Chasing the Moon
by LoquitorLatinae

Summary

With the recent slaughter of his pack, the Howling Commandos, alpha Wolf Steve Rogers finds a new purpose with the SHIELD organization and the possibility of a new life with his teammates and fellow Shifters Bruce, Natasha, Clint, and of course their human consultant, Tony Stark. AU. Mention of Steve/Bucky, eventual Stony, and hints of Thor/Loki, etc.

Notes

So, this is the first of my stories that I've put onto AO3, the rest are still back at my FF.net page at: http://www.fanfiction.net/u/1473502/LoquitorLatinae.

In any case, this is my first story in the Avengers universe and, yes, it is another gratuitous Shifter!fic. Because I can. Enjoy!

As a disclaimer (please apply to all subsequent chapters): I do not own Marvel, the Avengers, or any of the characters in this story. I do own the plot. That is all. Also, there is liable to be some foul language in aforementioned subsequent chapters, along with possible sexy times, which is why this story is bumped up to M.

Let me know what you think! :(
Chapter 1

The wind rushed passed his ears as Steve raced through the forest, branches heavy with leaves casting strips of darkness across the ground in front of him. The ground itself was warm and damp with the remnants of a summer storm but the scent of the wet dirt did nothing to douse the cloying stench of blood still flooding his mind as he heaved in huge breaths of air.

He was running faster than he had ever run in his life, his heart pounding in time with every step he took. It felt like it was going to burst right out of his chest. He still couldn't believe that—No. No. NO! Steve's blue eyes snapped shut as if it would help, help to block out the sight still burned into his brain of his pack getting torn to shreds. And the sounds—the sound of it! He was going for help, for those left alive, there had to be someone who could help! There had to be someone left!

With his eyes closed, Steve missed a gnarled root protruding from the forest floor and it caught him. His tired muscles collapsed and a gust of air rushed from his lungs as his body tumbled down to land in a heap on the forest floor. Reality hit hard as he looked down and saw his yellow pelt soaked in red, blood running down in thick rivulets and spattering onto the ground. He tried to get up, to get his legs to just move, but couldn't do anything more than pant against the dirt, his tongue lolling out of his mouth as he failed to catch his breath. There was only so much even he could take. For a moment he considered trying to shift back, but, no, that would just leave him in worse shape.

Was this it then?

This is how it was going to end?

Without the others, Bucky…He was having a hard time convincing himself that he cared.

A soft whimper unfitting for an alpha of his caliber slipped from his throat. The pain coursing through his body wasn't even close to the pain his heart was feeling. It literally hurt, felt like his chest was getting torn in two. For a Wolf, an alpha, to lose his entire pack—those tight bonds suddenly stretched tight and snapped—even a healthy one could die of heartbreak.

Steve didn't know what his chances were and didn't want to know. He could feel and smell his own blood beginning to pool around him and his vision blurred as he began to slip into unconsciousness. The scent of the woods began to fade and sounds began to shutter off, the last thing reaching his ears the sharp, mocking caws of a raven circling the sky above him. He tried to stay awake but couldn't even manage that as his vision grew black.

If only he could get help…then maybe…

…Maybe somebody could be saved…

Steve awoke with a start and a broken name on his lips, his eyes wide and wild. It took him a moment for his senses to catch up. Fear, sweat, wood, metal, the hum of a heater, the smell and feel of laundered cotton…

Releasing a long, shaky breath, Steve ran a hand over his face and was unsurprised when his palm came away covered in sweat. He was home, his new home, and had been for over four months
now, but the nightmares—the nightmares never seemed to end. They probably never would.

A quick glance over at the clock on his nightstand told Steve that it was just past four thirty in the morning. There was no point in going back to sleep now but a long run before his meeting might do him some good. Especially if he could get far enough out of town and shift. It had been a while since he had been able to get a good run in and he wanted to feel the wind against his fur again, even if it triggered awful dreams. Just because that part of his life had ended didn't mean he could let himself give up. Not when he was needed—whole and stable—again.

Steve swung his legs out from underneath his covers, slipping out of bed before turning to his wardrobe and pulling out a pair of track pants. Pulling them up over his briefs, he ran his fingers through his hair to comb it out. He'd make himself presentable after he got back from his run. No need to go through the morning routine twice.

Ten minutes later he was out of his tiny apartment and jogging down the city street, his breath clouding up in front of him in the cold, early morning air. He kept up a slow, steady pace as he passed by other apartments and storefronts just beginning to show signs of waking. If he wanted to, he could've made it to the city limits in less than twenty minutes but there was no reason for him to push it. Shifters were rare and if any normal human happened to glance out their window and catch him running down the road at very inhuman speeds it might provoke a panic. That, and SHIELD would surely reprimand him and he was in no mood to be chastised.

SHIELD was a secretive government organization designed to both control and protect Shifters, to manage the danger they posed to humanity and to keep them from being persecuted from those same humans. Until very recently Shifters had been forced to live in the shadows or be hunted down as monsters. Wolf shifters, the most common breed of Shifter, had given rise to the myth of werewolves, men who turned into uncontrollable beasts and preyed upon men during the full moon. In reality the lunar cycle had nothing to do with a Shifter's ability to change forms, though Wolves always had a certain affinity for the bright light provided by the full moon at night. And all that about Wolves losing control and preying upon humans was the unfortunate result of a few bad seeds. Like normal humans, every once and a while a violent Wolf would come around and use their heightened strength and speed to do harm to others, particularly against humans who they often viewed as weak.

Steve wasn't one of those Wolves. He had always loved humans and he never blamed them when they reacted in fear against Shifters. Maybe it was because he understood how they felt. Before he had matured, he had been weak, the runt of the litter. Everyone, even humans, had seemed to be bigger than him, and he had felt fear. It wasn't easy being an orphaned Wolf in a world that didn't want you. But he hadn't let it get him down, and his hope and refusal to back down had won him good friends, like Bucky and Peggy. Then, when he had reached maturity and had experienced a growth spurt almost unprecedented among other Wolves he had gained even more friends and had been able to start a pack of his very own.

They had called themselves the Howling Commandos and under Steve's leadership had devoted themselves to keeping the peace in the land Steve had claimed as their territory. More than just keep the peace though, Steve's purpose in life had become to protect those weaker than himself, namely humans. Soon enough, SHIELD had taken notice and—much to Steve's shock—had decided to support the vigilante group. Well, support in the sense that they didn't interfere with the Howling Commandos' activities.

For five years the Howling Commandos had faithfully served their city and then their state and the United States of America itself as they began to expand their operations. Anywhere there were signs of an aggressive Shifter, anywhere there was a cry for help, Steve and members of his pack
would rush in to assist. And they never lost against their opponents, at least never when it counted. It wasn't that they had been stronger than the other Shifters—okay, Steve was unusually strong—but instead they used their heads. They came in with a plan and worked together so seamlessly as a team that all of their operations had the efficiency of a well-oiled machine. The "Special Forces" of the Shifter world, as SHEILD had once said. With Steve acting as alpha and Bucky as his beta, nothing had seemed impossible.

Nothing, that is, until Steve's world had collapsed around him in a wash of blood. The Howling Commandos had been on a regular mission in upstate New York, responding to a letter they had received begging for help with an aggressive Wolf running wild in the woods near a small town. Steve had brought the whole pack out because it had been relatively close to home and it had been a while since they had all come together as a proper unit. They had been lighthearted as they ran through the woods, Steve elated and charged as he led them bounding amongst the trees. With his beta Bucky at his side and the rest of his pack following closely behind, it had felt so right that Steve had been completely unprepared for what happened next.

Their enemy had fallen on them hard and without warning. The first to go was Dernier, the lean Wolf's sharp squeal of pain causing the rest of them to freeze in their tracks and spin around. Dugan and Jones leapt to help ward off the attacker but both were caught midair by two more wolves jumping out from the underbrush. Steve snarled in rage and had been about to launch himself into the fray when a strange scent had caught his attention. Another alpha, but it was… distorted.

By then Kruger, Morita, and Falsworth had already been pulled into the scuffle and Steve's attention was torn between them and the new threat. Bucky stayed close to Steve though, unwilling to leave his side as the other alpha's scent grew stronger until finally its source emerged from behind a tight copse of trees.

The hair on the back of Steve's neck stood up and the wolf inside him tensed as the Shifter stepped out into the light. The Wolf was as big as Steve had ever seen, slightly larger than Steve himself, and had a deep burgundy pelt that looked almost red in the sun. More mesmerizing than the color of its fur though, was the sense of rage emanating off of him. Rage and a touch of insanity that Steve had only ever sensed off of Shifters that had gone completely wild, given over completely to their animalistic side. And yet this one seemed to have some sense of himself left as he stared Steve down, his cold eyes locking with Steve's with a challenging glare that struck him in his core.

Steve shifted slightly to position himself in front of Bucky, knowing that his beta would never survive a confrontation from this creature. Bucky was strong in his wolf form, his jet black limbs particularly agile, but the raw power coming off of this guy was something else entirely. Steve had to act fast before the other could gain the upper hand more than he already had with the element of surprise. And sometimes the best plan of action was the most straight-forward one.

Letting himself run on the instinct of his inner wolf, Steve's muscles bunched up before he launched himself at the other alpha, the two crashing together in a tangle of claws, snarls, and teeth. Steve struggled for dominance, struggled for a firm foothold, anything, as the two tumbled together. He managed to sink his teeth into the other Wolf's haunches before he was thrown off, forced to roll to the side as the other went straight for his throat. Before the other's jaws could find purchase a black shape darted between Steve and the Wolf as Bucky slammed into its side.

While the assist provided enough time for Steve to avoid the hit, Bucky's weight barely threw the larger red Wolf off balance. Before Steve could go to his friend's aid the Wolf had snapped his jaw down instead on Bucky's scruff and whipped the black Wolf away with such force that it sent Bucky flying about four feet, only coming to a stop when his back cracked against the rough bark
of a tree. Steve let out a sharp yip as his beta fell silent but the sound was cut off as the red Wolf rushed him.

Steve could hear the sounds of the others fighting around him, caught flashes of fur out of the corner of his eyes, but couldn’t do anything to help them as all of his focus was pulled to just surviving his opponent's assault. He was holding his own, but just barely; each time Red managed to bite down or scratch into Steve's flesh, he returned the blow but he was distracted. His pack's cries and the smell of their blood spilling onto the ground were making it difficult to stay on task. He had to end this one-on-one now or he wouldn't make it to the others in time.

With this thought in mind, Steve gave himself fully over to his instincts. His human mind balked at the thought of killing, no matter the circumstances, but sometimes the situation left room for no other option. As his wolf reared up in his head, he fell upon Red with a new ferocity that seemed to startle the other Wolf. Tearing at whatever body parts were closest to his muzzle as they crashed back together, Steve slowly began to gain the upper hand. And Red could sense it.

Letting out a sharp snarl, Red kicked out at Steve and caught him right in his ribs, the claws on his back legs ripping into the golden Wolf's chest. With all the adrenaline flying through him Steve barely even felt the wound but the impact sent him stumbling back a step. It was all the time Red needed to make his escape, a fierce howl signaling the rest of the Wolf's pack to disappear into the woods as swiftly as they had descended.

Steve snapped at Red's tail as he escaped but didn't give chase, instead turning to his own pack to see how they had fared as he came back to himself. What he saw froze his heart.

For a moment he couldn't even move, only stare at his comrades strewn about their makeshift battlefield. He could tell just by looking at them, and by their smell, that they were badly injured, most of them even—even...

Steve shook his head and limped over to them, the sound of his footpads like thunder in the sudden silence. Leaning down, he snuffled against Falsworth's back, nudging the British expatriate gently with his muzzle. He smelled…dull. Woofing quietly, Steve nudged him once more, just, just to check. Maybe, maybe he was wrong. After all, he wasn't a doctor, maybe a doctor could still help him.

A soft whimper drew his eyes over to the trees. Steve hadn't thought he could feel any worse but when he caught sight of Bucky crumpled up against the base of a tree it felt like the ground had opened up and sent him into free fall.

