for Jim to call him – he tends to text – so Steve picks it up right away, already starting to tense with worry.

The worst part is, he's not sure if he's worried that Tony didn't want to date Jim, or that he did.

Steve rubs his palms on his running shorts before picking up the cell phone. "Hello," he says, even though he knows who it is.

"Hey there," Jim says warmly. "How was your run?"

Steve smiles. "I'm that predictable, huh?"

"It's a nice day in D.C., according to the weather report. And I figured after yesterday, you'd need to run some stuff out. I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

"I get why you wanted to stay with Tony," Steve says. "You're the closest thing he has to a doctor for that thing."

"Yeah," Jim says, "that's a big part of why he's working on having it removed." Then he gets quiet. Steve waits through the silence for a few seconds before breaking it gently.

"My run was great, thanks. I met a cute dog. What's going on?" He feels sweat trickling down from
his hairline, and wipes his brow with his forearm.

"Uh, well, I've been talking with Pepper and Tony," Jim says. "Kind of – all night, actually."

This is good news, great news, but Steve still feels his heart sink a little, like his body into the mattress the night before. "Yeah?"

"And – I mean, I wanted to ask – shit. I should've waited, we should do this in person. I'm sorry for bothering you, sweetheart."

Jim's little endearments sound more natural and comfortable all the time, the more they practice hearing them together. This one sounds like it's just what they call each other, or like it's just what Steve is, Jim's sweetheart. Steve closes his eyes so he can remember the sound of it.

"You want to ask how I feel about it," Steve fills in. He opens his eyes again. "Jim, it's okay, I'm glad you called. He is, because he's Jim's friend and lover, and he wants more than anything to be there for him, and help him be happy.

"Okay," Jim says. Steve can practically hear the tension in his shoulders. "Okay, well – I think it's going . . . really well."

Steve smiles, and he loves Jim so much that it almost hurts. "Really well, as in, you'd like permission to have sex with them?" he asks. They hadn't really laid out any rules, when they'd talked before, but Steve's been chatting with Tara, who has two partners, and zie'd said that communication and honesty were key. Steve had agreed fiercely with the principle, but it's a lot harder to do for real.

"Well, I was gonna start by asking how you'd feel about some kissing," Jim demurs. He sounds painfully shy about it, and Steve wonders if his cheeks are heating up, if he's feeling hot under the collar, if he's all excited and embarrassed, like a kid, to be finally getting something he's wanted for so long. It makes Steve start to feel excited on his behalf.

"Kissing is fine." Steve licks his lips. "And sex is fine, too, if that's what you want."

There's a long pause. Steve waits. "Are you – are you sure? I mean, it's really fine with me if you want some limits – "

"Do you want me to place limits?" Steve asks, in his best seductive voice. Natasha has told him that it's not a very good seductive voice.

Jim laughs anyway, because he's sweet and he knows what Steve's going for. "No, it's only – this seems too easy. I keep worrying I'm going to wake up and find out I'm dreaming."

It's like a joke, but not really. Jim has kept himself so silent for so long. Steve knows what that's like.

"You're really easy to love," Steve says, because it's the God's honest truth. "It's not surprising that Tony and Pepper think so too."

Steve hears Jim's surprised breath over the phone line. "Thank you," he says, after a minute, sounding choked up. "That's – thank you."

Swallowing, Steve remembers his promise to Jim. "Just to keep you in the loop," he says, awkwardly, "I don't think I feel jealous. It's more like – worry, I guess."
"Worry about what?"

Steve blinks, trying to list them in his head, getting lost in all the possibilities. "Pretty much everything possible," he says. "It's a bad habit of mine. But I'm really happy that it might work out with you three. I swear it."

"Okay," Jim says softly. "That's more than I could've ever asked for."

"I know," Steve says, heart breaking with the truth of that statement. "It's why I offered."

"If I – if it gets physical, and you decide that's not okay after all, we can talk about it," Jim says. "Anything you want to talk about, we can do it."

"All right, already," Steve says, rolling his eyes. "I'm fine, Jim. Go have fun, okay? Do what feels right. Play around." Steve grins to himself. "The playing around part can be a lot of fun."

In the background, Steve hears Tony's voice: "Rhodey, you done talking to your imaginary boyfriend yet?"

"Tony thinks you don't exist because I wouldn't tell him your name," Jim says softly.

Steve frowns, thinking about this. In all the discussion about Jim's feelings, he'd kind of forgotten that it'd be polite for Jim to tell Tony and Pepper about him. He recoils from the idea, though, not ready to face their scrutiny.

"I don't think I'm really ready for them to know about, about me," he says. "Is it okay with you if we keep us private for now?"

"Yeah, of course," Jim says. "I understand that, believe me."

"I know you do. So long as Tony and Pepper are okay with it. I don't want them to feel uncomfortable."

Jim chuckles. "I love you."

Steve smiles helplessly. He hears Tony's voice in the distance again, a sing-song tease: "You're gonna miss the pancakes!"

"Yeah, I love you too, but I gotta shower, so go love somebody else for a while, okay?"

"Okay," Jim says. "Okay."

After he hangs up, Steve feels calm, centered in a way that the sleep and the running didn't manage. He realizes, belatedly, that it's just from talking to Jim and hearing his voice.

He hopes to God that he's not about to lose him.

*

They all have time off after the big mission, while they wait for some of the SHIELD teams to report in with intel about the missing scientists, and with Jim still in New York, Steve finds himself at loose ends. He does more shifts at the Planned Parenthood, thinking about what Maria said, and he checks in with a couple of his new activist friends who have protests or demonstrations coming up. Some of them don't want Steve out with them in public, distracting attention from the cause, but others say they'd love to have him, so he spends a little time making big elaborate signs with instructional cartoons on them, like he used to for Danielle. All the protesters really like them, and
Steve makes sure to sign each one, figuring they can sell them after for extra dough.

But after the third text from Maria and the first one from Nick, Steve figures he can't put it off anymore, and a week after the big battle he goes in to the Triskelion to meet with the candidates that Jennifer, from HR, has set up for him. He doesn't mean to be a jerk about it, he really doesn't, but there's something about the idea of hiring a publicist that puts him off, makes him want to avoid the whole thing for as long as possible.

"I've tried to find people who you might – be able to work well with," Jennifer says politely. Steve figures that someone gave her a lecture on not choosing people who are gonna piss Captain America off.

"I'm sure we can find someone," Steve says. He's in his civilian clothes, khakis and a dress shirt, but it feels like the wrong choice. If he were in his uniform, though, he knows he'd feel just as uncomfortable, like one of the Captain America poseable action figures he knows his publicist will be called upon to hock. He scratches under his collar, itchy, dissatisfied.

It's only when he realizes that he's longing for a lipstick or a pair of stockings that he starts to understand what the problem with the last two publicists really was.

"I guess I'm hoping for someone I can get to know," Steve says, recognizing this truth as it comes out of his mouth.

"Uh, okay," Jennifer says, probably because she wasn't expecting Steve to sound reasonable or friendly after the way he treated the last two guys. He grimaces; that's not the impression he wants to leave.

"Thank you for setting all this up, Jennifer," he says, turning to face her. "I really appreciate what you've done."

"Sure, no problem," she says, sounding dazed. "Right this way."

Steve's never interviewed anybody before, and it feels weird to be put in a position of judgment over people who know way more than he does about this business. But he gets an oily feeling from a lot of the guys that puts him off right away, so he thanks them as politely as he can for coming in and tells them no.

They are all guys, too, Steve notices; he wonders if Jennifer thought he wouldn't take a woman's opinion seriously.

"Am I doing this right?" Steve asks her, partway through. He's feeling even more uncomfortable in his clothes, like a complete imposter. He wishes he could change into something more – him. "I don't think I'm doing this right."

"You're doing fine," Jennifer says. "You're supposed to find someone who's right for you, for the public image you want to create. You _should_ say no if you don't like them."

"Okay," Steve says, thinking this over. His _public image_. He's seen his public image in toys and merchandise and History Channel documentaries and his own carefully orchestrated TV appearances, and he hates it. His public image is exactly what he's been trying to change. "Jennifer, did you schedule any interviews with women publicists?"

Jennifer looks at him, holding his gaze in a way she hasn't before. "Yes, a few."

"Can we see them next?"
The first woman candidate is just as slick and cold as any of the men, saying things about Steve's "sex appeal" that make him want to recoil physically. The idea of his body being sold and marketed even more than it already is – it makes him want to throw up.

The second one is pretty good, actually, friendly and professional, with an easygoing manner that Steve likes.

"Put her on the short list," he tells Jennifer, who raises her eyebrows, probably surprised that there is a short list.

The third woman just gives canned answers to Steve's questions, but she brings in her assistant, who has dyed blue hair, a nose piercing, and tattoos peeking out from under her sleeves. The candidate seems to rely on her for all her facts and figures, which strikes Steve as a bit sloppy.

"You hire me, you hire my whole team," the candidate – Hannah – says proudly. "We hire from all demographics so as to be in touch with everyone – youth culture, seniors, African-Americans, alternative lifestyles."

This speech makes Steve uncomfortable for a lot of reasons. "Alternative lifestyles?" he asks, not missing the way that the phrase makes the assistant, Allison, purse her lips ever so slightly.

Hannah's eyes go wide. "I, uh, well, you know – there's a lot of push now towards same-sex marriage and the like, and so we support, I mean, we research – alternative – "

Horrified, Steve puts her out of her misery. "It's okay, I don't need you to explain gay people to me," he says quickly, unable to stifle a small smile.

Allison stifles one too, he notices.

Hannah, on the other hand, looks relieved. "Good! Well, I mean, anything you need to learn about, we can help you with that too, prep you for interviews, make sure you feel comfortable."

"Did you see the public appearances I made two weeks ago, and the stuff I've been doing this week?" Steve asks. It's an honest question; based on her demeanor, he's not sure how she could have seen them.

Hannah turns to Allison, who immediately produces a sheet of paper from her meticulously organized folder.

"We did," she says, "and I took the liberty of having Allison run some numbers for you on how favorable each of the causes you were seen to support are among the general populace. I think we could do some tweaking there, to make sure you're staying on the message you want."

She hands over the piece of paper. The spreadsheets are very neatly organized.

Steve ignores them and pushes ahead with his next question. "Did you get the impression, from those appearances, that I'm interested in feeling comfortable?"

Hannah's eyebrows go up, but she says nothing.

"Did you see my public appearances?" he asks, turning to Allison.

Allison responds immediately, showing no surprise at being asked a question or consternation at being asked a question by Captain America. "Yeah, I did," she says.
"What did you think?"

"I thought they were pretty awesome, to be honest," she says. "Lots of passion, and nothing felt too posed. Your problem was doing them all in a bunch like that, not letting anyone react or absorb the message you're sending. But I really liked the message you were going for." She smiles.

"Allison, are you aware of how Public Relations works at SHIELD?" Steve asks.

She nods. "For the most part, SHIELD hires private publicity firms as sub-contractors on an as-needed basis, and coordinates with people under their umbrella who already have their own publicity teams, like Tony Stark."

"For the most part. Sometimes SHIELD hires permanent staff for the Public Relations division as well."

Hannah furrows her brow. "I was hoping we could get back to the point Allison made earlier about timing – " she says. Steve turns his attention back to her.

"Hannah, it was great to meet you," Steve says. "I really appreciate you coming in today, but I think you and I just aren't right for each other."

She blinks. "Ah – of course. Well, please give me a call if you change your mind. I think I could do a lot for you."

"Thank you."

Hannah gets up to go, and Allison gathers up the papers and follows along.

"Hey Allison," Steve says. She turns.

"Would you stay? I want to talk to you some more."

Slowly, glancing back at Hannah's retreating back, Allison walks back in and sits down.

"Tell me more about yourself," Steve says.

Allison's eyebrows go up. "Well, okay. I have an undergrad degree from Berkeley, then I did my Master's in Public Relations at Georgetown when I realized that a BA in Comp Lit wasn't going to pay for itself anytime soon. I got this internship with Crosby Spalding, they handle mostly politicians here in the D.C. area, and I've been working with Hannah, learning about her methods and clients so I can assist her. Did you – are you thinking about hiring Hannah?"

"Should I?" Steve asks, honestly.

Allison frowns. "Much as I'd like working with you, Captain Rogers, I don't know if it's a good fit. You're not a politician. But then, you're not the usual kind of celebrity, either. I saw some of the other people you're interviewing on the way in, and I don't know if anyone here actually has the skill set you need."

"Which is?"

She shrugs. "Depends on what you want. I'm guessing, based on your appearances a couple weeks ago, that you're not that interested in catering to public opinion."

"I guess I'm not," Steve agrees, smiling a little.
Nodding, she leans in, apparently getting excited by the problem. She reminds him of Bruce, or Tony, getting carried away by some science theory. "So you need something closer to spin and management, except I'm pretty sure that's what your last two publicists tried to do, and look where it got them."

Steve sighs. He's heard the word spin before, plenty of times, and he's never liked it. "I'm not interested in lying, or in . . . coating everything with sugar," he says, as honestly as he can. "I want someone who'll make my public image reflect who I am, and make sure I'm doing all the good I can."

Allison laughs softly. "Then maybe your first problem was hiring from a pool of publicists," she says, like a joke. Steve nods.

"Maybe it was."

She blinks at him. "What?"

"Tell me more about Berkeley," Steve says, changing the subject. "I've never been there. Is that where you're from, or did you move for school?"

Allison looks some combination of confused and suspicious, but after a moment she starts to speak. Steve listens, a lot, slowly coming to a decision.

About twenty minutes later, Steve sticks his head out the door to find Jennifer. She's sitting in one of the chairs in the waiting area and working on her laptop.

"Excuse me, Jennifer," he says. She looks up.

"Yes?"

"I need to know if we can hire someone directly to SHIELD, or if we have to subcontract."

Once Jennifer approves of stealing Allison away from Hannah's firm – at Steve's insistence, with a pretty high salary – Steve goes back into the interview room and shakes Allison's hand.

"Welcome to the Avengers," he says, smiling.

"Holy mother of fuck," Allison says, her eyes going wide.

Steve likes her already.

*  

Jim spends the next few weeks in New York, calling Steve almost every day – more than they ever talked before – and very clearly getting very seriously laid. Steve does his best not to begrudge it, because he remembers how he felt when he and Bucky first became lovers: how he couldn't bear to be away from him, couldn't bear to stop touching him and fucking him and sucking him. It'd been weeks before he'd gone home with Frank again, and Frank hadn't said a word about it; Steve figures he can be as generous as Frank was, and as happy for Jim.

He is happy for Jim.

It's just a little lonely, is the thing; he got used to having Jim around, for dates and talks, and recently, for sex, and it's a little hard to suddenly have so much time for himself.

Steve spends those weeks calling Maria every other day to hear, once again, that they're still
tracking down the people responsible for the experiments on the kids. Apparently they're deep in hiding, and it's going to take a lot of careful work to flush them out.

His bed starts to feel more and more like it did when he first came back from the war, like it's going to swallow him whole.

As a result, he gets up earlier every morning and goes on longer runs, sprinting along the National Mall. Anything is better than time spent alone in his apartment. Passing by a stationery store one day, he finally remembers to get himself a notebook to keep track of stuff he wants to get caught up on, and starts making notes.

Now at least when he meets people, he'll have something to do with his hands while they ask him what he thinks about the future and he tells them he likes the internet.

*

Allison calls every now and again, asking questions about what he wants to do and what audience he wants to reach, and it's a relief to be able to tell her the truth, or most of it.

"I'm working out a media strategy for you," she says. "Uh, it's the first one I've ever actually done on my own."

"You're telling me you never did them for Hannah?" Steve asks curiously.

"Yeah, of course, I worked on lots of them. But I never – they weren't mine."

"Okay, when I do that interview about the UFCW Walmart strikes and workers' rights," Steve says, "I want you to listen to it, and not just for buzzwords. Your labor belongs to you."

Steve thinks he can hear her frowning. "Yeah, well, I got news for you about intellectual property rights and corporate policy," she says, "but it'll piss you off, so maybe we'll save it for next week."

"Fine," Steve says, sighing. "How's it going at SHIELD PR? You fitting in okay?"

"The only people my age around here are bringing me coffee," she says, "and I don't think I quite have the wardrobe down."

"Do you want me to have SHIELD put a wardrobe budget into your pay package?" Steve asks. "It's no problem. You should see what they spend on tasers around here."

"Eh. I'll be okay. I'd rather dress how I like anyway, if it's all the same to you. Even if I am the only blue-haired girl in the office."

"It's all the same to me," Steve says, wishing he could say more and struggling. "I love your hair," he manages, eventually. Everything about Allison says to the world that she's taking control of how she's being seen; Steve envies her.

"Aw, Steve," Allison says, sounding pleased. "I mean, uh, Captain Rogers."

"I would really prefer Steve, actually," Steve says, smiling into the phone.

There's a little silence before Allison says, "Okay," sounding awed.

"Unless you'd prefer I call you Ms Chung," Steve offers lightly.

"Allison's fine, asshole," she says. "Um, I mean."
"I'm starting to figure out why Hannah had you stay quiet in meetings," Steve laughs. "For the record, it's also the reason I wanted to hear you talk."

Steve can just barely hear her rueful laugh. "My mom said, 'Allison, we all know you have trouble with impulse control, but please don't swear too much in front of Captain America –'"

"I told you," Steve interrupts, "to call me Steve."

"So . . . can I assume that you won't tell my mom I swore at you?"

"Fuck no," Steve says, so he can hear her laugh again.

At their next meeting, Allison asks him a lot of thoughtful questions about his boundaries – the kinds of appearances he wants, the parts of his life he's willing to show people, even which interview questions he doesn't want to be asked. Apparently, according to her, the interviewers will stop asking about who he's dating if she tells them to. She also asks Steve why he's chosen the kinds of public appearances and charities that he has, which Steve has to think about for a while before he can answer.

"I believe in all the things I'm supporting," he says, eventually. "I don't want you to think that it's a show. I don't want anyone to think that."

Allison nods for him to go on.

"But since I've woken up, people have been treating me like – I don't know. Like I've never heard of women's rights, or racism, or poverty. Like all that got invented last year. And things are so different in some ways, that it's hard to know what's right all the time, but other things are clear."

"So you want to get away from that man out of time narrative," Allison says, succinctly. She's making notes as she talks. "You're not America's mean racist grandpa."

"I guess," Steve says, puzzling it out as he talks. "But more than that – if people are going to try to call me conservative, and use me for that, I want to stop them. And if I have to be used, if I have to be weaponized like that, it should be on the behalf of the people who need me."

It's a hard conversation, but in the end it's worth it, because Allison books him a series of appearances that actually do some good, bringing media attention and donations to struggling causes. None of the causes are safe, and Steve has more occasions to stand up against the police or the reporters, offering his body or his name for the things he believes in.

The way Allison sets things up, people seem to really start listening.

It's enough, almost, to take his mind off of the work he wishes he could be doing: finding the people responsible for the Ten Rings' experiments, rounding up those scientists and making sure they don't harm anyone else.

They make jokes about him on the nighttime talk shows, and they scream about him on the right-wing propaganda channels, and sometimes it's hard to take, being so visible. Sometimes it's infuriating, when they make the story about him and not about the problems Steve wants to help solve. Sometimes when he does an interview or shows up to a protest he comes home shaking and sweating, unsure of himself and upset, but that's how he knows he was doing good work.

He hasn't prayed in a long time, and he hasn't been to church in even longer, but he keeps thinking about Maria's offer, about Maria lighting candles for the dead. As he slips back into the service
work he used to do before the war, standing up against bullying bosses and politicians, he finds himself wanting to say something to God for Danielle and Valentine, for his Ma, for Betty and Bucky and everyone who's gone, everyone who taught him how to stand up and fight. He wants to say, take care of them, please, the way they took care of me.

And the more time he spends in service, out in public with a sign on his shoulders or with his hands held fast by other hands, the more he starts thinking about Betty in particular, and what she used to say about standing up and fighting. He thinks of her twirling barefoot in her ballgown on her way out of the police station, how she'd made the world around her uncomfortable by making it her own. At home by himself, Steve starts wearing more skirts and dresses, trying more makeup, finding what fits, and he likes it, the sense that he's finding himself. At first, he thought he just wanted to dress up for dates, to make sure Jim saw him for who he was, but as time goes by with Jim out of town he starts to feel like the dressing up is for him, to feel right in his body whenever he wants.

He goes online a lot, curled up with his laptop, pretty clothes on his body and pretty makeup on his face. He chats with Jelani and Tara and Sage, listening to their stories and wondering how he fits into them. Eventually, he even manages to tell them how he’s feeling.

*I don't know if it's ok to call myself genderqueer,* Steve writes, at the end of a long conversation about what the different terms mean, and who gets to use them. *I don't know if it's me exactly. Or if it’s ok for me to use it.* This is the fear he's been holding inside for a while now, that there really isn't any term he can use for himself, not even the old ones.

*If it's not you, that's one thing,* Jelani writes back quickly, *but if you want to do it, it's ok. You get to decide how you feel.*

Steve nods, staring at the screen, wishing he had some way to explain to them all the complicated history he's been through: being a fairy, being a soldier, the transformation, the clothes and makeup that've helped him take his body back. It's not just the huge chasm between what it meant to be queer in the forties in Brooklyn and what it means to be queer now. It's the simple fact that no one else in the world has gone through the changes Steve has.

*LOTS of people don't feel authentic,* Sage says. *Because it's hard to feel authentic when every message out there tells you you're not, you can't be.*

*What made you all decide to label yourselves in one way, though,* Steve asks. *Did you have a feeling like, yes, that's me!* Steve's been waiting for that feeling, and he hasn't found it yet.

*lol no,* Tara writes. *i called myself nonbinary at first just 2 piss off my mom.* Steve laughs, surprised.

*Tara you're my hero,* Jelani writes. *I wish I'd been that badass.*

*did u kno what u wanted 2b called b4 u came out?*

*Are you kidding? I still don't know for sure!* Jelani writes, and Steve shakes his head, unable to imagine this confident, beautiful person being unsure about anything. *I started calling myself what I wanted to be, and then I tried to live up to it.*

*That's a really beautiful way of putting it,* Steve writes. He likes that a lot.
Borrow it if you like! Jelani says, generously. Steve is taken aback by that for a moment, but then he finds himself smiling at the idea. Maybe he could borrow an identity from Jelani, the way he borrowed makeup and scarves from Marlene and Betty, to try it on until he knows what will feel good.

Maybe I will, Steve writes.

Seriously, you can call yourself one thing now and a different thing later and it doesn't make any of it any less valid. You're allowed to change.

This is so lovely that it nearly brings tears to Steve's eyes. He wishes he could express his gratitude to his friends, so that they could know how much this means to him. Thank you, Steve writes, even though it's not enough. Thank you for all of this. He chews his lip for a minute. Okay, I guess next time I see my boyfriend, I'll tell him I'm genderqueer. For now.

yayyyyyyyyy!!!!!

YAYYYY!

Awesome, Jelani writes. Tell us all about it afterwards.

*

A couple of weeks into Allison's tenure as his publicist, she calls him while he's poking through the local used bookstore.

"So, this might be a little weird," she says, as Steve heads out to the sidewalk so that he can talk. "But I wanted to take your temperature on it."

"All right," Steve says. "Lay it on me."

"The Vets for Peace you marched with a little while ago sent in a request. They want to know if you'll come to a demonstration outside the White House."

"And?" Steve asks, suspiciously.

"And, some of their demands for transparency and oversight are about SHIELD."

His stomach turning in knots, Steve collapses on the bench outside the bookstore. "Missions I ran?"

"Freedom of information doesn't work well or fast, so no. They've got data up to 2011."

He sighs. "I've run secret missions with SHIELD, though. Stuff with . . . limited oversight."

Allison's silent for a little while. "Did you ever torture anyone, or kill civilians?"

"No, of course not," Steve replies, shaken, though he also can't help thinking: as far as I know. "Is that – are there SHIELD agents who did?"

"I don't know. Most on the stuff on this list is about breaches of privacy, stuff like that. I was asking for me."

"Oh."

"I – I don't think I could keep working with you if – "
"I get it," Steve says, softly. He closes his eyes. He can't protest SHIELD, in however small a part, while still working for them, still trusting them to do the right things. "I want to see whatever these documents are that have been released," he says. "But I can't go to the demonstration."

Allison's quiet again. "Okay."

"I'm going to look into it," he says. "I promise."

"Okay. It's okay, Steve."

There's a tight ball of anger burning in his chest, making his jaw and fists clench. He tries to make himself relax. "What else you got?"

"Protest for raising the minimum wage. SEIU with McDonald's workers, other fast food chains. They asked if you could come out with them again."

"I'll do that," Steve says.

He meets up with the protesters beforehand, and they all walk together to their first McDonald's of the day.

"Appreciate you coming out," one of the SEIU organizers, Alicia, says. She's at least a foot shorter than he is, so he bends down as far as he can so he can make it clear he's listening.

"I'm glad I can help," Steve says. "You know, I marched with the SEIU back in 1934. Garment workers' strike."

Alicia shakes her head. "Damn, it's hard to believe you're really that old. I mean, I know you're that old, but still."

Steve laughs with her. "I was only sixteen then," he says.

"Well. It does something for people. Seeing you out here, supporting the cause. We also get arrested a lot less when you're around making the cops uncomfortable."

"That's good," Steve says, thinking back on what Allison told him on the phone, about protests against SHIELD. "We want to make the cops uncomfortable."

"If only," Alicia snorts. "And if only their reactions to being uncomfortable weren't so damn deadly."

They get where they're going and start their chants, with Alicia and some of her colleagues reading out statistics now and again about McDonald's wealth and pay. It's a surprise protest, so it takes a while, but eventually reporters show up, and when they notice him, more reporters show up.

"Talk to her," Steve says, shaking his head and pointing to Alicia every time they ask him for comment. It's Allison's suggestion, and it works: rather than getting caught up interviewing him, the reporters actually talk to the people who are doing the work.

They crash a bunch of different fast food joints that day. Steve carries some of the workers on his shoulders now and again, like his mother used to do for him, so they can take a break from walking and get the signs up high.

"You think it'll make a difference?" he asks Alicia, when the day is winding down, with a tiny sixty-year-old lady named Beatrice perched on his shoulders as they walk. Beatrice has a bullhorn,
and she's really good with it.

"I gotta hope so, don't I?" Alicia asks, sighing. "I don't know. Some days you can feel change happening. Other days . . . I start to think it'd be better to just burn it all down."

"Burn it all down?" Steve asks.

"The system, the corporations, the politicians who keep everyone up there rich and safe while we're working for nothing," Alicia says. "Burn it all down."

Up on Steve's shoulders, Beatrice must hear her, because she yells it into her bullhorn.

"Burn it all down!"

Alicia laughs. "Build it all up!" she counters, with feeling.

"Maybe some of both," Steve offers.

"Let's hope so," Alicia agrees.

*

When he finally does get the call, and SHIELD is ready to go after the Ten Rings scientists, Steve's in uniform and out the door so fast he's still buckling his belt as he runs down the stairs. At the Triskelion, he bolts directly for the launch bay, texting Maria while he runs, letting her know he can get the briefing on the plane.

He'll be damned if he's going to let these people get away again.

Maria texts him back with the info on his ride: Bay 7, coordinate with Rumlow. Steve picks up the pace and ducks into the jet along with half a dozen other Strike team members, all of whom he recognizes from other missions.

"Gilbert, Bennett, Jefferson," Steve says, nodding at each of them in greeting. They nod back as the jet doors begin to close and the engines come on. Then Steve turns his head to see who's standing up near the cockpit, expecting the flash of red in the corner of his eye to be Natasha's bright hair.

It's not Natasha.

"Pepper," Steve says, surprised.

"I requested this mission," Pepper says, smiling at his confusion. "It – didn't feel right, leaving part of it unfinished."

Steve nods. "I know what you mean. Maybe you're more of an Avenger than you thought."

"Maybe," Pepper allows politely, but she doesn't seem convinced.

"Is Tony still out of action?" He winces as he says it, all too aware of the action Tony may well have been getting lately. Pepper doesn't seem to think anything of it.

"Yes. There was organic damage, as well as damage to the reactor casing, so he's still not supposed to be doing anything strenuous. And Jim's staying with him, because without a babysitter he's bound to come out here after me."

Steve nods. He tries to think of something else to say to her other than so, had sex with my
boyfriend lately?

He should tell her. He needs to tell her, eventually, he knows that. But maybe this crowded Strike team jet, three hours out from the target, isn't the place to come out to anyone.

"Rumlow has the mission briefing, if you want it," Pepper says.

"Yeah," Steve says. "Yeah, I'll go look that over."

He leaves her sitting in her quiet little corner, apart from the SHIELD Strike team, barefoot and dressed in black. She doesn't look like a human explosive.

"Easy as pie, Cap," Rumlow tells him, laying out the maps for the place they're raiding. "Four scientists, two directors, all of them high up in the Ten Rings hierarchy. We're supposed to take them alive. They think they're off the grid, so there's not much in the way of a guard."

"So we think," Steve murmurs, remembering the trap they fell into on the island.

"We got solid real-time intel," Rumlow says. "As good as it gets."

Steve nods, looking over the layout. "We go in here and here," he says, "incapacitate these guards – that's Jefferson and Gilbert – you and Lee and Jackson here, taking these two – "

"Bennett and Leibowitz securing these exits, you and Rescue lead Beta Team to get the other four," Rumlow fills in. "That's what I figured you'd want."

Steve smiles. "Guess I'm getting too predictable, huh?"

"Never, Cap. Just dependable."

Steve's been called worse, he figures. Rumlow smiles at him, warm and earnest, and Steve smiles back.

"All right. Prep everyone, get them organized. I'll talk to Ms Potts."

Rumlow nods. "Superhero stuff is your job, I just deal with the guns and soldiers."

Steve heads back to sit next to Pepper and briefs her on the updated strike plan.

"Sounds good," Pepper says. "Rumlow told you that we're to take these men alive?"

"Yeah. I assume Bruce wants to know what they know. To help the kids."

"That would be the best reason for it," Pepper says.

Steve frowns. "What else do you think is going on?"

Pepper presses her lips together, considering. "SHIELD wants more superhumans too," she says, eventually. "Do you think they're going to just lock these scientists up and forget that they somehow created stable superpowers of a kind no one has seen since – well, since you?"

"Jesus," Steve says. "SHIELD wouldn't experiment on children."

"Probably not," Pepper says, and the probably on its own is enough to send a chill down Steve's spine. "But what if they ask for volunteers? Look around, do you think any of these soldiers would take it on willingly?"
Steve looks up: Rumlow would do it, he thinks. And Bennett, and Leibowitz. Jefferson. The more he looks at them, the more he thinks they'd all do it.

"I did," Steve says. "But we were at war, and it was my only chance to serve. It was different."

"It was different," Pepper says, "because you didn't already have you to look up to. These men do." She pauses. "And SHIELD is always at war."

Steve sighs. This jet full of soldiers is the only thing standing between their targets and the rest of the world. They need SHIELD to keep these scientists from doing any more harm. "God," he says. "Pepper, what the hell else can we do?"

"We could kill them," Pepper says. "The scientists." Steve's head snaps up, and he looks her in the eye.

"I thought you were our pacifist flamethrower."

She searches his face.

"I don't know," she says. "I don't know, Steve. I'm here just like you, because it's the only option I have. I owe those kids, I owe them a guarantee that no one will ever go through what they went through again, and I have no idea how to do that."

Steve nods. "Would you really kill them?" he asks, in an undertone. She hadn't even used her fire offensively, back at the Ten Rings base. She'd used it to protect, and to defend, and to imprison, but not to attack.

Pepper sighs and rubs her palms against her knees. She has small, delicate hands. Her fingernails are elegantly shaped and painted. "I wouldn't," she says, eventually. "I can't kill human beings on purpose. I've done it, and I can't do it again. I can't kill human beings to take their knowledge from the world, it's – it's obscene."

They sit in silence for a moment.

"Would you?" she asks, her voice hoarse. Steve wonders if it's a hypothetical question or a polite request.

"I could," Steve says. "I could do it. I've done a lot of things for the greater good."

"But you wouldn't," Pepper sighs, as if Steve hadn't said just the opposite.

"No," Steve agrees.

"I saw you take a face full of pepper spray on the news," Pepper says. "The cop must've emptied the whole can on you."

"Illegal use of force," Steve says quietly. "But better me than someone else."

"I knew there was a reason your symbol was a shield," Pepper says, elbowing him gently. It occurs to Steve that Pepper uses a shield too, like he does.

"I saw you on the news too, you know," he says slowly.

"Yeah?"

"Something about turning Stark Industries into an ethical company."
"And yet every time I turn around there's another subsidiary who holds a subsidiary who holds a subsidiary who contracts with a third party who runs a sweatshop," Pepper says, looking down at her feet.

Steve grimaces. "Pretty sad when the CEO can't stop it. I thought you were supposed to have all the power."

"Yeah," she says, "me too. But it's a bit like this kind of power." Holding up one hand, she snaps her fingers and flicks a little flame up out of her thumb, the size you'd get from striking a match. "Inherently destructive. Impossible to ignore, and impossible to disarm."

"You didn't choose that," Steve says, watching as she moves the flame from fingertip to fingertip, like a magic trick.

"Just like the kids," Pepper agrees. "But it's mine now, isn't it." Closing her fist on the flame, she turns to look at him. "Did you choose yours?"

There's something frank and evaluative in Pepper's gaze, something that looks right through him. It's a question that Steve's avoided for a long time, at least out loud.

"Not really," he admits. "No more than Rumlow or Bennett would be able to choose. But I wouldn't change it, if that means anything."

"I think it does," Pepper muses. "I think it matters, what we do with the tools we have. How we manage the power. And I think we have to capture these scientists alive."

"Then that's what we'll do," Steve says.

The mission is easy as pie, like Rumlow said it would be. Steve doesn't even have to dodge that many bullets, and finds himself wishing he could have Pepper's fire-shield along on more missions. He doesn't think that's too likely to happen, though.

*

Steve goes in to see Director Fury, after they bring the prisoners in.

"Take a seat, Steve," Nick says, so Steve does.

"I want to supervise the interrogation of the prisoners," Steve says.

"Did you know that you're bleeding?"

Nick points, and Steve glances down.

"Oh." He brushes at his arm, rubbing the blood away from the tear in his uniform. "No, it's stopped."

"I can't let you supervise an interrogation," Nick says. "You're not trained as an interrogator."

"I don't need to be in the room. On the other side of the glass is fine. And I know the law."

Nick narrows his eye at Steve. "SHIELD works at a higher level of international law."

Steve grimaces. "That's what concerns me, Nick."

"You called Hill every damn day, waiting for this mission. You were more ready to capture these
guys than anyone.

Steve swallows, frustrated. "It's – that's why it's important that I do this, too," he says, after a minute.

Nick sizes him up for a long minute. "It's not in SHIELD's best interest to mistreat these prisoners. Making a deal is more likely to yield success."

Steve nods angrily. "Oh, so you're going to give these guys a job."

"I'd call it more of a work release program, after they've been tried and imprisoned."

"That's not funny."

"It wasn't intended to be, Cap. Look, we have one hundred and eighty-one kids in the medical bay experiencing various degrees of poisoning from God-knows-what compounds. I need to know how to make them better. Or do you want to explain to them that your principles got in the way?"

The words light a fire inside of Steve, white-hot like Pepper's shield, burning through him at the thought that the scientists' victims might be used to justify their freedom.

"And when the kids are better? When we've learned what we can to help them? Is the work release over then? Do we get justice then?"

"We can turn evil tools to a good purpose," Nick says. His voice is strained, like he's trying to convince himself, too. "We can turn them into weapons for something good. It's the only way to stay ahead."

Burning inside, breathing hard from the pulse of anger that's traveling through his blood in time with his heartbeat, Steve stares Nick down. There's something in his expression that gives Steve pause.

"What else is going on, Nick?" he asks, softly.

A bead of sweat breaks out on Nick's temple. Steve hasn't seen him sweat in two years, not since the time aliens invaded New York.

"Tell me," Steve says. He can see it hovering behind Nick's eye, some terrible truth that he wants to tell.

"What's going on is that I have an international intelligence organization to run," Nick growls, and whatever was showing on his face for that brief moment is long gone, locked down. Steve blinks in surprise at the sudden shift; it's so easy to forget that Nick was an undercover agent before he was the director of anything. "And I don't have time to coddle you. Observe the interrogations if you want. Burst in and keep 'em in line if they go over whatever arbitrary standards you've decided are ethical. But get out of my office, already."

Steve hesitates; this is the concession he came for. But he's worried, now, about Nick, about the other secrets Nick might be keeping.

"Did you hear me, Captain?" Nick says, dropping into his commander's voice.

"Yes, Director Fury, I did," Steve says, and goes.

The interrogations are, as it turns out, very polite. The scientists, all four of them, get their own
Steve goes running every morning, because without the exercise his body is always too full of energy, too ready, too powerful, and lately he's more likely to break dishes or tear doorknobs if he doesn't take the edge off.

And he goes running because, with the steady pound of his feet against the pavement, sometimes he can convince himself to stop thinking for a few minutes, and concentrate instead on his breath, his lungs, the wind on his face.

Peggy always says that thinking is his worst habit.

He's gotten to know the other runners on his route, by sight at least: the two women who show up at about quarter after five and jog away around six; the group of fit, white-haired older men who run with Secret Service attached, usually from about five-thirty to six-thirty; the large groups that tend to get there around seven; the pairs, the triads, the ones on their own.

The handsome guy who sometimes wears a bi pride t-shirt to run, with a blue, purple, and pink flag above the text SAY HI IF YOU'RE BI. Steve's noticed that guy a few times.

He's never said hi.

Some of them chat and laugh as they go, and some keep their eyes on the pavement in front of them, counting out each step like it can add up to something finished.

Steve just runs. He passes them all. He doesn't join in any of the groups or talk to the people who are stretching on the grass.

The day after SHIELD adds four new scientists to its Biological Enhancements division, he runs twenty-five miles in a little over an hour. He ends up exactly where he started, though, alone in his small apartment, missing his boyfriend, answering a phone call from Maria about his next mission.

"It's retrieving more of Ivan Vanko's prototypes," she says, and if it weren't for her standard flat military tone, Steve would swear she's being placating. "Getting them off the market and destroying them."

"How'd they get on the market in the first place?" Steve asks, unable to help himself. There's a long pause.

When she finally speaks, it's still in that flat declarative tone, demonstrating the absolute absence of emotion that you probably need to be Deputy Director of SHIELD. "To my knowledge, Captain Rogers, SHIELD never solicited any weapons designs from Vanko."

Steve looks down at the floor. "When do you want me there?"

The mission is a good one, the kind where they do good work and make the world safer. They get out without any injuries, and afterwards Natasha nudges him with her shoulder, and Rumlow makes him accept a high five, and Steve can't help but smile a little.

It's still late afternoon D.C. time when they get back.

labs at The Hub.
"I think Bennett's pushing for everyone to go out for dinner and a few beers," Natasha says, watching Steve carefully. "Wanna come, tell some stories about blowing up HYDRA installations?"

Steve smiles for her as best he can and shakes his head. "I might head home. I feel like being alone."

She cocks her head at him, narrowing her eyes. "You miss Jim, and you wish you weren't alone," she translates. "But since you are, you're gonna go wallow."

Steve's smile turns genuine. "I guess I am," he agrees.

"You know, Rogers, if it's an open relationship now and you want to get back on the field I can hook you up with some cute people. Ysabel in Statistics is really nice."

"Why don't you date her, then?"

"And there's that new guy, Jason? I think he's gay, I mean, his pronoun use when talking about exes is carefully neutral, so."

"He sounds charming, but I really don't need a fix-up," Steve says, starting to laugh in spite of himself.

"And of course you know that Jasper Sitwell would do you in a hot minute," she continues. "If you're just looking for sex."

"Stop, stop," Steve says, waving his hands in front of his face.

She does, watching him with a fond expression. "I'm sorry you've been feeling sad lately, Steve," she says. It's a bit of a shock, because Steve hasn't told her anything of the kind. In a way, though, that's the great benefit to having Natasha for a friend; you never have to say it.

It's the problem with having Natasha for a friend, too. "Thanks, Nat," he sighs.

"Call me later if you want to get beers. Just the two of us."

"Okay," he says. To his surprise, Natasha reaches out and squeezes his shoulder, her grip hard and brief and a little awkward.

"I mean it, Rogers, I'll get you a date so fast it'll make your head spin. A good one, I promise."

"I know you will," Steve says, stepping away from her touch, stepping back.

* *

When Steve gets home, ready for his wallowing time, he gets halfway up the stairs before he sees Jim standing in the hallway, leaning against the doorframe, a yellow rose in his hand. Steve has the absurd urge to rub at his eyes and shake his head in disbelief, like a cartoon character.

"Oh my God," he says, helplessly. "Oh my God, Jim." He reaches for him, then lets his hand fall, conscious of the way his neighbor Kate's peephole looks out on the hallway, and swallows hard. "Let me just get this unlocked." He does, and they both step inside, and then the door closes and they're alone together again.

"It hasn't been that long," Jim says, moving forward to take Steve in his arms. They hug tightly, with Steve's head bent down so that he can press his face against Jim's neck and feel just as small
as he wants to.

"Sweetheart," Jim whispers into Steve's hair. "Oh, sweetheart, I should've been back sooner."

"No, I wanted you to spend some time there," Steve says, but it's mostly muffled in Jim's jacket and against the warm skin of his neck. Jim must understand the gist of it, though.

"It was really good for me to be there and work stuff out with Tony and Pepper," he says, placing a light kiss on Steve's temple, "but God, I missed you."

Steve pulls back and kisses him, thoroughly and deeply, to make up for lost time. He hadn't even known that he missed the taste of Jim's mouth, or the smell of his sweat hidden in the dip of his throat.

It doesn't take long for the kiss to get heated or for them to press together, bodies aligning in a now-familiar pattern: Jim's hands on Steve's waist. Steve's palms rubbing against Jim's powerful shoulders, Jim's knee slipping between Steve's parting legs so his thigh can rub against Steve's dick.

"You must've really missed me," Jim breathes. Steve huffs out a laugh.

"Well, I wasn't getting laid by two superheroes in Tony Stark's Manhattan sex tower," Steve says. "That's a direct quote from The Enquirer, by the way, I saw it at the store."

"I know, Tony emailed it to me," Jim sighs. "Why not?"

Steve pulls back a little to look at Jim's face. Jim meets his gaze calmly.

"Why not what?"

"Why weren't you getting laid? Not necessarily in a Manhattan sex tower, I mean, just in general."

Fondly, Steve caresses the side of Jim's face, letting his thumb linger against the shell of his ear. Jim's eyes shutter closed and he leans into the touch like a cat. "Well, they paved over the queer joint I used to cruise to pick up trade," Steve says. "So what's a fella to do?"

Opening his eyes, Jim watches Steve, the silence hot and expectant between them. "You managed to pick me up, soldier," he says, and there's a glint in his eye that Steve hasn't seen before. His heart beats faster, and harder, so hard against his chest that he can hear every rough thump of it. He licks his lips and answers the question that Jim is asking.

"Just want to do my part for the war effort, sir," Steve grins. Jim's hands slide up Steve's arms to his shoulders.

"You're a pretty thing," he says, his lopsided half-grin on his face, not quite committing to the game; that makes it better, that they can be themselves playing around, not just the roles they're feeling out together.

Steve was never really much of an actor, but doing this with Jim feels natural, like they know each other well enough that it's not going to matter if he messes up.

Shifting his shoulders against the light pressure of Jim's hands, Steve closes his eyes for his next line: "Let me suck your cock. Please let me."

The pressure of Jim's hands on his shoulders increases, and Steve lets Jim bear him down to his knees. The soft thump as they hit the wood floor feels good, like every perfect landing he's ever made while wearing the uniform.
Jim unbuckles his belt and unzips his pants, pulling his dick out. It brushes against Steve's cheek; Steve closes his eyes and nuzzles against it.

"Suck me down," Jim says. It sounds like he's going to say more, but then he doesn't, so Steve looks up to check on him. They've never played this game before, never done anything like it, and Steve doesn't want Jim to feel uncomfortable.

Jim looks down at him. He's breathing fast. His cock is getting harder against Steve's lips.

"Suck me down like a good little fairy."

His voice kind of cracks partway through and he looks half-terrified but he says it, and that on its own is enough to make Steve groan, opening his mouth around Jim's cock and sinking down onto it. His skin gets hot and he knows he's blushing; knows that Jim can see it, the way this is turning him on and making him embarrassed at the same time.

God, Jim knows him so well.

Jim's hand buries itself in his hair. Steve keeps it short for fighting purposes, but Jim finds a grip anyway, the pull of it dragging another low noise out of Steve's throat.

"Take me all the way, little fairy," he says. "Don't be shy."

Steve whines, then gets his hands up and braced against Jim's thighs for support. He changes his angle, bobbing his head to take Jim deeper, and alternates slow, hard sucks with long light ones; he listens to Jim's breathing and knows exactly when to push, when to pull back, when to swallow.

Saliva drips out of his mouth. He doesn't care. He wants to make a mess.

"You're so good at that," Jim breathes. His hips are starting to stutter forward in little half-thrusts, and his hand on Steve's shoulder and his hands in Steve's hair are gripping harder, so that he can keep himself standing. "You're so good, such a good, good little cocksucker."

A wave of hot pleasure rushes through Steve's blood, lighting him up from the inside. He takes one of his hands off of Jim's body and uses it to unzip himself, tears of relief slipping from the corners of his eyes as his dick pushes up into his fist.

He closes his eyes again and sucks, licks, swallows, wanting more than anything for this to be good for Jim. Wanting to be good for Jim.

"God, I'm going to come," Jim groans. Steve doesn't open his eyes but he hears the sound of Jim's head falling back against the door, can imagine the arched line of his exposed throat. He doesn't pull away. He takes what Jim has to give him, salty and bitter over his tongue, and swallows it down eagerly.

A few seconds later, Jim is falling to his knees beside him, wincing as he hits the floor. Steve looks into his face, the taste of come still on his lips, and breathes hard. He's so desperate that he doesn't even know what to say, what to ask for.

Jim leans his forehead against Steve's forehead and wraps his hand around Steve's hand: their breath mingles but they don't kiss. Jim's steady, open gaze takes up Steve's entire field of vision.

"That was so good, sweetheart," Jim says. Sweetheart is for him, for who he is now, not for the Steve Rogers who used to suck off soldiers in alleyways, and it shakes Steve up inside to think that Jim loves both of those guys the same. He pushes up helplessly into Jim's fist, closing his eyes and
crying out uncontrollably.

"Jim," he manages, because he wants to make it clear who he's thinking about, "Jim, please, please – "

He doesn't even know what he's begging for.

Jim darts in and kisses him briefly, wetly, and then pulls back so they're forehead to forehead again. "Shhh," he says, "shhh, honey, I got you. I got you. You're so beautiful like this, all broken down and desperate, I love it, Steve, I love you, come on – "

Steve shoves up into Jim's fist and closes his eyes tight as he comes, the orgasm so fast and so rough that it's almost like pain. It shoves its way through him, shaking him down to his toes and his fingertips and leaving him warm and satisfied.

"Maybe I won't stay away so long next time," Jim says, pulling back a little so he can cup Steve's face. Steve's still panting and sweaty. He laughs.

"Eh, I can take you or leave you, honestly," he pants, and Jim punches him in the shoulder.

* 

They get some showers and some takeout, and Steve puts on the new dress he bought last week when he was thinking of Jim. It's white with lavender flowers all over it, the same kind of thing he always thought he'd like to get back in the forties. It doesn't stay on long, because Jim takes one look at him in his soft pink lipstick and short hemline and they end up fucking again, with Steve bent over the kitchen table and his dress flipped up over his waist to bare his ass.

Then they eat more takeout, and watch about half a movie, and then Steve tries to suck Jim's cock again but Jim's cock refuses to join in the fun.

"You wore me out," Jim laughs. "But you still want it, huh? You're still hot for it."

Naked on the couch, Steve squirms; there's no way Jim can miss the part of him that's definitely still hot for it.

"Yeah," he says. "I wish you could fuck me again."

"C'mere," Jim says, pulling Steve into his lap. Hesitantly, Steve straddles him, just like he would if he were going to ride his dick.

Instead, Jim gets a little lube and then slowly, teasingly, puts his fingers up into Steve's ass.

"How's that," he asks. "That what you want?"

"Yeah," Steve says, "yeah, that feels so good, Jim, God."

"Maybe I'll finger you for hours," Jim says. "Keep you on the edge with my fingers teasing your ass."

"If this is something you learned during your fuck vacation in the Manhattan sex tower," Steve breathes, laughing, "then I'm all for you spending more time there."

Jim's smile is hesitant but genuine. "It's still hard to believe. That I could have them and you too. I never thought I'd get this lucky."
"Think I'm the one getting lucky right now," Steve groans, working himself against Jim's hand. "Insatiable," Jim says. He has good fingers, long good fingers that give Steve exactly what he needs.

"You satisfy me just fine," Steve smiles. Jim cocks his head.

"What about when I'm not here?" he asks. His fingers don't stop what they're doing, slow strokes and short pushes against Steve's prostate, his wet thumb rubbing lightly against the rim.

"You saying you want me to get another lover?" Steve looks down to meet his eyes, not sure what he'll see there, more than a little afraid to find out. He wouldn't want to date someone just to make Jim feel better; he doesn't think he could.

Jim's expression is calm, confident, giving; it sets Steve at ease.

"I want you to do what makes you happy," he says, and presses a kiss to Steve's collarbone.

* *

Steve thinks about the promise he made to Jelani and Tara and Sage, about telling Jim he's genderqueer. He'd wanted to do it the moment he saw him, but then they'd gotten into things, and now Steve feels awkward about it, not sure how to bring it up.

Jim loves his lipstick and calls him a fairy and calls him his sweetheart, and Steve knows that Jim will be supportive. But he also knows that if he starts calling himself something new, he's going to feel pressure to measure up to the word.

But that'd been what Jelani had meant, hadn't it? You find a name you like, that means the thing you want to be, and you try to become it.

Steve doesn't want to be the man they made him into. He thinks, even though it's a hard thing to admit, that he doesn't want to be a man at all.

"There's one thing that . . . that I think will make me happy," he says, later, when he and Jim are lying in bed together. Jim's got his reading glasses on, poking at his Kindle, and Steve's been trying to read a book on Eleanor Roosevelt and failing to take in any of the words.

Jim puts down his Kindle and takes off his glasses to look over at Steve. "Oh yeah?" He reaches out a hand and trails it down Steve's arm to his wrist, encouragingly.

"Yeah. I was talking with – you know my online friends?"

Jim nods.

"Well, I was – I've been trying to think about what to call myself, these days. Other than a fairy, or your sweetheart." He smiles, nervously, and Jim returns it back to him. He turns on his side, laying his head down on the pillow and looking up at Steve.

"You've been looking for the right words for a long time," Jim says.

"Yeah. And I think I'm going to start saying genderqueer," Steve says, all in a rush. "I mean, to try it, at least." He licks his lips, then continues, "I like what the word sounds like, and what it means, and I think I'm going to try to be that."

"Sounds good to me," Jim says softly. "Can I do anything to help?"
Steve shrugs. "Just – to know that you know it will make a big difference, I think," he says.

"All right then," Jim smiles. "Then you're my genderqueer . . . friend. Genderqueer boyfriend?" He frowns. "That doesn't seem right."

"I like it," Steve says, remembering what Jelani said: he can take up whatever words feel right. "Genderqueer boyfriend is good."

"Then that's you, honey," Jim says, and kisses him softly. "My genderqueer boyfriend."

Steve settles into the name, and into Jim's warm embrace, letting his eyes close.

* *

"There is this guy on my run," Steve says the next morning, as they're eating breakfast.

"Yeah?" Jim smiles at him. "What's he look like?"

Steve shrugs, turning his attention to the omelette in front of him. "You know. Strong. Broad shouldered. Sort of handsome in the face."

"So, exactly like me," Jim says, taking a bite of his omelette.

"Nothing at all like you, jeez, you think I don't get sick of looking at this ugly mug?" Smiling, Steve cups Jim's cheek, then leans over to place a soft kiss on the corner of his mouth.

Jim smiles against the kiss. "So are you going to talk to him?"

"Maybe," Steve says. "I don't know." It's taken him so long, with Jim, to get to a place where he feels comfortable; the thought of starting from scratch with a new person is daunting. He smiles and nudges Jim with his elbow playfully. "If you're going to insist on splitting your time between New York and D.C., I'm going to get bored."

"It's not too long a trip in the suit," Jim shrugs. Steve furrows his brow. He's flown the distance with Jim, he knows this, but somehow he never put these pieces together before.

"Wait, so – that weekend, when we drove up to New York together – "

"Yeah, I didn't have to drive, I just wanted to spend time with you," Jim admits, while Steve starts laughing. "And that car always gets me laid."

"Yeah, I believe that it does," Steve says, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth so he doesn't lose any eggs while he laughs. "You're hot around cars. We should take up our lessons again. Maybe see if we can liberate a few more showpieces from Tony's garage and take them to see the world."

"Mmmm, we should," Jim agrees. "Let's do it. But it'll have to be in May, I'm not gonna be around much at all in the next two weeks." Steve frowns.

"Secret Service work?"

"Yeah. The President's doing a tour in West Asia. Security concerns are legion."

Steve whistles. "I bet. Maybe you could get her a suit of her own and be done with it."

"I wish. I put the suit on President Ellis, once, to protect him. It did seem to make more sense than
wearing it myself and standing next to him."

"When do you leave?" Steve asks.

"Day after tomorrow." He frowns. "Which sucks, I know, I haven't been around much. But I am completely at your disposal for these next two days, I promise."

"I'll hold you to that," Steve says, rubbing his thumb against Jim's wrist.

"And then, when I'm on the other side of the world, you should talk to that cute guy. Do you even know if he's gay?"

"He wears a bi pride t-shirt sometimes," Steve says, smiling.

"Oh, then he's a sure thing," Jim says. "You gonna feel weird about the . . . well, the genderqueer stuff?"

Steve sighs. "I don't know. I hope it'll be easier the second time, since it went so well with you. And you'll be back soon enough to comfort me if it goes badly." He tries the thought on for real, imagines himself approaching the handsome bi pride guy and – what? Asking him on a date?

It's not impossible.

Jim turns his hand over to return Steve's caress, joining their hands loosely so that he can touch as he's touched.

"Provided you don't get held up overseas, of course," Steve adds. He means it like getting held up due to travel issues or unscheduled stops, but then he thinks a little more about the kinds of things that could hold him up on that kind of mission. "Don't get held up," he says. "And don't get hurt."

"I won't, honey," Jim says, and bends down to kiss Steve's palm. "I promise."

They make every moment count for those two days together: going out for dinner, curling up on the couch to watch TV, fucking lazily, for hours, until even Steve is too sated to get it up again. It's perfect, and everything that Steve's been missing, but the whole time feels shot through with worry, too, at the thought of Jim going somewhere dangerous without him.

It's ridiculous, because Steve's seen Jim do all kinds of dangerous and heroic things, but Steve was always there to protect him. It feels wrong to send him off and stay home, like the war bride Bucky had wanted him to be all those years ago.

"Be careful," Steve says, kissing him goodbye just inside the door, where they kissed hello not that long ago. "Please be careful."

"I will," Jim promises, like he has every time Steve's mentioned it. "I'll be back before you can even miss me."

Steve doesn't say anything to that obvious lie, just kisses Jim again and again, until Jim has to run down for his cab, still wiping a smear of Steve's lipstick from his cheek.

That night, Steve's bed is softer than ever before. Decadent. Luxurious. Steve lies awake for long hours, twisting around in the sheets, flipping onto his side or his front in an effort to find some support. It doesn't work, and when he does doze off, somewhere around three in the morning, he dreams of sinking, the bed turning to mud and to water, his body pulled slowly down and down forever while he lies still and suffocates.
He keeps his head down the next morning, while he runs, and doesn't look for the handsome bi guy. He runs as hard as he can, for as long as he can, and gets home sweating and out of breath but still restless and keyed up. As he showers, he thinks about calling Jim, but it's unlikely that Jim will be in a position to talk freely. It's too early to call Bruce, and Natasha just got back last night from the op she and Clint were running all week in Venezuela, so he doesn't want to disturb her.

Instead he goes online to check his messages, and finds a lot more of them than he expected. Reading through, he finds that sometime yesterday, Tara's friend Sage had to leave their boyfriend. And their house. And all their stuff.

_It's a messed-up situation, _Tara wrote in hir post, _their boyfriend's name is the only one of the lease even though Sage has been paying most of the rent for the last two years, and he's locked them out. Go check out Sage's gofundme for more details, and if you can, kick in some $$ - they need to get a new place to stay and to replace a lot of their stuff._

Steve clicks on the gofundme and opens a chat window with Tara. _I was sorry to hear about Sage, he writes, I'm donating to the gofundme right now._

_awesome, thanks SG, they'll totally appreciate that!_

Steve looks at the page: Sage is asking for money for food, for basic necessities, and for first month, last month, and a security deposit on a new apartment. He frowns. He can easily remember being in similar jams, when he and Bucky couldn't make the payments for their rooms and had to go elsewhere, but at least back then apartments and rooming houses weren't like they are now. At least back then you could find another half-decent place for cheap, if you had to.

He checks his bank balance carefully, then donates ten thousand dollars, taking care to do it anonymously.

_The worst part of this whole thing is that I'm pretty sure he's thrown out a bunch of my stuff, Sage's description reads on the gofundme page. So even though I should be focused on the basics right now, I'm also really mourning all my makeup, shoes, and clothes! I'll have to put some money out right away to get some new outfits, because I just left with the stuff I could grab during the fight and I need more than three professional outfits for work. But it's gonna be a long time before I can really get back the stuff I had built up._

Steve looks at the page a while longer; the money should get them through, he figures, but he wishes he could do more. He glances over at the bedside table, where he keeps his growing little collection of makeup. Steve doesn't know them that well, but some of that stuff, Sage helped him pick out.

He reaches out to touch one of his powder blushes, a sleek silver disc with a catch on the front. When he presses it, idly, it springs open to reveal a soft pink that Sage had told him would work well with his skin tone.

The scent of the powder takes him back years, to all his evenings spent dolling up in Marlene and Betty's rooms, to the times he'd helped his drag queen friends get ready for the stage, and especially to the Christmas when Bucky got him makeup and stockings, the Christmas they kissed for the first time. Thinking back on it, it's hard for Steve to believe that he was ever so young as he was that Christmas, or that there was ever a time when he hadn't pressed a lipstick to his mouth or his mouth to Bucky's skin. He can remember with almost painful clarity how he'd felt, opening that box up, seeing the treasures inside. How he'd felt, looking at Bucky's face, so eager to make him
happy.

He brings the little disc of blush closer to his face and inhales deeply, filling himself up with that smell, those memories.

Bucky hadn't had a lot of money to his name, back then. He could've saved it, or spent it on things he needed: food, rent, a new pair of suspenders to replace the ratty old ones he'd worn almost to strings. But he'd spent it on Steve instead, given up the basic necessities for the chance to give Steve something beautiful and unnecessary.

Just a little like the money Steve's Ma used to waste, heating the whole apartment up on Christmas day.

Chewing his lip, he types to Tara again. *I was wondering, maybe we ought to take up another collection for Sage, too. Not just for the basics. Get them something nice, makeup or shoes to replace the ones they lost.*

He waits, wondering if Tara will think this is stupid when Sage has bigger things on their mind, but then Tara's message comes back with a lot of happy faces and exclamation marks attached.

*omg SG!!! that's a gr8 idea!!!*

Steve finds himself smiling at the screen. *Do you know what kinds of makeup they like? Or what their shoe size is?*

*im suuuuuuuuuure its all in my email b/c half the time I let them use my credit card, Tara says. we can tly set it up so that a big box of treats lands on sage's doorstep. once they have a doorstep I guess lol.*

*Sounds perfect, Steve writes.*

*i think sht ppl don't think of that stuff, u kno? not just what'll get us thru but what'll help us emotionally, or spiritually.*

Nodding his agreement, even though Tara can't see him, he types as fast as he can.

*Bread and roses, right?*

There's a little pause, and then Tara sends back: ?????

Steve raises his eyebrows in surprise. Everyone'd said that, back in his old neighborhood, as a known sort of phrase, but he guesses it hasn't made it all the way to now. *It's from an old poem, he explains. Actually about women who were striking for better wages. It means it's not enough to just survive. He thinks a few seconds, then adds, Or that sometimes survival isn't all we are, I guess. Not the most important thing. We need bread, but roses too.*

*thats beautiful, Tara writes. ill write that on the note on the package, when we send it.*

*I'll paypal you some cash for it, Steve writes. But make sure to get them some REALLY impractical shoes. Ones they can't wear to work.*

Tara sends a lot of smiley faces in reply.

* The next day, Steve checks in with Sage's online auction – they're astonished by the response and
shutting it down – and smiles, thinking of how surprised they'll be when they get Tara's package. Then he gets up to go running, still thinking about it: how glad he is that Sage has someone like Tara to get them through all this.

First thing when he gets to the Mall, he sees the handsome bi guy again, running his usual route, a little earlier today than normal. He's not wearing any of the running gear Steve's seen him in before, and he's not wearing his SAY HI IF YOU'RE BI shirt, either. Instead, maybe because it's a little cooler than it's been so far this week, he's wearing a sweatshirt with the banner of the Air National Guard on the chest. It nearly stops Steve in his tracks, to think that this guy Steve's been idly glancing at for weeks might be military like him, running around in a bi pride t-shirt some days and his Air Force emblem other days, perfectly comfortable for the world to see him as both at once.

Steve laps him a couple times, just out of curiosity. The guy sounds annoyed, the second time, and Steve tucks that information away.

Then, as a little experiment, he loops down south a little ways and comes back up to pass the guy again, before he finishes his run.

The guy's annoyed enough to run after him this time, putting on a burst of speed, and Steve smiles to himself as he keeps up the pace, alive with joy at the idea of being chased.

Of course, the guy doesn't catch him. But Steve goes back to find him, after, maybe to give him a second chance at it. He feels strange, a little reckless, but he can't help indulging his curiosity just this once.

Steve finds him breathing hard and sitting under a tree.

"Need a medic?" Steve asks.

Turns out the handsome guy in the bi pride t-shirt is funny, and willing to make fun of both Steve and himself, and – somehow – even more handsome when he smiles. Steve pulls him to his feet, and their hands fit together perfectly.

His name is Sam, and he's an ex-Pararescue, and Steve finds that he can't help smiling at him.

Right up until Sam asks about the whole defrosting thing.

Everyone asks that, of course. It's natural to be curious about it. Steve's answered that question a lot, over the last couple years, and he's gotten used to answering it, but right now, coming from a guy he – that he's – from Sam, it feels like a slap in the face. Getting to know a new person seems, suddenly, way too daunting to deal with.

He says something polite and turns away, ready to run back home and wait for his next mission.

"It's your bed, right?"

Steve hears him perfectly, or he thinks he does, but the idea of this guy mentioning Steve's bed is so impossible, so difficult to wrap his mind around, that he assumes he's heard wrong.

He turns back. "What's that?"

"Your bed, it's too soft."

Steve's mind reels from is this an obscure pick-up line I don't understand all the way over to how
does he know in less than a second. Sam, maybe seeing the surprise on his face, continues: "When I was over there I'd sleep on the ground, use rocks for pillows, like a caveman. Now I'm home, lying in my bed, and it's like – "

"Lying on a marshmallow," Steve finishes, looking into Sam's eyes again. They're deep, and warm, and understanding. "I feel like I'm gonna sink right through to the floor. How long?"

Sam shrugs. "Two tours." Maybe sensing Steve's need to change the subject, he says, "You must miss the good old days."

Steve gives his usual answer to that, running almost on autopilot, still reeling from the concept that this stranger – Sam Wilson, 58th Pararescue, now working down at the VA – might understand what Steve's been feeling, all the frustration and pent-up anger and restlessness.

He gives Steve a recommendation for music, and Steve writes it down dutifully. He wonders what kind of music might mean that much to Sam, that it's the first thing he thinks a man from the past ought to listen to.

Natasha texts him with a mission alert, and Steve shakes Sam's hand again: it feels even better the second time, and Steve makes it linger, teasing Sam a little and feeling a warm surge of joy when Sam accepts it, and laughs, and teases Steve right back.

Whatever else Sam might think about him, he treats him like a buddy, the way a soldier treats another soldier, and after all his time as a national icon and a SHIELD agent, it feels good to be looked at that way.

"Anytime you wanna stop by the VA, make me look awesome in front of the girl at the front desk, just let me know," Sam says. Steve wonders if he says that to all the guys, as a way to make them feel comfortable enough to come in for help.

He wonders if Sam wants to see him again in a professional capacity or a personal one.

"I'll keep it in mind," Steve says. As he says it, though, he's not sure if he would ever want to. If Sam just wants to help him out, like he helps other soldiers, Steve would almost rather not know. It might be better to imagine it, keep the possibility of it warm in his memory, and not find out.

"Kay," Sam says, and smiles again. God, Steve likes his smile.

Even if it never goes anywhere, though, even if they do no more than nod to each other in the mornings from time to time, the flirting feels good, like slipping back into an old favorite sweater that he's missed for far too long.

Or, Steve grins to himself, as he and Natasha zoom off down the street, slipping back into an old favorite pair of stockings.

* *

The nice thing about Tony Stark's technology is that even when Jim's on assignment in Turkey and Steve's on a jet heading for the Indian Ocean, Steve can still call him up securely. The bad thing is that Steve therefore has no excuse not to tell him about Sam.

Jim's been so open about everything he's feeling with Tony and Pepper; surely Steve can tell him about a little flirting that's probably half in Steve's imagination anyway.

He waits for a gap in their conversation, and double-checks to make sure he's alone in the back of
the jet, then takes a deep breath. "I talked to that guy on my run today," he says.

"Oh yeah?" Jim sounds surprised, but not upset. Steve forges on.

"Yeah. He was – nice. Really nice."

"Wow," Jim says. "So, did you ask him out?"

"Yeah(94x775), because Captain America propositioning random men is a great way to not come out," Steve murmurs, in an undertone. "I gotta be – you know. Subtle. Smooth."

Jim outright laughs at this, which Steve thinks is not very charitable, even if it is fair. "Okay. So, tell me more about him. What's your approach?"

"Uh, well, he likes . . . jogging . . . " Steve temporizes.

"Uh-huh. Did you talk to him at all or just stare into his eyes like a lost puppy dog?"

Steve winces, because he suspects there was a little bit of the latter. "I talked to him! We joked around! He used to be Pararescue, he works at the VA – "

Jim laughs again. "Pararescue, huh. Let me ask you this: have you ever dated anybody who isn't Air Force?"

"Hey, now, that's just insulting," Steve replies, grinning. "I dated regular Army! And – British Special Forces."

"Real diverse, Rogers," Jim chuckles.

"Seriously, though, I wanted to know what you think. If I – if it's okay for me to talk to him. I felt a little weird about it."

"Well, I'm not the boss of who you talk to," Jim says. "And I'm not the boss of who you kiss or sleep with, either."

"Jim, it's okay if you're not okay with it. You don't owe me anything."

Jim sighs. "I do, actually, in the sense that you helped me find something I've been missing for years. You . . . gave me so much of myself back, Steve, I don't even know how to tell you."

Steve smiles into the phone. "If this is something you want, to feel more like yourself, then I want you to have it."

"That's sweet," Steve says. He tries to think of what to say next, how to release Jim from this obligation he's setting himself up for. But Jim ends up speaking first.

"But as far as jealousy or whatever goes . . . I guess I don't really know how I feel yet," Jim says, "I'm new to all this polyamory stuff. It's hard to predict. But I guess we can explore it and see what happens."

"Okay," Steve says. "That sounds good."

"Are you feeling weird because of me, or are you feeling weird because of you?"

"I dunno," Steve sighs. "Both, probably."
"Ask him out for a beer. Or go see him at the VA, that could work. Just maybe text me or something before things go further, okay?"

"All right," Steve says. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Jim says. "And send me a picture, will you? I want to evaluate this guy's handsomeness for myself."

"Okay," Steve says. "If he's all right with it. I – wouldn't feel right, not telling him about you."

"I get that," Jim says. "And I think it would make me feel good if he knew about me."

"I'll tell him everything but your name and the fact that you're a famous superhero," Steve promises.

"Well, don't scare him off," Jim laughs, "telling him about your big strong Air Force Colonel boyfriend."

"Eh, I'll tell him that my big strong Air Force Colonel boyfriend is tough on the outside, but soft in the middle," Steve promises.

"You're gonna ruin my rep, Steve," Jim says fondly.

*

The mission turns out to be cleaning up after trespassing SHIELD spies again, and rescuing a ship full of hostages who shouldn't have been in these waters in the first place. But it goes well enough right up until Steve learns that Natasha is rescuing intel instead of hostages. Of course, of course it goes wrong, because he was supposed to be leading the mission and he didn't have a clue what half the mission was.

He's supposed to have a teammate, a person he can trust without question, and Natasha, as it turns out, isn't that person.

"Okay," Natasha says, like a joke, after they've barely escaped an explosion together. "That one's on me."

Steve breathes hard and doesn't look at her as hot anger rushes through him. "You're damn right," he says, and gets back up, because he's here to rescue hostages and that's exactly what he's going to do.

*

After the mission, they have a long ride back to American air space for Steve to not talk to Natasha.

He sits as still as he can, in one of the isolated jump seats near the cockpit, while his blood thrums through him, making him taste adrenaline and blurring his vision. His hands are clasped together, probably hard enough that he'd break his own bones if his bones were more breakable. He rests his elbows on his thighs and bends his head so that he's looking at the floor.

After about an hour, Natasha's boots enter his field of vision, coming to rest shoulder-width apart, firmly planted in the same stance she'd use for shooting.

He doesn't look up at her. She crouches down, so that he has no choice but to look her in the eyes.
"Keep brooding so handsomely and someone's gonna model one of those Captain America statues on you," she says.

Steve doesn't bother to answer this; he's tired of being compared to poster art caricatures of himself.

"You of all people, Nat," he says softly.

"I, of all people, had a secret mission? I, of all people, was doing spy work?" With a wry twist to her lips.

When Steve thinks about Natasha, lately, his mental image isn't her stealing heavily guarded intel, or seducing someone into spilling their secrets. It's her sitting backwards on a chair in a grubby bar and tossing back shots; it's her fighting unflinchingly beside him, placing her body between Ten Rings soldiers and the two hundred children they had tortured.

"I thought we were . . . " Letting go of his tightly clasped grip, he spreads his hands. He offers her wry smile back to her.

"What, brothers in arms?" she asks, quietly.

Steve huffs out a dry laugh at his own expense. "Something like that."

"Things don't work that way at SHIELD," she says, which is nothing Steve doesn't already know. She licks her lips and tries again. "I'm sorry, Steve, I know this broke your trust."

Steve holds her gaze, because he doesn't know how to answer that. She did break his trust. He wishes she wouldn't say it, though.

"For what it's worth, brother, I trust you," she says. She reaches up, then, placing a hand on Steve's knee. Steve looks down at it for a long moment.

"Must be nice for you."

"It is," Natasha says. She sounds so earnest about it, like someone grateful for a gift they can't ever reciprocate, that it moves Steve to place his hand over hers on his knee.

"I'm still angry with you," he says.

"Okay."

Neither of them moves. The jet hits a little turbulence, rocking them back and forth, but Natasha stays rock-solid in her crouching position.

"There's a woman down in Forensics, a real take-charge type, I think she's called Melanie – "

"Too soon," Steve says, cutting her off. Natasha nods, taking in this information as she would any other intel. Steve wonders what it must be like to live treating every relationship like a game.

Or, not a game, not really. A mission. The kind of mission where you go in without any weapons, without any backup, and braced for disaster. He wonders if maybe friendship feels that way to Natasha, like a life-or-death midnight op she doesn't always know the rules for. No wonder she was so bad at asking Maria out.

He sighs, and squeezes her hand. The corner of her mouth twitches upward.
"Did I hear you holster your shield when you fought Batroc?" Natasha asks. It's so far out of left field that Steve searches her face in confusion for the link to their previous conversation. Natasha's mind works like this sometimes, making obscure connections that Steve can't always follow. It's part of what makes her opaque to him.

"Yeah," he says, going along with it.

She nods slowly. "Do me a favor, Rogers," she says. There's something tense in her voice that Steve can't place. "If not out of friendship, then out of professional courtesy. No matter how bored you are, or how much of an adrenaline junkie, don't put down your best weapon when you're fighting a deadly assassin."

Steve lives and works among deadly assassins.

"It's a shield, not a weapon," he objects, pointlessly.

"You know as well as I do that it's both," she says. He grimaces.

"All right."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

She nods briskly and rises again to her feet. They don't speak again for the rest of the ride.

* *

This time, when he walks into Director Fury's office to protest SHIELD's methods, something changes. Instead of brushing him off, Nick stands up out of his chair and leads him to the elevator.

There is, apparently, a whole level of SHIELD that Steve's never had access to before. That he's not supposed to have access to now. He watches Nick carefully as they descend, floor after floor, from his office on the top level down to a sub-basement buried in the earth.

To pass the time, going down the long ride, Nick tells a story about his granddad and the loaded .22 Magnum he used to keep with him, walking through a rough neighborhood with tips in his lunch bag.

"My Granddad loved people. But he didn't trust them very much," Nick finishes, which didn't really seem like the point of the story until Steve turns around and sees what Nick's been keeping hidden, somehow, underneath SHIELD headquarters.

"I know," Nick says. He sounds calm and collected, joking even, as he takes Steve to a place Steve isn't supposed to go and shows him things that someone, for good reason, decided that Steve shouldn't see. "It's a little bigger than a .22."

Steve looks at the Insight helicarriers, and all he can think about, all he can see, are the bomb-planes from Red Skull's ship, each of them neatly labeled with the name of a city. New York, one of them had said.

As Nick explains the idea behind the helicarriers, Steve wonders which of these guns will have New York's name on it.

Nick shows him the guns up close and shows him the engines that mean the helicarriers never have
to come down out of the sky. And while he shows him these things, these things that he must know
Steve will hate, he tells him it's about time to get with the program.

"Don't hold your breath," Steve says, and turns around to get the hell out of there.

*

Steve runs, the next morning. He runs as fast as he can, and for a very long time.

He needs to wear himself out.

There's a circular bench that Steve runs past almost every day, on his way out to the Mall; it's only
a few blocks from his apartment, and near the subway station he uses when traffic's bad. He
doesn't ever look at it; he never wants to sit down or stop there.

The morning after Nick Fury tells Steve about his plans to control the world with sub-orbital
gunships, Steve barely glances that direction as he starts his run. When he goes by at five-thirty, it's
completely empty, unremarkable.

By eight, though, when he's coming back sweating and frustrated and exhausted after more miles
than he can count, it catches his eye. It's still empty of people, except those passing through on
their way to the subway station. But now it's covered in red roses: two or three on each of the seats,
some threaded through the metal slats, and many more on the ground below, circling the concrete
pad that the bench rests on.

Steve stops. It's beautiful, the rich red adorning the simple grey steel and concrete in the pink light
of dawn. His breathing starts to slow down.

He walks over to it, drawn by the color.

There's a plaque nearby, and Steve holds still while he reads it, feeling a shiver of shock and
recognition when he learns that this is a memorial for the caregivers of AIDS victims.

He walks in further.

He's never come close enough, before, to realize that there's an inscription on the concrete, circling
the bench and enclosing it. Steve walks around slowly, careful of the roses, and reads:

We fought the invisible
We looked to one another for comfort
We held hands of friends and lovers
We did not turn our backs
We embraced
We embraced

Moving almost without conscious thought, he shifts two roses off of one of the seats and sits down
heavily.

For a long time, he stays seated and still, staring down at the words beneath his feet, the end of the
poem: We embraced.

Someone put the roses here: someone came here while Steve was running and carefully placed
roses in a circle on the ground, placed roses on the seats, twined roses through the metal holes at
the back of the bench.

Red roses for love, Steve thinks.
It feels right, suitable for the poem: somebody doing their mourning through the outpouring of passionate love.

Red for love, red for passion. Red for blood.

_We embraced_. Because survival isn't enough.

The person who left the roses – Steve imagines an old man, like Arnie, maybe – that person didn't leave their roses on graves. They couldn't; there are too many graves; one person could never visit them all. And it wasn't a personal kind of mourning, from one person and for another, done quietly and in private. The mourner left roses here as a public statement, to invite the public to mourn with them.

That person isn't here anymore, but they're not alone in the world, either; Steve is here now, and mourning with them, and loving what they love. The way they love.

_We embraced_, solid underneath Steve's feet, a place he could step to push himself up off the bench and into a run.

To love so passionately, and without stopping, even though the loved one is dead; to love so much that it has to be public, and loud, and bright red on a hazy D.C. morning. To love so intensely that it doesn't matter that death comes after.

To choose love and death over life and terror.

Steve can't take his eyes off of the inscription.

He flashes back, suddenly, to the Insight helicarriers he saw the day before. Huge, and powerful, and unstoppable, studded with guns. _Eliminate a thousand hostiles a minute_, Nick had said, as if the thing to look for, in the termination of human life, is speed. And _We're gonna neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen_, as if fear of death could only be met with a first strike.

_We embraced_, the inscription says, because that's more important than another, equally true fact: _we died_. Because an embrace is the other response to fear.

Steve presses his shoes down against the concrete, puts the poem under his feet, and stands.

And he runs.

Chapter End Notes

_The history of the phrase 'Bread and Roses.'_

_The Poem Bench, Dupont Circle, Washington D.C._ (note: link has autoplay sound).
He finds himself at the Smithsonian. Allison suggested, a couple weeks ago, that he should go see the new exhibit as a publicity thing, but his mind bounced off the idea, and she didn't press. It's called *Captain America: The Living Legend and Symbol of Courage*, and he knows exactly the image of him it's going to present. It's not the one he sees in the mirror, not even close.

Walking in, with his hands in his pockets and his ballcap pulled down to shield his face, he feels like he used to when he wore makeup around Brooklyn: intensely visible, but stubbornly unwilling to be seen. He does his best to fade into the background.

The background, of course, is a twenty-foot-tall stylized image of Captain America, saluting, in front of a flag. If Steve had his charcoals, he might draw a mustache on himself.

Beyond that there's a strange little mirror display, not so different from the ones they used to use in the war, the ones that Steve was never quite tall enough to fit into. With these ones, you can measure yourself against Steve's original body and his post-serum body. He clenches his jaw; he's never actually seen a picture that did that, overlaid his old self and his new self to compare them. Looking into it, seeing himself reflected in the glass, his stomach lurches and his head spins, his whole body torn between the two familiar reflections.

It's hard to look away, until some kids come up and want to stand in Steve's place. Steve backs away politely, keeping his head down, and the kids giggle and jump up in place to try to look taller.

"If only we still had the serum," somebody says, a few feet away. "We could make more of him."

Steve lets out a long, slow breath and heads over to the memorial for Bucky. If Bucky were here, if he were alive, he might draw his own mustache on the giant picture of his face. Bucky died for a good reason, trying to do a good thing, but his death doesn't really mean that anymore. Instead, Bucky's death is part of this, the living legend and symbol of courage, a puzzle piece – friend, fellow soldier, heroic sacrifice – that fits cleanly into the image of what Steve is supposed to be.

There's film of him and Bucky laughing together. Steve doesn't remember the joke, but he does remember the cameraman hanging out at some camp in Italy, taking video of them for posterity. Manufacturing him even then, right next to the comic books and the trading cards.

They'd fucked that night, the night after the film was shot; Bucky had fucked him and kissed his muscled shoulder and called him beautiful, and it had made the presence of the cameras during the day more bearable, to have Bucky look at him that way and see him for what he was.

There's no mention of that on the display, of course.

A kid bumps into him, running towards the big Howling Commandos uniform display. When he
gets there, he poses in front of the Captain America uniform while his mom takes a picture. Steve wonders what war he'll be called on to fight, in ten years or so, whether Director Fury will have him manning a targeting scanner in a third generation Insight helicarrier.

There's a video interview with Peggy, which surprises Steve; he didn't know that the SSR had done interviews. He listens intently, hit once again by the longevity of her grief. This was eight years after he died: she had been mourning already for eight years, and she had almost sixty more to go before they would see each other again.

She still grieves, when she forgets that he came back. Steve suspects that she still grieves when she remembers, too.