Steve was at Bucky's side in an instant, curling up against the lither Wolf and running his tongue through Bucky's black fur. He tasted like copper. Panicking, Steve frantically tried to wash the blood trickling from a wound in Bucky's neck, nuzzling against his beta to try to get him to wake, to give any sign that he was alright. He had to be alright.

And he did give a sign. Bucky whimpered again and Steve felt him tremble against him. Another surge of panic welled up inside Steve as he realized that Bucky was shifting back into his human form. Steve growled to try and voice his displeasure—shifting would only aggravate Bucky's wounds and use too much energy—but his beta went through with the transformation anyway.

As soon as they formed, Bucky's lips let out a shuddering gasp embedded with so many layers of pain Steve could hardly stand it. A strangled scream soon followed and Steve's ears fell back to try and block it out, lapping at Bucky's chin and curling even closer against his now-human body, his pale skin streaked with red.
Bucky's face was twisted up in agony and it was only then that Steve lost any hope. The wound in his beta's throat was a possibly fatal one in of itself but it was worse than that. Something else was wrong and Steve wouldn't be able to fix it.

"St—Steve!"

Steve nuzzled against him again, nestling his muzzle under his friend's chin with a low whine and tried once more to wash away some of the still-streaming blood from his neck.

Bucky let out a wet cough and rubbed his cheek once up against Steve's head before trying to nudge him away. "Steve…S-stop. My back…it's my, my back...It's broken."

All the air rushed from Steve's lungs.

"You, you gotta get out of here. If, if they, they come back…Steve, you, you gotta run."

A snarl burst from Steve's chest before he could control it. He never ran, never. Once you started running you couldn't stop. And the very idea of leaving Bucky and the others like this made him want to choke.

Bucky understood and his eyes fell closed. Then they opened and he met Steve's gaze, his own eyes clouded over. "Then go get help. F-find help. Go, Steve."

Looking back at it now, Steve knew that Bucky had just told him that to get him to leave. All of them had been beyond saving, even Bucky. When the realization had hit, Steve had felt so betrayed. He had wanted to stay with him, offer him comfort if nothing else so at least he wouldn't have to die alone. Now Steve saw it differently. If their positions had been reversed, he would have done the same. Steve had been badly injured himself; if any one of their attackers had come back, Steve would've been killed too. Bucky had just wanted to save his life, just like Steve would've tried to save his.

Peggy had made him see that. She had drawn him from a deep depression after she had found him dying in the woods after having run twenty miles in search for help, bleeding out with every step. Peggy was a SHIELD agent, the fierce woman more than a match for most of the Shifters she had to deal with on a daily basis even though she was a normal human. She had known Steve before he had hit his growth spurt, back when the only friend he had in the world was Bucky and he was hardly big enough to remain standing when the wind blew too hard. She had made sure he was safe then, and when he had started to assemble the Howling Commandos she had spoken with SHIELD on his behalf and had been the one to convince the organization to support Steve's pack in their endeavors.

And two days ago she had visited him and told him that her supervisor wanted to speak with Steve about something important. She wouldn't say what, said she didn't even know herself, but she thought that it would be good for him. And that was good enough for Steve.

Blinking, Steve looked up and noticed that he had jogged all the way almost out to the city limits. Even at a slow, human-friendly pace he had made pretty good time and after the many miles he had traveled he wasn't even winded yet. Looking around, he noticed that he was getting close to the countryside and decided that he was far enough from high population densities to shift.

He really needed to run.

Ducking off of the main road, Steve jogged into the bushes for nearly another mile before deeming himself safe from prying eyes. Coming to a stop beside a long row of berry bushes, he efficiently
stripped off his track pants and his briefs and carefully folded them into a neat pile under the brush. Before he could even get cold he shifted into his wolf form and instantly loved the feeling of the brisk late-autumn air against his fur.

Steve even felt a little bit like his old self as he bounded into the green hills.

Four hours later, Steve walked back into his studio apartment, dressed back in his track pants and flushed red from exertion and the lingering chill. Smelling her even before he opened his front door, he was unsurprised to see Peggy sitting at the small table he had shoved into the corner of his room. He sent her a small smile and she returned the gesture. "I see you already got some exercise in this morning."

"Yeah. I, uh, I needed it. Do you mind if I…?"

Peggy waved a hand before running her fingers through her wavy brown hair. "Go ahead."

Steve nodded his thanks and moved towards the bathroom. A minute later Peggy heard the sound of the shower turn on, steam pouring out of the closet-sized room a moment after. Inside, Steve almost sensed Peggy's mood change to something more serious as he began to scrub the sweat from his hair. He wasn't surprised then when he heard her voice echo out over the sound of the water, her soft English accent comfortably familiar. "Are the dreams back?"

Biting his lip, Steve considered lying but quickly shook the thought away. He had no reason to lie except to save his own pride…besides, Peggy would know right away. He had always been a terrible liar and she knew him too well. "…Yeah. The same one."

"You know we have pills we could prescribe you to help you sleep better."

Steve shook his head before ducking his head under the water to rinse away the soap in his eyes. Pulling out of the stream, he wiped the suds from his eyes. "I know. And I appreciate it, Peggy, but I don't want them."

"They're specifically designed for Wolves so there wouldn't be any side effects."

"Again, thanks but no thanks." Finishing rinsing off, Steve shut the water off. "I like to sleep on my own, even if I can't sleep very well. Something about taking medication makes me feel… insufficient."

"Well, let me know if you ever change your mind."

"Sure." Steve felt around for his towel. Not finding it, he searched the room then let out a sigh. "Hey, Peggy?"

"What is it?"

Steve hesitated before stepping out of the shower stall, just out of Peggy's view. "Could you close your eyes? I left my towel in the other room."

He heard her laugh but let out a little noise of agreement. Peeking his head out of the bathroom, Steve checked to make sure that her eyes were actually closed then slipped out, skirting into the room and around his bed. Peggy smiled from where she was sitting at the table but kept her eyes closed, "Honestly Steve, I hardly know why you bother. It's not as if I haven't caught you in the buff countless times during your shifting."

A red blush lit up Steve's cheeks and traveled down his chest as he dug through his hamper. He
had meant to wash his clothes yesterday and had forgotten. "This is different! I'm not shifting, I'm just—"

"—Naked?"

"Yeah, that."

"Sometimes I think you were born fifty years too late."

"What? Never mind, don't answer that." Finally finding his towel, Steve whipped it out and wrapped it around his waist. "You can open your eyes now."

"Excellent. Now, I came to speak with you about—" Peggy cut herself off as Steve shook himself off like a wet dog, water drops spraying off and dousing Steve's bed and Peggy's clothes. Looking up, Steve shoots her an apologetic grin and she simply rolled her eyes. "—about the meeting this afternoon. And thank you very much for that."

"Sorry, didn't think about it. And about that meeting, are you coming or am I going solo?"

"I am to escort you to the SHIELD office but I was not authorized to attend the meeting. Don't worry though," she smiled teasingly at him, "I'll be waiting right outside in case you need me."

He knew she was just teasing but Steve was somewhat relieved that she would be nearby. It wasn't that he was nervous, Wolves just had a natural inclination to travel to new places with at least one or two companions. Nevertheless, he didn't want her to think that he was feeling any sort of anxieties over it. He was an alpha after all. "I think I'll be able to handle it. Who am I meeting, anyway? You haven't said yet."

"I did so. You are meeting with my supervisor."

"Who is…?"

Peggy pursed her painted lips at his prying, though her eyes were dancing. "His name is Agent Coulson and he's human. Anything more than that and you will have to ask him yourself."

Steve relaxed a little bit as he heard that he wasn't going to meet a Shifter. It wasn't that he was nervous, Wolves just had a natural inclination to travel to new places with at least one or two companions. Nevertheless, he didn't want her to think that he was feeling any sort of anxieties over it. He was an alpha after all. "I think I'll be able to handle it. Who am I meeting, anyway? You haven't said yet."

"As soon as you put some pants on, and preferably a shirt. The SHIELD office is rather a suit and tie sort of place."

Steve's face fell into a thoughtful frown as he turned to his wardrobe. "I don't have a suit. Should I go buy one?" He didn't have a lot of money, but he could probably stand to invest in some nice business wear if it was going to become a necessity.

Peggy was smiling at him again. "Steve, you're the most clean-cut Wolf I know. Also, I don't know if you even own any clothing that could be considered indecent. Just wear a clean pair of slacks and a button-down and you'll be fine."

Oh good, he could definitely manage that; he had a lot of those. "Can do." His hands paused as he reached for his underwear drawer and his blush returned. "Peggy?"

"Yes, Steve?"
"Could you, uh, wait downstairs? I'll be down in a few minutes. I just need to—"

"—get naked again?" Peggy's smile quirked up into a grin as she stood. "Of course. I'll see that the car's ready."

O~O~O~O

Steve joined Peggy outside on the street five minutes later to find her waiting for him in the back of a sleek black sedan, an anonymous driver dressed in a smart black suit at the wheel. Self-consciously smoothing his hair down, Steve stepped inside and tried not to show any sign of discomfort. This was already a little more high-brow than he was used to and he just hoped that he didn't embarrass himself. As he slid inside next to her, Peggy patted Steve's leg and he felt himself relax again.

They drove to the SHIELD building downtown in silence, Peggy's warm hand on his knee a calming presence the entire way. When they arrived, Steve tried not to act the part of a city bumpkin as he craned his neck up to try to find the top of the glass-lined tower in front of him. Even on the ground floor there was nothing listed on the structure to label it as a SHIELD outpost, but Steve trusted Peggy to lead him to the right place as she walked through the revolving doors and the modern, minimalistic lobby inside. It all felt very human, though he could distantly sense other Shifters. The lobby was scented with innumerable Wolves who had come in and out before him, more so than in the average office complex.

He tried not to squirm too much as she loaded him into a sleek looking elevator and pressed the button for floor thirty but she caught the movement anyway. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine. It's just, small spaces. You know."

"We're almost there."

Almost on cue, the elevator stopped moving before the doors slid open with a loud 'ding,' revealing a short corridor. At the end of the hall there was a reinforced door and Steve was finally met with that familiar eagle logo. Stepping forward, Peggy pulled out her SHIELD ID badge and ran it over a scanner embedded in the wall. A green light flickered on and Steve's ears caught the sound of a locking mechanism being undone in the door seconds before Peggy confidently pushed it open.

Marching confidently past the receptionist's desk with a brief nod, Peggy led Steve through a labyrinth of smaller winding halls until they finally came to a halt in front of a non-descript metal door with "Recruitment" stenciled in clear lettering on it. Steve blinked at the words in surprise. He didn't know what he had been expecting, but it hadn't been this. "Peggy, is this the right place?"

At the sound of his question, Peggy glanced over her shoulder at him as she gave the door a firm knock. "You'll be fine. Just speak with him honestly."

"Wait, Peggy, I—"

She didn't wait for Steve to finish his sentence. Instead, she simply opened the door, gave Steve a quick shove inside, and closed the door behind him. Steve's stuttered protests had no impact throughout the entire event and before he knew it he was standing in a room about the size of his entire apartment—though that wasn't saying much—staring at a man seated behind a wooden desk. The man himself didn't look particularly extraordinary and he smelled exceedingly human, just as Peggy had promised. But he did have a certain air to him as he sized Steve up from across the room that he had the authority to make Steve disappear with a snap of his fingers. Then he sent Steve an almost shy smile and the alpha realized that he at least had nothing to be worried about.
The man nodded to him and motioned towards a chair situated across from him, "Mr. Rogers. Please, take a seat."

Steve didn't really feel like sitting but it seemed like the polite thing to do so he accepted with a nod of his own. "Thank you."

The man's thin lips formed another quick smile before he seemed to remember himself and schooled his features. "Thank you for coming into see us. My name is Agent Phil Coulson, and I'm sure you have some questions for me about why you were brought here."

"Yes, sir, I have to admit I am curious."

"We, SHIELD as represented by myself, are very interested in discussing a certain business proposition with you. First, I, know it's hardly proper, but I have to start out by saying that I'm a huge fan."

Steve blinked, "Pardon?"

He almost would've sworn that the agent blushed. "Of your work, of course. Ever since Agent Carter brought you to our attention, I've been keeping close tabs on your activities and you've definitely impressed the right people."

Now it was Steve's turn to blush. Ducking his head, Steve rubbed the back of his neck in an attempt to ward off the flush that was spreading across his cheeks. "I didn't really do anything all that amazing."

"You might not think so, but your file says otherwise. Given the trials you were put through in your childhood, there was absolutely no indication that you'd grow up to be anything beyond normal, but you developed into something extraordinary. And I don't just mean your size or strength. Your actions and those of your pack proved time and time again that you have a remarkable penchant for leadership and high moral standards. I'm not saying it's impossible for Wolves to do right, but you've taken things to a level that is not necessarily part of the standard behavioral traits for your species."

"Thanks?"

"It was meant as a compliment."

Steve had thought so, but confirmation was good. "Thank you very much for saying so, sir, but I'm not all that special. I just do what I can to make a difference."

"So you'd like to continue your work?"

That caught Steve's attention and he couldn't help but be slightly suspicious. He trusted Agent Coulson, even though he had only known the man for a few moments he could sense that the agent was a good man. But that didn't necessarily mean that Steve automatically trusted Agent Coulson's superiors and what they seemed to have in store for him. "What do you mean?"

Coulson leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers under his chin. "Do you think it was just by chance that you were relocated to this particular city, Steve?"

After Peggy had found Steve dying in the forest he, along with the other members of the Howling Commandos, had been airlifted back to a SHEILD hospital. There was nothing to be done for the others but Steve had pulled through thanks to a combination of the best medicine the country had to offer and his own natural healing abilities that came with being a Shifter. When he had healed to
an acceptable agree Peggy had come to him with an offer of a small apartment in a new city and Steve had accepted. He had no real interest in staying where he had been living. It would've just kept dredging up memories. Besides, with the others gone, he had no real obligations to stick around for anymore.

But never along the way did Steve stop to think that there might have been some sort of ulterior motive behind SHIELD's support. "Well, I did think it was random, but I'm guessing that I'd be wrong."

Agent Coulson didn't seem interested in keeping him in the dark any longer. "We offered you a new start here of all places for two reasons. The first was because this is where one of our main headquarters is located so it would be easier to keep an eye on you and make sure that your recovery went well." Okay, Steve got that. Having a possibly unbalanced alpha Wolf wasn't something you'd want to let run supervised around town. "The second reason is because we knew that there would come a time when we could make use of your services, based on your notable track record."

So that was it. They needed him. Straightening up in his chair, Steve looked Coulson right in the eyes. Most humans shied away at prolonged eye contact with Shifters but the SHIELD agent held his ground without so much as blinking, a new seriousness in his steady gaze that told Steve they had finally gotten to the heart of the matter. "You have a mission for me?"

"Yes, Mr. Rogers, we do." Reaching down, Coulson opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a thick file. "We require your skills as a field operative to try and locate a missing person."

"And who would that person be?"

"One of our own." Coulson set the file onto the top of the desk and pushed it over to Steve in a clear invitation. Curious, Steve didn't waste any time in picking it up and flipping the manila folder open only to be met with a fuzzy photograph of a man. Agent Coulson watched for Steve's reaction then continued to speak as Steve went through the paperwork. "His name is Clint Barton and he's a SHIELD agent and a Shifter. He was sent out on a mission of his own a few months ago but we lost communication with him three weeks ago. We have reason to believe that he's still alive but we're going to need the help of someone like yourself to find and then extract him from whatever trouble he may have gotten himself into."

A frown pulled at Steve's lips as he turned back towards the front page of the dossier. "What about his teammates? Have they been reporting back?"

"He had no teammates with him."

"But, you said he was a Shifter." Now Steve was confused. No one, not even SHIELD, ever sent Wolves out alone on missions. They naturally functioned better as a team; in fact, a Wolf could only really get the upper-hand on their target in a group, assuming their target was also a Shifter as they usually were.

Understanding sparked in Coulson's eyes, "I see. You're correct, I did say he is a Shifter. And you'd be right to be concerned in standard situations, but Agent Barton isn't your standard Shifter."

"What do you—?"

"He's not a Wolf. He's a Hawk. They tend to work best alone."

A Hawk? Steve's eyes widened before he looked back down at the man in the picture. He had
never met a Hawk before. They were rare, even among Shifters. In fact, "I've never dealt with non-Wolves before." They just weren't enough non-Wolves around to have the opportunity.

"It won't be too much different, trust me. Besides, you won't be alone. We've assembled a small team to accompany you on your trip as support."

Good. Again, Wolves didn't work as well alone so any help Steve could get was welcome. "Will I get to meet them before we head out?"

"One of them. I'm afraid the second is a little more difficult to get in touch with, but both are reliable people who have worked enough with S.H.I.E.L.D. to gain our trust. The man you will get to meet is even a Wolf, so I hope that the two of you will be able to work well together."

"But you want me to be in charge of this mission, right?"

"That's correct. I have faith that no one could manage it quite like you could."

More good news. Steve was happy that he'd get the chance to work with a fellow Wolf but the last thing he wanted was to have to establish his dominance all over again. It probably wouldn't take a long time, but if S.H.I.E.L.D. was giving him full authority right from the start it would be just an accepted fact that he was in charge, no questions asked. "I'll do my best."

"Your 'best' is exactly what we're asking for. Now," Coulson held out his hand and Steve dutifully closed Barton's file and returned it, "I know you might already have a lot on your mind after this conversation, but I believe your new teammate is working here today if you would like to meet with him immediately. I would understand, however, if you would like to head back home and come back another day."

At the offer, Steve couldn't help but smile. "With all due respect, sir, it takes a little more than a talk to overwhelm me. And I would be very happy to meet with my new, teammate." Steve hesitated at the end of his sentence, the word "pack" on the tip of his tongue. He could already tell that he was going to have to constantly remind himself that he was not getting a new pack, just a team to lead. He couldn't expect that same level of community or devotion.

Agent Coulson smiled back as he pushed out his chair and rose to his feet. "Great. I'll have Agent Carter escort you to the Lab." Steve took the opportunity to stand as well and let the other man walk him to the door. When Coulson opened it, Steve caught sight of Peggy waiting for him right outside. His eyes were quickly drawn back to her supervisor as Coulson offered Steve his hand which he quickly shook. "Thank you for joining the team, Mr. Rogers. I can honestly say that it's been a real pleasure meeting you. I look forward to seeing you again soon."

"You too, sir."

Nodding, Coulson turned to Peggy, a small smile still on his face. "Agent Carter, please show our new recruit to the Lab. Last I heard Banner was still working down there almost non-stop, so there's no reason he shouldn't be there now."

Peggy straightened up, "Yes, sir."

With one last nod, Coulson closed the door, leaving Steve and Peggy standing in the hall. They looked at each other for a moment before Peggy tucked her arm in Steve's and grinned up at him as she began to walk him further down the corridor. "So, that seems to have gone well."

Steve let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding and grinned back. "I think so."
"Well I'm sure. Phil was practically glowing. It's obvious that he has a serious man-crush on you."

Darn it, Steve could feel yet another blush growing on his cheeks. "I don't know about that…"

"Either way, you clearly made a decent enough impression that he's let you in on his next mission. Especially if he's introducing you to Banner."

Steve's face smoothed into a more serious expression. That reminded him, "Peggy, did you know about the mission before you brought me here?" He was sure she had been listening behind that closed door.

A frown landed on Peggy's own face as she tilted her head. "Not much more than we had a missing field agent. I only knew Barton in passing, but believe me when I say that he's not the type to simply fall off the grid. I'm certain something has gone wrong."

"Do you think we have a good chance of bringing him back?"

"There's always a chance. And if anyone can do it, you would be the one to find him." Reaching yet another door, Peggy swiped her ID card again and it opened with a swish. "Now, there are a few things that you should know about Dr. Banner before you meet him."

Steve's eyes widened in surprise. "He's a doctor?" If Steve had heard right, Banner was a Wolf. Wolves usually didn't become doctors with an actual Ph.D. It wasn't that they weren't smart enough, it was simply that their other abilities funneled them into more manual occupations, if they even felt comfortable taking on a job among the general human populace at all.

"He's not just a doctor, he's one of the brightest minds in his field. Which, before you ask, is Biochemistry."

When Steve had been in school, he hadn't done well in either Biology or Chemistry, so he was already impressed. "That's amazing! But was that the other thing I had to know? Because you made it sound like it was something more serious."

"There's more. Before he came to work for SHIELD, he was involved with a series of experiments which devolved into something, less than legal." Seeing Steve's frown deepen, Peggy quickly clarified, "Banner himself is a good man, he simply got caught up in his associates' fervor."

"What exactly were they working on?"

"Given that I'm not a Biochemist myself, I don't know the specifics of it, but now that you have agreed to work with us I can tell you that they were working on what was essentially a method to alter Shifters' capacities when they transformed. To amplify the abilities granted to them in their animal form even further." Steve didn't like the sound of that. "Banner was intending to use the serum as a temporary boost to Shifters in order to allow them to achieve great feats of heroism but as I understand it he quickly began to doubt the moral compass of his colleagues. He began to conduct experiments in his own personal laboratory but there was an accident and, well, he experienced some unfortunate side effects."

Steve felt his stomach sink. "What sort of side effects?"

"You'll undoubtedly be able to sense something off when you meet him, which is why I'm even bothering to tell you any of this in the first place. The end result has been that he has lost nearly all control of his Wolf persona, along with his ability to control his transformations. Instead of having the normal capacity to shift at will, his transformations are now triggered by emotion. To make matters worse, he had managed to succeed in giving his Wolf persona an incredible amount of
added strength. I'm sure I don't need to stress to you the need to make sure Banner doesn't lose his temper."

"No, no I think I understand." Steve couldn't imagine though, being a Wolf and to not be able to control your other half. To be unable to allow yourself to shift. To be trapped inside your human form for the rest of your life, knowing what it felt like to run. It sounded like Hell. "Is there any cure?"

Peggy sighed. "He's been working to find one ever since. SHIELD had been keeping tabs on him ever since the accident but we just recently made contact to both make use of his research skills as well as to give him a secure place to live with people who can handle it if he loses himself."

It made sense and sounded like Banner and SHIELD were both getting something out of the deal. "Why was he assigned to the Barton case?"

"Because the assignment Agent Barton was originally put on was to scout out Banner's former colleagues at their remote research facility. That makes Banner an invaluable asset to you now since he's not only had access to the facilities but also knows who Barton was meant to be observing."

"Makes sense then."

"Good, because here we are."

Steve looked up at Peggy's words and peered curiously through the glass-lined room they had stopped in front of. Unlike Agent Coulson's office, this room was huge, though more than half of it wasn't visible from where they were standing. It was filled with computers, shelves full of chemicals, and long tables weighed down with beakers, Bunsen burners, and tools he couldn't even identify. All sleek lines, metal, and electricity, Steve already able to feel and hear the hum of transformers from outside. There were a few humans in white coats milling about near the computers, but Steve's gaze immediately locked instead on a figure sitting at one of the tables near the center of the room after his initial sweep of the space.

Peggy watched his expression for a moment before pulling her arm free of his and patting his shoulder. "I think I'll leave you to get acquainted. When you are ready to leave, report back to the receptionist and she will make sure that a car brings you home."

Steve hardly looked at her, too busy sizing up the newest and first real member of his team. "Sure thing, Peggy."

"Play nice, Steve. Remember what I told you."

That caught his attention. Turning, he flashed her a quick smile. "Don't worry. I'll be fine."
Chapter Notes

As a quick note, you can expect me to update this story about twice a week. I'll try to be good about sticking to that schedule, and hopefully that'll be quick enough for you dudes. I'm working full-time now so I don't have all the time in the world, but this is definitely a way that I relax at the end of the day. That being said, thanks to all of you who gave the last chapter kudos and bookmarks! It makes all the time I put into this worth that much more to know that folks out there are interested. :)

Chapter 2

O~O~O~O

Peggy was right about one thing; as soon as Steve entered the room he could sense that something was...off with the demure looking man hunched over one of the long steel work benches. From his presence and just by the way he was sitting Steve could tell that the Wolf was a natural beta, maybe even an omega, but certainly not an alpha. As he drew closer though, Steve could feel something almost writhing underneath the other's skin, something powerful but currently contained. Just barely.