Luckily, nobody seems to recognize him except for the one little kid with the big eyes, even though Steve isn't really in disguise. He doesn't get recognized out on the street very much, either, not unless it's a publicity event or a protest. For the first time, looking at this exhibit, he understands why that would be, in this culture bombarded with images of his face: it's because no one looks at him, Steve Rogers, and sees Captain America.

They made him into something bigger than himself, that's always been the problem. And no matter what he's tried, he's never been able to escape that.

* 

The archive footage makes him miss Peggy, ache for the sound of her voice and the way her sharp eyes narrow at him suspiciously when she thinks he's being ridiculous, so he goes to see her next. Predictably, when he tells her about his complicated moral dilemmas, she laughs at him.

"Always so dramatic," she says, which makes Steve grin too. "Look, you saved the world. We rather . . . mucked it up."

Steve's read Peggy's record, knows how many times she's saved the world herself, and can't bear to listen to her saying this. "You didn't," he says. "Knowing that you helped found SHIELD is half the reason I stay."

She takes his hand. It's not their first time holding hands, not anymore; it's not even their tenth or twentieth time holding hands. But every time always feels new to Steve, like something he's never been allowed to have until this moment. She holds his hand to say, listen to me, and to say I love you, but he also gets the feeling she does it so she can break it to him gently that he's being an idiot.

He holds still and listens to her.

"The world has changed," she says, "and none of us can go back. All we can do is our best." This is what Steve's been telling himself for two long years now, that he has to work within the system and do as much good as he can. This is what Pepper told him on their pre-mission flight together, what Natasha and Nick told him yesterday. Hell, it's what Danielle decided to do back when she joined the WAACs, after all her time spent protesting the war with Valentine. He opens his mouth to say this, but then Peggy continues:

"And sometimes the best that we can do is to start over."

Her cough distracts him from what she's said, and then as she slips into forgetfulness and grief all he can do is try to comfort her. But much later as he leaves the building her words come back to him. What would starting over even look like? Where would he go, and what would he do?
Steve remembers Alicia walking next to him at the protest, shaking her head and saying "burn it all down."

He wonders what Nick and Maria and Natasha and Rumlow would think if he handed in his uniform and stood outside the Triskelion instead of inside, poster board sign in hand, marching up and down the street by himself.

Handing in his uniform would mean not being a soldier anymore.

Handing in his uniform would mean becoming a veteran instead.

Well, he thinks. He did promise Jim that he'd go and talk to Sam.

*

The twenty minutes he spends on the internet figuring out exactly where Sam works makes him feel a little desperate, but Sam didn't say what he does at the VA, so Steve doesn't have a lot to go on.

He could, logically, go to any VA office he can find, but what he's contemplating right now is hard enough without having to unload it all on a complete stranger.

Even though he's only spoken to Sam once, he doesn't feel like a stranger at all.

He shows up halfway through one of Sam's open group counseling sessions – apparently, Sam's a counselor of some kind – and gets to listen in for a while.

The stories that he hears are startlingly familiar, in a general sense if not in the particulars. In a way, coming back from the war was better for him than it was for a lot of these vets; at least he had the excuse of being a time traveler to explain why his own hometown felt so strange and so foreign. If he'd gone back to Brooklyn in the forties, too tall for all the doors, he wouldn't have fit back into his old life. Even if he had seen everyone again – Danielle, Valentine, Betty, Marlene – he might've felt just as lost as these folks do.

When the session lets out, Steve waits for Sam. He fiddles around trying to figure out what to do with his hands, and his feet, and basically all the parts of his body, which suddenly feel as awkward and unfamiliar as they did when they were new, when he lost control and threw himself through a store window.

He's here to see Sam in a professional capacity, he reminds himself.

He rubs one shin against the opposite calf and wishes he could feel the slow slide of his stockings underneath his pants legs.

But when Sam comes over to him, something clicks, and Steve falls easily into the exact lean he used to do when he was cruising guys on the street: shoulder against a wall, hands in his pockets, feet crossed, looking up at Sam speculatively while also taking pressure off his knees. His knees don't hurt like they used to, of course, but the position still feels good.

His new body remembers, for once, the things his old body used to know.

They talk for a while.

"You lose someone?" Steve asks, because there's something in Sam's words, in his posture, in the way he talks about carrying loss, that Steve recognizes.
When he asks it, Sam meets his eyes and tells him, perfectly willing to let Steve see his grief.

It's like the roses on the bench, an invitation for Steve to join him in mourning.

"My wingman, Riley," Sam says. And then, after he describes his best friend being knocked out of the sky, he says, "It's like I was up there just to watch."

The story feels so close to Steve's own that it's like seeing his own grief in someone else's body, in Sam's suddenly crossed arms and pained expression. It's too much, and it makes Steve need to look away from Sam's open, solemn face. He looks down at the pamphlets on the table instead and keeps Bucky's name hidden behind his lips, doesn't give his own story to Sam like Sam gave him his.

"But you're happy now," Steve says instead. "Back in the world."

Sam doesn't push him, just goes along with the change of subject.

"The number of people giving me orders is down to about zero? So hell yeah." Sam smiles then, showing off the gap between his teeth and making Steve ache to touch him. If he were out, if he weren't Captain America, if he were a normal person, maybe that normal person could just reach out and touch Sam.

Maybe that Steve Rogers could tell Sam about his lover who fell from a train, and everything that had meant.

"You thinking about getting out?" Sam asks, which is so insightful it makes Steve shake his head no without even thinking about it.

"No," he says firmly. Then he remembers what Nick had shown him, and amends it. "I don't know. To be honest I don't know what I would do with myself if I did."

Sam's smile flashes at him again. His eyes are warm, teasing. "Ultimate fighting? Just a great idea off the top of my head."

Steve huffs a laugh. That's what people would expect of him, too, something that would put his muscles to work, something violent and confrontational. Masculine. He looks away from Sam's smile, because it's hard to take, the idea that fighting is all he is, or all he's good for.

"Seriously," Sam says, drawing him in again, "you could do whatever you want to do. What makes you happy?"

As much as he doesn't want Sam to see him as just a soldier, or as a fighting machine, he doesn't know what to say to help Sam see him any differently.

And he doesn't know the answer to that question. Jim makes him happy, but Steve gets the sense that that's not a good answer, even if he could give it.

"I don't know," he says, trying to smile ruefully so it seems less pathetic.

Sam doesn't laugh or look surprised, though; in fact, he does the opposite, nodding as if this was exactly what he expected to hear. "When I told you about Marvin Gaye, you had that little book with you."

Steve nods. Sam seems to be waiting for something, so he pulls the book out of his back pocket.
"What do you use it for?" Sam asks.

"Getting caught up. When someone tells me there's something in the future that I should do or see." He holds it out, and Sam takes it, but doesn't open it.

"Okay if I look?" he asks. Steve nods, swallowing. He's shown his book to Jim, and to Pepper, to Natasha and even to Maria, but this feels different, deliberate, like Sam's asking for an intimacy and Steve is doing something significant by surrendering it.

He watches Sam look through the book, smiling and nodding at a couple of things, wrinkling his nose up at others. When he gets to the last page, his gaze drops to the bottom, perhaps noticing his own suggestion in Steve's handwriting.

"Thai food? You haven't had Thai food yet?"

Steve shakes his head. "I don't get out to eat that much," he says, thinking of the endless rows of protein shakes taking up space in his fridge. For the most part, it's easier to just pour the calories into his body, to take care of his basic needs; Jim brings him takeout sometimes, or they order pizza, but going out to eat seems indulgent, or means dealing with the press, and cooking anything more complicated than eggs or a sandwich is beyond his skill.

"That is a shame," Sam says, "since you said yourself that food was one of the best things about the modern era." He's smiling again, but close-lipped this time, like he's inviting Steve to share a secret.

"I'm surprised you remember that," Steve says.

"You're a memorable guy." Sam takes a step closer, and it makes Steve want to move in closer, too, bridge the gap between them and kiss him, like he might've in the old days, throwing caution to the wind and making a move, happy to risk the punch.

He tilts his chin up a little. Sam licks his lips. Steve's gaze drops down to watch his mouth.

"You wanna take me to dinner, then, Sam?" he asks, breathlessly.

The look of pleased surprise on Sam's face sends an answering ripple of pleasure through Steve. It's nice, to be able to reveal himself like this, even if only a little, and watch someone else smile when they see what he's revealed.

He wonders if Sam would smile like that if Steve wore his lipstick, or put on a skirt. He hopes so.

Suddenly, happily, Steve is feeling a lot of hope.

"Oh, so that's how it is?" Sam asks softly.

Steve nods, because what the hell. Maybe he'll become a civilian; maybe he'll learn masonry work, or go back to art school. Maybe he'll take up Danielle and Valentine's legacies, and become an activist. Maybe he'll make that protest sign and stand outside the Triskelion.

Maybe he'll just be a regular queer fella living in D.C.

"Yeah," Steve says, quietly, hoarsely, wanting to shout it: yes, yes, yes. "That's how it is." And then, to leave Sam in no doubt, he reaches out and runs his index finger against the sleeve of Sam's shirt, above his elbow, barely even making contact with the skin and muscle underneath. Sam looks down at the light, brief touch.
"I know a great Thai place," Sam says.

*

They get a table in a dark, cozy little corner of the restaurant, with high screens on either side, so that they're only visible to someone standing in the aisle right beside them. As they sit, Steve thinks about Jim, how he always pulls Steve's chair out for him when they eat together, and he feels a pang of regret.

What would Sam think, if Steve asked him to hold his chair? Steve's seen the internet, he's heard Jelani's stories, and knows there are a lot of gay guys who really hate the femme stuff.

He takes a deep breath. It worked out with Jim, after all, and if it doesn't work out with Sam, it won't be the end of the world. In fact it feels like the opposite, despite his nervousness: like this moment, out on a first date with a new fella, could be the beginning of the world.

"I don't know anything about any of this," Steve says, looking over the menu.

"Well, that's why you need a friend to learn about a new kind of food," Sam says. "Someone to introduce you to it."

"Good thing I've got a friend, then," Steve says, smiling. Sam smiles back.

"Want me to order for you?"

Steve can't help the blush that crawls up his throat. He hopes Sam can't see, in the dim lighting.

"Yeah," he says, "I'd like that."

Sam nods at him slowly. "Then don't worry about a thing," he says. "I gotcha."

Steve swallows.

Maybe Sam would hold his chair for him, after all.

Sam orders a bunch of different dishes, insisting that Steve needs to try all kinds of Thai food. When it all arrives at the table, it reminds Steve of what Jim did for their first date, the plates and plates of delicate delicious food. He'd hardly tasted that meal, he'd been so nervous.

He tastes this one, though, as Sam nudges dish after dish towards him.

"Try the panang curry, it's amazing," Sam says, nudging the dish towards Steve with his thumb. He has broad thumbs, Steve notices.

"How spicy did you order it?" Steve asks suspiciously, because Sam had given a bunch of different numbers to their waiter and he's sure at least one of them was five.

"Three. See how you feel about it now you've had one and two."

Steve smiles, because it's nice that Sam's looking out for him, not trying to surprise him with something he can't handle.

His skin feels a little too hot and he can't seem to stop watching Sam's mouth as he eats; he figures he could handle a lot of things, right now. It's a surprising feeling, freeing, like the way he'd felt when Sam had asked if he was thinking of getting out of the service.

"Oh, wow, that is really good," Steve says, holding his hand against his mouth while he talks. Then
the spiciness sets in, and he raises his eyebrows. "Wow."

"Too hot for you?" Sam makes it sound like innuendo, or else it's just that every word he says is having an undue effect on Steve. There's something about him, in his voice or his posture or his easy smile, that Steve's body responds to hungrily.

"I don't know, give me a minute," Steve says. Sam does, and a minute later Steve says, "I like it."

"Captain America, graduating to a four," Sam smiles. Steve doesn't hesitate or think it over, just shakes his head firmly.

"Don't call me that," he says. "That's not . . . me. What I am."

Sam nods. "Sorry. Steve." His voice is low when he says Steve's name, so that when he hits the vowel in the middle it rumbles out of his chest. Steve wants to shiver at the sound of it.

"So what are you? If you're not gonna be Captain America anymore, I mean."

Steve grins, because Jim asked him almost the same question, once. "I dunno. I always wanted to be an artist, actually."

"Really," Sam says. "What kind of art?"

Steve shrugs. "Lots of kinds. Comic books. Political cartoons. I did a lot of portraiture, I always liked that."

Swallowing a bite of papaya salad, Sam narrows his eyes a little and asks, "Who did you draw?"

Even before Steve opens his mouth, Sam is already listening intently for the answer, his fork set down beside his plate and his gaze steady, as if he knows how important the question is. It's like he can see right through him. Steve takes a breath and answers.

"Everyone. The guys in my unit, the girls in the chorus line. My friends." He pauses, and Sam doesn't interrupt, waiting. "My lovers."

It shouldn't feel like a confession, something he should have to whisper; it wouldn't even be newsworthy if he shouted it from the rooftops. CAPTAIN AMERICA ANNOUNCES HE HAS HAD LOVERS, not gonna surprise anyone except maybe Natasha, who still insists that he and Jim are doing nothing more than holding hands occasionally and giving each other long looks.

Sam's eyebrows go up, but not in a disbelieving way; it takes Steve a moment to recognize the expression as something more like thrilled.

"Nude portraits?" Sam asks. Steve nods.

"It was always one of my – one of the best kinds of drawing I knew how to do. I liked sort of capturing the person, who they were underneath, you know?"

Sam nods slowly. "I like that," he says. "It's sexy. Sensual. That's not in the history books."

Reaching out, he runs two fingers along Steve's upturned arm, then up along the sensitive skin at his wrist, over the mound of his thumb and then tickling lightly up his index finger to the tip.

Steve watches him do it.

"I'm reading you right, aren't I?" Sam asks softly. "This is what you meant."
"Yeah," Steve says, his throat dry. "If telling you about my nude portraiture wasn't enough of a come-on, then yeah, Sam, this is what I meant." And he turns his hand over and encircles Sam's broad wrist with his fingers, rubbing slowly with his thumb at the soft skin there.

"Oh," Sam says, and swallows. "Well, that's good. That's really good, that's what I was hoping for."

"Glad to hear it," Steve smiles. He releases Sam's wrist and takes another bite of the panang curry. It's definitely his favorite so far.

Sam clears his throat. "But, uh, yeah, if you want to go to art school, or get help finding work or whatever, there's lots we can do for you down at the VA. Job transition and training is a big part of our mission."

"Okay," Steve says. "I – it's something to think about, anyway." He doesn't know if he could walk away from the good missions, the ones where they save people or destroy weapons, where they prevent harm. Not when he has skills that others don't, or could live through a mission when others might die.

But it couldn't hurt to listen to what Sam has to say.

"Though, I wanna make it clear, I'm not going to be your case worker," Sam says.

"No?"

"No. Because I am really, really hoping that I'll get to kiss you, at some point." His gaze drops to Steve's mouth, and Steve licks his lips without meaning to. "And they discourage us from doing that with clients."

"Well," Steve says, "I could always find someone else to kiss me."

Sam's answering grin is huge and confident. He knows exactly what effect he's having on Steve.

"But I guess I'll settle for another case worker," Steve finishes. Sam chuckles.

"There you go," he says. "Good choice."

"I think I'm ready for the four now," Steve says, glancing at the next dish over. It's a deep orange color, like burnt umber, and it smells amazing.

"You move fast, Steve," Sam says, and before Steve can pick up his fork Sam has his unused spoon in his hand, using it to scoop up a bit of chicken and rich sauce. "Here," he says softly. "Will you let me?"

He doesn't lift the spoon or push it in Steve's direction, waiting instead for an answer.

Steve leans forward and opens his mouth.

*

"I should pay," Steve says, when Sam pulls out his wallet, "I invited you."

Sam shrugs. "Are you sure? We could go halvesies."

"I also ate most of it," Steve points out. Sam surrenders and puts his wallet back in his pocket.

"Plus you've probably got all that back pay from the Army, interest for seventy years, all that," Sam
says. The waitress takes Steve's credit card.

"Uh, no," Steve says. "SHIELD pays me really well, but actually I'm not sure what happened to the money I had when I died."

Sam's eyes narrow. "You were listed as MIA, right? I mean, they never found your body, obviously."

Steve shrugs.

"They should've – okay, you know what, I'm still not going to be your case worker."

Steve laughs. "I promise I'll take it up with whoever you recommend for the position."

"Damn right you will," Sam says, drinking down the last sip of his beer. "It's a job, and you deserve to be compensated for it."

Steve smiles. It's the kind of thing his Ma used to say. "And here they always told me it was a duty," he says.

"I bet they did," Sam says darkly, and it makes Steve feel warm, that Sam would take offense on his behalf, or want to stand up for him.

The waitress comes back and sets down the bill; Steve fills in the tip and signs.

"Ready to go?" Steve asks. He doesn't want the evening to end, but there's nothing left to eat or drink, and it's a pretty busy place; he figures they'll want the table.

"Sure," Sam says. They stand up together and walk out, smiling and thanking the servers who wish them a nice night.

Outside, the street is quiet, just a few pedestrians wandering up and down the sidewalks or waiting outside of restaurants for a table.

Sam stops at the corner, near his car, and turns to face him. "Should I give you a ride back to your bike? Or – did you want to go somewhere else?"

It's the gentlest possible way of asking if Steve wants to come home with him. Steve does, very badly, but it's hard to know if he should.

He needs to talk to Jim.

"I, uh," Steve says. "I have to call someone first," he says.

"Yeah?"

"My boyfriend, actually." It's not hard to say; Steve thought it would be hard to say. But then, he thinks, he's said it to Natasha, and to Arnie and Jelani and Tara; it should be easy by now.

"Wow," Sam says. "You have a boyfriend?"

"It's the kind of boyfriend where he has another boyfriend, and a girlfriend," Steve says, rushing through the explanation.

"Ah," Sam says.
"I don't know if you – if that's something you wouldn't like."

Sam shrugs. "Naw, man, I don't mind. So long as he's not gonna beat me up."

Steve grins. "He said I shouldn't describe his physical prowess to you, in case it might scare you off."

"Hey, I got physical prowess," Sam objects gently. He bends his head to kiss his own bicep.

Steve lets out a breath, dropping the teasing tone altogether as he says, "You do." He wants to get Sam out of his long-sleeved shirt so he can see the power he used to glimpse when Sam wore a t-shirt to run: his strong pecs, his big arms.

He really needs to talk to Jim.

"Hmmm," Sam says, pleased. "I guess you better go talk to your boy, though, before you get too close to my prowess."

"Okay," Steve says, smiling, breathless. It's hard to look away from Sam sometimes.

"Wanna use the car?" Sam offers.

Steve looks down at the car. "Sure, yes," he says. "Thank you."

Sam unlocks it and holds the door for him; it's a little like a joke, but in another way, it's not, in the way he watches Steve closely to make sure he's in and then shuts the door gently. Taking care of him.

Steve really, really wants to kiss him.

Jim, God bless him, picks up on the second ring.

"Hey sweetheart," he says, easily. Steve figures he must be somewhere private.

"Hey handsome," Steve says, smiling. Just hearing Jim's voice is making him feel better, more grounded, less discombobulated.

"What's going on?"

"Well," Steve says, "I'm out on a date with Sam."

"Oh yeah? How's it going?"

Steve doesn't even realize he's sighing happily until Jim starts laughing.

"So, he's dreamy, huh?" Jim says. Steve laughs too.

"Kind of," he says. "We went out to dinner. We had Thai food. He has a really great smile."

Jim laughs again, but it's not unkind laughter. In fact, it sounds kind to Steve's ears. "Sounds like an amazing evening," he says.

"Not that your smile isn't gorgeous," Steve says hastily.

"Nice to know," Jim says. "So are you gonna kiss him or what?"

"I think he invited me back to his place," Steve says. "I'm actually not sure."
"Do you want to go back to his place?"

"I really do," Steve says. "Is this – are you okay with talking about this? I'm sorry, Jim, I didn't think to ask, I just wanted to talk to you about it so badly."

"It's okay," Jim says. "I'm not gonna lie to you, Steve. I am a little jealous." He sighs, and Steve frowns. It'd felt so good, with Sam, but if it makes Jim uncomfortable . . . maybe they need to take more time, let Jim get used to the idea the way Steve had gotten used to the idea of Tony and Pepper.

"Oh," Steve says, trying to keep his voice light and the disappointment out of it.

"But I'm – it's funny, I'm all excited, too," Jim says. "On your behalf. You sound so happy."

Steve smiles. He knows that feeling. "Yeah, I feel really happy," he says.

"I think you need to listen to yourself, to what you want," Jim says. "And go home with Sam if you think it's a good idea. Or wait and go on another date with him, if you want."

Steve bites his lip. "I keep thinking about that time – you know, after the amusement park," he says, in a low tone. He doesn't like to think about that too much. Dwelling on it makes the feeling come back, that horrible sense of not being seen, or being mistaken for someone he's not. The feeling doesn't happen to him as much anymore, but it's not like it's gone completely.

"Yeah. Did you tell him what you told me, about using the term genderqueer nowadays?"

"No," Steve sighs. "It all happened so fast, and it's hard to bring it up." Jelani is always very firm in his opinion that dates don't need to be informed in advance, but then, Jelani wears dresses and makeup almost every day, everywhere he goes, so Steve figures there's not much he has to tell them anyhow.

"I know you love a rollercoaster," Jim says, "but I don't want you to get hurt, honey."

"I know," Steve says. "I know. Okay. I think I'm gonna kiss him goodnight, though."

"Hell yeah," Jim says. "Give him one from me."

"Okay," Steve says, smiling. "Though that seems a little weird."

"Well, we're a little weird," Jim says. "Better he finds that out sooner than later."

Steve takes a deep breath. "Thank you for this, Jim. It really helped to talk to you."

"It's good to hear your voice," Jim says.

"How's the mission going?" Steve's stomach still tightens up when he thinks about it, Jim in danger and alone.

"Boring so far, knock on wood," Jim says. "All hurry up and wait. Don't worry about me. And don't keep your date waiting! Go kiss him already."

"So long as the fella's willing," Steve says. "Okay. I love you."

"Love you too, Steve."

They say goodbye, and Steve hangs up the phone. Glancing out the car window, he sees Sam
standing about halfway down the block, chatting with a couple of guys waiting in line for the
restaurant. He's talking animatedly, smiling and moving his hands. Steve smiles. One of the guys
says something that makes Sam laugh.

Steve walks back over to him, and he doesn't even have to say anything to get Sam to notice him
standing there; Sam swivels towards him automatically, giving Steve his full attention.

"Ready to head out?" he asks. Steve nods.

"If you don't mind giving me a ride back to my bike," he says. Sam nods.

"No problem." He turns to the people he was chatting with and offers his hand, which they both
shake. "Hey, nice meeting you guys."

Sam doesn't open the car door for him the second time, which is a little disappointing. Steve
wonders if it's something he could ask for, someday; something he could tell Sam about, that Sam
would understand.

As they wait at a stop light, Sam says, "So, you've got a boyfriend, and you go around asking
innocent veterans out on dates, and you're really famous, but nobody knows you're into guys. You
must be pretty good at picking them out."

"Yeah, I must be," Steve agrees, giving Sam a long hot look. Sam quirks his eyebrows, pleased. "I
don't ask people out that often. It's not like the old days, when I could just hit up a queer bar or a
tearoom or take a stroll down by the Navy Yard."

Sam whistles. "I am learning so many things right now," he says. "First of all, tearooms? Like with
the doilies and stuff?"

Steve laughs. "No, it was a joke name," he explains. "Tearooms are what you call public
bathrooms where guys meet up for sex. Like in department stores."

"Amazing," Sam says slowly. He really sounds amazed. "So even back then you were – I mean,
you dated men."

Steve can hear what Sam's not saying: gay, queer, bisexual, all the words that Sam's refusing to
attach to him until he knows which ones are right. It gives Steve a warm glow, that respect, and it
makes him brave, too.

"The word you're looking for is queer," Steve says. "And bisexual." He swallows. "And – and
genderqueer. I'm – it's kind of important for you to know that I'm genderqueer."

He's only ever said it to Jim, before now, and to Jelani and Tara and other folks online. He likes
how it feels to say it, I'm genderqueer, like claiming a part of himself.

"Oh, okay," Sam says softly. They're on a busy street, with lots of traffic, but he glances over
quickly to meet Steve's eyes and smile warmly. Steve lets out the breath he was holding. "Did you
– that wasn't what they called it back then, though."

"No, we used to say fairy or pansy, stuff like that." The terms feel a little strange in his mouth,
more nostalgic these days than personal, and it surprises Steve, to feel that distance from what he
used to be alongside the good feeling of calling himself genderqueer. He smiles, remembering how
Betty used to drawl her favorite word for herself: faiiiiiiry, like she couldn't get enough of the way
it tasted. Steve might start to feel that way about his new names for himself.
"I, uh, had a trans girlfriend for a while," Sam says. "I don't mean that like, it's the same thing or like I know all about you or anything. It's – I – " He stops in frustration, pursing his lips. Steve nods at him to go on. After a moment, he does. "I want you to feel comfortable, I don't know if I'm doing that right. But I mean that you being genderqueer isn't gonna be anything like a problem for me, if you – if you want to see me again. I want to see you again."

"I want to see you again," Steve echoes, softly. "You do make me feel comfortable."

Sam breathes out, and relaxes his grip on the wheel, stretching his fingers. Sam's so easygoing that it hadn't occurred to Steve that he might be nervous; maybe he just hides it well. It makes Steve feel a surge of affection for him, surprising in its intensity.

They pull off onto smaller side streets, getting close to the VA parking lot where Steve left his motorcycle.

"So I guess if you're not out in public you must trust me a lot, to tell me all that," Sam says. "Or even to ask me out in the first place. Thank you for that."

Steve smiles. "You seemed trustworthy," he says. "And it wasn't all that brave to ask you out, since I knew you were bi."

"Oh yeah? How'd you know that?" Sam makes the turn to pull into the VA parking lot. It's empty except for Steve's bike, dark and quiet.

"I, uh, saw your bi pride t-shirt," Steve admits. Sam's grin is immediate and beautiful.

"Yes!" He pumps his fist in the air, almost hitting the car ceiling. "I knew that thing would get me queers one day as well as straight ladies." Putting his hand back on the wheel, he shrugs at Steve. "Up to today it's just gotten me straight ladies."

"Good strategy," Steve laughs. "It definitely made me pay more attention to you." He pauses, thinking about how far he wants to take this, and then adds, "You know, while you were running."

"Oh ho," Sam says, turning the car off and turning towards Steve. The force of his full attention makes Steve's breath catch. "That's promising."

"Yeah," Steve says, because that's exactly what it is, what this whole night has been. Promising. He wants to leave Sam with another promise.

"I really want to kiss you," Sam says, sliding his hand across the space between them and brushing Steve's knee with his knuckles, the lightest of touches. Steve wants so much more.

"So kiss me then, Sam," Steve says, and leans over to meet him.

It starts soft, but not tentative at all: a lush desiring press of lips, Sam's lips capturing Steve's over and over, their mouths opening together but not quite joining, not yet. They kiss like that for a long while, Sam's breath shuddering out of him as he relaxes into it, Steve leaning further forward to get more of Sam's taste.

"Mmmm," Sam moans, into Steve's mouth. It's a quiet sound, reserved, but even so it's enough to make Steve's skin heat up as his body comes awake against Sam's touch. His dick starts to feel heavy between his legs, just from this, from a simple soft luxurious kiss. He brings a hand up to cup Sam's face, caressing his temple with his thumb, and Sam leans into it and deepens their kiss, offering Steve the hot press of his tongue.
Steve opens his mouth for it, and groans. Sam's beard is scratchy against his cheeks. Sam's hands come up to cup Steve's shoulders, his thumbs rubbing slow little circles that feel amazing even through Steve's shirt and jacket. He wants to feel Sam's hands on his bare skin.

They stay like that for a long time, kissing long, deep kisses, their lips catching and caressing, Sam's tongue pushing into Steve's mouth, Steve biting at Sam's lower lip and drawing a little laugh out of him. It feels so good, that lingering kiss, that Steve almost forgets about sex, lost in the sensation of Sam's soft mouth against his. While Sam is kissing him, Steve can't imagine anywhere else in the world he'd rather be.

Of course he ruins it by drooling on Sam halfway through.

"Oh, God, sorry," Steve says, pulling back. It was only a little drool, escaping the side of his mouth onto Sam's chin, but it's still really embarrassing.

"S'okay," Sam says, grinning at him. Steve loves his tooth gap. Steve wants to kiss his tooth gap again.

"Not so smooth, Rogers," he mutters, wiping at Sam's beard with his thumb.

"Frankly it just makes you more adorable," Sam says. Steve kisses him again, briefly, smiling against his smile, and then does it again, and again.

"I should go," Steve says, still kissing him. "I should really go."

"Mmmm, I'm not stopping you," Sam laughs, and meets Steve's mouth in another kiss.

"Okay," Steve says, pulling back and smiling breathlessly. His lips feel tender. He knows they must be red, as red as if he were wearing lipstick.

"Okay," Sam agrees. He pulls his hands back from Steve's shoulders, trailing them down Steve's pecs as he goes. Steve flinches a little at the touch to his chest, feeling suddenly too exposed, too masculine.

"You all right?" Sam asks.

"Yeah, I – " he swallows, then tries the lopsided smile he's learned from Jim. "I sometimes have a little dysphoria." He's never called it that, not out loud, not even after he and Tara talked about it and zie told him the name for the feeling. But Sam doesn't even blink, just keeps his hands on his thighs and nods.

"I'm sorry I triggered it," he says. "Was it touching your chest?"

"Yeah," Steve says, mouth dry. "I just need to go slow, is all."

"I guess there has to be something you do slow," Sam says, smiling. Steve smiles back. "It's all right, Steve. Anything you can do, I can do slower."

"Don't make me get competitive, Sam," Steve warns.

"Oh, but you're pretty when you're competitive," Sam says.

Steve leans in and kisses him, the same soft press of lips that they started with.

"Call me pretty again," he breathes.
"God, you're so pretty," Sam groans, kissing him again until his heart starts to thump in his chest and his skin starts to buzz with arousal.

"Okay, I should go," Steve laughs.

"Get out of here already," Sam says.

"When can I see you again?"

"How about . . . the day after tomorrow?" Sam suggests. "Any sooner and we won't be going very slow."

"Any later and I'll miss this too much," Steve agrees, kissing Sam's lips quickly. "Okay."

"Should I come and pick you up? We could go for lunch. My treat this time."

Steve frowns. "It's probably worth mentioning that my place is occasionally staked out by paparazzi," Steve says. "Not always, but – if you don't want people investigating you and your connection to me . . . well, it can't really be avoided. You should know that up front. But we could put it off for a while."

"Got it," Sam says. "Why don't you come over to my place? There's a couple great restaurants we can walk to from there."

"Okay," Steve says. "Here, you should write down your address for me."

Reaching into his pockets for a pen, he comes up with his notebook again. He offers it to Sam, smiling a little ruefully.

Sam blinks slowly. He doesn't flip to the back like Steve figured he would, or scribble it on a random page; instead he goes to the same page that says Thai food and Troubleman (soundtrack) and writes on the next available line.

Steve leans over to see what he's writing. Now, underneath Troubleman (soundtrack), it says:

Sam Wilson

Followed by a phone number and an address in Bethesda.

"That's something I should do in the future, huh," Steve asks. Sam shrugs innocently.

"It's certainly a jewel of the modern era that you should learn more about."

Steve takes his book back, and kisses Sam one last time. "I'm looking forward to it," he says.

"Me too."

Steve gets out of the car. "Goodnight, Sam."

"Goodnight, Steve," Sam replies, and Steve can't get the stupid smile off his face the whole way home.

* *

When he gets back home, the cute nurse Natasha mentioned during the mission yesterday is taking her laundry down to the basement. High on the success of his date with Sam, he actually decides to
try flirting with her; what's the worst that could happen? He'll ask her for a cup of coffee. Anybody can ask someone to get a cup of coffee, that's not hard, Steve can manage that.

It doesn't really come out right, though, and even he winces as he's talking.

She brings up infectious diseases in the process of telling him no, which is a pretty clear sign that he's still got way more game with fellas than with dames.

"Oh, and I think you left your stereo on," Kate says, as she heads towards the stairs.

Steve thanks her, but his mind is already reeling. Once Kate's out of sight, he jumps out the hall window, finds enough finger and toe holds in the brick to crawl along the wall, and slips through his own window without a sound.

He finds Nick Fury in his living room, with a ridiculous story about his wife kicking him out.

"I didn't know you were married," Steve says flatly.

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me," Nick replies, and Steve sighs.

"I know, Nick," he says. "That's the problem."

If Nick had told him about Project Insight earlier, if Steve could've brought it to the attention of the public, taken it up with some of the activists he's met, maybe gotten it defunded . . . but it's too late for that. Nick couldn't bring himself to trust Steve until yesterday, and it's already too late.

**SHIELD COMPROMISED**, Nick's phone tells him, and Steve can't even say he's surprised. Any organization that would build the Insight helicarriers has to be rotten all the way through. Steve was just too complacent to admit it before.

He wishes, desperately, that Jim weren't thousands of miles away. He doesn't want to face this on his own.

Then the shooting starts.

Steve doesn't react like a civilian, like an artist or an activist or a mason: he runs towards the shooter, like a soldier, and throws his best weapon right at the guy's head.

* 

Nick Fury dies. As it turns out, his last words were what he said to Steve as he handed him the flash drive: *don't trust anyone.*

Kate – if that's her name – is a SHIELD agent, any number of Steve's friends or colleagues might be behind Nick's death, and someone installed new bugs in his apartment since the last time Bruce checked for them.

At the moment, he can't argue with Nick. Nobody seems particularly trustworthy.

Steve puts his dull blue and brown uniform back on to go in to talk to Senator Pierce. As he pulls on the boots and tightens the straps on the gloves, he thinks about what his old publicist Craig had called it: the outfit for the realistic modern-day hero. Wearing it, Steve finds it easier to walk through the corridors like Captain America would, and easier to fade back, hold his tongue, keep his secrets.

Easier to follow Fury's last order.
Turns out the uniform makes him a target, too, and Steve ends up in an elevator beating ten people unconscious, half of them guys he's trusted to have his back for almost two years: Rumlow, Bennett, Jefferson, guys who Steve thought of as part of his team.

The fall from the elevator is nothing next to the cold realization that everything he thought he knew, about who he is and what he does, has been a lie.

After that, he takes the uniform off again, in the changing room of a running store on F Street, and walks out in sweats and a hoodie that he buys with the little emergency money he keeps in his kit. They're even duller than his uniform, more nondescript.

He leaves the uniform itself behind a dumpster.

He doesn't call Tony, or Pepper, or Bruce, or Jim, any of whom would probably know better than Steve what to do with the flash drive. He's seen the kind of surveillance technology they have at SHIELD. He doesn't call anyone. Instead, he puts his phone in an envelope and mails it to his apartment.

SHIELD can't be everywhere at once, though, and even though there aren't any payphones anymore, Steve could probably borrow someone's cell phone or use a phone at a store if he had to.

He doesn't.

Rumlow was in on it. Half of the agents on Steve's Strike team were in on it. What if Tony or Pepper were spying on him, gathering intel to use against him? What if Bruce had installed the bugs in his apartment and on his computer, rather than taking them away? He gave Bruce his blood, for God's sake.

What if Jelani and Tara were agents, like Kate, planted online to gain his trust and learn his secrets?

He tries not to think about Jim. It can't be Jim.

It could be Jim.

He puts the hood up, keeps his head down, and sets out alone to carry out his mission.

*

Natasha, of course, invites herself along.

Steve looks at the scar on her belly, when she raises her shirt, and feels suddenly bereft, missing her awkward flirting, her sudden confidences, what he used to think of as her honesty.

He wants it back, but he doesn't dare trust her again.

Natasha walks him past his motorcycle – "Dead giveaway," she says – and towards a car dealership. There's a brand new truck way out in the weeds at the far end of the lot. Steve breaks in and hotwires it, doubly grateful now for Jim's lessons, while Natasha distracts the salespeople.

"Okay," she says, as she buckles her seatbelt carefully. "The first step is to get you into something more inconspicuous." She gestures at Steve's incognito clothes, the dark hoodie and sweatpants. "This is fooling no one. Who taught you how to go on the run?"

"Nobody," Steve says, suppressing a sudden urge to throw up. "It's my first time."
When they find the truth, the obscene stretch of Zola's preserved brain grown into the bones of SHIELD itself, making up the foundation that supports the portraits of Peggy and Howard and Phillips upstairs, Steve thinks, *good*.

At least this is something he already knows how to fight.

After the explosion, Natasha wakes up in the truck as they race down unmarked gravel roads and away from the SHIELD agents – the HYDRA agents, Steve corrects himself, easier to think of them as HYDRA agents – who are chasing them. He buckled her in, but with the Strike team on their tail he hadn't had time to see to her head wound beyond making sure it wasn't bleeding too badly. He glances over at her anxiously when she moves and groans.

"Fuck," she says, drawing out the vowel sound and allowing Steve to take a deep, relieved breath. "What landed on us?"

"Every piece of ordnance the Strike team had available, I think," Steve says. He looks again; she's moving her legs and opening her eyes. "Be careful, you have a head wound."

"I've had worse," she says, touching it gingerly with her fingers and pulling them back to look at the blood.

The truck bounces over a series of potholes big enough that the state of New Jersey should probably reclassify them as public swimming pools. If the state of New Jersey exists out here; the gravel road is quickly becoming a dirt track, and the trees are closing in on either side.

Steve's never liked the country: it's always seemed too quiet, too empty, with too many trees and not enough people. During the war, it was always a relief to find an enemy base, the reassuring lines of human construction in the middle of European countryside.

"You're gonna give me a concussion with your driving, though, Rogers," Natasha complains, as they both rattle over the bumps. "Where are we?"

"Wherever HYDRA isn't." The dirt track meets up with something that might actually be a county road; Steve zooms right past it, and has to back up so he can make the turn.

"You mean SHIELD," Natasha says.

"Yeah," Steve sighs. "I mean SHIELD."

"Who just tried to blow us up. Who are about to kill a lot of people and take over the world."

"It's like Fury's Insight plan, but faster," Steve agrees. Glancing over at her again, he purses his lips. "I have to stop them, Nat," he says. "I have to go back to D.C."

"Yeah," she sighs, pushing her back against the seat and wincing, probably becoming aware of yet another bruise or cut.

"I – do you want me to leave you somewhere, a safehouse or – "

"Steve, you idiot," she interrupts, "I'm coming with you."

"Oh," Steve says. "That's good."

"You thought I was just gonna let you save the world and go get myself a mani-pedi, or what?"
"Well, I don't know, my Strike team tried to taser me into submission and cuff me to the wall!"

"Hot."

He gives her his best quelling glare, even though it's never really worked to quell her, then continues more quietly. "And I kept thinking, you know, what you said to Loki that one time. Regimes fall every day, and you tend not to weep over that. I thought you'd want to be long gone."

"Steve," Natasha sighs, "I was using the passive voice on purpose. I was being modest. When I said 'regimes fall,' what I meant was, I bring them down. And I won't hesitate to do it again."

Steve grins, delighted. Then there is something he can trust about Natasha after all. "All right then," he says. "Me too."

"We'll need somewhere to hide out, when we hit D.C.," Natasha muses. "Somewhere we won't be expected, where neither of us has ever been. If possible, we could really use some help from someone who isn't in SHIELD, or the intelligence game, or in the military. Any military." She licks her lips slowly, and Steve wonders if Natasha knows anyone at all in the world who doesn't fit into one of those categories.

For that matter, Steve isn't sure that he does, either.

He frowns, reaching into his pants pocket for his phone. Do they know about Arnie? Could Steve even ask that of Arnie? Or does he know anyone online who lives in the D.C. area? They shouldn't endanger civilians, not if they can help it.

While he's distracted looking for his phone, there's sudden motion in front of them, a dark shape moving swiftly across the road. Steve swerves and ducks, expecting gunfire; Natasha throws herself down on the seat. It's a deer. They manage not to hit it, and Natasha blows out a breath.

"God, that was so close," Natasha says.

"Fucking countryside," Steve says.

His phone isn't in his pocket, of course; he ditched it before he met up with Natasha.

But what's still in his pocket, what he hasn't ditched, is his little book of things to see and do in the future. 

*Sam Wilson,* it says, at the bottom of the most recent page. Sam, who isn't in the military anymore, and isn't part of SHIELD, and who made out with Steve less than twenty-four hours ago. It feels like so much longer. Sam, who isn't really a civilian, either, and might understand the risk he's taking on.

"I think I know someone who can help," he says.

They drive through the night; when they get back to D.C., they arrive in Bethesda just as Sam ought to be completing his morning run. Tucked away on a quiet little street, Sam's small house is silhouetted in the delicate pink light of dawn.

Steve knocks on the door.

*
Steve waits until Natasha's done to take his turn washing up in Sam's bathroom. As he does it he can't help the occasional glance in the mirror, looking back at Natasha where she's toweling her hair with a far-off expression.

Steve wants to resist, wants to stay angry with her, but she's stood by him long enough that he can't help himself.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," she replies, absently. Her face looks open and genuine. Steve tosses his towel in the hamper, and wonders how to deal with the day to day reality of being the friend of a superspy.

He sits across from her and tries again.

"What's going on?"

He waits patiently through several seconds of tense, full silence, and then Natasha speaks.

"When I first joined SHIELD I thought I was going straight," Natasha confesses. As she tells the rest of her story, Steve thinks he understands her a little better, the way her history might mean that she sees doing the wrong things for the right reasons as a step up.

"I thought I knew whose lies I was telling," Natasha says, with a wry, self-deprecating smile that cuts Steve down to the heart. "But I guess I can't tell the difference anymore."

Steve wishes he knew how to tell her that she's good, that she's better than the organizations that have manipulated her into doing their dirty work. Then it hits him, and he tells her what she told him.

"There's a chance you might be in the wrong business," he says.

She smiles, wondering, surprised, and he smiles softly back at her.

"I owe you," Natasha says, seriously, and Steve gets the feeling that it's the kind of debt she's not likely to forget soon. He shakes his head, looking down.

"It's okay," he says, but she persists.

"If it was the other way around," she says, soft and intense, "and it was down to me to save your life, now you be honest with me, would you trust me to do it?"

Steve meets her eyes. She's been with him through everything, ever since he first woke up, but it's not until this moment that he's felt like he truly understood who she was, who they could be to each other.

"I would now," he says, and he knows that their bond is stronger now for having been broken. "And I'm always honest," he adds, smiling his own kind of self-deprecation. She raises an indulgent eyebrow at him.

"You seem pretty chipper for someone who just found out they died for nothing."

Only Natasha would crack jokes about his death, and only she could make him feel so much better by doing it. It's one of her best features.

It's better, Steve thinks, to live for something than to die for it. Maybe Natasha – and Jim, and even Sam – can help him figure out how to do that.
"Well," he says, leaning back and smiling again, "guess I just like to know who I'm fighting."

It's not Natasha, not anymore, and it's not himself. A deadly cyborg assassin, three huge gunships, and the wrath of the world's biggest military organization don't seem like so much, beside all that.

Sam invites them to eat, and they go, and they strategize. And it turns out that Sam's his ally, too.

Steve's got more of those than he realized.

*

"Not exactly the meal I'd planned to feed you today," Sam says, after they've finished eating, while Natasha's in the bathroom.

Steve smiles. "You didn't want to cook me breakfast?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. I'd love to cook you breakfast sometime." Sam leans over and bumps Steve's shoulder with his. Steve bites down on the words he wants to say, to offer Sam another chance to back out. Sam's made his decision, Steve reminds himself, and his decision is to fight beside him.

Steve will have to trust him with that.

"I make a fair breakfast myself," Steve says instead, nudging back.

Sam clears his throat and looks down at the dishes, but he can't hide his big smile.

There's a real danger that Steve's going to fall for him, fast.

"I, uh, have some clothes that might fit you," Sam says. "I actually have a jacket that's a little too big for me in the shoulders that I bet you'd look great in."

Meeting his eyes, Steve feels his breathing pick up. He's spent so much time choosing his own clothes, finding things to make him comfortable – at least in private – that the idea of wearing someone else's clothes feels like it should be horrifying.

It's not.

He wants to wear Sam's things, the same way he wanted to wear Danielle's WAAC cap and Bucky's uniform jacket.

He wonders if the jacket will smell like Sam. He wants to get to know that scent.

They're busy fighting to save the world and Steve shouldn't even be allowing himself to think about it right now, but Natasha's in the bathroom and Sam's going to the front closet and pulling out a blue zippered jacket and Steve can't help the low crawl of longing that he feels.

He holds it up invitingly, and Steve walks the three steps over to him and puts his arms into the sleeves, letting Sam pull it up his shoulders.

"Fits nice," Steve says, clearing his throat.

"Suits you," Sam agrees. He steps back, the warmth of his hands leaving Steve's shoulders, and Steve looks over at him just in time to see him duck his head.

He's holding himself back, too, Steve figures, because they have to save the world. Steve takes a
"And I got some khakis and a t-shirt you can borrow," Sam adds.

"What about me?" Natasha asks, coming out of the bathroom. Steve feels the absurd urge to take another step away from Sam, to make the distance between them a little more respectable in front of Natasha's sharp, perceptive gaze; he quashes it.

Let her see him wearing Sam's clothes. If she figures out what it means, well. Steve trusts her now.

"You're a little small for my stuff," Sam says, "but I think my sister left some things in the guest room last time she stayed. She's about your size."

"Perfect," Natasha says, and turns down the hallway towards the bedrooms. "I assume that's the explanation for your hair straightener as well," she calls over her shoulder.

"That one I'm taking to my grave," Sam deadpans.

*  

Turns out Sam's fast on his feet and good with a smile, and gets the three of them most of the way into Fort Meade without having to punch a single person or break a single door.

"Thanks, buddy, I appreciate it," Sam says, slapping a soldier on his camoed shoulder before jogging back to them.

"Tour of the base," Sam tells them. "Only the non-classified stuff, of course, but they're happy to show us around."

"It'll do," Natasha smiles. "Steve, where did you say you found this guy again?"

"Just running aimlessly around the National Mall," Steve says.

"To be fair, a lot of guys try to pick me up there," Sam grins. "C'mon."

Natasha arches an eyebrow at Steve, and he rolls his eyes at her. "Focus on the mission," he says, quietly so that Sam won't hear.

"Oh, I am," she murmurs, as Sam walks ahead of them. "But rest assured that I'm going to ask Always Honest Rogers about this later."

"When we're not being hunted by an international military organization," Steve promises. Then, moved by his newfound trust in her, he grins and adds, "But there's not much to tell. This is only our second date."

He jogs to catch up with Sam before Natasha can close her mouth.

They jump a few fences, Natasha bypasses a few electronic keypads, and before long they're in possession of Sam's old wings.

"Beautiful machinery," Natasha says, as Sam takes them out of their storage container.

"I wish you could see the originals," Sam says. "These are the Stark redesign, to comply with military spending regulations. Gotta be domestic built." He pulls the straps over his shoulders and starts adjusting them. "But T'Challa was the original designer. Apparently they use these all the time in Wakanda."
Natasha whistles. "I saw his Forbes cover last month," she says. "Bet he'd be pissed if he knew Stark ripped off his design."

Sam starts buckling his wings in place. "There's more than one reason they were top secret," he agrees, frowning.

"Not that I'm not enjoying our conversation," Steve says, grimacing as he holds a gun on a fellow soldier, an Army private with the name Botrelle stitched over his heart. "But those alarms have been going off for a little while now."

"Not gonna be a problem," Sam says, securing the last buckle and double-checking it. "We're going out the back way."

He leads them up to the roof.

Sam takes Natasha first, so Steve has the minute and a half it takes Sam to fly to their rendezvous point and back to think about what's going to happen.

He can't decide if he's more anticipatory or apprehensive, but he knows he wants it, the feeling of Sam holding him firmly and making him weightless.

"Your turn, buddy," Sam says, as he flaps against the direction of flight to reduce his speed. Steve steps forward into the intimate circle formed by Sam's wings bending around them.

"Hey Falcon," he says, and without even thinking about it he kisses Sam, full on the mouth and wet and dirty, while booted feet stamp up the stairs behind them. They'll be through the door to the roof in a minute.

"Sure this is the time?" Sam breathes against Steve's mouth.

_We embraced_, Steve thinks.

"Yeah," he says, and kisses him again. "Always." It's easy to surrender himself to Sam's arms, and as he holds tight to his neck and Sam throws them both off the building, he kisses Sam's temple for good measure and then tosses back his head to feel the wind moving around them.

* 

"Who do you think he is?" Steve asks, as they wait in the car for Sam to come back with Sitwell.

Natasha turns to look at him and blinks twice, considering. She doesn't ask who he means. They both know he's going to show up again, standing between them and SHIELD.

"I don't know if I should tell you," she says, eventually.

Steve frowns. "You know I can't accept that."

She nods. "Yeah. I know." She looks down for a few seconds, then back up at Steve, watching him carefully while she speaks. "They call him the Winter Soldier because the prevailing theory is that he's kept cryogenically frozen between missions," she says. "And that's how he's behind so many assassinations over such a long period of time."

He hasn't felt it in a long time, and he doesn't feel it now, but he tenses in anticipation for it: the hard cold feeling in his chest that he used to imagine, right after he came out of the ice, that only started disappearing when he met Tony, and Jim, and Natasha, and the rest of the Avengers.
"I see," Steve says. He wonders what it must be like, to go through what he went through but over and over, year after year, unconsciousness followed by violence followed by unconsciousness. How easy it would be to lose yourself in the missions, accept what you're told. How easy killing would be if it were all you ever lived for.

"There are different theories about where he came from. A HYDRA soldier or scientist who underwent an experiment. An early Soviet special training program, of the kind that predated mine. He worked for the Soviets for a long time."

"Zola said your birthdate was 1981," Steve says, because he's read even the most classified parts of her SHIELD file and knows that it isn't.

"It's not," she agrees. "Turns out a reel-to-reel magnetic tape personality in a musty basement doesn't have all the info about me that it should," she says. "It's encouraging. Though, really, nobody knows the whole story."

Steve nods, wondering if that nobody includes herself. He lets the topic go.

"An experiment, huh," he sighs, thinking of Siddhani and the others, of Bruce, of Pepper. All the lab rats. "You think he volunteered?"

"Would you have volunteered for something like that?" Natasha asks. It's not a rhetorical question; she's asking him in earnest. Steve smiles and answers the same way.

"Yes."

She nods.

"But I wouldn't have stayed a volunteer. That life sounds like nothing less than torture."

"Steve, if you're thinking that you can get through to this guy, talk him down somehow, or save him, you can't. He's – if he was an innocent soldier at some point, he's not that anymore. In almost all the stories about him, he's completely brainwashed."

"Just another form of torture," Steve says, then holds up a hand against her next words. "I'll fight him, Nat. If I have to, I'll do it. But it doesn't sound to me like he's the enemy."

He looks her in the eye.

"It sounds to me like he's one of us."

*  

The Winter Soldier is one of the toughest opponents Steve's ever fought: as fast as Steve is, and almost as strong, his mechanical arm putting Steve at a huge disadvantage. He's not sure he could take a direct blow from it, so he has to move fast to avoid it and not just block or accept like he normally would.

He's not exactly what Steve would call a ghost, not with all the grenade launchers and machine guns in the middle of the freeway, but maybe he's coming out of hiding.

If he used to be a Soviet agent, Steve thinks suddenly, between one blow and the next, maybe he was like all the other cold war weaponry Steve's heard about: acquired at a discount, intended for a different purpose now. The new HYDRA might be thinking about getting rid of him, or spending him on one last mission. In between gunshots Steve looks at the goggles, the leather armor, the
metal arm that had to have hurt when he got it. The mask that muzzles him. More and more, Steve wonders if he's just another weapon, like Steve has been, used against his will, in need of rescue. In need of disarmament.

But it's hard to stop and talk to a guy shooting explosives at you.

They get closer and closer, moving from rifle range to handgun range to knife range and then finally to hand-to-hand, and as he moves in and grapples with Steve against a van Steve is hit with the smell of him: leather and gunpowder and the overpowering stench of unwashed, stale sweat. But there's something else, too, something that triggers an emotion in Steve, something he can't quite place.

There's something about the way the Winter Soldier smells that, for a single passing moment, activates a memory, and makes Steve feel . . . happy. But it's deep down, and far away, where he can't get to it.

He brushes the fleeting thought away as he moves, and twists, and lets himself attack with his full force, as he almost never does. They move in closer, and their bodies slam together, and the Soldier's hands punch and push him, and he grabs the Soldier by the arm, the face, the leg, the chest, the intense and terrible intimacy of combat. Finally Steve manages to get a solid grip, grabbing him and flipping him over.

The mask comes off.

The Winter Soldier turns towards him.

Steve finally places the smell.

"Bucky?" he says, a question because it can't be, there's no way that it could be –

_An innocent soldier,_ Natasha had said. But not anymore.

"Who the hell is Bucky," the ghost growls, and strides towards him.

In that moment, Steve feels the eerie, detached horror of watching a nightmare come to life: Bucky looking at him and not knowing him, Bucky seeing some stranger in a Captain America body when he looks at his girl Steve. Bucky lost permanently to Zola's brainwashing. The old fears that Steve carried for so long during the war bloom fresh and red inside of him, shaking their way through his disbelief and horror.

Bucky's eyes, when he looks at Steve, are empty.

Steve doesn't even realize that he's lowered the shield and squared his shoulders, making an easy target of himself, until Bucky raises the gun.

He doesn't move.

Sam saves him, swooping down from the sky like an angel and knocking Bucky down.

He wants to move, wants to dive towards Bucky and away from the Soldier, wants to take the ghost in his two hands and bring him back to life.

He doesn't move.

Bucky raises the gun again.
Natasha saves him, her aim perfect even with what looks like a gunshot wound to her shoulder, firing a grenade directly at Bucky's position.

The ghost disappears.

The SHIELD Strike team shows up, and puts Steve on his knees.

Steve doesn't move.

*

Maria saves them all, which is nice; Steve had wondered about Maria.

"Who's this guy?" she asks, nodding her head at Sam.

"Steve's plus one," Natasha replies.

"There are bandages in my coat pocket," Steve says, forcing himself to focus on the needs of the moment. He doesn't have all his gear, but he and Natasha had raided Sam's fairly extensive first aid kit.


"Inviting women to put their hands in your pockets isn't smooth, Rogers," Natasha says, obviously working hard to breathe through the pain. "Also, I never said you could date this one."

Steve puts on a little smile for her. *Comfort Natasha*, he adds to the list.

"C'mere, Cap," Maria says, but she doesn't reach into his pocket; instead, she unlocks the huge steel cuffs they'd put him in. Steve pulls the bandage out from his pocket and unwraps it while Maria uncuffs Sam.

He goes to put it on Natasha's shoulder, but Sam stops him. "The way her arm is bent back is pulling at the wound," he says. "We should uncuff her first."

"Here," Maria says, moving to kneel in front of Natasha. She uncuffs her, and Natasha moves her arms around to her front with a little wince.

"I'm okay," Natasha says, which Steve thinks is probably a reflex. "I'm fine."

"Shut up, agent," Maria growls, taking the bandage from Steve and applying it with fast, professional movements. "Go underground to fight HYDRA and you don't even call me . . . "

"We didn't know who was compromised," Natasha says. Steve winces on Maria's behalf at her unflinching honesty. "You didn't call me either."

"We didn't know who was compromised," Maria whispers, and they smile at each other. To Steve's surprise, Natasha reaches out: cups Maria's jaw in her hand and strokes with her thumb. Love among spies, Steve supposes.

Maria leans up as Natasha leans down, and Steve looks away politely. Sam catches his eye and gives him a significant look.

Steve smiles for him, too. *Comfort Sam*, he adds to the list.
Sam puts a hand on his forearm and squeezes. "Hey, it'll be okay," he says. "We'll figure it out."

"He didn't even know me," Steve says, even though he already said it earlier.

"Yeah," Sam agrees. "Some soldiers feel that way, when they come back."

Steve looks up at him, surprised that Sam would use such compassionate Veterans Affairs language to talk about a man who's been trying to kill them. He opens his mouth, though he doesn't know what he's going to say. He's interrupted by a loud metal clanging.

He looks over, and Maria's kicking aside a huge section of the van floor, revealing a hole with rushing road beneath it.

"You boys coming?" she asks.

*

Nick Fury is alive. As it turns out, Steve isn't alone: he has Natasha, and he has Sam, he has Maria and Nick, and if he could use the phones, he's betting he would have Jim and Tony and Pepper and Bruce.

That makes it a little easier to live with the knowledge that Bucky is out there, brainwashed, killing, traumatized, not knowing Steve. Not knowing himself, the man Steve loved for so long.

He doesn't say much as Nick and Maria discuss their plans to take over the helicarriers.

"We have to assume everyone aboard those carriers is HYDRA," Nick says, which is his way of saying assume everyone aboard those carriers is killable. "To get past them, insert these server blades, and then maybe, just maybe, we can salvage what's left – "

"We're not salvaging anything," Steve interrupts angrily. SHIELD was Peggy's dream, but it's been warped, perverted, used for evil, and not only by HYDRA agents working in secret. "We're not just taking down the carriers, Nick, we're taking down SHIELD."

"SHIELD had nothing to do with – "

Steve cuts him off. "You gave me this mission. This is how it ends. SHIELD's been compromised, you said so yourself. HYDRA grew right under your nose and nobody noticed."

How could anyone notice, when SHIELD and HYDRA did so many things the same way? It's like Natasha taught him: to hide in plain sight, you have to blend in with your surroundings.

HYDRA blended right in to SHIELD.

"Why do you think we're meeting in this cave?" Nick asks. "I noticed."

Steve presses him. "How many paid the price before you did?"

Nick takes his time in answering. "Look, I didn't know about Barnes."

And of course Nick thinks it's only about Bucky. Not at all about the Winter Soldier, or anyone else like him.

"Even if you had, would you have told me? Or would you've compartmentalized that too?" Steve shakes his head in negation, utterly rejecting what Nick is trying to do. "SHIELD. HYDRA. It all goes."
"He's right," Maria says.

Nick looks to Natasha, who sits in silent solidarity with Steve and Maria, and then he looks to Sam.

"Don't look at me," Sam says. "I do what he does, just slower."

Steve is buoyed up by his people, his brothers in arms who all have his back. He nods to each of them, taking in their support like the air he needs to breathe.

"Well," Nick says, leaning back in his chair, "looks like you're giving the orders now, Captain."

Steve stands up straighter. The soldiers gathered around the table look to him expectantly.

"I understand why you would want to preserve what you had. I understand that. Those dreams, those ideals, they meant something to us once, and we want to hold on to them even when they've turned to poison." Remembering what Peggy told him last time he saw her, Steve says, "But when that happens, sometimes the best that we can do, the only thing we can do, is to start over." He looks around the room, making eye contact, trying his best to hold them all together.

Steve takes a deep breath and gives them their first order. "Burn it all down."

*

"He's gonna be there, you know," Sam says, walking towards him, hands easy at his sides. He starts talking from a good ways away, maybe noticing that Steve is lost in thought and not wanting to startle him.

"I know," Steve replies.

"Look, whoever he used to be, and the guy he is now... I don't think he's the kind you save. I think he's the kind you stop."

Sam had been there at the bridge, had seen the ghost's relentlessness and singlemindedness. Someone had given Bucky the order to kill Steve; that much was clear. Sam's not wrong; it's not easy to save someone who's shooting at you.

"I don't know if I can do that," Steve says.

"Well, he might not give you a choice. He doesn't know you."

Just echoing what Steve had said himself, in the van. *He didn't even know me.* Steve looks over and meets Sam's eyes, willing him to understand, somehow.

"He will," Steve says. And then he starts moving. "Gear up. It's time."

"Are you gonna wear that?" Sam asks, as Steve walks away. Steve throws a glance over his shoulder, because in that moment Sam sounds just like Betty used to when she was critiquing his outfit. *Honestly, darling, that's what you're wearing to the drag ball?*

"No," Steve says, because as nice as it's been to wear Sam's clothes, he really needs something that belongs to him. "If you're gonna fight a war, you need a uniform."

He hears Sam's quick steps, jogging to catch up, and smiles to himself.

"Okay, what the hell does that mean?"
"Well, we can't hit the helicarriers until tomorrow," Steve says. "So I thought, why not rob the Smithsonian."

"Right," Sam says. "Okay. Makes sense. Since you're apparently an anarchist now."

Steve grins. "It's pronounced patriot, Sam."

Sam is still laughing when they get into the nondescript little car that Maria had given them the keys to. It's just another spy tool, to keep them out of sight and undercover. Steve thinks longingly of his brightly colored uniform and hopes he'll get to stop being undercover soon.

After their practice at Fort Meade, working with Sam is easy: they trade hand signals, slip quietly through doors, and move in almost perfect synchrony. Sam's a big guy, almost the same size as Steve, but he's graceful, too, and quiet when he needs to be.

Looking at the big stairwell, currently locked with a gate and cage at the bottom but open on the top, Steve jerks his head upwards, nods at Sam, and then drops to one knee.

Sam moves fast, but even so Steve can see his joyful, knowing grin as he runs three steps up to Steve, plants his foot on Steve's interlaced fingers, and leaps up into the air, all of Steve's strength propelling him upward.

Steve gets up to watch him go, and sees that he's made it, gotten a grip on the handrail and pulled himself over.

Sam turns, perhaps by long habit, and reaches down over the rail, right hand extended. Steve can make the jump unassisted, and does, but he grabs Sam's hand with his left hand while grabbing the railing in his right, hopping up over the side without forcing Sam to take his full weight.

"Guess you don't really need me here, huh," Sam says, not letting go of Steve's hand.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Steve replies. They walk up to the Howling Commandos display with Steve's old uniform in pride of place at the center, their hands swinging easily together. "Some of those buckles are hard to do up on your own."

Huffing a laugh, Sam doesn't hesitate, hands moving quickly to help Steve denude the mannequin.

"This is a little weird," he whispers. "Like I'm undressing you."

"Well, it is our third date," Steve says, which makes Sam chuckle. Frowning at the naked mannequin, he adds, "I think I'm better looking though."

"I'm kind of counting on that," Sam says. Smiling sidelong, he says, "Since this is our third date, would you like to make out with me in front of your Smithsonian exhibit?"

"Yeah," Steve says, his throat dry as he looks at the faceless models: Dum Dum, and Gabe, and Jim, and all the others, with Bucky up front next to the now-absent Captain America. "Yeah, I really would."

Sam wraps an arm around his shoulders and kisses him softly, gently, and it's exactly the reminder he needs, right now, of who he was before they made him into a superhero. When he was a tough little fairy, and Bucky's lover, and not yet a weapon of war.

Sam's other hand lands on his waist, and Steve gives up control, lets himself be bent back a little, trusting his weight to Sam's arms and melting against Sam's kiss.
He doesn't actually put the uniform on; instead he tucks it under his arm and they make a quick getaway, stopping to leave an apologetic note for the security guard. When they get back to the secret base, the sun has finally set. The darkness makes their entry into the barracks section feel clandestine, like they've snuck out a bedroom window to go to a speakeasy or away from base to hit the town.

The barracks is dark too, so they tiptoe stealthily towards their separate bunks.

The light comes on.

"You boys been off carousing? You know it's a school day tomorrow."

"Hey, Nat," Steve says, sighing. "We were picking something up."

He shows her the uniform before setting it down carefully on an empty cot. Whoever this base was designed for, it wasn't half a dozen ragtag revolutionaries; there are at least fifty racks in this room, and it's not the only room.

Natasha nods, lowering herself back down to a horizontal position. She watches them carefully. Steve wonders what she did to be able to turn the lights on and off from her bunk. That kind of tampering with wiring is probably like a New York Times Monday crossword for Natasha, something to take her mind off her wound, maybe.

Steve sits down gingerly on the edge of her bunk.

"You think it'll make him remember you?" she asks. Steve frowns, not looking up at her.

"Maybe I just didn't want to wage a war in Sam's least favorite khakis," he says.

"Those are my favorites, actually," Sam says. Then, after a moment, he adds, "Though, uh, I guess that's not the point."

Natasha frowns. "You're the one who gave the big speech about letting go of the past."

"I didn't mean it?" Steve tries. Glancing up at her, he sees that she's watching him carefully. "I meant it," he admits.

"Try again," Natasha says.

Sam crosses the room to the bunk he'd claimed earlier and sits down. He's across from Steve, so Steve has Natasha in front of him and Sam, as usual, on his right. They both wait for him to speak.

"You have to choose," Steve says, slowly, figuring it out. It's what Valentine might've said, or he hopes it is, anyway. "When you have power, you have to choose if you're going to be somebody else's weapon, or somebody else's shield. I want to give Bucky that choice. I need him to be able to choose like I have."

"You might have to die to give it to him," Sam says. Sam doesn't say it like it's a bad thing, just like it's a natural consequence he feels compelled to point out.

Love and death, or security and fear. Steve can't choose what Nick did when he watched the Insight helicarriers being built and said nothing about the misgivings in his heart.

Natasha says, "He might not be able to choose. Or he might choose what he knows."
"He knows me," Steve insists, clinging to what feels like the deepest truth he has. Even if it hadn't been in Bucky's eyes before, Steve has to hold on to this. "He knows looking after me."

Neither of them seem willing to argue over that.

"If he comes after me or anyone else, including you, I will kill him," Natasha says softly. "So will Sam. Not that Sam would put it like that."

"I said he has to be stopped, not saved," Sam offers.

"That's exactly how Sam would put it," Natasha agrees.

"Stopped first," Steve concedes. "Saved if we can."

"All right," Natasha sighs.

Steve rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands, pushing in frustration at the tears that he can't seem to stop.

Sam gets up and moves closer to Steve, then tentatively reaches out a hand, as if he's worried that Steve might bite it off.

"Hey Natasha," Steve says, without taking his hands from his eyes. "Whaddya say you turn those lights off again, and then Sam and I can get changed into those SHIELD-issue PJs without offending your modesty."

Natasha doesn't turn out the lights; instead, she levers herself slowly, carefully, up off of the cot. "Actually," she says, "I'm bunking with Maria tonight."

Steve drops his hands, and opens his eyes, and sees the easy, genuine compassion on her face. He lets out a shaking breath and tries to pretend like his voice isn't shaking too. "Oh yeah? Going that good, huh?"

"Well," Natasha says, walking up to him, "some of us don't wait to have our first kiss since 1945 while undercover with a work colleague in a mall."

"I told you, that wasn't my first kiss since – "

"I know," Natasha interrupts. "I know, Steve." And she stands up on tiptoe to kiss him, full on the mouth in exactly the way a friend wouldn't. This time Steve's prepared, and gives her as good as he gets. Their kiss tastes just a little like salt.

"Getting better," Natasha says, breathlessly, pulling away. "Though you should really talk to your boyfriend before you go around kissing people like that."

Steve spreads his hands in exasperation.

"Boyfriends," Natasha corrects herself, with an emphasis on the plural, as she glances back at Sam. "Night, boys."

"Goodnight," Steve says.

"Goodnight, Natasha," Sam says.

When she's out of the room, Sam says, "Well they're gonna go and bone."
Steve laughs helplessly, which makes more tears spring from his eyes, along with an embarrassing strangled sob.

Sam's at his side a moment later. "Hey, hey," he says softly. "Can I help? Do you want a hug?"

Looking up at Sam, his clear eyes and his pursed lips, Steve feels about as safe as he can while his childhood best friend and long-time lover is lost somewhere alone in violent madness.

"Yeah," he breathes, "Yeah, okay, Sam, yeah."

Sam hugs with his whole body, squeezing Steve firmly and holding the back of his head with one hand. He doesn't do the manly back-pat, just holds him like he would if Steve were a woman: tenderly, giving Steve enough space to back away.

He does back away, after a little while. "Thanks," he says hoarsely.

"Anytime. I mean it, man, I got all the hugs you want right here."

Steve smiles and nods. "Hey, maybe don't call me that," he says. At Sam's confused look, he adds, "Man. I'm – I mean, I don't think of myself that way anymore."

"All right," Sam agrees. "No problem. It's a habit, though, so I'm sorry in advance if I slip up."

"S'okay," Steve says. "C'mere." He reels Sam in again, hanging on to his big shoulders, burying his face against his neck.

"I kind of don't think we should bone, though," Sam says quietly, which makes Steve laugh again.

"No," Steve agrees.

"We could curl up in our bunks and sing camp songs or something," Sam suggests, not letting go.

"You ever go to camp?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"I think Natasha did, when she was a kid," Steve offers, remembering something from her classified file. "But it was sort of like . . . murder camp."

Sam huffs out a laugh; his breath tickles down Steve's neck. "I don't know if those would be very good songs for our purposes."

"I know a lot of World War Two songs about fucking," Steve says.

"There you go."

"But they are mostly really disrespectful to women."

"Bullshit," Sam sighs.

When Steve has to pull back, he kisses Sam once on the lips, dry and soft, before retreating back to his own bunk.

"If it's all the same to you, without Natasha present, I might just avoid the institutional PJs entirely," Sam says.
"Deal," Steve says. Being half-naked in front of other men in a barracks is an old, familiar feeling of excitement and trepidation; being half-naked in front of Sam sends a tired little zing of desire through his body.

They both strip down to underwear, separated by the six feet of space between rows of cots. Sam doesn't look at him at all, but even if he had, Steve doesn't think he'd feel too self-conscious about the muscles in his back or the definition of his abs.

Sam doesn't know everything about him yet, but he's listening, and that goes a long way towards making Steve feel comfortable.

Steve doesn't think he'll be able to sleep. As it turns out, though, it's been a long time since he's done it, and he finds himself drifting pretty quickly.

"See you tomorrow, Sam," he says.

"I'll be there," Sam replies.

*

In the morning, they take turns showering, even though it's a big military-style open shower and they could go together. Steve supposes that neither of them want this to be the first time they see each other completely naked.

He's halfway into the uniform when Sam comes back into the room, already wearing his combat fatigues with his Master Sergeant's stripes. They suit him. Steve hopes he won't have to wear them for long.

"I gotta say, Steve, it's kind of a trip to see you wearing the Captain America outfit with your little white socks poking out the bottom."

Steve looks up at him and grins. "What'd you expect me to wear under the boots?"

"My Captain America action figure had the boots glued on," Sam explains. "There was no soft cotton Steve Rogers underneath."

Steve cocks his head. "You tried to undress your Captain America action figure?"

Walking over to him, Sam sits down next to him on the cot. "Who didn't?"

Steve chuckles. "At least that explains why you were so good at it last night," he says, and looks down at his sock feet. They do look a little ridiculous under the thick blue uniform pants.

"That sounds way dirtier than it is," Sam says. "Unfortunately."

Steve nods ruefully, then frowns, looking down at his hands. "Oh, shit."

"What? What's wrong?" Sam asks.

"Nothing, I – " Steve laughs, unable to help himself. "Every time, I used to do this every time, and . . . Bucky would always make fun of me." He tries to say Bucky's name the way he's gotten used to saying it, like a fond memory of a lost friend. It almost works.

Sam cocks his head, puzzled. Steve holds up his hands, with the one buckled glove and the other one still unbuckled.
"You have to do the boots first," he explains. "You don't get a lot of manual dexterity with the gloves on."

"Ahhh," Sam says. Steve pulls off the loose glove and moves to unbuckle the other one.

"Every time," he sighs.

"Hang on," Sam says, putting his hands over Steve's. "I gotcha."

Sam flows smoothly from the cot down to his knees, then shuffles forward so he's between Steve's spread thighs.

"Don't think we have time for that, fella," Steve says, running his hand over Sam's hair gently and then setting his hand back down on the bunk.

"Funny," Sam says. "Not that I wouldn't give you a pre-battle blowjob, you understand, I just didn't think you were in the mood." He reaches to the side and picks up one of Steve's boots.

Steve nods. "I don't really want a Captain America needs my help kinda blowjob," he says, which makes Sam chuckle. "And anyway, I already put on the cup."

Sam arches an eyebrow, letting the boot rest on his thigh for a moment. Leaning forward, he puts a hand on Steve's knee.

"Can I?" he asks.

Steve blinks. It's a weird kind of question, but he has no objection. He nods.

Sam taps the cup twice with his index finger, *plink plink*.

"Now that is startlingly similar to my Captain America action figure," he says, grinning.

Steve pushes at his shoulder. "There's a real me under there, too," he says. Sam is rocked back slightly, then comes forward again on his knees, still smiling.

"Glad to hear it." He picks up the boot again. "Lift up," he says, easily, like it means nothing at all.

Steve lifts his right foot and lets Sam slide the boot onto him, holding the heel carefully to help shove Steve's foot down into it without crumpling the back of the boot.

"Not a long enough shoehorn in the world, huh," Sam says, smiling up at him. Steve shakes his head.

"I spent more time putting these on and taking them off than I ever did fighting HYDRA."

"They do make your calves look nice, though," Sam says, buckling them up. He winks up at Steve as he does it. "No one saying you can't be pretty and fight Nazis at the same time."

It's a funny thing, but Steve's never thought of it in quite that way before. Like the part of him who serves and the part of him who dresses up and gets fucked could be the same person. He always thought he had to keep them separate, who he was with his lovers and who he is for his enemies.

The revelation rushes through his body like fire, burning up a lot of things he's not going to need anymore.

Steve rests a hand on Sam's shoulder, needing more connection between them.
"I do all that right?" Sam asks, when the boot is secured in place. Steve nods, swallowing around a lump in his throat.

"You did perfectly, Sam."

"One more, then," Sam says, picking up the other boot. Steve puts his foot in Sam's hands, and Sam pulls the boot up his leg. Sam knows there's a soft cotton Steve Rogers underneath.

"The girls in the chorus line used to do my makeup for me," Steve tells him.

Sam looks up and smiles at him to go on.

"One girl in particular, Carol. She was so sweet. She used to say it was more fun to put makeup on other people than on yourself."

"I can see that," Sam says softly. "Did you like the makeup?"

"It was okay," Steve says, and licks his lips. He wishes he had a lipstick right now, to go with the bright colors of his old uniform. Adora would work well, he thinks, in Peggy Carter red for bravery, with sparkles for flair. "I was used to doing it myself, though, lipstick and mascara and all, so it was weird to let someone else do it."

"Aha," Sam says, but like it's an expected revelation, not a surprising one. He bends his head and kisses Steve's leg, just at the top edge of the boot. "How's that feel?"

Steve moves his feet around; the old boots are broken in by years of hard wear and miles of hard marches, shaped perfectly to his feet. He remembers these boots.

"Good," he says. Sam nods and stands up from a crouching position. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, since you mention it," Steve says, "getting on the second glove is always a little difficult."

Sam nods and sits back down next to him, tugging the glove up Steve's hand and pressing the leather in at every gap between his fingers. Steve can't really recall ever having been touched there before, not on purpose like this, with Sam's fingertips putting pressure against the soft, sensitive webbing.

"What else did you like to wear?" Sam asks. "Back in the day." He doesn't look up from his work, pulling and adjusting the glove carefully.

"Bucky got me stockings," Steve says. "One Christmas. And I'd wear them with garters."

Sam whistles softly. "You worn stockings since you woke up?"

"Yes," Steve says, looking down at the flag-red of the glove. "I have a bunch of them."

Sam's finished adjusting Steve's left glove, and takes Steve's right hand instead, which he'd already buckled himself. He pulls and tugs at that, too, until it feels more settled than it did after Steve's hasty job.

"What else? You ever wear gloves like this?"

Steve smiles, because it's never once occurred to him to look at the Captain America gloves like the fancy white ones ladies used to wear on special occasions. He flexes the fingers of his left hand in front of his eyes, and he can see it: how it emphasizes the delicacy of his wrist and the length of his fingers.
"No," he says. "I wish I had."

"Maybe you could," Sam suggests.

"I'd like that."

Finally finished with the other glove, Sam holds up Steve's hand and kisses it delicately.

Steve has no problem at all bringing all the old Brooklyn style limp-wristedness to the Captain America combat gauntlet, letting his hand dip to accept Sam's kiss. It's an odd feeling, like blaspheming used to feel when he was a kid, of doing something daring and inappropriate.

"Want me to get your helmet?" Sam asks. Steve nods.

He doesn't reach out to help, just holds still while Sam tucks the helmet over his head and pulls it down so it's aligned over his eyes.

"Scarves," Steve says, lifting his chin to give Sam access to the chinstrap, and to his throat. "Ladies' scarves and blouses, that you could hide under a coat while you were out walking."

Sam's fingers brush his neck softly, skin like silk, as he buckles up the chinstrap.

"But then you get to the club, right," Sam says. His breath tickles against Steve's exposed skin. "And you let it all hang loose."

"Exactly," Steve says, smiling. "Sometimes, with this thing, it felt like – being in the club out in public, but nobody noticed."

Sam nods. "I bet that was weird."

"That's one way to describe it," Steve says. He feels like laughing, a wave of it rising in his chest.

"That the whole outfit? Are there any more buckles? What are these buckles for?"

He pulls at the straps on Steve's chest, the ones that don't hook up to anything.

"Design error," Steve says. "I drew the uniform with a parachute, but Howard thought I wanted . . . extra buckles, I guess. Seemed rude to say anything."

Sam laughs for a long time, tucking his head against Steve's shoulder. The collar of his camo fatigues pulls back a little, revealing the soft hairs on his neck. Steve strokes them with his thumb.

"Okay," Sam says, sitting back up. "Imma ask you again. What are these buckles for?"

He wraps his fists around the straps, getting a good grip. Steve grins.

"Just what you think they're for," he says, so that Sam will reel him in and kiss him.

Sam does.

"All right," Sam murmurs against his lips, pulling away. "You're all set, beautiful."

Steve reels himself in this time and kisses Sam back hungrily.

"Thanks, Sam," he whispers, against his mouth.

He doesn't get up, though, and neither does Sam. Instead, they sit together for a few minutes, not
kissing but breathing together, stealing some quiet before they go back to war.

*

Natasha and Nick are off confronting Pierce, and they leave Maria at mission control, and he gets separated from Sam, so Steve faces Bucky alone.

It feels inevitable, that moment on the bridge.

The ghost stares at him for a long time before he makes a move, and Steve stays as still as he can, praying with everything he's got that Bucky will know him this time, will recognize him for what he is.

"Please don't make me do this," Steve says, tears in his eyes, because his first obligation is to be the shield for all the people down below, before he can be a shield for Bucky.

First, Bucky has to be stopped.

Bucky lowers his head, every inch the mindless guard dog.

Steve throws his best weapon right at him, as hard as he can.

They attack, and dodge, and block, but it's not like before: now he knows who Bucky is, he pulls his punches, chooses non-lethal attacks, focuses on just getting Bucky out of his way.

It's as close to passive resistance as he can get in a life-or-death fight without dying immediately.

Bucky shoots him in the side, throws him over the rail, punches him, stabs him in the shoulder.

It's all right.

All Steve has to do is get the last chip in place. That's his mission.

He wants, so badly, for his mission to be over.

They fight their way down to the lower part of the room. Bucky gets to the chip first.

"Drop it," Steve says, when he finds himself with the advantage, "drop it," hoping to God that Bucky can hear him, can understand him.

He doesn't drop it. Grimacing, Steve dislocates Bucky's arm, and he still doesn't drop it, so Steve pulls him back into a sleeper hold, wrapping him up in his arms and pinning him down with his legs, the position obscenely intimate.

Bucky still smells like himself, and this close it's hard not to be overwhelmed by the memories that triggers: all the times Bucky slung an arm around his shoulder, or hugged him close, or kissed him, or fucked him.

His voice, when he cries out in pain, is the same voice that used to cry out in pleasure when Steve sucked his cock, and his neck, where Steve is currently choking him out, has the same soft skin that Steve used to kiss.

He holds on until the moment Bucky lets go of the chip, and then he lets go. There's no time to check if he's breathing, no time to look for a pulse: Steve grabs the chip and leaps upwards, praying that he hasn't left the shell of James Buchanan Barnes empty beneath him.

It's a relief when the bullet tears through Steve's left thigh; it means that Bucky's still alive. Steve would take plenty of bullets to have that knowledge.
Steve keeps climbing. Bucky shoots him in the right forearm. Steve feels the bone crack.

It doesn't matter.

As he completes his mission, Bucky shoots him again, in the back. Steve watches the bullet leave his abdomen and embed itself in the metal rod in front of the control chips.