Steve was hardly silent as he walked into the tiled room with his boots on and yet he managed to get within ten steps of Banner before he seemed to take any notice of the other Wolf. He was either so engrossed with whatever he was working on that he had really not noticed or he was an expert at masking his reactions. Most Wolves would've jumped to attention after sensing an alpha walk into the room. Steve would eventually have to figure out which it was because the difference could mean important things for how he incorporated Banner into any future mission operations.

As it was, Banner finally did rise to his feet but almost reluctantly. He seemed oddly nervous too as he turned to Steve and shoved his hands into his pockets, shoulders still hunched almost as if to make himself look smaller. "You must be the consultant Agent Coulson said he was bringing on."

Steve tilted his head, "Why do you think so?"

Banner's eyes flitted up and he gave a light scoff. "The Lab doesn't get a lot of Shifter visitors, and definitely not a lot of alpha Wolves. That, and I've done a little homework, Mr. Rogers."

"Call me Steve."

His chin jerked up and his eyes finally met Steve's. Banner gave him a sick smile, "You know about me."

It wasn't a question, just a simple statement. There was no point in lying. "Yes, I do."

Banner shuffled his feet which snuck him a few steps closer to Steve and his nostrils flared. He was scenting Steve, common practice among Wolves. Once he had his fill, the scientist rocked back on his heels as he bit his lip before his mouth quirked up in what almost looked to be amusement. "But you're not scared."
Again, a statement, not a question. "Should I be?"

There was that same sick smile. "That depends. But, we should be safe for now, so I suppose not."

"Good." It would be a shame to ruin a relationship before it even got off the ground. "I hear we'll be working together on the upcoming mission, so I figured I'd come and introduce myself."

"Unfortunately, or luckily, your reputation precedes you, and you've clearly already heard all about me, so there aren't too many introductions to be made." Sitting back down at his desk, Banner pulled a laptop closer. His fingers seemed to fly across the keyboard as he typed and Steve tried not to stare. Personally, he didn't use computers that much. Mostly because he was completely terrible with them. People who could type without looking at the keys might as well be magicians. "I have to say though, that I am interested in what made you agree to join up."

"I'm just doing the right thing."

Banner's fingers paused over his keyboard for half a second before falling back into rhythm, the subtle blue glow from his laptop screen lighting up his new little smile on his lips. "You know it's crazy, but I actually believe you when you say that."

Steve managed not to get insulted by that one. "That's because I mean it."

"And that's the scary part." Banner fell silent as he typed a few more lines into his computer then shut the screen and turned around in his seat to fully face Steve again. "I have a meeting with the other operative who will be working with us on Tuesday. You can come if you want to."

That was odd. Steve tilted his head to the side, "Coulson gave me the impression that I wasn't going to be able to meet with them before the mission started."

Banner took his suspicion in stride. "And he would be right, except in this case I set up a rendezvous up outside of SHIELD. She doesn't like coming into the office too often but I heard she was coming into town earlier than officially stated and decided to make some early contact."

It was a 'her' then? Interesting. "Have you worked with her before?"

"Nope. I've heard stories though, and let's just say that we're probably in for a, unique experience."

The way that Banner had stressed the word "unique" told Steve that it wasn't necessarily a good thing. Or a safe one. And this was coming from a guy who was carrying around an emotionally-controlled super Wolf with him. That didn't really improve Steve's outlook but at the same time it sort of made him all the more curious. "I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"Great. I'll let her know you'll be coming too. If we can exchange email addresses, I'll get in contact with you about when and where the meeting is going to actually happen."

"I don't actually have an email address…" Steve inwardly sighed as Banner looked like he had been slapped. Peggy had been hounding him forever to get one and even Bucky had been on him about it but Steve was not good with technology. And that was an understatement. It was a stereotype that Wolves were terrible with electronics but for him it was unfortunately true. Steve could do wonders with a hammer or a wrench, but he had the developmental skills of an infant when it came to understanding technology. There was just something about it all that flummoxed him. But honestly, the world had been getting on just fine before all that stuff came around; Steve didn't know why it was so important.

"Okay…We'll need to work on that." Banner said that last part under his breath but it was still
pretty easy to catch with his enhanced hearing. "In the meantime we can make due with your cell number."

"Uh…"

"Don't tell me—"

Steve's shoulders drew up defensively, "I didn't see the need."

Heaving a sigh, the other Wolf ran his fingers through his wavy hair, his tone a mixture of frustrated and amazed. "How in the world do people stay in contact with you?"

"I have a house phone and I can receive letters at my apartment. And usually Peggy, Agent Carter, just comes over if there's ever anything important to tell me." He felt like he was back in grade school and had been caught rolling around outside when he should've been studying. When Steve had said he wasn't good with technology, he wasn't kidding. Back when he had needed constant reports with the Howling Commandos, he had relied almost exclusively on his pack and word of mouth communication. That, and Bucky had owned a cell phone which Steve had him use for emergencies. Since then though, no one had really ever had to call him.

Banner shook his head, "House phone it is then." Thankful that the other was satisfied, Steve dutifully listed off the number which Banner programmed straight into his smart phone. But apparently he wasn't quite done discussing the topic. "So if I get you a cell phone, would you actually learn to use it, or would you just let it get buried under a pile of dirty laundry?"

Well, he never left dirty laundry lying around, but… "Unless it proves to be a problem, you'd probably just be wasting your money if you bought me a phone."

"Good to know. Anyway, you can probably expect a call from me tomorrow or the next day with the details, Mr. Rogers."

Steve offered Banner a soft smile. "Thanks. And I told you, call me Steve. If we're going to be working together, we should at least be on a first name basis."

For a fleeting moment Banner looked surprised before he offered Steve a small smile in return. "Seems reasonable. I guess you can call me Bruce then."

"Bruce it is. I'll see you soon then."

"Yeah."

O–O–O–O

Steve had left Bruce in the SHIELD laboratory and had returned home after hitching a ride from one of the organization's personal vehicles. Once he had arrived back at his place though, he had so pumped up that the very idea of going back into his apartment and being cooped up for the rest of the day made him feel claustrophobic. He had already gone on a decent run, but an afternoon workout sounded like just what he needed. He had bought a membership for a Shifter-friendly gym he had found a month ago six blocks away and right now that sounded like the perfect way to burn off some energy. Running up the front steps of his apartment building, Steve hurried into his room, changed back into his track pants and an old t-shirt, then bounded back out the door with a bounce in his step.

The walk through his neighborhood was as uneventful as any other, all the humans he passed by not even giving him a second glance, completely unaware that he was an entirely different species.
What would they think of him if any of them knew what he really was? A freak? A monster? Steve had heard it all before, just like every other Shifter did. Once or twice Steve risked looking into the faces of the people he was passing. One old man looked entirely unaffected as he swept the front of his small grocery store, his brown eyes set deep in his wrinkled face not even acknowledging Steve as he walked by. Then a woman who glanced him out of the corner of her own eyes as he passed her at the bus station. Steve blinked as a soft wave of arousal wafted by his nose and he looked away as he flushed knowing that she sure wouldn't like him much if she knew he was a Wolf.

Even when surrounded by people, Steve very rarely felt anything but alone.

When he reached the gym, the owner waved at Steve as he pushed his way inside and made his way straight for the section where the boxers trained. Steve didn't box—didn't trust himself to not do anyone serious harm in the ring with his unusual strength—but he did make use of their punching bags at least three times a week. He had broken a few too, but the owner was never too annoyed as long as Steve paid for the minor repairs.

Claiming his usual spot in the back, Steve went through a short warm-up routine then got down to work. He kept his pace slow and steady as he slung his fists into the bag, using the time to think as much as exercise. A lot had changed for Steve within the last four hours or so and he was still trying to sort it all out in his mind. He liked being out in the country side but this would be the first time since the Howling Commandos fell apart that he would be getting back to the more remote areas away from the city. It would also be the first time in a long while that anyone followed him into such a place.

But he was really doing this; he was going back out on another mission. Steve stared at the punching bag as his chest heaved, his cheeks red but this time with exertion and the bag still swinging from the impact. He was going back out. With another team.

Steve's hands shot out to steady the bag and instantly stopped it from swinging as he continued to stare.

Could he do this? He had been so sure in Coulson's office but the more he thought about it he could only remember the sound of his pack's cries and yelps. He had failed them, what if he did the same to his new team? Had he lost the confidence he needed to lead? What if he choked? Steve took a shuddering breath. This wasn't good. He shouldn't be having these thoughts now, not when he was about to get back in the field. No matter what logic told him though, the thoughts still came. Steve had always been self-conscious for an alpha, although so far he had managed to push any insecurity away when duty called. Peggy had told Steve once that it was probably because he had grown up so small, that he still wasn't able to acknowledge just how far he had progressed. Bucky had just said that he was being an idiot and that Steve could do anything he put his mind to. If only Bucky were here now…

A miserable smile pulled at the corner of Steve's lips. If Bucky were here he'd be laughing at him. Steve could almost imagine his voice in his ear, smooth and teasing. 'What's the matter, Alpha, can't take a little pressure? You know you're better than this, so stop worrying about it.' Letting out a long breath, Steve tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He couldn't let past failures shake him. 'Learn from it and move on. Do you really think I would've followed you around if I didn't believe in you? Now, come on, stud, show me what you got.'

Steve opened his eyes and sent his fist flying back into the punching bag. He could do this. Another punch followed, then another. Bucky had never given up on him and Steve wasn't going to insult his memory and everyone else in the Howling Commandos by backing down now. His punches were pounding into the bag now, the impact hard enough to make it jump around on his
chain. With a loud growl, Steve threw everything he had into one more punch. On impact the chain finally gave and the bag ripped right off of the ceiling, flying back about eight feet before hitting the ground with an ear-splitting bang.

The gym fell silent save for Steve's pants as he sucked in deep breaths of air. Finally, the quiet was broken as the owner snapped back to his senses and called out from across the hall where he was lifting weights. "Yo, Rogers, you're paying for that."

That wouldn't be cheap. But now that Steve was taking on that job for SHIELD, he would be able to afford it. "Add it to my next month's membership fee."

O~O~O~O

After the incident at the gym, Steve's world had rolled back into business as usual. Steve spent most of his time outside, prepping his body and his mind to be in top shape for when they finally went out into the field. If he was going to lead then he wanted to be at his best.

The hours passed by quickly, turning into days, but Steve still jumped when the phone in his apartment rang. He was just about to eat dinner when the thing went off and had to scramble to get to it stacked like it was behind a large duffle bag full of camping gear. Steve just managed to get it on the last ring and yanked it to his ear, "Hello? Rogers speaking."

"Hey. It's Bruce."

Steve had forgotten that Bruce said that he would call soon! "Hi! Do you have some news?"

"In a way. I've set up a meeting with our future co-worker for tomorrow at one in the afternoon at the park downtown." The park. That seemed like a good place to meet someone without being seen or noticed. "If it works for you, I can meet you at the transit station right outside the park and we can walk in together."

"Sounds good." There was a transit station not five blocks away from Steve so that wouldn't be a difficult trip to make. "Anything new I should know about before then?"

"Nothing other than that. I've been too busy on my other projects to think too much about our upcoming job."

At some point Steve was going to have to question the other Wolf on just what other projects he was working on. Not today though; even over the phone Steve could tell that Bruce was under some stress. "Okay. I'll see you tomorrow at one then."

"Okay. Bye."

"Goodbye."

Hanging up the phone, Steve returned to his dinner with renewed gusto, demolishing the meatloaf and instant mashed potatoes he had made for himself. The doubt he had felt earlier at the gym was still lingering in the back of his mind but most of it had been overshadowed by a growing excitement for the next mission, the thrill of the hunt. And after he met the second member of his team, he could start actually forming a plan to how best accomplish that mission. He couldn't wait!

That night he slept like a kid on Christmas Eve. Whenever he slept alone he tended to roll and thrash a bit, but that night he actually woke himself up at least four times from it. After kicking off the blankets, then pulling them back up only to kick them back off, Steve finally rolled around until they formed a small nest he curled up with a huff, one arm tucked under his head with the other
keeping his pillow clutched tight to his chest.