He's forgotten how much it hurts, to get gutshot.

Waiting to feel Bucky's last bullet go through his head, Steve tells Maria to fire, and starts the difficult, painful climb back down to his long lost love and his brother in arms. His mission is over, and he's gotta try.

Sam said he might have to give his life, to give Bucky a choice. The lucky thing is, Steve might be dying anyway, which makes it an easier gift to give.

He's always known that he would sacrifice himself to let another soldier live, and that he would sacrifice anything for Bucky. Anything that was his to sacrifice.

By the time he gets down to Bucky, half the helicarrier is in ruins, and he's pinned underneath a huge part of the structure. It's the kind of thing that Steve can lift, like he can lift a tank, but he knows enough first aid to know that doing it with a hole in his belly might be the last thing he ever does.

He lifts the beam. Something gives way painfully in his gut, and he feels more blood spilling out of him. As he does it, he watches Bucky's hunted expression, the pure animal fear in his eyes, like a dog cowering in terror, anticipating abuse.

Bucky doesn't know him.

Steve will just have to fix that.

Bucky punches him, and Steve doesn't punch back.

"Bucky," he pants, "you've known me your whole life."

Turns out a direct hit from the metal arm is just as brutal as Steve thought it would be. Steve is rocked backwards.

"Your name is James Buchanan Barnes," Steve says slowly. This seems to enrage the ghost, and he launches himself at Steve screaming.

"Shut up!"

Another punch to the face. Steve stumbles, his vision going blurry. He doesn't know if it's from the blood loss or the blows to the head. Probably both.

It's worth it, though, because Bucky is angry. And ghosts don't get angry.

He takes off the helmet and drops it on the ground, turning as best he can to face Bucky just like he did on the freeway bridge, just like his first instinct told him to do: shoulders squared, letting him see his face.

Presenting an easy target.

"I'm not gonna fight you," Steve says, and drops his shield down into the Potomac.
He doesn't need it anymore. His body will serve instead, a human shield for Bucky to throw his rage against. Steve knows fighting, but he knows this too, from every hopeless backalley brawl he ever stepped into, every beat-down he ever got when the wrong somebody noticed his lipstick, every police raid that ever made them all itch to throw a high heel like it was a knife. It's in his bones and in his blood, learned at his mother's knee in the protest march, practiced shoulder-to-shoulder in the strike line and the sit-down, his arms linked with those of his brothers and sisters.

Steve is the only one here now, no one around to link their arms with his or take his blows for him, like Danielle and Valentine and Bucky used to do. He's a union of one, a single pacifist in patriotic drag against the greatest weapon since Captain America.

But he knows how to take a punch. And he knows why to take one, too.

"You're my friend," Steve says.

Bucky tackles him to the ground, and Steve goes willingly, a sick rush of blood flowing from his gut as he hits the hard metal surface.

"You're my mission," Bucky says, and punches him, and punches him, and punches him. Steve loses vision in one eye. He feels a tooth pop out, and more blood gush into his mouth.

It's been a long time since he felt this close to death, he thinks idly, almost floating. The last time was not long after his Ma died, when he came down with a fever that kept him in bed for weeks. It was that fever that put him out of his job, made him give up his Ma's apartment.

Bucky was there then, too, wiping his brow, feeding him soup whenever he was lucid enough to eat, and talking about the rooming house suite they could get together, where they could be carefree young fellas out on the town.

Now, Bucky punches him, over and over. "You're! My! Mission!" he screams, and Steve nods as well as he's able. There's something broken in his face.

"Then finish it," Steve says, surrendering. No longer a soldier. A conscientious objector, instead, protesting every act of violence that's ever been done to his lover in the name of peace.

_We embraced_, he thinks.

"Cuz I'm with you to the end of the line."

As Steve loses consciousness, he hopes he'll wake up again. He hopes Bucky will, too.
Steve wakes to the sound of unfamiliar music and the familiar sight of Sam Wilson on his right.

"On your left," he says, because he wants Sam's eyes on him, Sam's slow smile pointed in his direction.

"You probably shouldn't move much," Sam says, a minute later. "You broke your – a lot of things. I have the list if you want it."

Experimentally, Steve lifts his right arm so he can wave Sam's worries away. Sure enough, there's the telltale, familiar pull of a quickly knitting bone. He remembers the bullet that fractured it.

"How long was I out?" he asks. His mouth is dry. He hurts everywhere, his body a single thrumming center of pain with hot spots here and there: his gut, his thigh, his shoulder. He can feel his organs arranging themselves back into position.

"About three days. You went into a coma. Doctors said it was a lucky thing, too, because you burn through every anesthetic and painkiller they have at a ridiculous rate."

"Also I can't get drunk." He coughs a little as he says it, and Sam is at his side in an instant, a plastic cup of water in his hands. He bends the straw towards Steve.

"That's a major bummer," Sam says.

Steve drinks gratefully.

"Yeah."

"They haven't found Barnes yet," Sam says, so that Steve doesn't have to ask. "Natasha called Bruce and Pepper, they're looking for him."

Steve blinks in alarm.

"Don't worry, they're not going to engage if they find him. Just keep tabs. Natasha said that's what you'd want."

"Yeah," Steve sighs. "That's – that's good. But they haven't found him dead, either."

"No," Sam says. "We just found you."

A memory hits him, then, the old memory of arctic water enveloping him – no, warmer than that, muddier: a new memory. He tries to put it together.

"Someone pulled me out of the river," he says, experiencing the concept physically, as a hard pull on his decorative uniform strap, his left one, the one buckled below his non-injured shoulder.

Sam doesn't speak for a moment, but when he does, his voice is gentle. "There was no one anywhere near you except the people on that helicarrier."

Steve smiles; it pulls painfully at his split lip, but he doesn't stop.

"It could've been anyone," Sam cautions. Steve shakes his head. In his fragments of memory, he can smell leather and gunpowder, can see sunlight glinting off of metal.
"It was Bucky."

Sam chuckles and breaks into a smile. "Yeah," he says, "I think it was."

"Bucky's alive. And not trying to kill me anymore." The words come out of Steve's throat on a hoarse, joyful laugh.

"Low bar for friendship, but I guess you know what you're doing," Sam shrugs. He's smiling too.

"Sam," Steve says, swept by affection, reaching out towards him. "Sam." His shoulder flares with pain as he moves it; from the stab wound, Steve remembers. "Sam, how long have you been sitting here?"

Frowning, Sam takes his hand and, pointedly but gently, pushes it closer to Steve so his shoulder doesn't have to take the strain. He keeps holding it, though, interlacing their fingers on the side of the bed.

"About three days," he says quietly.

Steve figured as much. He closes his eyes for a moment; it's been years since being awake, sitting up, or talking could tire him out, but the heavy feeling of exhaustion is still familiar enough. He breathes out and listens to the music.

All right, baby, ooh
I've come up hard, but now I'm cool
I didn't make it, baby, playin' by the rules
I've come up hard, baby, but now I'm fine
I'm checkin' trouble, sugar, hey, movin' down the line

"This is the one you wanted me to hear," Steve says. He searches his memory. "Marvin Gaye."

"Yeah," Sam says. "But you don't gotta write me an essay of Marvin Gaye appreciation right now. Next week will be fine."

Steve rubs his thumb over Sam's and smiles. "I'll get right on it."

Soulful, slow. Like the singer is a little sad about feeling fine. He wonders if this is what they call soul music.

Steve's eyes have just slipped closed again when a series of noises startle him alert: the whoosh of the door opening, the clatter of wheels and equipment, and the squeak of tennis shoes against the polished floor.

His heart hammering in his chest, he pulls his hand away from Sam's. He has to kind of yank to pull their fingers apart, and then he's panicking, not sure what to do with his hands. In desperation, he lays them both over his lap.

Sam pulls back suddenly, like he's been slapped. When Steve dares to glance at him, he looks upset, frowning and narrowing his eyes. Steve feels hot shame run over his skin, shame that he might've let the nurse see them holding hands, shame that he didn't, shame that he feels the shame to begin with. He purses his lips, and has the sudden, irrational urge to be mad at Sam for being mad about it.

"Oh, Captain Rogers, good to see you up!" The nurse, a cheerful young woman with her dark hair in a ponytail and bright pink flower-patterned scrubs, doesn't seem to have noticed anything anyway.
"Thank you, ma'am," Steve replies politely.

Sam doesn't say anything.

"How are you feeling? In any pain?"

"Some, ma'am. Not too bad."

She gives him an eyebrow like she's heard that before. "Would you like a painkiller? The doctors are still trying to figure out what we can give you that won't knock you out but will reduce the pain. I've got a new one to try."

He's been putting the pain out of his mind, just by force of habit, but now that he thinks about it he can feel every single wound, the throb of pain growing stronger with every moment of consciousness. "Thank you, I'd appreciate it."

She takes a needle off of her tray and inserts it into his IV. "Let me know if this helps," she says. They give it a minute, but the pain doesn't lessen.

"Anything?" she asks.

Steve shakes his head. "Afraid not."

"All right, I'll go and talk to Doctor Moller. You stay put."

"Wouldn't dream of moving, ma'am," Steve replies, and gives her a smile.

She smiles back, then bustles her cart back out of the room.

Steve turns back to Sam, afraid of what he might see on his face. To his surprise, Sam doesn't look mad, but his expression is hard to read; Steve thinks he looks . . . blank. Maybe tired.

"I – you knew I wasn't out," Steve says. It sounds like an accusation, even to his own ears.

Sam frowns. "Yeah, I knew," he says. He sighs. "Been a while since I been through that kind of song and dance, though."

"You don't – you always date guys who are. Out of the closet."

Sam's laugh is the quiet, rueful kind. "Yeah. Last time I dated someone who wasn't out, I – it was hard. My heart got pretty well broke. So bad that my grandma made me promise not to date closeted guys anymore."

Steve tries to wrap his mind around that. "I don't want to break your heart, Sam," he says. He doesn't know if it's the idea of losing Sam or if it's the gut wound, but he aches inside.

"I know you don't," Sam replies, sighing. He shakes his head, then, as if shaking away the topic of conversation entirely, and takes a deep breath.

"People been by to see you," he says, changing the subject. "Whole celebrity cavalcade."

"Yeah?" Steve asks. He thought he'd effectively alienated all the polite celebrities when he came out in favor of abortion, immigration, welfare, unions, and the redistribution of American wealth.

"Tony Stark, Pepper Potts, Bruce Banner," Sam says.
"Oh, those celebrities." Steve tries to joke, and a little smile appears on Sam's face.

"And Colonel Rhodes was here," he adds, brightening further. "War Machine! Did you know he came down and did flight training with us at Fort Bragg, when we first got the wings?"

"Jim's here?" Steve asks, sitting up quickly and then wincing when it yanks at the hole in his abdomen.

"Settle down, he's gone now," Sam says. "He sat with you for a while, though, he let me go home to shower and change and oh my God Colonel James Rhodes is your boyfriend, isn't he."

Steve winces. He doesn't want to have to say it, but he doesn't have a choice, not when he has to protect Jim. "My boyfriend is . . . kind of a private person, Sam," he says, quietly.

"Sorry," Sam says, more quietly. "I'll be – I won't tell, I promise."

"Thank you," Steve says. He looks over at Sam's face, but Sam doesn't meet his eyes for a second. Then he looks back up and shrugs.

"No problem," he sighs, then smiles softly. "But, wow, there are just a bunch of hot queer superheroes, huh? I am kind of freaking out." He shakes his head in disbelief. "War Machine!" he hisses, again.

Steve smiles. "Yeah. I would've introduced you. He was overseas for a couple weeks, I guess he just got back."

"Yeah, the President came home in a hurry when she heard about . . . all this," Sam says. He waves towards the window, meaning to include the revelation that American Nazis almost took over the world, the crashed helicarriers in the river, and the destruction of the world's biggest intelligence organization.

"Did Natasha dump the files?" Steve asks.

"Oh yeah. And she's on the Hill now, answering for it. I've lived in Washington for years, I've never heard of politicians getting their asses in a room that fast."

Steve widens his eyes in alarm. "Should I – "

"I think she's better off without you, to be honest," Sam says. "She was by yesterday, she said it's pissing them off that you're not there."

Huffing a laugh, Steve says, "Good."

There's a little silence between them, then. Steve wants to reach out and take Sam's hand again, but he doesn't know if Sam would be okay with it, so he doesn't.

"You want me to call Colonel Rhodes? He said I should let him know when you woke up."

Jim hadn't wanted to sit by his bedside. Or, he had, but couldn't. Steve feels a wave of anger for every asshole who would make his life harder for waiting next to Sam.

"I miss him," Steve says, which isn't really the right thing to say, not to Sam, but it's all he can think of. "Sorry," he adds.

"Hey, hey, man, don't apologize." Sam grimaces. "And I'm sorry, I shouldn't call you that. Gotta think of something else to call you."
"Kinda liked it when you called me beautiful," Steve says, trying his best cocky grin.

Sam laughs. "Kay then." Looking right into Steve's eyes, he says, "Beautiful. Imma go call your boy, all right? There's no phones allowed in here."

Steve nods, grateful. "Thanks, Sam."

* 

The new drugs start kicking in after all, and once they do Steve finds it hard to stay conscious for long. When he does swim up out of it Sam is there, reading a book, or changing up the music, or sitting quietly next to Steve; not touching him, but present. At least once he's sure he hears Jim, too, Jim's voice speaking softly at the edge of his awareness, but he can't quite break through into consciousness to hear him.

After a while – Steve wonders if it's still three days since the battle, or if it might be four or five by now – he comes to consciousness with the pain lessened and the image, before his eyes, of Sam Wilson and Jim Rhodes standing close together, almost shoulder to shoulder, and talking in low tones.

"No, it still flies great," Sam is saying. "Or, it did. I gotta say I miss those T'Challa prototypes, though."

"Yeah, I never did figure out where those went. Not that I'm suggesting that anyone should stage a clandestine mission to retrieve them."

Steve chuckles a little at that, which makes a sharp flare of pain flash across his back. He shifts uncomfortably.

"Hey there," Sam says, noticing Steve's slow movements. "How you feeling?"

"M'okay," Steve says. He feels strange, like he's floating. It's possible that they finally gave him the right amount of painkillers to have an effect without also knocking him out. "Hey Jim."

Jim is at his side in a moment, his hands resting on the side rail of the bed.

"Anyway, I'm gonna just hit this," Sam says, from the other side of the room, pulling the blinds so that the room isn't visible from the outside. As Steve watches, he opens the door and backs into the hallway. "And step outside for a minute. Not far outside, you know, so I'll be here if the nurses come by."

Then he sort of sidles awkwardly out the door and shuts it behind him.

"I like him," Jim says. Once the door is closed, he takes Steve's hand in his and strokes slowly. Steve closes his eyes, feeling himself relax in a way he hasn't in weeks.

"I saw him first," Steve mumbles. His lips aren't working quite right. He opens his eyes again and looks up at Jim.

"Not technically true, but I think he only has eyes for you anyway, sweetheart," Jim says softly, and then bends down to kiss him.

Steve's lips do fine after all. Or he thinks they do. He's not sure he could even feel it this time if he drooled.
"I missed you so much," he sighs against Jim's mouth. "I wanted you with me."

"SHIELD – or, HYDRA, I guess," Jim says, stumbling over the terms with the rest of them, "HYDRA had a near-total communications blackout, so by the time we got wind of what was happening, it was already over."

"I know you would've come if you could."

"I would've been by your side," Jim says, fiercely.

Steve swallows. "They told you? About Bucky?"

"Yeah." Jim is one of only three people alive who truly know what Bucky meant to him. What Bucky means to him. "I was so worried for you, when Natasha called me. I can't imagine what that's been like."

"Yeah," Steve says, not sure how to communicate the way it'd felt, seeing Bucky on the freeway bridge, seeing Bucky look right through him like they were strangers. "It was hard. I'm still – it's still hard to get my mind around, what's been done to him."

Jim nods, frowning, and squeezes Steve's hand. Steve purses his lips, wanting Jim to know about the other half of it, too.

"But that's not all," he says, and Jim cocks his head curiously. Steve allows himself a little smile. "In some ways, it's been – good. Freeing. Hopeful."

"Unmourning a loss," Jim says. His thumb is stroking slowly back and forth over Steve's knuckles. Steve sighs, because that's it exactly. Like part of his grief has been lifted away.

"Yeah." Looking up at Jim, he says, "I didn't know if I'd wake up this time. I'm really glad I did."

"Me too," Jim breathes.

"Kiss me again." Steve doesn't have the strength to pull Jim down by his hand so he tugs instead, indicating the direction he wants Jim to go.

This time Jim kisses him longer, the wet hot lingering kind of kiss that Steve associates with fucking, not with convalescing.

When he pulls back, he doesn't go far, his nose brushing Steve's as he pulls back a few inches. "I brought you something," he says.

"Yeah? Please don't tell me it's your dick, I don't think I'm up to that yet. I'm pretty sure I'm regrowing a tooth." It itches, deep in his mouth.

"Christ," Jim says, "no." He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a tube of lipstick.

Steve feels a slow smile lighting up his whole face.

He takes it from Jim's hand, and looks at the bottom. Adora, it says, the shade he wanted before the battle, the one that's Peggy Carter red for bravery with a few Captain America sparkles for flair.

"How'd you know this was the right one?" he asks.

Jim smiles his lopsided smile. "That one seemed the most like you."
"You think the nurses will notice if my lips are all red and sparkly?"

"Well, yes," Jim says, "so that's up to you. But I thought you might want to use it, even if you have to take it off after."

"Yeah," Steve says, warmed by the thought, "yeah, okay." He presses his lips together experimentally; they're dry, though the cut has disappeared.

Jim pulls Steve's lip moisturizer out of another pocket, and Steve smiles. The touch of Jim's finger, as he applies it to Steve's lips, is soft, the moisturizer itself pleasurably cool.

When Jim pulls out the lipstick, Steve shakes his head. "You gotta give it a minute."

"Okay," Jim says, and bends down to kiss him again.

"Not on the lips," Steve says.

"Well, that leaves a lot of options," Jim says. He kisses Steve's forehead, and his cheeks, and his chin, and a slow line below his jaw that seems to last forever.

"How about now?" Jim asks, when he pulls back again.

"Now you could do whatever you wanted to me," Steve says.

"What an offer," Jim murmurs.

Jim does a good job with the lipstick. As he applies it, he concentrates carefully, the same way he does standing over a car engine, watching for smudges and wiping them away with his thumb when they show up.

"Red and sparkly," he says, finally satisfied. "You look gorgeous."

"You like the paper gown look, huh," Steve says. "I don't know why I bothered buying all those fancy dresses."

Closing his eyes, as if in pain, Jim bends down and kisses Steve's forehead again. "They told me you were gonna die," he says, in a choked voice.

"I didn't. " Steve holds out his arms as best he can, and Jim collapses down into the hug. "Jim, I didn't."

They hold each other for a long time, just breathing, and then Jim stands up again, wiping at his eyes, and sits down heavily in the chair.

"So," he says, his voice sounding a little forced, "I was worried you'd found a new handsome black Air Force officer to replace me with, but it turns out he was enlisted, so that's all right."

"There's no one on Earth I could replace you with," Steve says, "no one." His voice is choked as he thinks about it, how precious Jim is, how much he's brought to Steve's life. He smiles when he sees the watery smile bloom on Jim's face. "Besides, you outrank him, Colonel."

"Damn straight. " Jim passes the heels of his hands over his eyes again, pushing away more tears. "Did you end up talking to him? About – " he gestures at Steve's mouth. "The lipstick, and everything?"

"I told him I'm, uh, genderqueer," Steve says, shyly. "And I told him how I like to dress and all
that." He wants to shiver, remembering it, the way Sam had buckled his boots for him, and kissed him just below the knee, and called him pretty.

"And he was good about it?" Jim sounds suddenly fierce, and Steve could just about swoon at the idea of Jim standing up for him.

"Yeah, he was really good," Steve says. Jim nods once, thoughtfully.

"You want him to see you with your lipstick on? Or you want me to help you wash it off?"

The thought makes uncertainty roll through him; talking about it is one thing, but letting Sam see is something else. But the uncertainty is nothing next to the warm wave of desire he feels alongside it, to show even more of himself to Sam.

"I'd like him to see," Steve says. Jim squeezes his hand and smiles.

"Okay, then maybe I'll go get him," he says. "Before I'm tempted to mess up that lipstick myself."

"That would be a tragedy," Steve says.

Jim sticks his head out the door and beckons, and Sam comes in.

"Hey," he says, then notices Steve's lipstick. "Oh, sparkly!"

Steve laughs, and Jim does, too, as he slips out to watch for the nurses.

"Jim brought it for me. Thought it'd cheer me up some."

"Certainly cheers me up," Sam says, and bends down to kiss Steve, lightly, on the lips. When he pulls back, there's a little smear of red on his mouth.

Steve thinks about the promise Sam made to his grandma.

"Sam," Steve says, watching the red of his lips and feeling suddenly sure of what comes next. He takes Sam's hand; Sam looks down at it thoughtfully.

"Yeah?" Sam asks. "You need something?"

"I need to talk to Natasha," Steve says, "whenever she's free."

"I texted her already, to tell her she has a shot at seeing you while you're conscious now," Sam says, nodding. Watching Steve carefully, he asks, "What else?"

"I think I need an appointment with a VA case worker," Steve says. "If there's anyone there who can help me with the whole process. What did you call it? Job training and transitioning?"

"You mean -- " Sam begins, furrowing his brow. Steve nods at him firmly.

"I want to talk to someone about getting out," he says.

*

Sam and Jim both stay with him for a while, and it makes Steve glad to see the two of them building up a tentative rapport and sharing gentle jokes with each other, even if they are mostly at Steve's expense. They do give Steve a cloth to wash away the lipstick, so that the nurses don't see, and Steve doesn't feel its loss too badly with Sam and Jim on either side of his bed, looking at him
like they can see who he is even without it.

"I'm gonna go home for a shower," Sam says, about an hour later, standing up to stretch and giving Steve and Jim both a good view of his abs where his shirt rides up. Jim grins at Steve lasciviously, and Steve has to roll his eyes, embarrassed and pleased. "I'll talk to someone about that appointment you wanted, too."

"Thank you, Sam," Steve says, and Sam runs his hand through Steve's hair fondly before he goes. Steve leans into the touch.

"Anytime," Sam says easily.

When they're alone again, Jim says, "You two are pretty comfortable with each other." He says it gently, and it's a question, but Steve hopes it's not an anxious one.

"I've always found that fighting beside someone makes that happen," Steve says, meeting Jim's eyes. "As you should know."

"I knew sweeping you off your feet in battle was a good move," Jim chuckles.

"But we haven't – I mean, it's just been kissing. We were really busy taking down HYDRA."

"I'm glad he was there for you. And you two should definitely have sex, if you want to."

"Jim, can I tell you," Steve says, throwing his head back against the pillow. "Can I tell you, I want to have sex with that guy so bad."

Jim laughs. "I don't blame you," he says. "Maybe when you're all healed up?"

"Once my tooth grows back," Steve agrees. Then he sighs. "And – there's so much stuff to take care of. So many consequences to deal with. I'm glad Natasha is working the political side of things, but the fallout is going to be a disaster."

"Speaking of," Jim says, "There's something else I have to tell you. I wasn't sure if you'd want Sam to know, or if you would want to keep it to yourself for now."

Steve's blood goes cold as he braces for whatever news Jim has. From his tone, it doesn't sound good.

"Okay," he says.

"The kids – you remember the kids from the Ten Rings base?"

"God," Steve says, mouth so dry his words rasp their way out. "What happened."

"It's not – they're not dead, so far as we know. But there were HYDRA agents among the SHIELD people at the Academy. Among the teachers and therapists who were supposed to be helping them." Jim pauses for a moment, his breath coming fast, and Steve feels his own anger leap to join Jim's. "They tried to kidnap the ones with powers when the shit hit the fan."

Closing his eyes, but only for a second, Steve forces himself to breathe in and nods for Jim to continue.

"They all – well, it looks like they killed one of the HYDRA people, then broke out and ran away together."
None of them is older than twelve, Steve recalls. He put those kids with SHIELD. "So where are they now?" Steve asks, swallowing.

"That's the thing. We have no idea. There were a couple of sightings in the first days, so we know they're all together, but now they seem to be laying low."

"They don't trust anyone," Steve says. He knows the feeling.

"I wouldn't, if I were them. The people assigned to their care suddenly tried to put them right back into some nightmare experimentation scenario."

"Jesus," Steve breathes. "What can we do?"

"Natasha and I talked about it," Jim says, "because she's – kind of been where these kids are, I think. Or close to it. And she said the best thing, for right now, is to let them be. That trying to hunt them down would just scare them further away."

Steve covers his face with his hand. "That's true," he acknowledges. He doesn't want it to be true; he wants to jump right out of the hospital bed and go round them all up right now. But who knows how a scared ten year old with half-developed superpowers would react to him barging in behind his shield.

Probably about as well as Bucky would, if Steve went out hunting for him. He shifts impatiently in the hospital bed, longing for some kind of movement, and gets brought up short by the intense burst of pain through his abdomen that makes him wince and hiss in agony.

"You had better not be thinking about getting up and moving," Jim says warningly. "Just because you might not die of it doesn't mean it's a good idea."

"There's so much I need to do," Steve says. "People I need to talk to."

"Rupturing your internal organs again isn't going to help find Bucky or the kids," Jim says, far too reasonably. "And right now there's nothing physical you can do to help them, anyway. I know you're going to ask Natasha to find some intel on Bucky. Let me run the search for the kids, try to keep track of sightings and figure out where they are. By the time there's something to actually do, maybe you'll be healed up."

"All right," Steve sighs. "You're right. But it feels wrong to be lying here while everyone else is out doing the work."

"I know, sweetheart," Jim says softly. "I know it's hard for you." He brushes his fingers lightly over Steve's hand.

"It's not that I don't trust you," Steve says emphatically. "I trust you more than anyone." Steve doesn't ever want to tell Jim about the thought that passed through his mind in his darkest hours, just after Nick was shot, the thought that even Jim could be a spy sent to betray him. Now, looking into Jim's eyes, he's ashamed of ever having thought such a thing.

Jim smiles gently. "So let me be your hands for now," he says. "Me and Natasha. We'll figure things out, and you can concentrate on getting better."

"Okay," Steve says. "I can do that."

*
Turns out, though, that it's a lot harder to do that than Steve anticipates. He remembers all the days he used to spend too ill to move, trying to get himself well enough to get up again, and so he's used to the boredom of the sickbed, but he's never had to do it before while Bucky was lost and hurt, or while the world was falling to pieces around them, or while a bunch of scared kids were in need of his help.

Natasha comes by a couple of times, to give him updates on whether or not he's going to be charged with treason. She's always wearing a suit and elegantly coiffed, having just come from one of the meetings Steve's been watching on television.

"Yeah, there's a lot to sort through, information-wise," she says, kicking her feet up on the bedside table and eating Steve's green jello. Her heels are killer. "So the international community is going to be in a tizzy for a while yet. And frankly, so many people have done so many illegal things that we're going to come out looking way better for stopping them than we look bad for doing it without authorization."

"You sure you don't need me up there? They could wheel me in and display my wounds for sympathy," Steve says. Natasha shrugs.

"There were photographers there when you were rescued," she says. "Plenty of photos already of your bleeding body in your old Captain America uniform. Couldn't have been better publicity if you'd planned it."

"That's cold, Nat," Steve says. He's changed the channel every time they've shown the report on TV: CAPTAIN AMERICA PULLED FROM POTOMAC. He doesn't want to see himself, wet and almost dead, being dredged up from the water once again.

"That's the truth."

There was something, though, in the image of his bleeding body that had caught his eye: his shield, laid over his chest, like flowers on a corpse. He can't help but think that it made the image even better publicity than it would've been otherwise.

"Who found my shield?" he asks.

Natasha tosses the empty jello cup and spoon casually onto Steve’s tray. "I did."

"And you . . . put it on me." He understands why she did it, of course, and he doesn't blame her, but it's still weird to think about his unconscious body turned into a symbol once again. It makes him feel . . . used, uncomfortable, in a way that public appearances never have.

It reminds him, too much, of what was done to him after he went into the ice.

All the casual relaxation goes out of Natasha’s posture and she swivels in her chair to meet Steve’s eyes. "Yeah, I sure did," she says, voice like steel. Steve starts to frown, but she goes on, speaking quickly: "And I’d do it again, because that image buys us time to tell the truth. I picked up that hunk of metal and arranged it on your body and I’d do it again, no matter how mad I might be that you broke your promise to me."

Don’t put down your best weapon when you’re fighting a deadly assassin, Natasha had told him, after Batroc. Steve licks his dry lips.

"How’d you know?" he asks.

She arches her eyebrow. "You just told me. And I got the idea, from the number of bullet holes in
you, that you weren’t putting up your best fight."

"I’m sorry, Natasha," he says. "It was the right thing to do."

She holds his gaze for a long moment, expression blank and unreadable. "You’re hard to be friends with, Rogers. You’re hard work."

Steve breathes out, letting those words settle around him.

"I know," he says.

There’s a little silence between them. Steve closes his eyes; the painkillers they gave him this time are already wearing off. He aches everywhere.

"What about Bucky?" he asks, after a while.

Natasha shrugs. "A few sightings in the first few days. Sleeping on a park bench, buying a hot dog. He robbed a convenience store."

Steve opens his eyes and stares at her in shock. "Did he – was anyone hurt?"

"No," Natasha says slowly. "No, he was very careful, actually. A man tried to stop him, and he used his right arm, rather than his left, to push him away."

Steve breathes out. "He's gonna get shot," he says.

Natasha nods at this possibility. "But he's not gonna shoot anyone. I don't think. That's something."

It's not enough.

"I have to go out and get him, Natasha, I have to find him, I have to bring him in – "

"How are you gonna do that, exactly?" she asks, meeting his eyes. "If he doesn't want to go. If he's still under the influence of his programming. If he fights you."

"He saved my life," Steve insists.

She shakes her head. "Doesn't mean you won't trigger him the moment you try to force him to do anything."

"He's not a gun," Steve says.

"He is," Natasha says. "And he's a victim. And he's your friend." She purses her lips and looks down. "You read my SHIELD file," she says.

Steve nods, frowning.

"You know what Clint did for me. That he was sent to kill me."

"He decided not to," Steve says. "I know."

"But you know I didn't just turn around and follow him in to SHIELD, right?" Natasha says. "He waited for me. It took me a long time. Clint was . . . patient. He held still."

"You're saying you and Bucky are alike."

"I'm saying you may have to let him come in on his own. Let him come to you."
There's a hollow ache, deep in Steve's stomach, that he's not sure has anything to do with the bullet wound. "What if he doesn't know me," Steve says, quietly, looking down at his hands. "What if he can't find me?"

She sighs. "We'll work on that. But Steve?"

He looks up at her; she's wearing that little half-smile that he knows is her most genuine.

"I came in. I found Clint, I found you all. He can do it too. Trust him."

*

It's a few more days before Steve can move without a lot of pain, and in that time he changes his mind about the VA again and again. He doesn't know if there's any service for him to stay in, now that SHIELD is gone, but even if it's just symbolic, resigning still seems too final.

"Sam, did you make me an appointment with the case worker?" he asks, the next time Sam comes by to visit him.

"Yup," Sam says. "Tamara. I think you'll like her, she was Army like you. Why?"

"I think we should cancel it," Steve says, all in a rush. "It's too – it sends too much of a message, and I have to think about the effect it'll have on public opinion."

"Okay," Sam says. "No problem."

A couple hours later, when Sam is coming back with an illegal donut that he bought downstairs for Steve, Steve says, "Did you cancel the appointment?"

"Not yet," Sam says easily.

"Then maybe we'd better keep it," Steve says.

"Sure."

He spends the next hours going back and forth a few more times, until he's apologizing to Sam every time he brings the subject up. Eventually Sam sighs and gives him a long look.

"Listen, Steve," he says, "you're obviously undecided about what you want to do. That's okay. Tamara isn't going to show up with papers for you to sign in blood and stand over you with a hot poker. You need help making this decision, and she can do that. Even if it takes a while. She won't pressure you, I swear, and she won't go to the media."

"Okay," Steve breathes. "Okay. Thanks, Sam."

"You're welcome."

The problem remains, though: if he hangs up his stars and stripes, if he denounces what he's been doing for SHIELD... he'll be cutting himself off from a lot of the people and resources that could help him find Bucky, or take care of Bucky once he's been found.

*

His doctors and nurses advise him against leaving, but once he's walking around and digesting nutrients he's more than ready to be out of the hospital. He wants to catch up with everyone, and he needs to figure out his next move. Despite what Natasha said, there has to be more to do than wait
for Bucky, or for the kids.

Jim walks in the door to his room just as he's tugging his jeans up over the pink healing scars on his thigh and abdomen.

"Whoa, whoa, what're you doing there?" he asks, rushing in and setting his stuff down hurriedly on the bedside table. There are a couple new books from Steve's apartment and a cold lemonade.

"Oh wow, you found lemonade," Steve says, grinning. He'd complained yesterday about wanting one, sweet and freshly-squeezed.

"I made you lemonade," Jim says, walking back to close the door to the room. "Out of lemons and sugar. Why don't you lie down, take your pants off, and drink it?"

"Such a romantic invitation," Steve says, smiling, and the in-joke makes Jim smile too. "No, Jim, I gotta get out of this hospital." He looks down. It was really tiring just getting his jeans on, and now zipping them up seems like way too much work. Also they're kind of tight over his thigh wound.

"I thought you were getting out this evening?" Jim asks.

Frowning at him, Steve says, "I'm really ready to go now."

"God, that pout," Jim sighs. "Well, okay, but you can't wear those tight-ass jeans," he says. "You had major abdominal surgery."

"Yeah, I'm starting to regret this decision," Steve says mournfully.

Chuckling, Jim goes to the duffel bag he'd brought from Steve's apartment a couple of days before. Eventually he finds a pair of sweatpants and a big, loose t-shirt.

Steve stands up and shoves the jeans back down his hips, baring the shorts he'd managed to get on underneath. Then he sits again, thinking about how much effort it'll take to get them off his ankles. It's been a long time since simple tasks like this were so difficult for him, and he's torn between hating the feeling of weakness and wanting to relish it while it lasts.

"You know, if you don't have the strength to undress yourself, maybe you shouldn't be leaving the hospital," Jim says. He doesn't belabor the point, though, coming over to kneel down at Steve's feet and pull the jeans off.

The blinds are down, and the door is closed, so Steve lets himself reach down and cup Jim's jaw in his hand.

"Thanks, Jim," he says.

Jim smiles softly up at him, the old smile of someone who knows Steve well. He rocks forward on his knees and kisses Steve's thigh, right below the place where the skin has recently healed over the wound.

"Come on, put your arms up," Jim says, and when Steve complies he pulls the paper gown up over Steve's head and tosses it away. Naked now except for his underwear, Steve watches him fondly.

"You gonna kiss them all?"

Shaking his head and looking over Steve's torso, Jim says, "Do we have that kind of time? God, Steve. He shot you so many times."
Steve nods. "He was programmed to kill me."

Bending up, Jim kisses Steve's belly, above where Bucky's last bullet tore through.

"I ever tell you about Bucky's role in our unit? Back during the war?"

Jim blinks up at him. "No, but I think I remember reading that he was a sharpshooter, right? A sniper?"

Steve nods. Moving up his torso, Jim kisses Steve's side, where there's just a fading red line to show where he was grazed. Steve strokes his head, running his thumb along the shell of his ear where it's sensitive.

"He could've shot me in the head. Easily, at that distance."

Sitting on the bed next to him, Jim takes Steve's arm in his hands and bends to kiss the place where Bucky's bullet hit the bone. "He shot you in the arm instead?"

"To try to get me to fall."

Jim kisses Steve's shoulder wound, the stab wound. That one's still painful, and Steve hisses.

"Sorry," Jim says. "Still hurt there?"

"Yeah," Steve says. "Kiss it again."

Smiling, Jim does. His mouth feels good against Steve's skin, despite the pain, like there's some healing deeper down than the muscle or bone, some healing that Steve was missing until now.

"All better," Jim says.

"Come here," Steve says, and takes Jim's face in his hands, kissing his mouth as sweetly as he knows how. "You always take care of me," he breathes, resting his forehead against Jim's.

Quirking his eyebrows, Jim says, "You make it kind of a big job. I'm relieved you brought Sam in to help."

Steve smiles. "How're you feeling about that?" he asks.

"A lot better since I learned who he was and had a chance to spend some time with him again. He's someone who'll treat you right, I think."

Steve leans his head down against Jim's shoulder; Jim wraps his arm around him and holds him tight. "I think so too," he says. "It's sweet that that's what you were worried about."

"Isn't it what you were worried about, when I told Tony and Pepper how I felt?"

Steve nods. They sit together in silence for a minute or two, Jim warm against Steve's naked side. He's not cold, because he's never cold, but he does feel exposed, vulnerable in a completely comfortable way. He knows, now, what Jim sees when he looks at him. It's an image Steve can be proud to try to live up to.

"Oh, did I tell you," Steve says, as his mind wanders. "Natasha kissed me. A couple of times."

"Oh yeah?"
"Yeah. Once for undercover reasons, and once because – well, I guess for friendship reasons."

"Friendship reasons like with tongue?" Jim kisses the top of Steve's head.

"Yeah. Natasha's not always great at boundaries." Licking his lips, Steve adds, "I kind of liked it, to be honest."

"Huh," Jim says. "So it's not so much guys, for you, as it is literally anyone in a uniform who can handle a gun. Now I know why you saluted when you met me."

Steve pokes Jim in the ribs. "I'll salute you all day and all night, Colonel," he murmurs. "But, no, I'm not gonna – I like being friends with Natasha. We work well that way, I think."

"But you're warning me that she might sometimes make out with you."

Steve laughs. "I guess I am." Sitting up, Steve shifts on the bed to look at Jim. "And I guess I'd better put clothes on before some well-meaning nurse comes in and sees me like this."

"I made it so the door wouldn't open," Jim says, smiling.

Steve glances over at the door, puzzled, because it doesn't have a mechanical lock. "What, like, electronically?"

"No, with a doorstop."

"Ha. Okay." He pulls on his sweatpants anyway, figuring that he'd rather snuggle with Jim somewhere that doesn't smell like antiseptic.

"So what's your first move?" Jim asks.

"Go home," Steve says, accepting Jim's help in getting the t-shirt over his head without straining his wounded arm. "Get my phone. Get in touch with people. Start making maps. I gotta figure out where Bucky is."

Thinking back on what Natasha said, Steve is still confused about what he's going to do once he does figure out where Bucky is, but he'll take things one step at a time and hope he can work that out when he gets there.

"Well," Jim sighs, "if all these injuries didn't kill you, I suppose escaping from the hospital half a day early won't either."

Steve's still a little shaky on his left leg, but it's not so bad as it was and he's sure he can make it down to the lobby. "Give me a lift home?"

"I'm not gonna make you take the bus. Especially given all the people outside."

When they get to the ground floor, Steve sees what he means: there are hundreds of people gathered outside the hospital, press and well-wishers and protesters, people with flowers and cards, and people with signs that say CAPTAIN AMERICA: TRAITOR on them in big black letters.

"God," Steve says. He had no idea. These people must've been here for days. "Is there a plan for this?"

"There was, but you weren't supposed to be released until later today."

Steve frowns. "Well, no way out but through, I suppose."
There are actually multiple ways out," Jim says, rushing to keep pace with Steve as he walks unsteadily for the front doors. "I could get my suit and take you off the roof, we could use the back entrance, there's a loading dock – "

Stopping for a second, Steve turns to him. "You don't have to come with me."

Jim rolls his eyes. "If you get shot again five feet from the hospital, at least I'll be there this time."

Steve grins at him and charges forward, opening the hospital doors to a wall of sound and light.

"Captain Rogers, can you explain your actions against SHIELD?"

"Captain Rogers, do you consider what you've done to be treason?"

"Captain Rogers, did you know some people are calling you an anarchist revolutionary bent on the destruction of the American government?"

"Captain Rogers, would you care to make a statement?"

Steve pauses at that one, and turns. The reporter looks momentarily stunned that she's captured his attention, but doesn't waste any time rushing forward with her microphone.

"Sure," he says, as he hears Jim sighing behind him. "Here it is. SHIELD was corrupt, not just with HYDRA, but with homegrown violence and paranoia. I'm glad it's gone. I'm mourning all the lives that were lost to make that happen, and grateful to those who gave their lives in service. It's not an easy choice to make, to fight for justice and against power. I admire everyone who had the courage to do that. And if people want to call me a revolutionary," he smiles for the camera, "well, I think that's just fine. I'm honored. Some of my best friends have been revolutionaries. We need a little revolution from time to time."

He turns away, pushing his way through the crowd as gently as he can, wincing when his shoulder comes into contact with the moving, demanding mass of people. The reporters finally notice Jim and start throwing questions at him, too, but Jim waves a practiced hand and offers them his usual "no comment," in an increasingly firm tone, until they back off.

Some of the crowd cheers for him, and some of the crowd screams at him. It's a lot to take, though Steve actually isn't sure if it's harder to be called a hero or a traitor. When they get to Jim's car, Steve relaxes back in the passenger seat and closes his eyes.

"Next time, let me take you off the roof," Jim says.

"Never gonna happen," Steve says, smiling tiredly, and Jim laughs.

Steve's apartment building is being patrolled by an Iron Man suit, which makes Steve frown, thinking of his neighbors, but it has kept the protesters and reporters to the other side of the street.

"Is Tony in that thing?"

"Just a rental," Jim says. "It's empty. And it doesn't actually have working guns. I checked it myself."

Kate's apartment door is closed, and there's no light to be seen from under it. Steve wonders if she's gone permanently, or if she'll be back when things settle down.

When they open the door to Steve's apartment, Steve expects a mess, blood still on the floor and
bullet holes in the walls, but as they walk in Steve hears voices already inside. He freezes, clamping one hand around Jim's arm.

"It's okay," Jim says, smiling at him and planting a soft kiss on his cheek. "C'mon."

They go in further, and as Steve looks around the corner he sees Sam with some drywall spackle in his hands, patching up the walls, and Bruce crouched down on the floor with his bug-scanning device, running it over the floors inch by inch. They're talking quietly, not yet aware of Steve and Jim standing in the threshold.

"Yeah, man, I tried it, but it's the worst for paranoia! I felt like I was in a David Lynch movie the whole time!"

Bruce chuckles. "I think I know a great variety for you, then," he says, then glances over his shoulder and sees them. "Hey, oh my God, hi guys, come in! Jim, we thought it was gonna be more like five thirty."

"You try standing between Steve and an exit door," Jim sighs, which makes Steve grin.

"Sorry, were you all planning a surprise party?" he asks, blinking at them happily.

Pepper and Tony come out of the kitchen. "It crossed our minds," Pepper says, holding her arms open.

Steve hugs her, laughing. "Wow, don't tell me you two are cooking," he says, accepting her soft kiss on his cheek.

"Cooking is the most delicious form of science," Tony says, slipping his goggles down around his neck. He wraps his arms around Steve too, after Pepper, and it's a little awkward at first but then Tony's squeezing tight and they're rocking back and forth. It's as close as they've ever been, Steve thinks. Odd that it should only happen after Steve's destroyed the organization that Tony's father helped to build. He accepts the affection, bemused, and squeezes back despite the flaring pain throughout his torso.

"All right, get moving, my turn," Bruce laughs, shoving at Tony's shoulders. "You get that you're just a superhuman, right?" he says to Steve, when Tony moves aside, clapping his hand against Steve's cheek and cupping his jaw. "Not invincible. Not supposed to get shot all over your body a whole bunch of times."

Steve takes Bruce in his arms, relaxing into the warm wool smell of him, breathing in deeply. Bruce hugs him very gently. It makes Steve feel incredibly tender towards him, that gentleness. "I know," he says, into Bruce's neck. "I'm sorry."

When Bruce pulls back, he takes Steve's face in his hands and kisses him, firm and close-mouthed, on the lips. "Good to have you back, buddy," he says. Steve laughs and pulls him in for another quick hug.

"Well, if we're all getting some sugar," Natasha says, from behind them; Steve turns around to see her framed in the doorway, shopping bags in her hands.

"Nat," Steve breathes, a smile breaking over his face.

"Girl can't go out for a few party snacks without missing the orgy," she says, putting the bags down and walking towards him.
He opens his arms for her. She settles, easily, into them.

He doesn't think he and Natasha have ever hugged before, for all that he knows how to throw her against an enemy and what her preferred grappling hooks are and how she tastes and the way her tongue feels against his. Usually, he thinks, neither one of them can hold still long enough for something like this, the simple, gentle press of their bodies together, the admission that they each want the comfort of the other.

She fits neatly against him, her head tucked under his, and for once he doesn't feel too big; he and Natasha fit together like puzzle pieces, and he feels exactly the right size.

When she pulls back, she wraps her arms around his neck and stands on her tiptoes to kiss him deeply, which makes him chuckle and then kiss her back with everything he's got. It may not be the most normal friendship, but he and Natasha get each other. He gets fancy with his tongue and teeth, which leaves an appreciative gleam in her eye when she pulls back.

"I'm gradually getting more convinced about you, Rogers," she says approvingly.

Tony and Sam are whistling, Steve realizes, and he feels giddy, to be teased like this, by these people who take up so much of his heart.

"Relax, fellas, we're just friends," Steve says, holding up his hands.

"Hey, I'm your friend," Sam says, arms crossed. "I didn't get that kind of greeting."

Steve looks up; despite the joking grin on Sam's face, he's shifting from foot to foot, and Steve can see that it's hurting him, a little, to have to call himself Steve's friend in mixed company.

Unable to resist Sam's challenge, Steve takes the four steps towards him and slides his hands around his body, one over his ribs and around to his back, one up over his shoulder, and tilts his head, asking the question. Sam's answering grin makes Steve feel good, daring.

He wants them all to see how he feels about Sam. How he feels about men. Their eyes on him – Tony's, Pepper's, Natasha's, Bruce's – feel good, like he can take in heat and nourishment just from their gazes. He's safe here, among his friends, who have all fought beside him, who are all here now to welcome him back after a long battle.

Jim stands behind him, his presence solid and reassuring, and that makes Steve feel safest of all.

"Hi, Sam," Steve says, and moves in slowly; Sam goes just as slow, matching him, and they kiss softly, hungrily, as Sam slides his hands up Steve's back. Sam's tongue pushes lazily into Steve's mouth, and Steve meets it eagerly, opening and sliding his own tongue against it. They kiss for a long, languorous moment before Steve finally pulls back with a wet sound.

"Hey there," Sam says.

"Nice of you to fix up the drywall," Steve says. Their arms are still wrapped around one another.

"We wanted to make it nice for you," Sam says. "Jim's idea."

Turning slightly out of Sam's embrace, Steve looks back at Jim. "Thanks," he says.

Jim clears his throat, then walks over to him. "Hey Bruce," he says. "You finished with that bug sweep?"
"Yup," Bruce says, smiling as he watches Jim's movements.

Jim's hand lands on Steve's shoulder, and then trails down Steve's arm; Steve turns his wrist, as he's done for Jim a hundred times before, and Jim takes his hand. Steve nods at him, and waits.

"Welcome home, sweetheart," Jim says, and kisses Steve on the lips, briefly, softly.

Steve smiles. Across the room, Tony crosses his arms, and Pepper whispers into his ear, and eventually Tony relents and takes out his wallet, passing her a hundred dollar bill.

"Never doubt me again," she smiles, tucking it into her jeans pocket with satisfaction.

"Taking bets on who Jim's imaginary boyfriend was?" Steve laughs.

"Not everything is about you, Rogers," Tony informs him haughtily.

"But since you're the kind of dork who shows up early to his own surprise party," Sam says, smiling, "you can help. Those spots over there are ready to be sanded, if your arm is up to it."

"And I think I smell something burning," Natasha puts in, looking with doubt towards the kitchen.

"Shit," Pepper swears, and runs back in. Tony quirks his eyebrows and puts his goggles back up over his eyes before following her.

They get the place fixed up quick; by the time Sam and Steve are done patching up the bullet holes and the kitchen disaster is fixed, Maria shows up with a tin of paint. She seems a little taken aback when Steve wraps her up in a hug, too, but chuckles and goes with it before pulling back to throw an arm around his neck and rub her knuckles against his hair. She's mindful of his wounds as she does it, making it into the kindest roughhousing Steve's experienced since before the serum.

"You know how long it took us to find you, going up and down the Potomac?" she yells into his ear. "Sam thought you were dead when he found you."

"Sam found me?" Steve asks. In all their time in the hospital, Sam hadn't mentioned that.

"He carried you up the bank himself," Maria confirms, as she opens the paint and dips a brush in.

Steve licks his lips, thinking about that image, his body in Sam's arms.

"On a stretcher," Sam clarifies. "Natasha too."

Maria paints the walls, covering over the places they'd patched, until the holes are all concealed: healing, just like Steve, soon to be without any scars at all.

Natasha, Tony, and Pepper appear bearing food, and they all arrange themselves around Steve's tiny living room, making do with the limited seating. Steve ends up on the far right side of the couch with Jim tucked up close beside him and Sam sitting on the floor in front of him, relaxing back against Steve's legs.

As they eat, Steve watches the paint dry on the wall, darkening and disappearing, erasing Bucky's bullets from memory.

"I've been thinking about what to do with myself," Steve says slowly, when there's a gap in the conversation. "Now that SHIELD is gone."

"There's always private superheroing," Tony offers. "I did it for years."
"With no resources, no connections, and no oversight," Pepper says. "Making yourself sick and crazy."

"Not untrue," Tony concedes.

"Oversight, that's the thing," Steve says.

"The Army would take you back," Jim says, "but I don't think you'd want them to."

"They'd regret it afterwards," Natasha agrees, smiling as she chews on a bite of slightly burnt cookie. Steve huffs a laugh.

"They did the first time, too," he says.

"You could always join a real military branch, like the Air Force," Sam jokes, leaning back to look up at him so Steve can see his smile.

"Why on earth did I saddle myself with two zoomies," Steve moans.

"To be fair," Jim puts in, "Pararescues aren't really zoomies. They're more like . . . float gently down-ies. I was always taught that if you were using a parachute, you'd done something wrong."

"You two realize that you do practically exactly the same thing, right?" Maria says, crunching a chip as she points between them.

"Don't try, sailor," Steve cautions her.

"It's a real problem, though," Natasha says softly, running her finger through the dip on her plate and popping it into her mouth thoughtfully. "Without an international organization to oversee us, we're just vigilantes. No offense, Stark."

"None taken," Tony says, tossing back the rest of his beer and getting up for another one.

"SHIELD gathered the intel, told us where to go, supplied the weapons and the transportation and the backup," Steve says.

"SHIELD loaded us, pointed us, and fired us," Natasha counters, meeting Steve's eyes. Steve nods, thinking about Bucky, loaded and pointed and fired countless times over the course of the last seventy years. Bucky, wandering alone in the world, a weapon without a target, just like Steve.

How can anyone hope to stop someone like Bucky, or even hope to save him, without Steve and his kind around to help?

"I mean, this is all based on the assumption that the best thing is to keep . . . " Sam waves his hand vaguely. "Superheroing. But there is always the option to stop."

Steve thinks about this, trying to reclaim the feeling he'd had when he first met Sam, that he could quit, become a civilian, stop wearing the flag on his shoulders. He shakes his head slowly, dropping his hand down to rest against Sam's arm. Even if they're not fighting anymore, they have to be doing something.

"There's so much weaponry in the world that we're responsible for," he says. "And so many superhumans coming into their power. When SHIELD was active, I thought – maybe I could stop, just me. Maybe they'd look after any new powers that showed up. Maybe they'd make sure there weren't any Hammertech tanks in the wrong hands. Or in any hands."
"That's what I think about, too," Jim says softly. "Those kids we rescued, stuff like that. God knows I've seen a lot of shit in the military, things that made me want to just desert on the spot, go AWOL, but I stayed in for that kind of thing. And because I thought I could get enough power to start to change it from inside."

Those kids are lost now, alone and on the run because there's no one in the world they can trust not to exploit them. Steve wants them to have what he never did: people to look up to, to help them learn who they are and how they want to use their powers.

"Those were my repulsor engines on the Insight helicarriers," Tony murmurs as he sits back down, not looking at any of them. "I built Iron Man to get rid of the shit I put into the world in the first place, but it keeps happening. Makes you want to stop inventing."

"Really?" Jim asks, raising his eyebrows.

"No," Tony says. "C'mon."

"Don't scare me like that," Jim says. "I like having access to your labs."

Tony smiles, and for the first time Steve sees what Natasha told him about: Tony's deep, powerful love for Jim. After a moment's thought, Tony leans over, kissing Jim on the temple. Steve thinks he means it to be playful and loud, but it looks soft to Steve, hesitant even. Jim smiles at the kiss.

A lot of firsts, tonight, Steve figures. He holds Jim's hand and gives it a little squeeze. Jim squeezes back.

"Well," Natasha drawls, "if you give the Washington assholes ten minutes to get over their fainting spells, they'll be back to rubbing their dicks over how amazing Captain America is. There's talk of forming an anti-HYDRA task force to get rid of the rest of the agents we didn't catch. I bet me and Jim together can get you on it, get you Congressional authority to do whatever you want."

"In the US," Maria says. She and Natasha are sitting close together, now, closer than they were last time Steve looked; it's more of a public declaration than he expected from either of them, the easy way they sit with their thighs touching and their shoulders bumping.

Steve frowns at the idea. No one should have the authority to go wherever they want and do whatever they like, that's the problem.

"Maybe you put an ad on Craigslist," Sam suggests. "Superhero for hire."

"It's not a bad idea, actually," Pepper says. At Steve's disbelieving look, she adds, "Well, not the Craigslist part, maybe. But there are plenty of security specialists and consultants who travel all over the world."

"Doing morally reprehensible things for a shitpile of money," Maria points out. "But they do get around."

"Hey, I was an independent consultant," Tony puts in, and Steve can't quite tell if he's really annoyed or pretending to be. "I kept the peace on my own before the rest of you showed up."

"And did all kinds of shit that made the Pentagon hate you," Jim points out. Tony rolls his eyes.

"I thought we agreed that the military was morally bankrupt and worse than useless," Tony says, turning to look Jim in the eye.
"Yeah, that’s not what I said, Tony," Jim replies, and Steve knows Jim well enough to know that he’s definitely annoyed. Steve gets the impression that it’s not the first time they’ve had this argument.

"Let’s step away from the independent contractor model for a moment," Pepper says, holding up her hands. "Since privatizing world peace didn’t quite work out the way you wanted, Tony."

Tony sighs, but throws his hands up in an elaborate shrug, conceding the point.

"I wouldn’t want to run things like a business," Steve muses, softly, shooting an apologetic glance at Pepper and Tony.

"Not even if it’d given you more rights and more access under the law?" Tony asks.

"Make it pay-what-you-can," Bruce says, smiling. "So everyone has access to it. Like those ethical food trucks, you put out a tip jar and people give you whatever they want."

"Or register yourself as a charity," Pepper suggests. "If you want oversight, then you get together a board, make all your movements public . . ."

Bruce shakes his head. "Yeah, because NGOs never do any harm and always employ checks and balances to make sure they’re benefiting the local community," he says. "We’ve talked about this, Pepper."

"Why not register all the Avengers together as a charity?" Sam asks. "And you don’t just barge in like the Red Cross, Bruce, you go where you're invited and work with people on the ground, like Doctors Without Borders."

"Who gets to invite us?" Jim asks.

"And who makes the decision, if some people want you there and some people don't," Bruce adds. "I mean . . . Superheroes Without Borders is kind of the problem in the first place."

They're all silent for a while, mulling over that one. Steve takes a sip of water; Pepper downs her glass of wine.

Natasha stretches up out of her chair and wanders over to the record player, eventually pulling a record from its sleeve and putting it on to play.

"Not funny," Steve says, as he hears the opening bars.

Natasha pulls out a bottle of whisky from somewhere and grabs some of the unbroken glasses from Steve's shelves. They must've swept up all the broken glass, Steve realizes, and cleaned all the shelves. There's no debris anywhere, no sign that Bucky stood outside with a rifle in his hands and shot to kill.

Or maybe he didn't shoot to kill. Nick survived, after all.

"I think it's hilarious," Natasha says, as Joan Baez assures them that the answer is blowing in the wind. She pours the whisky, handing the glasses around the room.

Sam leans his head backward, looking at Steve upside down. "You got to Joan Baez, but not to Marvin Gaye?"

Steve bends forward slowly, careful of his wounds, so he can kiss Sam's forehead.
"I've still got a lot to learn," he says.

* 

He sees everyone out that night, even Jim and Sam, who both offer to stay at the exact same time, then look awkward.

"Gee, boys," Steve says. "This is so flattering."

"You were shot four times two weeks ago," Jim says, annoyed. "I'm saying, maybe someone should stay here with you and make sure you don't do anything stupid."

"You're confusing me with your other boyfriend," Steve says. "I never take unnecessary risks."

At least he can make both of his boyfriends laugh, Steve thinks. That's gotta be worth something.

"I could stay on the couch," Sam says, as he wraps Steve up in a hug. "Just to be nearby."

"I'll be fine."

Sam kisses him, long and soft, before passing him to Jim, who meets his eyes and reaches out to cup his cheek.

"Promise me you'll call if you need anything. Even in the middle of the night. Or else I'll be really disappointed."

"Manipulation, sir?" Steve grins, and Jim laughs as he kisses him.

"Always," he says.

"Go spend some time with Tony and Pepper," Steve says. "I need to rest."

"I really hope you do rest," Jim says, and Sam nods his agreement.

"Take it easy a while, Steve," Sam says. "Natasha's gathering intel, and there's nothing you can do right now."

"I know," Steve says, sighing. "Thanks. To both of you. I needed this."

"Call me," Jim says, again, pointing at him.

"I'll see you at the VA tomorrow, just knock on my door after your appointment, okay?" Sam says.

Steve nods and closes the door as the two of them head down the stairs together.

"Need a lift somewhere, Sam?" Jim is asking.

"I got a rental car," Sam replies. "Thanks, though."

Steve feels an immediate wave of loneliness, faced with his empty apartment and the thought of Jim and Sam both leaving, stepping out into the cool spring night and finding their ways elsewhere.

It's late. He really should rest.

He gets into his own bed for the first time in days, and takes a long time falling asleep. He keeps thinking about Bucky, where he might be tonight, if he's sleeping rough again or if he has money enough to get himself a motel or an overnight bus. There haven't been any sightings of him since
the convenience store, and Steve figures that what Natasha said must be true, that he is capable of disappearing like a ghost, metal arm and all. He hopes he wouldn't kill or threaten anyone for the sake of his own safety, but it's hard to know.

Sam's right. There's not much they can do without any intel and without any authority to go kicking down doors. Not unless Bucky wants to turn himself in. Steve will just have to wait.

He falls asleep eventually, but tosses and turns fitfully, lost in suffocating dreams that he can't remember afterward. When he wakes up, he feels strangely groggy, still low on energy after all the blood loss and organ damage.

He wanders aimlessly around the apartment for a while, wishing he could go for a run, fully aware that it would get on the news, and then Jim and Natasha would get mad at him, and Sam would probably get disappointed, and Steve would have to come up with a reason why jogging around the National Mall is worth rupturing a kidney.

Glancing over at the table by the door, he notices a padded envelope. A cold wave of fear rushes through him before he remembers that he sent it to himself, that it's his phone, that Bruce checked his apartment thoroughly and put in new scanners and definitely would've spotted a bomb.

His phone, when he opens the package and plugs it in, is mostly full of texts from Allison with a steadily increasing amount of allcaps.

Sorry, he sends to her, Had to get rid of my phone for a while. I should've checked in with you.

Since you blew up my employer it might've been nice, she texts back, a moment later. Are you all right? I ask that but you seemed just fine giving statements on the national news.

Sorry, Steve says again. I'm really sorry, Allison, I'll do whatever you want me to do.

Now there's a blank check.

Steve smiles.

I don't actually know what I want you to do though, because again I am UNEMPLOYED so idk whose interests or image I'm protecting.

Nodding down at his phone, Steve bites his lip.

Come over tonight, he writes. I'll buy you dinner and we'll figure it out.

She accepts, and Steve breathes a sigh of relief. He has a feeling he's going to need Allison a lot in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, though, he promised Sam that he'd meet the case manager he's lined up down at the VA at ten. He puts off showering and eating until the last minute, so that he's running out the door to make it there on time, and has to run back in several times, too – for the keys to his bike, for his wallet, for his ballcap – not that he has a lot of hope that it'll keep the public from recognizing him these days. Eventually he has no other choice but to actually start up his bike and drive to the VA.

It's exhausting; he never realized, before, how much work it is to ride a motorcycle as opposed to driving a car. He gets there exactly on time, already feeling tired and aching all through his torso.

Tamara's office is at the end of the long hallway, so Steve keeps a curious eye out for Sam's office
on his way, glancing up at nameplates and job titles: Traumatic Brain Injury Specialist, Justice Coordinator, Homeless Outreach Coordinator, Palliative Care Specialist. He finally finds Sam's door down near the end; it's closed, but the nameplate it carries makes Steve stop in his tracks.

Sam Wilson, Social Worker, LGBTQ+ Outreach Specialist

There's a pride flag sticker on the door next to the nameplate.

Steve can't help but laugh, quietly, to himself. He keeps staring at the door, as if it has more to tell him, but it stays exactly the same, cheerful rainbow sticker seeming to light up the whole hallway. He keeps on walking, feeling his exhaustion a little bit less.

Tamara's door is ajar, so Steve knocks and steps in hesitantly.

"Captain Rogers!" the woman inside says. "Please come in."

"Steve, please," he says, as he comes the rest of the way into the office.

He's a little relieved to see that the small room isn't nearly as institutional as he'd feared; instead, it has a lived-in feel, with a coffee machine, a couple of plants on the windowsill, and somewhat messy stacks of papers and books. The books have dozens of little post-it notes all through them, like Tamara's been over them and over them looking for useful information.

He notices a couple of titles: How to File and Collect on VA Claims, Third Edition, Advances in Social Work Practice with the Military, Couple-Based Interventions for Military and Veterans' Families, and a bunch of journals called Health and Social Work. He frowns, wondering how much those books can tell her about him. He's not the kind of veteran she's used to dealing with. It makes him feel even more nervous, wondering what kinds of things he'll have to correct her on, to make her understand him.

"Can I get you something?" Tamara asks, as Steve sits down. "Coffee, tea, water?" She wears her hair in small braids, has red horn-rimmed glasses perched on her nose, and has the bearing that Steve's come to recognize in military people. Underneath her nondescript blouse and trousers, Steve can see that she carries a lot of muscle.

Steve shakes his head. "I'm fine, ma'am," he says.

"No need for formalities. We don't have rank around here. You can call me Tamara."

Nodding, Steve says, "Sorry. Old habit."

"Those are the worst ones," Tamara smiles. Then she pauses, patiently, waiting for Steve to speak again.

"Uh, my friend Sam – Wilson – said that you were Army?"

She nods. "Not the same as your Army, I guess," she says. "But we do have that in common."

When Steve asks, she tells him a little about her time in the service, some of the things that she went through and saw, and how her experience of counseling after she got back was what led her to get her Master's in Social Work and become a counselor herself.

Steve asks a lot of questions, which she answers without hesitating, and it feels good, like it did with Sam, to hear someone talk about getting out of the service, about how it improved their life.
After a while, though, she cuts into the flow of conversation with a firm, "So what about you, Steve? What brings you here today?"

Steve blinks, because he's not even sure how to put it, doesn't even know what he wants. "I guess I'm here because this is where you're supposed to go if you don't want to be a soldier anymore," Steve says hesitantly. "Also, uh, because Sam said I was entitled to back pay that I never got."

Tamara looks surprised. "You've been off of MIA status for what, two years? And you never got your back pay?"

"Is it – would it be a lot?"

Quirking her eyebrows, Tamara says, "I'll have to run some numbers. But yes, it will be a lot. And yes, I will put you in touch with people who make sure you get it. Also you're entitled to benefits – medical care, mental health care, things like that."

Steve always turned down the services of therapists, when SHIELD suggested them. He's just as glad he did, now, since any therapist he got would've had a good chance of being a HYDRA spy. He frowns, stomach turning at the thought. He still doesn't know if it's something he could do, telling his feelings to a stranger. "Okay," he says.

"Let's focus on the other question, though. Just for now. You don't want to be a soldier anymore, okay. Your Army contract is long over and your SHIELD job was just that – a job. So you don't have any legalities to deal with. Do you have money to live on while you wait for your back pay to come through? It could be months."

"I've got lots saved up," Steve says. They always paid him a lot, and it wasn't like he'd spent very much. He wonders if he'll have to take over the rent on his apartment, now that SHIELD is gone.

"So what is it that you're hoping we can provide, Steve?"

He smiles ruefully, ducking his head. He's starting to feel like he ought to have gone to Maria's church with her instead. "Spiritual advice?"

To his surprise, she doesn't laugh or make a joke of it, just nods. "You wanna figure out how to become a civilian," she says, and taps her chest, over her heart. "In here."

Steve shrugs, shying away from that concept. "Maybe. I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to be doing, once I'm all healed."

"You wanna hear about options?" she asks, and Steve nods gratefully.

"I don't even know what's out there," he says.

Tamara gives him a lot of pamphlets and papers: on going back to school, on adjusting to civilian life, on benefits and compensation, on career-building after the military. She explains them all, and tells him a few stories to go along with them, of vets she's known who've started on a whole new life after their military service.

"It's totally doable. It's not some impossible dream," she says. "You take little steps, you'll figure out where you want to be. Thousands have done it before you, and I get the feeling that you know how to apply yourself to a goal."

Smiling, Steve sets the last pamphlet she gave him on top of the stack. It's as close as she's come to mentioning who he is, and what he's done, this whole time. "I guess I've got some reading to do,"
"You can call me here with any questions, or if you want to chat," Tamara says. "My office hours are on the card. Leave a message and I'll always get back to you."

Glancing up, something behind Steve seems to catch her eye, and she smiles. "But I think our time's up for today." She gestures with her chin, and Steve turns around to see Sam lurking outside the office door.

"All done?" he asks. "Tamara didn't use the hot pokers?"

"Never on a first meeting," Tamara says.

Steve sticks out his hand. "Thank you so much for all of this, ma'am. Tamara."

She shakes with him, her firm, warm grip reassuring. He doesn't know why, because it's not like he's made any kind of decision – if anything, he's even more confused by all the options – but he feels hopeful after talking to her.

"I'll be in touch about that back pay," she says.

"Thanks again," Steve says, and follows Sam out into the hallway.

"I did your back pay calculation after that night we went for Thai food," Sam says, casually, hands in his pockets. "Couldn't resist."

"Oh yeah?" Steve asks.

"It's not exact, because it depends on how they define some of the categories you fall into, and how the money was handled. But I'd put it around ten million."

Steve stops walking. SHIELD had paid him very well, but – "Million?" he says. He can't wrap his head around the number.

Sam smiles. "Yup. So you can afford to take me out for Thai again."

Steve can't help but smile back, and they start walking again. "Anytime you like, Sam."

"How's tonight? We can actually get any kind of food you want, I'm just joking about the Thai."

"I'd love that, but I promised my publicist I'd have dinner with her. She's not having the best time right now."

Sam whistles. "Not to mention you went and blew up her employer, right?"

"They were Nazis!" Steve says, exasperated. "I wasn't going to just say, well, these Nazis are really good for the local economy, it means a lot of job loss if I stop these Nazis from taking over the world – "

Laughing, Sam puts a hand on Steve's shoulder. "I was there, I was there, I know," he says. "Still. You gonna hire her privately?"

It's a good idea; Steve nods slowly as he considers it. "I guess I'd better, at least for a while. The press about me is a disaster right now. I don't wanna do all this on my own."

"Speaking of not doing things on your own," Sam says, as they come to the end of the hallway. "I
wanted to ask if you'd like to come in to a group session."

Steve furrows his brow. "When?"

"There happens to be one starting right now," Sam says innocently. Steve gives him a look.

"You scheduled it that way? To spring this on me?" He's not mad, not really, but he is annoyed; not
that he thinks that Sam would use his name in any way, but if word got around, if people are
expecting him to be Captain America for them, Steve doesn't think he could sit in that room.

Sam shakes his head. "It's a group meeting, and we always meet at eleven on Thursdays. It's my
group meeting, in fact, the one where I go to get help. Tamara leads it. I wanted to invite you to it.
No pressure, if you wanna leave. No one's expecting you."

Steve relaxes a little. "So why not tell me in advance?" he asks.

Shrugging, Sam says, "I don't know. Maybe I'm projecting a little, but I got this feeling that you
might be receptive to a spur of the moment invitation to do something that scares the hell out of
you."

Steve can't help but laugh at that. "I guess you've got me pretty well figured out," he says. "No
mystery at all anymore."

"I'm sure there's one or two things I could still explore," Sam says warmly.

Steve follows him into the big meeting room.

He sits at the back, and though a bunch of people clearly recognize him, they don't come up to him
or ask him for photographs or call him a traitor. He doesn't say anything, as the session gets going,
but he listens a lot.

"I got something to share," Sam says, when Tamara asks, halfway through, if anyone has any
general thoughts for the group. Steve looks up sharply, and watches Sam closely, worried about
what he might say, what he might reveal.

He doesn't even know why he feels that way; there's nothing that he could say about the battle
they've gone through that would be news to anyone who's seen a newspaper in the last two weeks.
But Steve can't help the sinking, helpless feeling of fear that crawls through him at the idea of all
these strangers discussing his life.

"I've been thinking a lot lately about my old wingman, Riley, who I lost while we were running a
PJ mission together," Sam says. "I guess I've been thinking about him because we were so close,
and because I was in a dangerous situation recently. Riley always used to keep me out of danger,
you know, look out for me. When things start going wrong, that's always when I wish he was
there."

There are nods all around the room, and Steve is surprised to find that he's responsible for one of
them, ready to hear more of what Sam has to say. His fear dissipates, leaving curiosity behind it.

"But anyway, I missed him a lot. Kept looking for him over my shoulder, you know, like he'd
suddenly show up after all these years. I guess you all saw on the news, that was me with the
wings. Doing stuff I swore I'd never do again, for a good reason. But thinking about Riley brought
back a lot of feelings of guilt. I was there when he got shot down, and I spent a lot of time
grappling with that. Thinking it was my fault that he fell."
Steve swallows, and clasps his hands together a little tighter.

"So all that made me start to wonder, you know, is it worth it to get back in, to take these kinds of risks again. Do I want to be responsible for peoples' lives."

"You don't just mean risking your body, or your mental health," Tamara says.

"Emotional risk," Sam clarifies. "The risk that I could . . . go through something like that again."

"And what answer did you give yourself?" Tamara asks.

"I don't know yet," Sam says, grinning ruefully. "I'm really happy where I am. Where I was. But if I could be happy doing this stuff again, dangerous work, tough work, work that was so hard on me emotionally – would I want to? Do I have to?"

"What do you mean, have to?" someone sitting next to Sam asks tentatively. Steve holds his breath as he listens for the answer.

"I guess I mean – what do I owe," Sam says slowly. "And if I owe something, if I owe it to Riley or to – to other people, people who are lost and might need my help – is that enough of a reason to do it? Because I'm scared as hell right now, and I don't know the right thing to do."

Tamara nods, and Sam shrugs to indicate that he's finished.

"Sounds like you're on the cusp of a big decision," she says slowly. "And thinking a lot about responsibility, and what we owe to the dead, or to the others around us. Anyone else had this kind of feeling?" she asks.

Steve feels angry and embarrassed, absolutely sure, for a second, that Tamara is calling for Steve to talk, but a woman near the edge of the crowd puts her hand up, and Tamara immediately calls on her.

"Yeah, Sophia," she says. She never even looks back at Steve.

Steve breathes out slowly and listens to what Sophia has to say.

For the rest of the session, Steve watches the back of Sam's head and marvels over Sam's ability to do that, to just stand up in public and tell people how he feels, how indecisive he is, how he's scared and doesn't know what's right. It's astonishing, that openness, the way Sam lets himself be open to the whole world and doesn't seem to mind, so much, that he gets hurt sometimes.

Afterwards, Steve finds Sam and walks up to him, sticking his hands in his pockets so that he won't touch him. He wants to touch him, to feel the solidity of his body, to feel how warm and real he is.

"That was really great, Sam," Steve says. "What you said."

Sam shrugs. "I've been thinking about it a lot, after what you said at the party last night," he says. "I don't know what the solution is."

"Me neither," Steve admits. He fidgets a little, then tells himself to stop. "And I think I owe you an apology, too. For accusing you of . . . manipulating me to get me here."

Sam nods for Steve to go on. "Yeah?" he asks.

"I – I wasn't thinking about how this has been hard for you. What you might be going through. That you might want me to listen. I'm sorry."

"So all that made me start to wonder, you know, is it worth it to get back in, to take these kinds of risks again. Do I want to be responsible for peoples' lives."
Nodding again, Sam says, "That's okay. I get it. Apology accepted."

Steve smiles his thanks. "But – it was something, to hear you talk about it like that. It felt – I don't know, it felt really good."

"Group is like that sometimes," Sam says. "Nothing like it for making you realize that your feelings are important, but that they're not the whole world. I dunno, Steve, for me it was a relief to realize that everything isn't always about me."

Steve grins ruefully. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, that's it." The way he'd felt so paranoid, and the way he'd felt as the paranoia had drained away and he had truly started to listen . . . "It felt good," he says again.

Sam cocks his head at Steve and looks at him for a long second. "Are you okay? Do you want a hug or something?"

"I – that's not really – I mean, it's in public," Steve says, keeping his hands in his pockets.

"I'll hug you anywhere," Sam says softly. "If you want."

The people have all mostly gone, except for a few who've stuck around to talk to Tamara.

Coming to a decision, Steve takes his hands out of his pockets and wraps his arms around Sam. Sam responds right away, hugging him back with that tight, full-body attention that Steve remembers from the last time they embraced.

"Hey, it's all right," Sam says. "It'll be all right."

Steve lets himself bury his face against Sam's shoulder for a few seconds. "Same to you, Sam," he says, as he starts to pull back. "I'm sorry to have put you into this situation."

"I put myself in this situation," Sam says firmly, once their bodies are no longer touching. "I chose to stand beside you."

"I know," Steve smiles. "It's just hard. I guess you know. To think that I could lose you like I did Bucky."

"It was the most terrifying thing I've ever seen," Sam murmurs, "seeing you falling off that helicarrier. Worrying that I wouldn't get to you in time."

"I'm sorry," Steve says again, as Sam waves this second apology away.

"But then," Sam says, "it was the greatest thing in the world, to catch you, to know I'd caught you."

"It felt good to me, too," Steve smiles. "Big strong hero scooping me up out of midair."

Sam pshaws at this, but Steve thinks he's pleased, too.

"Sure you can't have dinner tonight?" Sam asks, low-voiced.

"I couldn't do that to Allison," Steve says. "I've left her hanging for two weeks already. But – tomorrow?"

Sam shakes his head sadly. "Tomorrow is the start of D.C. Black Pride, and I'm manning a booth all weekend, plus I got plans with some friends who're coming in from out of town. You're welcome to come out with us, if you want, but – I get why you might not want to."
He looks resigned. Steve wants, so badly, to make him smile again.

"I do want to," he says, surprised by how much he means it. He wonders what would happen, if he just showed up at a Pride parade with his boyfriend and took the advice Jim gave him over a year ago: make out with him in public, and let everyone else draw their own conclusions.

Their conclusions would be wrong, of course, and that's a big part of what holds Steve back.

"But – maybe I shouldn't make Allison's week any tougher than it is, you know?"

"Then I'll send you some pictures, and bring you back some condoms," Sam says, squeezing his shoulder. "That's a traditional Pride thing, in case you're wondering, it's not a come-on."

"Not even if I want it to be?" Steve asks. He puts his hands in his pockets again, for pretty much the same reason as before. When he and Sam flirt like this, it's like a fire starts up inside him, and all he can think about is how much he wants Sam on him, all over him, inside him.

He wants to know what Sam's cock feels like in his mouth, how his orgasm takes him, how his hands would feel on Steve's naked body.

"You're terrible," Sam says. "I did not know when I met you that you were this terrible."

Steve shrugs. "That's the soft cotton Steve Rogers underneath, I guess," he says, tentatively.

"Well, it's the soft cotton Steve Rogers I started running after," Sam confirms, meeting his eyes.

Steve glows under the warmth of his gaze. "Here," he says, hoarsely. "Here, I'll text you, and then you'll have my number to send me stuff."

"Ah, so you do have a smartphone," Sam says. "I was worried, when you pulled out that little book for me to write my number down, that it was all 1940s rotary phones up at your place."

"I just forget sometimes," Steve says, softly, reproachfully. He texts Sam: hi, Sam. I can use the internets too btw.

Sam's phone beeps in his pocket, and he pulls it out, chuckling at the message. "All right, all right," he says. "I'll send you all kinds of fun stuff, don't worry."

"I'll look forward to it," Steve says. Even Tamara and the last few stragglers have left the room by now, and they're standing against the wall, not visible from the hallway. Steve, daringly, leans forward and kisses Sam's cheek. Sam's eyebrows go all the way up at the gesture.

"Keep a little time free for me next week, okay?" Steve says, turning to leave. He could swear his lips are tingling, just from that, just from the brief touch of Sam's skin to his.

"Hey, Steve," Sam says, and Steve turns back. "You got some time right now?"

Glancing at his watch, Steve asks, "Did you want to get lunch?"

Sam shakes his head. "I don't have time to go out for lunch today. I gotta prepare all the materials for the booth at Pride."

"Okay," Steve says.

"I was wondering if you'd like to have takeout with me in my office," Sam says, "from the place down the street, and help me fold pamphlets."
Steve brightens at the prospect of something, anything, to do. "Well," he says, "I guess you helped me out with my job."

"It's only fair, right?" Sam puts an arm around Steve's shoulder – he's always so tactile, he's like Bucky that way – and guides him out into the hallway. "I got a ton of stuff to do, posters to proof and print out, info sheets to write, supplies to pick up, and if you could put some superhero efficiency into the pamphlets it would help a lot."

"Sure," Steve says. "I am especially resistant to paper cuts."

He and Sam get sandwiches, and then Sam sets Steve up in a corner of his office with a little folding table and a huge stack of printouts to turn into pamphlets. Sam's office isn't that big, and like Tamara's it's full of books and papers, so Steve's chair ends up butting up against the side of Sam's desk. The cramped quarters and the smell of hot, freshly printed paper remind him of his old Catholic Worker meetings, where they'd mimeo flyers, or stuff envelopes, or hand-draw posters.

They don't talk much, Sam typing away on his computer while Steve folds and sorts, does the kind of simple human labor that even the great advances in technology apparently can't solve. The pamphlets are targeted at African-American LGBTQ+ veterans; Steve hopes, as he folds each one, that it finds its way into the hands of someone who needs Sam's help.

"Wow, I think our graphic designer is literally asleep when he's doing this stuff," Sam says, clicking through some images on his computer. Steve looks over his shoulder, and sees a lot of colorful prints.

"They look nice to me," he offers. Sam shakes his head.

"There are like eighteen typos and mistakes on here," he says, pointing to a few of them. "I'm gonna have to have him redo them. Before tomorrow. If I can even get a hold of him." Sam sounds like a man gradually realizing that he's sinking underwater.

Looking at the posters in more detail, Steve bites his lip. "If there isn't time for that, I could probably fix them," he offers. "If you have a – " he blinks for a moment, trying to remember the word. "A photocopier."

"Huh. Really?"

"I mean, I don't have the skills with the computer, but with that design, you wouldn't even notice a little cut and paste work," Steve says, pointing at the clean lines separating the text from the images. "I used to do this all the time for some of the union and activist groups I worked with. Though those were all hand-drawn in the first place."

Sam pushes his chair back and looks at Steve with interest. "Did you do the drawing?" he asks.

Steve smiles at him. "Yeah. Lots of poster art."

"All right, art school, all right," Sam says. "It's all yours. I'll get you the corrections."

It's a couple of hours later before Steve finishes, his little folding table now covered with neat stacks of pamphlets, informational sheets, and posters. He sweeps the paper cuttings into the recycling bin.

"Okay, I think I'm done," he says, putting his hands on his hips. He stretches a little, side to side, and feels a pull of pain through his gut. It's getting better, at least, but it's still enough to warn him that he shouldn't be doing much more than this.
Sam gets up.

"Thanks for all your help today," he says. "I'd ask you to stay and hang out, but I'm sure you got more interesting things to do, and I got an appointment with a client at three-thirty."

"I was really glad I could help," Steve says, sighing. "At least this superhero work I can do while injured, you know?"

Sam smiles. "You're really sweet," he says. "For the record, I like you a lot."

"That's good," Steve says, sure his smile is completely doofy but not caring that much. "I like you a lot too."

Steve kisses him, there in Sam's office with the door open. Sam's mouth is soft and warm against his, and Steve doesn't think he'll ever get enough of kissing Sam, or the easy way their bodies fit together.

Sam pulls back first, brow furrowed, the lips that were so sweet on Steve's pulled down in a frown.

"What's wrong?" Steve asks.

"It's just – you say no PDAs, then you're kissing on me all over my workplace," Sam says, sighing. "It's kind of a mixed signal."

Steve swallows hard, and crosses his arms. "I thought – I thought it's what you wanted," he says.

Sam sits down on the edge of his desk and takes a moment before he replies. "I want to be able to touch you without worrying about it," he says, eventually.

"I can close the door," Steve offers. Sam watches him thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"All right," he says, softly. "For now. But not forever."

Steve closes it, and Sam pushes the knob to lock it.

"Kiss me again," Sam says, wrapping his arms around Steve's waist. Steve puts everything he has into that kiss, wishing he could show Sam how much he feels for him.

He gets the feeling that Sam doesn't know.

"Good God, beautiful," Sam says, when they pull apart. He's cupping Steve's jaw with his broad palm; Steve leans into it.

"So, next week," Steve says. "Monday? You don't have any plans on Monday?"

Sam gives him a slow, hot look. "I'm all yours, baby," he says quietly.

Steve kisses him again, helpless, and then tears himself away before Sam's appointment can knock on the door.

He starts up his bike and heads back home, feeling better than he did when he set out. When he gets back to his apartment, he spreads all the stuff Tamara gave him out on the coffee table, along with his laptop, a legal pad, and a pen. Staring at all those pamphlets and posters gave him an idea.

Maybe they can't start looking for Bucky or the kids without any intel. Maybe Steve can't handle any kind of search right now, while he's still healing and can't ride a motorcycle for half an hour.
without getting exhausted. Maybe it's not a good idea to go out and try to force Bucky back home, or to burst in on the kids and scare them.

But maybe they can make it easier for all their fugitive superheroes to come in to them.

*

"I can't pay you what SHIELD paid," he tells Allison, while they wait for the Thai food they've ordered to arrive. Steve ordered panang curry, like he and Sam had together, and he hopes it'll be just as good. "Not until my back pay comes through, anyhow."

Allison takes a sip of the wine Steve poured for her. "SHIELD paid me eighty thousand dollars a year," she sighs. "It was really helping to knock down those student loans. So, yeah, I kinda doubt it. What would you pay me?"

Steve does some arithmetic in his head. He's worried that the search for Bucky, whatever form it might take, will get expensive, and he doesn't have SHIELD to back him up anymore. "How about fifty, for a year, and then we could renegotiate?"

"Oh, wow," she says, "deal. That's great."

"Really? You don't drive a very hard bargain, Ms Chung."

"I really like being your publicist, Captain Rogers," she replies. "Plus I was making nothing as an intern."

Steve blinks. "Metaphorically nothing, or – "

"Literally absolutely fucking nothing," she says. "That's how internships work nowadays. Sit down!" This last as Steve shifts in his seat, wanting to get up and move and do something.

"I – how can they – " Steve sputters.

"God, you want to fix every damn problem at once, don't you? Your mother ever teach you patience?"

"My mother taught me how to hold a protest sign without straining my arms, and let me sit on her shoulders while she marched," Steve says, vehemently.

Allison's sudden smile is bright and full. "Oh," she laughs, "okay, that makes sense. Well, look, I will be the last one to stop you from organizing interns to unionize, but first of all let's figure out your media strategy, okay?"

"Okay," Steve sighs.

"So you're not affiliated with any military or para-military organizations anymore," she says, taking out her computer.

"Just a regular citizen," Steve agrees.

"Citizen Rogers," Allison says thoughtfully. "I like that, that could work. Well, you'll have to talk to some reporters pretty soon and explain what that means. Are you still gonna superhero, now that SHIELD's gone?"

"I don't know," Steve says, spreading his hands. "I honestly don't know."
Allison sighs and collapses back against the couch, cradling her glass of wine. "You desperately need good public opinion right now, Steve. Your injuries bought you some goodwill, but it's running out. Some of them are calling for your blood. You need to say something. Anything."

Steve leans forward on his knees and scrubs his hands through his hair. "I can't. I can't go up in front of those cameras and . . . and make them understand this. I don't understand this."

"What about print?"

Looking up at her, Steve furrows his brow. "What?"

"Print interviews. You can go slower, give longer answers. And you won't get cut off so they can get to the musical guest."

Steve nods. "Maybe," he says. "If I have to."

"If you want for there to be a job for me to do in a year? Then you have to."

"Well then," Steve says, smiling. "For your sake."

She elbows him in the side, and Steve smiles softly as he watches her make more notes on her laptop.

After a while she stops typing, but keeps staring at the screen, biting her lip as if trying to figure out how to phrase something difficult. Steve frowns and watches her, waiting with trepidation.

"One thing that could help," she says, eventually, with great delicacy, "is me knowing exactly what did happen. Knowing . . . what you want. From the public. If I know what you're trying to do, I can help guide the media towards that."

That stack of pamphlets on Sam's desk, the posters, the business cards, they were all designed carefully, with an eye to the best way to draw in a reluctant veteran who might be in any kind of pain or trouble. Sam designed them, on purpose, to help those veterans feel more able to come in and ask for help.

"Do you know who Bucky Barnes is?" Steve asks quietly.

Allison nods. "I read all the biographies of you," she says. "I researched everything about you. And I actually went to the Smithsonian exhibit when it opened, rather than sneaking around it in a ballcap and hoping no one saw me."

"No one did see me!" Steve objects. "Like five people saw you and took pictures and posted them on the internet," Allison corrects him. "Five is an abnormally low number, given your fame, your shitty disguise, the fact that you were standing next to a giant picture of yourself, and of course your, uh," she gestures in his general direction, "face, but people see you wherever you go."

"Huh," Steve says. He had felt so invisible, at the time, so divorced from the image of himself as Captain America.

"Anyway." She looks him in the eye and speaks in a low, serious tone. "There have been some less reputable media sources saying that one of the HYDRA soldiers was Bucky Barnes. Nobody believes them."
"It was him," Steve says. "Yeah. They – experimented on him. Preserved him. Like me. It's him, but he's not himself. Not entirely." He wants to explain more, but he can't find the right words. He wants Allison to feel sympathy for Bucky, but he doesn't know how to make that happen.

Allison nods, frowning. Steve can't bear to look at her reaction.

"That's awful," she says, hesitantly. "Horrifying."

Staring down at his hands, Steve says, "I need to find him. That's what I need to do. I need to help him. If possible, I need to get him to come in to us. That's all I know right now for sure."

Allison breathes out slowly. "Do you, uh. Want a hug? A glass of water? A nice pat on the shoulder?"

Steve smiles and shakes his head. He shouldn't be putting any of this on her, but he's going to need help if his plan is going to work. "Shoulder pat wouldn't go astray," he says, turning towards her to offer her the smile on his face.

She smiles back, hesitantly, and reaches across the couch to pat his shoulder. She has small hands, and her pats are astonishingly gentle.

"So what do I do, Allison?" Steve asks, meeting her eyes. "What do I do to make that possible?"

Her last pat ends, so that her hand is resting on his shoulder. "There are things we can do," she says. "There are totally ways to do this. To get his name out there, to build public sympathy for him, to make people see who he is. I can do that, Steve, I swear it. We'll write you a script so you know what to say."

He nods at her slowly. "I guess I see the use for a publicist now," he says.

"Got news for you, Citizen Rogers. This is way above and beyond the call of publicist duty."

"Then I suppose I see the use for an Allison," he says, which makes her blush and shove him a little. "Let me get my notes. I had this idea when I was folding pamphlets down at the VA today."

"You were – you know what, never mind, if I try to police all your volunteer stuff I'll lose it."

"It was just a favor for a friend," Steve says, placatingly, as he gathers up his papers from earlier.

"So was the time you picked up a Keystone XL bulldozer," Allison sighs. "But I am letting it go. Show me what you have so far."

Steve does, though he feels awkward explaining his hasty, ignorant notes to her. But she nods thoughtfully and pulls a pen out of her ponytail, using the paper instead of her laptop to build on what he's got.

Allison sees the shape of what he was trying to do, and actually knows how it can be done in the real world. It's a huge relief, because Steve wasn't looking forward to hours of fruitless Wikipedia searching just to figure out the basic concepts.

The food arrives about twenty minutes later, and they take a little break to dish it out onto plates.

The panang curry is just as good as Steve remembers, if a little different than it was at the place he and Sam went to. Allison eats slowly, chewing thoughtfully and gazing over at Steve's curry with obvious envy.
"Did you want some?" Steve offers, laughing.

"Oh fuck, I'm sorry, I don't mean to stare! It looks really good though. I'm having orderer's regret." She pokes her dry-looking shrimp dish desultorily.

"Here," Steve says, pushing the plastic bowl of curry towards her.

"Are we really at the food-sharing stage of our publicist-and-client relationship?" Allison asks. "Or, uh, Allison-and-client relationship?"

"Any Allison who sticks with me after I crash three helicarriers into the Potomac can eat off my plate anytime," Steve says heartily, and Allison grins. "Plus I ordered four of these."

"All right," she says. "Let me at it."

Once Steve's made sure that she's gotten a good portion of the curry, they settle back in to eat some more, and Allison tells him funny stories about her cat while they finish. After the food is demolished and the dishes are in the sink, Steve sighs and picks up one of the magazines Allison brought with her, one of the ones that's done an in-depth story on him and the battle over the Potomac. He's been avoiding it, but he's gonna have to face it eventually.

He starts reading.

"The first thing," Allison says softly, looking over his shoulder, "is responding to ongoing conversations people have been having. So make some notes as you read that, of language that you like or dislike, that you want to respond to or tap into."

Steve grimaces, and writes the word traitor at the top of a yellow legal pad.

"Yeah, so let's call that the dislike column," Allison says. "Good start."

"You're really something, you know that?" Steve asks. Underneath traitor, he writes anarchist, then hesitates over communist.

"Yeah, I do," she says easily, leaning towards him with her pen. Forming a new column across from the one Steve's started with her untidy left-handed scrawl, she writes: patriot.

Steve laughs a lot, then takes a picture to send to Sam. See, he types, my publicist gets it.

Sam texts back, a few minutes later: you're not gonna make your publicist rob the smithsonian, are you? xxoo

No, that'd be too romantic an outing for a professional relationship, Steve texts back. He doesn't even realize that he's grinning down at his phone until he looks up and sees Allison watching him, amused, one eyebrow raised.

"Texting someone special?" she asks.

Steve takes a long time to reply, the sound caught in his throat, but eventually he says, "Yeah."

"Let me know if it's something I'm gonna have to talk to reporters about, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Steve says, wondering if the day will come when he'll be able to do that. "I will."

By the time Allison leaves, a couple hours later, Steve has a whole bunch of notes on his laptop and the beginnings of a plan.
Sam, it turns out, sends him a lot of photos from D.C. Black Pride.

It starts, on the Friday afternoon, with some shots of the VA booth for LGBTQ+ outreach that Sam is running, colorful with dozens of little flags: stars and stripes on one side, pride rainbows on the other. There are pamphlets and information sheets, too, along with the apparently obligatory bowls of condoms and dental dams.

Then Sam starts taking some selfies – him sitting at the booth, him making faces in front of the booth, him with his arm around his booth-mates. Steve lingers over each one, over the warm feeling he gets seeing Sam smiling in the sun and surrounded by people. He texts Sam back: These are great! Keep them coming. Then he remembers what Sam sent him yesterday, and sends another text: xxoo.

He blushes as he does it, which makes him feel like a dolt. But there's something about putting those feelings in writing that still seems so daring. It takes him back to his days in Brooklyn, before the serum, writing letters to Bucky from his best girl and sealing them with a kiss.

On Saturday, Steve gets ready to do a few of the interviews that Allison set up for him. He tries on half a dozen different suits, the ones that SHIELD gave him for interviews and such when he first woke up, and feels more uncomfortable with every one he tries.

He wonders if the hair and makeup people at the newspapers and magazines will notice if he wears his stockings underneath. Sometimes they take pictures. Sometimes the magazines even want to change what he's wearing.

As he tries out jeans and a t-shirt instead – which still always feels practically disrespectful to wear outside – his phone starts beeping, somewhere on the bed about seven pairs of pants down in the pile. He fishes it out, and smiles to see a photo of Sam, smiling outrageously big, a pink feather boa around his neck, huge sunglasses on his face, with his arm wrapped around a guy with a beard and long braids. It takes him a moment to realize that the guy is wearing a Captain America t-shirt.

Sam's text, which comes a moment later, says, seeing lots of cap shirts around today! you're a hit with queer black vets which I guess isn't much of a surprise to you :D

Steve looks for a while, scrolling up and down between the picture and Sam's text to enjoy them both. The guy with the Cap shirt is making a peace sign.

Just what I needed right now, he sends back. Say hello to everyone from me! I'm doing interviews and it's gonna be a long day.

Sam sends back a bunch of animated hearts that make Steve laugh and feel good. He takes a deep breath and looks back at the messy pile of clothes on the bed.

He keeps the jeans, but, struck by sudden inspiration, he reaches into the back of the closet; they'd given him all kinds of clothes, two years ago, and there are things in here that he's never worn.

The soft pink dress shirt at the back of the closet is one of them. He remembers being shocked by all the shirts, when he first saw them in his wardrobe, shocked that men's shirts came in such bright colors and shocked that anyone would think to provide them for him. Later on, he'd learned the implications of pink shirts on men in this era, and wondered even more that someone – some SHIELD agent, Steve presumes, or a contractor – had put this in his closet. Steve never met the person, but in his day, someone with a job like that was pretty likely to be queer.
He's been dressing in blues and greys and whites for a long time, whenever he goes outside, but it's been by habit, not by choice. It's how he used to pass under the radar, back in the forties.

He puts on the pink shirt, and it brings out his coloring and eyes in a way that's absolutely familiar from when he used to wear a scarf in a similar color, even though his face is different now.

It makes him feel armored, protected, maybe like the way queer guys at Pride feel when they wear a Captain America shirt. Steve reaches for more: there's a matching tie, in pink paisley, that he's pretty sure Betty would've fought someone for if she'd ever seen it. His hands shake a little, tying it, and he ends up having to try a few times before he gets the knot quite right.

He can't help thinking that he has a pink lipstick that would look amazing with this. Or maybe he could wear the bright red that he hasn't worn much; it would stand up nicely to the pink. Could he darken his eyelashes, or rouge his cheeks? Use a little eyeliner? Staring at his face in the mirror, he wonders how much makeup he could wear before people would notice that he was wearing it. He wonders what they would say if they did notice, what they would think.

In the end, he doesn't wear any makeup; just the shirt and tie make him feel exposed enough. He runs his hands through his hair, spiking it up, and puts on a pair of sunglasses, and the really funny thing is that when he goes out of his building, it takes the press a good minute and a half to realize who he is and start following him. By then, he's already on his bike and driving away.

Throughout the day, he answers the same interview questions over and over: Yes, we had no choice. No, I do not consider it treason to stop Nazis from killing people, it's what the Army had me do during the war. Yes, I fully support Natasha Romanoff and her recent actions, just as I support Chelsea Manning. We need to expose and end the atrocities that the American military, and militaries worldwide, have committed. The interviewers seem universally shocked that he would make clear statements in support of his clear actions, but Steve isn't going to soft-pedal anything for them. He's sick of the media making him more palatable than he is; this time, they'll have no choice but to listen, and report what he says.

They ask him what he's planning to do now that SHIELD is destroyed, and he tries to be honest with that question, too.

"I don't know what the future holds. SHIELD was spying on people, breaking laws, breaking the public's trust, all in the name of security. We also did good work there, helping people, preventing violence. I don't know what we should build up in its place. But I guess the one thing I do know is that the people should have a choice in it this time." Getting through that one is a lot harder, but he sees some thoughtful looks on the interviewers' faces, and thinks that maybe what he's saying is making some sense to them.

Once those questions are out of the way, he starts on the really hard stuff.

"The Winter Soldier, sent by HYDRA, was Bucky Barnes, my childhood friend and brother in arms, who I thought was dead," Steve says, clearly and slowly. "He was kept in cryogenic suspension, tortured by HYDRA, and brainwashed. They forced him to become their weapon, and he's been used that way, against his will, sold to the highest bidder for decades. He has been a prisoner of war for longer than any other American in history, and it's time we brought him home."

The interviewers universally widen their eyes and blink nervously before trying some version of: "Is he a danger to the public, Captain Rogers?"

Steve replies with the responses he and Allison worked out. "I don't know. I urge the public not to approach him, but if he comes to you for help, please tell him to get in touch with me. There's a
special email account I've made, and a phone number, that I'd like you to print with the article."

The interviewers all nod nervously.

"I want Bucky to get in touch with people who can help him. My friend Sam Wilson – who you know as the Falcon, now – works at the VA, and he and his colleagues will work together to get him any help he needs."

Most of the interviewers just confirm Sam Wilson's name and move on at that point, but one of them – the guy from one of the online news magazines, who wears a hat indoors – raises an eyebrow and says, "Sam Wilson, I have here, is an LGBTQ+ Outreach Specialist at the VA."

"Yes," Steve says. He and Allison talked about this, even though it'd been hard to think through, and Steve is so, so glad that they did. Otherwise he would already be nervous, angry, breathing fast in anxiety of what this line of questions might lead to.

Allison told him what this line of questions might lead to.

"Do you have any comment on that?"

Steve smiles. "Sure. I think it's great work, and I'm proud of Sam for doing it. He's down at D.C. Black Pride today, reaching out to veterans. He's running a workshop tomorrow, too, in the Bayard Rustin room at one pm. In case you want to go for background info on him."

The guy in the hat narrows his eyes slightly and then asks, "Is Sam Wilson gay?"

"Probably a better question to ask him," Steve says. His heart is racing, but he keeps his face neutral and pleasant.

Looking frustrated, hat guy resorts to, "Would you be comfortable if you found out that Sam Wilson, or any of your fellow superheroes, were gay?"

Blessing Allison silently for helping him figure out how to phrase this, Steve says, "Why wouldn't I be comfortable? Did you think there weren't any queer people in Brooklyn in the 30s? Or during World War Two?"

The interviewer taps his finger against the side of the iPhone he's using to record their conversation. After a long silence, he says, "I like your shirt."

Steve says, "Thank you." Glancing down at the soft pink shirt and the paisley tie, Steve reminds himself that he gets to choose who he is and what he does, that he controls his image, because he figures he can guess what's coming next.

"Do you have any comment on your own sexuality?"

Hoping that Jim will be proud of him, Steve says, "None whatsoever." He meets the guy's eyes, daring him to pursue the line of questioning; Steve can plant his feet and refuse to give just as well as the next protester.

The interviewer drops it, and goes back to asking about Bucky.

Steve answers as well as he can, giving him good copy to print. He's really going to have to come out sometime soon, he thinks; it's getting hard to hold it inside. But not right now. Right now he needs the story to be about Bucky.
Between interviews, whenever he looks down at his phone, Sam has always sent him more pictures and texts, telling him about the work he's doing, the little joys and victories that will make a difference in peoples' lives.

Steve wishes, more and more, that he could be with him.

*

That night, when Steve checks his email, he finds one from Arnie, full of the usual cute cat videos and some pictures of him and Tom during their recent weekend together in Miami. They both look happy, grinning in the bright Florida sun, holding hands as they walk along the beach. It makes Steve’s heart ache, a little, to see it.

Tom is definitely very handsome. Steve figures he’d take up backgammon, too, if he were Arnie.

There’s a message in the email as well, a lot longer than Arnie’s emails usually are. He talks a bit about the Florida trip, complains about the plane ride, and then, at the bottom, spares a mention for Steve’s recent overthrow of an international spy agency.

*Saw you on the news again, of course. There have been a lot of people calling you a traitor, but of course I don't believe it. I've been setting them right down at the senior's center whenever I hear anyone saying that. I hope you’re healing up okay. In my experience (which is hip surgery, not getting shot) the cat videos help with that.*

Steve smiles, reaching out for the screen and running his fingers over Arnie’s words. He wishes that the email were more like a letter, so he could hold it in his hands, see Arnie’s writing, even smell Arnie’s cologne on the paper.

He picks up the phone to call him instead, but hesitates just before he presses the green "call" icon.

Arnie doesn’t know that it was Bucky, on the news. And Steve will have to tell him before those articles come out later in the week.

Taking a deep breath, Steve touches his finger to the icon. Arnie picks up after a few rings, and he and Steve chat for a while, just like they usually do. Arnie asks after Jim, and Steve asks after Tom, and he gets to hear a lot more about their time in Florida, and about Arnie’s hip surgery from six years ago.

"So listen, Arnie," Steve says, when there’s a lull in the conversation. "I have to tell you something."

Arnie’s voice sounds firm and calm as he says "Go ahead," and Steve is reminded of how many of his old friends he’s already watched die, how much experience he has getting ready for bad news. Steve wishes he could say anything else, or take back the interviews, or buy up every copy of TIME magazine in Queens, so that Arnie wouldn’t have to know.

Steve said this to a dozen people just yesterday, but saying it to Arnie is much, much worse. He pushes ahead anyhow, falling back on the scripts he used with the reporters.

"It was Bucky Barnes, who I was fighting on those helicarriers. He was the soldier with the metal arm. They – it was HYDRA, they caught him and brainwashed him, kept him frozen for years."

"Oh my God," Arnie breathes. "Bucky Barnes, your old boyfriend?"

Arnie’s the only person in the world who would’ve put it like that, who would remember Bucky
that way, and it’s enough to break down Steve’s defenses. Alone at his kitchen table, Steve leans forward, and rests his head in his hand, and closes his eyes.

"Yes," he says, crying and trying not to let it show in his voice. "That’s right."

"God, Steve. I can’t imagine. Is he - what happened to him?"

"I didn’t kill him," Steve says. "I couldn’t."

"Of course you couldn’t," Arnie says. "And he couldn’t kill you."

The certainty in Arnie's voice is unbelievable, overwhelming. No one else had known that, at the time, not even Sam or Natasha. No one but Steve. But it had been true.

"No," Steve agrees. "He couldn't. And now he's . . . out there, maybe starting to remember who he is. I don't know."

"All right," Arnie says, sounding a little distressed, "all right, tell me the whole story. From the top."

So Steve does, from when Bucky fell from the train in 1945 to when he'd pulled Steve out of the river. He feels himself calming down as he tells the story, as he puts it all into the proper order for someone who wasn't there.

"But he's not out there hurting anyone," Arnie says, when Steve finishes. "That's a good sign."

"I know," Steve says, sighing, running a hand through his hair. "I just wish I could get out there and find him. Help him."

"You'll find him," Arnie says. "I saw the way you two looked at each other, back in the war. That wasn't the end of your story. You'll find him."

"Thanks, Arnie," Steve breathes. He doesn't know what else to say. After a pause, Arnie speaks again.

"Wasn't it Bucky who played that trick on the grammar school teacher to get us all out of school early? Back when we were kids?"

"Yeah," Steve says, warmly. "It was. He'd gotten jobs for us, as lookouts for the local speakeasy, and we had to get there by four."

Arnie laughs. "I'd forgotten about all those speakeasies back then. Those jobs were good training for when we had to dodge the fuzz at gay bars later on."

Steve laughs too, and then Arnie asks another question about Bucky, and another, and before long they're lost in reminiscing, sharing stories back and forth until it's almost midnight, and Arnie has to take his medication and get into bed.

"Thanks for this, Arnie," Steve says. "I needed it."

"You go out and catch yourself that man," Arnie replies, firmly. "You managed it once before."

"You bet," Steve says.

*
The next morning he's brimming over with energy, desperate for activity, but he still isn't supposed to go running or hit the bag. He'd ignore the advice – since the transformation, he's never had to worry about healing right, and his body can take whatever he throws at it – but he doesn't have any of the intel he needs, all the people he needs to talk to are out of the office on Sundays, and his gut wound really does ache a lot, still. He supposes he's never had that many organs perforated at once before.

He calls Jim at nine, hoping that he's in town.

"Hi you," Jim says, when he answers. "How're you doing?"

"I miss you," Steve sighs, relaxing back against his kitchen counter and crossing his ankles. He can't help thinking about those pictures of Arnie and Tom, walking hand in hand on the beach, and feeling a bit lonely.

"I'm in New York," Jim says, "but I can be there in half an hour. Wanna meet me on the roof?"

Steve smiles, relieved. "Half an hour the best you can do?"

Steve wears his favorite dress to meet him, the white one with the lavender flowers, standing on the rooftop in the wind and loving the sight of it blowing around his knees and baring his thighs. Jim lands walking, and as he takes the three big robot-powered strides towards Steve he looks huge and powerful. His faceplate flips back, he wraps a metal arm around Steve's waist, and then he dips him backwards a little, so that his face is above Steve's.

"Good entrance," Steve breathes, right before Jim takes his mouth.

Later, in the bedroom, Jim refuses to fuck him, citing Steve's injuries and refusing to cave in the face of Steve's insistence that he can handle a little jostling for a good cause.

"I heal fast," Steve protests.

"Then give it one more day, at least," Jim says. "For my sake."

Instead he makes Steve lie down in bed and kisses him, peeling Steve's clothes off slowly and putting his mouth to the skin he's bared. Steve starts panting under the simple, wet pressure of Jim's mouth on his body, under the huge, overwhelming sensation of Jim loving him so well.

He reaches up to hold Jim, to caress him in return, but Jim runs his hands along Steve's upper arms, pressing them gently towards the bed.

"Will you stay still for me a little while, Steve?" Jim asks quietly. "Just let me do this to you?"

"Okay," Steve says, his mouth falling open with his breath. "Okay."

When Steve's naked, Jim's still in the t-shirt and jeans he came out of his War Machine suit in. Even in the warm May air it gives Steve a little shiver to be laid out like this, on top of the covers, bare to the morning sunshine streaming in the window.

His cock is hard against his belly; when Jim works his way down to it, hands and lips and tongue, Steve almost breaks his word and lifts his hands up off the bed to take Jim's face in his hands, to direct him, to take control.

"Is this okay, honey?" Jim asks, making careful eye contact. He's sucked Steve off before, but not that many times, not when it's all too often made Steve feel strange and uncomfortable.
Right now, it feels indulgent, like a pleasure so great he almost doesn't dare accept it. Steve nods at Jim, and lies still, and accepts what Jim has to give him.

"I want it," he says, exposing more of himself than the nakedness or the sunshine ever could.

Jim doesn't hesitate after that, just ducks his head and gets to sucking, his mouth working eagerly on Steve's big cock. He stops for a second to get a little lube, then uses his slick hand on the base. Steve groans and shifts beneath him, then stops abruptly when the ache in his leg makes itself known.


It takes him a long time to come, the pleasure building slowly within him until it crests: gently, inevitably. He looks down at Jim, then, his cheeks hot, his mind clear for the first time in weeks; Jim is looking up at him, grinning hard, with a bit of Steve's come still glistening on his lips.

"Never get hurt like that again," Jim says, warningly. "Or this is what happens."

Steve laughs, turning his head to press his hot face against the cool pillow. "I'll never do it again, sir, I promise," he says.

"Glad to hear it."

"Come here," Steve demands, finally lifting his arms and reaching out. "Come up here, seriously, get naked and then come here."

Jim obediently takes off his clothes, then climbs up the bed and hovers over him, still smiling. When he bends down to kiss him Steve opens his mouth in joyful anticipation.

"What do you want," Steve asks, between searching, soft kisses. "Tell me what you want and I'll do it for you."

Jim huffs a laugh against Steve's lips. "I want you to rim me until I don't know my own name anymore," he says.

"Aye aye," Steve says, smiling back.

As he rolls over onto his stomach, Jim asks, "Wait, are we doing the Navy now? We've never done Navy roleplay."

Trying to keep a straight face and failing, Steve says, "Up periscope." As Jim laughs, he shuffles down the bed as best he can with his damaged arm and leg, bites Jim's ass firmly, and goes to work.

After, they make lunch together and Jim lets him know what he's found out.

"The kids aren't in town anymore, we're fairly sure of that. There have been enough sightings elsewhere to convince us they've moved. They haven't been spotted in a group in a while, but the two oldest ones have been stealing stuff."

"Siddhani and Rokia?" Steve asks. Jim nods, setting out the bread for a few sandwiches while Steve stirs the canned soup together with the milk. "So where are they now?"

"Heading south, along the coast," Jim says. "The sightings I'm inclined to believe were in Scranton and Philadelphia."
"How the hell did they get so far," Steve asks. "The bus?"

"Well, there are no reports of a pack of pre-teens stealing a car with Hulk strength and fireballs, so I guess so. Unless the Extremis kids have figured out flight."

"God. Shouldn't they be a lot more visible than they are? Shouldn't we have a better sense of their movements?"

"Everyone's been so busy trying to track down and clean up HYDRA installations that we haven't had the people power to figure out where they are, or do any sustained surveillance. It's wild out there."

"They are stealing food, though, right?" Looking down at the stuff in front of them – meat, cheese, vegetables, milk – Steve wishes to God he could send it all to the kids. It feels obscene to be eating, or getting ready to eat, during this conversation, when Siddhani and the others are out there, maybe cold, maybe in danger, maybe going hungry or thirsty and all because Steve didn't prevent it.

"Yeah," Jim sighs. "Food. Some clothes, some soap and things like that. No medical supplies that we know of, no weapons."

"Good," Steve says. "That's something." He takes over stirring the soup so that Jim can make the sandwiches, piled high with good things. "We can't – we can't leave them messages, can we? Like I did in those interviews, for Bucky? Or leave them supplies?"

Jim shakes his head. "When what's left of HYDRA regroups, they're going to want to get their hands on them. Not to mention other government agencies and interests. I don't want to call attention to their existence."

Sighing, Steve nods.

"Have you heard from them?"

Steve glances up at him in shock, but Jim doesn't look away from the mustard he's spreading on the bread.

"Why would I have heard from them?" Steve asks.

Jim shrugs. "I went by the hospital a few times, after the rescue. Check in on the kids."

Steve smiles; he didn't know Jim had done that, but it's not a surprise; Jim tends not to feel right until he sees a mission properly completed, especially if it involves civilians or hostages.

"They talked about you. Especially Siddhani, who's the oldest. She said she had your number. She sounded really . . . you know. Kind of hero-worshippy, about you, like she was proud you'd given her your card."

Steve feels an absurd urge to run to his phone and check the messages, even though he knows there's nothing from Siddhani. God. That she could've looked up to him, thought so well of him, and then known that it was a bad idea to trust him . . . Steve wishes he could change it. He wishes he could make her see him as her hero again, if only so she wouldn't have to be on the run and alone anymore.

"I haven't heard from anyone," Steve says, eventually, coughing to clear his throat. "I hope they'll call, though."
Jim nods, frowning, as if this were no more than he expected. "We gotta do something for them," he says, as he cuts the sandwiches into neat diagonals. "Make them know it's safe to come in to us."

"How can we do that?" Steve asks, getting out the bowls. "How can we do that, when I'm not even sure I would come in to us if I were them?"

Jim purses his lips. "I don't know. It'd be better if we could ask them. You don't have any way of getting in touch with Siddhani, by any chance, do you?"

"No," Steve says. "I didn't think to ask." He hadn't ever thought that he would need her help, only the other way around. Stupid.

"Then I guess we keep waiting, and watching, and hoping," Jim says. "I'll let you know as soon as I have anything else."

They sit down at the kitchen table to eat, and Steve has to force himself to take the first bite, too angry and too upset to want to eat anything while the kids might be starving.

"Eat your lunch," Jim says softly, after a while. Steve realizes that he's been frozen, with the spoon in his hands, for a long time.

"Okay," Steve says. He breathes out, and Jim places a reassuring hand on his arm. "Thanks, Jim."

He eats the soup, and thinks about how to go about making the kind of world those kids could feel safe in.

* 

Steve wakes up Monday morning to a series of texts from Sam, all received between midnight and three am; Steve smiles, running a hand through his hair and gazing down at the increasingly drunken messages. Sam is going to be sleeping in and skipping his run this morning, he figures.

Sure enough, he gets another text a little after noon, apologizing for all the other texts.

*That's okay. Your drunk texts were very sweet. Did you see you sent me six Yelp pages so I could decide on a restaurant for tonight?*

yes, Sam texts back. *I maybe got into an internet research spiral after the sixth martini and recruited some of my old PJ buddies into helping me find a good place to take you.*

Grinning, Steve texts, *Aw, you talked about me to your friends?*

*I think I kind of bored them by talking about nothing else,* Sam admits. *don't worry, I didn't give your name and just said you were a distinguished veteran and an artist.*

*I sound like a great catch,* Steve writes. Despite the omission of truth, he likes the idea of Sam telling his friends about him, maybe describing his sense of humor or his voice or his . . . physical characteristics, even.

*told them how beautiful you are, too,* Sam writes. *they were all ready to fight me for your hand.*

Steve blushes and runs his finger along the side of his phone, wishing he could reach out and caress Sam the same way.

*Well send me some pics,* Steve writes, *in case I want to trade you in for some other Air Force vet.*
all my friends are unkind and unattractive, Sam writes.

Steve laughs out loud, and then texts lol to Sam. So when can I see you today? he asks.

I'm doing a half-day at the office, so how about I pick you up around 6:30?

Okay. I'll go through your extensive research and pick a restaurant.

looking forward to it, beautiful, Sam writes.

Steve usually tries to delete texts as they come in, to keep things neat, but he has a hard time with the last one from Sam. Eventually he decides to keep it, even knowing what he knows about surveillance. There are some things he's not willing to give up, anymore.

*

Steve looks over the restaurants that Sam sent him. He tries to imagine the two of them in each place: in candlelight at the little Italian bistro, sitting tucked up close on a bench trying new things at the sushi place, hip to hip at the round corner table at the Ethiopian cafe. Nothing seems quite right.

He realizes, slowly, that it's not the food or the places he's rejecting, but the idea of himself there, with Sam, not holding Sam's hand, not wearing a dress, not acting like you would on a date. And he’s suddenly worried that Sam wouldn't really like it either, would get that pinched look on his face like he’s making the best of a bad situation every time he doesn’t reach out to touch Steve and breaks his word to his grandma.

So Steve has to ask himself where he can take Sam, where Sam wouldn't have to worry about whether or not he's allowed to touch.

Struck by inspiration, he calls Jim. Jim laughs at him a lot, but eventually helps him out.

When Sam knocks on his door, Steve takes a nervous breath before opening it. He's wearing one of his new dresses, fitted against his chest and flaring out below his waist, all in a rich purple that makes him happy whenever it catches his eye. There are buttons up the front and a bow-tied belt and it's cute, a cute date dress, he hopes, but he doesn't know how Sam will react to seeing him in it. He did his makeup all up, too, pink lipstick to match his pink Cons, and spiked his hair a little with the pomade that everyone insists on calling "product." When he'd looked in the bedroom mirror, he'd felt so pretty he'd had to twirl around a few times just to enjoy it.

The look of delighted surprise on Sam's face is entirely worth it. He takes Steve in slowly, eyes traveling up and down his body, his gaze getting hotter and hotter as he does it. Steve smiles his best smile and does his best lean against the doorframe.

"Hi Sam," he says.

Sam looks gorgeous, dressed in a perfectly fitted dove-grey three-piece suit with a purple shirt underneath, open at the collar, exposing the notch between his collarbones.

"Hi Steve," Sam says, grinning slowly. "Nice of you to dress to match me."

"Guess we're just in sync," Steve breathes, looking into Sam's eyes. For a long moment he considers forgetting about the dinner part and grabbing Sam up by his lapels instead, dragging him inside to fuck him right now.
It would be a big waste, though, and anyway the anticipation is half the fun. Instead he lets the energy crackle between them, making him feel lit up from the inside.

"I take it we're staying in? Or am I invited to your coming-out party tonight?"

Steve laughs. "Like a debutante. No, I thought - it might be easier if we stayed in." He watches Sam’s face carefully, and after a moment, Sam nods.

"You might be right," he says. Steve takes Sam’s hand and tugs on it, leading him towards the stairs that go to the roof.

"Come with me."

When they get there, Sam whistles. "Thought it was my turn to pay," he says, taking in the whole setup: brightly colored flowers, strings of white lights, white tablecloth fluttering in the breeze.

"You owe me two now," Steve says, squeezing his hand. "Not very gentlemanly."

"I did bring you chocolates," Sam says, holding up the box in his other hand. "Really fancy ones."

"Then you're redeeming yourself," Steve says.

Sam shakes his head as he sits down and the servers come to pour their wine and water. "How'd you set all this up?" he asks.

Ducking his head ruefully, he says, "It's actually Jim's idea. This is how he did our first date. I called him and asked him if I could use his people."

"Really," Sam laughs. "And what did he say to that?"

"That I oughta get my own game and stop stealing his moves," Steve admits. "But I explained it was an homage to his smooth romantic style, and he gave me the phone number."

"Charmer," Sam says. "Did I tell you how gorgeous you look in that dress?"

"No," Steve says, pleased. "But I didn't tell you how well you're wearing that suit, either."

"Then I guess we're both beautiful and callous people," Sam concludes, sipping at the wine.

"We're perfect for each other," Steve says, which comes out way more sappy than it ought to be for the light, teasing tone of their conversation, but Sam just reaches across the table and takes his hand, stroking his fingers with his thumb.

"I keep thinking that too," he says, low and serious.

The servers come with their first course, all tiny finger-food like Steve requested.

"Thank you," Sam says to them, making eye contact. They nod and smile and stay unobtrusive.

"Jim employs these folks?" Sam asks, watching them leave.

"Tony," Steve says, which clears the confusion on Sam's face.

"Ah," he says. "That makes sense."

"They're very discreet," Steve says.
"They'd have to be." Looking at Steve again, he says, "So what kind of food did you ask them to make?"

Steve lowers his voice to a murmur. "I told them it didn't matter, as long as it was simple, not too many courses, and something we could eat with our fingers."

"So you got a little of your own game after all," Sam grins. "C'mere, then."

He picks up a tiny morsel off the plate – something delicate in puff pastry – and holds it out to Steve.

Steve opens his mouth, careful of his lipstick, and takes it from Sam's fingers, getting the taste of him along with the food. It turns out to be crab, a perfect complement to the salty taste of Sam's skin, and Steve closes his eyes to chew it.

When he opens his eyes again, Sam's licking his lips.

"Want one of your own, Sam?"

"I'd like nothing better," Sam murmurs. He eats off of Steve's fingers, kissing the tips of them as he goes, then chews slowly, savoring. "Delicious," he says.

They go on like that, trading back and forth until all the finger foods are gone, until Sam's laughing at the little pink lipstick kisses on his fingers and Steve has to lean over and kiss him, quickly, on the mouth, just to finish off the course.

"Can I bring you some more? Or another appetizer?" One of the servers asks, taking away the empty plates.

"Next course, I think," Steve says, looking up at her. She nods, smiling softly.

The next course is bowls of meat and vegetables that come with a half-dozen sauces for dipping, some creamy and thick, some light and thin. He and Sam play around for a while, testing them all out, using the little skewers to feed each other morsels. Every time he takes a bite Sam gets a hot, intense look in his eyes, watching Steve's lips pull the food from the tines, and it makes Steve never want to eat any other way ever again.

"It's been so long since I've had fondue," Sam says, at one point, laughing. "I guess it came around to being romantic and fancy again."

Steve freezes, then swallows. "This is fondue?" he asks.

Sam nods, looking a little confused at Steve's shocked tone.

"I – someone told me that fondue was cheese and bread," Steve says, starting to smile.

"I guess traditionally," Sam says slowly. "But it's also any food you put on a skewer and dip in a sauce. You can have chocolate fondue with fruit, too." After a little pause, he asks, "Why?"

"It's a long story," Steve says, "about another person. I'm not sure it's good date etiquette."

"You told me you got the idea for our date from your other boyfriend," Sam laughs. "I think I'll be fine, if you feel like telling the story."

He holds up a piece of the tender beef, dipped in one of the spicy sauces, and Steve leans forward to take it. It's delicious.
He sets up one of the same for Sam, and as Sam ducks his head and opens his lips for Steve, Steve tells him the story: how he was confused about who he was, how he was interested in Peggy, how Peggy and Howard had seemed like they might be together.

"Wait, her and Stark's dad? This superheroing is pretty incestuous sometimes."

"Small communities," Steve says, thinking back to how it was in Brooklyn, how there were guys that he and Marlene and Betty had all fucked at one time or another. "Anyway, it was—I mean, we didn't do bisexuality the same way, then, so it was weird to me that Peggy might be a butch dyke but also a normal—I mean, straight girl."

"I guess it would've fed into how strange you were feeling at the time?" Sam says, hesitantly. "Not knowing who you should be attracted to."

"Yeah," Steve says, realizing it himself in retrospect. "In some ways, Peggy and I were both outliers, or . . . inbetween, I guess. We connected on that level."

"You still go to see her?" Sam asks.

"I haven't since I destroyed the institution she built with her own two hands," Steve sighs, leaning back in his chair. "I owe her a visit."

"I'll go with you, if you want," Sam offers. "For moral support."

Steve considers; it's not something he would've ever thought to do, and he doesn't know if he would be comfortable with it. He wishes he could introduce Sam to Peggy as she was when Steve first knew her, with all her faculties. He worries that Sam, or anyone, wouldn't be able to see how wonderful she is, might get distracted by the kind of pity that Peggy would hate to receive.

"Maybe," Steve says. He bends his head to kiss Sam's hand in appreciation, then spears a roasted mushroom for him.

"No, no, no. No way," Sam says, shaking his head. "I can't do mushrooms."

"What," Steve says, disbelieving. "I have seen you eat mushrooms. When we had Thai food."

"Only because I was nervous! I didn't want to pick things out of my food like a toddler while on a first date with America's most eligible bachelor," Sam says, grinning a little shyly. "I sucked it up. Now you get the real me."

"Soft cotton Sam Wilson," Steve says. "I like it." He ditches the mushroom and spears a head of asparagus instead. "Okay?"

"Bring it on," Sam says.

Steve does, using his napkin to wipe a little spill of sauce that escapes Sam's lips and trickles down into his beard. "I hope you're not still afraid to look like a toddler," Steve says, deadpan, and Sam laughs.

"Shut up, it's your bad skewer work that got us here," Sam says.

Steve leans over and kisses him to make up for it, and Sam meets him happily, pressing their lips together soft and sweet before pulling back again. During the course of the meal they've edged a little closer to one another, and now Steve takes the final step, shuffling his chair around so it's right next to Sam's.
"There's something else," Steve says. "Something else I wanted to tell you about those days. During the war."

"All right," Sam says, because he's too kind to say that this is way beyond the limits of date etiquette. But Steve finally feels able to say it, comfortable enough, and he wants Sam to know.

For reasons he can't quite put into words, even for himself, he wants Sam to know before they have sex. It feels dishonest, otherwise.

"Bucky wasn't just my friend, back then. He was my lover."

Sam nods. "I wondered," he says.

"He was my lover before and after the transformation," Steve adds, trying to explain it so Sam can understand. "When I was little, and then when I was big, so he didn't – he still knew who I was."

"I can see that," Sam says softly. "I bet it was hard to feel like yourself, at first."

"Hard to feel like a little Brooklyn fairy when you're busy being Captain America, yeah," Steve says. He shakes his head. "Bucky was there for me when I had nothing else."

"I can't imagine how it must've felt when you saw him again," Sam says. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Steve says. "I think – I hope it's going to be okay, anyway."

"You wanna talk about how to go about finding him? Because I talked to the homeless outreach coordinator, Jason, he had some ideas that might help, if Bucky's still sleeping outside or squatting somewhere."

"I definitely do," Steve says, smiling. He'll have to get Sam and Allison together, at some point, to talk some of this out. "But right now I think I'm distracting attention away from our date."

"It's our date," Sam says. "We can talk about what we want." His eyes stay on Steve for a few more seconds, though, and eventually he adds, "Was there a reason you wanted to tell me?"

Steve shrugs. "It was just – something I wanted you to know about me. And about him, I guess."

"Thank you," Sam says, kissing Steve's cheek. "I'm glad you told me."

"I wanted to, back when you told me about Riley," Steve sighs, leaning his head on Sam's shoulder. "I don't know how you do that, open yourself up to the world and let them see you. We were strangers when you shared your story with me."

"It's practice, baby," Sam murmurs, kissing the top of Steve's head. "It's all just practice."

Keeping his head on Sam's shoulder, Steve feeds him another few pieces of food, watching his mouth as he opens up, kissing his throat as he swallows.

"Were you and Riley lovers?" Steve asks, his eyes on the food in front of them. "It's a question he's been wanting to ask for a while, but he didn't feel comfortable doing it when he hadn't shared his own story."

"Nah," Sam says. "He was gay, but our friendship was – it was bigger than any attraction we had, I guess. We used to cause havoc together whenever we hit a gay bar on leave."

Steve grins, picturing it as he offers Sam another bite of the beef. "I bet you got mistaken for a
couple a lot," he says.

Laughing, Sam nods; Steve feels the motion in Sam's shoulder. "Oh my God," he says, "all the time. My mom used to give me these sad looks and say, honey, we know about you and Riley, it's okay to call him your boyfriend when you bring him home for Christmas."

It's such a beautiful thought that Steve feels his throat close up a little. He clears it. "Your mom sounds great."

"She is," Sam agrees. Sam doesn't offer, but Steve feels the possibility of it, that one day Sam might take him home for Christmas dinner, to meet his family, the way Steve and Frank used to joke about. The idea will take a lot of getting used to, but it makes Steve feel warm inside just to imagine it.

When they've thoroughly demolished the meats and vegetables and sauces, their server comes back and refills their wine for them. Steve doesn't take his head off of Sam's shoulder, testing how it feels to have her see him like that. She doesn't seem to notice or care, still armed with her pleasant, warm smile and efficient manner.

"Can I get you another course? Or dessert?" she asks.

"Time for dessert, baby?" Sam asks, and Steve nods against him.

"Please," Steve says.

"Coffee, tea, perhaps a port or sherry?"

Steve shakes his head, but Sam orders a port.

"You ever had it?"

"No," Steve says, smiling. He pushes himself back up to a sitting position and meets Sam's eyes. "It was way out of my class. And I didn't experiment much with alcohol after the transformation, since it doesn't work on me."

"I keep forgetting," Sam says. "Still, you might like the taste."

"Maybe you'll give me a sip of yours," Steve says.

Dessert arrives in the form of dozens of tiny bite-sized tarts and cakes. Sam feeds the first one to him, and Steve licks his fingers this time, trapping one in his mouth to bite and suck at the tip a little before letting go.

"Hmmm, you make it hard to concentrate on dessert, Steve," Sam says, sipping his port and watching him with lidded eyes.

"Do I?" Steve asks, picking up another tart, this one filled with a single blueberry and a single slice of strawberry.

"I keep thinking about something other than food, for some reason," Sam says. Steve pops the tart between Sam's teeth; when he's done eating it, Steve ducks in and takes his mouth, chasing the sweet flavor of the berries with his lips and tongue, opening his mouth against Sam's, kissing him deeply.

"I think I like the port," Steve says, which makes Sam breathe out a soft, delighted smile.
"I think I like you," Sam says. "C'mere, do that again." Steve kisses him again, taking the time to taste his lips and tongue.

Sam groans beneath him, and Steve can't help himself; without breaking their kiss, he gets up off his chair and straddles Sam's lap, resting his weight on Sam's thighs.

"Is this okay?" he asks, against Sam's lips. "I'm not squishing you?"

"I caught you with one arm," Sam says. "This is fine." He runs his hands up Steve's bare thighs, under his dress. Steve covers Sam's hands with his own, urging him upward.

"God, you're gorgeous," Sam says, and Steve closes his eyes in pleasure at those words. "So sexy. You make such a pretty girl."

Steve opens his eyes again, looking down at Sam in surprise. Sam looks worried.

"Sorry, was that wrong to say? I'm sorry, Steve, I should've asked." His hands have stilled on Steve's thighs. Steve wants them to be moving instead.

"That was – no, it wasn't wrong," he says. "I like it. It's just." He swallows, blinks away a confusing tear that's threatening to fall, half joy and half grief. He told Sam about Bucky, he thinks; he can tell him this. "Bucky used to call me that. His girl, his best girl, things like that."

"Do you want me not to say it?" Sam asks.

Steve slides his hips forward, relishing the soft slick feeling of Sam's suit pants against his bare thighs, the heat mingling between their bodies.

"I – only if you don't want me to be your girl," Steve breathes. "I want to be, though."

"My girl," Sam says, experimentally. He licks his lips. His hands slide up a little further under Steve's dress, stroking his hips, almost touching his ass, then drawing back down again in a long slow caress.

"Think about it," Steve says, arching against Sam's hands.

"I will," Sam says. One of his hands leaves Steve's leg, and a moment later Sam's holding up a little delicate cake square. "More sweet?" he asks. Steve bends down to take it from his fingers, but Sam fumbles it so that it falls into his palm instead.

"Whoops," he says, "let me get you another."

"S'okay," Steve says, and brings Sam's cupped palm up to his mouth instead, lapping the chocolate up with his lips and tongue.

"God," Sam says, reverently. They exchange a few more bites of dessert, and then a few more kisses, and after a while the kisses start to seriously outnumber the bites.

"You want any more to eat?" Steve asks, gazing into Sam's eyes.

"I feel satisfied," Sam says.

"Oh, then there's nothing more for me to do," Steve teases, running his palms down Sam's chest. Sam's broad and strong and probably won't pin Steve to the mattress and hold him down while he's still supposed to be healing; too bad. They'll have to save that.
"I can think of one or two things," Sam admits. He leans up to kiss Steve's neck gently. "I don't want to trigger your dysphoria again, though," he says. "Is there anything I should know?"

"I think I'm okay right now," Steve says, considering the question. He doesn't feel any anxiety, here in Sam's lap, dress falling over his legs, the evidence of his lipstick here and there on Sam's face. That doesn't mean he won't, though. "But maybe – don't touch my chest too much yet," he says. "To be safe."

"All right," Sam agrees. "What about all your injuries, is this okay to do?"

"Yeah," Steve says, kissing Sam's jaw, lingering with each sweet touch of his lips to Sam's skin. "You just have to treat me a little gently."

"Oh, Steve," Sam says, voice low and thick. "You have no idea how gently I want to treat you."

Steve flushes. "Then maybe let's get off this rooftop," he says.

Sam kisses him, then says, "Okay." But before Steve can move to clamber off his lap, Sam stands up, arms wrapped around Steve's back, urging him upwards.

Automatically, Steve locks his legs around Sam's waist and holds onto Sam's shoulders with his arms. Sam walks forward, looking up into Steve's eyes, and Steve gazes back down, heart thumping hard in his chest.

He hasn't been carried like this in so long, face to face, body to body, Sam's heat up against his, Sam's arms holding him secure. It makes Steve's whole body rush with blood and pleasure.

"You're so strong," he says, appreciatively, running his hands over the thick muscles on Sam's arms.

"I better be, to carry your pretty ass around," Sam grins, starting down the stairs.

"Don't forget those chocolates," Steve laughs, and Sam rolls his eyes and goes back for them.

By the time they get into Steve's apartment Sam's looking a little tired, but Steve kisses his cheek, and his jaw, and his ear, and Sam grins and keeps going.

"Bedroom through there," Steve says, jerking his head.

"Presumptuous," Sam says, but takes them straight through the apartment and sets Steve down gently on the bed.

Sam lays down beside him, panting a little. "I need a second," Sam says. Steve laughs.

"I loved it, Sam," he says, into Sam's ear. "I love how I feel in your arms."

"Me too," Sam says, and grins at him, and that sight gets Steve going like a switch has been flipped, lust rolling through his body in a wave.

Steve does what he would normally do, getting on top of Sam and straddling his hips, but after a minute or two of kissing like that, all bent over, the position starts to bother him, pulling with dull pain against his abdomen.

"Wait, wait," Steve says, and Sam stops kissing him and stills his roving hands. "I can't – this is too hard on my, uh," he gestures, not sure how to phrase it.
"Your recent gut wound?" Sam puts in, raising his eyebrows. "Are you sure you don't want to wait? I'll come back anytime you like."

"No, no," Steve says, rolling over onto his back and urging Sam to come with him. "I'm just better off resting my back."

"Please tell me we'll stop if it gets to be too much," Sam says.

"I promise, Sam," Steve says, kissing him to convince him, little kisses, over and over. "I promise, it won't hurt me, I promise, I want it, want you inside me, Sam – "

Sam groans and collapses into position, covering Steve with his body but not pressing down on him. "God, you're impossible," Sam says, between kisses.

"I've been told that," Steve says, "but the truth is I'm really easy."

Sam laughs against his neck, and Steve wraps his arms around him, squeezing hard, loving the weight and solidity of Sam's body above his.

"We'll just have to do it with you on top another time," Sam says, his hands on Steve's thighs again. Steve spreads his legs helpfully, encouraging Sam higher.

"Yeah," Steve agrees. "I like it that way."

"Bet you do," Sam says. He squeezes Steve's thighs, then runs his palms upwards, under Steve's dress and over the lace panties covering his hardening dick. "Pushy little bottom, huh."

Steve's heart pounds harder at the words. "You love it," he manages, panting.

"I really do," Sam agrees. "What you got on under here, baby?"

"Undress me and find out," Steve says challengingly, sitting up to meet him. Sam chuckles. While he hesitates, Steve starts working the buttons on his vest, wanting to see Sam, too, wanting to have Sam's skin on his. He gets the vest undone and most of the buttons on the shirt beneath, too, before Sam stops struggling around the belt of Steve's dress and asks.

"Is there a zipper, or – " Sam asks.

"Undo the buttons on the front," Steve replies. "It'll slip over my head."

Sam undoes the buttons carefully, one by one, not touching Steve's chest as he does it, and not dipping his hands in underneath once the buttons are undone. That easy care turns Steve on even more, as he realizes exactly how gentle Sam is gonna be with him.

Steve toes off his shoes and socks; Sam, observing him, does the same, though he has to stop to untie his dress shoes first. Then they're both of them unbuttoned together, Sam's chest flashing out underneath the purple shirt.

"You first," Steve says, jerking his chin at Sam. Sam undoes the last three buttons on his shirt and pushes it all off – shirt, vest, and coat – in one smooth motion. It falls off his shoulders and onto the floor, and Steve finally gets to see what he's been craving, what Sam's kept mostly hidden under his dress shirts and baggy sweaters. His arms, muscled and strong; his shoulders, scarred with a bullet wound on the right side, big and powerful; his tight nipples, his little belly. There's dark hair leading down into the waist of his gray trousers, but none on his chest.
Sam walks forward and kneels on the bed, coming up between Steve's parted thighs. He gathers up the skirt of Steve's dress slowly, lifting it up over Steve's hips, then meets his eyes.

"Up," he says, and Steve raises his arms obediently, not looking away from Sam's warm gaze. Sam pulls the dress up and off, going slowly to avoid tearing it where it pulls tight across Steve's shoulders.

Once it's off, Steve leans back on his elbows, aware of the picture he's making in nothing but his makeup and black panties, glad of the force of Sam's regard on his skin. It occurs to him to wonder that he feels so comfortable with Sam, so ready to be exposed in front of him, and that thought makes him feel even more desperate to get Sam on top of him.

"Take off your pants, Sam," Steve drawls. Sam does, his fingers slipping a little on the button, making Steve smile to himself.

Down to his boxer-briefs, Sam crawls up the bed between Steve's thighs and kisses him just above the knee.

"You wear these for me, beautiful?" Sam asks, running his finger along the edge of the lace. Steve's dick is hard, pushing up against the fabric, but Sam keeps his touch light and teasing against Steve's hip.

"You know I did," Steve admits, touching Sam's head, running his fingertips over Sam's ear, his neck, the soft hair on his jaw. Sam smiles up at him, then places a kiss where his fingers have just been, on Steve's thigh below the edge of the lace.

"I want to suck you right through them," Sam says, kissing his way slowly in towards Steve's inner thighs. "Can I?"

"Okay," Steve says softly, running his hands down Sam's neck to his shoulders. Sam mouths him over the panties, sloppy and half-teasing, but the scratch of the lace and the soothing of the satin against his dick drives Steve wild; he squirms against Sam's mouth, gripping his shoulders hard.

Sam's hands rub slowly up and down his hips, then forward to the front of his thighs, and then back again. Sam's mouth moves up and down Steve's cock, sucking here and there, pressing, lipping, making the fabric wet and sodden against Steve's skin.

"Jesus," Steve swears, watching as Sam's eyes close in pleasure. "Sam."

Looking up at him, Sam has more than a little mischief in his eyes as he comes further up the bed and pulls the elastic down on Steve's panties, baring the reddened head of his cock before taking it into his mouth and sucking, hard, just on the tip.

"Oh, oh, Sam, yes – "

Sam pulls off before Steve can get too far, though, putting his hand on Steve's cock instead but not rubbing or squeezing, just holding him in place. "I like how you taste," he says, a little breathlessly. "I wanted to taste you."

"Mmmm," Steve says, pushing up against Sam's touch, searching for more friction, "Didn't know I was on the dessert menu."

Coming further up the bed, so they're face to face with Sam above him, Sam kisses him deeply.

"Gonna eat you all up, baby."
"Yeah," Steve says, stretching under Sam's body, arching up against him. "Yeah, Sam, I want your mouth on me." He runs his hands down Sam's sides, tucking his fingers under the edge of his underwear.

Sam gives him a nod, and Steve pulls the boxer-briefs down and lets Sam kick them off. Sam's cock is more than half-hard, curved a little left, circumcised, beautiful. Steve can't help but reach out to take him in hand, stroking up and down slowly. Sam's already wet and leaking, easing the way for Steve's hand.

"Gonna get you all ready for me," Steve says, leaning up to meet Sam's mouth. Sam kisses back eagerly, a little whine of pleasure passing from his mouth to Steve's as Steve strokes his thumb over the tip of his cock.

Sam breaks their kiss after a while, bending instead to kiss Steve's neck and work his way down to his collarbones. "I was sad I couldn't see you, these last few days," he says, his lips dragging over Steve's skin. "I gave out a zillion condoms and didn't get to use any."

"I thought you were supposed to hook up at Pride," Steve says, because he'd done more than a little reading this morning while waiting for Sam's text.

"Turns out I was too smitten with you," Sam says, sighing. "Couldn't see anyone else all weekend."

Steve surges up and kisses him, full and lush, sucking and biting at his bottom lip. Sam's dick hardens in his fist. "I really want you to fuck me," Steve breathes. He wants it like he wanted Sam’s mouth, like he’s wanted Sam since the first moment they met.

He wants Sam to want him. So far, it’s a miracle every time it seems like Sam does.

"I suppose we could arrange that," Sam says, looking into Steve's eyes. "You gonna be comfortable like this, though, or would another position be better?"

Experimentally, Steve crunches up and raises his legs off the bed a little; the pressure on his stomach is uncomfortable. "Hands and knees, I think," he says, grimacing. "Or else on my side."

"Just a friendly reminder that we could do a variety of lower-impact sex acts," Sam offers.

"Just a friendly reminder that I want your cock inside me," Steve shoots back, which shocks Sam into a laugh.

"All right, hero," he says. "C'mere." He urges Steve over onto his hands and knees. "If you get what you want, though, I get what I want. Said I was gonna eat you all up."

He feels Sam's hot breath against his ass and groans. To be spread out before Sam like a meal, devoured by him. "Christ, Sam, yes."

Sam pulls Steve's panties down to his thighs, baring his ass and freeing his cock.

"The mouth on you," Sam murmurs, before putting his mouth on Steve, kissing his way in to Steve's asshole. He starts slow, with little gentle kisses and licks, but as Steve gasps and writhes his appreciation he speeds up, and his tongue pushes inside, wet and wriggling into Steve's body. Steve lets his head hang down between his arms and fists his hands in the sheets.

"If you don't like hearing me swear you picked the wrong thing to do with your t – ah, ah, Sam, oh God, oh fuck, oh – "
Pulling back for a few seconds, Sam says, "I love hearing you say fuck." He kisses Steve's asshole again, licks hard, flattens his tongue and then pushes it back in a little. "Say it again."

"Fuck," Steve says, not even needing the encouragement. "Fuck, fuck, Sam, fuck me, come on, fuck me, do me," he chants.

"Gonna fuck you so good, baby," Sam breathes, still licking and sucking, making obscene wet noises where he's buried in Steve's body. "Where's your stuff?"

"Hang on," Steve pants, and leans over to get lube and condoms from the bedside table, taking the opportunity to kick his panties the rest of the way off. "Here." He ends up on his side, with one knee drawn up, and the position is so comfortable that he stays there. Sam kisses his shoulder and hands him back the lube.

"Can you do yourself?" he asks. "Will it hurt your arm?"

"Nah," Steve says, taking the bottle in his hands and squeezing some lube onto his fingers. "Like to watch, huh," he grins.

"That day we met running, I didn't just sit down because I was tired," Sam says. "I figured I'd get a better view of your ass if I waited for you to loop back around."

"Filthy," Steve says, pushing two fingers deep inside. His ass is already wet and open from Sam's tongue and it's easy to stretch himself out wider.

Sam rubs his palm along Steve's thigh. "Yeah," he says. "Just like that. Get yourself all open and ready."

Steve cranes his head back to look at Sam, and the expression on his face is worth the way the motion pulls at his shoulder: he looks intense, and intent, and happy, all from watching Steve finger himself.

"Kiss me," Steve says, and Sam bends down to do it, soft lips pressed to Steve's mouth as Steve opens his asshole.

"You ready for me, baby?" Sam asks, shimmying down into position behind Steve. His hands are still roving over Steve's skin, and his mouth is pressed against Steve's neck. Steve shivers.

"Yeah, Sam," he says, "all ready." He reaches back with one arm to stroke the back of Sam's head and down to his jaw.

Sam fucks him slow at first, pushing inside and stretching Steve out while Steve rocks back against him, desperate to take more of him, and faster. He wants to feel nothing else but Sam's cock inside him.

"Easy there," Sam says, in a low chuckle. "Gimme a minute."

"You feel amazing inside me," Steve says. "Oh, oh, Sam, you feel so big, and so hot."

"God," Sam groans. "God, Steve." He speeds up then, pulling back and pushing back in slowly, with a hard rough little twist at the end that makes Steve press his cheek against the bed and groan.

"That's perfect," Steve says. "Sam, do it like that, fuck me like that – "

Sam does, giving him a few more of those hard slow thrusts as his breathing starts to get out of
"Gonna take good care of you," he pants. "Beautiful girl."

Steve closes his eyes tight and bites his lip, overwhelmed. His reaching hand finds Sam's hip and he grips it hard, hanging on, pulling Sam closer, keeping Sam buried deep inside him.

"Harder," Steve groans, "come on, Sam, fuck me."

"Yeah," Sam drawls, and doesn't waste any time doing it, using his hand to hold Steve's leg up and keep him open while he fucks inside. "Love how you feel," he pants out, as he thrusts.

"You're fucking me so good, oh, Sam," Steve breathes, bending his head as Sam's thrusts get harder, get faster, rough and brutal, trusting Steve to take it. He matches Sam's speed, rocking backwards to meet him, getting as much of Sam’s dick as he can, filling himself up with it.

"Love fucking you like this, gorgeous girl," Sam murmurs, into Steve's neck.

"Sam," Steve gasps, "Sam, Sam, Sam, I'm gonna come."

"Touch yourself, baby," Sam moans. "Let me see, let me see you, c'mon – "

Steve wraps his fist around his prick and gasps as his orgasm begins to roll through him, slowly, building up and up and up until the crest seems inevitable and then building some more, until Steve's hands and feet are tingling and his mouth is open and panting and Sam holds him and fucks him and fucks him through it, so that when the crest finally comes it's a long fall from a high place.

Sam is there to catch him.

"Steve," Sam is saying, behind him, kissing wildly against Steve's neck and shoulders. "Steve, Jesus, you're so pretty when you come, I just wanna fuck you forever, God."

Every thrust is setting off strange deep shocks throughout Steve's body, the arcing post-orgasm pleasure that he's always liked. He groans happily, urging Sam on. "I can take it," he says. "I can take it, Sam, give it to me how you like it."

Sam squeezes Steve's shoulder with one hand and hitches Steve's thigh up higher with the other. His fucking gets faster and more desperate until it's hard enough to rattle Steve's teeth and shake the bed, and every drag of his cock inside Steve's ass feels amazing, even better than the orgasm.

"Steve, Steve, Steve," Sam is saying, over and over. "Steve, please – "

"Come on, Sam," Steve murmurs, shoving back and clenching down in time with Sam's thrusts. "I want you to come inside me."

Sam presses his forehead to Steve's shoulder, and thrusts a few more times, and then he does come, his long low groan and trembling hands giving him away. Steve reaches up to hold Sam's hand in his, keeping him still and grounded as he shakes his way through it.

It takes them a while, after that, to get separated and lying down again; both of them are slow and clumsy with pleasure, and they fumble around each other a little, grinning softly as they settle down. Steve points vaguely at the corner, where the garbage can is. Sam ties off the condom and throws it, but it bounces off the rim and onto the floor.

"Gross," Steve sighs, closing his eyes.

"We can't all be supersoldiers," Sam says, dragging himself up out of bed and throwing it out.
properly. He finds Steve's bathroom, and Steve hears the water running for a minute before Sam comes back, cloth in hand, and offers it to Steve.

Steve does his best to mop things up a little bit, then tosses the cloth into the hamper.

"Nothing but net," Steve says.

"Show-off," Sam says, settling down beside him. Steve snuggles in against his chest, and Sam wraps his arm around Steve's shoulders.

"Can't help it," Steve murmurs.

"I know," Sam sighs, aggrieved. He kisses Steve on the top of his head. "Speaking of," he adds, slowly, "I gotta admit I've been curious how the super soldier serum affects your . . . " he trails off, gesturing.

"My cock?" Steve guesses, making Sam huff a laugh.

"Sure," he says.

"I can get hard again real quick, if you want," Steve says. "Though I don't do it too often. Don't see the point when this part already feels so good."

"Yeah," Sam agrees. "I can see that." He turns on his side to kiss Steve, which takes a good long while, their mouths meeting and pulling apart over and over.

"I always liked this," Steve confesses, burrowing in against Sam's chest. "Being held." Sam's good at it, too, with his strong warm arms and steady body, wrapping himself around Steve firmly.

They stay like that a long time, drifting happily together in the cool dark of the bedroom. After a while, Sam falls asleep, and Steve gets up to get the box of chocolates off the front table.

Sam stirs as he sits back down in bed. "Oh, planning on hogging the chocolates, huh?" he asks, sleepily, barely opening his eyes.

"I'll share," Steve promises, crawling back into bed and holding one out for Sam. He takes it from Steve's fingers and chews slowly, savoring it. Steve follows it with a kiss, which Sam returns sweetly and sleepily.

"Sorry," he sighs, "I get kinda wiped after."

"It's okay," Steve says. "I'll sleep eventually. I only usually do four hours a night."

"But you're healing," Sam says.

"Yeah, it's been more like eight lately. Feels weird."

Sam nods. "Your bed still feel like a marshmallow?" he asks, running his hand up and down the sheets beside him, where Steve was laying a couple minutes ago.

Steve sighs. "Sometimes. I thought after we took down SHIELD I would – you know. Rest. But there's so much to do." He looks down at the chocolates in his hands, but doesn't eat one.

Levering himself up on the bed, Sam shuffles over to Steve and sits beside him, wrapping his arms around Steve's shoulders. "You deserve rest," he murmurs, into Steve's ear. "You deserve a soft bed and good chocolate and people who want to hold you."
Sam picks a truffle up out of the box and holds it up. Steve leans forward, obediently, and takes it from his fingers. Sam runs his hand through Steve's hair.

The chocolate is delicious, and the bed is soft, and Sam's body is warm next to his, and Steve can't help thinking that Bucky doesn't have any of that. He closes his eyes tight.

"Lie down with me," Sam says. "Lie down here and try to stop thinking for a while."

Steve set the chocolates on the bedside table and curls back up next to Sam. Idly, he trails his hand up Sam's thigh, then over his dick; he's soft and pliable in Steve's hand, but soon starts to grow harder as Steve strokes him.

"Mmmm," Sam says, shifting to spread his thighs a little wider. "That's nice, Steve." He keeps running his hand through Steve's hair, fingers caressing his scalp, tugging a little at the hairs at the nape of his neck. Steve sighs in pleasure.

"Let me suck you, Sam," Steve says, still stroking slowly with his hand. "Please."

He wants to put Sam's cock in his mouth and suck it till his jaw gets sore, till his mind stops reeling, till all he can taste and think is Sam. Maybe it isn't fair to ask for that, not on their first night together, but Sam turns towards him and smiles easily, like he sees everything that makes Steve weak but somehow doesn't mind.

"Oh, well, if it's the only way to make you feel better," Sam says, "I guess I could get through it."

"I don't want to give you a Captain-America-needs-my-help kinda blowjob," Steve says, meeting Sam's eyes. Sam shakes his head and kisses him.

"How about one of those, my beautiful girl wants to treat me right kinda blowjobs?" Sam asks. Steve nods, and moves down the bed, kissing Sam's skin gratefully as he goes.

* 

Steve does sleep, after that, and as far as he can tell he doesn't dream, Sam's loose embrace enough to ground him in his body, in his bed, in the present.

But they're both woken at about four am, when Steve's cell phone starts ringing and vibrating on the bedside table.

From long habit, Steve gets his hand on the phone and the phone to his ear before his eyes are even open. For a strange, disorienting, half-asleep moment, he assumes it's Natasha, or Maria, or Rumlow, calling him in to another mission.

It comes back eventually: Rumlow's a Nazi, and Natasha's burned all her covers, and Maria's nobody's deputy director. Steve furrows his brow. "Hello."

There's a long pause; in the background, Steve can hear street noise, cars, people shouting.

"Captain Rogers?" comes the voice on the other end. It's a young voice, and familiar. As he comes out of sleep, Steve recognizes it quickly.

"Siddhani?" he says, sitting straight up in bed. "What's going on? Where are you?"

"We need help," Siddhani replies, firmly. "Ha-neul is . . . something is wrong with her. She might be going critical."
Behind him, he can sense Sam getting up, getting dressed, getting ready. Steve pulls on a pair of jeans one-handed while holding the phone to his ear.

"Tell me what you want me to do," Steve says. "Siddhani. Tell me where you are."

There's a long pause; in it, Steve hears a lot of panicky voices on the other side. Children's voices. Steve fumbles trying to zip up his jeans one-handed.

"We need Doctor Banner," Siddhani says, but she doesn't answer Steve's question for the second time. Steve assumes it's not because she didn't hear it. Steve pinches his finger in the teeth of his zipper.

Sam comes around in front of him and zips up his jeans for him, doing up the button easily and then backing away. Steve hears him opening the closet.

"Siddhani. Please."

"Do you know why we've been hiding," Siddhani asks, more a statement than a question. "Do you know."

"Yes," Steve breathes. "I know." They'd had to kill, to escape the Academy. To escape HYDRA, and SHIELD, who would've made them into weapons.

Sam comes back with a plaid button-up shirt; Steve nods his thanks and lets Sam hold it up while he puts his arms into the sleeves.

"We won't be taken again," Siddhani says. Her voice is flat and angry. "Not a third time."

Steve doesn't want to make any promises. If Ha-neul is in bad shape and they need to take her back with them, they might have to force the issue. And it sounds like Siddhani, at least, is ready to fight back.

Licking his lips, Steve makes the decision to surrender. "You have my word. I won't call the authorities. I won't make you come in."

"I have no choice but to trust to that," Siddhani says, eventually, and gives Steve an address in Philadelphia. Jim had said they'd been sighted there, but Steve hadn't believed it, not really. He shouldn't have doubted these kids' ability to run.

"Hurry," she says, and then hangs up.

"Sounds like a situation," Sam says. Steve turns around to find him buttoning up his purple dress shirt. "Need help?"

Steve watches him carefully, unsure. He can't forget what Sam said in group, about not being sure about getting back in on a permanent basis. But he's offering, and he knows what his offer might mean. Steve comes to a decision.

"I'll explain on the way," he says.

*  

He calls Jim as soon as they're in the car and Sam's put the address into his GPS. The machine says three hours in traffic, but it's the middle of the night and he doesn't think Sam's going to keep to the speed limit.
"Steve? What's wrong?" Jim asks, as he answers the phone. "Was your date with Sam okay?"

The cautious potential anger in Jim's voice makes Steve want to laugh. "My date with Sam was wonderful. He's with me now, in fact."

"Oh," Jim says. "I guess that's . . . nice?" he says. "I don't really need an update, though –"

"It's Siddhani. She called in."

"Where is she?" Steve hears Jim sitting up, rifling through his bedside table, getting himself ready. He smiles, relieved; Jim will be there to have his back.

"I'll send you the address; I don't want to say it out loud." He doesn't think Sam's car would be bugged, but it hasn't been checked, and there's no way to know right now. "But I need you to get the suit, get Bruce, and get both your asses to Philadelphia."

"What's the crisis?"

"Ha-neul is going critical, she said. I think they're still all together."

"Going critical – Ha-neul is one of the Extremis cases," he says. "That means she's in the process of exploding. We need to get local authorities on this, evacuate the area."

"The address she gave me is pretty isolated; from what I can tell it's an abandoned manufacturing district. I think they did that on purpose, isolated themselves in case one of them started to lose it."


"Jim," Steve says, "I gave her my word that we wouldn't reveal their location, or make them come back in."

"Why you wanna go do a dumbass thing like that," Sam mutters next to him, as Jim on the phone says, "Well, you shouldn't have!"

"These kids do not trust us right now and they have absolutely no reason to," Steve says, trying to hold in his temper. He wishes he hadn’t made the promise either, but there was no choice.

"I know, I know," Jim says. His breathing is coming a little fast now, and Steve imagines him hopping around to get his pants on.

"They have to be given a choice. And I can't call Pepper unless I know she'll do that. How do you think the kids will react when I show up with the CEO of the company that used to be the world's largest weapons manufacturer?"

"First of all, do not introduce her to the kids that way," Jim says. "And second, you can trust Pepper. You know you can. You know how she feels about these kids, and the Extremis ones in particular."

Steve nods, remembering her white-hot rage that had burned the lab facility to the ground, that had destroyed every last piece of equipment that had gone into making the kids what they were.

"All right," he says. "I'll call her. Tell her to join you and Bruce in the air."

"I'll have to find a flight suit for Bruce," Jim says. "I think suffocating in the upper atmosphere might bring out the Hulk."
"Let me know when you've got an ETA," Steve says, falling into his old habits, thinking about travel time, and containment, and how to limit casualties.

If only the thing they're trying to contain weren't, herself, a potential casualty.

"Roger," Jim says, and hangs up.

Steve calls Pepper next, and explains the situation before giving her any idea of where they're headed.

"If her Extremis is out of control, you might be the only one who could help her. Or – limit the damage, if it comes to that," Steve says. He doesn't start imagining Pepper's usefulness in a firefight, a literal firefight, between them and the kids. It's not the time to start thinking that way yet.

"I understand," Pepper says. She hesitates, and then says, "You don't want Tony on this one?"

Steve hesitates. "I think the fewer of us, the better," he says, eventually. And, he thinks, Tony isn't always the best at defusing tense situations.

"Okay," Pepper says. "I'll tell him to get ready in case we need backup, though."

"All right," Steve agrees. He pauses again, trying to think of how to phrase what he needs to say so that it won't offend her.

"I'm not going to hurt them, Steve," she says, softly, into the silence. "I'm the last one who would try to weaponize them."

"We can't force them to come in," Steve says. "I gave my word."

"I wouldn't want to try," Pepper says, dryly. Steve gets that, how dangerous it would be to do that, but he wishes that weren't the only reason she had. It's not the reassurance he was hoping for, but it'll have to do. Pepper's the only one who's lived through what Ha-neul's going through.

"Okay," Steve says. "Okay. Get to Philadelphia, then, quick as you can."

"I'll get Bruce into a flight suit," Pepper says, echoing Jim's thinking, "and then Jim and I will go together."

"He's on his way there from D.C. Should be there soon," Steve says. "Call me when you're in the air."

"I will. And Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"I swear to God I will die before I let anyone take those kids again. I swear."

"Yeah," Steve says, breathing out slowly. "Okay." He thinks back on what Siddhani said: We won't be taken again. Not a third time. That means that it was the Avengers, Pepper and Natasha and Steve, who were responsible for taking them the second time.

He hangs up the phone and looks over at Sam.

"Couple more hours," Sam says. It's all dark highway in front of them now, mostly populated by the occasional semi truck. Steve doesn't look over at the speedometer; he doesn't need to know. It's
too easy to justify breaking laws in a crisis, but he doesn't know what else to do.

"Thanks for driving, Sam," Steve says, as Sam passes another truck. Sam's new car is practical and unremarkable, but he's treating it like one of Jim's sports cars, coaxing it faster and faster.

"Just be ready to Captain America our way out of a trip to jail if a cop sees a black man driving this fast," Sam mutters. Steve nods grimly.

"I'll practice my national emergency speech," he promises. Sam nods, and they drive for a few more minutes, passing truck after truck, whipping in and out of the lanes.

"So you wanna tell me all the details?" Sam asks. "I got some of it from your conversation, but."

"Yeah." Steve scrubs a hand through his hair. "Well, you know how I was made, right?"

Sam takes one hand off the wheel and holds it out to Steve. Steve takes it and hangs on.

"Yeah," he says, "I do."

So Steve tells him about the kids. It takes a long time, and when Steve finishes, the sun's coming up. At the end, Sam shakes his head, still not taking his eyes off the road.

"They went somewhere they couldn't be a danger to anyone," Sam says. "What does that say?"

"Something good about them," Steve sighs, running a hand through his hair. "And something bad about the kind of world we've built for them to live in."

* *

Pepper, Jim, and Bruce beat them to Philly, and they don't even need the address to find the kids from there. Ha-neul is giving off enough heat that the sensors in Jim's suit are able to track her.

"I think she's stable for now," Jim says. "Pepper says the really bad sign is extreme temperature fluctuation, which she doesn't have yet."

"Then stay put," Steve says, "unless something changes. I want us all to be there together."

He and Sam roll up to the old rusted-out factory not too much later.

"Want me to stay with the car?" Sam asks. Steve hesitates. He'd meant what he'd told Pepper, about not wanting too many people there, and the kids have never even met Sam.

"For now," Steve says. "If you don't mind."

"Wherever you need me," Sam says. "Call me if you need backup."

Steve nods. "Kiss for luck?" he says, hopefully. Sam chuckles.

"Sure," he says, and kisses Steve quickly.

They get out of the car, Steve striding over to the others, Sam leaning on the car and waving from a distance.

Steve leaves Sam at his back, and nods at Pepper, Bruce, and Jim. They nod back. Pepper waves at Sam.
"All right, everyone ready? Any new intel?" Steve asks.

"Heat signatures still elevated but steady," Jim reports. "Pepper says that's normal for the pre-explosive stage of Extremis."

"Assuming it's the same," Pepper says.

"Ha-neul had one of the more complex . . . treatment plans," Bruce says, stumbling over the euphemism. "It's not standard Extremis, so I'm worried that it's not going to behave in expected ways, or respond to the treatment we used on Pepper."

"Did Ha-neul get that treatment already?" Steve asks.

"Yeah," Bruce says. "And it seemed to work, she had it under control for a while."

Jim frowns. "Bruce, I read over the kids' files a lot, and over the medical notes you and Doctor Cho made, and it seemed like . . . mental and emotional control could be a factor? Like it is for you?"

Bruce nods. "Definitely."

"Even I find it works differently depending on my mental state," Pepper explains. "Fatigue, stress, physical pain, emotional distress . . . they all make the powers work sort of differently. It took me months to be able to use them in any situation, and depend on them."

"So we might be dealing with a lack of training, or just with – " Steve shakes his head. "I mean. She's a kid, and look at what she's been through."

They all take a moment to absorb this. Steve purses his lips.