When Steve woke the final time to find the sun glaring at him through the blinds he gave up on trying to get back to sleep. Another short run helped to calm him down a little, although he didn't have the time to shift and get some proper exercise in. By the time he came back to his place, showered, and wolfed down a six egg omelet and a plate of bacon, it was time to catch the light rail to the park.

Steve usually preferred to walk everywhere that he could. Cars made him feel like he was caged in and while he liked humans, the cramped conditions of public transportation made him edgy. But the city park was all the way across town and unless he wanted to show up to the meeting covered in sweat the light rail really was the most efficient way to travel. But stuck inside the car between a rather portly business man and a college-student who really seemed to enjoy making elaborate hand gestures as she talked loudly into her cell phone, he began to rethink his decision. The smells of everyone crowded against him were nearly overwhelming and Steve had to ignore all of the information he was taking in. Instead, he stared out the window across the car from him and watched the city sail by.

With that distraction, his stop quickly arrived and Steve all but leapt out and sucked in a lung-full of fresh air. The park was only another two blocks away from the rail stop and even though Steve had never been up that way before—preferring the real forest to the manufactured, manicured one—he was able to follow his nose towards the scent of trees and grass. It stuck out like a beacon amongst the concrete and asphalt of the streets and skyscrapers that surrounded him.

Although he reached the entrance to the park almost fifteen minutes early, Bruce was already there waiting for him. Even if Steve hadn't seen the other man the presence of another Shifter was immediately noticeable and made the humans milling about seem like they were just figures in a faded photograph. Bruce caught sight of him just as quickly and gave Steve a subdued wave as he smiled at him. The other Wolf looked different in the sunlight; he had looked pale and withdrawn under the florescent in the SHIELD Lab but today his skin had a healthy golden undertone to it even though the bags under his eyes had darkened a bit since Steve had last seen him. At least he wasn't spending all of his time stuck indoors.

"Bruce, hello. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Not too long, no. I, haven't been out here yet, so I wanted to leave some extra time to get lost."

Steve grinned. "You seemed to have found it alright."

There was that shaky smile again. "Yeah, guess I did."

Pleased with himself for prompting even the smallest signs of happiness from the other, Steve motioned towards the park. "Do you think she's there yet?"

"I'd put money on it. But we can go find out for sure."

Nodding in agreement, Steve followed him through the opened gate and into the park. As he fell into step with Bruce, Steve could almost smell relief washing over the other Wolf. Relief for not having to be alone for what he was about to do. He was grateful that Bruce had thought to invite him along. He didn't need to after all, but it meant that Bruce already trusted Steve enough, at least on a subconscious level, to protect him from any possible threats.

Fighting his instinctual urge to get a few steps ahead of the scientist, Steve cleared his throat. "So, tell me everything you know about the woman we're going to meet."
"Russian?"

"Yeah. She has apparently been traveling a lot from a young age though if her file's anything to go on. Speaking of her file, it's pretty vague, suspiciously so actually."

Steve's eyebrows rose. "Do you think someone wiped her file?"

"I definitely think it leaves some stuff out. But, for all that, the work she's done for SHIELD seems to be solid. I've spoken with a couple people who worked with her and they all say that she's intense but professional. Apparently she's a Shifter but no one has ever seen her transform."

That surprised Steve. "She completes all of her missions in her human form?"

"Seems like it."

Now that was impressive. Although Shifters did have some amount of increased agility and strength in their human forms compared to normal humans, their true power only came out when they transformed. The fact that Romanov had managed to be a successful SHIELD field agent without even shifting was a remarkable feat. Steve had to wonder though why she would make the choice to do so. Apparently he was going to be working with two Shifters who chose not to let their animal halves loose.

The two of them meandered their way towards the center of the city park, Steve scanning the stretches of grass and Bruce with his eyes straight ahead and his hands in his pockets. Even though it was the middle of a work day, the park was still full of joggers, mothers and their young children, and men and women in suits getting a late lunch break. Every once and a while Steve would sense another Shifter on his periphery but the Wolves only ever threw a glance their way before going about their business. Bruce ignored them completely, silently allowing Steve to handle any obligatory social exchanges for the both of them.

Even though neither of them ever frequented the park they easily navigated their way to the fountain. As they drew closer, the sound and smell of the water guided them, and it didn't hurt that the paved walkways only led so many places. When they arrived there was only one person sitting near the fountain and as soon as Steve saw her he instantly knew that she was the one they were looking for. He knew that Bruce felt it too as the Wolf tensed up just a little beside him, his jaw setting a little tighter as they walked over.

Steve took advantage of the fifty yards or so still separating the two of them from the woman by using it as an opportunity to observe. She was tall and slender, though fit looking underneath the black dress and dark coat she was wearing. With her heels on she would probably be a couple inches taller than Bruce, but luckily Steve had her beat by a long shot. From a distance her hair was probably the most noticeable thing about her, the fiery red waves cropped short and framing her pale face. By all accounts, she was a very beautiful woman but to Steve's Shifter senses there might as well have been a big red flag over her head blasting sirens and decorated with neon lights. She was dangerous. He couldn't quite place how, but she even more so than Bruce, and Steve was very, very glad that she was on their team.

Steve leaned over to his companion before they were within hearing range of Romanov. "Hey, Bruce?"

The other Wolf seemed momentarily startled at having Steve move in so close but shook himself
off. "Hmm?"

"She's a Shifter, right?"

Bruce nodded. "Yup."

Steve frowned. "But she's not a Wolf. She doesn't smell like a Wolf."

"No, she's not a Wolf, that much I do know."

So just like Barton, Romanov was a non-Wolf Shifter. Steve had never dreamed of meeting one his entire life and then suddenly within the last week he had already run into two. "I'm assuming that you don't know what she is then."

"Nope. I tried to look it up for a few minutes but the section of her file about her personal information is under virtual lock and key. I thought of asking a friend to hack in for me but I decided that would somehow be going overboard."

"As long as we're on the same page." It meant that they were both going to be in dark about how to properly behave around her, but at least they'd stumble through it together. Whenever Shifters encountered each other there were certain expectations of behavior that usually depended on their dominance structure. Non-Wolf Shifters would throw all those expectations off balance though, especially if they didn't function on the alpha-beta-omega system.

Steve wasn't sure how long it took Romanov to notice them but she didn't bother looking their way until he and Bruce were less than ten steps away. When she finally faced them, she didn't smile, didn't nod. Instead, she pursed her lips and looked Steve up and down. "So, you are our new leader then?"

Steve straightened up, unwilling to be taken aback by her actions. He was an alpha, after all, it wasn't in him to back down. "Yes ma'am."

Romanov hummed then looked away to turn her eyes back to the fountain. "At least you seem like you know what you're doing…"

Steve looked at Bruce who just shrugged. Deciding to take it as a compliment, Steve didn't argue with her. Instead he looked back at Bruce who realized that Steve was waiting for him to speak. He cleared his throat and stepped closer to Romanov, "Thank you for meeting with us, Agent Romanov. I figured it would be good for all of us to meet before we head out."

She gave a slight nod. "I agree. It has already been very informative."

Really? Because Steve was having trouble working things out. Taking the reins from Bruce, Steve jumped into the conversation. "I've heard a little bit about you, but I'm curious to know just what it is that you do."

She met his eyes again, then glanced over at Bruce before turning her attention back to Steve. "For SHIELD, I solve their problems."

"Solve them how?"

"Usually with a few well-placed bullets between the problem's eyes."

Oh, well then…Bruce cleared his throat next to Steve. "Since you were brought in, does SHIELD expect us to run into any such 'problems'?"
"You can never be too careful."

A few seconds passed and they all just looked at each other. Trying to make conversation felt awkward but Steve felt compelled to fill the silence, as well as to try and figure out more about her. "So, Natasha—Is it alright if I call you Natasha?" He and Bruce were on a first-name basis so it would be odd to have to address her more formally.

A frown spread across her face but she seemed more annoyed than angry. "If you must."

"Great. Natasha then. I know why Bruce was chosen for this job, but what about you? Why'd you decide to join in?" Bruce had very intimate ties not only to the location where they would be working but to the case. From what Natasha had just said though, this upcoming mission didn't really seem to be her style.

"Personal reasons."

Steve smiled disarmingly, "There has to be something behind it. From what I've just heard, you're not usually rescue personnel." It sounded like she was usually the person causing some damage rather than trying to fix things.

Bruce suddenly seemed nervous about it and waved Steve's statement off. "Come on, Steve, I'm sure it's none of our business. As long as the job gets done, what does it really matter, right?"

"I'm just curious." And it did matter; it mattered a lot to Steve. He wanted to know what her part in all of this was, just like he had wanted to figure Bruce out. How she answered would affect how Steve could use her out in the field and if she had any strengths or conflicts of interest it would be best to know now rather than figure it out the hard way in the field.

Natasha seemed amused by Steve's insistence, although her smile definitely didn't reach her eyes. "It's fine, Dr. Banner, I don't have anything to hide. The only answer I have for you is that Agent Barton and I have worked together before. I know him and I owe it to him to look for him now."

There was clearly a history there but Steve felt it would be pressing his luck to continue pumping her for answers. Besides, he had gotten what he had really needed out of her. If she actually did know Barton that could probably be quite helpful.

"That's good enough for me." Steve left the 'for now' unsaid.

"And me as well." Bruce took an involuntary step back as Natasha gracefully rose to her feet, smoothly adjusting her coat as she did so. Her cool eyes passed over each of them as she gave each Wolf one more searching gaze. Whatever she saw seemed to satisfy her and she gave them a tight nod. "If you'll excuse me, I have some business to take care of before we're sent out."

Steve nodded back. He wasn't about to stop her. "We'll see you again at the briefing."

"Yes, I suppose you will."

Bruce raised his eyebrows as Natasha turned and walked the opposite way. Even her posture as she walked spoke volumes about her; deceivingly relaxed with an almost unnoticeable tension in her posture, as if she were ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. She probably was.

An unspoken agreement passed between Steve and Bruce and they waited, just standing there, until she was completely out of sight before speaking. When the last sign of her fiery hair finally disappeared from view, Bruce cleared his throat. "So…That was…interesting."
"She will make a good member of the team. As long as we can trust her."

"And that'll be the key sticking point, I think."

In Steve's eyes, reciprocal trust was one of the most important qualities there was between a leader and their teammate. He already felt himself trusting Bruce, maybe because he was a fellow Wolf, maybe because of his scent. Steve wasn't sure, it was instinctual. He didn't have the same instinctual trust for Natasha. "For now, if SHIELD trusts her, I'm willing to give her the benefit of the doubt."

"I guess... I'm also not one to judge though."

Bruce's tone fell and a silence settled between them. It looked like even though Steve trusted the other Wolf, the scientist didn't even trust himself. Not knowing quite what to say, Steve decided to turn the conversation in a different direction with the one thing he knew all Wolves innately loved: food. "I don't know about you, but I could use something to eat."

Bruce seemed relieved. "Yeah, sure. Food would be good."

"On my way into the park I saw a hotdog stand. Would that work for you?"

"It'll do."

He didn't seem terribly excited, but he still seemed grateful for the distraction. "Then how about you find us a place to sit around here and I'll go grab some for us. What do you want?"

Bruce thought about it for a minute before letting out a small sigh, "Get me four hotdogs with everything on them, except sauerkraut." Steve smiled at the order. Bruce might not like shifting anymore but he still had the appetite of a Wolf. "I can pay you back when I see you next."

Steve waved the offer away. "Don't worry about it." Bruce looked like he was going to argue further but then thought better of it and let it go with a small shrug of his shoulders. If an alpha wanted to get food for him, he wasn't about to insult Steve by forcing repayment on him.

Leaving Bruce by the fountain, Steve made short work of making his way back to the entrance of the park. The hot dog stand was there across the street just like he had remembered. The shocked look on the vendor's face when Steve ordered eight hotdogs with everything, minus sauerkraut, was enough to make Steve blush but he ignored it in favor of grabbing a handful of paper napkins.