"Okay. Here's the plan. I'm going to go in with Bruce first, and tell them there are others outside," Steve says. "We're the people they're expecting. When I give you the signal, come on in."

"Wait, what's the signal?" Pepper asks, bare feet hovering above the gravel.

"It's Steve texting us." Jim smiles tightly. "He just likes saying 'the signal.'"

"Be careful," Pepper says. "I remember what it was like, when it was unstable, and I can't imagine how frightening it is for a child."

"She was kept by the Ten Rings for a long time," Jim says softly. "Almost the longest of any who survived. Ten months."

"God," Pepper says. "It's – when it's out of control, it's hard to think, hard to concentrate on anything. Hard to form short-term memory. What if she's flashing back to that time?"

"We should've brought a shrink," Bruce sighs. "I'm not necessarily the right kind of doctor for this."

Steve bites his lip. "Okay, while we go in, Jim and Pepper, talk to Sam, brief him on the situation." Steve looks over at Sam, still leaning on the roof of the car, and gestures him over. Sam jogs double-time. "Sam's not a shrink, but he's the closest we've got right now."

"Go slowly," Pepper says to Steve. "Don't make sudden moves, and keep talking. Keep repeating who you are and why you're there."

"Okay," Steve says. "Thanks, Pep."
"There are eight of them," Jim says, flatly, "all with potentially deadly powers. Three with Extremis-related fire, including Ha-neul, two with Hulk-like superstrength, and three with enhanced physical healing and physical capabilities, like Steve. Their ages range from seven to twelve. Most of them are small enough to hide in extremely tight spaces, where you might not think to look for them."

Steve recognizes this threat assessment for what it is, and frowns at its necessity. From the expression on Jim's face, it's killing him to have to lay it out like that, to tell them what to expect in a fight against children. Steve reaches out for his hand, and Jim reaches back, squeezing it hard.

"We'll be fine," Steve says, which is as close as he can get to saying I'm not going to fight them, if it comes to it. From the narrowing of Jim's eyes, Steve thinks he gets it.

Steve doesn't know how to explain it if he doesn't.

Steve and Bruce turn to walk into the factory.

"You're not afraid of hulking out?" Steve asks, looking ahead. He's worked with Bruce a lot, over the last two years, but to Steve's knowledge, Bruce hasn't gone through a transformation since the alien invasion. There aren't a lot of situations where the Hulk is called for.

"Always," Bruce sighs. "But there isn't anyone else."

Steve nods. That's the thing.

When they reach the front door, Siddhani opens it just as they reach for the doorknob. They step back; she's leaning over her right wheel to hold the door open, and looks up at them warily.

"Who are all the others?" she asks.

"Pepper Potts, Jim Rhodes, and Sam Wilson," Steve replies. "I work with them sometimes."

Siddhani frowns. "Pepper Potts is the CEO of Stark Industries," she says.

Bruce nods. "She's also been through the same thing that Ha-neul is going through. She might be able to help. That's why she's here."

"And the other two?"

"Jim's been leading the case to track you all down," Steve says. "To figure out where you are, to help you."

"To round us up."

"No," Steve says. "I swear."

Siddhani stares at him, obviously trying to decide if he's trustworthy. Her perfectly justified paranoia breaks Steve's heart.

"Sam's one of the people who helped Steve take down SHIELD," Bruce offers, after a long silence. "If you think Steve's okay, you should be all right with Sam, too."

"Only you two for now," Siddhani says.

Steve nods. "Just let Doctor Banner see her. Before she goes explosive."
"Follow me," Siddhani says, and leads them inside.

They've obviously been sheltering here for a while, and done a pretty good job of it; there are soft, relatively clean places to sleep made of blankets and cots, and a pile of canned food and cereal stacked up on one ancient rusting workbench. Steve had less than that when he was their ages. Ha-neul is lying on a heap of blankets, dripping with sweat, tossing and turning like she's in the grip of a bad fever. She looks semi-conscious in a way Steve recognizes instantly, the heated delirium of his childhood fevers taken to the extreme.

"We've been trying to keep her cool," Siddhani says, wheeling up to the edge of the blankets. There are two other kids kneeling next to Ha-neul, sponging her down with wet cloths. It's a warm spring, but the factory is cool, even without air conditioning. In contrast, the air around Ha-neul's body is blistering hot, enough so that Steve can see a heat haze rising around her skin.

"You did really good," Bruce says softly, coming to kneel next to them. Carefully, he touches Ha-neul's forehead; finding that he can do it without burning himself, he takes her pulse, checks her skin, and lifts her eyelids to examine her eyes. Steve watches anxiously.

"Where's everyone else?" he asks Siddhani, softly. There should be four others.

"Where you can't see them," Siddhani replies.

Steve nods. Surreptitiously, he eyes the rafters, the equipment, the stairs going to the upper levels; he manages to spot three of the four. They're not soldiers, not yet, and they fidget more than enough to reveal their positions. The fourth one might be better hidden, or might be somewhere else. Or might not be with the others anymore.

Bruce is speaking to Ha-neul in low tones, telling her that she's going to be all right, that she just has to hold on. As Pepper instructed, he keeps repeating his name, and her name, and telling her that he's here to help her. His hands, as he examines her, are gentle, and slow, so that no touch comes as a surprise.

Steve glances over at Siddhani, who's observing Bruce carefully. "Can I ask how many of you there are? Is it still eight?"

"Yes."

Bruce takes medicine and a needle out of his bag. "Siddhani," he says, without looking away from Ha-neul, "come over here for a moment, please."

Siddhani rolls closer.

"This is the same medicine I gave all the Extremis kids after we rescued you," he says, holding up the bottle for her inspection. She reads the label carefully. "It's designed to keep the Extremis symptoms under control, lower the heat in the body, counteract the body chemicals that are causing the reaction."

"Give it to her," Siddhani says, and Bruce nods. As he swipes Ha-neul's arm with alcohol, Steve is struck by how small it is, how dwarfed she is by Bruce, even in his normal form.

"What brought it on?" Steve asks. "Has she been getting hotter for a while now?"

"She was fine," one of the other kids says – Georgie, who Steve remembers from the rescue: the
tiny loud helpful one. His skin has a calm, permanent, greenish tinge to it. "She was fine, she had it under control."

"Yes," Siddhani says. "We would have called if we thought she was sick. We're not stupid. It was really sudden."

The other child sitting on the blankets, keeping Ha-neul cool, looks up swiftly, then back down again, gazing at Ha-neul's glowing skin. Steve takes a cautious step forward and crouches down next to her. His abdomen aches from the position, but Steve puts it out of his mind.

"Hey," he says. The child – Anna, he knows, from her file – doesn't look up at him. She's the other Hulk-kid, like Georgie, glowing greenish when the light hits her right. The kids might've thought it was best to keep the other Extremis kids away from Ha-neul, in case they set each other off somehow. For all Steve knows, that's true.

"Anna was one of my best helpers back at SHIELD medical," Bruce says softly. He's finished administering the medicine, and is taking Ha-neul's temperature again. "She wanted to look after the other kids."

"I bet you've been looking after Ha-neul," Steve says. "I bet you've been doing like Doctor Banner showed you, keeping careful watch of everyone to make sure they're okay."

Siddhani wheels a little closer and leans down. "Anna was with Ha-neul when she first started to heat up, yesterday."

"Did you do like I taught you?" Bruce asks softly. "Did you collect the data?"

Finally looking up, Anna meets Bruce's eyes and nods. Bruce smiles at her.

"That's great. That could be really helpful."

Anna, doubtfully, looks back at Siddhani. Siddhani nods.

"Stay right there, I'll get it for you." She wheels away to another table of supplies, and comes back with a notebook and pen, which she gives to Anna.

"Anna hasn't been talking much," Siddhani explains.

Steve bites his lip and keeps his arms at rest on his thighs. They have to take one thing at a time, and go slowly, or it'll just get worse for Anna and everyone else. But he wants to be able to heal them all, right now.

Her pen flies across the page, though, and she looks confident when she hands it to Bruce.

"She says they were out getting food at a convenience store and the clerk chased them down the street," Bruce says, looking up over his glasses at Steve, worried. "They had to run, and they almost got caught. After that Ha-neul started getting hot, and she was really worried about other people chasing them, even though no one was there. Even after they got back home."

Bruce's throat sticks on the last word, like he hates to admit that this dirty abandoned factory is more of a home for these kids than they were able to make. Steve swallows.

"Anna, you didn't say anything," Siddhani says. "Is that why she was so paranoid yesterday, all day?"
Anna nods.

Frowning, Siddhani says, "She kept checking the doors, and hearing things. Noises, like people outside, coming to get us."

Taking her pad back from Bruce, Anna writes again, then hands it to Bruce, who reads it. "There was no one. We checked. She didn't believe us."

Steve nods. He's certainly heard enough stories like that, during the war and at the VA, to guess at what's going on.

"Siddhani, I think Ha-neul's Extremis flare-up might be related to her feelings, might be caused by her anxiety and paranoia. It could be something called post-traumatic stress disorder."

Siddhani purses her lips, then nods. "She was always more afraid of getting caught than the rest of us. She spent longer being experimented on than anyone."

Steve nods. "If Doctor Banner can bring her around, I think it might really help her to get some therapy. Do you know what that is?"

She raises an eyebrow. "Of course."

"My friend Sam is outside," Steve says. "He's not a therapist, but he is a social worker, and has a lot of experience with people who have the same illness Ha-neul might have. People who've been through traumatic incidents."

"Bring him in," Siddhani says. "The rest of them, too."

"Okay," Steve says, and pulls out his phone to text them.

They come in cautiously, followed by another of the Extremis-powered kids, Rokia, who keeps a careful eye on Pepper's bare feet and hands.

"What can we do?" Sam asks.

Siddhani, looking pointedly at Jim, says, "Take off your war machine."

Jim nods, walking to the corner and stepping out of it before locking it closed again. Six inches shorter, in his mis-buttoned blue shirt and grey sweatpants, he cuts a much less imposing figure.

Steve explains the situation, using mostly the same words that Anna did to keep things accurate. Sam frowns and nods. "You think her condition was triggered by her emotional state."

"That's how it happens sometimes," Pepper says.

Rokia looks up at Pepper sharply; Steve recalls that she's eleven, younger than Siddhani, but she's tall for her age. She says, in halting English, "You – you are," looking up at Pepper, but doesn't seem to have the words to complete the sentence.

Steve wishes Natasha were here; she speaks more languages than anyone Steve knows.

Pepper looks down at her and cocks her head. "What is it, honey?" she asks.

"Rokia's from Mali, I don't think she speaks English," Jim says softly. Making eye contact with her, he says, "Bambara?"
Rokia brightens and starts speaking quickly to Jim, who winces and holds up his hands. He says a few words, which Steve assumes mean "I don't speak Bambara," because Rokia's face falls.

"She and Haziq speak in French sometimes," Siddhani says. "We manage."

"Tu parles français ?" Steve asks, looking down at her. Her eyebrows go up again. It turns out she does, but only a little, and Steve finds her accent difficult, being so far from the Parisian French that Gabe and Jacques taught him. When they both speak slowly and clearly, though, they do okay. It's something, seeing a smile gradually break over her face as she realizes she's got someone new to talk to.

"She wants to know if you've been through what Ha-neul is going through," Steve translates, eventually. Pepper nods, moving over to the pile of blankets, a few feet away from Ha-neul, and folding down elegantly into a cross-legged pose.

"It happened to me many times, on a smaller scale," she says, gesturing for Rokia to sit next to her. Rokia does, mimicking her body language.

Steve does his best to translate, stumbling over the right way to communicate "smaller scale."

Rokia says something way too fast for Steve to understand, and he shakes his head. She sighs impatiently and does it again, this time adding some exaggerated gestures to drive home the meaning: her hand over her heart, her palm against her forehead, fingers crackling upward for fire, hands pulling apart quickly for an explosion. Steve nods.

"She says she's been trying to – control emotional instability," Steve says. "That when she's calm, she can – oh, there you go."

Rokia snaps her fingers, and a spout of flame dances up. Pepper grins.

"Whoa," she laughs. "Nice."

Apparently needing no translation for this, Rokia smiles. Then her smile fades as she glances over at Ha-neul. Pepper nods.

"Bruce is going to try to get her temperature down and wake her up," Steve explains to Pepper. "Then we'll try to help her be calm, and keep her power under control." He repeats this in French, as best he can, and then tries again when Rokia shakes her head. Eventually her eyebrows go up, and she springs to her feet and scampers off into the shadows of the factory floor.

Steve and Pepper shrug at each other, then glance over at Jim and Sam, who've sat down on the blankets a little ways away and are talking to Siddhani, Anna, and Georgie. Sam reads Anna's notes solemnly, and nods at her.

"It could be that she was reminded of something terrible that happened to her," Sam says. He says it in a way that makes it sound normal, like terrible things happen to people all the time, and they sometimes react by almost exploding.

Steve figures he's not wrong.

Anna writes more, a torrent of words filling the page, making Sam smile a little. When she gives it to him, he spends a long time reading it before looking up at her and nodding.

"Sounds like you two are best friends," Sam says. Anna smiles shyly. "I can tell you love her a lot. Y'all did the right thing to help your friend by calling Steve."
Anna nods at him eagerly; then her eyes lift up, looking over Sam's shoulder, where Rokia is running back towards them with something in her hands.

"Behind you," Steve says softly, to both Jim and Sam, keeping his own posture relaxed to let them know there's no threat. Neither of them startles at the sudden motion of Rokia running up alongside and kneeling down. She drops a few things on the blankets: an engraved silver lighter, a children's book covered with pictures of strange monsters in bright colors, and the engine of a toy train.

"These are Ha-neul's?" Jim asks, picking up the book. Steve repeats the question in French, and Rokia nods and replies.

"The train . . . reminds her of her mother?" Steve says, frowning. "I might've gotten that wrong."

"She used to take the train with her mother every morning," Siddhani says. "Before her mother died and she got sent to the orphanage. She used to talk about her mother a lot."

"This is a really good idea," Sam says, looking up at Rokia. He smiles at her, and gives her a thumbs-up; Steve follows it with a bonne idée, and she nods back nervously.

"Is this her favorite book?" Pepper asks. "If I Ran the Circus?"

Georgie nods enthusiastically. "She sometimes reads it to us."

"So her English is pretty good, huh?" Sam asks him softly, and Georgie smiles wide.

"Really really good," he says. "And she speaks Korean and Chinese, too. She said she would teach us."

Sam nods to himself, and Steve can see the wheels working behind his eyes, the way he's assembling tools to have at the ready when Ha-neul wakes up.

"What do you think, Sam?" Steve asks.

"I think you should've met yourself a child psychologist while you were out jogging," Sam says, out of the side of his mouth. "I'm way out of my depth."

"We had plenty of child psychologists at the Academy," Siddhani says. "They didn't care about us. They just wanted to use us. Look how that turned out." Glancing up at Rokia, she says, "Theodore," which is enough to make Rokia cross her arms and frown down at them.

"That sucks," Sam says. "I'm sorry that happened. I swear there are good people out there, though, who would be better than I am at helping her. Helping all of you."

Siddhani and Anna both look solemn. Before they can say anything in return, Bruce holds up his hand for their attention.

"She's about to start coming around," Bruce says. "I've got her temperature down for now, but I really don't want to risk antagonizing her."

"She's gonna freak out at all the strangers," Georgie says, and Siddhani nods her agreement.

"Let's all get back," Steve says.

"Hey Siddhani," Sam says, looking up at her from his crouching position. She turns to meet his eyes. "Maybe you could read this, while she wakes up. So she knows she's safe, and remembers where she is."
He hands her the book, and Siddhani takes it slowly, opening to the first page. "Okay," she says, biting her lip.

They all back off to a safe distance, except for Bruce, who takes a few steps away and crouches back down, so he's not leaning over her.

"If I Ran the Circus," Siddhani announces, then flips to the first page. "In the whole town, the most wonderful spot is behind Sneelock's store in the big vacant lot. It's just the right spot for my wonderful plans,' said young Morris McGurk, '... if I clean up the cans.'"

She goes on reading, gaining confidence and rhythm as she goes. Georgie and Anna take Ha-neul's hands, squeezing them tight, which makes her body tense almost imperceptibly. Steve opens his mouth to say something to Sam, but Sam sees it too, and intervenes.

"Hey, guys," he says softly. They look up at him, and Siddhani stops reading. "Maybe let go of her hands for now. I know you want to make her feel safe, but she's gonna be confused."

Hesitantly, they put Ha-neul's hands back down on the blanket.

"It can feel like being held down," Siddhani says, very quietly, almost to herself. Georgie and Anna recognize the significance of that, and even back off a little bit to give Ha-neul more room.

Sam nods encouragingly. "That's really good."

"Should I go on?" Siddhani asks. Sam nods again.

"Definitely. You're doing great."

Siddhani continues, talking all about the circus that's gonna be built if the abandoned lot could just get cleaned up. Ha-neul seems to settle down a little, and her eyes start to flutter open.

"And now comes an act of Enormous Enormance," Siddhani says quietly.

"No former performer's performed this performance," Ha-neul slurs, moaning, and the rest of the kids sit up and watch her carefully.

"It's okay, Ha-neul," Siddhani says, quietly. "We're all here and we're all safe."

She looks around, confused, and at the sight of unfamiliar people, starts breathing harder. Her skin glows a shade more orange. Steve holds his position, and keeps his body calm.

"Doctor Banner is here," Georgie says. "He made you better."

"They're friends, Ha-neul," Siddhani says.

But Ha-neul’s breathing gets faster, and the air around her starts to shimmer wildly in a heat haze. Even Georgie and Anna draw back from it, wincing. Steve grimaces and re-checks the positions of the hidden guards, making sure that they could defend against them if they had to. He makes eye contact with Jim, who nods at him.

Ha-neul’s skin starts to crack, like rock floating on rivers of lava, and dark orange fire shows beneath the surface.

"Everybody out," Bruce says, softly, into the sudden silence. He doesn’t move himself, but stays kneeling at Ha-neul’s side, probably because he knows he’ll survive the explosion. Steve can see his hands moving fast as he tries to fill another needle with the anti-Extremis medication. Jim legs
it back to his armor, and Sam moves fast too, picking Georgie up and running towards the other end of the warehouse.

"Let’s go," Steve says, with his most commanding voice, trying to put his body between Ha-neul and the others so that he can grab them and carry them out of the building if he needs to. Anna, Rokia, and Siddhani draw back at first, following Steve’s urgent gestures towards the door, but then a frown crosses Anna’s face, her skin glows with a sudden fluorescent green, and she shoves forward, pushing Steve out of the way as if he weighed nothing. She runs back to Ha-neul.

Before she can get there, Ha-neul starts to scream.

Everything around Steve seems to slow down, but he feels slow, too, like he’s moving in molasses. He throws himself after Anna, but she’s fast, too fast.

The kids who were in hiding around the building show themselves, and Steve braces to duck or roll away from some ill-considered attack, but the kids are just as horrified as they are, and don’t take more than a couple of steps toward the center of the room.

Fire spurts out of Ha-neul’s mouth, as if she were a dragon in a fairytale. Anna, knight and princess, flings herself down on her knees beside her, ducking as if to get in under the heat. The air is choked with the smell of burning hair. Everyone else, even Bruce, has been pushed back by the heat; only Anna is still trying to move towards Ha-neul.

Steve finally gets over to them, moving in and out as fast as he can, taking Anna unawares and picking her up so he can carry her back out of the danger zone, out of the warehouse, out of the potential explosion. When he does, though, Ha-neul’s head snaps to the right and there’s a sudden awareness behind her eyes that wasn’t there before.

"Put. Her. Down!" Ha-neul screams, flames crackling all around her now, her skin separating to make way for the heat beneath. Steve can’t do anything but turn his back to her and shield Anna with his body from the spurt of flame he’s sure is coming.

It doesn’t come, and when Steve glances behind himself again, he sees that Pepper has intervened, her own wall of flame coming up to protect Steve, Siddhani, Rokia, and Anna. Jim is standing behind her, but it’s clear that his suit doesn’t deal well with heat, because he’s keeping his distance, waiting until he has no choice but to jump in.

Steve keeps holding on to Anna, unsure of what she’ll do if she’s allowed to go back to Ha-neul’s side, but Anna twists in his arms and punches him solidly in the gut, right where his still-healing wound is, with considerable strength.

Steve goes down, and as the pain races through his body he has to fight to stay conscious. A few seconds later, when he can sit up again, he sees Bruce, needle in hand, diving behind Pepper.

"Get me close," Bruce yells, and Pepper doesn’t hesitate or ask if he’s going to hulk out; she just throws up her protective wall and starts walking toward Ha-neul. Meanwhile, Anna and Rokia are approaching her from the other side, Rokia’s flame-shield a little less steady than Pepper’s but still impressive.

Steve watches, helpless, as they reach for her.

Bruce is fastest, managing to inject Ha-neul’s thigh with the medication; once the plunger is fully depressed, he yanks his hand back and screams in pain, a burn mark red and blistered on his arm. A moment later, Rokia and Pepper each take one of Ha-neul’s hands, and as they do it’s like a candle
has been snuffed out: the flame disappears, and her skin comes back together, and instead of the
flames pouring out of her mouth there are hot tears pouring down her face.

Ha-neul swats Rokia and Pepper away, screaming wordlessly, arms flailing, all rage but without
any of the fire.

Without the fire, she’s just an angry, scared little girl.

Steve looks at Sam, and Sam frowns back. Jim steps back out of his armor, coming to crouch down
near the kids, but doesn’t say anything.

No one moves. Ha-neul draws her knees up to her chest as her screams turn into racking, horrible
sobs.

Holding very still, Anna extends one tenuous arm, until her hand is hovering just above Ha-neul’s.
Ha-neul reaches up, weakly, and grasps it. Anna gasps at the heat, but doesn’t let go. Ha-neul
doesn’t stop crying right away, but her breathing gradually begins to slow down. With that
couragement, Anna gets closer and holds her more firmly, curling up beside her. Steve lets out a
breath he didn’t know he was holding.

Georgie comes back, tentatively, from the other side of the warehouse, and as he comes he picks up
Ha-neul’s little train engine, which got knocked aside in all the commotion. Walking right up to
Ha-neul, he puts it in her hand. Ha-neul looks down at it in wonder, and her tears start to slow.

"We're all here to help," Bruce says. His voice sounds pained, and he’s cradling his arm against his
chest; Sam immediately grabs a med kit and goes to kneel beside him. "We're not going to make
you do anything you don't want."

"How – how did you find us," Ha-neul asks, panic still threaded underneath her voice. She moves
her head, and a few sparks fly from her hair, making Georgie and Anna have to dodge quickly.

"I called them," Siddhani says. "We'll move again after they leave."

Ha-neul shifts, agitated, and Anna strokes her hair softly to soothe her, apparently not caring about
potential sparks. Steve can't tell if it helps or not.

"We just want to make sure you don't overload again," Pepper says, softly. She moves in a little
closer, putting herself within Ha-neul’s reach. "I know how it is. It's hard to control."

Ha-neul watches Pepper blearily, then nods, more tears slipping down her cheeks. Anna keeps
strocking her hair, and squeezing her hand, and Ha-neul leans against her, clearly exhausted.

"I know you," Georgie says to Pepper. "You helped save us." Pepper nods at this, and snaps her
fingers, just like Rokia did, to make a tiny flame dance above her thumb. This, strangely enough,
seems to help Ha-neul calm down a little.

Rokia squints at Jim, then says something that it takes Steve a moment to puzzle out.

"She says you were her pilot," Steve tells Jim. "She remembers you flying them out."

"Tell her I remember her, too," Jim says, smiling.

Steve does his best to tell her just that, and it must work okay, because it makes Rokia smile back
at Jim.
They go on talking softly, and Ha-neul seems to calm down gradually, taking her cues from her friends. Eventually, Steve introduces Sam, and tells her what he does.

"Like the psychologists," Ha-neul says. Sam shrugs, as if he has no fear at all of this girl attacking him the way these kids attacked their HYDRA headshrinker.

"I do a lot of counseling, sure. I hope I'm not like the people who hurt you, and tried to abuse your powers. I also do a lot of other stuff, helping people find homes and jobs, helping them figure out how to live in the world."

Siddhani snorts. "That's what we need."

"That's what we can never have," Ha-neul says, emphatically. "There's nowhere we can go. They'll try to catch us."

Steve doesn't try to refute that, but he wishes he could.

"What if we built you something," Pepper says. "A school, a home, somewhere you could live."

"Our last school was a prison," Siddhani says.

Anna sits up and finds her book, now slightly singed around the edges, so she can write something down. They wait while she hands it to Bruce.

"I want to stop running," Bruce reads. He quirks his eyebrows wryly, clearly thinking of his own time on the run. He gives Anna back the notebook.

"You all have these powers now," Steve says, spreading his hands. "We can't change that. But right now you're vulnerable. HYDRA is regrouping, and there are others out there, too. All I want to do is – is make you safe so that no one can ever use you like that again."

Rokia speaks, loudly and clearly. Steve blinks up at her.

"What was that?" Jim asks.

"She said, build it first," Steve says. Jim's eyebrows go up.

"Yes. Build it first," Ha-neul says. "Right now, if we went with you, where would you take us?"

"There are safe places," Steve tries. "Surely you can all see, after what happened today – you need to come with us now."

"No," Siddhani says. "Not unless the others want to go. But I don’t want to go. You people just make things worse. Everything you do, you make it worse."

"Bruce helped Ha-neul," Georgie objects.

"If he gave me the medication, I could help myself," Ha-neul points out. "Or Anna could do it." Steve feels himself shaking his head before he's even aware of a conscious decision to do it; everything inside of him is screaming that they can’t wait anymore for the kids to come back in.

"But you can’t live like this," he says, trying not to raise his voice and finding it hard. "I thought, if you saw how bad things could get, you would understand. You kids have to trust us. You’ve seen how we can help you. Keep you from hurting each other."

"I saw how you grabbed Anna and dragged her away from me, when she was the one who could
"You would have burned her to a crisp," Steve says, and now he can hear himself getting louder but doesn’t know how to stop it. "You’re - it’s dangerous for you to be out here by yourselves. You have to see that. You have to come with us. We can help you." He wishes for something to punch, something he can strike out against, something he can move in the direction he wants it to go. "Why won’t you let us help you?"

The last part comes out in a yell. He draws his hand over his face in frustration and holds it over his mouth. Everyone’s eyes are on him, and he turns away, unable to bear the shocked expressions on their faces.

Before he can get himself together enough to turn back around, someone is touching his hand. Steve looks down, and sees Anna, holding up a note for him to read.

*We don’t know if we can trust you.*

Steve takes a deep breath and bites back tears, helpless to keep himself from imagining a similar note in Bucky’s familiar handwriting. He crouches down, taking in Anna’s somber expression, her curly hair with its new burnt patches, and the defiant jut of her chin.

"I’m sorry I grabbed you. I was worried you’d be hurt."

Anna nods, and writes again. Steve reads it:

*We were worried you would hurt us.*

Steve nods, gripping his knees too hard with his hands, and forces himself to swallow the lump in his throat.

"We’re gonna build you what you need," Steve says, fervently. "We’re gonna build it, and then you can decide if it’s safe." He looks up, and sees that all his friends are watching him, but not with the pity or horror that he expected; instead, they look . . . kind. "We can do that, right Pepper?"

"We can do that," Pepper says softly. "You kids can tell us where it should be, and what it should look like."

Siddhani nods. "All right. But you have to stop treating us like, like . . . " she trails off, spreading her hands in frustration.

Rokia jumps in, in French, and Steve grimaces as he translates. "Like merchandise."

"Like bombs about to go off," Ha-neul says, pointedly.

"You can’t just hand us over to people we don’t know or trust and expect things to be okay," Siddhani finishes.

There’s a long pause. Steve looks to Jim and Pepper, at a loss for what to say next.

"I know a lot of people who work with kids," Sam says, eventually, breaking the silence. "What if I brought you their résumés and let you figure out who to hire?"

"Yeah," Georgie says. "We could get people who speak all our languages. Not like at the last place."

"To do any of that, though, we have to keep in touch with you," Sam says, cautiously. "Know
where you are."

Pepper unslings her backpack and starts pulling things out. There are all kinds of first-aid supplies, a pile of smartphones, and what looks to Steve like an obscene amount of cold hard cash.

"We know you can track us through those phones," Ha-neul says. Steve closes his eyes in frustration; if he could just know where they were, he could feel a little better about it.

Pepper nods. "We can. Jim could disable that, but you'd have no reason to believe he had really done it. So take them if you want, and let us know where you are, or leave them behind."

"You could put them in safe places around the city," Jim suggests. "Where you could get to them in an emergency."

Ha-neul looks thoughtful at this suggestion.

"And there's plenty of money here that you could use to buy new cell phones if you wanted," Pepper says. "But these ones have all our numbers programmed in for you, so make sure you get them first."

"Okay," Ha-neul says.

Steve stands from his crouching position and walks back over toward the others. Anna trails behind him.

"I'll need to check on you again," Bruce says, to Ha-neul. "Will you call me and tell me where to meet you in a couple of days? I'll come right away."

"Okay," Ha-neul says. "But not . . . not everyone."

Bruce nods. "Just me." He hesitates, then pulls out a new set of needles and some ampoules of the medication. "If you want, I can show you how to use these. But you have to be very careful and responsible with them."

Ha-neul nods, fascinated, and Bruce takes her, Anna, and Rokia through the process, so they’ll be able to stop this kind of thing if it happens again.

"We’re gonna leave you alone," Steve says, almost choking on the words, but knowing there’s nothing else he can say. He takes a breath and wills his voice not to shake. "But before we do, we want to make sure that Ha-neul can control her powers a little more. Ha-neul, do you think you’d feel able to talk to Pepper and Sam for a while? Learn a little bit about that?"

Ha-neul nods. Her glow has faded almost entirely, now, and there's no longer any heat haze rising from her skin. It’s something. They stopped the worst case scenario from happening. It counts for something.

Steve makes eye contact with Siddhani, who’s watching him closely. He keeps his voice soft this time. "And we’d love to say hi to the rest of the gang, if we could," he says. They all retreated into their hiding places again once the danger was passed, which is either some impressive discipline or a deeply troubling defensive mindset. Maybe both.

Siddhani calls out a few words in what Steve guesses is Marathi, and the last three kids come out to sit with the rest of them: Haziq and Tabil, who have their own versions of Steve’s supersoldier abilities, and Grace, who’s the third Extremis kid. Steve, Jim, and Bruce sit around talking with them for a while, keeping an eye, the whole time, on Pepper and Sam and Ha-neul. Steve hopes
that Sam can help her with some ways to cope with her panic attacks, and that Pepper can give her some insight into the Extremis power.

They leave hours later, when the sun is starting to set again. Steve's the last to exit the building; just as he turns to go through the door, Siddhani catches his arm.

"You didn't ask," she says, when he turns to her.

"I didn't?"

She watches him for a moment. "You must have found the body. You didn't ask who did it."

Jim had given him the file: they'd found the body of the HYDRA agent, and the gun he was holding, and the holes in the walls from the bullets he'd fired. The cause of death had been a head injury: someone had pushed him down a set of stairs that led to an exit door. The coroner had said that it would very likely be ruled self-defense, if it ever came to trial.

"It's not important for us to know," Steve says, softly. He turns all the way back to her, then crouches down so they're eye to eye. "Whoever did it, it was what they had to do to survive. No one could ever blame them for that."

Siddhani swallows hard, and Steve aches to notice how small her throat is, how fragile her collarbones given the enormous weight on her shoulders. "Would that person go to jail? If we went back."

Steve frowns. He wishes Natasha were here; she might know whether Siddhani is asking for herself or protecting one of the others. Steve can't tell at all. "I can't promise that they wouldn't," he says, slowly, because he knows how crucial it is that he be honest with her. "But I don't think it's a high priority. A lot of HYDRA agents died that day."

"Did you kill them, Captain America?" Siddhani asks, her eyes bright and piercing.

Steve nods, holding her gaze. "Yes. A lot of them." Not all, though, he thinks, remembering the smell of the leather and gunpowder and the glint of sunlight on bright metal. Not all of them. He had put his shield down eventually.

Siddhani sighs. "It would be too much. To have to go through it all again in a trial, it would be – painful. For that person."

Now Steve knows that she's protecting someone else, maybe even Ha-neul. "I understand," he says. "I'll talk to Jim, and he can look into it."

Siddhani nods firmly. "Thank you," she says.

With a tired smile, Steve shrugs. "Thank you for calling me. Call me again whenever you like."

She shakes his hand, just like a grownup, and Steve shakes back solemnly. Reluctantly, he pulls his aching body upright again. His abdomen and thigh are both throbbing with pain, and he feels exhausted in a way he almost never has, since the serum.

The others are waiting for him by Sam's car, and they look drained, too. "Feels wrong," Steve says, looking down at his shoes. They're his pink Cons, the ones he usually wears at home with dresses. He didn't even notice, until right now, that they were the ones he threw on in the dark. "Leaving a bunch of kids living in a factory."
"It's the only option," Sam says. "Ha-neul is working on her recovery, and Rokia is going to help her learn to control her power. It's not much, but we've given them something."

"They'll be packed up and gone in half an hour," Bruce says. "They've all been through a lot, and they know how to make themselves scarce."

"Speaking from personal experience, Bruce?" Steve asks, curiously. Bruce nods.

"Let's just say I recognize the signs," he says.

"What did you do, when you wanted to stop running?" Steve asks. He knows it's dumb and naive to think it, but he has the sudden hope that Bruce knows the answer to this problem, that it's something easy and quick that doesn't involve leaving dangerous, traumatized people to fend for themselves. "I know you were pursued by the military for a long time. What changed?"

"I got some powerful friends," Bruce sighs. "Without Tony and Pepper offering me a place to stay and their protection, I would have been on the run again. No big secret, but not exactly a great solution for everyone."

"I'll shelter every superpowered person who knocks on my door," Pepper says. Steve glances at her, surprised; she's said she felt responsible for the Extremis kids, but this is going a step further. She looks angry, and determined, like she did the day they burned down the facility that made these kids what they are. "As long as I can. There are going to be more and more people like us in the world, and we can't leave any of them to live like this."

"I hope these kids take you up on it," Steve says.

"From what I can tell, they'd better. What they're doing now isn't enough to avoid HYDRA for very long, or anyone else who decides to make a serious play for them," Jim says. "I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one trying to keep tabs on them."

"You think you can throw them off the scent?" Sam asks. "Plant a false trail?"

Jim grimaces. "Maybe. I'll do my best to keep them safe while we wait for them to come in. Maybe get Maria in to help, she knows more about this spy-versus-spy stuff than I do."

"Good," Steve says. There's nothing else to do now but hope, and try to build them a place they can live. It's in their hands.

*

It's late evening when he and Sam get back to D.C., too late for either of them to start this new project. Sam offers to drop Steve off and drive home, but Steve shakes his head.

"We didn't get to finish our afterglow," he says, giving Sam half a smile to make a joke out of it. "If you don't mind, I'd like you to come and nap with me." It's suddenly all he can think about, Sam's warm body pressed to his under the cool sheets, the deep urge to close his eyes and breathe slowly.

He doesn't know why he's so exhausted, when they didn't do anything like the usual amount of fighting or running, but he feels like he's come from some days-long emergency, not like he's been riding in a car and talking to kids. Aside from the brief skirmish when Ha-neul lost control, there hadn’t been anything to tax Steve’s body.

"That sounds really good, actually," Sam says. "I'm always wiped after group counseling anyway,
and that was a little more intense than I'm used to."

Steve nods slowly, thinking this through.

"But let's stop and get some food on the way, all right?" Sam adds. "I'm starving."

He drives them to a tiny hole-in-the-wall place on Florida Avenue, not that far from Steve's apartment, and they wait together at the bar while the staff cooks up the long list of foods that Sam ordered for them.

It's not that Steve isn't aware of the people coming towards them, but he's learned that sometimes a careful obliviousness keeps them from talking to him. In this case, though, it doesn't work.

"Hey, I don't mean to bother you, but can I get your autograph?"

The person speaking is a young woman, in her early twenties maybe, and she's accompanied by a guy who looks about the same age. She's smiling, but he looks uncomfortable. Steve always hates that combination.

"Sure," he says, and holds out his hands, searching for the pen and paper he assumes she's holding.

She's not holding anything, so there's an awkward shuffle while she roots around in her bag to find the needed items. When she finally comes up with a sharpie and an old take-out menu, Steve smiles and offers a little cheer to make her feel less awkward about it.

"All right! We got it," he says warmly, making her smile. "Who should I make it out to?"

"Eliza," the woman says. She leans forward as Steve uncaps the sharpie, watching to see what he'll write.

For several long seconds, despite having done this hundreds of times before, Steve can't think of a single thing to put down.

"Uh, it's E-L-I-Z-A," she says, when Steve keeps on not writing anything. He shakes his head a little and smiles at her.

"Long day," he mumbles and winks. She smiles.

To Eliza, he writes, Great meeting you over bbq! Your pal, Steve Rogers.

He hands it over to her, and she beams as she sees what's written. "Thanks," she says. "Oh, and this is my boyfriend, Alan."

"Hey," Steve says, offering his hand to shake. Alan shakes it, but doesn't look pleased to be an afterthought.

"Hey."

"I wanted to say, too," Eliza adds, "that I love your sneakers!"

Steve glances down, and remembers: the pink Cons. They hadn't seemed like a big deal before, but now, in the tiny crowded restaurant, he feels odd wearing them. Not quite ashamed, but not easy about it, either.

"So many men are all worried about their appearance," Eliza says. "I love that you're so confident in your masculinity."
The compliment feels like a slap, and makes Steve want to hide behind the counter and yell at the same time. It flits through Steve's mind to say *I'm not a man, not like that, that's not me* but he can't say that, and he can't find any other words to say, either: his brain feels slow and tired. He keeps forgetting to smile.

"C'mon, Eliza, our food's ready, let's go," Alan mumbles, pulling at her elbow. He gives Steve a suspicious, impatient eyeballing, maybe because he thinks Steve's out to steal his girl or something.

Eliza touches Alan's arm to silence him for a moment, her eyes still on Steve. "And I wanted to tell you that we're all really glad about what you did in the battle in April," she says. "I know some people are saying you should've waited, or called the cops or something, but it was HYDRA, you know?"

Steve nods, trying to keep his eyes focused on her.

Suddenly, he feels Sam's hand on his shoulder, light and friendly, and hears Sam's voice beside him.

"I'm afraid we have to get going now," he says firmly. "It's nice of you to show your support."

Eliza looks startled, then blushes. Steve feels bad for her; she didn't realize the effect she was having on him.

"It was really nice to meet you," he manages, offering her one more smile. "Write me if you want more autographs, anytime."

"Okay, I will," she says. This time, when Alan tries to drag her away, she goes.

"You all right?" Sam asks, low-voiced. Steve looks up at him, not sure why Sam would ask that.

"Just tired," he says. Sam purses his lips, but nods.

Their food is ready a couple minutes later, and Steve spends the first half of the car ride back to his apartment smelling it happily.

"Sam, what did you get us?" he asks, pressing his nose down against the cardboard container.

"What is this delicious smell?"

"Ribs, brisket, collard greens, hush puppies, cheese grits," Sam lists, looking over at him and smiling. "Plus the milkshakes we got. God, you are really punch-drunk right now, aren't you."

"I only got punched once today," Steve objects. Granted, it was with something like Hulk-strength and on his still-healing abdomen, but he didn't get knocked around a ring.

"Yeah, I mean, emotionally punched." Sam pulls into Steve's driveway and parks the car, but he didn't open his door or undo his seatbelt.

Steve sighs, sitting back up and looking over at Sam. "I – it's weird, I just feel exhausted. Not physically, though."

"That's how it is sometimes," Sam says. "I could see it when you checked out of the conversation back there."

Steve nods ruefully. "I feel bad for being so rude," he admits, scrubbing his hands over his face. He unclips his seatbelt.
"Steve. Baby," Sam says emphatically. Steve looks up at him, pausing with his hand halfway to the door handle. "You give a lot of yourself, all the time. You're trying to save everybody right now. It's not rude to draw some boundaries."

Steve thinks back on what he’d yelled to Siddhani, back in the warehouse. Trying to save everybody hasn’t really meant that he’s been able to do it. He sighs, letting his hand drop into his lap again.

"She was really nice," he says, trying not to think, for the moment, about how uncomfortable he’d felt when she’d talked about his masculinity. He wants to tell Jelani about it. He knows Jelani would say she misgendered you, but Steve's mind shies away from those words.

"Yeah, she was probably nice enough that she would've said okay if you'd said you didn't have time to talk," Sam points out. "People can't always tell if they're using up your emotional resources."

"Okay," Steve says. "Okay, Sam, you're right. Thank you for looking out for me, back there."

"Sorry to – to lecture you," Sam says. "It's just hard for me to see people draining you down like that, after a day like today."

"It's all right," Steve says. He watches Sam shrewdly for a second, then says, "Does it bother you because it's something you do yourself? Give too much?"

Sam narrows his eyes. "Maybe," he says slowly, obviously meaning yes. Steve laughs. "Why do you think I recognize it?"

"So how do I know you're not being drained down by me, Sam?" Steve asks. "I've been relying on you a lot. I mean, you didn't even go into work today."

"I took a personal day," Sam says, a little defensively. "I'm allowed."

Steve smiles wanly; he still feels spacey, dull inside, but even so he can see what Sam's doing. Now that Sam's pointed it out, it's obvious.

"Seriously," Steve says, touching his hand. "I worry that you're going to give me too much of yourself."

"You have no idea how much I want to say 'no, it's fine' and reassure you right now," Sam says, smiling self-depreciatingly. He breathes out slowly, stretching his fingers on the steering wheel. "But yeah. You're not wrong. It could get to be a problem, and we should look out for it."

"Okay," Steve says. He doesn't really know how to do that, but he hopes that Sam does.

"Right now, I think we should both recharge. Eat that delicious food before it gets cold, maybe take a shower, and then that nap you talked about."

Steve licks his lips. "Yeah," he says. "Sounds good."

The food is amazing; once they start eating, Steve can't stop making noises of appreciation.

"It's not that far from your neighborhood," Sam points out, after a particularly loud exclamation. "I'm surprised you never got barbeque for post-mission refueling before."

Steve shrugs. "I usually just have some protein shakes," he says. Sam frowns.
"That is the saddest thing I've ever heard," he says.

"Well, they keep me going." Steve points out, tearing another tender piece of meat away from the ribs he's eating. It's spectacularly good: the smoky flavor of the spices, the soft slick texture of the meat, the tang of the sauce. He chews slowly to savor it.

"Sure, in an emergency," Sam allows, taking a bite of the cheese grits. "Or when you're too beat to cook or order something. But there's a reason it's called soul food, you know."

"There is?" Steve asks.

"We have so much work to do," Sam grins.

"I have to say, this is much more delicious than the protein shakes," Steve says, sighing happily as he puts the picked-clean rib down on the now-towering pile of them.

"And protein shakes don't get barbeque sauce all over your mouth," Sam says, looking at Steve's lips.

Reaching for a napkin, Steve shakes his head. "That's a good thing," he says, right before Sam's hand closes around his wrist. Steve puts the napkin back down.

"Not when you got someone who'll kiss you all clean," Sam says, and leans over to do exactly that, lips sucking at the corners of Steve's mouth, his chin, even up onto his cheek.

"Wow," Steve laughs, "I didn't know I got so messy."

"I could keep finding barbeque sauce if you want," Sam says. Steve thinks for a second, then drags his finger through the leftover sauce and touches it to Sam's nose.

"Boop," he says, unable to keep himself from laughing again. Sam chuckles, too, as Steve leans in and kisses his nose clean.

"Okay, it's possible I like you punch-drunk," Sam admits.

Once they've finished the food, they sit around the table for a while in silence. Steve feels good, full, easier than he has in a while. At least they got a chance to see the kids today, and it wasn't a complete disaster. That has to count for something.

Little steps, Tamara had said. It's hard to live by that. A big decisive battle would be so much easier.

After a long, comfortable silence, Sam stretches and sighs. His purple shirt rides up at the side, revealing a patch of skin at his waist. "Well," he says, "I could use a shower, if that's okay."

Steve meets his eyes. "Want company?" he asks.

Sam nods slowly. "Yeah," he says.

Steve spends the next half hour knowing very little except for Sam's skin against his, slick and wet under the hot cascade of water, the sensation of Sam's loose grip around his cock, the way he can wrap his leg around Sam's thigh and take Sam's slow, sloppy thrusts against his hip. Steve's too tired for anything fancy, and Sam seems to be too, but they stay together under the shower for a long time, trading sweet kisses and getting each other off in the simplest way possible: skin to skin, bodies pressed up tight until they start to gasp and moan, until Sam turns to press his cheek against
the cool tile and closes his eyes; until Steve rests his forehead on Sam's shoulder and whispers his name.

When they're both done they clean each other up, soap flowing down over their bodies, and that feels good too, being able to wash Sam clean of the trials of the day and feeling Sam's hands on him doing the same.

They towel off together. Sam slips clumsily against the sink, so that Steve has to hold him up; Sam kisses his thanks, and they roll into bed together, bodies warm and bare against the soft, cool sheets.

Sam runs his hand through Steve's damp hair.

"Everyone always says you're blond," he says, sleepily. Steve rests his hand on Sam's naked hip, finding a place where his fingers fit perfectly. "In the children's books and comics and stuff you're always blond."

"It's getting darker as I get older," Steve says, yawning. "Used to be really blond. The hair on my face still is." He takes Sam's hand and holds it up to his cheek, nuzzling against Sam's palm with his stubble. Normally he's really careful to keep it shaved, but he hadn't bothered during their shower. He realizes, belatedly, how deep his trust of Sam must be, if he didn't even think to feel strange about it.

"Hmmm," Sam says. He runs his thumb along Steve's jaw, as if to revel in the prickly texture of it. "Hair still changing color. What are you, anyway, Steve? Twenty-five?"

"Twenty-eight," Steve says, eyes drifting closed. "I'll be twenty-nine in July. I was frozen in April, and woke up in April, so it works out okay."

He hadn't bothered to celebrate his birthday last year, beyond going with Jim and Natasha to the fireworks. It'd felt like enough just to be alive, then, and he hadn't told either of them. Maybe this year he can do something more. Ask Sam or Jim to take him out. Have a party.

Bucky'd always thrown him a party, on his birthday, because Bucky'd said it wasn't fair to miss out just because your birthday was also a holiday.

Steve wonders: if they threw a party, would Bucky remember? Would he show up, gift in hand, like he always used to do?

"Twenty-eight," Sam sighs. "You're so young, still." He kisses the top of Steve's head, and Steve cuddles down against his chest, safe and protected.

"I feel young," Steve says, right before he falls asleep. "Sometimes."

*

Steve's almost completely healed, a couple days later, when he gets a series of texts from someone he can only assume to be Natasha, using a new name and a new number.

\textit{got the thing you wanted}, one of them says, \textit{come and meet me and our mutual friend on thursday.} It's followed by an address.

Their instructions, as it turns out, are to meet Nick at his own grave. Steve apparently missed the funeral while he was unconscious; he's glad of that. He wouldn't have known what to say to reporters asking him about how he felt about Nick, or what he thought of his death. Instead, when
he and Sam arrive, there's just a simple headstone in the ground.

Appearing out of nowhere, Nick Fury walks up next to it and looks down at his own name: COL. NICHOLAS J. FURY. It occurs to Steve that he doesn't even know what branch of the service Nick was in, during his military career. It was never a topic of discussion, between them, never relevant to their relationship.

Steve wishes he'd asked.

"So, you've experienced this sort of thing before," Nick says.

Steve did visit his own grave, right after he came out of the ice. They'd left it up, saying it was still an important symbol of what he'd sacrificed. At the time, it'd made Steve feel cold inside, like he was still dead or frozen, but now he thinks it's kinda funny, how people got so attached to him not being alive.

"You get used to it," he says.

"We've been data mining HYDRA's files," Nick says. Steve wonders who that we consists of.

"Looks like a lot of rats didn't go down with the ship. I'm headed to Europe tonight. Wanted to ask if you'd come."

Steve frowns, wishing Nick didn't sound so much like he's about to start SHIELD right back up again. But then, Steve doesn't know that he shouldn't. They can't leave HYDRA to prosper.

But Steve's HYDRA target, for now, is just one man.

"There's something I gotta do first," he says. He looks to Sam, who meets his eyes and nods.

"How about you, Wilson?" Fury asks. "Could use a man with your abilities."

Tearing his gaze away from Steve to look over at Nick, Sam says, "I'm more of a soldier than a spy."

Steve smiles at him helplessly.

"All right then."

They all shake hands.

Nodding down at his own grave, Nick says, "Anybody asks for me, tell them they can find me right here."

Natasha arrives just then, as Nick departs, and Sam hangs back to give her and Steve a little space.

"Not going with him?" Steve asks. It was more than he could've hoped for, to have her on his side during this, but he's been afraid that she would be the first to join with Nick in some kind of new SHIELD.

"No," she says, and the way she says it, with an ironic smile, makes Steve's heart warm.

"Not staying here."

"No," she says, "I blew all my covers, I gotta go figure out a new one." Steve can understand that, how vulnerable she must be feeling right now, after spending weeks with her face on every news channel, with everyone in the world picking her storied career apart. He couldn't ask her to stay.
He doesn't ask her to stay, and help find Bucky, though he desperately wants to. She's done enough, and deserves to do what she wants now. Reinvent herself. Retire.

She does give him the folder of intel she's collected, though, and tease him about Kate – or, rather, Sharon. Steve hasn't seen Sharon going in or out of her apartment in the last few weeks, and her car has been gone; Steve wonders if she's one of the people heading to Europe with Nick.

He expects Natasha to kiss him goodbye the way she's been kissing him, open-mouthed and dirty, and is bemused when she leans up towards his cheek, when she gives him a soft, chaste peck instead. It's more of a real goodbye than he wanted from her.

"Be careful, Steve," she says, as she walks away. Turning around, she meets his eyes, her expression concerned. "You might not wanna pull on that thread."

Steve opens the folder, and the first thing he sees is Bucky, cold and blue, eyes closed, locked inside the cryo-unit they kept him in. Like a tool in storage, an object to be used as necessary.

Below, there's a photo Steve's seen before, most recently at the Smithsonian: Bucky as he used to be, looking warm and alive and himself. Steve remembers the day Bucky's mom took those pictures, right before Bucky shipped out; she was so proud of her son in his uniform. The contrast between the two images makes Steve's blood run cold.

He's so focused that he doesn't notice Sam walking up beside him until they're standing shoulder to shoulder. Sam's jacket brushes against Steve's sleeve, the glancing touch of the fabric enough to make Steve feel the sense of his presence.

"You're going after him," Sam says. It's not a question.

Steve can't take his eyes off of the two photos, his friend and lover below, the weapon he was made into above. But he has to give Sam an out, can't let him make the offer he's about to make without giving him a choice.

"You don't have to come with me," Steve says.

"I know," Sam says. "When do we start?"

Steve looks up from the file and into Sam's eyes. He doesn't see any hesitation there.

"What about your job?" Steve asks, biting back on his desire to tell Sam that he'll be fine on his own. Sam knows what he's doing, and anyway, Steve's pretty sure that wouldn't be true.

"Helping mentally ill queer veterans is my job," Sam says. Steve gives him a dirty look. He holds up his hands. "But I'll talk to the bosses about it. I could take a leave of absence, or go down to part-time for a while."

"I can pay you to make up for it," Steve says. "I don't want you missing wages for me."

Sam shrugs. "If you insist. I won't say no. But then we should work out a contract or something. I'll provide air support and witty commentary in exchange for a decent salary."

Steve closes the folder in his hands and tucks it against his arm, turning to go.

They're going to find him.

"You might be down to just witty commentary, the way your wings got torn up," Steve says,
putting his hand on Sam's shoulder as they walk out of the cemetery together.

"No, didn't Jim tell you? He said he'd fix them up for me. He's been working on them since you got out of the hospital. Turns out my boyfriend's boyfriend is pretty handy to have around."

"He didn't tell me," Steve says, smiling and shaking his head. So typical of Jim, to take on a project like that and not think it was a big deal. "Maybe I should be paying him, too."

"Nah, he said I could owe him a favor," Sam says. "Truth be told, I think he just wanted to nerd out with the wings again." They reach the car and climb back in.

"So what's our first step?" Sam asks.

Steve opens the folder on his lap. Under the official documents, there are some new typed notes; glancing through them, he sees they're from Natasha and addressed to him.

"It looks like Nat translated all this stuff for us," Steve says. "And – there's context for some of the politics and people discussed. And analysis. Wow."

"You're gonna owe her a favor, too," Sam says.

"I'm gonna owe her ten," Steve says, flipping from page to page.

"I guess the question is, if Bucky's having flashes of memory, if he doesn't know who to trust or what to do . . . where would he go?"

"I've been on the lookout for any public sightings," Steve says. "And Maria's put the word out, too. There were a few sightings of him in the first week, sleeping on the street, but since then nobody's seen him."

"He's holed up somewhere, then," Sam says. "Maybe a homeless shelter or a squat somewhere, or maybe a safehouse with food and supplies, since he hasn't been spotted robbing anymore convenience stores."

"A lot of these safehouses are in Eastern Europe," Steve says, looking at the list. "They're the ones Nick's going after, I guess."

"He's not getting through airport security with that arm," Sam says. "I don't know how they flew him anywhere, actually."

Frowning, Steve flips to the part of the file labelled Transportation. "Private planes," Steve says, reading. "They loaded him as cargo."

"Jesus," Sam breathes. "Listen, maybe – do you want me to read it for you? Give you the summary?"

Steve shakes his head. "I need to know myself," he says. Natasha’s notes are all carefully worded, but she hadn't flinched at translating the official documents faithfully. The language they use about Bucky – the asset, they call him – is so cold, so dehumanizing. Like talking about a gun, or a bomb.

There's a maintenance schedule, for when he was to be cleaned.

Steve shuts his eyes briefly, stomach churning, then opens them again, and keeps reading.

He doesn't even realize he's reached out for Sam's hand until Sam takes it and holds it.
Sam gets him home, and makes him a cup of coffee.

Steve keeps reading, and gets out his maps, but he knows there's something else he's going to have to do before he can go any further.

*

Peggy takes his hand, smiling. "I'm so proud of you," she says, squeezing tightly.

Steve collapses down into the chair next to her. "For committing treason?" he asks, trying to smile back.

She laughs, like it's just a little treason between old friends. "For being brave enough to start over."

"I would never have done it without you," he tells her, and she pulls her hand away from his and uses it to wave this away dismissively. "Really," he insists. "I kept asking myself – what would Peggy have done?"

She turns her face away, a tear slipping down her cheek. "Steve. I know you found it – found the machine buried in the basement."

Steve nods. "Zola." Bucky's torturer, meticulously preserved as part of Peggy Carter's SHIELD. "Was that your idea?" he asks, softly.

She shakes her head. "I opposed it," she whispers. "I want you to know, if it matters – I did oppose it, from the first. But I could've quit, after they brought him on, and I didn't. I could've made it public, and I didn't."

A tear slips down Steve's cheek, too, and he dashes it angrily away. "My hands aren't clean, Peg," he says. "I made mistakes. I compromised too." He thinks of the HYDRA weapons delivered into SSR's hands, the endless SHIELD missions where he'd trespassed, violated international laws, maybe even stolen technologies or intel. Where he hadn't even bothered to ask.

"You had the courage to stop," she says. "You redeemed us."

Steve thinks about it, the long history that he's been just one small part of, the complex interweaving threads that make up all their lives: his, and Peggy's, and Bucky's, Natasha's and Sam's, Jim's and Nick's. He thinks about the people who made him who he is, his Ma and his friends, his union pals, his neighbors, his queer families.

"I wasn't alone," Steve says, tears falling in earnest now. "Peggy. I was never alone."

"It was Bucky, wasn't it," she says. She's trembling visibly, the tremors vibrating through her frail body. "On the news. I thought I was dreaming it at first. I get confused. But it was Bucky."

"Yeah," Steve breathes, and there's some magic in the admission, like saying a prayer. "It was."

"Are you going to chase after him?"

"Just like I did in the war," Steve says, nodding, feeling sure now. "Just like he did anytime I was in trouble and on my own. But he's – he's not who he used to be, Peg."

She shakes her head, lips pressed tightly together. "Neither am I," she says. "Neither are you. It doesn't matter."

Steve scrubs the tears off of his cheeks with the palms of his hands. "I hope so," he says. "I hope it
doesn't."

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He gets a text from Bruce, saying that the kids have reached out to him, and that he's going to go see them in their new place, to check on Ha-neul and make sure her biochemistry doesn't put her on a hair trigger again.

*I'm not supposed to tell you where they are, though, Bruce says. Sorry.*

*That's okay, Steve sends back. Glad they reached out at all.*

*Ha-neul asked for Sam, too, Bruce texts. Apparently he made an impression. But I didn't have his number.*

Pepper wouldn't have put Sam's number into the cell phones, Steve guesses. *I'll text it to you.*

He calls Sam to tell him about it, and Sam sounds pleased to hear that the kids are asking for help. "Toughest thing for anyone to do, I sometimes think," Sam says, and Steve agrees ruefully.

"They want you, too. Ha-neul does. I guess all that stuff you talked about is helping."

"The panic attack stuff? That's really good. I'm happy to go. But Steve, that kid's been through a lot. She needs real therapy."

"I think you're as close to it as they're likely to accept right now. I'm not even allowed to go this time."

*We were worried that you would hurt us, Anna had said. Steve guesses they still are.*

"They're keeping the number of people who know about their new hideout low," Sam says. "They're smart." Steve listens to Sam's breath as he sighs. "But I'll take along those résumés, see if they can find people they like, who could start working with them. I've been in touch with a bunch of people about it, here and overseas."

"Good idea. What did you tell them?"

"Just that a friend of mine is trying to open a recovery center and accessible school for traumatized kids. I got lots of interest, Siddhani and the others can have their pick."

"Great."

There's a pause, then, and Sam says, "So I guess I'll be in Philly for a bit. Do you know where we're going yet, to look for Bucky?"

"Safehouse outside of Trenton," Steve says. He figures they might as well start with the closest bases and safehouses they can find. The federal anti-HYDRA task force is still getting their priorities together, but Steve and Sam can choose their targets lot quicker, and call them in for backup if need be.

"Damn, what is it with HYDRA and Jersey?" Sam asks. "They had quite a foothold there."

"It's how you can tell they're evil," Steve jokes, and Sam, who must still be a New Yorker at heart, laughs. Steve finds himself thinking of Bucky, wondering what he'd think of Sam. What he'd say to him, what they'd have in common.
"So do you want to hit the safehouse on Friday?" Sam asks. "I got a client on Thursday morning I can't cancel on, and then we have group at eleven, if you want to come again. But we could drive out Thursday night, get a hotel."

Steve wants to go now, wants to kick down the door and knock heads together until he finds Bucky. But part of the reason he wants Sam along is so that he won't do exactly that. And, he reminds himself guiltily, Sam's client needs help just like Bucky does.

"Okay," he says. "I'll make a list of other places, we can go to a bunch of them over the weekend. If – if he's not at the first one, I mean." He's trying not to hope for it to be that easy, but in his mind it's all he can think of: driving to the safehouse, knocking on the door, and finding Bucky inside.

He figures if he were to let the fantasy go on, it'd feature Bucky getting his memories back painlessly, coming to live with Steve, laughing like he used to, the ghosts in his eyes long gone. Steve doesn't let it get that far.

"In the meantime, I got that list of numbers for you to call," Sam says. "I'll email it to you. It'll probably take you till Thursday to get through them all."

"Thanks, Sam," Steve says. Licking his lips, he says, "Will I see you tonight?"

"Try to stop me," Sam says. "I miss you, baby. I've been distracted, all day, thinking about you." His voice lowers, and he adds, "Your mouth especially."

Steve groans. "Sam, that is not fair," he says. "You're gonna get me all excited with nowhere to go."

Sam chuckles. "Yeah, I gotta get back to work. But I saw your boyfriend on CSPAN this morning, so I think he's in town. Why not pay him a visit?"

"Jim's in town?" Steve blinks; usually when he has meetings on the Hill or Secret Service duty, Jim always texts him in advance so they can make plans.

"Unless someone else is borrowing his suit," Sam says. "He was standing next to the President and a really recognizable local building."

"Huh," Steve says. "Okay."

"But I'll be by to see you at seven, so don't get too wore out."

"I'll have plenty of energy left to suck your cock, Sam, I promise," Steve says, grinning to himself. "I'll take my time, too, suck you so slow – "

"Okay, okay, shut up," Sam laughs. "I have to go lead a group meeting in ten minutes."

"Goes around comes around," Steve says primly.

They manage to hang up eventually, and Steve taps his fingers on the counter a few times, thoughtfully, before calling Jim.

"Hey, sweetheart," Jim says, when he answers, which is a pretty good sign he's not at work anymore.

"Hey handsome. Heard you were in town."

"Yeah, you know. Lots of meetings to pore over the leaked SHIELD info."
He sounds so casual that Steve almost doesn't ask, almost thinks he's being ridiculous. "You didn't text me," he says, trying for a light tone himself.

"Oh, well – I wanted to give you and Sam some time, you know," Jim stutters, eventually. "Like you did for me and Tony and Pepper."

Steve sighs. He should've known. "I didn't ask you for that," he says. "I've been missing you."

There's a little silence, and then Jim says, "Want me to come over?"

"Please," Steve says.

While he waits for Jim, Steve puts on his little denim skirt and one of his tight white undershirts to go with it. He does a little lipstick in a dark red, and some smudgey eyeliner, and nods at himself in the mirror. It feels good, like battle armor, suited to the work he'll have to do later today.

"Hey, gorgeous," Jim says, when he gets in the door. "You look punk."

Steve shrugs. He's still getting used to the modern usage of that word, but in this case it works either way. "I was feeling kinda punk today."

Jim kisses him warmly, his fingers splayed in the small of Steve's back. It always melts Steve's spine when he does that kind of stuff, wrapping himself around Steve's body like he could wrap him up completely.

"You're a punk every day," Jim says, looking him in the eyes and smiling. "You just fool people with that clean-cut look of yours."

"I'm really glad you're here," Steve says, kissing him again. "I wish you'd told me you were in town."

Jim frowns. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I didn't know it would bother you."

"It's not so much that," Steve says, thinking it through. "It's more like... it's what we talked about before. The way you withdraw, sometimes, and make sure your feelings aren't my problem."

"I didn't want you to worry about me while you and Sam are getting to know each other," Jim says, sighing. "And while you're dealing with Bucky, and the kids, and everything. I didn't mean it like that."

"I like worrying about you," Steve says. "Let me choose to worry if I want to."

Jim nods. "I get why you're upset," he says. "I'm sorry."

"I just want you to know," Steve says, "there's room here for you. All of you." Reaching out, he takes Jim's hand and swings it slowly between them. "You don't have to give me space I haven't asked for, not if you don't want to."

Closing the gap between them, Jim comes in and wraps his arms around Steve's shoulders; Steve feels a bunch of tension drain away immediately.

"I love you," Jim says, into his shoulder.

"Love you too," Steve says. "Don't know where you got the idea that you staying away from me would make me happy."
Jim gives him a little squeeze, then pulls back. "I'm dumb sometimes," he says. "I'm working on it. It's hard for me."

"I know. Good thing you're cute," Steve says, shaking his head.

Jim grins. "So what're you up to today?" he asks.

"Calling VA centers and homeless shelters, places like that. We're trying to get the word out about Bucky. Tell them who he is, and what's happened to him, and make sure people are safe around him. Make sure they'll email me if they see him."

Jim nods. "Sounds like it'll be hard," he says.

Steve wants to say _I'll be fine_, but since he just got upset with Jim for keeping his emotions to himself, he forces himself to say, "Yeah. Sam and Allison helped me, though, we worked out a script. Stuff to say, how to answer questions."

Jim nods. "If there's a script, then it doesn't have to be you calling," he points out. "Want some help?"

It hadn't even occurred to Steve to ask Jim to help him, but the idea of it – Jim beside him, holding his hand while they tell the world about Bucky – makes him feel a rush of relief.

"Yeah," he says. "Thanks, Jim."

They work through the list Sam gave them, all of the non-HYDRA places that Bucky might go to lay low, or get help, or get food. _Hi, I wanted to let you know about a mentally ill veteran who might come in seeking help. We're trying to get in touch with him, and if you see him, we'd like you to give him some contact info_. It goes on and on, through the morning and into the afternoon, explaining that Bucky was brainwashed and could be dangerous, explaining that Bucky may not know who he is, over and over until Steve is sick of saying it.

They talk until they both get hoarse, until Jim's voice cracks on the words and Steve can't stop coughing, so when Jim fucks him later, up against the wall with his skirt pushed up his thighs, when Jim bites his neck and takes him rough and makes him come, neither of them make a sound.

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Steve does go back to group therapy that Thursday morning; Tamara smiles and nods at him as he files in. He smiles back, tentatively, and takes the same seat he had before, near the back. There's a man sitting in the row in front of him, and when Steve sits he turns around, throwing one arm over the back of his chair.

Smiling, Steve braces himself. "Hey, I read that interview you did," he says. Steve wonders which one, but doesn't ask.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I have a buddy who says . . . " He trails off, obviously unwilling to tell Steve what exactly his buddy says. Steve waits. "Anyway, I kinda thought the same, but then – were they really gonna kill all those people?"

"Over seven hundred thousand," Steve says. Maria had told him the number during the welcome home party; Steve still can't wrap his mind around it.
"And they thought – they'd kill all those important people, then they could take over? The rest of us wouldn't mind?" The guy's face is incredulous, and Steve lets himself relax a little.

"Well, you might've been one of the seven hundred thousand," Steve says reasonably. "The algorithm rated military experience highly, I think. But yeah, I guess they figured everyone else would just accept it."

The guy blinks in shock at the idea that HYDRA might've targeted him, that his life might've been valuable enough to have been in danger. He shakes his head slowly. "Like if they killed my neighbor, I wouldn't've stood up for him."

"Or if they killed you, your neighbor wouldn't have stood up for you," Steve agrees.

"What the hell were they thinking," the guy scoffs. "That's a really terrible world takeover plan."

Steve chuckles. "Pretty sure they were thinking that the world is run by extraordinary people," he says. "Not by you and me."

The guy raises an eyebrow at him, and Steve feels a little chagrin – it's a bit odd, maybe, to this guy, for him to say he's ordinary. But it's how he feels, still, so he just shrugs.

With a bemused smile, the guy shakes his head again. After a little pause, he says, "I read about your friend, too, in that interview. Bucky Barnes. You gonna talk about him today?"

"I . . . hadn't planned on it," Steve says. It'd been hard enough over the phone, talking to people who might be able to help Bucky.

The guy shrugs a shoulder. "Lots of people here who've been homeless, or in a bad place," he says. "Might be able to help."

Tamara gets the meeting started about then, so the guy – Steve realizes he doesn't even know his name – turns back to face forward again, and Steve is left alone to think, and listen.

Later, as one ex-Navy SEAL tells a story about encountering an old buddy on the street, begging, Steve finds himself nodding a lot at the guy's story. When Tamara asks, a few minutes later, if anyone else has had a similar experience, Steve raises his hand.

"Yeah, Steve?"

Resisting the urge to stand, Steve says, "I guess you all know about Sergeant Barnes," and sees a few nods around the room. "It's not the same as what Brian was saying, but it was – a shock, seeing him like that. Not knowing who he was, or . . . knowing me." Steve frowns, because this wasn't what he'd meant to say, not at all. He puts himself back on track. "I'm worried that he doesn't have a safe place to stay, and I thought – if anyone knows anyone in the homeless community, maybe they could help get the word out. I'm trying to get in touch with him."

Tamara smiles and says, "Steve, I'm going to tell you the same thing I told Brian, which is to talk with Jason, our homeless outreach coordinator. He can definitely help you out with that. That goes for everyone here who's homeless or who knows a homeless vet who wants help."

Licking his lips, Steve nods; Sam's already talked to Jason, he knows. Maybe Tamara even knows it too, but wants to make sure everyone else does.
"Okay," he says.

"Do you want to talk a little more about how it felt, when you ran into your old buddy?" Tamara asks. She makes it sound like he bumped into Bucky at the department store, not like Bucky was a brainwashed cryogenically frozen assassin and Steve had beaten him and dislocated his arm to prevent him from unwittingly killing thousands of people.

He shakes his head. "No," he says. "I just wanted to get the word out. I – it's hard to know what the right thing is to do. Whether he even needs or wants my help. I don't know if he's safe, or eating enough, or hurting people, it's all – I have no idea. I want him to get help, so he can get back to who he used to be."

The guy in front of Steve raises his hand, and Tamara nods at him. "That sounds real hard, Steve," he says, turning around again, and Steve is struck by the sudden, ridiculous urge to cry. "But wanting him to go back and be who he was . . . that doesn't ever happen to any of us."

Steve purses his lips and nods, dropping his head and looking at the floor.

"Could you go back to who you were before your war, Steve?" Tamara asks gently. "Would you want to?"

Steve thinks about this for a long moment, long enough that Tamara looks like she's about to let him off the hook and ask someone else the question when he finally speaks.

"No," he says, hearing the truth of his answer as the word escapes his lips. "I guess I couldn't. And I . . . I wouldn't. I wouldn't want to go back. I'm someone else now."

Tamara nods. "That's okay," she says to Steve. Then, lifting her gaze to encompass the room, she adds, "And it's okay to feel like you do want to go back. No shame in either, or in feeling confused. How does everyone else feel? Would you go back to who you were, or stay who you are now?"

A bunch of the others share their feelings, one after another, and Steve can recognize a lot of himself, and other guys he's known, in what they say.

He wonders, for the first time, what kind of therapy Bucky might want, if they find him.

After the meeting, Sam comes up to him, and this time Steve doesn't hesitate in accepting a quick, tight hug.

"You did great," Sam says, meeting Steve's eyes as they both pull back. "You did so great, Steve, I'm really proud of you."

Steve nods, sticking his hands awkwardly into his pockets. "Thanks," he says.

"I mean it," Sam adds, softly. "That was heroic."

Steve gives Sam an incredulous look. "It was just talking," he points out. "Not stepping in front of a bullet or fighting alien invaders."

Sam quirks an eyebrow. "No," he agrees. "Those things are easy."

*

That night, he and Sam take the same roads up to Jersey that he and Natasha took a few weeks before, when they were hot on the trail of Fury's killers. Steve spends a lot of time looking out the
window, wondering if Bucky might've been here, if he might've walked, or hitched, or stolen a car.

"How was your meeting with the kids?" Steve asks, when they’ve been on a road a while. "You went with Bruce, right?"

"Yeah," Sam answers. "Cool guy. Not that I’m over what he did to my old neighborhood, but we got along."

A beat goes by, and Steve frowns. "You’re not going to tell me what the kids had to say?"

Sam shrugs. "I get that, to you, it’s a matter of national urgency or whatever. But to me, it’s scared kids who desperately need someone to respect their boundaries. So no, I’m not gonna tell you."

"I want to respect their boundaries, Sam," Steve says softly, a little hurt. "Is it so wrong to wonder how much longer they’ll have to be on their own, sleeping God knows where, or how much longer Jim and Maria will have to keep HYDRA off their trail?"

Sam sighs. "No. But look, right now it’s not something you can help with."

Steve taps his fingers against the door of the car and looks out the window, annoyed.

"I can tell you what I said, though," Sam offers, a moment later. Steve looks over at him.

"Yeah?"

"For example," Sam says, "I answered a lot of questions about you. And told them my story about taking down HYDRA, from the beginning to the end."

"God," Steve frowns, thinking about it. "Isn’t that just going to scare them?"

"More than the boogeymen they’re afraid of now, who can jump out of dark corners and take them away to be experimented on? No, I think the truth isn’t gonna scare them that much."

Steve holds up his hands, surrendering.

"They need to know who they can trust not to be HYDRA," Sam adds, in a softer voice. "I told them."

"Okay," Steve says. "I guess that’s something."

"Damn right it is."

Steve feels bad, suddenly, for having given Sam such a hard time when he’s clearly been putting so much work into this. "Thank you, Sam. I’m glad you’re there with them."

"Me too," Sam sighs. He doesn’t sound glad at all.

"Are you okay?" Steve asks. Sam lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug.

"When I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to keep them safe, or get them to come in? Not really. It’s hard work."

Nodding, Steve licks his lips, looking for the right words. "Is this – what we talked about? You giving too much of yourself?" he asks, softly.

Sam spares a glance from the road to meet his eyes briefly. "I don't know. Maybe. I gotta think
"about it. And talk to some people about it."

Steve reaches over and squeezes his thigh. "Superheroing's not what it's cracked up to be," he says.

"Got that right," Sam agrees, but doesn't say anything more. The silence stretches between them for a while, not entirely comfortable.

After a few minutes, Steve does his best to change the subject, asking Sam about his favorite music until they both get laughing and chatting again, making the drive pass a little faster. There’s a light in Sam’s eyes when he talks about Motown, about what that music meant to him when he was young, that Steve aches to see again and again. So Steve keeps asking questions, building up a picture in his mind of a sensitive fourteen year old Sam Wilson, plugged into something called a Walkman, deep in his feelings and shutting out the rest of the world.

"Did you know you were bi? Back then?" Steve asks. Sam tilts his hand back and forth in a seesaw gesture.

"I knew I was something," Sam replies. "But Baptists didn’t have queer-friendly congregations at that time. Hell, no one did. And my father’s congregation wasn’t exactly pushing the envelope. So I kept it to myself."

"Until you turned . . . eighteen?" Steve guesses. Sam laughs.

"Seventeen. How’d you know?"

Steve grins. "I can’t imagine you holding yourself back, Sam."

"Yeah, well. I didn’t arrive in the world this awesome. It took work."

"Between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, I’m sure it did," Steve says, and Sam laughs. Steve thinks about what Maria told him, about progressive Catholic churches, and wonders. "Did your father . . . is his congregation still conservative?"

Sam shakes his head. "No. He did a lot of work too, when I came out. Took a lot of years, but. He did the work. I love that man. He started one of the first LGBT-friendly Baptist congregations."

"Wow," Steve says. "That's – " He can't find a word for how amazing and overwhelming that is, how impossible it feels to see queers welcomed in organized religion. He spreads his hands, speechless.

"Yeah," Sam says, sighing. "I know. I feel that too." He glances over at Steve, curious. "You spiritual? I think I saw someone on the news saying you were Catholic."

Steve thinks about this. It's possible he'll never stop being Catholic, in his heart, no matter how many years he's gone without Confession and Holy Communion. "I am. Or I was. It – I couldn't reconcile it to my life, for a long time, so I had to put it aside."

Sam nods, and frowns. "I remember feeling that way," he says. "Like it was something I had to get rid of. Like I had to cut it outta me if I wanted to be whole."

Steve reaches out to touch Sam's shoulder, rubbing gently down his arm. "And now?"

Sam grins. "Now, I'm scheming ways to get you to my dad's church some Sunday morning."

Steve laughs. "We'll see," he says.
They get in around midnight and get a room at a good hotel not far off the highway, where they can make it to the safehouse easily the next morning. Sam throws his bag on the floor and stretches, standing up on tiptoe and raising his arms to the ceiling. Steve watches, loving the backward arch of his spine, the angle of his chin as he tips his head back, the shadow of eyelashes on his cheeks.

"Tired of being in the car?" Steve asks.

"I miss those wings already," Sam says, sighing as his back pops. "The superheroes with flying powers really have an edge."

"Don't I know it," Steve sighs. He gets tired, sometimes, of being one of the few Avengers who has to take the stairs.

"What about you? You healed enough to come on a late-night jog with me?" Sam walks up to him, bouncing a little on his toes.

Steve does a few slow, experimental twists; his torso doesn't pull like it did, and his arm hasn't ached in a while.

"I should be okay to go slow," he says, smiling slowly. "Maybe you can keep up with that."

Sam shakes his head. "I don't know why I put up with you."

Pulling him in for a hot, wet kiss, Steve says, "Yeah you do."

"That is cheating," Sam says, and kisses him again. Steve loves the feeling of Sam's smile against his mouth.

"I'll go change into some sweats," Steve says, putting a hand on Sam's chest and pushing him gently away. "Unless you're trying to distract me from our jog."

"I will race you anytime, Rogers. On your best day."

Grinning, Steve roots around in his duffel bag. When he looks up again, Sam is holding some shorts and a t-shirt in his hand and leaning against the little table in the corner.

"Okay if I change in here?" he asks.

"Yeah. I've seen you naked before," Steve says, chuckling. Sam shrugs and takes off his button-up, revealing all the muscles he usually keeps hidden.

"It's different for different people," Sam says easily. "I don't mind if you change in here or use the bathroom," he adds.

Steve pulls his shirt over his head and then undoes his jeans, dropping them to the floor. "Not a big deal," he says.

"It never bothered you, in the Army?" Sam asks, as he pulls on his shorts. "People looking?"

Steve frowns a little as he pulls on his sweats; it's a tough question. "Sometimes. I was really new to my body, back then. Everything was so confusing. Some days I felt really good, and other days it was . . . hard."

Sam nods. "And now?"
"Now . . ." Steve walks over to Sam, still topless, and puts his hands on Sam's face. Sam's hands land on his hips. "Now some days are hard, and other days I feel really good," he says.

Reaching down, he takes Sam's hands in his and drags them up his sides to his chest. "I have a lot of good days with you," he breathes. "I trust you."

Sam keeps his hands where Steve's put them, but moves his fingertips, rubbing at Steve's nipples. Steve closes his eyes in pleasure.

"This doesn't bother you?" Sam asks softly. He leans forward and kisses Steve's neck.

"Not right now," Steve says, as Sam goes on caressing. "Right now it makes me feel . . . I don't know. Feminine. And really turned on."

"Mmmm," Sam says, in appreciation. "It sucks if you get dysphoria about your chest but like having your nipples played with."

"I know," Steve sighs. Sam keeps rubbing, and Steve relaxes into the sensation, letting his arms slide down around Sam's shoulders.

A minute later, Sam's hands pull away. "Hey Steve."

"Yeah?" Steve rubs his cheek against Sam's.

"Open your eyes."

Steve does, pulling back, and Sam immediately tosses his t-shirt at him and takes off for the door.

"Didn't want you whining about me having an unfair advantage!" Sam calls, as he slips into the hallway. Steve curses, pulls on his shirt, and goes after him. Just like Sam to make him run when his dick is getting hard.

"I swear to God, Wilson," he yells, chasing after him.

They run side-by-side, for the most part, after the initial sprinting chase that makes Sam laugh and push himself hard, working against Steve's supersoldier stamina and speed as if he has any chance of winning. By the time they get back to the hotel, their positions are reversed, with Steve running backwards and egging Sam on while Sam calls out profanities and puffs to keep up.

Once they get back into the room, Sam stumbles up to him, wrapping his arms around Steve's waist and putting his shoulder to Steve's hip, tackling him onto one of the beds. Steve is so surprised by the move that he falls, without resistance, down onto the soft surface with Sam on top of him.

"Caught you," Sam pants. Steve loves the feeling of Sam's strong body pressing him down; he squirms against it gladly.

"Hate to tell you this, Sam," Steve says, "but you caught me the first time you ever chased me."

Sam rolls off of Steve and collapses onto the bed laughing, his hand on his belly. Steve is struck again by the lines of his body, the planes and curves of him.

Turning onto his side next to Sam, Steve props his head on his arm and looks his fill. Eventually Sam turns his head to look back.

"You ever do any modeling, Sam?" Steve asks.
"Oh wow," Sam says, chuckling, "that is a really cheesy pickup line. Even cheesier since you've already picked me up."

"Shut up, I mean it," Steve says, feeling a little embarrassed but not willing to back down. "Any artist would love to draw you."


Getting up, Sam roots through his bag and pulls out some stuff; as he turns, Steve recognizes an artist's sketchpad.

"We have a bunch of supplies in the art therapy room," Sam explains. "I was in there this morning and it was – I don't know. Call it a whim. I didn't know if you carried your own stuff around with you or not."

"I used to," Steve says, sitting up himself and reaching out curiously for the materials. "I used to carry my book everywhere, sketch everything."

"Not anymore?"

"I tried, after the . . . the whole defrosting thing," he says delicately, and Sam snorts. "I've done a little since then, mostly for picket signs. I keep falling out of the habit, though. More important stuff keeps coming up."

Sam's gotten him pencils and charcoals, so Steve has his choice. He picks up one of the pencils and, out of pure muscle memory, starts sharpening it with a knife from his kit.

"Starting without me, huh?"

"Getting warmed up for the main event," Steve corrects, looking up at Sam through his lashes.

Sam sits on the bed, towel still hanging on. The edges of the towel split over his lap, no longer covering the shadowed darkness of his inner thighs. Steve taps his pencil on the paper: once, twice.

"So what do I do?" Sam asks, hands resting on his thighs. "Put on clothes, not put on clothes, pose . . . ?"

"You do whatever feels natural to you," Steve says. "I like drawing people how they are, you know?"

Sam nods. "I like that. Okay." He frowns, hesitating, and then adds, "It's kind of hard to think of a physical pose that represents your inner self, though."

Grinning, Steve says, "Well, you want to make sure not to pick anything too strenuous. That your body couldn't handle."
"Don't push me, baby, I'll do a quad stretch," Sam says. Steve raises his eyebrows, thinking about it: Sam with his hand braced on the desk, naked, holding one ankle behind himself. He can imagine the drawing he'd make, how he'd linger over Sam's ass and the tight lines of his leg muscles.

"Can't resist a dare, can you, Sam?"

Sam laughs. "I can't believe you said that with a straight face, you ridiculous adrenaline junkie." Standing, he drops the towel carelessly onto the end of the bed, then lays down on his back, with his fingers laced behind his head and one knee – the one further away from Steve – drawn up.

"Just try to do what you would naturally do," Steve says, watching Sam's naked, unselfconscious body with warm affection.

"Naturally, I'd fall asleep," Sam says, yawning. "Long day."

"That's fine," Steve says. He starts making a few quick lines, getting a feel for Sam's silhouette.

"And let you draw me drooling all over myself?" Sam asks. He turns his head on the pillow to look at Steve. "No thanks."

"You're cute when you're asleep," Steve says, spending some time on the shape and musculature of Sam's upper arms, the crooks of his elbows. He's hit by the memory of doing this with Arnie, so long ago, the memory of not knowing how to draw an elbow, of not knowing how to ask a boy to fuck you.

"Mmm-hm," Sam hums, clearly not believing him. Steve smiles and settles into the drawing. It feels good to be doing it again, putting the lines of his lover's body onto paper, caressing him with the strokes of the pencil, capturing his beauty.

Sam is very beautiful, Steve finds. He loves doing this, finding the exact outline of him, the exact volume of air displaced by his presence in the world.

It's a while later before either of them speaks again; Steve is lost entirely in sketching the shape of Sam's right ankle when he hears him clear his throat.

"Can I ask you something, Steve?" Sam asks. He sounds slow and dreamy, like maybe he really did fall asleep for a minute there, lulled by the sounds of Steve's pencil on the paper.

"Sure," Steve says. He moves up a little and adds more shading to the calf; this light isn't spectacular, so he has to fudge it a little bit.

"You ever draw yourself?"

Steve's pencil stops mid-line. "What?"

"Like, a self-portrait. Lots of artists do, don't they?" He still sounds sleepy, like he's not even entirely aware of what he's saying.

Steve clears his throat and takes the point of the pencil up from the paper. He's torn drawings before, especially since the transformation, and he likes this one. "Why do you ask?"

Sam blinks slowly at him. "I guess I'd like to see one," he says. "See you how you see yourself."

Steve nods slowly. "I've never done one," he says. "I never – I mean, the drawings were mostly just for me."
"Maybe someday you'll make me one," Sam says, closing his eyes again. After another minute or two, he falls back asleep, his leg gradually slipping down the bed until he's lying flat. Steve finishes the drawing. When he puts the last line down on paper – a feather-light touch to Sam's full lower lip – he has to swallow hard around the rough, raw vulnerability he feels. He looks at Sam, naked and asleep, trusting him, and wishes he could give that gift back to him.

He sets the drawing on the bedside table and gets the blankets from the other bed, pulling them up over Sam so he won't get cold. He goes to take a shower, thinking about what Sam said. How he would draw himself. What position he'd put himself in. What he'd want to wear.

When he comes back, Sam's moved, curled up on his side with his knees drawn up. As Steve gets closer, he sees that he actually is drooling on the pillow. He smiles, and crawls in next to him, tucking himself into the cradle of Sam's body and doing his best to avoid the drool.

"Maybe someday," he whispers, against Sam's chest.

*

Steve wakes in the night, certain that something in the room has changed; sure enough, when he gets his eyes open and looks around, he seems Sam standing at the window, wearing only his boxer shorts, drinking a glass of water. He's illuminated by the light pouring in through the gap in the curtains, which plays over his shoulders and accentuates his lines of muscle. Steve blinks, watching him.

"You okay?" he says, after a minute. Sam looks over at him, surprised.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" He closes the curtains again and sets down the glass before crawling back into bed with Steve. Steve holds the blankets up for him, then snuggles close to give Sam some of his body heat. Sam's skin is cool; he must've been outside of their little blanket nest for a while.


Sam gets settled beneath the blankets again and kisses Steve on the forehead. "You're so warm," he says, wrapping his arms around Steve's bare torso.

Steve kisses him in lieu of an answer. Sam's mouth opens beneath his like it was all planned in advance, like they've been doing this forever, like their bodies were meant to fit together this way.

Sam moves, and Steve moves with him; Steve pushes, and Sam falls back. Sam rolls, and Steve rolls with him; Steve groans, and Sam's voice rises too. Their rhythm is perfect, as if this moment were designed only for them, for this effortless give and take between them, for the movement of their bodies in tandem and the beating of their hearts together.

"Fuck me," Steve breathes, and Sam's breath comes in reply, as he says, "Yes, yes," and they move together to get into the right position, Sam covering Steve as Steve kneels on the bed and spreads his legs to get ready.

When Sam slides into him, it's the easiest fuck Steve can remember, Sam's body fitted into his, his pace matching Sam's exactly. It's nothing at all like running rings around Sam: in this, they're evenly matched.

Evenly matched, but Steve chooses to submit, and Sam chooses to accept his submission.

Steve presses his fists into the mattress and exhales long and loud and matches Sam move for move, thrust for thrust, breath for breath. The world slows down around them and Sam's body joins
his in an endless rising pleasure that Steve can't help but sob his way through.

"Baby, baby, baby," Sam is chanting, but Steve thinks it's just nonsense syllables, just something to say to get his breath out of his body. Steve thinks he's saying something back, but he doesn't know what, Sam's name or a plea or a curse.

It feels like they live together in that moment for a long time before they crest, and fall, and collapse into one another, until Sam's body and his flash into joy before they start coming down again.

A long, long time later, when Sam's gotten rid of the condom and Steve's mouth has found a place to rest slow kisses against Sam's shoulder, Sam says, "Is that what it's always like, for you?"

Steve shakes his head, then realizes that Sam's got his eyes closed and can't see it. "No," he says. "It's just us."

Sam's breath is borne on a laugh, and he shakes his head without opening his eyes. "I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse. I've never had sexual chemistry like that with anyone. In my life."

"It's really neat," Steve agrees, which makes Sam laugh, which makes Steve laugh too, helplessly, for a little while. When he can, Steve presses a smiling kiss to Sam's collarbone. "We work really well together, Sam," he says, a simple truth that he's felt in his gut since long before he and Sam first slept together. "You know when to catch me."

"I guess I do," Sam agrees. "I guess you're saying you know when to jump off of tall things."

"My specialty," Steve agrees. They lie together in silence for a little bit.

"Hey, are those the drawings you did of me?" Sam asks, looking over at the bedside table. There's still just enough light streaming in from the crack in the blinds to make the sketches visible.

"They're not done," Steve cautions him, but hands over the stack of images. Sam clicks on the lamp and looks them over slowly, carefully.

"Wow," he says, after a moment. "This is one handsome guy you've drawn." It has a hint of Sam's usual confidence, the way he'll call himself good-looking or talk about his strength and prowess, but it's crucially different from that, too, as if deep down Sam actually doubts that he could be the beauty on the paper in front of him.

"It sure is," Steve agrees, running an idle hand over Sam's thigh. Sam puts the drawings back on the bedside table and bends to kiss Steve's temple.

"I love them. You're amazing."

Steve grins into the pillow and sighs as Sam clicks off the light and eases back down to curl their bodies together.

Sleep wants to overcome him, but something nags at Steve's consciousness. Slow-eyed and dreamy, Steve finally finds the question.

"What's got you up at night, Sam?"

Sam's breathing doesn't change, but he fidgets against the sheets, uncomfortable. After a long moment, he says, "Night before a mission. I guess – I'm still getting used to how that feels, again."
The planning, the stress, the tension."

"You need me to relieve some more tension?" Steve offers, and Sam's breath huffs out of him on a low laugh.

"Not just this moment, babe."

Steve licks his lips. "I know what you mean. The anticipation."

"I'd just started getting so I liked my beds soft, again." Sam doesn't sound sad about it, or regretful, but he does sound . . . almost surprised, wondering, that this could've changed on him.

"You'll tell me, Sam. If I'm using you too hard."

"I'll tell you," Sam promises, again. "Come here." He gathers Steve up, so that Steve's head rests on his shoulder, so Sam's strong arms circle his shoulders. It feels safe, far safer than any soft mattress ever could, and Steve just hopes that it'll be enough for both of them.

*

"Are we sure we got the right address?" Sam asks the next day, looking doubtfully at the rows of huge, beautiful houses and pristine landscaped lawns. "It looks like rich white people live here."

Steve shrugs. "HYDRA kind of is rich white people," he points out.

"True."

They pull up next to the house; it's exactly like all the others, perfectly maintained, three stories, with chimneys and balconies and a lawn so green it almost hurts Steve's eyes.

"I dunno," Sam says, as they get out of the car. "I think if someone who looked like Bucky came here, the neighbors would call the cops in ten seconds flat." He smiles suddenly and raises a hand to wave; Steve looks in the direction of his gaze and sees an old white man standing on his stoop, hands in his pockets, watching them. "In fact, if I stay here on the sidewalk much longer, they might call the cops on me," Sam says, out of the corner of his mouth.

"I shoulda worn the suit," Steve says. He'd decided against it, thinking it would probably cause more problems than it would solve, and that being Citizen Rogers has to start sometime, but maybe it would have helped to communicate their intentions. "Okay, let's go up to the door, then."

They'd talked strategies, beforehand: whether they should burst through the door, or call the police to accompany them, or come at night and try to do some stealth reconnaissance first. In the end, they'd decided that the best thing to do, to avoid startling Bucky, and to stay on the right side of the law, was to knock.

Steve knocks on the door.

"This feels really weird," Sam says under his breath.

"Captain America calling," Steve says, in a quiet singsong. "Hi, any HYDRA agents here?"

Sam snickers.

The person who opens the door is definitely not Bucky.

She brushes her hair out of her face and smiles. "Yes? Can I help you?"
"Pardon me, ma'am," Steve says, stumbling a little. "Can I ask – do you live here?"

"Yes," she says. A man appears in the foyer behind her, wearing a suit and holding a cup of coffee. "My husband and I." Another man, coming down the stairs, stops suddenly when he sees Steve. "And my brother," she adds, hastily.

Sam taps his index finger against Steve's leg, just once, a movement too tiny for anyone to see.

Steve taps back.

"I'm Steve Rogers," Steve says, and her eyes immediately go wide.

"Honey," she says, over her shoulder, without taking her eyes off of Steve. "Steve Rogers is here!"

Steve waits for her to pull the gun, then goes into action, grabbing her wrist and punching her in the face to knock her back. He and Sam follow her through the doorway, into the house, and that's when the real fight begins.

Luckily there's only one more gun between them: in an ankle-holster on the second guy, which Sam takes off of him as soon as he pulls it. Steve keeps Sam in sight as much as he can to make sure he's safe, but Sam is fine on his own, immobilizing his guy with a few quick blows, and only taking a couple of punches himself. Steve gets the woman pinned and puts her into a sleeper hold, and then he and Sam together take the other one, moving in perfect synch.

There's something easy about fighting next to Sam, a carryover of the rhythm they have everywhere else, like the rhythm of their fucking the night before.

Once they have all three of them on the ground, they zip-tie their hands and feet so that no one can wake up and take another shot. Sam nods at him once and heads for the door to the kitchen.

"I'll search the house for more," Sam says, a little out of breath. "You okay here?"

Steve nods. He changes position to make sure he's got all three in view, and Sam leaves the room.

He comes back a little later with a laptop in one hand and a machine gun in the other.

"They've got quite the arsenal back there where the TV room oughta be," Sam says. Once everyone is restrained, and Sam's checked the breathing and pulse rates on the unconscious ones, Steve calls 911.

"HYDRA will rise again," the conscious man spits, after Steve hangs up. "Cut off one head, two more will take its place."

"You know, I find it hard to believe these assholes stayed under the radar for fifty years," Sam says.

"And that they never changed that motto," Steve agrees. He looks over at Sam, biting his lip. "Sam. You checked the whole house?"

Sam frowns and nods. "Yeah. No sign. A lot of potential intel, though, we should copy the computer files before we go."

"Okay," Steve says. "Then we'll wait for the anti-HYDRA task force to show up and take these guys, and then we can go do the next one. It's in Newark."

"Fucking Jersey," Sam sighs.
None of the HYDRA safehouses they check that day have Bucky in them, and most of them have HYDRA agents who went to ground when shit went sideways. Steve gets increasingly tired of the conversations he has to have with local authorities — *Yes, that Steve Rogers. Yes, HYDRA. Yes, we'll have to hold them until the new federal task force comes to pick them up. No, this is not a joke. Yes, even the women.*

"So we're sure that the new federal anti-HYDRA task force isn't HYDRA?" Sam asks, jokingly, the next day, as they leave their fourth safehouse.

Steve shrugs. "Natasha said she was pretty sure they aren't."

"Comforting."

"I can't keep all these guys prisoner in my apartment," Steve sighs. It's not perfect, he knows that, but he has to send them somewhere; there has to be some kind of due process. "The task force is mostly ex-SHIELD agents who sided against HYDRA. It's the best test we've got."

"I guess so," Sam says.

Late Saturday evening, at the sixth safehouse — a run-down old apartment in Philadelphia — there are no HYDRA agents and no signs of recent habitation. The architecture isn't quite the same, but the mood of the place reminds Steve of his old neighborhood in Brooklyn: people out on the front stoop smoking, narrow dark stairwells, well-worn wood floors in the hallways. He gets a chill down his back, thinking about Bucky coming here, maybe even choosing to come here.

He wouldn't have seemed out of place in this building, not like he would've in the rich suburban neighborhood.

They find the door of the apartment in question — 4A — unlocked. When the doorknob turns in his hand, Sam shrugs and they both enter cautiously.

It doesn't take long to search it. There's no one inside.

"No food in the kitchen, no garbage, dust on everything," Sam says, taking it all in. He grimaces down at the filthy surfaces.

"Who knows how long HYDRA was paying rent on this place without using it," Steve agrees. "Let's go, we can cross this one off the list."

"Hang on," Sam says, crouching down to look at something on the floor. Steve furrows his brow and looks at the thing he's picking up. It's a magazine, Steve realizes, just another piece of trash to add to the collection already covering the floors and the furniture.

"No dust on this," Sam points out, and Steve goes over to crouch beside him. When Sam flips the magazine over, Steve covers his mouth with his hand.

"It's the *TIME* cover from when he first came out of the ice, the one that calls him The Man Who Sacrificed Everything. It's his face."

"Anyone could've left this," Sam says softly. "It doesn't mean . . . " he trails off as Steve takes the magazine gently out of his hands and opens it. It's an old, well-worn library copy, and it falls immediately open to the main story. To the first interview Steve did after the Battle of New York. Someone's circled Steve's name, in the first sentence of the article, in heavy black marker. A
couple pages later, the same black circle surrounds another name: James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes.

"Jesus," Sam says, putting a hand on Steve's shoulder. Steve turns the page, to the part of the interview where he'd talked about the war. In the margins there are a series of scribbled notes: radio broken, next to one paragraph, and sniper duty next to another, small details about the war stories that weren't included in the article. At the bottom of the page, under a paragraph about the USO show, the word girl has been circled, and the word my written next to it.

Steve's entire body feels hollowed out, like he's been made into nothing more than a shell, the skin they put over his body so long ago suddenly becoming his only self. His hands shake.

"That's his handwriting," he hears himself say, and realizes that it's true.

He flips to the next page, and then the next, and the next, but there are no more notes, as if the article were discarded after that last one. As if Bucky threw it to the ground and forgot about it, made himself forget about it, to the point that he left it here on the floor in plain sight when he was so careful to leave no other trace.

"He's alive, and he's not trying to kill you," Sam says softly, an echo of what Steve said back at the hospital. "And he's remembering you."

Steve nods, not bothering to wipe his wet face. Sam waits beside him, and Steve knows he could turn to him, could ask to be held or comforted.

The idea of being touched sends a shiver of disgusted claustrophobia through Steve's body. Steve stays, staring at the article, and Sam stays beside him.

He doesn't know how much later it is when he stands up again. Sam looks up into his eyes, clearly worried, and Steve looks away.

"You gonna be okay?" he asks.

Steve nods, takes a deep breath. "He's remembering me," he says.

He leaves the magazine on the floor, and finds a pen and a piece of scrap paper to write a note.

**Dear Bucky,** he begins, and then pauses. What can he possibly say to Bucky that would convince him to come in? He's said it already, to the shelters and the magazines, to every person he could reach who might come in contact with Bucky.

Watching him, Sam says, "Sometimes it's not about what you say. It's about how many times you say it, and how you follow through."

Steve nods. This is different, though, than briefing a homeless shelter or leaving word with someone. This is – but Bucky will never read this. Probably he'll never get it. But it's as close as Steve's come to direct contact since the phantom tug on his uniform strap that lifted him out of the Potomac.

"What should I write?" he asks, eventually.

"What do you want him to know?" Sam replies, softly.

Steve bites his lip and writes again. *I am your friend. I want to help you in whatever way I can. If you need anything, please call me or email me. If you want food, or shelter, or want to talk about*
whatever memories you have, please call. It still doesn't feel like enough, like that stuff isn't reason enough for Bucky to get in touch. He thinks about it for a moment, then adds, I miss you.

He puts all of his contact info at the bottom and signs it Steve Rogers. Sam reads it, and looks thoughtful, and adds a note of his own.

"What are you saying?" Steve asks.

"That if he can't contact you, he can contact me," Sam says. "Give him options."

As they leave, Steve grimaces at the dirty apartment. Any HYDRA agents on the loose could show up here at any time to lie low. There's no arsenal or equipment here – possibly Bucky took everything with him – but they should really expose the place and get it checked anyway.

"There's no point in leaving this place as is," Steve says. "It doesn't even look like he slept here the first time. I doubt he trusts these safehouses enough to do more than use them for supplies." He sighs. "He's not gonna come back here."

"He might," Sam says.

They leave the apartment as it is, and drive back to D.C. that night.

"You wanna go back out tomorrow?" Sam asks, as Steve takes his turn at the wheel.

Steve shakes his head, keeping his eyes on the road in front of him. "I need to look over new HYDRA intel. Figure out his likely moves."

"Okay," Sam agrees, softly.

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When they get back to D.C., Sam drops him off and gives his hand a firm squeeze goodbye before they get out of the car.

"Sorry, Steve, I really need some sleep," he says, apologetically. "And . . . I think I need a little time alone to sort through it." He rubs two fingers against his forehead and looks down as he says it, and Steve squeezes his shoulder, suddenly guilty that he's put Sam back into the line of fire again.

He knows it's not helpful to say that, though, so he holds Sam's arm until he looks back up to meet Steve's gaze.

"Don't apologize," Steve says. "You've done so much for me this weekend. Thank you, Sam."

"Call me when you know what's up," Sam says, then gives Steve a long, searching look before shaking his head. "You get some sleep too, okay? If you can."

"All right," Steve agrees, softly. Sam nods, as if to himself, and then gets back in the car and drives off.

Checking his phone on his way up the stairs, Steve finds that he has a text from Natasha: Back in town for a few days. He texts her back, telling her they've found some signs of their missing person and asking if she has any time to talk over the intel with him.

Geez, Rogers, you'd think you're only interested in me for my extensive knowledge of spy networks.
Embarrassed, he types as quickly as he can with the tiny keys: *Sorry! Been focused on the mission. How's your trip so far?*

*Meet me for breakfast tomorrow and I'll tell you,* Natasha promises, and sends an address and a time. It's almost like it used to be, when Natasha would sometimes text him his orders for a new mission.

He assembles everything he has on the search for Bucky: the few sightings, the surveillance footage from the convenience store robbery, the pictures Steve took yesterday of the magazine with Bucky's handwriting in it, and the network of HYDRA safehouses: the ones he and Sam had cleared, the ones the task force had cleared, and the ones that were still out there. It's a lot of paper, but as Steve looks at it, tucked into an expandable file folder, he can't help thinking how little information it actually contains.

The questions he has burning hot inside him can't be answered by anyone but Bucky himself. *Are you okay? Are you eating? Are you remembering?*

Still, Natasha will probably be able to give him some insight, given this data; she's more familiar with this kind of manhunt than Steve is.

He sleeps three or four hours, tossing and turning, wishing that Sam or Jim were there to hold him and make his body stop sinking into the bed, or else make this time better spent. Wishing, at the same time, that the hours between the night and the morning would disappear altogether, erasing the barrier between him and his meeting with Natasha.

At five, he gets up and runs for a while. Around seven, when he's finally getting a little winded, he spots Sam near the Lincoln Memorial.

"Don't you dare," Sam yells, as Steve approaches him from behind at a dead run. Steve can't help but laugh, and slows down to keep pace with him.

"Hi, Sam," Steve says instead.

Sam looks over in surprise at the sound of his voice, the hitch in his breathing, and his eyebrows go up when he sees the trickle of sweat that's dampened the collar of Steve's shirt.

"How long you been out here?" he asks.

Steve shrugs, looking down at their feet, the steady pace of their jogging. "A while. I'm meeting Natasha for breakfast in a bit."

"Oh, Nat's back in town, huh," Sam says.

"Yeah. Just for a couple days, I think. I'm gonna take her the intel we've got so far, see what she can make of it."

"Okay," Sam says. "Hey, come sit over here with me for a minute."

Steve can't help but think of it as their tree, the place they first met. This time Steve sits next to Sam amid the thick roots, against the cool grass, and feels his heart begin to slow again to its resting rate.

"Get any sleep last night?"

Steve leans back against the tree, bringing his shoulder into contact with Sam's. "Nah. You?"
"I did my best," Sam says. "Kept thinking about you and Bucky."

"Sorry, Sam," Steve says, and Sam waves him away.

"Shut up. I can be an idiot and keep myself up nights thinking about things I can't change if I want to."

Steve chuckles. "Is that meant for me, too?"

"Only if you think you need some encouragement to be an idiot," Sam drawls, and Steve punches him lightly on the arm.

"I don't," Steve says. "You wanna come over tonight? Maybe the two of us together could get some sleep."

"Ha, yeah, I'm sure a lot of sleeping would get done," Sam laughs, then shakes his head. "I... think I still need a little time," Sam says, slowly. "If that's okay."

"Yeah, Sam, of course," Steve says softly. "It's okay to worry about yourself, and the rest of your life."

Sam gives him a weird look. "I'm gonna remember you said that," he says, then gets to his feet. He extends one hand down towards Steve, and Steve takes it, in a mirror image of the first time they ever touched.

Sam's hand still feels good in his.

"I'll run you home," Sam offers. Steve nods, biting his lip in thought; if he goes home now, he'll still have time to kill before he meets Natasha. But he supposes he can use the time to go through the weapons inventories from the various HYDRA safehouses one more time.

Because they're out in public, Sam claps him on the shoulder when they part, rather than giving him a hug or kissing him goodbye. Sam sort of frowns as he does it, and Steve feels a now-familiar wave of worry and frustration, but puts it aside. Coming out right now would distract the media from the story about Bucky, and would take up a lot of his time. It's not a priority at the moment.

As he showers, though, he does wish he'd dragged Sam inside to kiss him instead of accepting the clap on the shoulder.

Steve gets to the restaurant early, so he's studying the menu when Natasha walks up to their table. He recognizes her scent a moment before he realizes she's standing next to him, and is surprised by the rush of good feeling that he associates with it.

Looking up, taking in Natasha's smile, Steve feels something ease inside him that he didn't even know was tense.

"Nat," he says, and stands without thinking to hug her. She squeezes him back, hard, and with his face buried in her hair he breathes in, taking in the scent he'd caught earlier.

"I was only gone a couple weeks, geez," she says, sitting down across the table from him.

"It's good to see you," Steve says, feeling a little embarrassed. He realizes they've never done that before, hugged in public, and that the cameras going off around them mean they're gonna be in the papers the next day. As if there aren't enough articles out there already speculating about their torrid affair, or -- worse -- claiming that Natasha seduced him.
"Good to see you too," Natasha intones, seriously. She doesn't take her eyes from his, and she doesn't act like he's just compromised her public image.

"How long will you be in town?"

Natasha grimaces. "Don't know yet. I've got a few contacts here I need to meet with."

Cocking his head, Steve asks, "Is one of them Maria?"

She rolls her eyes and then opens her menu. "Shut up, Rogers, I'm not as domesticated as you are."

"But you're gonna see her while you're here?"

"Yes," Natasha sighs, "I am going to see her while I'm here. And then I'll see her again two weeks after that, when I'm here again. We agreed." Eyeing Steve, she adds, "Because I wanted to."

"Oh, I would never imply otherwise," Steve says, keeping his eyes on the menu text in front of him, even though he's working so hard to stop himself from laughing that he's not really reading it.

He listens while she talks about the continued political fallout from their actions a month and a half ago; Steve's been following the news on the continued Congressional hearings and whatnot, but Natasha makes it all sound so much simpler, funnier, and more manageable than it seems when he gets it from newsreaders. He laughs at her descriptions of some of the politicians, and gives her all the straight lines she needs, getting back into their old playful back-and-forth.

It's not until they've ordered their food, and Natasha is slowly savoring her coffee, that Steve remembers why he wanted to meet with her in the first place. It wasn't to catch up and tell jokes.

He sits up straighter, guilt rolling through him. He waits for her to finish her story so that he can change the topic, bring it back to what he actually needs to focus on. What he should've been focusing on all along. But she must recognize the shift in his body language, because she trails off immediately and puts her coffee down on its saucer pointedly.

"Well?" she asks, tapping one fingernail against the smooth wood of the table.

"Well what?" Steve asks, feeling guilty.

She shakes her head and laughs. "You're like an anxious puppy. You're practically vibrating. Ask me what you want to ask."

Frowning, Steve takes out some of the files from the folder, the stuff she hasn't seen yet. "I – we found a clue, yesterday. Bucky's been in Philly."

"Popular hideout spot," Natasha says, accepting the files from him. "We?"

"Sam's been helping me. Coming along to check likely hideouts, stuff like that. We ran into some HYDRA agents, and he was good in the fight."

"Sounds like a keeper, that one."

Steve can't help a small smile. "Yeah."

"How are things with Jim? He settling into his new role in your polyamorous lifestyle?" She's scanning the intel, but it doesn't look like she's reading it in any detail.

"It's not important," Steve says, then watches in horror as Natasha raises her eyebrows at him. "I
mean, it is important, but –"

"But you're kind of focused on your mission right now," Natasha says softly. Steve recognizes the language from his own text the night before.

"I'm sorry," he says, "I didn't –"

"You don't have to apologize to me," Natasha interrupts. "But it sounds like you're going to have to apologize to Jim or Sam before too long, at this rate."

Steve frowns, and Natasha smiles at him before leaning forward to poke him in the arm. "Hey, go easy, superworrier. I know they both understand. We all do."

"Yeah," Steve says, but doesn't feel good about it. "I really appreciate it, Nat. And you don't have to look through this stuff if you don't –"

She holds up a hand to stop him talking, and he does, settling down into silence while she reads his notes and drinks her coffee. When she puts it all down again, she shrugs.

"Looks good to me," she says.

Steve raises his eyebrows. "That's it?"

"Don't know what else to tell you. Clearing the safehouses is a smart priority, it does good even if you don't find him, and it's obvious now that he's actually using the safehouses, at least for supplies, so it's probably your best bet. Plus it's a way of making your presence known to him. Keep him focused on you."

"Okay," Steve says.

The server interrupts to bring them their food. Steve starts in on it, chewing methodically and thinking it through. It's possible that they'll find Bucky at one of the other safehouses.

"The more interesting question," Natasha says, "isn't how you're going to find him. You'll leave him enough messages, and he'll come in to you or he won't. You'll make enough noise clearing safehouses, and he'll let himself be found or he won't."

"You think so?" Steve asks. "I mean, you think he might – come in willingly?"

"I think that nobody had better try to do it any other way," Natasha says darkly, and Steve remembers that she's been where Bucky is now, or somewhere a lot like it. "And yeah, I think you've got a good shot. He's curious about you."

Steve nods, letting Natasha's words fan the little spark of hope he's been carrying around so carefully. Then, frowning, he asks, "Wait – you said there's a more interesting question than how he'll come in?"

She nods, smiling the little smile that says she approves of him. "The more interesting question, Steve, is what the hell you're going to do with him when you find him."

Blinking, Steve says, "Well, I thought – therapy, and medical attention, and . . . I can support him as long as he needs . . ." He'd known it wouldn't be easy, but Sam has colleagues who've worked with people who have severe trauma and memory loss. Steve has resources in place. He's thought about it. But Natasha shakes her head.
"No, that's not what I mean. Did you hear what Senator Baker said last week?"

"Yeah. But he's on the fringe, no one else is demanding anything like what he wants." Steve's TV remote still has a thumbprint in it, though, where Steve had gripped too hard before carefully pressing the power button.

"Believe me," Natasha says, "if Barnes shows up, a real person who was really a brainwashed assassin for seventy years, who really has that metal arm . . . there are going to be a lot more people calling for a trial. And for his blood. He's not real to them right now."

Steve swallows. "What can I do?"

Someone comes up to their table before Natasha can answer, and Steve breaks the intense eye contact between them to look up and assess the situation. A middle-aged white man in a business suit, absolutely unremarkable, except that Steve's sure he's seen him before.

"Jerry," Natasha says, smiling. "How are you." She doesn't say it like a question, but Jerry doesn't seem to notice.

"Fine, thanks," he says, before turning away from her and towards Steve; with that dismissive gesture, Steve remembers him. One of the men from one of the committees who'd questioned Natasha after the helicarriers crashed into the Potomac. Steve had seen him on CSPAN.

"Hello, Representative Wither," Steve says, as Wither's gaze falls on him.

"Good to meet you, Captain Rogers," Wither says, holding out a hand for Steve to shake. Steve stands up and shakes it. "We hoped we would see you at the hearings, but you were injured, they said. You seem all healed up now."

"Yes," Steve says, "I am."

"Good to hear. You know, we were all praying for your recovery."

"That's very kind."

"And of course I did what I could to restore confidence in you after that whole . . . incident."

"Did you?" Steve asks, thinking of the questions this man had asked Natasha. One that particularly sticks in Steve's mind was about whether she had destroyed SHIELD's protected files out of anger after Alexander Pierce spurned her sexual advances.

"I have always had the utmost faith in you," Wither insists.

"Funny, because I seem to recall you spearheading an investigation into whether or not I was an imposter sent to spy for the Ten Rings," Steve says, narrowing his eyes.

Wither looks shocked, like he never expected anyone to call him out on that. Steve glances over at Natasha, who nods at him and steps in, their rhythm together as good as it ever was.

"Jerry, I'd love to chat, but we were just hoping to have a quiet meal," she says, in a low voice. "I'm sure you know how it is, when you're recognized everywhere you go."

Wither turns back to her, as if surprised to find that she's still there, and blinks. "Well, yes, of course, don't let me disturb you two," he says, and then puts on a chuckle. "Quite the gentleman, eh Rogers, take the lady out to a nice breakfast the morning after."
Steve crosses his arms. It has a lot more effect on people now than it did when he was small. "The morning after what?" he asks, dangerously.

Wither chuckles again and puts his hands up, mock-surrendering. "Nothing, nothing. I know how it is, a man and a woman working together in close proximity. I'll get out of your hair."

He walks away, giving them a sly wink as he goes. Steve watches him leave the restaurant before he sits back down. He closes his eyes briefly, annoyed, flushed, sick to his stomach.

When he opens them again, Natasha isn't looking at him; she's looking down at her eggs instead, poking them with her fork.

"Doesn't it bother you?" he asks. She looks up at him, and he knows she must be able to see exactly what he's feeling, but he feels compelled to explain anyhow. "When they make assumptions like that. About you."

She shrugs one shoulder elegantly.

"I usually find that there's a lot of power in letting people assume what they want to about me," she says. Steve purses his lips, and Natasha chuckles softly. "But I know that's not a kind of power you're interested in," she adds.

"I hate all that stuff. Sometimes I just want to scream at them."

"You can if you want," she says. "Nobody stopping you."

"It's not a priority right now," Steve says, telling her what he's been telling himself for weeks. "I need to think about Bucky. Like you said, get guys like Wither to not . . . see him as a threat, I guess."

She shakes her head. "You're really the wrong superhero for that job," she says, almost laughing.

Steve looks down at the table, then back up at her. "I can't ask you to spend more time arguing for political favors for me, Nat," he says. "You don't want that."

"Yeah, no kidding," she says. "And I don't have the political capital for it right now anyway, I'm broke. But there's someone else who isn't."

At Steve's furrowed brow, Natasha rolls her eyes. "How on earth did you ever take down HYDRA back during the war?" she asks.

"They usually didn't set me riddles to solve?"

She picks up her unused spoon and bonks him on the head. He ducks down to allow it.

"Jim, dumbass. That guy you know who stands next to the president all the time? He's the one who can make a soft landing for Bucky, politically."

Steve can picture it now, what she means: Jim in his dress blues, cap under his arm, knocking softly on the doors of Senators and Representatives, speaking in hushed, serious tones with the Attorney General and the CIA Director. Jim would be able to do it, quietly, and in the background, so that if Bucky ever were ready to reclaim his identity, the US Government would be ready to throw him a parade and not a trial.

"Oh," he says.
"Yeah, oh."

"It's a lot to ask of him," Steve says, trying the idea on.

"He'll know that. He can make his own decisions. But I can tell you that Jim does this all the time, for Tony, for the Avengers, for all of us. This is what he really does."

"Yeah," Steve nods. He never thought about it too much, Jim's Secret Service job, or how it might be an in to the other, more important job that he does. "Okay. I'll ask him."

"Good. And if that doesn't work, I still know of a few resources that could be helpful for ex-assassins with patchy memories and no real sense of self."

Steve chuckles in spite of himself. "I can't believe you're making jokes about that."

Natasha sips her coffee, taking her time to answer. "I never did get all the memories back," she says. "Jokes were about all I had, some days."

He nods, licking his lips. "I'll remember that."

*

The next day, Steve looks at his maps and his intel, all the boltholes where Bucky might be. He could call Sam, and go out on the road again, taking shots in the dark to try to find him.

Instead, he opens his closet and reaches into the back, past the Captain America uniforms – some the muted navy and brown, two of the design Coulson made for him, and one slightly beat-up winter-weight World War Two version – and pulls out his dress uniform instead, dark olive drab with his Captain's bars on the shoulders. He pins his medals to it carefully, polishes his shoes, gets the whole thing on neat and careful, and heads up to the Hill.

Jim has them let Steve in right away, which is a relief; Steve likes meeting servicemembers, but shaking the hand of each and every one passing by Jim's office is a little much.

"Hey. I was surprised when they told me you were here," Jim says, standing up from behind his desk when Steve comes in. Steve shuts the door behind him, and Jim leans up to give him a quick kiss. It's something, being kissed by Jim with both of them in their dress uniforms; Steve smiles against Jim's mouth and savors the feeling.

"Well, I had something official to ask you, and I thought – maybe best to do it officially, you know?"

"I hope you're not proposing," Jim says, raising an eyebrow. "Because, for the record, I really don't want to be proposed to."

"No," Steve laughs, as they both sit down, on either side of Jim's desk. "Not that I wouldn't snap you up in a second if you were the marrying kind, you understand."

Jim smiles. Steve takes a deep breath. "Jim, I need to ask you for a favor, and it's a big one."

"You want some help softening the political territory for Bucky," Jim says, leaning back in his chair. Steve raises his eyebrows.

"You knew?"

Jim shrugs. "I've been thinking about it ever since we called around to those shelters together. It
could be possible to get him a fake ID, let him live under the radar, but there are a lot of pictures of him and his metal arm from that day on the freeway. And if he wants to reclaim who he was . . . it's going to be an uphill battle, Steve, I can tell you that much.

"I know it's a lot to ask," Steve says. "I can put on the uniform and shake hands and give speeches and do whatever you need from me, but it's not a battle I really know how to fight."

"Plus you'd probably threaten to beat up Senator Baker," Jim adds dryly.

Steve sighs. "You're not wrong. But I could hold it in check if I needed to."

Jim waves a hand. "I'm already working the problem. I've got meetings coming up with a few people who'll help me get the ball rolling."

Shaking his head, Steve says, "You're too good to me, Jim."

"I'm exactly the right amount of good to you," Jim grins.

"I'll have to be good to you later in return," Steve says, basking in Jim's gaze on him.

Jim watches him for another few seconds, the space between them quiet and charged. Then he stands and walks around the desk to lean against it, putting Steve's head about level with his chest.

"Don't suppose you'd enjoy wearing your uniform for me later," Jim says. He reaches out and caresses Steve's face with his thumb, just touching the corner of Steve's mouth. "You look so pretty in it, little fairy soldier."

Steve blushed. "I always kind of . . . liked the uniforms, I guess. Like military drag." Slowly, he runs the palm of his hand over the front of Jim's pants, a tease and a question. "But surely you don't want me to blow you here, in your office in the heart of government. It's so dangerous."

"Smartass," Jim breathes, laughing. "What was it about me that made you think I don't like danger?"

"The secrecy always did add something," Steve agrees.

Jim's hand wraps around Steve's wrist, then, stilling the motion of his hand against Jim's dick. "I actually do have a meeting in ten minutes," he says, "but please don't take this as a sign that I never want you to blow me in my office."

"I'll take a rain check," Steve says, letting his hand fall. "I knew you were a little kinky about being closeted." He says it with a smile, so that Jim will know he's not making fun.

"It wouldn't be my first dress uniform blowjob behind closed doors," Jim admits. "But I know that's not really what you . . . how you want things to be."

Steve looks up at him, noticing the frown that pulls Jim's mouth downward. "It's what I want sometimes," he says. "I want to be with you."

Shrugging, Jim says, "I thought maybe – you might move on from me." His tone is light in a way that takes Steve back to the first days of their acquaintance, when Jim kept his distance and kept his feelings to himself. But Steve's known him for long enough now to hear the pain under his voice, and it breaks his heart.

Desperate to set Jim right, Steve grabs up his hand and kisses it, the same way he does for Peggy,
chivalrously, like a knight for his liege. "I don't want that," Steve says. "Please don't think that. I wouldn't leave you unless you wanted me to."

Jim shakes his head vehemently. "I want to be with you," he says. "But I can't – with my position, and my career, I can't ever be out like Sam can. Or even - like you can."

"I thought you didn't want to be out," Steve says, gently.

"I don't," Jim says, "but I want – it would make you happy, if I were."

"Not if it would make you miserable," Steve sighs. He thinks back on Representative Wither, how uncomfortable Steve had felt when he'd assumed Steve and Natasha were together. "It's not that I don't want people to know," he says, "I just wish it didn't come with all the people who make assumptions about me. I feel like we have that in common."

"Yeah," Jim agrees. He looks down at the floor for a minute, then back up to meet Steve's eyes. "It'll be hard, if you're out and I'm not. And we're still together."

"Well, it's not gonna happen anytime soon," Steve says, "so we don't have to worry about it right now."

Jim furrows his brow in confusion. "You know I support you coming out, right?" he asks, slowly. "If you want them to start making a whole new set of terrible assumptions for a change."

Steve laughs and shakes his head. "It'd be too much of a distraction right now. Especially when you're trying to do this work for Bucky."

"Hey," Jim says, and runs a finger under Steve's chin so he'll look up. Steve does. "I liaised Tony Stark with the American military during the days when he was being thrown in jail for hosting pansexual coke orgies in public parks. I can handle liaising for a genderqueer Steve Rogers, okay?"


"I don't know where you got the idea that you coming out could hurt Bucky," he says, "but it can't." He purses his lips, a determined look coming over his face. "And it won't hurt me, either. We'll figure it out."

Steve sighs, because he can't imagine that it would help. "It's not a big deal, really. It'd take up a lot of my time, to do it."

Jim shrugs. "Okay. I'm obviously the last one to push anybody to come out who's not ready or doesn't want to. But . . . be sure it's a decision you've made for you, okay, sweetheart? You deserve that."

"Okay," Steve says again. He stands up, bringing his face closer to Jim's, and kisses him.

"And imagine the kinds of things you could wear to my office if you were out," Jim breathes, against his mouth. "We could get you a skirt for this uniform. You could taste like lipstick when you kiss me."

Steve has to close his eyes against that image, himself strolling the halls of these buildings in a sensible olive-drab skirt and makeup in conservative, neutral colors. He can't deny that it's tempting. Almost as tempting as the idea of giving Jim a clandestine blowjob under his desk and letting no one else know about it but them.
"Well, I'll definitely think about that," Steve says. He kisses Jim again, for longer this time, sinking into his heat. He's startled away by a sudden knock on the door.

"Colonel? Your eleven o'clock is here," comes the voice of Jim's assistant.

"Just a moment," Jim calls back. His voice sounds completely normal.

"You don't look like you've been making out with me at all," Steve assures him. Jim rolls his eyes.

"Come on and do the little play with me," he says, pushing Steve towards the door. Steve opens it, and steps into the threshold before offering his hand.

"Thank you for seeing me, Colonel," he says, with a sweet smile on his face.

"Thanks for coming in," Jim replies, cool as could be, and shakes Steve's hand firmly. "I'll be in touch, I promise." He puts just the smallest hesitation before the words in touch, and Steve has to work hard not to laugh at his boyfriend's cheesy sense of humor.

"Oh, I'll look forward to it," Steve says instead, and claps him on the shoulder warmly.

He tucks his cap under his arm and turns to go, nodding at Jim's assistant and the wide-eyed woman in a smart business suit who's waiting to go in.

At home, he takes his time getting out of the uniform, thinking about each buckle and button and how badly he'd wanted it, back before the Army decided that they'd have to do medical experiments on him to make him worthy of it.

He hangs it up carefully in the closet again, and puts on a skirt and tank top instead. He looks again at the assembled papers and intel on Bucky, all the safehouses he could be hitting.

Instead, he calls up Allison and asks her what their next targets are. This time, she books him for TV interviews.

*

Sam disappears for a couple of days, leaving Steve with nothing more than a text that says he’s fine and he’ll be back soon. Steve worries about it a lot, up until he hears from Pepper that Bruce is gone too, and it seems likely that they’re doing something with the kids.

"Then Bruce called me this morning," she says, over the phone, with the sounds of wind and traffic behind her voice; she must be in one of the convertibles. "He said I’m supposed to gather you up and meet him at a coffee place in D.C. He said you’d know which one."

"I do," Steve says, smiling at the thought of his coffee dates with Bruce. "I’ll send you the address."

"I’m on the road with Tony, we’ll be there to get you soon. If you’re not too tuckered out after doing all the morning shows."

"Heard about that, huh?" Steve asks, running a hand through his hair.

"I think it’s a smart play," Pepper says. "Public opinion is going to be the court that counts, if your friend comes out of hiding."

There’s something odd in the way Pepper says "your friend" to mean Bucky, and it takes Steve a
moment to place it, because he thinks the last person he heard talking about him and Bucky that way was Danielle. He smiles softly.

"Thanks," he says. "See you soon."

When Tony, Pepper, and Steve pull up outside the coffee shop, they see Bruce standing on the corner, hands folded in front of himself, glancing around anxiously. He couldn’t look more like someone waiting for a clandestine meetup. Steve's pretty sure he was more covert back when he used to be a lookout for speakeasies.

"In my day, the cops woulda made you for sure," Steve says, by way of greeting. Bruce turns toward his voice, startled, and then walks toward them.

"Hey Steve." Steve shakes Bruce’s outstretched hand, bemused. "Good thing we’re not doing anything illegal."

"Everyone hear that?" Tony says, with a slightly raised voice. "This is all completely above board. Just friends meeting friends for coffee." He looks over his sunglasses at the coffee shop. "Though this place looks annoyingly bougie."

"Actually, this isn’t the meeting place. I have to take you." Bruce smiles wryly.

"Those kids are getting good," Pepper comments lightly. Steve wonders what Natasha would think of it, this feral group of young superspies. He knows that he doesn’t like it very much.

"And, I’m sorry, Tony," Bruce says, "you can’t come. It’s just Steve and Pepper."

Tony crosses his arms and leans against a lamppost, the picture of relaxed nonchalance. "Yeah? How come? It’s my money you’re looking to spend."

Steve frowns, but Bruce and Pepper don’t seem fazed by Tony’s childishness.

"Pepper’s one of them," Bruce says, gently. "And so is Steve."

"And so are you. But Wilson isn’t, and Rhodey isn’t. So why exactly aren’t you all inviting me along on your little visits?"

Pepper steps forward, taking Tony’s hand. "You know why," she says, and she doesn’t flinch when she looks him in the eye.

"I don’t make weapons for the military anymore," Tony says, "and I never would’ve – experiments on kids, come on, that was never me."

"The kids know that it was your repulsor engine technology that got the HYDRA helicarriers in the air," Bruce says.

"Yeah? Do they know I nearly died trying to rescue them the first time?"

"Yes," Bruce says.

"Tony," Steve breaks in, feeling more tender toward him now. He offers Tony the same advice he’s been giving himself for weeks. "Give it time."

Tony’s sharp gaze falls on Steve. Steve waits for him to speak, expecting more bravado, but instead Tony takes off his sunglasses and blows out a frustrated breath. "I’ve been where they are," he says, and there's pain behind his voice. "I just want to help."
"Yeah," Steve sighs. "I get that. Believe me."

"We'll bring you in when we need something tinkered with," Pepper promises, stepping up close to Tony again and taking his gaze away from Steve. She kisses him on the cheek. "I'll call you when I'm done. We'll hit that hamburger joint you like."

"Look after them," Tony says, in a low voice meant for Pepper. "You know how . . ." His lips clamp shut on the sentence.

"How PTSD can be," Pepper fills in softly. "I know."

Bruce leads Pepper and Steve down the street, and behind them, Tony gets back in his car and drives off.

"Why did the kids ask for me, really?" Steve asks. "I know I didn’t make the best impression last time."

"Honestly?" Bruce says, smiling. "I think it’s because they heard Sam’s stories, and they’ve gotten used to the idea that they can trust you."

"To fight HYDRA," Steve nods. Bruce shakes his head.

"To overthrow any corrupt regime, if it were keeping them prisoner," he says, and ducks through a half-hidden door in an old brick wall.

The place turns out to be a deli, but the guy behind the counter just waves Bruce past. In the back room there’s a folding card table with an adding machine and what look like the ledgers for the business. Sitting at the table, on the far side with a view of the exits, are Siddhani and Tabil. Standing by the back door, with her arms crossed and a forbidding expression on her face, is Anna, green muscles bulging under her t-shirt.

"Hi," Steve says. Siddhani gestures for them to sit down, and they do, with Pepper crossing her legs and opening her briefcase as if she’s used to taking high-level CEO meetings at a folding table in the back of a deli. Hell, for all Steve knows, she is.

Tentatively, Steve offers his hand to shake, and it’s enough to surprise Tabil into grinning, and Siddhani into cracking a half a smile. They both shake with him, and then with Pepper.

"We need to make plans," Siddhani says. "For the – a place to live. We’ve decided."

Steve has to hold back a cheer, a dance, and a hallelujah. He doesn't want to spend any more nights than he has to worrying that HYDRA is going to snatch the kids back up.

Pepper just nods calmly, as if this isn’t the huge breakthrough they’ve been waiting for. "I’ve been putting together some of the paperwork we’ll need," she says.

They go through a bunch of the basics together, making checklists and discussing classes, and Steve does his best to make some suggestions, but he doesn’t really know what he’s there for until Siddhani turns to him, halfway through, and says, "Now you should tell us how to make it safe."

Pepper turns to look at Steve, too, and Steve spreads his hands. "Bars and guards can make it safer, but you said your last school was a prison, and you don’t want that again."

Tabil looks at Siddhani, who nods at him. "Tell them what you told me," she says.
"We thought – alarms," Tabil says. "Cameras. Ways to escape if we need to. Emergency evacuation plans."

Steve nods slowly. "I can help with that," he says. He’s certainly seen enough supposedly secure facilities in his time to know what works and what doesn’t. "Though you might want to get my friend Natasha in on the computer security stuff."

"Or our friend Tony," Pepper suggests, softly, and Steve huffs out a laugh.

"Or our friend Tony," he agrees. "He really wants to help you guys."

Steve grabs up a pencil and a piece of paper and starts sketching, showing them how they can build or adapt an existing building to have multiple escape routes without having multiple vulnerable entrance points. As he draws, he notices Anna come over from her position by the door and peer curiously over Siddhani’s shoulder.

"I’m no architect," Steve says, "but this is the general kind of system that works best."

Siddhani and Tabil ask a lot of questions, and Steve explains patiently, surprised by how insightful they both are.

"How do you know so much about this?" he asks, teasing them, and Tabil shrugs before offering a shy smile.

"I escaped from the orphanage a lot," he says, and Steve can’t help but laugh softly. Over in the corner, Bruce is laughing too, his hand pressed to his mouth.

"Then you’ll be the perfect one to test the defenses, once we build them," Pepper says. "Our Houdini."

Tabil's smile gets bigger.

When they’ve gone through everything, Pepper puts all the paperwork and checklists away in her briefcase and snaps it closed with a satisfied smile.

"Now," she says, "are you kids doing all right otherwise? Need more money, or anything else?"

"Bruce is helping us," Tabil says. "Sam too, when he comes by."

Siddhani cocks her head at Steve, bites her lip, and then says, "They moved us here. To D.C. They said there were people getting too close to us in Philadelphia."

Steve nods solemnly, trying to tamp down the panic he feels at the idea of these kids getting scooped up by HYDRA. "I’m glad they’re being careful," he says. He makes a note to himself to thank Jim again for all his work keeping the kids’ movements invisible.

"Wow. So now you’re living in Steve’s neighborhood," Pepper puts in, smiling. "You could all hang out whenever you like."

"Maybe," Siddhani says.

Steve breathes out. "I’d like that," he says.

When they get up to leave, Anna darts forward, picking up the architectural sketches that Steve had done. She raises her eyebrows at Steve and cocks her head.

Anna folds them carefully and tucks them into her pocket, and then they’re out the door.

"You’re not supposed to leave the deli for ten more minutes," Bruce informs them, hands in his pockets.

"Then I’ll just use the ladies'," Pepper says, heading back out to the front room of the deli.

Steve leans against a countertop. "What was that about, with Anna and the drawings?"

Bruce’s face lights up, and he smiles one of his rare smiles. "She’s been drawing a lot. I think she likes having another way to express herself." He shakes his head. "She’s so fucking smart, Steve."

"Sounds like she needs a genius in her life to mentor her," Steve says, grinning. Bruce waves this away.

"It’s not just her. They’re all really curious, and engaged, and so . . . so dedicated to looking after one another."

"Curious about what?" Steve asks, because he thinks he might know, and the thought of it is a little chilling.

Bruce meets his eyes. "How they were made. How you and I and Pepper were made."

Steve raises his eyebrows. "And you’ve, what – you’ve been telling them?" he demands.

Bruce puts his hands up, palms towards Steve, an automatic gesture of surrender. "Hey," he says, "don’t freak out."

Steve takes a breath, frustrated, and backs away a step so he's out of Bruce's space. Bruce puts his hands down again, and looks a little less tense.

"Don’t – this is a perfectly reasonable time to freak out, Bruce," Steve says, biting out the words as quietly as he can. He can’t help but remember Pepper, sitting next to him on a plane, wondering whether they should kill people to keep their knowledge – to keep this exact knowledge – out of the world. And now Bruce is putting that knowledge into the heads of these kids. "You’re making them even more of a target than they already were."

"That doesn’t matter," Bruce says. "Don’t you get that yet? It doesn’t matter. They deserve to know, and they asked, so I told them. They’re going to be targets for the rest of their lives, so they may as well know why."

Steve shakes his head. "No," he says, automatically, still recoiling from the idea. "They don’t need – they shouldn’t have to – " Steve stalls out, lost for words.

"Yeah, they shouldn’t have to," Bruce agrees, softly. He steps closer to Steve, until they’re sharing space, only a few inches apart. "But they’re going to need to."

Steve presses his hand to his forehead for a moment, then pulls it away and meets Bruce’s eyes. They’re brown, and kind, and Steve knows there’s a mind behind them that keeps a monster at bay.

"Curious, huh," Steve asks, tiredly.

Bruce licks his lips, and nods. "I think sometimes, for kids who’ve been through a lot, it’s – it can help to learn stuff. Makes you feel like you have control."
Steve was briefed on all the details of Bruce’s past years ago, all of it laid out in a SHIELD file with every police report and every horrifying detail. But he loves Bruce too much to ever stop pretending that he doesn’t know. Instead he reaches out and squeezes Bruce’s shoulder gently.

"So it’s helping them."

Bruce shakes his head. "You should see them, Steve. See how they all light up when we talk about it. Even the quiet ones. They’re hungry for knowledge about themselves."

Steve nods, and sighs. "I get it," he says. "Yeah."

There’s a sound at the door, and both of them look up to see Pepper standing there. Steve wonders how long she’s been listening, and how in the hell she snuck up on them in those high-heeled shoes of hers.

"You can’t stop people from knowing," she says, walking over to them. "It’ll never work. All you can do is spread the knowledge far and wide, and teach everyone to use it responsibly. And be there to stop them when they don’t."

"So, it’s about trust," Steve says, arching an eyebrow. Pepper shrugs.

"Always." She's adamant, in her easygoing way, and in her eyes Steve sees someone who's thought it through, who's lived it: lived with security and fear long enough to want to choose love and uncertainty instead.

"Come on," Bruce says, wrapping his arm around Steve’s shoulders to embrace him. He’s a lot shorter than Steve, so he has to stand on tiptoe to do it; Steve slouches down a bit to make it easier. "Let’s go tell Tony we found a way for him to help."

"It’ll make him happy," Pepper agrees.

* 

Natasha texts him with a couple of educated guesses based on the new HYDRA intel, so Steve follows her hunches, and manages to extrapolate some new potential targets: bases that weren't named in any of the documents they had before, but that would've been used for scientific research.

He shows it to Sam that Thursday, after they get out of group. "You think Bucky's more likely to be in the labs than the safehouses?" Sam asks, eventually.

"I've been going through the Winter Soldier documentation on transportation and storage again," Steve says, taking a gulp of hot coffee from his paper cup. "I found some indications that these might be the bases he was taken to."

"Okay," Sam says. He nods slowly. "When do we go?"

They spend the weekend working through a series of much more extensive bases throughout North Carolina and Virginia, places that look like regular research facilities on the outside, until you penetrate to the horror beneath: chemical and biological weapons, human experimentation, killing machines that look like Jim's robot suit or Sam's wings.

The first one they come to claims on the sign to be a small lab doing medical research, but when they go in, the scientists – all four of them – have guns, and know who they are.

"The alarm's been tripped," one of the scientists says to Steve. "You're not getting out alive this
time."

He and Sam both manage to duck when the bullets start flying, getting low and taking the scientists out quickly; when the guards arrive, they're armed too, but Sam disarms one as he enters the room and Steve takes on the other two, jumping and twisting to evade their fire.

One of the guards makes use of an opening Steve leaves on his right side, and Steve is ready, braced for the bullet, when Sam steps in and takes him down: three swift, brutal movements that end with the guard on the ground, his neck broken. Steve makes short work of the other one, breaking his arm to get the gun and then knocking him out.

"You okay?" Steve asks, breathing a little hard.

"Yeah," Sam says immediately. "Fine. What kind of researchers are packing heat?"

"HYDRA ones, I guess," Steve says. They make sure everyone who's still alive is bound and as comfortable as possible. Sam, Steve notices, doesn't touch the guy whose neck he snapped, so Steve double-checks for a pulse before pulling his body over to the side with the scientist that Steve killed.

"We should check out what they were researching, right?" Sam asks. "What kinds of weapons."

"Yeah," Steve agrees. "I don't – Sam, I don't necessarily want to hand this stuff over to the anti-HYDRA task force."

Maybe they can't keep this knowledge from the world. But despite everything Bruce said last week, faced with the decision, Steve can't help but try to delay it for a while.

Sam bites his lip. "We're supposed to. If you want there to be evidence of these guys' crimes, stuff we can use to convict them, then we have to."

Steve sighs, looking around. From the test tubes and microscopes, he suspects it was biological research of some kind. He remembers this, remembers handing weapons over to the so-called good guys to take apart, and he doesn't want to do it again.

What he wants, instead, is to talk to someone who he knows will understand.

"We call Bruce," Steve says. "We call Bruce, and he can tell us how to make it so that . . . whatever they were doing, it doesn't work anymore."

Sam raises his eyebrows. He thinks about it for a minute, then nods slowly. "We call Bruce," he agrees.

Within about three cell phone pictures of the research that was being done, Bruce's voice goes cold. "Destroy all the live samples," Bruce instructs. "Every single thing. And I'll tell you the files to save for evidence, and then you can delete every hard drive."

"You're not – I thought you'd want to preserve it. So we would have the knowledge if we ever had to fight it." Steve huffs a bitter laugh. "I thought I'd have to convince you."

"Not when we can nip something like this in the bud," Bruce replies. "And hope no one ever discovers it again."

"Do I want to know what this is?" Steve asks.
"No," Bruce says, firmly.

"Can the scientists reproduce it? Without their data?" Steve glances over at their prisoners.

There's a long silence from Bruce. "I don't think so," he says eventually. Steve breathes out.

"Okay," he says.

He and Sam follow Bruce's instructions, and when the anti-HYDRA task force shows up, they take into custody some very unethical people who didn't ever get their very unethical research to work. Steve hopes to God that these ones don't get cushy research jobs in lieu of prison sentences.

There are two more facilities that day: one building killing machines that look like Jim's suit, and one building some kind of chemical gas weapons. Steve calls Jim to help him dismantle the first, and, on Jim's advice, calls Tony to help with the second.

"Chemical weapons always scared the shit out of me. I guess it's all fucking terrifying, but for some reason they seemed worse," Tony says, over the phone.

"So can you help?" Steve asks.

"Yeah. I study up harder on shit that terrifies me. We'll start by neutralizing some of the compounds."

By the end of the day, they've been in three firefights and four fistfights, Steve has a bullet graze on his left arm, Sam has a burn on his shoulder from a flamethrowing robot, and they've covered up mountains of evidence together.

Steve keeps track, after the first one, and by his count, Sam kills four people.

"Let's get a pizza," Sam says, as they pull into the nearest hotel they can find. "And a first-aid kit."

They end up eating, and dressing each other's wounds, and fucking, all on the same bed, Sam fucking him vigorously enough to knock the empty pizza box and rolls of gauze to the floor. They fuck hard, and fast, but for a long time, too, in a bunch of different positions, sweat pouring off of both of them, their bodies slamming together in a perfect, unending rhythm.

Sam makes him come, and comes inside him, and it's not ten minutes later before they're at it again, Sam's dick inside him, Sam shoving into him hard enough to rock the bed against the wall over and over. Steve comes again, and again, and again, and Sam keeps going, until Steve sobs and braces his hands against the wall and pushes back.

"Fucking come already, Sam, come on," he begs. "Come inside me, I need it, come on --"

Sam groans long and loud and pistons his hips even faster and then holds still, his fingertips digging into Steve's skin.

"God, God, God," Sam is saying, resting his forehead against Steve's back. "What the fuck."

They collapse on the bed together, on their backs, displacing the last box of bandages that managed to keep from falling on the floor until now.

"Post-battle sex," Steve says, sighing. His body feels used, even sore; it's nice.

"I guess," Sam agrees. "It's been a long time since I've . . . done that."
"Maybe you needed the outlet," Steve suggests. "Do you feel better?"

"Yeah, I think so," Sam says. "I don't know."

Steve rolls over to kiss Sam's collarbone. "You can tell me. You said you would."

Sam frowns. "I was kinda hoping you'd forgotten that."

Steve rolls his eyes and rests his chin on Sam's broad, strong chest. "Come on," he says, like he said when Sam was fucking him, but softer, gentler.

Nodding slowly, Sam says, "How I feel is, I loved the sex, and your ass is amazing," he says, kissing Steve's forehead.

"And?"

"And, I'm not . . . sure this is good for me. These missions. I don't know. I want to do it, it's good work and it clearly needs doing, if those weapons labs today are anything to go by."

Steve nods.

"But it's a lot to handle. A lot of feelings coming back, you know, that I thought I'd worked past."

"You wanna talk about them?" Steve asks. Sam shakes his head, but then he speaks again.

"Watching you in danger is hard. Harder, now we're . . . dating. It reminds me of watching Riley fall."

"I thought you and Riley weren't . . . " Steve trails off, flapping his hand to indicate the wild marathon fuck session they'd just had.

"We weren't, but he was my friend, and I loved him. Like I love you."

Steve leans up and kisses him, fast and fierce. "Love you too," he breathes, and kisses Sam again, and again, a bunch of times until he can bring himself to settle back down against Sam's chest.

"And I worry about you, too," Steve adds. He feels tired, all of a sudden, tired of the endless life or death battles for the lives of the people he loves. He figures that's how Sam's feeling, too.

"I know you do. I don't want to be another stress. But I can't help – this is all bringing back the past, a little."

"I get that," Steve says. He thinks about Bucky falling from the train. He rubs a few slow circles over Sam's heart with his fingertips.

"And it's more than that, too. I don't know if I'm willing to be a soldier anymore. Or, if I'm willing to do it all the time like this." He glances down at Steve, and Steve is surprised to see a tear in his eye, falling out of the corner and down towards his temple.

"Hey, it's okay," Steve says. "It's all right if you want to stop. We can go home tomorrow."

"But will you go back out without me?" Sam asks. "That's what I'm worried about."

"I can bring Jim, or Tony and Pepper, or someone else. I can get other backup."

Sam sighs. "That's not really the concern."
"You're worried that I'm . . . too wrapped up in this," Steve says.

Sam kisses him then, leaning down to take his mouth with a full, lush press of lips. "Yeah. And I'm worried that you're using yourself up, and not paying attention to how this could hurt you." His hand swoops over the bandage on Steve's arm, the place where Sam had disinfected a bullet graze earlier. It still stings a bit.

"Sounds bad," Steve says.

"Could be," Sam says. "Or maybe it's just hard, and we'll get through it, together."

"Maybe," Steve allows. He runs his hands further down Sam's body, over his belly and the tops of his thighs, brushing teasing fingertips over Sam's cock, which is stirring again.

A few gentle touches later, Sam takes a deep, shuddering breath and swallows hard. "God, I want to fuck you again," he says.

"Yeah," Steve says. "Yeah, Sam, I want it."

"You do the work this time," Sam says, grabbing him by the hips and pulling him up on top. "You ride me like I know you like."

Steve does, finding another condom from the pack on the bedside table and taking Sam easily back inside his body, wishing they could live like that, joined like that, in pleasure like that, all the time. That this little bubble could be their world, with nothing else outside of it.

*

The next day, Sam says, "I'm fine to hit that last base if you want." So they drive up to Delaware, and find the address they had listed.

"Well, no setting this one on fire if it contains a doomsday weapon," Sam murmurs, as they ride up the elevator to the 64th floor of the skyscraper, past dozens of corporate offices.

They go in at high alert, ready for another knock-down drag-out fight, for poison gas or flamethrowing robots, but it turns out that this base is where HYDRA laundered a lot of their money, and that it's not that hard to capture a bunch of evil accountants.

"That one, we could've left for the task force," Sam says dryly, when they've zip tied twelve chagrined-looking office workers.

"Yeah, I'm a little embarrassed," Steve agrees. "Not really a job for Captain America."

They drive back to D.C. with a lot of silence between them, both of them thinking things through. When they get there, though, Sam takes Steve home with him, and kisses him, and lays him down gently in bed.

"I love you," Steve tells him, because it seems like one of the few stable things in the world, how he feels about Sam, and he figures they both need that right now.

"Love you too," Sam says.

They fuck slow and easy, and don't talk about whether or not they're going to go hunting for HYDRA bases again next weekend.

*
Steve's still thinking it through when Bruce texts him on Monday morning, saying he's in town again and asking to meet. When Steve texts back, Bruce sends him an address, in a part of D.C. Steve doesn't usually go to. It turns out to be a waffle shop; even though he's had breakfast, Steve's stomach rumbles at the sweet smell snaking out the doors toward him.

Usually it takes a moment to spot Bruce in a crowd; he has a tendency to hunch down, blend in, find the corners of any room and get his back up against a wall. But this time Steve has absolutely no problem finding him.

"Hey, Steve," he says, shrugging as if to acknowledge how strange the situation is. "We saved you a seat."

Steve sits down at the big table, between Siddhani and Rokia, and looks around at the assembled kids in astonishment.

"I didn't know I'd get to see all of you so soon," he says, then repeats it in French for Rokia.

Rokia tells him that they're trying something new, and Georgie, across the table, nods.

"Sam says sometimes it's good to push yourself a little," he reports, and Steve smiles.

"Sam's told me that, too," he replies, and Georgie looks pleased to have confirmation.

"I would've warned you," Bruce says, "but the kids didn't want you to bring anyone else along with you."

"I'm just glad you called me in the first place," Steve says. "Is this secure?"

The skin at the back of his neck prickles as he re-evaluates his memories of the people he saw standing outside, the other diners, the waitstaff. Some of the people he's seen strike him as . . . unusual.

"Pepper's security," Bruce says, indicating with his eyes the exact people who'd given Steve an odd feeling. Steve relaxes. "And Jim and Maria have been laying down a false trail for any other interested parties to follow. All the evidence shows that the kids left Philly and headed for Texas somewhere."

"Anyhow, who would believe that the Hulk would take us out for waffles in D.C.?" Siddhani says, a little smile on her face. She looks much more relaxed than the last couple of times Steve saw her, in that abandoned warehouse with Ha-neul about to go critical, or in the back of the deli with a tight, wary smile on her face. This is better, he thinks: this is how it should be, for these kids, sitting in a bright restaurant drinking milk and drawing with the crayons the waitress brought them.

They all look good physically, too, clean and neatly dressed. He supposes Pepper's money has done them some good.

"You look a lot better, Ha-neul," Steve says, leaning forward to look down the table at her. "How are you feeling?"

She looks up at him, considering the question, and brushes her hair from her face. The gesture makes her look much older than nine.

"I'm better at control," she says. "Pepper and Sam help me a lot. And Rokia."

"I'm glad," Steve says. "All you firestarters gotta stick together, right?"

Ha-neul nods. "Yes. Because – there are more people like the ones who made us."
recognizes the anger and fear that he'd seen on her face before, when she had been caught in a panic attack; now, it's joined to a fierce determination and confidence that make Steve glad.

"I know," Steve says. "We're doing what we can to stop them."

"But today's not about all that," Sam's voice comes, from behind him. Steve turns, smiling, surprised to see him. It looks like he's just come back from the bathroom. "Today's about taking a break and eating some good food."

"Hi, Sam," he says, almost reaching out for him and then stopping himself.

"Hey Steve," Sam says, sitting on the other side of the table.

"Who had the waffles over easy?" the waitress says, coming up behind Steve. The food is quickly set down in front of them; to Steve's surprise, there are a couple of plates of waffles, bacon, and eggs set down in front of him, followed by a tall glass of milk.

"I ordered for you," Sam says, smiling softly at his surprise. "Figured you're always hungry."

"You're not wrong," Steve says, warmed by Sam's thoughtfulness. "Thank you."

"That's the same for us," Siddhani says, glancing down the table at the two boys, Haziq and Tabil, who have super-strength like she does. All three of them have their plates piled high in front of them. "We eat a lot more now than we used to."

"You three were given a variant on the same serum that Steve was given," Bruce says, tucking into his own waffles without looking up. "It's not surprising you'd have some of the same side effects."

"You guys should talk more often," Sam says, nudging Tabil, who's sitting next to him. Tabil shrugs noncommittally, but then bites his lip and looks up at Steve curiously.

"Did someone take you, too?" he asks. "When you were little."

Bruce and Sam both raise their eyebrows at this question, but say nothing. The other kids look up too, watching Steve carefully. Steve puts down his fork and meets Tabil's eyes.

"No," he says, softly. "I volunteered. I wanted to join the Army, and they wouldn't let me unless they could make me bigger and stronger."

"Did yours hurt?" Tabil asks.

Steve's surprised by the question. He thinks the last person who asked him that was Bucky.

"Yes," he says, slowly. "It hurt a lot."

"How much can you lift? Can you lift as much as Siddhani can?"

"Hey, let's let Steve eat some of his waffles," Sam says, gently.

"It's okay, Sam, I don't mind," Steve says. Then, turning to Tabil, he says, "I wish we could meet at a gym or something, so you guys could all show me what you can do."

"Maybe when Pepper finishes the school," Siddhani says. "You can give us some tips."

"Finishes?" Steve asks, looking up at Bruce, who shrugs.
"They didn't want us to tell anyone," Bruce says, "but Pepper found a site the kids liked, so she's having it renovated. An abandoned boarding school in Westchester county, beautiful old buildings, tennis courts, swimming pool, the works."

"We're going to see if any of the other kids want to come too," Siddhani says. "It's one of our conditions."

"The other kids . . . from the lab?"

Siddhani nods. "The ones who didn't get powers. Most of them are orphans, you know, or very poor. They don't have anywhere to go. They can come and stay with us if they want."

"That's a good idea," Steve says. "I guess it'd be silly to have the whole school set up for just eight of you."

"Nine," Sam says. "There's a girl – Bruce says that you and Natasha rescued her?"

"I remember," Steve says. "Zoe."

"She was safe in her foster home when we took down SHIELD, but Pepper's reached out to her." He glances up and nods at Siddhani. "Siddhani's idea."

"I thought there must have been others before us," Siddhani says. "Maybe many of them, maybe some that SHIELD never found. I want to find them. I want to bring them together."

Steve nods. "That's a really great idea."

"It's what we have to do," Siddhani says, firmly. Ha-neul looks down the table at her.

"Yes, but right now you have to give me the whipped cream," she says, smiling. "I want whipped cream before we fight for justice."

Siddhani passes it down, rolling her eyes.

"That's a good point, though," Sam puts in. "We all need more whipped cream." He signals the waitress, then looks at Steve's plate. "You especially," he says to Steve.

"If you insist, Sam," Steve says.

"Well, I don't insist," Sam says, "but I do think it can't always be about fighting for justice. Sometimes it's gotta be waffles."

Steve dumps a whole pile of whipped cream and maple syrup onto his waffles, just to make Sam happy. Rokia, next to him, laughs and says something in French that Steve doesn't quite get. Haziq starts laughing too, and then repeats what Rokia said, also in French, but Steve furrows his brow, not getting it.

"I have what?"

Rokia collapses back against her chair, giggling, and Haziq almost chokes on the chicken wing he's eating. Shaking his head, Sam leans forward across the table and swipes at Steve's nose with a napkin.

"Whipped cream," he says, clearly trying to show more restraint than the ten year olds, but not doing too well. Steve chuckles.
"I guess I need more practice at the waffles part," he says, which makes Sam laugh.

"We'll take you again next week," Bruce promises. "Kids, what do you think?"

The kids cheer.

After the meal, Steve stands with Bruce and Sam, watching the kids leave, in cabs, for wherever they're hiding out these days. The handicab is the last to leave, Siddhani waving solemnly from behind her window.

"How long till that school is ready for them?" Steve asks.

"Pepper says it's almost up to code. She has to get the permits, register it, do things right."

Steve nods, but hates the delay, the idea that they're out there on their own this whole time.

"They're gonna be okay," Bruce says. "I've seen – they're feeling a lot better. They've got it rough, but they've got each other."

Steve bumps into Bruce's shoulder with his own. "They've got you, too." Bruce shakes his head, looking down.

"I'm the last one to tell a bunch of traumatized kids how to cope," he says. "I'm glad Sam's been coming with me, lately."

"They love him," Sam reports. "They trust him. That's the best thing right now, for helping them cope."

Bruce shrugs, and Steve is overwhelmed with pride in him. "I'm glad they have you," he says, slinging an arm around Bruce's shoulder and squeezing him briefly. "Maybe you can't see it, but they're doing so much better than they were. Are you going to stay on with them, at the school?"

Sam gives Steve a look that tells him this isn't the first time the subject's been brought up. Bruce frowns.

"Once they're set up, Sam and Pepper are bringing in the best therapists and teachers they can find. All from the kids' home countries and regions."

"They're still gonna need a school nurse," Sam points out, and Bruce laughs.

"I never really thought I had the temperament for nursing," he says. "I hated my residency. Never liked patients."

"These ones like you," Steve points out. "And Georgie and Anna might want someone to teach them how to Hulk out, someday."

"Your Ph.D. also means you could teach science classes without a teaching certificate," Sam offers.

Bruce smiles softly at the thought, then holds up his hands to stop them. "We'll see," he says quellingly. "Maybe if Steve agrees to be the gym teacher."

Steve laughs. "We'll see," he echoes.

Sam checks his phone. "Sorry, I gotta get going if I'm gonna have time to prepare for group today. Steve, you coming in for the meeting on Thursday?"
"Yeah," Steve says. "I am." He clears his throat and looks down. "And I was thinking that I'd keep going, this weekend. Clear the last of those research bases." He looks up into Sam's eyes, more than a little afraid of what he might see there, but Sam's face is open and smiling.

"Romantic getaways with Steve Rogers," Sam murmurs, pitching his voice so that no one else on the street will hear. "I've been thinking about that too. I want to go with you, get rid of the rest of those places. But in the meantime, do something fun, okay? Don't just pore over intel till your eyes cross."

"Okay," Steve agrees. "I'll do something fun."

"Good," Sam says. He leans in, as if to kiss him, then hesitates and draws back again. Steve manages a pained, apologetic smile.

"Sorry," he says, softly, but Sam shakes his head and squeezes Steve's shoulder instead.

"It's okay," he says, looking down at the ground for a second before looking back up to meet Steve's eyes and wink. "Bye, gorgeous."

Steve flushes to be called that in front of Bruce, but it feels good, too, hot and powerful, to be recognized that way even with only one witness. He wants more, wants to be seen by everyone in the world. "Bye, Sam."

As Sam walks away, Steve wonders when it's going to be the right time to do it. He fantasizes about what his life could be like after – holding Sam's hand in public, wearing lipstick around town like he used to, maybe even correcting the history books a little. But when he tries to think about the act itself, about calling Allison and booking an interview and, and saying it, his mind skips off the idea.

Despite what Jim said, Steve really does think it might be better to wait until they find Bucky. And maybe until after Bucky's name is cleared, and he can live free. Until then, Steve can't afford to spend any of his public goodwill.

As Sam gets in his car and drives off, Bruce nudges him with an elbow. "So, how's that going?" he asks, amused. They walk together over to Steve's bike. Steve shrugs, but he can't help but smile.

"Really well, I think. If I can be worthy of him."

"I'm sure you manage fine," Bruce says.

Steve shakes his head. He knows that lately, he's been more of a stress to Sam than anything else.

"What about you? How've you been?"

"Doing science. Living the quiet life. Becoming the awkward adopted uncle to a bunch of superpowered kids, apparently."

"Sounds pretty good," Steve says.

"It's weird," Bruce says, sighing. "I never liked kids any more than I liked patients. But these guys . . . they don't have a lot of other people they can talk to, who've been through that kind of stuff. I taught Anna and Ha-neul the breathing exercises I used to use to keep my emotions from triggering the Hulk, and it felt like . . . I don't know. Weird."

"You should get Sam to set up a support group," Steve jokes. Bruce raises his eyebrows.
"Not a bad idea, actually," he says. "If we set one up, would you come to it?"

Steve takes a deep breath. "Maybe," he says. "You?"

"Maybe," Bruce says.

They get to Steve's bike. "You want a ride?" Steve asks doubtfully. Bruce shakes his head.

"I'm the last person who should ever get on a motorcycle," he says. "I'll leave it to you adrenaline junkies. And get a cab."

"You heading back to New York?" Steve asks, swinging a leg over his bike.

"No, I'm here for a few days. There's a conference all this week on genetic engineering. I find that my presence during the Q&A sessions tends to deflate some of the more . . . ambitious scientists."

"Raining on a parade, huh?" Steve asks, smiling.

"Something like that. It's my responsibility to the scientific community, I suppose. Teach them caution."

Steve nods slowly, and realizes how wrong he was, before. Bruce is the best teacher those kids could possibly have.

"They're lucky to have you, Bruce," Steve says seriously. Bruce shrugs.

"Remains to be seen," he says. "But yeah, if you want to get coffee sometime this week, I'll be around. I'm staying in Pepper and Tony's townhouse."

Steve frowns. "I've got a lot of work to do before the weekend. TV interviews, plus I have to go through the voicemails and emails for the tip lines . . ."

"Didn't your boyfriend just tell you to do something fun?" Bruce teases. Steve crosses his arms.

"He's not my boss," he protests, which makes Bruce chuckle.

"Seriously, I think he's right. You can't live on bread alone."

Steve laughs, startled by the familiar metaphor. "All right," he says, slowly. "I'll try to find some roses. And I'll call you."

"Good," Bruce says, with an approving nod.

Steve spends the drive home trying to think of something that'll take his mind off of his interviews, HYDRA, and Bucky. Sam's right, anyway; if he doesn't find something distracting, he'll be climbing the walls soon enough. He thinks about drawing, even picks up his sketchbook and does a few warmups, but it doesn't hold his attention.

*

He finds what he's looking for, oddly enough, in the form of an email invitation that Allison forwarded on to him. The show at the Smithsonian was such a hit that other museums immediately jumped on the bandwagon, setting up all kinds of World War II, Howling Commandos, and Steve Rogers exhibits. Steve has mostly stayed away, because they tend to range from inaccurate and painful to downright embarrassing, but this one catches his eye.
He calls Allison. "I'm gonna go to that thing at the National Gallery of Art. The me-thing."

"Cool," she says. "Give me a day, let me set up a press release about it, will you?"

Steve sighs. "Everything I do these days has to come with a tactical plan more involved than the ones we use against HYDRA," he says.

"That's one way to look at it," Allison says. "The other way to look at it is: I keep you responsible and focused on doing good in the way that makes the biggest impact. Or don't you want to sponsor a local organization working to help young artists? Maybe artists with disabilities? Artist-activists?"

"Huh," Steve says.

"Gotcha," Steve can hear her grinning.

"You did. You're way too good at knowing my soft spots."

"You love it. And anyway, they're going to put up some of your portraits of Bucky, so I can tie it in to your publicity campaign about him, float some of the story of him supporting you when you were a struggling artist."

None of that's untrue, of course, but Steve wishes he could give Allison the rest of the story to go with it: that Bucky had been one of Steve's favorite models; that Steve had loved Bucky best when he was drawing him; that Steve's first real portrait was of Arnie Roth, naked and fifteen.

It's not important, though. The official story will be better anyway, for making a good narrative.

So Steve asks Bruce and Jim, who are generally up for cultural stuff, and Pepper, who actually knows about art, and Sam, because he just likes having Sam around. Natasha's going to be in town to see Maria again, he thinks, so he texts her too, and she texts back to say that she wouldn't miss it, but that Maria definitely would. Tony's in Malibu, and Clint's overseas raiding HYDRA bases with Nick, but it'll still be a good sized group.

They all head out together, Steve dressed in his pink dress shirt and tie, and spend a bunch of time looking at pencil and charcoal sketches while pretending not to notice flashbulbs going off around them.

"So, do you remember the stuff they're showing, Steve?" Pepper asks, as they look at the rest of the display, the non-Captain America part of the display. It's all sketches drawn by soldiers in wartime, from World War One to the present, and a lot of them are very powerful. Steve's glad he came; seeing these wars from the perspectives of other artists makes him feel less alone.

"I don't know, I had a lot of sketchbooks," Steve says. "I drew almost constantly during the war, whenever we had downtime." He made portraits of every Howling Commando, of Peggy, of Howard, of dozens of GIs and officers and WACs they'd met. Other stuff too, the countryside in Europe, ruined buildings, still-life studies, but he suspects it'll mostly be the portraiture they've collected.