Once he was loaded down with his purchases Steve headed back into the park. He wasn't sure where Bruce had gone off to, but he wasn't worried. He knew the Wolf's scent and it wasn't hard to follow. It was true that there was a lot of foot traffic in the park but even among the occasional Shifters who walked through, Bruce's scent was distinct. His nose led him to a secluded corer of the park about one hundred yards away from the fountain. There were a row of bushes and a few trees, and Bruce was settled down on a patch of grass behind them. Steve should have guessed that the shy Wolf would have chosen a spot out of the way from the general public. Steve didn't mind; the quiet was nice.

Bruce greeted him silently with a small smile which Steve quickly returned and sat down next to him. He set the bags of food in front of him and his smile widened as Bruce's nose twitched and he subconsciously leaned in closers to the plastic bags. Opening one of them up, Steve motioned for Bruce to do the same as he pulled out a hot dog. "Go ahead. I got eight of the same thing, so just grab four."

"Thanks."
Steve was glad that the other Wolf agreed to come to lunch. He wasn't ready to leave Bruce quite yet. It was comforting, being in the presence of another Wolf after spending months in isolation, surrounded by humans. Humans were great, but there was a bond between Shifters that just couldn't be replicated in a human-Shifters relationship. Though Peggy had come close for him. Making a mental note to call her later, Steve turned his attention back to his lunch. "So," Pausing to take a large bite out of his hotdog, Steve swallowed before continuing to speak, "what do we already know about where we're being sent out to?"

In the few minutes Steve had let himself get lost in his thoughts, Bruce had already eaten one dog and was working up unwrapping his second when he shook his head. "Not much. We'll get the full briefing the day before we're sent out, which should be sometime soon. But I guess that's just how SHIELD works. They keep things very under wraps and only give information out on a need-to-know basis."

They already did know some facts though, including Natasha's disposition. "Then it was a good thing we got to meet up with Natasha. That will be one less surprise."

"Exactly."

After that the conversation dried up and they finished up the rest of their lunch in companionable silence. The sun was out today so even in the brisk winter air Steve was warm and comfortable. There was just a hint of a breeze and it had him itching to go for a run as a wolf. He was about to ask if Bruce wanted to join him but caught himself just as the question was about to leave his mouth. Right. Bruce couldn't shift anymore, even if he wanted to. That was going to be hard to remember…

He had to wonder if Bruce saw something pass across his face because when the other Wolf spoke his voice was full of regret. Or maybe he was just enjoying Steve's company. "I guess we should head out. I've got some more work to do back at the lab that I'd like to have finished up before we're sent on our mission."

"Of course." Balling up all the foil his hotdogs had been wrapped in, Steve tossed them in the bag, making sure not to leave an inch of trash behind. "Are you heading back to SHIELD then?"

"Yeah. They have a room for me there…"

"That's nice of them to provide that."

"Yeah." Bruce didn't sound like he really agreed. Steve opened his mouth to ask but Bruce's eyes flickered up to meet his and Steve pressed his lips together instead. He didn't want to get into it and it wasn't Steve's place to push it. He wasn't Steve's pack member, so Steve didn't have the right to push himself into his business. Even if his alpha instincts were telling him to do just that.

He decided to do what little he could. "Well, if you're heading back that way, how about I ride with you until I have to transfer transit lines?" The truth was there was a line that went directly back to his neighborhood, the same line he had taken to get to the park. Riding with Bruce part of the way would probably add an extra thirty minutes to his commute but it'd be worth it.

Luckily Bruce didn't seem to know that. Or at least had the good graces not to call him on it. "If you want."

With the scientist's albeit-unenthusiastic agreement they gathered themselves up and made their way out of the park. As soon as they stepped back out onto the city streets Steve immediately missed the smell of grass and trees. They hadn't been quite as real, as organic, but they had been a
They were just about to the light rail station when a series of small chimes coming from Bruce's back pocket made Steve start a bit. The beta Wolf looked faintly amused as he slowed to a stop and pulled out a smart phone. Frowning at his own reaction to the noise, Steve stopped too, listening in despite himself as Bruce answered in a hushed tone. "Hello? Dr. Banner speaking."

"Dr. Banner, this is Agent Coulson from SHIELD."

Steve had no trouble hearing the other side of the conversation from where he was standing about two feet away. He saw Bruce cast a quick glance up at him, a questioning look in his eyes, probably wondering whether he should try to block Steve out but seemed to decide against it. "Agent Coulson. What can I do for you?"

"We're holding the briefing meeting in two days at the SHIELD office; Thursday at one p.m. I assume you'll be able to make it?"

"It shouldn't be a problem."

"Good. I left a message on Rogers' home phone, but I would appreciate it if you could relate the message to him if you happen to see him sooner in person. Unfortunately we've been having trouble locating the last member of your team, Agent Romanov, but hopefully she will hear about it one way or another."

There was a pregnant pause and Steve knew that Coulson has somehow found out about their meeting with Natasha. His eyes narrowed and he couldn't help but scan the area around them for SHIELD agents out of his peripheral vision but there were so many men and women walking around that it would've been impossible to tell. Bruce cleared his throat nervously, "I'll, uh, do what I can to let them both know."

"We'd be grateful for the assistance."

There was an abrupt click from the other end of the line and Bruce turned his phone off as it switched to dial tone. They both just stared for a moment down at the cell phone before Steve let out a little sigh. "Well...it looks like we've got about two days to tie things up before the mission starts."

"I think it's also safe to say that we're being watched." Bruce's gaze slid around, skirting over each and every passer-by on the block as he slid his phone back into his pocket.

"True. But at the same time, Agent Coulson didn't say anything about the meeting, so he doesn't disapprove."

"I still don't like it."

Steve shrugged. He liked Coulson, and SHIELD had never done him wrong, so if they wanted to keep an eye on him he was alright with that. He wasn't planning on doing anything wrong. But he could understand how Bruce wouldn't like it. If he let it get to him, it could seem a little confining. Like someone was constantly watching over your shoulder. Or, in this case, via satellite. Who knew what sort of resources SHIELD had at its disposal?

Bruce sighed, clearly unhappy with Steve's nonchalance. But he accepted it. Letting the subject drop, Bruce checked his watch. "We should hurry if we want to catch the next train."

Steve grinned at the beta. "Then we should get going!"
The next two days passed by in a blur for Steve. Now that he had met both Bruce and Natasha the whole situation seemed that much more real. He was thinking so much about the upcoming mission that he could barely make himself sleep, instead throwing himself into running and working out at the gym simply to burn off some of the adrenaline. He seemed to have a limitless supply of it though and could only force his mind to rest four, maybe five hours each night before he was kicking off his sheets, rolling out of bed, and pacing around his tiny apartment.

Steve had acted like this when he had been with the Howling Commandos too and he driven the rest of his pack crazy. He laughed a little to himself, remembering how they would take turns running through the woods with him as wolves, jog with him around the city, or lift weights with him in their den. One time Steve accidentally woke Bucky up at three in the morning when he had been rustling around and his beta had been so frustrated that he had shoved Steve to the ground, sat on his back, and told him to do two hundred push-ups while he took a nap. Steve had thought he was joking but Bucky stayed sitting right where he was on top of the alpha's back and didn't move an inch until Steve had done exactly two hundred push-ups. In the end Bucky hadn't been able to get a nap in but Bucky's added weight and the late-night exercise was enough that night to calm Steve back down.

Steve shook himself from the memory and his eyes widened in surprise. That had been the first time he had ever been able to think about the Howling Commandos, of Bucky, without feeling like a piece of his heart was being ripped out. Maybe...Maybe he was actually beginning to heal that gaping wound.

As he came back to himself Steve stopped and looked up at the building in front of him. The two days had finally passed, Thursday had finally arrived, and now he was standing in front of the SHIELD office again. This time Peggy wasn't with him, but his new team was waiting for him inside.

Steve waved at the secretary as he walked into the lobby and up to the front desk. Giving the prim-looking brunette a smile he really hoped was charming, he fought the urge to scent the air to see if Bruce and Natasha had already passed through. "Excuse me, ma'am, but my name is Steve Rogers and I have a meeting with—"

Her blue eyes flashed up to his and though her expression never changed a spark flashed in her gaze. "Yes, Mr. Rogers, we've been expecting you." There was a sleek looking computer on her desk and her fingers flew over the keyboard. "I've alerted Agent Coulson that you arrived. Do you know your way to his office?"

Steve blinked, a little taken aback by her efficiency. "Uh, yes ma'am, I can manage." He remembered the route Peggy had taken him on well enough.

"Good. Go on up. I'll unlock the doors for you so you can get inside. When Agent Coulson debriefs you today he should assign you a badge so you can get through the security doors on your own in the future."

"Thank you very much, Miss—"

"—Hill. Agent Hill." Her eyes softened just for a moment. "Welcome to the team, Mr. Rogers."

Thanking her again, Steve gave her one last look before making his way to the elevator. Just like Agent Hill had promised, the main door to the SHIELD offices slid open for him as he approached. Momentarily alone, Steve let himself inhale deeply through his nose, his nostrils flaring as he
immediately identified not only Agent Coulson, but Bruce and Natasha as well. It looked like he was the last one to arrive.

Agent Coulson was waiting for him outside his office, the man's face lighting up as he caught sight of Steve coming down the hall. "Mr. Rogers, glad to see you found your way up."

"Of course. And please, call me Steve."

Steve grinned as the corner of Coulson's lips quirked up into a subdued smile. "Steve, then. Your colleagues are already waiting for you in one of our conference rooms."

"Lead the way."

Agent Coulson did exactly that, though he did so in a way that showed he was good at his job. Instead of getting in front of Steve he walked along beside him. Body language meant a lot among Wolves and Coulson obviously had enough courtesy to not try and walk in front of an alpha.

The conference room was right around the corner and down a short corridor from Coulson's office and the closer he got the stronger Bruce and Natasha's scents became. It was no surprise then when Agent Coulson opened the door and Steve was greeted with a small smile from Bruce and a calculated glance from Natasha. They were seated around a large table in the shape of a semi-circle, chairs placed around the curve of the table and a large monitor was mounted on the front wall so that everyone in the room would have a decent view. There was a small black case sitting on the table in front of the screen. Steve nodded to both of them and took a seat next to Bruce as Agent Coulson went to stand at the front of the room, ignoring the briefcase for now.

"Now that we're all here, let's go ahead and get started. First of all, thank you all for coming on such relative short notice. Agent Romanov," Natasha tilted her head up in acknowledgement, "I'm happy to see that you seemed to have heard about the meeting despite the fact that we had some difficulty getting in contact with you. After the debriefing, it's been requested that you see Agent Hill downstairs to update your phone number and mailing address."

While Coulson had kept his tone neutral enough, his eyes were piercing into Natasha's and she was left with no option but to nod, though she did so with a roll of her eyes. "I'll make sure to get you my new information, though I cannot promise it will not change within the month."

"Noted, and thank you." Satisfied, the SHIELD agent pulled a small remote out of his suit pocket and the lights in the room dimmed as he clicked the power on the large screen behind him. "You are all aware of why you are here. Your objective for this mission is simple: locate and retrieve Agent Barton." An image of Barton appeared on the screen along with the basic information; age, height, weight, physical description. "We don't leave any member of our team behind. Besides, Barton has a good deal of information about our organization that could be severely misused in the wrong hands. We managed to track him down to here," Coulson clicked the remote in his hands and a satellite image popped up on the screen showing an aerial view of what looked to be a large concrete building in the middle of the forest. There was a dirt service road leading into the clearing the building was sitting in but it was clear that there were few other signs of civilization around. "This was where his last communication originated from."

Natasha broke in at that point, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "Can we hear the message? It may give us some leads as to what happened to him."

Steve straightened up in his seat as Coulson nodded and pressed another button on the remote. A tinny, static-filled hiss filtered out through the speakers on the monitor. Steve's sensitive ears picked up every catch and pop, and when Agent Barton's voice whispered out through the white
noise he was able to make out the Hawk's short, gasping breaths. It sounded like the man was running. ".This is Barton. I've been compromised...Requesting immediate backup! Repeat, requesting immediate backup! Hydra's got some sort of laboratory set up and—shit! I've been spotted—End transmission to shif—Shit! I can't—they got me with someth—thing—I can't... can't—"

The transmission ended abruptly. Steve was completely tense and the controlled panic he had heard in the agent's voice and nearly jumped as he felt a hand rest on his arm. Looking down, he saw Bruce's fingers wrapped around his wrist and felt his muscles beginning to relax underneath the other's palm. He might not have been Steve's beta but he was playing a beta's role fantastically. Letting out a breath to calm himself down further, Steve looked up at Coulson. "It sounded like he was trying to shift when something caught him off guard."

Agent Coulson nodded. "And that's part of what makes it such a disturbing situation. As a Hawk, Agent Barton is naturally proficient as a scout and it is very difficult to catch him unaware. To us, it sounds like whatever he encountered at this location was more than he could handle."

Bruce swallowed. "That must be Hydra's new compound...which makes Barton's reference to a laboratory make sense. And you think he's still alive?"

"Honestly we have no evidence either way, but until we know for certain he is considered alive and being held against his will."

Steve's jaw tightened. "If he's alive, we will bring him back."

"That's what we're counting on." Agent Coulson leaned forward and rested his hands on the table. "We have set up a base of operations for you a few miles away from the target location. Maps and GPS devices will be provided on location, but I suspect that you will be able to find your way to the Hydra compound without much help."

It was Natasha's turn again to ask questions. "How soon can we head out?"

"We have transport prepared to take you out within the hour if you're prepared to leave."

Steve nodded. The sooner they left, the better their chances of reaching Barton before it was too late. But, "I'll need time to get back to my apartment and gather supplies."

"All supplies will be provided to you by SHIELD, so unless you have any specific items in mind you should be set. Dr. Banner, I assume all of your equipment are currently in our lab or in your room here in this building, correct?"

Nodding, Bruce leaned back in his seat. "I can have it packed up in half an hour."

"Good. And Agent Romanov, I'm guessing you came prepared to leave immediately?"

"Of course."

"Excellent. All the background information you'll need for the case will be provided to you on the plane ride and copies of the same documents will be waiting for you at the base. For now, all three of you will need these," Coulson pulled a small stack of cards from his front jacket pocket and slid one to each of them. Picking up the card offered to him, Steve flipped it over to see a picture of himself he didn't remember being taken and the SHIELD logo. It was his ID badge. Agent Steven Rogers. So it was official now.

"And you'll need these." Looking up, Steve just blinked as Agent Coulson flipped open the small
case that had been sitting on the table next to him. Inside there were what looked to be three hearing aids or headphones. "Although they don't look like much, these are perhaps some of the most advanced pieces of technology that you'll be carrying out with you."

Tilting his head, Steve tried not to behave like a country bumpkin but couldn't for the life of him figure out what he was looking at. "What are they?"

"They are wireless transmitter and receivers that not only have been calibrated to operate on a frequency used exclusively by SHIELD, eliminating any chance of eavesdropping, but also have been made out of a highly complex, manufactured organic-based material that will actually adjust its size according to the user's ear shape. This should allow you to shift while still wearing the earpiece so that the transmission will remain uninterrupted and communication will continue even when you are in your animal form."

Bruce's face lit up like a kid in a candy store while Steve was pretty sure his jaw dropped. Natasha looked entirely unimpressed.

Coulson closed the case then slid it over the table to Steve. Looking up at the SHIELD agent, Steve's gaze caught the man's, his sharp eyes more serious than Steve had ever seen. "Agent Rogers, this is your team now. A man's life is at stake; we expect you to put everything you have into this."

Steve's jaw tightened and he gave Coulson a firm nod. "Yes sir. You can count on it."
Chapter 3

O~O~O~O

Within six hours of their meeting all three of them had gathered their supplies, been packed into a private car, driven to the municipal airport, and put on a jet plane heading northwest. According to the map they had been shown they were being sent to a remote location in upstate New York. Steve wasn't sure why Hydra had decided to set up shop there, but there hadn't seemed to be much else besides hills and forests. Maybe that was the reason in itself; that sort of privacy was hard to find. It had been a mild winter so there wouldn't even be any snow where they were going…not to say that it would be warm, but at least he didn't have to take terrible weather into account.

Letting out a breath, Steve leaned back in his seat. They were on a short flight but Bruce had already fallen asleep with the aid of a couple of sedatives. The other Wolf was slouching down in the seat behind Steve's, his head lolling against his closed window screen. Apparently the doctor found flying stressful. It wasn't Steve's favorite thing to do either but it was a necessary evil; it was hard to discount the benefits of a quick transport. As long as he didn't think about the fact that he was belted into a tin can sailing above the clouds Steve would be alright.

Over the sound of the engines Steve could hear Natasha flipping through the packet of paperwork Agent Coulson had provided them with from where she was sitting behind him. He had skimmed it himself already. Most of the pages were devoted to a more detailed account of everything SHIELD knew about Agent Barton's disappearance. It was unsettlingly sparse. The last full communication they received from him was upon his arrival to the Hydra compound. This apparently wasn't unusual as the Hawk tended to run pretty silent operations. This apparently wasn't unusual as the Hawk tended to run pretty silent operations, but it certainly didn't do them any favors.

Agent Barton had made it to the compound three days before that last frantic radio communication. That meant that he had enough time to settle in and get a handle on his environment before he ran into trouble. Given all that, and Agent Coulson's firm assertion of Barton's skills, the fact that Hydra was about to catch him off guard was a frightening thought. For a business cooperation they clearly had a strong offensive ability and Steve was going to have to pay special attention not to underestimate them.

Lost in his own mind, the flight was over before Steve knew it and they were landed in a small country airport with a landing strip barely long enough to support their compact jet. He was the first one out of the plane with Natasha behind him and Bruce struggling, half-asleep, to his feet. As soon as Steve stepped outside he was met with a mobile set of stairs leading down to the tarmac and a SHIELD agent dressed in a sharp black suit and sunglasses to block out the glare of the
sunset.

"Agent Rogers, Romanov, and Dr. Banner, I hope you had a pleasant flight."

The man's neutral expression gave the impression that the greeting was nothing more than a nicety and he didn't really care either way, but Steve still gave him a nod and a smile. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Good. If you'll follow me, we have a car waiting to take you the rest of the way."

Steve heard Bruce let out a small grunt of discontent from behind him. Steve was sympathetic; he wasn't in a big hurry to get back inside a vehicle any time soon himself. But that's exactly what they had signed up to do. Hoisting his SHIELD-issue gear up onto his shoulder, Steve motioned for the others to follow after him as he let the agent guide them across the runway. Although the man seemed experienced enough it was clear he didn't have Coulson's finesse of working closely with Shifters. He didn't even pretend to allow Steve to lead the group, a serious social faux pas had he been a Shifter himself. As it was, Steve let it go and chalked it up to ignorance. It's not like a human was a challenge to his alpha status.

The nameless agent stopped in front of a black jeep that had just enough mud on it to prove that it hadn't been driven straight out of a car dealer's show room. Steve quickly claimed the front seat with the assumption that the SHIELD agent would be driving, leaving Bruce and Natasha to sort out who got which seat in the back. Luckily neither of them seemed to care in the least and after they packed their own bags into the trunk space of the car they were off again, heading deeper into the wooded country-side.

O~O~O~O

"This is where we're staying?"

Bruce didn't look terribly impressed and Steve didn't blame him. They had been dropped off by the SHIELD agent in a remote clearing about two hours ago with some verbal directions and a map and had spent the time in between then and now hiking through a thickly-vegetated forest to an even more remote location only to arrive at what appeared to be a run-down log cabin. It didn't exactly look SHIELD issue and if Steve hadn't already been able to smell that no one was around at least a mile he would've been expecting a crazy woodsman to jump out of the cabin door and yell at them for trespassing. Honestly, it was a little anti-climactic after the trouble they went through to get there.

"I guess so." Steve tried to look on the bright side of things to clear up the sudden cloud that had settled over the three of them. "We are only staying here for a few days if all goes well so it won't be that bad." He had stayed in worse shelters over the years. He hadn't enjoyed it, but it was doable.

Adjusting his grip on the gear on his back, Bruce narrowed his eyes and tilted his head as if he were trying to peer into the blackened windows of the structure. "This is going to be a problem if I don't have access to an electric power source. I didn't bring a generator along and without computers we'll be dead in the water."

Natasha stepped up from behind them and made her way closer to the cabin before Steve could come up with a solution. "You can't always judge a book by its cover. SHIELD works in odd ways at times, but they would never compromise a mission by providing less than adequate supplies."

A few hours ago Steve would've been sure about the same thing, but now…it was hard to think
like that when there was apparent evidence to the contrary right in front of them. She seemed sure of herself though and he wanted to believe her so Steve just held back and waited as she began to inspect the front of the cabin. He wasn't sure what she was looking for but as her inspection brought her to the door she seemed to find it.

Natasha let out a soft, victorious hum and crouched down slightly to the left of the doorframe, her fingertips skimming over the rough wooden boards as Steve and Bruce walked up to stand behind her. A few seconds later her fingers dug into a small indent Steve hadn't even noticed and she popped off a small panel of weathered bark to reveal a metal keycode pad embedded into the wall of the cabin. Steve's mouth fell open for a second but snapped shut as she tossed a smug look back at them. Natasha quickly typed in a seven-numbered code and stepped back as there was a 'click' of the door unlocking. "They are, on the other hand, quite fond of camouflage."

Steve frowned. "How did you know that was even there?"

"I knew it was there because this isn't my first mission."

Bruce looked equally confused. "But how did you know what the code was?"

"Because it was in the mission document Agent Coulson gave us."

"Oh." Bruce looked away, abashed, the only one of the three who hadn't had the chance to go through the official paperwork. Steve had known the code too, he just hadn't known the keypad would be there. It seemed he had something to learn about SHIELD operations.

Without further ado, Natasha unceremoniously pushed the now-unlocked door to the cabin open, stepping back to let Steve enter first. After the keypad incident, Steve appreciated the gesture and the return of control that went along with it.

Stepping into the small building, Steve felt his eyes go wide as he was greeted not with a musty shack but instead by concrete floors, metal walls, and a bank of computer monitors. To the right of the entryway there was a small kitchenette set up on one wall opposite two stacks of two cots hung up on the other wall. Between the stacks of cots there was a door he could only assume led to a very tiny bathroom. To the left of the entryway there was a small table, a series of electrical devices, and a large topographic map on the wall with their position marked with a bright blue pushpin. There was a red pushpin too to mark the location of the Hydra research facilities and Steve had to look away before his mind began to calculate the fastest routes between the two.

Bruce and Natasha were quick to follow him inside, both of them immediately making their way toward the left end of the cabin. Natasha was the first to cross over to the table and deposited her gear with no indication of surprise. Finally stepping away from the door, Steve went to the right and claimed the lower bunk closest to the main door by dropping his own gear on it. "Is this normal for SHIELD operations?"

Natasha shrugged as she walked over to inspect the kitchenette, opening the small refrigerator and cupboards to reveal that they were packed with food and water. "It is pretty standard. It's a little smaller than they usually provide but, like you said earlier, we're only going to be here for a few days."

Bruce finally spoke up as he made a beeline for the bank of computers. "This is amazing! With all this equipment I'll be able to monitor everything just from inside this cabin."

"Good." The easier Bruce's job was, the easier Steve's would be. But the apparent ease Bruce would have in monitoring their surroundings brought a thought to mind. With all of these
technological benefits and his own natural abilities, how had Agent Barton not seen trouble coming? But, wait…

Straightening up, Steve sniffed the air. "…Barton never came in here. At least, I don't smell him." The only scents in the air were the faintly lingering smell of humans, both men and women. It probably belonged to whoever set the cabin up.

The smile dropped from Bruce's lips as he paused and took a deep inhale. "No, you're right. I don't smell him either."

Natasha looked from Wolf to Wolf before putting her hands on her hips. "I doubt he was ever given the chance to use this base. Judging by what's in here, this place was set up specifically for us."

If that were true it partly explained why SHIELD took so relatively long to send out a recovery team for Barton. They had to set up the infrastructure first, probably in response to a higher perceived threat level after the Hawk was taken.

There was a short moment of silence before Steve broke it, meeting each of their eyes in turn. "Then we should take full advantage of the opportunity and make the most of it. Let's get everything set up." After they knew what they had to work with he could start planning out their moves in detail.