He assumes they haven't found that one risqué sketchbook, or he'd have heard about it by now.

"I've always been curious about your artwork," Bruce says. "It came up a lot, when I was researching the serum."

"Really?" Steve says, turning toward him. He's got his hands in his pockets, his glasses perched on
his nose as he peers at a beautiful, half-finished sketch of an empty World War One helmet, lying on the ground. He turns to face Steve and shrugs.

"Yeah, people trying to answer questions about the serum's effects on hand-eye coordination," he says dismissively. "They thought your art could be analyzed to prove something about your motor control. That wasn't related to my research directly, though. I just read those articles because I was interested in you."

It still astonishes Steve, sometimes, how much attention has been paid to him in the last seventy years. Scientists, cultural theorists, sociologists, literary critics . . . all of them poring over his life and legacy, his physical capabilities, his wartime missions, and every piece of writing from his telegrams to the Captain America comic books. Funny that none of them ever uncovered his secrets, exposed him for a fairy; the SSR and SHIELD must've missed it. Or else it was something that no one wanted to find, and they buried it. Back in the forties and fifties, no one would've wanted that information to get out. Steve shakes that thought off.

"Well, if you want to introduce me to those scientists, I'll be happy to tell them that I had to relearn how to hold a piece of charcoal with these giant muscly fingers," he says, holding up his hands and wiggling his fingers for emphasis. Natasha grins at him, and Pepper laughs.

"Yeah, you're quite the clumsy ox," Jim says, rolling his eyes. "A giant lumbering beast." He shoves his shoulder into Steve's, playfully, and Steve shoves back.

They pass slowly through the rooms of the exhibit, finally coming to the stuff Steve drew. It's none of it remarkable, except in the way that all of the drawings here are remarkable: they document and remember a unique, ground-level experience of war.

"I like how they don't do a lot of fanfare about you," Natasha says. "No offense, Steve, but some of these gallery exhibits are a little much for those of us who've heard you fart."

They all break out laughing, Steve hardest of all. "No, no, that's why I wanted to come!" he insists. "I like being included in a group of soldier artists. That's a good historical project." He's been reading the plaques next to the sketches, and each of them gives a brief biography of the artist, where they served, what they did, how their lives or deaths turned out. It's nice.

"I like that they got women artists in here too," Sam says to Steve. "Especially for the older wars. A lot of times they don't even try."

Steve nods his agreement. "Remember what Tamara said, in group?"

"As a woman soldier, you don't see reflections of yourself anywhere," Sam quotes. "She's not wrong."

"That one over there looks like your style, Steve," Pepper says, pointing. Steve looks, and sees the sketch he did of the dancing monkey, the one that Peggy saw over his shoulder right before all the Howling Commandos stuff happened. He smiles.

"Yeah, good eye, that's definitely one of mine," Steve says. "I remember that one."

"I think we're coming at it from the wrong side. The Steve section starts over there," Sam says, pointing. They all cross the room to start this part of the exhibit properly.

"I'm not reading the biography," Steve says, which of course prompts Natasha to start reading it aloud, with dramatic emphasis. Steve tries to tune her out.
"Shall we move on to the drawings?" Steve says, loudly.

"...our greatest national hero, a living legend...

"I like the one of the empty Captain America suit," Pepper says, a smile twisting her lips as she gestures at the first picture in the series.

"...shining example of the American success story...

"Thank you, Pepper, I appreciate that. I was always proud of the shading on the helmet."

"...humble origins in a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn. Oh, okay, this is the best part: Steve Rogers was a truly a self-made man. Oh wow."

Steve can't help it; he turns his head and stares at Natasha. "It doesn't say that."

"I swear to God," Natasha laughs, pointing at the plaque.

"I was – scientists literally made me!" Steve protests. "How can they – I am the least self-made man in history!"

"Says it right on the sign," Natasha shrugs.

Bruce, taking one look at Steve, raises a calm eyebrow and says, "Probably not worth hulking out over, though."

"And my mother was on welfare," Steve says, hearing himself getting a little louder. Natasha is still smirking at him, and Bruce is looking on with concern, and Pepper is standing back, waiting and watching. Jim gives him a fond look, and Sam puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, you are totally gonna have to write them a firmly-worded letter," Sam says, obviously making fun of him. Steve takes a deep breath and then huffs out a laugh.

"Fine, fine," he says. "I'm letting it go."

"Hey, this is Jacques Dernier, right? And Gabriel Jones? This is beautiful, Steve." Pepper is looking at one Steve drew of the two of them laughing together; Gabe's leaning forward, his head bent and his eyes are closed tight, while Jacques' head is thrown back, his cracked tooth visible in his open mouth. Steve smiles.

"Yeah," Steve says. "That's them, all right."

Both of them are long dead. Both married after the war, had children, lived what seemed from the outside to be happy lives. Steve feels too jealous of their privacy to tell anyone that they were lovers during the war, but at the same time, he wishes there were someone else around who knew, someone like Dum Dum or Jim Morita. Even Peggy didn't know that particular secret, he's pretty sure.

Bucky knew, of course. Maybe he still knows, wherever he is right now. Maybe not.

"You capture emotion really well," Bruce says.

"Yeah, sweetheart, these are beautiful," Jim murmurs quietly. Steve smiles.

"And there's one of Bucky Barnes," Sam says, glancing sidelong at Steve. Sam's trying to prepare him, spare him the shock, probably because he doesn't know how much time Steve has spent
staring at old pictures of Bucky in the last couple months. Steve nods at him, so he knows it's okay.
Maybe he could tell Sam about Gabe and Jacques; Sam wouldn't tell anyone. Neither would Jim, he
figures.

Maybe he could tell all the Avengers.

He looks up to see which portrait of Bucky they've got on the wall – there were so many, over the
years – and his heart drops down into his shoes as he recognizes it.

It's not Bucky in uniform, or Bucky reading a comic book in a pup tent, or Bucky in some London
bar on leave. It's Bucky before the war, asleep on the broken down couch in their old rooming
house suite, a minute away from waking up and taking off his clothes so that Steve can draw him
nude.

The next page in that sketchbook was Bucky posing nude.

Looking to the right, Steve expects to see it, the lovingly detailed portrait of Bucky's body, Bucky's
cock half-hard and his eyes half-lidded, all of his raw sexuality channeled onto the page.

It's not there. Of course. Steve would've heard about it.

He takes a breath, wondering which gallery workers have seen the nudes that were in that book,
which ones have decided to keep his secret for him. Which ones know how he looked at men and
wanted them.

It makes sense that they haven't hung them up on the wall. It's a violation of privacy, probably.
And it's supposed to be a family-friendly show. Steve figures it's fine.

He lets the others talk around him, discussing the things they see in his drawings, praising him for
this or that. He nods along, his heart gradually slowing in his chest.

Then Pepper laughs, delighted, and Steve looks up to see her standing next to one of Steve's nude
portraits.

It's of Carol.

He remembers the night he drew it, the kiss she'd given him after. Carol Jeffries, néé Miller, died
of cancer twelve years ago, but before that she had done Steve's makeup for him and known him
for a queer. Steve can't take his eyes off the image, the way her elbow is braced against her knee as
she lights the cigarette.

"Steve, didn't know you had it in you," Natasha says, smiling.

Steve knows, he knows for a fact, that he'd put that drawing in the book with his other nudes: with
Bucky, and Marlene, and Hyam, and Frank, and the old one of Arnie.

Someone chose to display this one, and not to display the others.

Or else: someone chose to archive this one, and not to archive the others.

This, he's pretty sure, is worth hulking out over.

He feels adrenaline rush through him, slowing everything down, making the world clear and crisp
around him. He knows, suddenly, what's about to happen.

"I have to go speak to the gallery director," Steve says, calmly. "Don't wait for me."
After he leaves the director’s office, Steve starts thinking about the reporters outside, the cameras, the microphones.

And he starts thinking about Allison.

Steve doesn't want Allison to quit the way the other two did. He likes her. He needs her.

He does the best he can, calling her and leaving a message, then sending a text for good measure. He doesn't think he can stop the words behind his teeth any longer, but Allison deserves at least a heads-up. I'm sorry, he writes in the text, but I have to do this now. I'll do whatever interviews with whoever you want tomorrow. He hopes she'll understand.

As he strides down the corridor, he hears, vaguely, the sound of voices behind him: the director, various curators, the head archivist, the head of guest services, and a couple of hapless docents. They want him to stop, to talk this out, but that's not going to happen. He can feel the words building inside him, and while he's not sure exactly what he's going to say just yet, he knows it's going to be a disaster.

His phone buzzes with a series of texts from Allison. At first he ignores them, because he's sure they'll be like the messages he used to get from Craig: stop, don't, you can't, your image.

But as he approaches the doors, curiosity overwhelms him, and he glances at his phone. There are three texts from Allison:

oh my god Steve what the fuck are you doing to me

I mean, CONGRATULATIONS that's awesome you're so brave and I love you, give 'em hell

I am going to skin you alive tomorrow though

Steve smiles, saves the texts, and steps up in front of the reporters outside.

"I have a statement to make," he announces, and the cameras swing towards him with interest.

Steve takes a deep breath: in, then out. He licks his lips, raises his head, and speaks directly to the cameras, just like the old days, making PSAs and propaganda films. Never let it be said that his Army training isn't useful.

"I didn't come here today to do this," he begins, feeling his way through the words. "I was waiting until I was ready, until it was the right time. But maybe you're never ready. Maybe the right time never comes, and you have to do what you can when you're able.

"I came here today as a visitor, with my friends, to see what I thought would be an interesting gallery exhibit: a collection of drawings by American soldiers in wartime. The fact that I was included in this exhibition was flattering, but the fact that I was included in the company of these – " he pauses, and doesn't say the phrase, men and women, that is on the tip of his tongue. "These brave, talented people, that was an honor. I was honored, earlier today, to be a part of this.

"I don't feel honored now."

Some flashbulbs go off, and a few reporters who had been idling at the back and not looking at Steve perk up and pay attention. A couple of them pull out their phones, maybe calling to alert their editors.
Steve continues.

"What I saw here made me feel dishonored. When a national institution like this one commits to a historical project, they owe us something: an unflinching respect for the past. They owe us the truth. And what I saw here today wasn't the truth. It was cowardly. It was an attempt on the part of this gallery to suppress and – and clean up the past. Make it more to their liking. A lot of the soldiers who drew those pictures are no longer with us; they're not here to tell us what's right and what's wrong. But I am."

He takes another breath. From the crowd, a reporter shouts out a question.

"What was wrong with the exhibit, Captain Rogers?"

"What was wrong with this exhibit was that it cheerfully presented the one nude drawing of a woman I had in my sketchbooks," he says, and he can see the disbelief begin on the reporters' faces, the eagerness to dismiss his quaint old-fashioned prudery. Let them try. "But it suppressed the many drawings, from the same sketchbook, that depicted nude men."

A lot of flashbulbs now. Steve could've guessed.

"It's been a difficult transition for me, showing up in what I thought of as the future. I had a lot of challenges, a lot to learn, a lot to figure out. One of the hardest things to figure out was how I fit in to this world as a queer. As a fairy. As a pansy. That's what we used to call ourselves, back in the forties." Steve thinks of Bruce telling him that he can call himself whatever he wants, and the prickle of tears begins at the back of his eyes. He wills it away through long practice and goes on. He needs his voice to be steady and clear.

"And so I said nothing about myself, and didn't correct the assumptions that have been made about me for over seventy years. I did this not out of fear for my safety, not out of fear of losing my job or my family or my friends, and not even because I wanted to. Not to protect my privacy or that of my lovers. I said nothing because it was the easy thing to do."

He looks down, feeling the shame of that, trying to find a way through it. When he looks up again, still at a loss, he sees that his friends – Pepper, Natasha, Bruce, Jim, Sam – have come around to the other side of the cameras to put themselves into Steve's line of sight. Pepper is nodding encouragement, and Natasha is smiling her rare genuine smile. Bruce has his hands clasped in front of him and is almost rocking forward on his toes in eagerness. Jim is giving him a slow nod, and as Steve watches he goes through a bunch of the military hand signals they've used together in the field: go ahead, all clear, I've got your six. And Sam – Sam is beaming at him, his smile bright and open like the sun, his eyes wide in delight, his hands at ease in his pockets. Under the heat of his gaze, Steve glows too, and finds the words to go on.

"But today I saw how wrong I was to do that. Today I saw how easily our history – our queer history, our American history – can be lost. How easily it can be destroyed. It gets burned up quietly, and behind closed doors, so that we never even know to mourn for it. The National Gallery of Art didn't think it was appropriate to contradict the historical image of me as a straight, cis man. They refused to correct your assumptions. They refused to step up and say: here is how Captain America looked at men."

Sam winks at him, which almost surprises an inappropriate laugh out of Steve. He turns it into a small smile instead.

"I am going to step up and say it, because it is vital that this history not be lost. It is vital because LGBTQ kids and adults will watch this broadcast and hear, for once, about themselves. It is vital
because there are still those who seek to erase my people from history, to make it as if we never existed, and we have to fight against them with everything we've got.” He thinks, but does not say, *even if it's just a shoe.*

"But most of all it is vital because it is the God's honest truth."

He sees a tear fall from Bruce's eye. Bruce gives him a nod and a small but enthusiastic thumbs up. Steve shrugs. "So, here's my truth," he says easily. "I'm queer, I'm genderqueer, and I'm bisexual. When I was young I was a fairy, or a pansy. Those were the words I had for myself then. These are the words I have for myself now. You can use masculine pronouns for me, or gender neutral pronouns like zie or they. If you want to know what that means for my sex life, or how I dress or act in private – " he falters for a second, then purses his lips into a twist of a smile. "Well, if you want to know that, I'll tell you it's none of your damn business." This gets him a thumbs up from Jim, and Steve wants to laugh again, giddy with the joy of it. "But I will tell you that there are a lot of nude portraits missing from the walls in there, and that they were all of men I – men I loved deeply."

He takes a breath, and thinks of Bucky, and wonders why he's waited this long to tell the world how much he loved him.

"Including Bucky Barnes."

More flashbulbs.

"The National Gallery of Art will try to tell you that they made a mistake in archiving the portraits, and they got misplaced. But I know what happened. We all know what happened. There's a good chance it happened at the Smithsonian, too, and at the National Museum of American History. At university collections across the country, in SHIELD archives, in government offices. I'm coming to realize that it happens all the time, and I'm sick of it."

He tries to breathe, lost in his own circling, angry thoughts. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Pepper twirl a finger, and Steve recognizes the old movie director's gesture for *wrap it up*. Right.

He finds his momentum again.

"Queer people have been living in this country, building this country, and fighting for this country since the very beginning. I remember gay soldiers who died in my war, and even if you don't see it on their tombstones or on their memorials, they were there. They were there in every war and in every time of peace. I'm here now. I'm not going to forget, and I'm sure as hell not going to let anyone else forget either."

As he walks away from the cameras, he sees Sam make a mic-drop gesture to Natasha, who nods, grinning. They're all grinning. They all look . . . elated. Steve supposes he's the first one of them, other than Sam who was out before he found fame, to stand up and say it like that.

He doesn't remember much about the walk back to the limo, the pressing tide of reporters, the voices shouting questions. What he does remember is Jim standing on his left, and Sam standing on his right; he remembers Natasha and Bruce guarding his six while Pepper breaks the crowd in front of them with her imposing high-heeled stride and the crackling sparks at her fingertips.

Once he's in the car, Steve sighs, relaxing, and smiles cheerfully at his friends. "So, you think that one's gonna make it onto Youtube?"

They fall around him, laughing, hugging him, kissing his cheek, holding his hands, and Steve hugs
them back, kisses them back, holds them back, and revels in the feeling of being among his people.
People Like Us

Chapter Notes

Here we are: the last chapter! I hope you've enjoyed the ride; it's meant the world to me to be able to share this story with all of you, and feel all these feelings together. I love you, all my known associates.

PLEASE NOTE: I'm going to post the bibliography as a chapter after the end of the story, so DON'T BE FOOLED. Chapter 8 is the LAST CHAPTER OF THE FIC. The END OF THE STORY happens at the end of this chapter. When you click "next chapter" after this, you will go to the bibliography. It's a pretty sweet annotated bibliography, but it's not more of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We're throwing you a party," Pepper says, as they drive back to Steve's place. "We're throwing you a party and we are celebrating."

"Sounds good," Steve says, still flushed with exhilaration. He leans back against Jim, whose arms are wrapped warmly around him, and smiles across the aisle at Sam, who has a thoughtful expression on his face. "Sam, you look like you're planning something."

Sam laughs. "Well, I'm with Pepper, we oughta be planning you a party. But yeah, you caught me, I was already thinking about how happy all my queer vets are gonna be, to officially have you on the team. I am gonna play that footage for every single person who comes in and tells me they can't be queer and still be a soldier."

Steve grins, delighted.

"It'll do a lot of good," Jim murmurs, quietly, in his ear. "I'm proud of you."

"I love you," Steve murmurs back. "I couldn't have done it without you."

Jim kisses his neck, just below his ear, and then does it again, like he can't get enough of Steve's skin, Steve's taste. He closes his eyes.

"Hope you're paying attention, Rogers, because it sounds like Pepper's throwing you a cotillion over there," Natasha says, interrupting his reverie.

"And the same lettering on the second one," Pepper is saying, into her phone. "Actually, you know what, make it three."

"Pepper, please tell me you're not throwing me a cotillion," Steve says. Pepper hangs up her phone and grins.

"An intimate little gathering, just us, with some food and some music and a few decorations," she says. "This is why I keep an event planner on retainer."

"In case your friends come out at gallery exhibits?" Bruce asks.
"Precisely," Pepper says.

Steve's phone starts to bing: texts from Tony, and from a couple guys he's met down at the VA, and another one from Allison.

Tony's text congratulates him on the decision, looks down at him for doing it at a random gallery event, and yells at him for doing it when he, Tony, was out of town and unable to enjoy it, all in less than twenty words. Smiling, Steve texts back to tell him to get his butt in the Iron Man suit and get to D.C. for the party.

He texts thanks back to his new VA buddies, and looks at Allison's text for a moment before speaking.

"Okay, okay, I'm in for the party. But you gotta give me a couple hours with Allison, my PR person. She's got a lot going on right now."

Bruce snorts, and Natasha laughs.

"Poor woman," Pepper croons. "Does she want backup? You can borrow anyone you want from my PR staff."

Steve almost refuses, then stops himself. "I'll ask her," he promises.

"It'll take a couple of hours to get the party going anyhow," Sam says, reasonably.

"Yeah," Jim deadpans, "it takes at least that long to oil all the strippers."

Sam rolls his eyes at Jim. "We could drop you off, then pick you up again later."

"Okay," Steve agrees, and texts Allison to tell her to meet him at his apartment.

When they get there, it takes a long time to get out of the car: Pepper hugs him, and Bruce kisses his cheek, shyly; Sam and Jim each take a turn squeezing him tight and kissing him; and Natasha, last in line, presses her lips to his softly.

"You better not be late," she warns him.

"I promise," he says, breathlessly.

There are an awful lot of reporters staked out outside his apartment, but when all of them exit the car together, first Rescue and War Machine, then Black Widow and Falcon, then the Hulk with an unassuming tug to his sleeves, the hordes back off a little.

"Nobody better step on my foot," Bruce says. He speaks softly, but everyone seems to hear him, and they clear a respectably wide aisle to Steve's door.

"Gonna have to build you one of those privacy screens after all," Jim says, arching an eyebrow.

Steve laughs and lets Bruce escort him in, waving away reporters' questions.

*  

When he gets up the stairs, Allison's waiting for him outside his door.

"Hey boss," she says. Her eyes are wide. He finds his keys and gets the door open.
"Can I get you anything?" he asks, tossing his keys onto the table. She shakes her head at him in disbelief.

"Can I get you anything?" she replies. "Water? Protein shake? Xanax?"

Steve laughs and collapses down on the couch. "Maybe an ounce of common sense," he says. He glances at her, frowning ruefully. "Sorry to make your job so much harder."

Allison shrugs. She seems to struggle for the right words for a moment. "You've made it a lot more interesting," she says eventually.

“Well, that's something." Leaning his head back, he blinks up to take in Allison's outfit for the day: big black boots, short skirt, collared shirt and tie. She always wears a lot more makeup than most women he's seen in the future, but today he thinks there's extra. She sparkles around the eyes.

Steve licks his lips. His mouth feels dry after all that talking. "Would it be really inappropriate for me to ask you if you were, uh, queer?"

She blinks at him, then frowns. "Yes. And I'd refuse to answer."

He frowns. That was dumb. "I'm sorry, Allison, I shouldn't have – " She's already waving his words away, so he stops in mid-sentence. Sighing, she comes to sit next to him on the couch. He notices her shoulder pressing against his, mostly because she doesn't touch him all that often.

"But I might volunteer the information," she says, "to a friend." Then there's a long pause. "I have a girlfriend. This last year. And I never had any girlfriends before but I think I was. You know. Kidding myself."

Steve nods. He notices a tear escaping from the corner of Allison's eye. It doesn't disturb her makeup at all; Steve's impressed once again at how far makeup technology has advanced.

"I know how that is," he says, after a while, when he figures he ought to say something.

Allison takes a deep breath, and Steve feels her fingers against his, tentative and slow.

"Sorry," she says, "is this okay?"

Steve takes her hand firmly. "Yup," he says.

"Watching you today, I mean, you told me about it in advance, so I figured I'd be – " she laughs. "Whatever. Prepared. But I wasn't. It hit me hard." She takes a shaky breath. "I don't know if you know how much good you did today. How much it'll mean to people."

He shrugs, a little uncomfortable. "When you're a symbol of the nation everything you do means stuff to people."

"Too true," Allison sighs, and Steve thinks, not for the first time, that she has the toughest job in the Avengers.

They hold hands for a while.

"I think sometimes I might be trans," she says. "Like, a trans guy. I might be a guy." She scrubs her free hand over her face, and now her makeup does smudge a little. "God, I sound so stupid. I'm twenty-five, I should be over this dumb figuring-yourself-out shit by now."

"Hey, no," Steve says, unable to hold himself back. "It's hard. And it's different for different
people. You're doing fine."

Allison laughs, once, harshly, and another tear slips down her cheek.

"You've got it together, though, that's what I keep thinking. You had all your adjectives lined up in a row."

*Queer. Genderqueer. Bisexual.*

"Well, but that took me ninety years!" Steve exclaims, which drags a real laugh out of Allison. "And anyway," he says, more gently, "that was for the press. You gotta give them – definitions, you know? Things they can look up on Wikipedia. I really don't know what I'm doing, Al, and I don't know where you got the idea that I do."

She takes her hand away from her face and looks up at him. "Well, that's reassuring, I guess. Or depressing." She smiles suddenly. "You're being modest, though. That collection of terms you gave the press is going to send them into a horrifying Wikipedia spiral when they try to figure out how they can all go together."

Steve chuckles. "I hope so."

She seems to come to herself, pressing a knuckle to the corner of her eye to catch a tear. "God, I'm sorry I broke down on you like that, Jesus, as if you're not having enough of a day."

Patting through his pockets, Steve finds a handkerchief and hands it over to her. "It's okay. It's kind of nice, actually. Not to be the only dope around."

She huffs out a laugh as she dabs carefully at her eyes. "And anyway, you're probably gonna have to get used to it. You're gonna be on the receiving end of a lot of tearful queer revelations, I think. Welcome to being a role model."

He thinks back to what Bruce told him, back when he first came out of the ice: that he had wanted Steve Rogers to be queer, had thought about it and hoped for it, that the idea had given him hope and confidence in turn. He thinks about all the kids who will get to have that feeling, now, and he's glad for it.

"Eh, I don't mind so much," he says. He squeezes her hand. "So . . . do you want different pronouns?"

Allison smiles up at him, her eyes searching his face. "They really don't make 'em like they used to," she says, squeezing his hand back. "Fuck, I don't know. Maybe. Not right now. Let me think about it, okay?"

"Okay," Steve agrees. "We can talk about it some more if you want. Whenever."

"Yeah," Allison says. "Maybe. Maybe we can." Then she lets go of his hand and stands up, dabbing at her eyes one more time before she balls up the handkerchief and throws it back to Steve. Steve catches it.

"But right now I gotta go to work, since my asshole of a client just unleashed a goddamn shitstorm and I gotta clean it up."

Steve laughs. "I ever tell you, you remind me of this union organizer friend I had, back in the thirties and forties."
Allison's smile is surprised and pleased. "No, but you can tell me all about it while I start hacking my way through your interview requests."

"Deal," Steve says.

*

An hour or so later, Natasha texts him to let him know that he's welcome over at Tony and Pepper's townhouse any time he'd like to show; Steve texts back to let her know he's on his way, then watches Allison carefully.

"Hey, Al," he says. "Wanna go to a party with me?"

She blinks at him. He doesn't know when she last took her eyes away from her phone or her laptop screen. "You mean . . . as a date?" she asks, with a wince.

Steve backs up. "No," he says, holding up his hands reassuringly. "No, no, no. I – some of my friends are holding a little impromptu get-together for me, and I thought you'd like to come."

Suspicion chases the relief that passed over her face. "Let me get this straight," she says slowly. "You are inviting me to your coming-out party with the Avengers on the one night I really, literally, cannot go."

"Um," Steve says, realizing his mistake.

"Like. Okay. I had fantasies about that scenario, all right? And I – and this – " she stares mournfully down at her laptop, at the huge mess that Steve has made.

"Put it off," Steve says, suddenly.

"What?" She looks at him like he's stopped speaking English.

"Put it off. You booked me in for interviews tomorrow, you did the prep work for them, everything else can wait. Pepper said you can borrow her entire PR team if you want to."

"Steve, I don't know if you realize this, but the President wants to talk to you – "

"I've talked to her before," Steve says, smiling now. "Even voted for her. We'll call her tomorrow. You can bring your phone to the party in case of an emergency."

"Your entire life is an emergency," Allison grumbles, but she starts packing up her stuff, and when Steve smiles at her sidelong, she breaks out into a helpless grin and shakes her head at him. "Can I bring my girlfriend?"

*

By the time he gets to the townhouse, there's already food laid out, a live band, a space cleared for dancing, and an impressive wet bar complete with bartender. There's also Maria Hill, standing with her hand on Natasha's arm and laughing. She turns when Steve comes in, and walks over to greet him.

"Nice work today, Rogers," she says, gruffly, and grabs him up in a brief, backslapping hug before standing up on tiptoe so she can sling her arm around his neck. He ducks to make it easier. "Let me buy you a drink."

"It's an open bar, ma'am," the bartender says, quirking an eyebrow. Steve recognizes her as one of
the incredibly discreet waitstaff who attended his rooftop dates with Jim and Sam. "Captain Rogers, congratulations," she says, and offers him a small smile.

"Thanks," he says. "Uh, I don't know your name."

"That's how Mister Stark usually likes it," she says seriously. Then she waves a hand, as if to shoo all that nonsense away. "But it's LaShonda."

"Nice to meet you," Steve says. "Again. I really appreciate that you kept all this to yourself all this time."

She grins. "My silence puts my two little girls through school," she says. "And I never much wanted to tell other peoples' secrets, anyway."

She gets them set up with drinks, and Steve falls to chatting with Maria and Jim, about great military comings-out they've known; before long they've got Steve in stitches with their stories.

"And he even found a way to sneak into the General's office and replace the little American flag on his desk with a rainbow flag," Jim says, while Steve and Maria laugh. "The best part is, the General didn't notice for a full week."

"General Butterfield? I think he liked it," comes Tony's voice, from across the room. He's slightly rumpled in the way he only gets when he's fresh out of the Iron Man suit, but he tugs his sleeve and adjusts his tie as he strides across the room, and a moment later he's perfect again. He reaches out for Steve's hand, which Steve takes on reflex; as they share a manly handshake, Tony stands up on tiptoe and gives Steve a kiss on the cheek. Steve laughs.

"Hi, Tony," he says warmly. "Thanks for coming up from Malibu."

"Well, when your boyfriend's boyfriend comes out, you're supposed to be there for him," he says, gruffly. "Next time, for God's sake, warn a fella. And also let me know when you're inviting guests."

"Sorry?" Steve asks.

"JARVIS?" Tony calls, and the door opens again to admit Allison and a woman about her age. They're holding hands and both look a little nervous, but they step forward into the room and come up to where Steve and Tony are. "Who are these people, Steve, are they corporate spies? Supervillains? Lookie-los?"

"That's my friend Allison," Steve says. "She's my publicist."

"And this is my girlfriend Casey," Allison says.

"Nice to meet you," Steve says to her, holding out a hand. She shakes it briefly.

"Big fan," Casey says, smiling.

"You've never even met this one?" Tony groans. "Okay, hold still, I'll get some paperwork."

"That's really not necessary," Steve calls after him.

"If you want everyone to be able to relax and enjoy themselves, it really is," Jim says, quietly. Steve frowns and nods, realizing his mistake.

"I – it's okay, I'm already sworn to secrecy about half of Allison's old clients – " Casey says.

"So then you won't mind signing a non-disclosure agreement," Tony says, returning with the paperwork.

Allison and Casey both sign, bemused, and Steve shrugs his apology.

"Now this party better do something worthy of an NDA," Casey says. "Or it's gonna feel like a waste."

"There's an open bar," Steve offers, gesturing in its direction. Allison grins.

"Good start," she says.

They eat, and talk, and when the sun sets the townhouse glows in response with lights strung along the ceilings and around the doors. Maria and Jim coerce everyone into a game of poker, which gets progressively more raucous as Tony cheats more and more outrageously.

Steve's sitting next to Sam, who apparently takes poker so seriously that he won't let Steve cuddle up against him, just in case Steve might sneak a look at his cards.

"I wouldn't do that," Steve insists.

"I don't believe you," Sam says, and kisses him with his cards pressed to his chest.

"Steve has x-ray vision anyway," Bruce drawls. "He could look if he wanted to."

Conversation around the table stills. Jim's already laughing silently; Tony narrows his eyes; Natasha's whispering something in Maria's ear to make her laugh.

"I don't have x-ray vision," Steve says, exasperated.

Tony punches Bruce in the shoulder, hard. Bruce grins and goes with it. "Your jokes are never funny, Banner," he says. Bruce shrugs.

"Had you going, though."

Steve takes a moment to look around the table, wondering if he's ready for the next step. He doesn't feel ready, but that doesn't mean it's not the right time.

"Hey, Sam, can you come help me with something?" he asks, quietly, while the rest of them are still rolling their eyes at Bruce.

"Sure," Sam says, and gets up to follow him. "Deal us out for now," he says to Pepper, who nods and winks at him under her green visor.

Steve grabs the bag he brought with him on the way down the hall, then grabs Sam's wrist in his other hand and drags him into the bathroom.

"Hey, hey, what – " Sam says, as the lights come on automatically and Steve shuts the door behind them. "Wow, this is possibly the swankiest bathroom I have ever seen."

"I know," Steve laughs.

"So what exactly did you want me to help you with?" Sam asks, stepping in close to run a hand over Steve's belly. Steve meets his kiss, warm and sweet and comfortable.
"Not this, actually," he breathes, against Sam's mouth, and Sam chuckles.

"I'm just saying, you used to get off in department store bathrooms, and this is way nicer – "

Steve shuts him up with another kiss, longer and more lingering.

"I want you to dress me," he says, when they break apart.

Sam raises an eyebrow. "Most of the time, I gotta say, I'm hoping for the opposite request," he says.

Steve opens the bag and shows him the contents: a soft magenta dress, pair of short black boots, a set of stockings and garters, and his makeup case.

"Oh, wow," Sam says. "Okay."

"I thought, because it's kind of our thing," Steve says, thinking back to the time Sam had put him into his Captain America uniform. Sam nods.

"Let's get that tie off of you, then," he says, and unknots Steve's tie with careful fingers. "Shoulda got the others to play strip poker."

Steve grins. Sam unbuttons and unzips him, strips him down to his panties.

"This is torture," Sam says, and kisses him again, pressing their bodies together. "You know I can't stand how hot you are in those little lingerie numbers."

"I know," Steve breathes, delighted. "Later you can take this all off again, I promise."

"Gonna hold you to that," Sam says, and gets down on one knee to roll the stockings up Steve's legs, kissing his way up as he goes. Steve steps into the garter belt and he and Sam work together to do up the little clips, Steve shivering at every brush of Sam's skin against his bare thigh.

"We could always stop there," Sam says, kissing Steve's bare collarbone. "You look amazing."

Steve pushes him away, smiling, and pulls on the dress. "I'm not that kind of girl," he says. "Zip me up?" He turns around, giving Sam access to his bare back.

Sam's hands go to Steve's ass, to the bottom of the zipper, but he doesn't pull it up right away; instead he lays a trail of kisses there, too, all the way up Steve's back, before zipping the dress up over the heat left by his mouth.

"Sam," Steve groans. He's too nervous to get hard, really, but there's something so intimate, so powerful, about what Sam is doing that it makes his heart ache with longing.

"Spin around for me, gorgeous," Sam murmurs, and Steve does, spreading his arms in a ta-da! gesture. Sam smiles.

"Well?" Steve asks. He'd thought about wearing a skirt instead, with a more masculine top, or maybe wearing his Cons, but . . . this was how he'd felt, tonight. This was the him he wanted to show off to his friends.

"You know how beautiful you are," Sam says. "Don't go fishing. You'll get plenty of compliments just for being the prettiest girl in the room."

Steve cups Sam's face gently and kisses him, kisses his soft lips, kisses the little gap between his
teeth, kisses his chin and his nose until Sam downright giggles.

"Now I've got that out of my system, you can put the lipstick on for me," Steve says. Sam does, going through the whole process the way Steve has shown him, then watching in the mirror, and kissing Steve's neck softly, while Steve does his own eye makeup.

"All set?" Sam asks, when Steve's zipped everything back up into his bag. Steve nods.

"I feel strange," Steve says. His heartrate hasn't been this high in a long time, he thinks, not even when he was fighting HYDRA. His palms are sweating.

"You don't have to," Sam assures him, wrapping his hands around Steve's waist and looking up at both of them in the mirror. "My beautiful girl. They're gonna love you. Hell, they already do."

Steve nods, and they go back out into the main room together.

There are a few wolf whistles, mostly from Jim and Tony, and Natasha compliments him on his lipstick.

"Are you telling me that I could've been taking you with me shoe shopping all this time?" Pepper demands, looking down at the short boots he's wearing.

"Sorry," Steve says, shrugging.

"Well, no time like the present," she sighs. "Wanna go next week?"

"Yeah," Steve says, "I do."

"We'll find out how high the sizes go on my favorite designer brands," Pepper says, "and if they don't go high enough, we'll stage a protest. Everyone deserves pretty things."

Steve grins as Pepper deals him back in, picking up his cards one by one and focusing on them so that his nerves don't make him shake.

"That dress is a really good color on you," Casey offers, shyly.

"Thanks," Steve says, "my friend Jelani picked it out."

He looks down at his cards, and tries not to smile at the full house he's been dealt. He's gonna bet big.

*

Not long after that, Steve's phone rings. It's Arnie. Steve excuses himself from the poker game again and wanders away to the corner of the room.

"Hi there," Steve says cheerfully, when he picks it up.

"Saw you on the news," Arnie says.

"Yeah? See anything you like?"

Arnie laughs, and Steve smiles into the phone.

"Not bad, kid," he says. "You're doing Brooklyn proud."


The joy that wells up inside of Steve is light and airy, so much so that it makes him feel like he's floating. "Thanks," he says, grinning into the phone. "I still got a ways to go before I can beat little Ruthie Bader, though."

"Ain't that a hell of a thing? I remember when she was five and used to come up to the park and boss us big kids around."

"Destined for greatness," Steve agrees.

"Like you," Arnie says. "You're gonna change things, Steve. It's something to see."

Steve glows. "You know one of the missing drawings was of you," he says, hesitantly.

"I wondered. Kinda surprised you kept that, though."

"I never wanted to forget you," Steve says. "If I find it . . . " he trails off, not sure how to ask.

"If you find it, you go ahead and put that nude picture of a skinny little Brooklyn kid up in the National Gallery," Arnie says firmly. "I'll come down to D.C. myself to see that."

"Thanks, Arnie," Steve says softly. There's a little pause between them, and then Steve has an idea. "Hey . . . do you want to come to this party I'm at? There's liquor, and poker, and a bunch of superheroes." He stops, actually thinking it through, and then adds, awkwardly, "We could . . . send you a helicopter?"

Arnie laughs. "I'm too old to get on helicopters after ten pm," he says. "But invite me to the next one, okay?"

"You and Tom both," Steve promises. "How's that going, anyway?"


"He's here. He's amazing." Steve hesitates. "And there are two young men now, actually."

"Oh ho! Well, if they're both sticking around, I think I'd like to meet them. Maybe next time you're in town."

"Okay," Steve says, shyly, getting used to the idea. "Want to say hi to everyone now?"

"Sure!"

So Steve walks back over to the poker table and puts his phone on speaker. "Everyone, say hi to my old pal Arnie from Brooklyn," he says. There are a lot of curious looks around the table, but they all gamely chorus some version of "hi, Arnie" towards Steve's phone.

"Hi, everyone," Arnie chuckles. "Steve says you're playing poker. Invite me next time so I can kick all your butts."

Sam leans forward. "Hope you don't think we're too good to take money from some ninety year old war veteran," he says.

"I don't, or you wouldn't be playing Steve," Arnie replies tartly, making Sam grin.

Steve takes the phone off speaker again. "Just me again, Arnie," he says. Then he takes a deep breath and says, "I'll invite you to the next one, I promise."
"I'll hold you to that. I'll see if I can't take some of Tony Stark's money."

"Tony cheats," Steve says, to Arnie's laughter and Tony's impassioned **hey!** from across the table.

"Well get her," Arnie says. Steve laughs, surprised, happy. "All right, kid, I'll talk to you again soon, okay? Now I got a boyfriend to go snuggle up to."

"That serious, huh? He's spending the night?"

"Are you kidding? At our age we fall asleep so much we sometimes spend the night by accident."

Smiling, Steve says goodnight, and Arnie says it back.

Steve sits back down at the table to a whole bunch of interested glances. He clears his throat.

"Someone you knew from Brooklyn in the old days, huh?" Bruce asks, gazing at Steve warmly. Steve lets out the breath he was holding; he's already told some of these stories to Bruce, and to Jim, and to Sam. It's not so hard to tell a few more people. He shoots Bruce a grateful smile and speaks.

"Arnie's the first boy I ever kissed," Steve begins. His friends listen.

* 

After the party, Sam takes him home.

"So, what," Steve asks in the car, "do you and Jim just flip a coin for who goes with me on a given night?"

Sam eyes him, unimpressed. "We're adults in a polyamorous relationship, Steve, we don't flip for people like they're the last donut in the box."

"Well said."

"We did rock paper scissors."

Steve laughs, burying his face in his hands.

"Jim's great and all," Sam continues blithely, "but you can tell just by looking at him that he's one of those guys who always chooses rock. He can't help himself."

"I'm glad you two are getting along so well," Steve says, when he's recovered. "Though I'm a little worried if you've decided to rock paper scissors our sex lives."

"Eh, not really. He said he got a little drunker than he should have, and he wanted someone to treat you right on your special day."

"Treat me right, huh?" Steve asks.

"Yeah. You bet." Sam looks away from the road to give him a hot, open look. Steve's breathing picks up a bit as he feels the first warm flush of desire move through him.

But it's still a few miles to home, so Steve clears his throat and tells himself to be patient. "You and Jim – you had that meeting a couple days ago, right? About your wings?"

"Yeah, we did. Figuring out upgrades and all that. Exciting stuff."
Steve nods, biting his lip.

"Ask what you want to ask, Steve," Sam says, gently. "Doesn't do me any good to keep it inside and make me feel anxious about it."

Watching him carefully, Steve says, "I guess I keep wondering – whether the two of you might, you know." At Sam's pointed eyebrow-raise, he adds, "Might want each other," he finishes.

"Well, wanting is different from going out and getting," Sam says slowly, and Steve feels a confusing mixture of fear and excitement when he realizes that it's not a flat-out denial. "Why are you asking? Is it because you'd like to have us both in your bed at the same time, without any need for coin flips?"

"I can't say I wouldn't want that," Steve admits. "But mostly I just want to be sure that you – that you're getting everything you need. And if someone else might give you that, then that's what I want for you."

"You can't help sacrificing yourself, even when it's not necessary, can you?" Sam asks, and he's chuckling a little but he also sounds genuinely frustrated underneath.

"Sorry," Steve says. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know you didn't," Sam sighs. "But it is your first instinct in a crisis. And apparently a non-crisis."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Hey, baby, I appreciate you looking out for me. But I'm pretty happy with where we are right now. Especially now we don't have to hide anymore." He glances at Steve out of the side of his eye, and adds, "We, uh, don't have to hide anymore, do we?"

"No," Steve says firmly. "We don't. And that's really good to hear." Steve sighs. Then, faced with Sam's meaningful silence, he adds, "Maybe next time I'll just ask that."

"Good," Sam laughs. "Because you don't have to offer me your boyfriend like he's the last donut in the box to show me you care."

Steve grins. "You could always ask out Natasha instead," he says.

"Isn't she gay?"

Shrugging, because Natasha's sexuality has never been that clear to him, he adds, "Or there's Tony and Pepper, or Bruce," he says. "Lots of donuts in that box."

"Ooof," Sam says. "I think dating one superhero is more than enough for me. I don't know how Jim manages three of them."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure Tony and Pepper manage him," Steve says archly, and Sam looks at him, surprised.

"Really?"

Steve nods slowly.

"But when you two are together, he's the one who . . ."
Steve nods again. "Yup."

"Well, that's attractive," Sam says. "I love a switch. Now I kinda do want to get him in our bed sometime."

"You could have us both doing whatever you want," Steve intones, because it's not like he hasn't thought about it.

"Ha. As if you do whatever I want. You're the pushiest bottom I ever met."

"I like what I like," Steve shrugs, grinning. "And what I like is you holding me down and fucking me hard."

"Jesus," Sam says, as they turn into Sam's driveway. The car comes to a pretty inelegant stop. Sam unbuckles his seatbelt and turns to him. "You want to get us in an accident?"

"I trust you to keep me safe, Sam," Steve says sweetly, and Sam shakes his head.

"Ridiculous," he mutters.

Sam opens Steve's door and holds out his hand; Steve takes it, letting Sam pull him to his feet. "Thanks, Sam," he says, pleased. He's still in his dress, and even though there's no visible crowd of reporters outside of Sam's place tonight – they're probably all still staked out at Steve's – it makes Steve feel vulnerable and exposed to be on the quiet, empty street in women's clothes, even for a few seconds, even in the middle of the night.

Sam maybe notices him looking around, because he sticks out an elbow and smiles.

"Escort you in, beautiful?" he asks. Steve takes his arm, and they head in together.

"So," Steve says, leaning back against the counter in Sam's kitchen. "This is the part where you treat me right, huh?"

"Better believe it," Sam agrees, kissing him softly. "You know how pretty you looked all night in this dress?"

"I told you you'd get to take it off of me again," Steve breathes. "Mmmm," Sam agrees, his hands playing lightly over Steve's shoulders. "Can I touch your chest tonight, baby?"

"Yeah," Steve groans. "Yeah, I want you to."

"I could tell," Sam says, as his hands run down Steve's collarbones and then down over his pecs. "I could see how hard your nipples were through that dress tonight."

"God, Sam," Steve says, "please take me to bed."

So Sam does, picking Steve up in his arms and carrying him into the bedroom. When they're both on the bed, Steve holds Sam's chin with one hand, kissing him deeply, and reaches a hand back to unzip his dress with the other.

"So flexible," Sam laughs softly. "You don't really need me to zip you up, do you?"

"I don't really need you to carry me to the bed, either, but it's damn nice when you do," Steve replies. He shrugs forward, letting the dress fall away from his chest. Sam touches one already-
hard nipple, and Steve gasps at the sensation.

"So sensitive already," Sam says.

"The dress material was – soft. And scratchy."

"We'll have to get you a bra," Sam says. He cups both of Steve's pecs in his hands, squeezing them. "God, I love your tits."

Steve groans involuntarily at the word, at the sensation, at the sheer exposure he feels with Sam's thumbs pressing soft and sure against his nipples.

"Y-yeah?" he says, stuttering. "You do?"

"Yeah," Sam says. He looks into Steve's eyes. "So pretty."

Steve pushes forward against Sam's grip, slides his hands up Sam's thighs and gets the heel of his hand over Sam's dick. "Say it again," he says. "Say that word again."

"Your tits? You like that? When I call them that?"

Steve nods, hands rubbing helplessly over Sam's dick, his thighs, his stomach, wandering around in a desperate attempt to feel more of him.

Sam gives him a long look, then licks his lips. As Steve watches, he bends his head and sucks one nipple into his mouth, still cupping Steve's – Steve's tit in his hand. His finger traces the line between the pectoral and Steve's abdomen and the sensation turns Steve on so fast it shocks him.

Sam finishes with a bite, not gentle at all on the already-sensitive hard nipple, and Steve squirms helplessly beneath him. "They're so big," Sam murmurs, his breath tickling over the abused surface. Steve groans. "Big, round, bouncy tits. They bounce when you run, you know that? I can never take my eyes off them."

He squeezes again, with both hands, his thumbs rubbing over both nipples now.

"God, Sam, you're gonna make me come," Steve pants, half-laughing. His dick is hard against his panties and he can't stop arching into Sam's touch.

"Yeah? Can you come just from me playing with your tits?" He takes the right nipple into his mouth briefly, hard perfect suction, there and then gone.

"Ungh. I dunno," Steve licks his lips, so turned on and overwhelmed that it's hard to think straight. "I – no one's ever tried."

"Then let's find out, beautiful," Sam says, and grins back at him, so unselfconsciously that Steve can't doubt that he means it. He feels a blush race up his chest to heat his neck and cheeks.

"Please," Steve begs, helplessly, desperate for it, arching against Sam's hands. "Please, please, yes –"

Sam scratches his fingernails over Steve's nipple, and sucks it, and scratches it, and squeezes it, until Steve's breath is coming fast and he has to push down his panties to let his dick free. Sam doesn't let up, his wet lips making obscene sucking noises as he lips and sucks at Steve's tit. His other hand sneaks up and squeezes Steve's other breast, his thumb sliding over the nipple and then meeting his index finger in a hard, relentless pinch. Steve groans and rolls his hips uselessly.
"God," Steve moans, "God, you're gonna kill me, Sam."

"That's because I got a tactic that HYDRA never tried," Sam says, bending his head again so he can do both nipples at the same time.

Steve laughs his way into his orgasm, and it hits him bright and easy, rushing through him like cold clear water. Sam slides up the bed and kisses him through it, so that the sensation of Sam's lips against his is the first thing he feels as he comes back to himself.

"Now we got that edge off," Sam says, his beard scratching against Steve's mouth, "how about I fuck your ass."

"Christ," Steve groans, and rolls over as quick as he can manage.

Later, a long time later, when they're tucked up together in Sam's bed, Steve feels the tug of sleep but can't quite bring himself to close his eyes. Sam looks so beautiful, glowing from the exertion, his own eyes drooping closed slowly.

"I want to draw you," Steve murmurs, into the quiet.

"You already drew me," Sam protests.

"I want to draw you again. Again and again, every day, a million pictures of you well-fucked and beautiful, like you are now."

"Sounds like a lot of work on your part," Sam yawns.

"I'll take it on willingly," Steve says. He strokes Sam's face. "I wouldn't mind."

"Come here," Sam says, reaching out haphazardly and eventually finding Steve's hip, pulling him in towards him.

They breathe together for a while.

"I have a bra," Steve confesses, into the dark.

"Yeah?" Sam sounds half-asleep, but his hand is still moving, caressing Steve's lower back, fingers dipping in at his waist and then back out again.

"Mmm. I got it after Jim and I . . . talked about it. I've never worn it, though."

"I'd like to see you in it," Sam says, not asking why Steve hasn't tried it before, just offering his desire to Steve, openly, like a gift.

It makes Steve want to overcome every fear he's ever had, to meet that desire with his own.

"I'll wear it for you, then."

Sam kisses his cheek lazily, sloppily. "Beautiful girl. Get some sleep."

Steve sighs and curls in against Sam's chest. He sleeps, and the bed is just soft enough that he doesn't stir, and doesn't dream.

*  

For the morning shows the next day, Steve wears his cutest panties, a suit with a lavender tie, and
stockings under his trousers. He feels fabulous, and armored, and himself, so it's not so hard to deal with some of the terrible questions he gets from bright smiling interviewers.

"Queer," he interrupts, smiling broadly himself, every time they try to tell him he's gay, or homosexual. And "first out queer superhero," he corrects, letting his eyes and his teeth sparkle at the camera, every time they try to tell him he's the world's first.

The interviewers blink and bluster, trying hard to keep their smiles from faltering. Steve watches, amused, and draws one leg slowly against the other as he crosses them, delicately, like a lady.

And when they ask him how long he's known, or if waking up in the modern world with all its progress is what made him finally realize who he was, well, Steve can't help but chuckle to himself.

He tells them his stories, since they ask so nicely. Police raids and drag bars and boyfriends and all. It feels pretty good.

*

When he comes out of the last morning show interview, Allison's there holding a bottle of water and a bar of chocolate.

"I get rewards for doing interviews now? Like training a dog?" Steve jokes. He takes the chocolate carefully, opening the wrapper and taking a small bite; even after a couple of years, it's hard not to treat it like it's precious.

"I figure, since you drove away your last two PR guys, I get to use unorthodox methods to keep you in line. Like behavioral conditioning," Allison says. Steve shakes his head.

"You don't have to worry. You're my favorite PR guy." He shoots her a sideways smile, and she looks faintly pleased, picking up her pace a little.

"Um," she says, clearly a little flustered. "Your phone rang a bunch." She hands it back to him. She never lets him take it into the interviews, saying it spoils the line of his pants.

"Oh," he says. They reach the car the studio provided, and pile into the back seat. He scrolls through his missed calls. "It was Peggy."

"Carter?" Allison raises her eyebrows. "How's she gonna feel about your big revelation?"

"I don't know. Good, I think. She wanted me to . . . to be able to do this." Even so, he looks down at the number on his phone and doesn't touch the button to call Peggy back.

"That's pretty awesome of her."

"Yeah," Steve says.

He goes to see her later that afternoon. He nods and smiles at Peggy's nurse – it's Bella, today – and suddenly feels strange and nervous, as he hasn't felt in a long time.

But when he sees her, she's smiling broadly and holding out her hands for his, and when he offers them to her she takes them and kisses them. He crouches down next to her, wanting to remember how he was the first time he ever saw her, back when she towered over him, back when he wanted nothing more than to be her girl. All his nervousness slips away.
"Darling, you did wonderfully," she says. "I've been watching the clip over and over so I wouldn't forget it too soon. And you were wonderful."

"Thank you," he says, letting his hands linger in hers, feeling the warmth of her skin. He smiles wryly. "I hope you know you're responsible for me calling myself bisexual."

"Oh, hush," Peggy laughs. "I'm sure there were other ladies who turned your head. What about that lovely redhead I've seen on CSPAN?"

"Natasha's just a friend," Steve says, embarrassed and exhilarated, too, to be discussing this with her. He never told her about Jim, back when he was keeping it a secret from almost everyone, and he hasn't told her about Sam, either, maybe just out of habit.

"And there are no other young ladies? Or gentlemen?" Peggy looks a little flushed herself, and Steve wonders if she wanted to ask before now, but could never bring herself to do it. This is how it is, he thinks, when you tell your secrets, this is how it always was: you offer something of yourself to others, and it draws people in.

"There's – there are, uh. Two gentlemen, actually."

"Two!" Peggy grins. "How very modern of you."

"Actually, I think it's pretty old-fashioned of me," Steve replies. He's still crouching, letting her hold his hands, and the position makes him feel . . . submissive, like a knight before his lady. "All the fellas I used to know had plenty of boyfriends."

She laughs brightly. "Well, you should bring them by sometime. I'd love to meet them."

When Sam had asked to meet Peggy, Steve had felt protective, or maybe just shy, reluctant to unite those two parts of his life. But if Peggy's asking too, Steve really won't have any excuse. He swallows down his nervousness at the idea, and thinks about Sam in this room, hearing Peggy's laughter and her stories.

"All right," he says, softly. "I'll bring Sam to meet you sometime. I'll have to ask Jim about it."

"Sam, what a lovely name," Peggy sighs. "Who is Sam?"

"My boyfriend," Steve says. "One of my boyfriends."

"One of them! How many are there?"

"Two. My other boyfriend's name is Jim," Steve says, and Peggy looks confused.

"You don't mean – I always did wonder about you and James Barnes," she says slowly. "There were those interviews, and I did wonder."

"I was with Bucky," Steve says, gently. The more times he tells her, strangely, the easier it becomes to tell her again for the first time. "But this new guy's a different James. He's a Jim."

"Oh, all right," Peggy says, and Steve can't tell if she understands or if she's given up in frustration. She changes the subject. "Steve, have you seen those interviews? The ones with the Howling Commandos?"

"I saw some at the Smithsonian," Steve says. "They had video clips."

"The SSR did them," Peggy says. "I've been meaning to say, I meant to say when I saw you . . .
when you were on TV, why were you on TV?"

"I came out," Steve says. "What did you mean to say?"

"That I had all the interviews for you," she says. "The versions before the SSR edited them. You'll be interested to see them."

"Okay," Steve says. "Where are they?"

"In that box by the door," Peggy says. "I've been meaning to say."

The box by the door has been there the last four or five times Steve's visited. He nods. "I'll get them on my way out, Peg."

"You – did you say you came out?" Peggy looks confused again, but determined to know what's going on.

"Yeah," Steve says. "You saw it on TV, remember? You watched it over and over."

"That's right, I did," Peggy says. "I didn't want to forget it. Oh, Steve, it was so beautiful to watch. I was never able to do that, you know, it simply wasn't done. And especially with my job with the SSR, they would've fired me on security grounds."

"I know," Steve says softly. "I understand. I'm glad I can do it now, for both of us."

"And then there was always Angie's acting career to think about," Peggy sighs. "Have I ever told you about Angie?"

"Yes," Steve says. Letting go of Peggy's hands, he moves over to sit in the chair and settles himself in. "But I'd love to hear it again, if you want to talk about her."

Peggy does, so Steve listens to a story he's heard many times before, but doesn't get tired of hearing: two women who loved each other for fifty years, who went on a hundred wild adventures together, who gave one another everything they had and were only ever parted by death.

"Tell me the one about the spy in the rooming house again," Steve says, when Peggy gets confused and stops. "The one about how you first fell in love."

That one, Peggy never seems to forget.

*

It's a couple of days before he finds the time to go back online, but his friends welcome him back.

i was worried u'd been hatecrimed or s/t omg r u ok, Tara messages him.

I was hoping you were just shacked up with that new guy you told us about, Jelani says. Were you shacked up with him?

Steve assures them that he's okay, and says that yes, he has been shacked up with his new guy, among other things, and asks them how they're doing.

In group chat, Jelani tells some hilarious stories about his encounters with assholes at work, and Sage responds with a story of the time they accidentally gave their conservative cousins access to their Facebook page, and they all get to talking for a while. Steve tells them a little about how it's going with Sam, and they all sigh appreciatively over Sam's sweetness and beauty, as Steve
describes it.

wait tho, Tara says, after a while, SG wasn't around b4 when the ~~~big news~~~ happened omg SG did you even hear, or were you too busy making out with your new boyfriend to look out from under your rock?

what big news? Steve asks.

ABOUT CAPTAIN AMERICAAAAAA Sage yells. Steve laughs in honest, delighted surprise.

steve rogers came out as genderqueer and it was the best thing that's ever happened 2 me, Tara says.

I did hear about that, Steve writes, biting his lip. He realizes that he could tell them, now. There's nothing to stop him from telling them.

He was already a perfect cinnamon roll and then he said he's gq and I died, Jelani says.

Steve starts to feel a little guilty; he doesn't want Jelani to feel embarrassed later over anything he said.

that's great, Steve writes. Then, as quickly as he can, he adds, hey, Sage, I took your advice about the purple eyeshadows last week, wanna see a selfie?

sure!!!

Steve finds the picture he'd taken when he'd finally gotten the shading right. Smiling, a little hesitant, ready to feel really embarrassed, he attaches it and sends it to the group.

They scream at him for a long time, which he pretty much deserves. Once they're convinced it's real, they scream at him some more, this time calling him a troll at length.

I wasn't out! Steve writes, laughing, in his own defense. but it made a big difference to have you all around, I want you to know that.

Tara writes, *cooing noises*, which makes Steve laugh even more.

Wait, so SG is for . . . ? Jelani asks.

Steven Grant, Steve writes. I couldn't think of a good nickname.

OKAY now I KNOW that this is really Steve Rogers, Sage says. Steve rolls his eyes, and waits for the followup message, which comes promptly: b/c that is the SQUAREST thing I have ever heard.

I can't help notice that none of you have even mentioned how you like my makeup job, Steve says.

TROLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL, Sage says.

srsly tho, Tara says, you look gorgeous.

I love that lipstick on you too, Jelani says.

Thanks, Steve writes.

we luv u beautiful weird troll captain america, Tara says.
We do, Jelani agrees.

They all sort of pile up on him then, with internet hugs, and Steve wishes he could reach right through the screen to hug them back. Instead he uses the happy blushing emoji an awful lot and grins and grins down at his keyboard.

*

That Thursday, a bunch of the folks in group come up to Steve afterward, clapping him on the back or shaking his hand, congratulating him. Sam hangs back, leaning on a doorway and watching carefully, obviously ready to intervene if anyone's a jerk about it, or if Steve gives him a signal that he needs to go. Steve never knew how grateful he could be for that kind of support, and nods his thanks at Sam.

Tamara comes up to him last, gives him a particularly big smile and punches him on the arm.

"Congratulations, Steve," she says.

"Thanks," he replies, not sure what else to say to that. She licks her lips, then speaks again.

"I have a – well, I have a kid," she says. "I named her Isaiah, but she's been going by Jordan since her seventh birthday." Steve nods quickly; he's heard a lot of stories like this, in the last few days, from PAs on talk shows and people in the street. But he still feels nervous every time, conscious of the need to say exactly the right thing. "Anyway, I showed her your clip, and she was really excited."

"I'm glad," Steve says. "How old is she now?"

"Twelve. With tastes in shoes and makeup that I can not afford."

"I remember how that is. I used to borrow from my friends, till they got annoyed and strongly suggested to Bucky that he buy me makeup for Christmas."

Steve still remembers how it'd felt, that gift. Not just like getting something he wanted, but like being understood, knowing that Bucky understood him, saw him and loved him anyway.

"If I could get this one to wait for Christmas, that'd be a blessing," Tamara says. "But her birthday's coming up, so she's in present overdrive."

Steve glances over at Sam, who shrugs and smiles. Steve thinks for a moment, then goes for it. "Would it be okay if I got her a present? You could let me know what makeup she really wants."

"I . . . think she'd faint with joy," Tamara says, surprised and pleased. "Especially if you delivered it yourself."

"Tell me when and where," Steve promises. "I'll be there."

Tamara shakes his hand warmly and thanks him before heading off to talk to another client.

"You're doing kids' birthday parties now?" Sam asks, laughing.

"One. One birthday party," Steve promises.

Sam nods thoughtfully. "The question is, what'll you wear?"

Steve's eyes widen and he blinks in surprise. "Well," he says, slowly, "I guess I could wear
anything I wanted."

They chat a while longer about group, walking out to Steve's bike in the parking lot.

"So, we still on for tonight? Going and clearing out those last few HYDRA research bases? Or has your schedule changed with all the . . . " Sam waves a hand to encompass Steve's coming out, the interviews, the Fox News accusations of gay brainwashing, the tabloid headlines, and the drastically mixed reactions Steve's been getting on the street.

"Hoopla?" Steve suggests. "No, we're still on. I don't want those weapons in anyone's hands."

"We haven't found any signs of Bucky at those places," Sam reminds him. "Are you sure the intel said he was . . . kept there?"

Steve winces, hearing the word stored behind Sam's teeth. "I don't know for sure. I thought it did. But I feel like, even if it's not about finding Bucky and bringing him in, we can . . . I don't know. Make our presence known, in a way he might notice. Show him that we're stopping the people who might've hurt him."

"Everybody noticed you this week," Sam says. Steve gets on his bike, and Sam puts his hands in his pockets. "So, I had a question, and I meant to ask it earlier."

"That's okay," Steve says. "What's your question?"

"You don't have to decide right now. Consider it a question about a later opportunity."

"Sam," Steve says warningly.

"Can I kiss you in public?" Sam blurts out, ducking his head a little like he's nervous. Steve melts.

"Come here," he says, softly. Steve didn't see anyone in the parking lot, but someone could be there, hiding with a camera, ready to catch him on film. Steve doesn't mind; he's already warned Allison, and he told the talk shows that he had a couple boyfriends.

Sam steps closer. Steve takes his hand, then leans up and takes his mouth, too, softly and sweetly.

"Good answer," Sam breathes. Steve chuckles.

"Come pick me up after you're done work," Steve says, still holding Sam's hand for all the world to see.

*

They don't find any sign of Bucky over the weekend, but they destroy a lot of weapons and turn a lot of HYDRA agents over to the task force. Steve watches him out of the corner of his eye during the fights, but Sam seems as unhesitating and self-possessed as ever, disarming their attackers efficiently and without excessive force. Steve wonders if he's feeling better than he was about their missions, if he'd found a good way to deal with it.

The last installation they find turns out to be the one they were looking for.

It's deep underground beneath a university engineering department, eighteen year olds who want to save the world coming and going blithely above their heads.

There's a cold storage unit, big enough to fit Bucky. There are schematics for Bucky's cybernetic arm, all its inner workings and parts. And they find a chair – a brainwashing chair, a programming
chair – like the one in the bank in D.C. and the ones Steve's seen in the HYDRA files Natasha gave him. He's read through the documents a dozen times, a hundred, but even though he knows what every switch and control on the chair does, even though he's stared down diagrams and photographs, he has trouble looking at it.

"You gonna be okay, Steve?" Sam asks, while they wait for the task force to show up. There were only two HYDRA agents here, both scientists judging by the fight they put up, and they're both bound securely in the corner of the room.

"Yeah," Steve says. His voice sounds hoarse. He clears his throat. "Yeah. You?"

Sam shrugs one shoulder. "I can't say I like it down here," he says, but doesn't expand on that. He looks around. "You think Bucky's been back to a place like this? Since he . . . got free?"

Steve blinks; the idea hadn't even occurred to him. "Why would he come back here?"

"Repair? Supplies? Uh, parts?"

It's true enough that there's nowhere else Bucky could get the parts to fix his arm, if it were damaged. Jim had said that something like that would require regular maintenance even if nothing went wrong.

"We could stake this place out," Steve says slowly. "If we don't find any sign that he's been here, if the scientists haven't seen him, we could stake it out and wait for him."

"We could," Sam agrees.

Steve meets his eyes. "You don't think we should, though."

"I think . . . maybe you should play that scenario through to the end. What happens after Bucky comes through the door, and you or me or someone else is lying in wait?"

"I get it," Steve says, breathing out hard. "So what, I leave another note?"

"They're gonna have to clear all this equipment out first," Sam says. "This shit we can't leave lying around. But then, yeah."

Steve nods. Sam slips an arm around his shoulders, rubbing gently between Steve's shoulderblades. Steve leans back against Sam's hand.

"It'd be so much easier if there were something to punch," Steve sighs.

"I know."

There's a sound of steps and voices behind them; the task force agents coming back in. Steve turns to look at them, and sees them, all four of them, frozen in place as if witnessing something shocking. Steve realizes that Sam's friendly touch doesn't mean the same thing to them that it would've meant a week ago, and sighs.

"Find anything interesting?" Steve asks.

The agents fidget. Sam doesn't say anything, but he doesn't take his hand off of Steve's back, either.

"Uh, there are a bunch of maybe . . . equipment repair kits," one of them says, eventually. "Possibly relating to the Winter Soldier. Uh. There was a spare hand."
Steve's stomach turns. He walks over to the woman who spoke – Thompson is her name – and has a look. "Horrible," he murmurs, looking into the box. The hand is just like Bucky's, all right.

Thompson swallows. "Yeah, it's . . . I can't imagine," she says. Steve starts to nod, because he can't imagine either, how terrible it must've been for Bucky when they took his arm, but then Thompson continues: "How hard it must be for you. You lost him for so long and then this happens."

Steve meets Thompson's eyes, confused, and she's blushing but clear-eyed, too. "Thanks," Steve says, softly.

Thompson looks away and clears her throat. "Anyway, we'll box up anything else related to the Soldier that we find and send it on to you, per usual."

"All right," Steve says. "Thanks." Licking his lips, he says, "I'd like to leave him a note, once all the stuff is cleared away."

"Leave it with me," Thompson says. "I'll make sure to leave it behind when we go."

So Sam and Steve each write a note and put them in an envelope with Bucky's full name written on it: James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes. Steve writes the same things in this one that he did in the last one, that he'll help Bucky with whatever he needs, that he won't force him to do anything, that he misses him.

Afterwards, he takes Sam's hand in his while they walk out. The task force agents don't say anything about it.

Sam smiles a lot, though.

* 

The next Thursday, after group, he finds Sam over by the coffee machine. It's his first time wearing makeup in public in decades, and he's feeling a little nervous about it, even if it's only a little eyeliner and lipstick and no one's mentioned anything yet.

"Hey," he says to Sam, hands in his pockets, stopping a few feet away like he always used to.

"Hey," Sam says, clearly bemused. "Walk me to my office?"

Steve does, and even though Sam doesn't close the door all the way, it still makes Steve feel a little easier, more private.

"I like the lipstick," Sam says, his eyes dropping to Steve's mouth. "That your first time doing it in public?"

"Well, since 1942," Steve says. "I feel lit up like a beacon."

"That's just what you are," Sam says. He takes Steve's hand. "In a good way." Steve chuckles.

"So," Steve says, after a long pause. "Lately we've been leaving on Thursdays or Fridays to go out and take out the bases."

"Do you know of any more? Of the research facilities, I mean."

"No," Steve says. "At least, there's nothing in the intel right now. Maria knows everyone on the task force, though, and she's gonna let me know if there's anything that we might need destroyed, or that might lead to Bucky."
Sam blows out a slow breath, and Steve squeezes his hand.

"Then I don't think I'm going to go on any more of the missions just now," he says, slowly. It sounds like a hard-won decision, the kind of thing Sam had wrestled over. Steve nods quickly.

"It's not that I don't think the work should be done. I – it's that I don't think it's best for me to be doing it, right now," Sam goes on. "And I don't want you to feel guilty for going without me, if that's what you gotta do. I don't want to hold you back."

"You do the opposite of holding me back," Steve says, softly, meeting Sam's eyes. "Always." Sam looks relieved, so Steve presses on: "And I think that's a really good decision."

"Yeah?" Sam brushes his thumb up and down Steve's hand, as if savoring the feeling of it.

"Yeah. All the other safehouses, from every piece of intel we have, will just contain conventional weapons, and the task force can take care of it."

"Oh," Sam says. "You mean – you're not going to go out on your own?"

Steve shakes his head, and waits for the right words. "No," he says. "I'll go back as soon as there's a scrap of info on Bucky, or if I'm needed," he says. "But I'm tired, Sam. I need a break, and I think I need to regroup for a while. It sounds weak to his own ears, but Sam's smile makes the feelings of doubt and shame evaporate.

"Good," he says. "That's really good. So . . . do you want to regroup together?"

Steve grins at him. "Maybe on Sunday. Saturday night, Jim and I are gonna eat pizza and work on some cars."

"Sounds like a pretty hot date," Sam laughs. "How come he gets Saturday?"

"I rock paper scissored him for it," Steve says. Sam's outraged face is priceless.

"You – you can't rock paper scissors for yourself!"

"I acted as your proxy, Sam," Steve says, grinning. "Do you mind?"

Sam breaks down laughing, and Steve watches fondly and chuckles to himself.

"Okay, okay. Sunday then. We'll go out for dinner, maybe catch a movie at E Street. No guns, no poison gas, no explosions."

"Romance must be dead," Steve says. "But all right, I'll try it."

*

That Saturday, once they've washed off the engine grease, Steve and Jim end up curled up on the couch together, watching the finale of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and eating pizza. It's been a couple of weeks since his big coming out speech, and Allison no longer texts him every day with a new emergency, so it's a surprise to see a text from her on the weekend. Steve glances down at his phone; looks like it's not an emergency, for a change.

*Been getting a lot of gifts in the mail from fans since your big announcement! I've forwarded on all the ones that passed Bruce's scanner tests, package should be there in an hour or so. I'll have more in a couple of days. Don't freak out when a box arrives that you didn't order!*
Steve smiles down at the text.

"What's up?" Jim asks. He's got his arm around Steve's shoulders, and Steve is resting back against his chest comfortably.

"I get presents, I guess," Steve says. "Coming out presents?"

"Oh, fanmail," Jim nods.

"You get a lot of it?"

"Sure," Jim says. "I have Ray send out autographed pictures. Some of the stuff he sends on to me. I always reply to the kids directly."

Steve nods. He's always gotten mail from fans, ever since he started touring with the USO; after the Captain America comic books started coming out, he'd gotten a lot more of it. He'd always answered what he could, as strange as it had felt. Later, though, when he'd been fighting HYDRA, he'd mostly lost track of it.

"Since the Battle of New York I've gotten a fair amount. Mostly I've done the same as you, tried to send personal messages to the kids. SHIELD always handled most of it."

It occurs to him that he hasn't seen any fanmail at all since they took SHIELD down, which might mean that it's been in limbo somewhere and Allison's just figured out how to get her hands on it. He'll have to ask.

They finish the finale, yelling at the screen the whole time, and then cheering when their favorite actually wins.

"That was satisfying," Jim says, sighing. "Though now I don't know what we're going to watch together."

"I have Tony's entire media library at my fingertips," Steve says. "We can find something."

"I wonder if Tony has Noah's Arc," Jim muses. "I bet you'd like that." He wanders over to the coffee table to get the remote, and almost trips over the box sitting next to it.

"Careful," Steve says, reaching out to prevent the fall that didn't happen.

"What's all this?" Jim asks, looking down into the open box. "Home movies?"

Steve furrows his brow in confusion, then remembers the footage Peggy gave him. "Oh, yeah. It's interviews from Peggy. Howling Commandos stuff. I have to get a reel-to-reel for some of them, but nobody I called seems to have one. And the other ones I had no clue about, they're like reel-to-reel but the reels are inside a little box."

Jim crouches down, laughing, and picks up one of the boxed reel-to-reel tapes. "It's a VHS tape," he explains. "You need a VCR."

"Never heard of it," Steve shrugs. Jim looks at him blankly for a few seconds, then shakes his head.

"Sometimes I can't tell if I'm too young for you or too old for you," he says. "But whichever one it is means that I have a VCR at home you can use. And I'm pretty sure Tony has a reel-to-reel somewhere."
"That's great, thanks," Steve says. "I'll ask him if I can borrow it."

Jim collapses back down on the couch next to Steve, and Steve presses a kiss to his neck, then moves up to his ears where he's sensitive.

"Mmmm," Jim says, closing his eyes. "You can feel free to keep doing that as long as you like."

"Gonna be a while, then."

Jim doesn't actually let him linger, though; after a minute he turns and pushes Steve down onto the couch before climbing on top and kissing him hard.

"You're all riled up," Steve laughs, squirming happily under him. He lowers his voice to his sexiest register and deadpans, "Is it because I didn't know what a VCR was?"

"You've found out my secret," Jim says, kissing the soft skin under Steve's chin and making him shiver. "It's the only reason I ever wanted you."

Steve laughs, warm fondness swelling up inside him, and strokes Jim's head, his neck, the shells of his ears, all as softly and teasingly as he can manage.

Just then there's a buzz at the door, making Jim pull back and frown. Steve pushes him off.

"Let me up, it's my presents," he says, and goes to sign for the package. He runs back up the stairs with it, almost dropping it twice; it's a lot bigger and more awkward than he thought it would be.

Allison's helpfully written *Queer Fan Mail!* on the side in bright pink marker, which makes Steve grin.

"Wanna help?" he asks Jim. Jim smiles and pulls a multitool out of his pocket, flipping it open into a knife.

"Let's see what you got for Christmas," he says.

There are a lot of cards and letters, which Steve sets aside in a pile to read later, and a lot of bi pride and genderqueer/non-binary pride stuff as well: t-shirts, patches, coffee mugs, hats. Beyond that, there's the handmade stuff, drawings and paintings and crafts of all kinds. One person did a whole embroidery with a picture of Steve's face in front of the rainbow flag, a perfect callback to the image they'd used at the Smithsonian, and Steve stares at it for a long time trying to figure out how to feel about it.

"This is really cool," Jim says, looking through some of the knitted stuff: socks and mittens and all kinds of things in various pride color schemes. A bunch of them do the symbol version of Steve's shield in pride colors, even.

"Yeah," Steve says, and is surprised to find that he's a little choked up. He eyes the pile of letters, wondering what he'll find in there, whose stories are going to be told in response to his.

"Hey, there's one more package here at the bottom," Jim says, reaching back into the big box and fishing it out. He slices the tape and hands it over to Steve, and Steve's hands are opening it automatically before his mind can process what it's seeing. He freezes.

Slowly, he puts the flaps of the box back down and stares at the address.

"Something wrong?" Jim asks.
"It can't be," Steve says, mostly to himself. But his hands shake as he opens the box again.

Inside, nestled in tissue paper, is a pair of old-fashioned silk stockings.

Steve touches them. They're as soft and sleek as the first pair he ever owned.

When he pulls them out of the box, a piece of torn notepaper flutters down onto the table.

"Steve," Jim says, softly. "Steve, there's a note."

Steve manages to tear his eyes away from the stockings long enough to meet Jim's gaze.

Jim hands him the piece of paper, and Steve hands him the stockings, letting them slip away between his fingers.

The note, like the address on the box, is in Bucky's handwriting.

*Saw you on the news,* the note says. *When you said my name. Remembered this.* Then, a long ways below, in a much shakier hand, Steve reads the words *I miss you too.* It isn't signed.

"Christ," Steve says, the blasphemy emerging from his helpless body. "Jesus."

Jim moves slowly, telegraphing his movements, and puts a tentative hand on Steve's arm. Wordlessly, Steve hands over the note.

"On the news," Jim reads aloud.

Steve's been on the news talking about Bucky plenty of times: on half a dozen interview shows, both before and after his coming out speech, both before and after the Winter Soldier showed up in D.C. Steve's said Bucky's name to reporters a dozen times, a hundred, more.

But he knows which one finally drew Bucky in.

"When I said I loved him," Steve says. "When I said I loved men, and I loved him."

"I guess that was what he needed to hear," Jim says.

Steve nods. Jim uses his thumb to brush a tear off of Steve's cheek.

"These like the ones he got you back in the day?" Jim asks, passing him the stockings again. Steve can't help but run his fingertips over the material.

"Yeah. Bigger size, though."

"You'll have to see if they fit."

Steve looks up at him. Jim is smiling his lopsided smile, offering it to Steve hopefully.

"I – I couldn't wear them."

Jim shrugs. "Yeah, okay. But I bet he'd want you to."

Steve remembers Bucky's hands on his legs, how neither of them had been able to resist pulling the stockings out of the package and getting them on Steve's body. Remembers the touch of the silk. Remembers Bucky's mouth, and how big and strong Bucky had felt when he picked Steve up.

"I bet he would," Steve agrees.
"I've been talking to a lot of people. Cashing in a lot of favors. If he wants to come in officially, he'll have friends who'll fight for him. It won't be easy, and I can't make any guarantees, but I've got folks lined up to take his side."

Steve nods, still looking at the stockings in his hands. "And if he doesn't want to come in officially?"

Jim squeezes Steve's shoulder. "Then he'll have friends who'll keep him off the radar until he's ready."

Steve kisses Jim softly. "Thank you," he says. "Thank you so much for that, Jim."

"You're welcome," Jim replies, kissing him back.

He puts the stockings and the note away in a drawer. Then he calls Sam.

Sam picks up the phone with a smile in his voice. "Hey, babe, what's the good word?"

Steve looks over at Jim, and runs his hand over his face, and can't help smiling and smiling and smiling as more tears slide down his cheeks.

"Bucky," he says.

*

Not long after that, Bucky starts emailing.

He uses the hotline email they set up for that purpose, the one they put in magazines and flashed at the bottom of the screen during interviews, the one homeless shelters were instructed to give him if they saw him. A lot of junk comes in through that email, but Steve clicks through every single message anyhow, every morning, and reads them carefully.

One day, as Steve drinks his protein shake and works his way through the inbox, one of them stands out to him even before he clicks on it. The subject line says present.

Steve clicks as fast as he can, and in the split second while the email loads he swallows hard, and slows his breathing, and tries to tell himself that he shouldn't get his hopes up.

Hope this works, it says. Don't know if you're checking this. Wanted to know if you got the package. If you liked it. You can email back at this address. No sensitive information, may not be secure.

Steve clicks the reply button, then sits motionless with his fingers on the keyboard. He's been wanting to talk to Bucky for months, desperate for every scrap of intel and every potential lead, and now he's listening, Steve doesn't know what to say.

Remembered this, Bucky's note had said, as if his memories were still patchy. Steve doesn't think he can talk to him like he's the same guy from 1945.

He takes a breath, remembering what the other vets said in group. That none of them are the same, and he should reach out to Bucky without expecting that.

He writes: Hi, Bucky. I got the present, and I loved it. It reminded me of the present you gave me for Christmas that year. Thank you. I'm so glad you emailed – it's great to hear from you. Do you need anything? I can get you money or a safe place to stay or whatever else you want. Then,
because it obviously made an impression before, he adds, *I miss you. Hope you're OK.*

Then it's two days of checking that email every five minutes, and driving everyone in his vicinity up the wall with it, before he gets a reply.

*Got it covered. Lots of places to sleep, even better than what we had in Brooklyn. Or in Jerusalem. Glad you liked the present. Don't worry. Not hard to stay secure and supplied. Don't worry.*

Steve, of course, worries a lot. He doesn't know whether to tell Bucky that they've never been to Jerusalem together, that his memories are getting mixed up. He agonizes over it for an hour, but then he can't bear to wait any longer, and writes back.

*Yeah, we stayed in some crappy places in Brooklyn in the 1940s. But I never minded, because I liked being with you. I wish I could see you again.*

Bucky doesn't reply. The silence is terrible, after the joy of the brief contact, and Steve wishes he knew what he did wrong, or what he didn't say, or what he can do to make it right. In his darker moments, he wonders if Bucky's forgotten about the emails, or forgotten about him, if he's trapped in his head and doesn't know the way out. He wants to write again, but Sam advises him against sending any more emails until Bucky replies.

"Give it time," he says. "He's alive, and he's not trying to kill you, and he's reaching out. There are bound to be some bumps along the way."

So Steve tries to be patient, and feels restless, and wonders what he ought to do with his energy while he waits for another email.

* *

He finds himself up at Pepper's school in Westchester county, along with Jim and Tony, fixing up a few last construction problems and assembling playground equipment in preparation for the grand opening.

"I can't help but wonder if that story about the construction company messing up the dates was just so you could watch us lift heavy things," Jim says to Pepper. He's wearing a tanktop and shorts in the warm June sunshine, with his arc reactor chest plate and the two gauntlets on top. The rest of his War Machine suit is standing on the grass next to Tony's; Tony has a similar setup going on.

"It's a good view, I admit that," Pepper says, sipping her smoothie and stepping up to the metal joints that Tony and Jim are holding together. She sticks out her index finger, ratchets her heat up to blue, and runs the flame along the metal, forming a perfect weld. The sparks that fly back onto her skin don't seem to bother her at all.

"You guys ready for this part?" Steve asks, lifting the whole set of monkey bars up over his head. Tony nods.

"Yeah, it should slot right in there," he says, pointing. "Then Pepper can go around and seal everything, as if I don't own a welding torch."

"More fun this way," Pepper says. "Swords into ploughshares."

Tony rolls his eyes, but doesn't say anything. Steve, Jim, and Tony all wrestle with the monkey bars until they're finally in place, slotted into the interior foundation.

"These are a lot heavier than I thought they'd be," Steve says. He's actually sweating.
"It's a special alloy that Tony and I came up with," Jim explains. "We're hoping it'll stand up to wear and tear from a bunch of tiny Hulks."

Steve smiles. "And I guess it's all flame retardant, too?"

"That was the hardest part about designing and decorating the place," Pepper says. "Trying to make everything as fireproof as possible. I ended up talking to someone at NASA to get pointers."

"Huh." Steve looks across the lawn at the huge brick building, which is much older than he is and which will soon house superpowered children in space-age surroundings.

Pepper finishes up the welds, and Tony grins at her, bouncing on his feet. "Can we test it out now?" he asks. Pepper smiles.

"All right, children," she says, but actually she's the first one there, jetting up to the top of the monkey bars and leaving a smoking trail behind her. Tony and Jim jump up, too, swinging from bar to bar with all the strength in their gauntlets, and nothing breaks or even bends.

"Get up here, Steve," Jim calls.

Steve does a few fancy flips and mid-air somersaults, just for fun, on his way up the bars.

"Show-off," Jim says.

"Booo," Tony agrees.

Steve ignores them pointedly. "I should get a set of these for my place," he says, balancing at the top in a handstand and then doing a few upside-down pushups. "This is great." He squeezes the bars, and while he can feel that he could crush or bend them, if he needed to, they hold up well against his everyday strength.

"Bruce is right," Pepper laughs. She's going hand-over-hand along the bars, the regular human way, though the bars she's touched do look a little hot. "You should be the gym teacher here."

"He told you that?"

"He said you and Sam were trying to convince him to be a science teacher. A position we have already staffed, by the way."

"And I assume you've got a gym teacher, too," Steve points out.

Pepper swings her legs back up and squirms through the bars to sit on top of them. "Yes," she says, "but I do worry about her a bit. She doesn't have superpowers. Just a whistle."

"And she's not HYDRA?" Steve asks, idly, flipping himself around to sit on one of the bars. What's the point of doing all this if what happened before could happen again?

Pepper shrugs. "As far as we can tell. A lot of the school staff are recruited from the kids' hometowns, local schools and non-profits. That way we get multilingual instruction and also . . . tend to avoid the kinds of powerful people that HYDRA liked to recruit."

"You don't think a teacher is powerful?" Steve asks, because it seems to him that the people who shape these children's minds have incredible power, between them.

"I do. I'm not sure HYDRA does."
"Maybe you should come by now and then," Jim suggests. "To keep in touch with the kids. All of us should."

Steve thinks about the support group that Bruce suggested, thinks about how it would be to sit in a room full of human experiments and talk about the things they talk about at the VA. Responsibility, and power, and loss. It's the one thing that he thinks could make a difference.

"That sounds good," Steve says. "Now that we've cleared most of the HYDRA safehouses we knew about, and SHIELD's disbanded, I need some way to fill my time."

"There'll be more superpowered threats," Tony says. "There always are. Thor drags some new monster back from Asgard, or more criminal superhumans show up. Some asshole tries to take over the world, with nuclear farts or laser eyes or whatever, and we'll get called up to fight."

"Nuclear farts?" Jim asks. "Really?"

"I've seen Bruce's latest paper, it's theoretically possible," Tony says, defensively.

"Your face is theoretically possible," Jim says. They start a slapfight, which Steve gently defuses by pulling them apart and holding them there while their gauntlets whirr uselessly against his hands.

"But waiting around to be useful isn't really your bag, is it, Steve?" Pepper asks. She's watching him carefully, maybe because she's not real big on waiting around either.

"Not really, no," Steve agrees.

"Well," Pepper says, "What makes you happy?"

Steve throws his head back and laughs. Then he looks around at the half-assembled playground, at his friends and his lover, at the space they're building for people who are just like them, and he says, "This."

*

Steve sets aside a morning to start going through the footage that Peggy gave him, but by the time he has the reel-to-reel he borrowed from Tony and the VCR he borrowed from Jim set up and working properly, it's already midafternoon. Steve doesn't realize it, though, until there's a buzz at his door; he checks the cameras, then runs downstairs to let Bruce in.

"Sorry," Steve says, "I forgot it was our bugsweep day."

"Not like you," Bruce says easily, as he follows Steve up the stairs.

"Well," Steve says, as they enter the apartment, "as you can see, I had a bit of a project on my hands."

Bruce whistles. "I haven't seen a VCR in ages," he says. "What's all this?"

"Footage Peggy wanted me to see. Interviews with the Howling Commandos and other SSR types. Some of it's from sixty years ago, some of it's as recent as the late eighties."

Bruce blinks and says nothing. Going to the kitchen table, he sets down his laptop bag carefully, then comes back out into the living room.

"Are you telling me," he says, slowly, "that you have the missing SSR interview footage?"
"Missing?" Steve winces.

"SSR and SHIELD edited everything heavily," Bruce says slowly. The reel Steve set up to test the projector is still running, and Bruce's eyes don't leave the image for a second. "People spent years begging them for this stuff."

"People . . . you mean, scientists. For clues on how to improve the serum."

Bruce shakes his head. "No. I mean, yes, we wanted to see it, because we wanted more first-hand accounts of your abilities, not just the stuff that came through garbled third-hand stories. But we didn't really expect that a random soldier was going to reveal the secret to Erskine's formula. It was mostly the historians who wanted it, the archivists, the folklorists."

Steve looks from the image, to Bruce, back to the image again.

"You wanna watch them with me?" he asks.

Bruce nods eagerly. "I really do."

There are hours and hours of footage, so they don't get through it all that day. Even so, there's more than one moment that makes Steve freeze in shock, or makes Bruce turn to him with surprise written all over his face.

From Dum-Dum Dugan, in 1956: "Steve and Bucky were close. Closer than brothers."

From Gabe Jones, in 1989: "Lots of guys in the unit fooled around back then. We didn't talk about it, but yeah, of course."

From Peggy Carter, in 1977: "Naturally one makes sacrifices. We all have secrets we can't tell, not even to this camera, not even now, in the supposedly enlightened seventies."

From Jim Morita, in 1988, when he still held his office as Senator: "We did things we shouldn't've. Those weapons, those people who got experimented on, where are they now? The SSR never told us. I've been trying to get accountability out of this government for years, but SHIELD doesn't say a word. You don't say a word."

And from Falsworth, looking sick and pale and way too thin, in 1987: "I don't know why you're bothering to record this, really. No one cares to hear what we have to say. Senator Morita digs up answers, and you bury them. Rogers and Barnes were experimented on like lab rats, and no one wants to hear it because you want more soldiers to go under the knife. Rogers at least was probably gay, and no one wants to hear that while more gay men die of AIDS. We handed over terrifying weapons to the American military, and now there are rumors of weapons like that being used in Vietnam. No one cares, or if they care, they die. All the inconvenient stuff, you sweep under the rug. You want me to say something heartwarming and soldierly about the Howling Commandos, for your propaganda reel, but I'm no longer under your employ and I'm certainly not going to do it. Find someone else to shill for you. We did plenty that I'm proud of, and we saved a lot of lives, but what good does it do if we get shaped into some handy image to make it all happen over again?"

Bruce stops the VCR after that one. "I've seen part of that interview before," he says, and his voice sounds cold.

"The part where he says, 'We did plenty that I'm proud of, and we saved a lot of lives,'" Steve agrees. "Me too. Just that part."

"You should give these to someone. Someone needs to see these," Bruce says.
"Who?" Steve asks. "Who could I trust with this?"

Bruce grimaces. "No one. We make copies, then we digitize them, then we make more copies. Then you take them into an archivist somewhere, a librarian, who will put them up online."

Steve thinks, for the first time in a long time, about his KNOWN ASSOCIATES box, full of letters and FBI files and all the evidence of what and who he truly was. He chews his lip, thinking.

"You're right," he says, slowly. "I need to find a librarian. Will you help me make the copies?"

"Yeah," Bruce says, sighing shakily. "You bet."

* 

Once the talk about his coming-out speech has died down a little, Steve gets back to his regular shifts at Planned Parenthood, and coordinates with Allison to let folks he's protested with before know that he's available again, if they want him. A few say sure, and a few say they're worried about negative media attention, and a few say fine, so long as he doesn't wear a skirt or anything weird like that.

Steve shows up where he's actually wanted, and puts his body between police shields and vulnerable civilians as much as he can.

One day soon, he thinks, he's going to do it in a skirt.

* 

Thor does, in fact, show up with a bunch of monsters from Asgard, and the Avengers suit up to go and fight them: Steve with Thor, Tony, and Pepper on the front lines, Natasha, Jim, and Sam working the perimeter, and Maria and Clint coordinating the civilian evacuation. Bruce is hanging back, and checking in every now and again, but Steve doesn't think they'll need him. There really aren't that many situations where you want to call in the Hulk.

"How have you been, Captain?" Thor asks him, as they punch giant slugs together. "It has been long since we last battled side by side."

"Doing good," Steve replies. "Keeping busy."

* 

But in his downtime, Steve's sometimes still restless. Tamara contacts him to let him know that his money has come in from the Army – it ends up at a little over twelve million, actually – and with that number in mind, Steve finds himself drawing, his hand moving over sketches of places that don't exist, not yet.

* 

"It's your birthday soon," Natasha points out, next time Steve sees her, when they're both in New York for an Avengers meeting. Tony and Pepper hadn't had much for them, just a couple of potential superpowered threats they're keeping an eye on, so the meeting had mostly been spent drinking beer and arguing about whether or not HYDRA had been behind the Star Wars prequels.

Steve and Natasha escaped together, but rather than heading off in separate directions, they'd started walking, unwilling to say goodbye just yet. They've made their way down to the Village, and are doing a little window shopping. Steve's in a bright green collared shirt, like the one he used
to wear around Brooklyn, and has done his eye makeup and lipstick; so far, he's managing to ignore the people taking pictures of them.

"It is?" Steve asks, innocently.

"Don't think I don't know. And don't think I'm not going to inform your boyfriends."

"I surrender," Steve replies, immediately, because that's usually a good first step with Natasha. "I had no idea that your superspy powers extended to knowing my very well documented date of birth."


"Rather than snooping into my emails and then presenting me with a creepily specific gift?" Steve says, smiling. He stops at an LGBT bookstore; there's a new memoir by a gay Vietnam soldier he wants to get.

"Clint told you about that, huh?"

"And Maria. And Pepper."

"I'm not great at being friends with people."

Steve offers his hand, and she takes it, clearly not caring if it shows up in the tabloids tomorrow. He squeezes her hand warmly.

"You're doing fine," he says.

They step inside the bookstore, and the guy behind the desk gets over being flummoxed by Captain America really quickly, and says he thinks he knows the memoir Steve wants. They wait while he goes to the back to find it.

Steve peruses the bulletin board, full of ads for queer events, quests for roommates and band members, domestic violence and trauma support groups. He smiles at one in particular. "As for what I'd like for my birthday," he says, "I think I've got a good idea."

*   *

He invites everyone, and to his surprise, everyone comes; Allison and Casey, Arnie and Tom, Tony and Pepper and Jim, Sam and Natasha and Maria and Clint, even Bruce. Allison clears it with the event coordinators in advance, and Pepper works out the security arrangements, so that on the night of July 4th they can all pile out of a car and into the bright, sparkling gay bar with the sign in lights that says DRAG SHOW 2NITE.

Steve gulps, and smooths down his miniskirt, and balances carefully on the fancy high-heeled shoes Pepper'd gotten for him.

"You look amazing," Sam whispers in his ear.

"Yeah, you've got great legs, no one can deny it," Tony grumbles, brushing past them. Tony's chosen to abandon his usual three-piece suit for very expensive-looking ripped jeans and a very tight black shirt; looking at the hard curves of his biceps, Steve can almost understand what Jim sees in him. Natasha and Maria have both worn smart suits and ties for the occasion, and Clint's in his usual ensemble of sleeveless shirt and black pants.
Steve himself had gone with a tight tanktop above his black miniskirt, with his hair spiked up and the darkest red lipstick he could find slashed over his mouth. He likes the outfit, and it's always made him feel powerful and sexy before, but even so he feels sweaty and strange, nervous, not really sure if he can bear for the public at large to see him this way yet.

Maybe the heels were a mistake. If he trips, no one will ever let him hear the end of it.

"Well this is bringing back memories," Arnie says, eschewing his cane to lean on Tom's arm instead. Steve has to admit that Tom's pretty lean-worthy, for a seventy year old, and even handsomer than his pictures. Arnie's still got pull with the fellas, apparently.

"Arnie used to do drag for the Army," Steve explains to everyone else.

"Wow," Clint blinks.

"I guess World War Two was a different time," Jim says.

When they first walk in, Steve feels the surprised, assessing glances of the bar's patrons on his skin, the way their eyes dart to all the people around him but then settle on him, on his skirt, on his broad masculine chest, on the heels that make him even taller than he already is.

They settle down at the table the bar owner, Jack, reserved for them.

"We're big fans around here," he says, sparkling and powdered but in boy clothes. "I can't say we ever expected that you'd stop by, though." He offers his hand.

Steve tries not to make it obvious that he's wiping his hand on his miniskirt before shaking with the guy. "I wanted to get back on the scene," Steve says, firmly. "See what the kids are up to these days."

"Oh, well, you'll have to go down the street for that, it's all bitter old hags here," Jack says. He looks nervous as he says it, but when Steve laughs, he seems to relax a bit.

"What's this about bitter old hags?" Arnie demands, coming up beside them. Steve introduces them.

"It's meant affectionately," Jack explains, slowly. "We kind of have our own lingo here. Don't get a lot of older clientele, I'm afraid."

"Probably because those chairs are damned uncomfortable," Arnie says. "Have you got anything softer? My boyfriend has a bad back."

Jack blinks exactly twice, then signals a waiter and asks him to get some cushions.

"Arnie was an old friend of mine, back in the day," Steve says carefully, pointedly. "We all used to go to plenty of drag clubs."

Jack nods, licking his lips. "I guess it's easy to forget the history. Like you said on TV."

Steve smiles, and shakes Jack's hand again. "I'm really grateful to you for letting us come. I know all these celebrities are a bother."

"I'm – it's really great to have you," Jack says.

Steve goes to sit down with his friends, only realizing after the fact that he managed not to be self-conscious about his outfit for a whole two minutes.
"Saved you a seat, beautiful," Sam says, and Steve settles down beside him. Tentatively, Sam reaches out, and Steve takes his hand. A few cell phone cameras go off, and Allison, across the table, buries her head in her hands. Casey rubs her shoulder and signals the waiter.

"We're gonna need more drinks," she says. "Shots all around. On his tab." She points at Steve.

"You said it was okay," Steve protests, trying to get Allison to pick her head back up off the table.

"You're impossible," she groans. "It's fine. Okay." She pulls out her own phone and holds it up pointedly, until Sam and Steve snuggle together for the camera. She takes a few pictures, then starts pressing buttons furiously. "If it's on your official Twitter and Tumblr first, it's not a secret," she mutters.

"Thank you, Allison," Steve says.

"Thank you, Allison," Sam agrees. Steve grins at him.

"Your grandma gonna be proud of you, Sam?" he asks. Sam smiles.

"Yeah, I'm sure she'll . . . " he trails off, and his eyes go wide. "Shit!" Then he's got his phone in his hands and is texting furiously while Steve laughs at him.

"Keep laughing," Sam mutters. "She's gonna want to meet you next."

"It'd be my pleasure, Sam," Steve says, seriously. Sam spares a glance from his phone screen, where a fast series of texts are popping up, to raise an eyebrow at him.

"What're you doing on Thanksgiving?" he asks.

Steve grins, overwhelmed by the happiness that wells up inside him at the idea. "Being thankful, I bet," he says.

The waiter comes back with the round of shots. "Oh my God," he says to Steve, standing beside him. "I love your shoes."

"Really?" Steve asks. He feels himself flushing. "Thank you. Pepper got them for me." He nods across the table at her.

"Tall girls gotta own it," Pepper says, tossing back her shot. "Once you're five-ten, you might as well be six-three."

"God bless you," the waiter tells her, before turning away and heading back to the bar.

"He means because you have nice legs," Tony points out loudly.

"Yes, Tony, I get it," Steve grumbles, blushing some more. Sam grins and kisses his knuckles while Jim presses the back of his hand to his mouth to hold in his laughter.

Steve takes a deep breath and glances down at the shoes; he loves them too. He looks cute, he thinks. He tries to relax as the MC comes on stage.

The show itself is amazing, as funny and sexy and powerful as any show Steve's been to, and he finds himself clapping and hollering just as loud as he used to back in Brooklyn. It's surprising how many jokes have even hung on since the forties, how much of it actually survived. Take away the Taylor Swift songs and the Nicki Minaj impersonator and it could almost be the forties again, but with better makeup and better fake boobs.
Gradually, he feels looser and more relaxed, less conspicuous. He's in a room full of people in pretty clothes, after all, and he's nothing special here. Later on, when the show is over and the floor is cleared for dancing, he even spins around the floor once or twice with Sam, and with Jim, and then with Pepper and Tony, and then with Natasha, who dips him.

"I'm really impressed," Steve says, from his position near the floor, as Natasha holds his weight. "But I think your girlfriend is jealous."

Natasha laughs and spins him back up, giving him one last twirl before moving off to dance with Maria. He finds himself back in Sam's arms again.

"Hey beautiful girl," Sam says, softly. "Good birthday?"

"Really good," Steve says. "Great birthday."

Natasha laughs and spins him back up, giving him one last twirl before moving off to dance with Maria. He finds himself back in Sam's arms again.

"Hey beautiful girl," Sam says, softly. "Good birthday?"

"Really good," Steve says. "Great birthday."

Natasha laughs and spins him back up, giving him one last twirl before moving off to dance with Maria. He finds himself back in Sam's arms again.

"I gotta say, though, you're not much of a dancer, despite the legs on you." Sam's hands on his body are gentle, guiding him through the steps, but even so Steve can feel that he doesn't quite have the hang of it, not yet. He doesn't mind too much, though.

"Well, I've never really done it before," Steve says, and follows where Sam leads him.

It's all just practice, he thinks.

*

By the time they leave the club, word has gotten around that the Avengers were there, and there are a bunch of people outside – reporters and just regular people with their phones – who've shown up to take photos of them. Steve keeps his back straight, and tosses his head the way he would if he were tossing curls over his shoulders, and uses his heels to pound out his forward momentum. If he's going to be in the papers, he might as well look pretty.

"You're disgusting, Rogers, you're a disgrace," some asshole calls from the crowd, as they make their way back to the car. "Put on some fucking pants and be a man."

It's not the first time Steve's heard that kind of thing, not by far. He finds the asshole in the crowd and grins at him.

"I'll wear whatever I fucking want," he yells back, laughing as Jim rolls his eyes and shoves him into the backseat.

*

The next day, when he checks his emails, he finds one from Bucky.

Happy birthday, it reads.

Steve stares at it for a long time, smiling, full of warm glowing hope, then writes back.

Thank you! Steve types. Yours is in March. If you want to celebrate it with me, I'll be here.

*

Jim spends about two weeks in D.C. but not with Steve, working non-stop and glued to his phone even when he's not working. Steve tries not to push him, but after a while he gets tired of fly-by
visits, or nights when Jim shows up and only manages to stay awake twenty minutes before 
-crashing in Steve's bed.

"Is it anything I could help with?" he asks, stroking Jim's temples as he falls asleep. Jim shakes his 
head no.

"It's mostly this one asshole senator who refuses to give. We're trying to set up legislation 
guaranteeing the rights of new superpowered folks. Keep what happened to the kids from 
happening again."

Steve nods; Jim had mentioned it before, but Steve didn't know it was the source of all the stress.

"What kinds of rights?" he asks.

"Well, some non-discrimination stuff that's pretty doable, things like that. The one that Billingsley's 
hung up on is the one that says supers can't be drafted."

Steve's eyebrows go up. "Wouldn't that – I mean, wouldn't that set a precedent for getting rid of the 
draft all together?"

"Now you see my problem. I have plenty of military brass who are usually there to back me up, but 
suddenly they're not taking my calls."

"Hmm," Steve says, thinking it through. "And you don't think you could use me?"

Jim's eyes, which had been drifting steadily closed, snap open again. He doesn't speak for a little 
while, searching Steve's face, then sighs and says, "That's exactly what I was afraid of doing. Using 
you."

Raising an eyebrow, Steve kisses Jim's cheek. "I can be your lever, if you need me."

"More like my blunt instrument," Jim teases, but he shuffles closer to Steve in bed and presses their 
odies together, warm and solid. "It's a big play to bring you into one of those meetings."

Steve shrugs. "I don't much like those meetings anyhow. I wasn't thinking of going in."

Jim blinks. "You mean – pressure from without."

"I'm doing it all the time anyway. Protest work. I could organize a sit-in outside his office, like that 
one we did together before."

Jim's smile shows teeth. "You mean, you show up with a bunch of friends and make noise, frame 
the issue sympathetically for the press, change public opinion, and then I go in the back door and 
tell him I can make his problems go away."

"If you think it'll work."

"It could, it could work," Jim is saying, and then he's sitting up in bed, letting the blankets fall off 
of him and letting cold air in underneath. Steve groans, annoyed.

"I didn't mean you should get back up," he says, sitting up as Jim takes notes on his phone. Jim 
gazes at him fondly, then wraps a hand around his neck and pulls him in so he can kiss his 
forehead.

"Hush," he says. "Levers don't need to talk."
Steve chuckles at that. "Of course, I'm going to have to read the legislation. And I won't let anyone protest with me under false pretenses."

"You're actually a very demanding lever," Jim drawls.

Steve kisses his neck as he makes more notes. "That's what Sam always says," Steve muses, "except he says it differently."

"Sam says you're the pushiest bottom he's ever met in his life," Jim murmurs, not looking up from his phone.

Grinning, Steve shrugs. "That's how he says it," he agrees. As Jim goes on writing, Steve thinks about it some more.

"I do want to be of use, though," he murmurs. "I want someone to point me in the right direction, apply me to the right spot. Planned Parenthood, Keystone XL, those kinds of issues are clear to me. But with other things, it's hard to know what the right move is, what the right cause is to stand by. Or to know where I can do the most good." He frowns, collapsing against Jim's side a little. "Since Sam and I finished clearing HYDRA bases, I've felt like . . . I'm drifting."

Jim's hand slides across Steve's bare shoulders and pulls him into a sideways hug. "I can help," he says, softly. "We can do more of it together. I've got plenty of ways you can be of use, in addition to what you already do."

Steve smiles, glad of the assurance. It makes him feel hopeful.

"I'll start making the signs," he says. "I can do a cartoon of Billingsley."

Jim chuckles darkly. "I've got some suggestions," he says.

"And maybe if you start using me to fix these things, you could start coming home in time to do something other than fall asleep," Steve teases.

Setting his phone carefully on the side table, Jim pushes Steve back down onto the mattress and climbs on top of him. "Oh, I'm going to use you," he says, the light warm in his eyes. "You're going to solve a lot of problems for me. I can't believe I never thought of this before."

Steve runs his hands over Jim's bare chest, down his belly to toy with the waistband of his boxers. "I'm so glad to be of service, sir," he breathes.

"I know," Jim says, solemnly, and kisses him deeply as their bodies press together, skin to skin, underneath the warm blanket.

*

Every now and again, as Steve is about to fall asleep, he recalls something Sam suggested a while ago, in a hotel room in Jersey. Sam had been half-asleep at the time, and as he drifts near to sleep himself Steve wonders if that's why it comes to him almost like a dream, like it was an idea living just below their shared consciousness. Steve usually recalls it as the sound of Sam's voice speaking, along with the image of Sam's body, naked and open against the white sheets of the hotel bed. The words echo in his head, though, in a way they couldn't have done at the time.

*Have you ever drawn yourself*

The idea keeps growing inside him as he goes about his life, recurring at odd times – out on the
road on his bike, sitting in group with Sam's hand clasped in his, trying not to be too angry or bored during an anti-HYDRA task force meeting. When it's fully present in his mind, when it's taking over his thoughts, when the idea is completely formed and recognizable before him, he finally decides that he has to do something about it.

His first try involves propping a mirror up opposite his couch and lying down in a seductive pose; he's naked except for his lipstick, and he doesn't think he's ever been more nervous to be in a room by himself.

He only gets a few lines onto the page before he has to stop, that old roiling feeling clenching through his stomach, his reflection suddenly turned strange and unfamiliar.

He puts his clothes back on and hangs the mirror back up in his bedroom, avoiding his reflection as he does it.

The second time he tries, it's in one of his favorite dresses, the purple one that brings out his broad shoulders and narrow waist. He tries it sitting up, recognizing for the first time how hard it really is to choose a physical position that reflects your inner self. He chuckles self-consciously, figuring he owes an apology to Sam, and to Carol and Marlene and all the others too, for that matter.

This time he doesn't feel dysphoria, not really, but he doesn't feel comfortable, either, and the strokes of the pencil on paper are harsh and wrong.

He throws his sketchbook on the table, frustrated, and tries not to think about it for a while. But the next day, when he and Jim are curled up on the couch together, watching Noah's Arc and eating sushi, Steve sees the sketchbook again and gets an idea.

"Hey, handsome," he says softly. "How would it be if I drew us like this?" He tilts his head back to look up at Jim, who looks back down at him.

"Is it going to end up on the wall in the National Gallery?"

Steve shrugs. "Maybe after we're dead."

Jim thinks about it a bit. "You called me handsome there just to soften me up," he accuses. Steve shrugs.

"Telling the truth at the right time is more powerful than telling a lie," he says. Jim pokes him in the neck.

"Okay. But I definitely don't want it in the National Gallery before I die and I definitely do want it in the National Gallery after I die."

"I'll see what I can do," Steve says, and gets up to get the mirror and the sketchpad. He props the mirror up carefully against a chair, and this time it's easier to trace the lines and curves of his own body.

"It's about time, anyhow," Jim says. "I was getting jealous. Sam said you drew a nude of him."

"Why are you going around listening to what Sam tells you?" Steve grumbles.

"Because we're co-boyfriends, I guess. You know we've been getting coffee now and again."

"I know. I think it's cute."
"And I'm gonna be finished his wings soon. I finally sourced all the parts I need."

Steve smiles, drawing the place where Jim's hand drapes comfortably around his shoulders. "When you're done, maybe you could teach me how to repair them," he says. "For emergencies in the field, that kind of thing."

"You think you and Sam are going to end up shot down together a lot without me there to get your back?" Jim kisses the top of Steve's head; in the mirror, it looks the way it feels, tender and slow. Steve tries to put that into the drawing.

"I don't know," Steve says, honestly. "I don't know what kinds of missions we might fly in the future. But just in case. So we can come back to you."

"You got it, sweetheart," Jim says.

The finished drawing is pretty good, Steve thinks. And it gives him another idea.

* *

"Like a family portrait," he tells them. "Everyone together."

"You want to put all the Avengers in a room and have them hold still for a long period of time?" Tony asks, arching an eyebrow. "You know that's begging to have some supervillain attack us, right?"

"Gotta live your life," Steve shrugs. "You can just say if you're chicken."

Tony scowls.

The day before the scheduled portrait-sitting – which has been pushed back four times already due to various scheduling emergencies – Natasha shows up at Steve's door.

"Brought you something," she says, when he sets her back down after their hug.

She's holding a box, the flat wide kind that usually holds dresses or suits. He raises an eyebrow. "You bring me a new uniform, Romanoff?"

"It was my idea, but Pepper's people designed it," she says. "We thought... for the portrait tomorrow, we could do one in our uniforms and one in civvies."

It's not a bad suggestion. Steve likes the idea of them all lounging around casually in superhero outfits. "That could work," he agrees. "Except for Bruce, I guess."

"We could always make him pose naked and covered in brick dust," Natasha suggests. Steve laughs. He sets the box down on the table, and opens it nervously; the last time he got a new uniform, it really wasn't to his taste.

The first thing he notices is the colors: all bright and primary, like his original costume, with stars and stripes positioned prominently. He smiles, and reaches into the box to pull it out.

"It's a little like the one I had in New York," he says. "But with fewer weird zippers. I like the – " he trails off as the bottom half of the uniform shakes out.

"You don't have to wear it if you don't like it," Natasha says. "But we thought – good to have options, right?"
Steve swallows hard, unable to tear his eyes away from the Captain America suit with the big padded shoulders and the knife-resistant flexible armor and the flippy little red white and blue skirt over matching leggings.

"Right," he agrees, voice choked. "Nat, this is perfect."

"Think you'll ever wear it in public?" she asks. Steve shakes his head.

"Not today," he says. "But not never, either."

Allison told him the other day that he's been asked to Grand Marshal the New York Pride parade next year; maybe by then, he'll be able to wear this, standing on top of a float, waving at the crowds.

"Anyway. If you want to wear it for the portrait, we thought it'd be cute. And if you wanted to wear it for doing feats of heroism and saving peoples' lives, we'd be proud to stand beside you."

Steve nods. "Thank you," he says again. She shrugs, but her smile is genuinely pleased.

"I figured, if you're going to go into battle dressed like a target, you might as well be a pretty target."

"Ah, so that's been your strategy this whole time," Steve says. He grabs her up in another hug, and she squeezes him back.

"Love you, sister-in-arms," she says, softly, into his ear.

Steve shuts his eyes, overcome. "Love you too, Nat," he says.

*  

Of the two family portraits he draws, Steve likes the casual one better; they're draped all over one another on a long couch, Jim with his head in Tony's lap and Pepper lying against Tony's chest, Sam falling against Steve's shoulder, Natasha curled around Maria who's curled around Bruce who's got his arm around Clint. They're all in sweatpants and t-shirts and hoodies, Natasha's bare feet tucked up under Steve's legs. Steve draws himself drawing, there in the middle of them all, and he even likes the expression on his own face, quiet focus as he tries to capture the strange, laughing, beautiful freaks around him.

By contrast, the one of them in their uniforms – and Bruce, begrudgingly, with his shirt off – is almost hard to look at, in its strange juxtaposition of their power and their personalities. Tony and Jim stand in their robot suits, faceplates up, their arms on each other's shoulders, both of them smiling; Steve sits between Maria and Natasha, all of them in their uniforms, all of them with serious expressions on their faces; Pepper's in her black leotard, looking grave, while Clint stands next to her with his arms crossed; Bruce sits on the arm of the couch, his bare back to the rest of them; and Sam stands behind, brand-new wings spread, goggles down, unsmiling.

The truth of them, he supposes, lies somewhere in between the two drawings.

*  

After that, he knows what he wants for his self-portrait. He invites Jim and Sam over to his place and explains it to them, and they agree. Steve gets them all a beer.

"You don't have to get us all liquored up," Sam says, but he does take a sip. "I mean, I can't speak
for your other boyfriend, but I like seeing you lounging around half-naked."

"I can't say I object," Jim allows. They clink their beer bottles together.

"Yeah, well. Sometimes it's a little easier this way," Steve says, sipping his own beer, more for the metaphorical relaxation than any real effect. "I ever tell you about Carol from the chorus line, either of you?"

Jim says no, and Sam shakes his head. Steve smiles.

He walks them both over to the couch, where he's set up the light and the mirror, and puts down his beer. On the side table are two small items: the stockings Bucky sent him, and the lipstick that reminds him of Peggy. He hands the stockings over to Jim, and the lipstick over to Sam.

"Everyone's got a little job," Sam says. Steve wonders if he's nervous; he tends to babble a bit when he gets nervous.

"Jim first," Steve says.

Jim arches an eyebrow. "You want me to roll these on over your khakis?" he asks pointedly. Steve smiles and shakes his head.

He pulls his shirt off over his head and tosses it into the corner, follows it with his pants. Underneath, he's wearing lace panties and a matching garter belt, with the straps dangling against his thighs.

"That's better," Jim says. "Down on the couch, now, sweetheart."

Steve sits and lets Jim take his long bare leg in his hands. Jim runs a hand up it, tickling against the sparse blond hair.

"Always so baby-soft and bare," Jim says, bending to kiss Steve's knee. Steve shivers.

"Serum side-effect," Steve explains. "Got rid of my chest hair, too. Not that I had much to begin with."

"Well, that's a time-saver," Jim says, as he begins to slide a stocking over Steve's foot and up his calf. His hands are warm and confident against Steve's skin.

There's a little silence while Jim gets the first stocking in place and attaches the straps at the top, one by one, slowly and carefully. Steve meets his eyes and grins breathlessly. Jim grins back.

Sam, perched on the edge of the couch, makes a little noise. Steve looks over at him, arching a questioning eyebrow, but Sam shakes his head and smiles.

"You two look really good together," he says, simply.

Jim flashes his smile sideways at Sam, and reaches for the second stocking.

He does Steve's left stocking just as slowly as his right, adjusting the seams and tugging it upward until the two are a perfect match.

"Almost done, honey," Jim says, maybe just for the sake of having something to say. Steve grins.

"Take your time, it's not exactly torture." The whole situation has Steve already half-hard, without even being touched beyond the light, fluttering caresses of Jim's fingertips against his thighs.
Jim attaches the last strap. "I can tell," he says, and rises up to kiss Steve's mouth before backing away and giving Sam some room.

"I guess I'd better kiss you first," Sam says. "Or I'll mess it all up."

"Well, if you insist, Sam," Steve says. He leans back on his arms against the couch, stretching his legs out in front of him to make an inviting picture. Sam cups his face and kisses him softly, soundly. When he pulls back, Steve hands him the lip primer.

Sam works as slowly and carefully as Jim did, taking care to prep Steve's lips properly before putting on the color.

"So the stockings are the ones Bucky sent you," Sam says, as he applies the lipstick in quick little strokes to Steve's bottom lip. "Is the lipstick special?"

Steve waits for Sam to finish before answering. "It reminds me of the one Peggy used to wear." Sam smiles gently and nods, then finishes it up.

"I don't know how it looked on her," Sam says, "but it's devastating on you."

Steve ducks his head, smiling. "Thanks, Sam."

"So you want us to hold the mirror?" Jim asks, doubtfully. "Won't it shake?"

"No, just prop it up against the chair, and then stand by to move it a bit if I need you to. So I can get my feet and stuff."

"Check," Jim says, nodding. He and Sam move to sit on the floor on either side of the mirror, and Steve lays down sideways on the couch with his sketchbook in hand.

"Feels a little silly," he confesses. In the mirror, his legs stretch out long and lithe while his strong left arm props up his broad chest. He shuffles around a bit, until he finds a position he thinks he can draw in.

"You look amazing," Sam says warmly.

"Let yourself get comfortable," Jim says.

Steve starts the first few lines, letting his hand replicate what he sees in the mirror.

He's not the first naked person he's drawn, he tells himself, or even the tenth. He's practiced for this.

"You were going to tell us the story about Carol from the chorus line," Sam says, after Steve's gotten started.

"Oh, yeah," Steve says, a little distracted by the shapes forming under his hand. He draws his own legs, and the lines where the garter straps follow the curve of his hip. "Well, Carol was great. That's her portrait in the National Gallery."


"I didn't – it wasn't like that," Steve says. "Or, not when I was drawing her, anyway."

Steve watches the mirror, and watches the lines on the page, and doesn't pay too much attention to what he's saying, just letting the story unfold.
“What was it like?” Jim asks, quietly.

“She was really kind to me. I was all alone on the USO tour, nobody I knew around, and she and some of the other girls helped look after me. I’d just had the serum, so it was . . . I guess it was a hard time for me.”

“Your whole body was new to you,” Sam murmurs. Steve nods, lost a little bit in the spell of the drawing. He follows the pencil with his eyes as it shapes his navel, his abdominal muscles, the line of his panties.

“Yeah. And I thought – you know. I thought I’d be different, after the serum. That I’d be fixed, normal, wouldn't want men anymore.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve sees Sam shoot a surprised look at Jim, and Jim shaking his head.

“Jesus,” Jim says.

“So when Carol made a pass, I thought, why not. She was so pretty. And on the stage, she was in complete control. I liked her.”

“So Peggy and Natasha aren't the only women to ever pique your interest,” Jim smiles.

Steve looks up from the drawing for a moment to glare at Jim. "I – Natasha and I are just friends,” he protests. Jim shrugs.


“Especially when she's driving that hot black sportscar,” Sam puts in. "What is it, a Corvette?"

“Stingray,” Jim and Steve say at the same time, making Sam laugh.

“Okay, I give up,” Steve laughs. He feels a little embarrassed, but good, too, that these two can see him so well and not think the way he feels is strange, or wrong. "But sure, I guess Carol also turned my head a bit."

“So what happened next?” Sam asks, though he has to see the way the story is going. Steve goes back to drawing, back to the soothing sound and sensation of the pencil bringing his own shape out of the paper.

“She kissed me,” Steve says. “Like a freight train, pushed me up against the wall.”

“Who wouldn't?” Jim asks. Steve smiles, and catches his own smile in the mirror, letting it trickle down onto the drawing. He draws his lips full and dark.

“We tried to have sex, but I couldn't. I was so new to who I was, back then, and I freaked out.” He shoots an apologetic glance at Jim, who smiles and nods at him to go on.

“But in a way, it got better between us after that. She became a good friend to me. Did my makeup every day before the show. And one night, when we’d all been drinking and partying together, she asked me to draw her. The funny thing was, she never needed to have a drink before she came on to a guy, but I think she did to ask me for that.”

Steve spends time dwelling lovingly on the details of his own pecs, his tits, and on the hard cords of muscle that cap his shoulders and twist down his arms.
"It's a lot to deal with," Jim says, slowly. "Being seen that way. Letting someone look at you that way."

Steve nods, and draws his own eyes, bright and solemn, just as they are looking back at him in the mirror.

"So I think it made it easier for her, to ask for what she really wanted from me. What she wanted from everyone around her, maybe. But she did ask, and I was so grateful to her. It was a pleasure, to draw her."

"And you did that one that's in the National Gallery," Sam fills in. Steve nods.

"And a bunch of other ones, too. I gave those to her, though. She made me keep one."

"To remember her by," Jim says.

"Yes," Steve agrees, "though it's not as if I could ever forget her."

He looks away from the mirror then, into the eyes of his lovers.

Jim and Sam, on either side of the mirror, look back at him, and he sees himself reflected in their eyes as much as he does in the mirror. With their eyes on him, every stroke of the pencil feels like a caress.

* 

After Steve's done, he lines up the sketches he's made on the coffee table, looking them over. The person looking back at him in those drawings is him, he knows it's him, but it's almost hard to believe: he looks so pretty, so sure of himself, so self-possessed.

"That's you, sweetheart," Jim says, wrapping his arms around Steve from behind and looking over his shoulder. "That's what you look like to me, too."

"Definitely," Sam agrees, sitting next to Steve on the couch and resting one hand on Steve's leg, over the slightly scratchy lace. "You captured how beautiful you are." He presses a soft kiss to Steve's neck, just below his ear.

"You want us to stick around?" Jim asks. "Or you want some time to yourself? Yourselves?" Steve feels Jim's teasing smile against his bare shoulder, and he laughs.

He's not hard anymore, but he feels warm and ready, caught between these two, and knows that he could say yes, and that they would both stay, and maybe they would all three of them end up in bed together.

But he also feels . . . tired, not the physical exhaustion he can sometimes generate, but a deeper, more emotional weariness. If they both stayed, if they tried to consummate this now, Steve has a feeling that he wouldn't be in the right frame of mind for it.

"Maybe me myself and I will spend the evening together," Steve jokes back. He puts his right hand over Jim's, on his chest, and his left hand over Sam's, on his thigh, touching them gently to let them know how sweet he is on both of them.

"All right," Sam says, and kisses Steve, that deep long kiss that's Sam's specialty. Steve sighs into it, and the moment it's done his head is being turned to Jim, who takes his mouth in a fast, hard, yearning press of lips.
When they pull apart, Steve expects them both to get up and get ready to leave, but Jim reaches out and stops Sam's motion with a hand on his arm.

"What?" Sam asks. His voice is quiet. Steve stays as still as he can and watches.

"C'mere?" Jim asks, a little awkwardly. Sam smiles, and leans across Steve's body, and then he and Jim are sharing a soft, questioning first kiss. It's brief and almost friendly, like the kisses Steve shares with Tony, but also a different kind of friendly, like the kisses Steve shares with Natasha.

In it, locked up, is a whole rush of warm potential, all the things they could do but are choosing not to, just now.

When they pull apart again, Steve gets up and escorts them both to the door, holding their hands, and gives them each one last kiss on the cheek before they leave.

For a moment, as he watches them out the window, walking to their respective cars, Steve feels a pang of regret. Part of him wants to call them back up and ask them to fuck him, or fuck each other, or to just lie with him in bed for hours, naked, skin to skin.

But another part of him wants nothing more than to relish the crackling arc of potential that runs between them and among them.

They've got all the time in the world.

*

It's a hot, green day in late August when they're finally able to open the school and let the kids move in. The official semester doesn't start for another couple of weeks, but Pepper says that they're going to run it year-round anyway, as a kind of permanent home.

Steve offered his services for lifting whatever might need to be lifted, but of course the kids don't have a lot in the way of personal possessions to cart around, so the whole process ends up taking half an hour at most, and the heaviest thing Steve carries is Ha-neul's collection of Doctor Seuss books, with _If I Ran the Circus_ sitting on top.

"When the others start coming in, the ones without powers who have been in foster care, then we might need those muscles," Pepper tells him. "Right now, the most important thing is to get them settled and feeling safe."

Rokia and Ha-neul are running across the lawn, giggling and chasing and sparking at each other; meanwhile, Tabil and Haziq are testing out the monkey bars that Steve helped set up. So far, they're holding. The rest of the kids are inside, finally meeting some of the teachers, caretakers, and counselors whose résumés they had pored carefully over. Through the window he glimpses Siddhani, in the big airy conference room, making careful, extensive notes as each adult introduces themselves, and he can't help but smile.

"I think they're doing okay," Steve says. "I think that one's going to be interning for you before too long."

Pepper grins. "Or running this school herself. She's already got leads on four more potentially superpowered kids who SHIELD never heard about."

He wanders inside to find Bruce sitting quietly with Georgie and Anna, all three of them solemn and serious as Bruce leads them through a series of breathing exercises. It's so cute that Steve can't help lurking around a corner and watching them for a bit.
"We can tell you're there," Georgie says, after a while. "We have Hulk senses."

"You do, huh," Steve says, coming in and crouching down next to them. "Bruce never told me that."

"They're not that useful," Bruce says, apologetically. "They're like yours."

Steve nods; his enhanced hearing and vision have come in handy plenty of times in his life, especially in his old line of work, but it's not much to write home about.

Anna hands him a sheet of paper. *Bruce says you're an artist*, it reads.

Steve smiles at her and nods. "Among other things. I'm actually thinking of going back to art school."

She writes again: *I want to be an artist too. I like to draw.*

"That's great," Steve says, touched. "Would you show me some of your drawings sometime?"

She nods shyly. Then, in a sudden rush, she grabs Georgie's hand and runs off up the stairs, presumably to go get her drawings. Georgie squawks as he's pulled to his feet, but then follows along gamely enough.

"She asked me if it was okay to be an artist, instead of a superhero," Bruce says, folding his hands in front of him. "Even though she can lift cars off the ground. I told her about you, a little."

"I'm glad," Steve says. He licks his lips. "Maybe I can set her up with a scholarship someday."

"Yeah?" Bruce asks. He shuffles sideways on the couch so that Steve can sit down next to him. Steve does, pulling the much-folded drawings and notes out of his pocket. He's been working on them for long enough, and today seems like the right day to put things in motion.

"I've been thinking," Steve says slowly, "ever since I got my back pay from the Army. The accountant says I've got the resources to set up a few things and still have enough to live on."

Bruce takes the pages from Steve's hands and looks them over. At the top of the first page are scrawled several headings:

*The Valentine Johnson Support Fund for African-American Activists*
*The Danielle Flynn Grant for Women Veterans*
*The Marlene Ross Makeup Gift Program*
*The James Buchanan Barnes LGBTQ Homeless Shelter*

Bruce smiles as he reads them, then arches an eyebrow. "So what's the scholarship you'd give to Anna?" he asks.

Steve takes the papers back from Bruce and writes, underneath, *The Steven G. Rogers Scholarship for Aspiring Superhero Artists*. Bruce laughs.

"Nice," he says. He looks through the rest of the papers, Steve's architectural imaginings for the homeless shelter and notes on the makeup gift program. "You know, there's a real need for this. I've been homeless, a few times, and a lot of places won't take queer folks at all. Some won't take trans people, and trans women especially."

"I know." It'd been Jelani's story of being kicked out of the house at fifteen, and not being able to
find a place to stay, that had helped cement the idea in Steve's mind.

"Have you heard from Bucky? How does he feel about his name on something like this?"

"I don't know," Steve says, sighing. "I don't – he hasn't been in touch in a couple of months. I wish I could see him, to ask him."

Bruce nods, biting his lip. "Well. I think it's a great idea. And maybe . . . I don't know. If you build it, and put his name on it, maybe one day he'll come in and use it."

Steve sighs. "I hope so. It's hard, not knowing where he is, what's going through his head. If he's in pain. If I'll ever see him again." He blinks back the tears that want to gather at the corners of his eyes.

Bruce lays a gentle hand between Steve's shoulder blades and rubs slowly, back and forth. "I know," he says.

"And meanwhile half the government wants to put him on trial, and the other half wants to make him a war hero, and he's – stuck, I guess, between all the power he has and whatever it is that he wants for himself now. What if it takes years? What if he never comes back?"

Bruce's hand slips further around Steve's shoulders and squeezes.

"Then we'll keep waiting," Bruce says, slowly, his other hand ghosting over the sketches on his lap. "As long as it takes. Or forever."

Steve nods and gets up again, goes over to the window to look out. Jim and Sam have just arrived, bearing presents, and are being set upon by the kids. Sam's laughing, picking Rokia up and twirling her, and Jim's crouching down carefully to shake Ha-neul's hand and listen to what she's saying. They're surrounded by the summer sun and the green grass and the safe, quiet space that they've made together.

"Yeah, we will," Steve agrees, and feels the truth of it inside him, solid and sure. "He's one of us."

*  

Steve walks up the steps to the library with his jaw set and his hands clenched tight on the box he's carrying. He's sure about this decision, has been sure about it for a long time, but it's still hard not to be intimidated by the imposing brick walls of the library building, by the floors and floors of windows that look down on the world. This place is part of the system that kept Captain America's image so squeaky clean for so many years, that manufactured a killing silence about him and his kind that still echoes in the world today. But he can't see any way to change that without doing this, without starting somewhere. Miss Sarfati seems like the kind of person he can make a start with.

So he walks up the steps to the library, feet steady and sure, and when he gets inside he asks for directions to the right office in a calm, clear voice. When he finds it, the door is ajar, warm yellow light spilling out into the institutional hallway. He knocks, and the door swings inward a little, revealing a soft blue carpet on the floor and a multicolored quilt thrown over a small, well-worn beige couch.

"Is that Captain Rogers? Come in!" a voice calls from inside.

As he pushes the door open, he sees a young-looking woman in cute silver glasses and a skirt suit, standing and tugging self-consciously at her bright yellow top. She smiles and sticks out her hand.
Steve has to juggle the box into his left hand in order to shake with her, and they share and awkward smile as they work around it.

"You must be Miss Sarfati," Steve says.

"Jessica," she says, automatically. "Please, you can put that down." She gestures at the desk to her right, where a space has clearly been made among the stacks of books and papers.

Steve sets it down, but then feels even more awkward, with no barrier between himself and the archivist. He shrugs and tries to stick his hands in his pockets, realizing too late that he's wearing a skirt that doesn't have any.

"No pockets, huh," Jessica says brightly, offering Steve a shy, knowing smile.

Glancing down at their skirts, Steve returns her smile and relaxes a little. "Worst thing about women's clothing," he agrees. "Makes me want to wear my utility belt twenty-four seven."

This draws a quiet laugh out of Jessica. "Maybe I should get one myself," she agrees, gesturing for him to sit and taking her own chair.

"Oh, well, I could hook you up," Steve offers.

"My impression from your emails was that you were going to hook me up with some even cooler stuff," she says. "I have to admit, it took me a while to even believe it was really you emailing."

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

"Yes. Well." She looks down at her hands for a moment. "You understand why I was surprised."

"You don't get a lot of dead American icons offering to substantially alter their own historical record?" Steve asks cheerfully.

"Not so much, no." She smiles again. "But it's an archivist's dream. I can't imagine you didn't get requests from the bigger universities, asking you to add to their records, or correct them."

"Not as many as you might think," Steve says. "I got the feeling that some scholars were annoyed that I came back to life."

Jessica snorts. "Typical. Well, I'm overjoyed you came to us. It's going to be a real coup for the LGBTQ collection here."

"You seemed like you might like the stuff I've put together," Steve smiles.

"Then let's have a look, shall we?"

Steve nods and pulls stuff out of the box.

The stack has grown a lot since he first got this box from SHIELD; where there were once just a few thin Army records, there are now stacks of letters and photographs, including all the ones Steve had received during the war. He's put in the non-classified FBI files he'd dug up on all his queer and protester friends, the transcriptions of their phone calls, the pictures that Arnie still had of his Army drag shows. There are posters and protest signs that Steve did back in Brooklyn, the Howling Commandos video interviews that Peggy gave him, and a bunch of Project Rebirth records that Bruce had helped him to dig up, including stuff on Smith and Stepnowski. It's his life as he knows it, all the people he's known and the lives he's led.
Jessica picks through the stack slowly, unrolling one of the protest signs, pausing now and then to ask if a given document is an original or a copy.

"This is a lot, Captain," she says, after a while. "You know we can seal the records for a few years, or limit access, right? It doesn't have to be all or nothing. You're putting a lot of yourself up for debate." Her eyes are imploring, and Steve knows instantly that she has no intention of covering up his past or trying to make him more palatable for modern audiences; that, instead, her concern is for him personally, for the kind of attention and censure this information might draw. She wants to spare him pain, or the necessity of explaining himself, because they're sisters in arms and she's maybe felt that kind of pain herself.

"I know," he says, gently. "But it seemed faster than calling up every author and yelling at them for getting it wrong."

"Guess so," Jessica agrees, nodding down at the stack. "So I get to be the person who enters you into the record as a femme fairy communist activist and unwitting lab experiment."

"Socialist," Steve corrects, smiling. "You think you're up to it?"

Jessica's answering grin is wide and white, like a shark's.

"Oh, I'm looking forward to it," she says.

"I'll be here if you need any backup," he promises. "I know people will say you're making it up, or altering documents."

"Really? You think people will wonder why one of the most visible trans academics at a major research institution just happened to find a goldmine of info on genderqueer Captain America for her archive?" Jessica laughs.

"You can tell them I found it all, and I'll write you a letter to verify it," Steve says. "But yeah, I imagine people will talk about bias."

"And no one will talk about the vast systemic bias that led to your queerness being erased from history in the first place," Jessica sighs. "I'm on it. I promise you this, Captain Rogers. We'll make this information free. Every scholar, every historian, every queer kid with internet access will be able to read these letters and look at these photos."

Steve nods, a fire lighting in his heart at the idea. "That's just what I was hoping for," he says. "By the way, I've also made a list of the stuff that's out there somewhere that I wasn't able to find. In case you don't have enough to do."

"Love it," Jessica says. "Can I email you if I have any questions?"

"Please," Steve says. "Anytime. I'll give you my phone number too, you can text me."

"Texting with Captain America," Jessica says, as they both rise from their chairs. Steve shakes his head firmly.

"Steve," he says. "Some days I feel like I don't really know that Captain America guy."

Jessica nods seriously. "Steve," she repeats, slowly. "I won't forget that. Gender-neutral pronouns are okay, for the labels, the collection, all of that?"

"Yeah," Steve says, because while he still thinks in masculine pronouns for himself, he likes the
idea of this collection using something else for him, out of respect for his life. His life up to now.
"You bet."

She nods again, biting her lip and looking away, and Steve realizes suddenly that she's crying. Before Steve can think of something to say or do, she's pursing her lips and shaking her head once as if to clear away her tears.

"Hey," Steve says, awkwardly, wishing he had Arnie's ability to comfort people, or Natasha's to make a joke, or Sam's to ask just the right question at the right time. "Hey," he says again, instead, and steps toward her.

She's tall, almost as tall as Steve, but when they fit their bodies together in a hug, she tucks her head down so she fits under his chin. Steve holds her tight.

"Sorry," she says, laughing against him. "I was trying really hard to stay professional."

"It's okay," Steve says, as they pull apart again. "It's honestly the best part of coming out. I get a lot of hugs these days."

She laughs. "Right? I remember that too. It means a lot, to find your community. When you find the right people to welcome you."

"Yeah," Steve agrees, and finds his voice choked, tears struggling to leave his eyes. He blinks them back, taking a deep breath, and sets his palm on the stack of documents, no more than a foot high, that will give his communities to the world, and welcome his people into his life.

"It's a good feeling," he says.

When he turns to leave, Jessica stops him with a gentle hand on his arm. "You forgot your box," she says, picking it up off the desk. He blinks at her in confusion for a moment, and she raises an eyebrow at him. "Unless you're trying to tell me you're done filling it up."

"Good point," Steve says, and takes it from her. On the side, it still says STEVEN GRANT ROGERS, CAPTAIN – KNOWN ASSOCIATES, 1918-1945.

"Just gotta fix one thing, though," Jessica says, and picks up a marker. Solemnly, she crosses out 1945 and, underneath, writes the word PRESENT instead.

"Perfect," Steve says.

Chapter End Notes

The end.

Click "next chapter" to read the annotated bibliography, which includes a lot of the research I did as well as a bunch of recs for fannish things - meta, art, vids - that inspired me to keep writing for three years.
This is an incomplete list of sources that I used for research and inspiration while writing this story. I also learned a lot from Wikipedia, all kinds of web resources that I forgot to write down, my betas, my twitter pals, and my military historian dad. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the research process for this fic!

Stuff Appearing in the Fic: (in order of appearance)

This is the kind of baseball card Steve got for Bucky – 1920 W522 Zach Wheat #33. Zach Wheat is actually pictured twice in that set, but I imagined Steve getting Bucky the smiley headshot, not the shot of him with his mitt about to throw. The cards say Zach and Wikipedia says Zack but I went with Zach.

Richard Wright's anti-war speech, from which I drew heavily (word for word in some places) for Valentine's anti-war speech in Harlem.

The Poem Bench, Dupont Circle, Washington D.C. (note: link has autoplay sound) – the poem engraved into the ground that Steve finds on his run is real, and is really located near Steve's apartment in Captain America 2. The poem is by E. Ethelbert Miller. It is meant to go along with the Walt Whitman quote engraved over the local subway entrance, which is also about caretaking for the ill. Together, the two poetry selections form a story, across history, about queer caretaking.

2015 DC Black Pride photo collection from The Advocate This link goes to the particular picture that was the inspiration for the one Sam sends Steve, of a guy in a Captain America t-shirt making a peace sign. Aw all these photos are great, though!

Soda Fountain Dress in Grape My inspiration for Steve's date night dress with Sam.

DC McDonald's Minimum Wage Protest This is the kind of thing I had in mind writing Steve doing minimum wage protests with fast food workers in DC.

Non-Fannish Sources and Influences

1. Books/Articles:

Alexander, Jeb. *Jeb and Dash: A Diary of a Gay Life, 1918-1945*. I was interested in this as a memoir detailing gay life in Washington in this era, and while there was a lot of interesting stuff in it, I ultimately didn't find it useful for the fic. On its own, it's a somewhat sad, somewhat hopeful, very touching memoir.

Berube, Allan. *Coming Out Under Fire*. I love this book to pieces and would recommend it to anyone. It's thorough, specific, contains a ton of amazing first-hand stories from gay GIs in WWII, plus it's funny and thoughtful. Berube's working with limited information, but works hard to foreground what info he has on gay people of color and gay women in the American military. There are stories and details in the fic taken directly from Berube, most notably the story of gay
men in New York hearing about the Nazi persecution of queer people from gay Jewish German refugees. And the military drag performers; there's a whole chapter on military drag performers that I heartily recommend. I typed out a bunch of my favourite quotes from this book, if you'd like to peruse them, but it's well worth reading in its entirety.

Brown, Ricardo. *The Evening Crowd at Kirmser's*. This is actually a memoir, written many years later, about a gay bar in Minneapolis in the forties (post-WWII). Even though gay culture in Minneapolis was vastly different than that of New York (Brown went to NYC at one point and found the fairy/drag culture unappealing), this still gave me a lot of valuable historical insights about the day to day lives of white gay men in this era, what kinds of things could fly under the radar and what was risky. Really fascinating read.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York*. This is a classic reference for this era in gay history, and a lot of fic writers thinking about Steve in this era have made use of it. I find that it's a wonderful book for getting a general sense of trends and communities, but terrible for specifics. So it was a great starting point for me (plus, I already owned it, score) but didn't really give me the details about how the communities changed and developed that I was hoping for. Tell me what years things happened in, George Chauncey!

Cory, Donald Webster. *The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach*. This is a really interesting book, because it's published by a gay man in 1951, with the intention of "explaining" gay men to the straight world. It's a difficult text to read, in part because it's so anxious, in part because it's so quietly furious, but it also gives a sense of the terminology that's in play in this time, the intersection of queer community language and psychologizing language (legitimizing language). One of the pioneering works of gay rights literature in America.

Groth, Paul. *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States*. Bless Paul Groth. Bless him. Bless his ability to answer my question about whether or not women who weren't prostitutes would live in the same crappy rooming houses as men. Bless him for ending that hours-long research spiral. This book is actually super fascinating in its own right, too; I learned a lot about how NYC living arrangements worked pre-/post-/during Steve's era. If anyone's writing about Peggy Carter, there's a fair amount of info in here as well on single women's professional rooming houses like The Griffith.

Johnson, James Weldon. *Black Manhattan*. Written in 1930, this is obviously a huge classic work of sociology/history, and it was completely fascinating to me. I knew so little about black civil rights history in the north – and so many online resources are all about civil rights in the south that it became hard to answer questions about what kinds of oppression someone like Valentine would be used to seeing in NYC. This helped answer a lot of those questions for me, and it also provided a beautiful window into the Harlem Renaissance and various artistic/cultural movements at the time.

Kaiser, Charles. *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996*. This author is terrible and no one should trust a single word that he says. He's downright wrong about historical constructions of queerness, and his skewed perspective comes through in every word he writes. Gross and pernicious shit. That said, he also has some AMAZING interviews from gay people quoted at length in the book, and that's the reason to pick it up. Ignore everything the author says; enjoy the vast, varied, detailed descriptions of queer sex and sexualities in the past. The first-hand accounts are great, even if Kaiser's framing of those accounts should be thrown in a fire and burned.

Kyvig, David E. *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940: How Americans Lived Through the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression*. This is such a useful book, because all too often historians are really interested in Broad Sweeping Trends and not interested enough in what life
looked like for average people. It was really good for learning about food and laundry and transportation and so on. Special thanks to this book for answering my question about whether they would have light switches in a rooming house in Brooklyn in the forties. (A: they wouldn't. Pull-cord light bulbs.)

McGarry, Molly, and Wasserman, Fred. *Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth-Century America*. This is a beautiful visual resource that I paged through almost daily at one point, getting a sense for the fashions and the people of this era. Gorgeous book, very well annotated and compiled, and it did my heart a lot of good to look at these pictures of historical queers.

Nursall, Alex. *Eyeliner and Liner Notes: The 1940s*. Good article on 40s makeup fashions and available resources! I didn't have Steve put boot polish on his eyelashes but it wasn't because I didn't want to.

Siebers, Tobin. "Sex, Shame, and Disability Identity" in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub. This article, and the Mark O'Brien poems that it references, greatly influenced my thinking about femininity, disability, and bodies that disobey or fail masculinity. Steve conceptualizing his disabilities as a kind of femininity is obviously fraught, and this article helped me think through that. If you'd like to read it, I've uploaded it on Sendspace.

Van Amber Paske, Janet. *Stories and Recipes of the Great Depression*. This was a helpful source on what Steve and his mom would've eaten during the Depression. Yikes.

Zinn, Howard. *The Peoples' History of the United States*. This was a great general source for me on American history and politics. Steve's attitudes on the FBI are drawn particularly from this Zinn article. It's more about the 60s Civil Rights era, but it's a good encapsulation of the problems earlier civil rights organizers had too.

2. Films:

*Cradle Will Rock*, 1999, dir. Tim Robbins. This is one of my old favourite films of all time. It's about unions, and artists, and FDR's welfare state, and the war machine, and American complicity in fascism, and every kind of hypocrite and well-intentioned believer. It's a smart and uncompromising film, and it gives a great picture of NYC in the 30s.

*Pride*, 2013, dir. Matthew Warchus. This is my new favourite film of all time. I cried so hard I thought I was going to dissolve. It's so hopeful, and so great: about activism, and unions, and queers, and intersectionality, and connections across communities. This had a huge effect on me while I was in the midst of writing. It's why one of the chapters is called Bread and Roses.

3. Web Resources:

150 Years of Lesbians and Other Lady-Loving-Ladies An amazing photo resource, covering a huge span of time. A few photos in here inspired me in thinking about Danielle and Valentine's fashion choices. Many photos in here inspired me to be happy.

A 1932 Illustrated Map of Harlem's Night Clubs Not actually useful for this story, as I didn't send Steve up to Harlem much, but I put it here because it's beautiful and interesting and might be useful to others who are writing stories set in this era.

1940s New York This is a cool flyer and market analysis published in 1943 about the different boroughs of New York. The Brooklyn one helped me figure out where to set a lot of scenes in the early chapters, helped me figure out distances and subways, and also gave me the street names that
Steve would've used Catholic Worker publications. It was so fascinating to go back and read some of Dorothy Day's early Catholic Worker stuff, especially the anti-war stuff from the 1940s. She's so staunch and so unflinching. I never knew that there were such strong post-Pearl Harbor pacifist/anti-war voices in America. I did a lot of research and investigation into the Catholic Worker movement, as I wanted to make Steve part of it while also making him somewhat estranged from his Catholicism in other ways. It's such an interesting history.

Changing New York. A collection of photographs from the New York Public Library archive, based around a project by photographer Berenice Abbott in 1935. Tons of cool photos of New York from the 30s, filter-able by lots of different criteria. Great resource.

Core NYC History. The history of CORE, which was my inspiration for a lot of Valentine's opinions and activism. In the story, Valentine references friends in Chicago who are trying to start up an organization like the Committee for Peace at Home, and in my mind, Valentine has some connection to Bayard Rustin. Researching CORE and Bayard Rustin had a huge influence on how I wrote Valentine and her politics.

Critical Past. This is an amazing stock footage website, searchable by era and keyword. I used it to find lots of video about and of New York/Brooklyn in the 30s and 40s, and learned a lot about how things looked and felt in that time. Most notably, this is where I found Richard Wright's anti-war speech, from which I drew heavily (word for word in some places) for Valentine's anti-war speech in Harlem.

Glamourdaze.com Great resource on 30s/40s makeup and fashion! Lots of great articles and links and images here.

Harlem: 1900-1940 Exhibition by the New York Public Library. The website is SUPER annoying and the bibliography desperately needs updating, but there are some great resources here, including a great photo gallery and links to various articles and speeches from Harlem activists and artists of the time. Great background for thinking about Valentine's bohemian artist family.

History Is a Weapon. This website is amazing. It has a ton of great resources that helped me navigate the gap between popular American history and suppressed American history. Very, very useful for challenging all the assumptions I had about America in general and this time period in particular.

National Women's History Museum: A History of Women in Industry: The Depression and WWII. Great resource from the NWHM with all kinds of posters and other documents from working women's history in this period.

On the (Queer) Waterfront: Brooklyn's Hidden LGBT Past. This has such a great selection of pictures and stories of Brooklyn's queer past; what a delightful resource!

Student Activism in the 30s. This was a really interesting and useful resource on the kinds of student activism that Danielle might've been engaging in, whether or not she was ever a student herself.

A Timeline of Slang Terms for Sexual Intercourse, for Oral and Anal Sex, and for Orgasm, Bodily Fluids, and Contraception. SO cool. I didn't really make use of the more colorful ones, because gosh, but this is super fun to scroll through, and great for checking on the validity of using a certain term at a certain time.
Walkout on War Pamphlet, Brooklyn College: The Walkout on War protest that Danielle talks about organizing at the beginning was a real protest; here's a flyer that was posted at the time. There were concerns about nationalism/xenophobia/the war effort leading to the censorship of American colleges, and also about American colleges becoming soldier-factories for the war machine. All the other strikes and protests she and Steve mention are also real ones drawn from that time period (Garment Workers' Strike, Sugar Strike, and so on) and you can read up on those if you're interested.

What Does Body Dysphoria Feel Like? I read a bunch of different sources on body dysphoria for this fic, but this one was the most useful to me, as it had a lot of different first-hand stories and experiences. I struggled with how to represent Steve's dysphoria, since for the most part it's not completely analogous to the regular human kind. It's important to note that not all trans/genderqueer/nonbinary folks experience dysphoria as well.

The photographer Weegee took a lot of photos of the queer community in New York at the time; I especially love this photo, which made me think of Betty being arrested Crossdresser. But also these photos: Transvestite in a police van, Man Arrested for Crossdressing, Men Arrested for Crossdressing, New York, Men Arrested for Crossdressing, New York (2), and Police Officer Arresting Man for Crossdressing, New York. It's worth noting that Weegee was exploiting the queer community for photos, but also worth noting that these are some of the few photos we have of this systemic oppression at this time.

4. Songs:

Bread and Roses: As Steve explains in the fic, this song is based on a poem which is based on a speech; a woman made the speech originally, and then a man wrote the poem, which to me explains why there's a What About The Mens verse. But it's a beautiful song, I find the sentiment expressed in it incredibly valuable, and I listened to it and sang it and cried about it a lot.

Camp Records: These songs are from the 60s, so twenty years after Steve's time, but there's a fair amount of continuity in terms of culture and terminology, especially because WWII is a huge moment in American gay history, in the way it spreads gay culture all across the country and brings previously isolated communities and people together. Anyhow, I listened to these adorable, hilarious songs many times while writing, to put me in that queer queer mood. JD Doyle, the archivist who's collected these (and whose queer music podcasts are AMAZING in general) argues that these songs may not have been made by gay men, but there's such affection and community in-jokes in them that I really disagree. To me these songs are one of the most precious kinds of historical document: pieces made in, by, and for the community, without reference to the mainstream, so there's no anxiety and no attempt to make the community look better or different than it is. This is probably the kind of thing that Steve's queer barbershop quartet would've gotten up to. And it's worth noting that "A Bar Is a Bar Is a Bar" is a parody of a traditional tavern song ("There Is a Tavern in the Town"), which happens to be the same tavern song the Howling Commandos are singing in Captain America: TFA. :D

The Internationale (traditional English language version): Did I make Steve Rogers sing L'Internationale in a fic? Yes, yes I did. Possibly my greatest accomplishment. This is the version he would've known.

The Internationale (Billy Bragg version): I really love the Billy Bragg version of the song, too, especially "freedom is only privilege extended unless enjoyed by one and all."

My Buddy: Allan Berube has a great couple of paragraphs on this song, in which he talks about how masculine affection develops during the war years. This song is a great example of non-
anxious, physical, romantic, overtly non-sexual male/male love in the early 20th century in America. The song was written in the 20s, and is about soldiers in WWI, but it became hugely popular again in WWII and Steve and Bucky undoubtedly heard it many times. I need a Steve/Bucky vid to it.

The Preacher and the Slave This song, and the story of Joe Hill, would've been part of Steve's cultural narrative, if he was involved with unions in NYC in the 30s and 40s. Gives a sense of the critiques of religion coming from the working class/unions and why I think Steve would be so dedicated to service as the fundamental pillar of religious life.

Fannish Sources and Influences

Here follows a list of amazing fanworks that inspired me, influenced me, and gave me knowledge. I'm so grateful to all these fans.

1. Meta:

flarechaser's analysis of Steve's Brooklyn landmarks/communities This is such a great post, so thorough and well-researched! It branches off from my post about Steve's queer neighbourhood and talks about the intersections of Catholic churches and schools, male brothels, communist communities, etc. Such impressive work! I have not done justice to this level of research, not at all. But it's gorgeous and I recommend it highly.

gyzym's tag meta re: Steve leaning on a wall in Cap2 I loved this tag meta so much I had it open in a tab for like a month. It totally made it into my fic!

Historically Accurate Steve Rogers I haven't even been through this entire tumblr, because I didn't find it until I was deeeeeeep in the writing process (damn it! it would've been a lot more useful to me earlier) but it's a great collection of posts discussing Steve's background and politics and his comics liberalism. Lots of great resources here, and reminders about some of the issues that the comics and movies tend to brush right by (eg Japanese Internment Camps).

MCU Wiki Timeline This is what I used as a reference for when MCU events are supposed to take place, though I fudged it in a few places (because what the heck is even going on with IM3, why isn't anyone else helping???).

melannen's great post on Steve's back pay I'm really grateful to Melannen for working out how much Steve might have coming to him in back pay, as it was crucial for a few plot points in the later chapters. Awesome analysis!

Steve Rogers Isn't Just Any Hero This article by Steven Attewell does a really good job summing up how (mostly 616) Steve Rogers represents a very specific kind of New Deal Liberalism, and how he would've been exposed to a lot of socialist politics as well. One thing that Attewell doesn't address is how Steve's background and politics (Catholic, son of immigrants, pro-union, at the least socialist-adjacent) would've brought him continuously into the path of anti-war politics and pacifism as well. In fact, I've never seen one of these "why Steve Rogers was liberal" articles or tumblr posts that discussed Steve in the milieu of anti-war/pacifist politics, despite that being a key discussion within those communities at that time; if you know of one I'd love to read it.

Stucky-Official's discussion of Sam's PJ training This was SO interesting and informative! Sam's Pararescue training would've made him such a huge badass. I loved this post and tried to reflect it in portraying Sam's competence and his variety of skills.
teaberry's post on Sam Wilson's Accidental Superhero Club I read this after I'd constructed the plot about the superpowered kids and Sam's relationship to them, but I loved this meta/story/notfic so much that I had to mention it here. The way this story frames Sam's ability to listen and build communities was so inspiring to me.

And, just so no one comments to tell me about them, I'll also reference my own meta posts. :) Mr Rogers' Gaybourhood, about Steve's very queer surroundings in Brooklyn; on gay and queer, which discusses the terms used for queer people and queer sex in the forties and today and the way in which our ideas about sexualities in the past are strongly shaped by current political approaches to sexuality; and I'm the tyranny of evil men, my Cap2 review that discusses the political undercurrents in the film and Nick Fury's character arc. The Nick Fury in this fic is definitely the Nick Fury in that post.

2. Vids:

While writing this story, I would sometimes find myself low on feels, and in need of a feels fill-up. So I would watch these vids, over and over, to remind myself of these characters and their FACES and all the many lots of feelings I had. I was fond of saying, throughout the process, that my story was poised exactly halfway between "Freedom Ride" and "Hey Ho," and indeed I still feel that way. Hot little fandom bicycle critiquing the war machine. :) Or, to put it another way: queer poly ethics offer systematic critique of the military-industrial complex. Seriously, though, a lot of these were huge influences on me and how I saw the characters, the universe, and the relationships, and I'm grateful for all the thought and critique and analysis in these vids. I learned a lot from them.

A Thousand Miles by rhoboat – Sam/Steve and their beautiful open soaring gorgeous love! I wrapped this vid around me like a blanket while writing the Sam/Steve romance parts.

Carry On by settiai – Steve, Steve/Bucky, grief, and moving on. Heartbreaking.

Clear the Area by kaydeefalls – AMAZING Sam POV vid! This depicts Sam as having a kind of thoughtfulness/critical distance about his relationship to Steve – while simultaneously being ALL IN – that inspired many samfeels in me.

Clint Eastwood by giandujakiss – body horror and the terror of the oncoming future and the way Steve and Bucky's bodies become tools to be used by the state. So creepy and smart.

Crew by Isagel – my absolute favourite Avengers team vid! I love how this shows the slow buildup of trust and camaraderie among the group. So happy-making.

Don't Stop Believing by purplefringe – always there to remind me that Sam and Steve are really that cheesy around each other. OMG these two. This vid gives me the silliest and happiest of Sam/Steve feels.

Firewood by nel_ani – oh god this vid. Such a huge influence on me. Steve's willing to sacrifice himself. And his process of waking up from the ice is so slow, and so painful, and never precludes that sacrifice from happening again. Augh. The tears. Especially on "everyone knows you're going to live."

Freedom Ride by sallysparrow017 – ahahahaha b/c Steve Rogers is the BEST fandom bicycle. I think my favourite thing about this vid is that Steve is so hot that he's both the subject and the object of the song. Nobody ever count how many times I have watched this. I could've invented cold fusion in that time. No regrets tho.

Hey Ho by thuviaptarth – incredibly formative for me and my thinking about the Marvel universe.
I learned so much from this vid. This is how Marvel creates the war machine, both in-universe and in our universe. And how the victims of that war machine nonetheless end up being its greatest proponents.

**Holding Out for a Hero** by china_shop – look sometimes you just need to watch Sam Wilson be badass. Sometimes you need to watch that a LOT. This vid delivers.

**How Far** by kaydeefalls – augh I love this one SO MUCH! When you look at all of Steve's past and future mashed together, what's really changed, and what's he really fighting for? The end section always makes me cheer "burn it all down!" Like I physically cannot refrain from lifting my arms in the air in joy when I watch this.

**I Will Be Your Home** by sweetestgale – One of my favourite Tony/Rhodey vids! This staunch, self-sacrificing, withdrawn, loyal, loving Jim is the guy I put in my fic.

**In the Bullpen** by genusshrike – I always come back to the amazing editing on "I love this job but oh good god sometimes I hate this business" – it fits in perfectly with the Natasha I wanted to write in this fic.

**Intervention** by legoline – Jesus Christ poor Steve. He gives up everything. The two bits in this that get me the most are "working for the church while your family dies" and then also "they're gonna get their money back somehow." That second line was really inspiring for me in thinking about how the Army and the SSR and SHIELD all just want to wring Steve out for all he's worth. And how Steve resists.

**Radioactive in the Dark** by cantrous – really amazing Cap2 vid about Steve's journey and what he's up against. Absolutely killer ending.

**Sorrow** by trelkez – does what it says on the tin, I guess you could say. Which means: reduces me to tears on the regular. It's deft and gentle and delicate while it deals with so much pain. STEVE OH GOD

**The War Was In Color** by settiai – Steve-centric, Steve/Bucky, Steve/Peggy. I watched this vid every day for like a month at one point in writing. You may notice that a lyric/concept from the vid made it into the story. :)

U.S. This vid is about Steve's legacy, all the experiments and all the inspiration, how those two things are at odds with one another. I didn't see this one until after I'd finished my first draft, but when I did I was gape-mouthed with joy and recognition, and I said, "wow, that's chapter three."

**When You Came Around** by tehlime – oh this just fills my heart up with joy and with Sam/Steve feelings! They need so much from each other, and they're both willing to give it. To me this is about the generosity of their love.

### 3. Art:

Huge thanks to eruthros, who maintains the wonderful tumblr account thingsfortwwings, a collection of things she thinks I might like. It's SO FULL of things I might like. Again, when I was feeling low on feelings, I would go and hit the Steve Rogers tag on thingsfortwwings, where there were so many great arts that I could just fall delightedly into them forever. I can't possibly list all the great Steve-related arts that I love and that influenced me, but I want to give a shoutout to a few fanartists in particular who are super inspiring and wonderful.

**faun_songs** Amazing art of/headcanons for non-binary and trans characters, especially Steve,
Bucky, and Sam. I love all the ones of them in lingerie, dresses, makeup, and piercings. So fabulous. Also the Peggy/Steve and Peggy/Angie is wonderful. I just adore all these arts and the vision of this artist and I'm so grateful for all the things they've made.

k-atnight I adorrrre their Steve – so overwhelmed and blushy and subby! Love the Steve/Peggy, the Steve/Sam/Bucky, and especially the ones of Steve in stockings and garters. :D :D :D

kissingcullens So much great Steve, and Steve/Sam/Bucky/Natasha/Sharon, and so on and on. My heart hurts all the time looking at these, especially all the ones of Sam.

kivitaskuart Link goes to one drawing in particular that I kept open in a tab for like four months and looked at all the time. Such beautiful Sam/Steve, 100% my vision of them together.

shire-kaiju omg so many great trans and non-binary MCU characters, great Steve/Sam/Bucky (and permutations thereof), and pegging, and lingerie, and just . . . smiles and sex. Love all of it.

And all the other artists who've drawn Steve in lingerie, many of whom are archived at the thingsfortwwings lingerie tag. I can stare at pics of Steve in garters basically 4evr.

4. Comics

Are Marvel comics fannish or non-fannish sources? Let's go with fannish. A few comics that are important for the Steve of my heart or for canon knowledge for this fic:

Amazing Spider-Man #537 Of course Steve's famous "plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth" speech is all up in my Steve characterization all the time. I still get sniffly about it.

Captain America and The Falcon Vol. 3, #180 (1974) - When Steve can no longer bring himself to be called Captain America due to fundamental ideological differences with Washington, he decides to become a new superhero – Nomad! And designs and sews himself a new pretty costume with some serious cleavage! I am super inspired, both by Steve's strong dedication to his principles and by his love of cute costumes. This is also the issue where he trips over his cape. STEVE.

Captain America Vol. 3, #225-227 (1978) - Steve's lost his memories of his early, pre-serum life, and a dude says he can restore them! The memories he gets in this issue are retconned later – Steve isn't actually from Maryland, doesn't actually have a brother, etc. – but there are elements in here that are really fascinating: these issues depict pre-serum Steve as a pacifist, socialist, and anti-war activist (yes, they use all those words), as an artist, and very explicitly coded as queer by standards of the time (words used in the comic are pensive, withdrawn, gentle, artistic, non-athletic, sensitive, scrawny, not normal, no interest in girls or sports, etc.). His father is disappointed in his failure of masculinity and so forth, but then his brother is KIA and Steve volunteers for the serum. While this isn't canon anymore, I like that the comics imagined this possible background for Steve. Also interesting to think about how this is the source of Steve's canon MCU middle name (Grant) which is explicitly non-canonical at this time in 616. I like to think they could've brought his socialist pacifist sensitive artistic queerness into the MCU along with his middle name.

Captain America comics featuring Arnie Roth - This is a bunch of comics, all very interesting to read through, but if you want a summary of Arnie Roth's canon appearances trelkez has a great one here. It was really important to me to bring him back into the MCU, especially because the MCU uses Bucky to erase Arnie. Bucky, who is meant to be interpreted as straight, becomes the big, strong friend who protects Steve when he gets himself into scrapes, whereas in these 80s comics that was Arnie's job. MCU Bucky actually performs double queer erasure – he covers over both the canonically gay Arnie Roth and the super campy "boy partner" original Bucky Barnes – and this infuriates me so much that just queering Bucky himself isn't enough for me; I had to get Arnie in
Iron Man 3 Prelude, #1-2 - These comics explains Jim's absence from the first Avengers movie (he was indeed off fighting a nuclear Ten Rings tank in Hong Kong). So that's where I got that canon from. At the end of the comic, he shows up in NYC at the schawarma shop and joins the rest of the Avengers, just as it happens in my fic. :)  

As I said above, I truly can't count or even remember all the resources that I used over the last three years as I wrote this fic – there were so many, and I didn't keep track much early on. I did my best to research everything that needed researching; if there were still holes or inconsistencies, I'm sorry for that. I hope that some of these resources will be helpful to you if you are interested in writing about Steve. :) 

Chapter End Notes

I hope you've enjoyed the fic and also the bibliography for the fic! I know I had a wonderful time making all of this for you.

I don't currently plan to write a sequel and would appreciate it if no one asked me to. I do, as always, offer blanket permission for transformative works, so if you want to write a sequel, that's awesome and you should go for it. :D

**edited to add:** I very, very swiftly fell behind on replying to comments on this, for which I'm sorry. I can't tell you how much the comments mean to me, how much they lift me up and make me glad, especially all the comments sharing your personal stories and connection to the fic. I hope to come back and answer comments eventually, but for now, please know that I read every single one and that they move me to tears all the time. Love you all.

Works inspired by this:  
[One Good Ol' Days](http://archiveofour.org/work/224972) by [seekeronthepath](http://archiveofour.org/user/seekeronthepath), [Hard Times: Contemporary Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project 1936-1941](http://archiveofour.org/work/48616) by [tomato__greens](http://archiveofour.org/user/tomato__greens), [~A Gathering Between and Before~](http://archiveofour.org/work/61740) by [Haemish (an_fish)](http://archiveofour.org/user/Haemish (an_fish))

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://archiveofour.org/work/224972) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!