The next hour was spent doing exactly what Steve had said to do. He put Bruce in charge of getting all of the electronics up and working and Natasha went to work on gathering as much intelligence as she could as soon as the beta Wolf got the cameras on line. Bruce had been able to tap into SHIELD's extensive satellite systems to get a bird's eye view of the compound and the pictures had a clear enough resolution that if Natasha had wanted to she could've counted the number of bars there were on the grates of the compound's heating system on their roof.

While they were busy with that, Steve had sat himself down at the small table and covered it in maps, diagrams, photos, and documents from SHIELD's files to try and sort things out. So far, it didn't seem like it had to necessarily be complicated. Their job was to get Barton out, preferably with as little trouble as possible. Assuming that the Hawk was being held inside the compound—likely since SHIELD hadn't seen any significant transportation leave the building since the agent's disappearance—all they needed to do then was get to the Hydra facility, sneak in, get Barton, and sneak back out with him.

Early into the hour, Natasha had noticed armed guards patrolling the perimeter of the facility. There were two sets of two guards constantly circulating around, meaning that a guard passed by any given part of the building every five minutes. That gave them a safety window of about two minutes to sneak in. Banking on them being able to keep quiet while they rescued Barton inside the building, they would then have about another two minutes to escape after the second patrol went by. Two minutes didn't sound like a lot of time but if Steve was really putting his all into this and used his full strength and speed it wasn't an impossible task. Especially if he had Natasha there to assist him, which was exactly the plan. Bruce would stay at the cabin and keep a bird's-eye view on things while Steve and Natasha went out. That way, Bruce would be able to warn them over the headsets when to expect the guards and they would be able to time their movements properly.

Steve and Natasha would only get one good shot at it though. He wasn't willing to risk them sending one of them out as a scout in case Hydra had some decent surveillance of their own. If the organization figured out someone had been snooping around that would put them on high alert and make the recovery stage more difficult. So Steve was depending on him and Natasha being able to figure out where they were keeping Barton and retrieving him all in one night. The good news was
that Natasha had already pinpointed the most likely location. It was just barely visible in the satellite images but one of the windows along the southern side of the structure had recently been welded shut except for a thin strip of exposed window glass at the very top, probably left open either for air flow or for natural light. The repair was obviously recent because the material used hadn't had the time to weather under the elements yet and building supplies were still sitting out along the wall. It wasn't a sure thing that the room was the one they were keeping their hostage in, but Steve couldn't think of another reason Hydra would suddenly need to do unanticipated renovations on their building.

Steve was so lost in thought that he wasn't at all prepared for their silence to be suddenly and sharply broken. All three of their heads snapped up as a beeping noise filled the room and Bruce jumped about six inches into the air as the largest monitor on the wall burst to life right beside him. Steve was immediately on his feet, ready for action, but tilted his head when the SHIELD logo popped on.

"What happened?"

Bruce shook his head as he and Natasha also gathered around, "I don't know. I didn't do anything that should've turned it on."

"No, but I did." As the audio crackled out of the speakers, the SHIELD logo faded away to be replaced by Agent Coulson, visible in the monitor from the chest up. "How do you like your accommodations?"

Steve relaxed as his heart rate returned to normal. It was just Coulson, nothing to worry about. A small smile slipped onto his face at the technological trick. "They're pretty nice, considering."

"Good. Now, unfortunately I didn't just call for a social visit. I just received word from my supervisor that there has been a slight change of plans to your mission."

The grin on Steve's face fell away at Coulson's tone. He could tell that the other man wasn't happy with the situation and that made Steve wary. "Changed how?"

Natasha seemed equally concerned, moving to stand in front of Steve so that she could look straight at Coulson. "We're still retrieving Barton, right?"

The senior SHEILD agent nodded then massaged his forehead. "Yes, that is still the primary objective and will remain that way if I have anything to say about it. But the bureaucrats in all their wisdom have decided that now not only are you to get Barton out, you're to finish up his mission as well."

Steve frowned, "We weren't properly briefed on his mission." They already had a plan worked out that didn't leave any room for side-trips. Not to mention that they had only brought the equipment they would need for their own job.

"I know, and I apologize on behalf of my supervisors, but they were insistent. I'm sending you all the information you'll need now." As if on cue, a printer in the corner whirred to life and began to roll out pages of what looked to be a classified document. "I know this is unexpected, but seeing what you are all able to accomplish individually, I have faith that you'll be able to handle this just fine. Remember though, finding Barton is still your primary goal. If finishing his mission at any point threatens his rescue, abort your attempts and just get him out of there. He has waited long enough for us to get all of our pieces together."

Pursing his lips, Steve nodded. "Understood."
Another hour passed by as Steve, Bruce, and Natasha dove head-first into the fifty or so pages
Agent Coulson had sent them. Unlike the packet the three of them had initially been given, this
new one went into extreme detail about Hydra and just why SHIELD had an interest in their
dealings. From what Steve was able to decipher—and what Bruce was able to interpret for him—
Hydra was continuing their work on creating a chemical formula to alter Shifter abilities and rumor
had reached SHIELD that they had just had a major breakthrough in their research. The results of
that breakthrough weren't specified, SHIELD didn't seem to know the specifics themselves, but just
the possibilities of what Hydra could have discovered were enough of a threat to force SHIELD
into action. They had sent Barton to break into the compound and download all the information he
could from the organization's private files.

Now it was up to them to not only rescue Barton but also get the files he was supposed to retrieve.

They needed a new plan. With their new objective two minute windows just weren't going to cut it;
they needed fewer security guards doing rounds. Now there were multiple ways of taking care of
that problem but one thing Steve wanted to avoid as long as possible was having to kill anyone. He
was there to save a life, not take one. With murder off the table, that left removing the guards from
the scene alive. It was possible that he and Natasha could sneak up on a pair of guards and knock
them out but it wouldn't take long for their disappearance to go unnoticed. No, it would be best to
get them to leave on their own volition. But how to do that? They could set some sort of trap, but
again, someone else back at the compound might notice that something was wrong and send out
backup. If they could lure the guards away, far enough away for a long enough time, that might
give them a better chance at finding Barton and getting the intel he was sent out for. One of them
was going to have to serve as a distraction. When Steve told the others about this, they weren't
excited about the idea of splitting the team up but they saw the necessity in it.

After Steve had explained what he had come up with so far, he sighed and crossed his arms over
his chest as he stood in front of his team. "I'll go in and infiltrate the compound—"

Steve tensed up as Natasha interrupted him mid-sentence. "No offense, but that's a terrible idea. I
should definitely be the one to break in."

He rarely lost his cool but being challenged like that really did not sit well with him, especially
when he was already on edge. "I don't see what would qualify you to—"

"I'm faster, I'm quieter, I've had more experience, and I'm clearly the better choice."

Bruce stayed silent but moved in closer to stand beside Steve and it was a good thing he did. The
beta's presence instinctually calmed Steve from anger back down to mild irritation. He hated when
he let himself get to that point; sometimes alpha hormones were not all they were cracked up to be.

Pulled back to rationality, Steve forced himself to honestly think it over. Whenever he had led a
team in the past he had always taken the most challenging roles he thought he could successfully
achieve. He hadn't been about to send any pack members into a danger he himself was unwilling to
face. But he did understand that people had different skills and if Natasha honestly could do better
than him, he wasn't going to be so pigheaded not to let her. It would've been great if she had said it
better but he could get over it.

"Fine." Natasha and Bruce both looked surprised. They obviously weren't expecting him to change
his mind. Steve wasn't unreasonable, he could take their advice—but they were going to do it his
way. "But you need to just get in and out and you'll stay in constant communication. If I give you
any other orders you better follow them. Can you agree to that?"

Steve was looking straight into Natasha's eyes, trying to force all the authority he wasn't allowing
in his voice into his gaze. Natasha stared right back, completely unintimidated, her eyes as cold and hard as stone. It was at that moment that Steve knew not what the female Shifter was, but what she wasn't. She had never felt human, but she didn't even feel mammal, didn't feel warm-blooded. It wasn't anything Steve had ever encountered before and it was eerie. Even with all of that though, Steve was becoming convinced that neither he nor Brue were in any sort of trouble being around her.

Finally she acquiesced. "I can work with that."

Bruce let out a breath as Steve gave a stiff nod and sat back down at the table. "Then before you find your way inside, Natasha, I'll lure security's attention away from your entrance point."

"You'll have to be subtle about it. If they think they're under attack it will only make the situation worse."

At least they were already thinking along the same lines. Pulling a map of the area out free from the stack of papers on the table, Steve shook it out and laid it on top of the others. If he was going to be the distraction, at least he would have one advantage that Natasha wouldn't if she were in the same position. "I'll act just like a curious wolf. With any luck they'll send some guards out after me without putting the whole place on high alert, making it easier for you to slip in."

Bruce frowned. "It's a little simplistic…Don't you think they'll be suspicious?"

But that was just it. Steve nodded, beginning to get excited again. This just might work. "Its simplicity is what makes it. They'll be looking for more obvious signs of a team breaking in. And I'm counting on them being suspicious. That's the only reason they'd send a patrol out after an animal."

Natasha was frowning at him too, but at least she wasn't arguing anymore. "There are definitely some details we need to work out."

"Then let's get to work."

O~O~O~O

"Bruce, can you hear me?"

Bruce's voice echoed in his ear with a soft crackle. "Crystal clear. These ear pieces seem to be working like a charm."

Steve nodded. "It's good on my end."

"Natasha, are you online?"

The female Shifter's voice filtered through the tiny speaker. "I can hear you."

"Good. We're all set then."

They had spent nearly a full day planning. They had taken turns sleeping and had worked right through the morning hours and into the next afternoon. Steve had been so engrossed in the process that he would've forgotten to eat if Bruce hadn't dropped a plate of pancakes and bacon in front of him around ten in the morning. It was a good thing too because all of them were going to need their strength for the night to come.

Before Steve knew it, the sun was setting, they had a plan, and he was standing in the icy cold air
about a mile away from the cabin with his hand pressed against his earpiece. Bruce was still in the
cabin, theoretically watching from the sky, while Natasha was trailing behind Steve at a distance,
far enough away that he wasn't even able to smell her scent on the wind.

He could hear Bruce typing on his computer over the beta's headset. "Natasha, remember to hang
back until you hear Steve give the signal. Steve, are you ready?"

Steve looked ahead. According to the maps, there was only about four miles separating him from
the Hydra compound. "I'm about to go in."

"The cameras show that two guards are just leaving on patrol now. If you head north you should
be able to get close enough for them to hear you but not see you."

"Affirmative. I'm shifting now, so don't be alarmed if I don't respond—with words at least."

"I got it."

Having known that this was going to be the plan when he left the cabin, Steve had come prepared
and was dressed only in a pair of SHIELD issue sweat pants and a t-shirt. It hadn't done much to
combat the chill, but it was better than nothing and easier to hide than a large coat. He pulled off
both articles of clothing and left them behind some greenery, making a mental note of their
location so he could collect them at the end of the night. Then Steve took a breath and shifted.

The change was nearly instantaneous as always and he was in his wolf form before he even had a
chance to adjust to the feeling of being nude. Steve shook himself off, his pelt acting like a big
down feather jacket in the cold winter air. To his relief the earpiece stayed exactly where it should
in his ear even through his transformation. That was a pretty nifty little gadget.

"Steve, this is Bruce. Natasha's ready to go out. Let me know when you're in position."

For a minute Steve was stymied about how he was supposed to respond without being able to
speak. But just because he couldn't speak words didn't mean he couldn't make noise. And being a
Wolf, Bruce would know how to interpret them. Letting out an experimental woofing noise to
indicate agreement, Steve listened carefully for a response as he trotted further into the woods.

"Good to know this thing still works when you're a wolf."

Steve woofed again and if he were human he would be smiling. He picked up his pace and let his
senses stretch out around him as he made his way closer to the Hydra compound. He was careful
not to aim directly for it, but went instead in a more winding, natural pattern like a real wild wolf
would just in case he had already been spotted on some sort of radar system. It would take him a
bit longer than usual but it never hurt to be careful.

He ran along for about twenty-five minutes before he was able to smell the scent of humans
lingering in the frostbitten air. Humans, male, of a mature age…the scent couldn't have been more
than six hours old.

Lowering his head to sniff at the ground, Steve's eyes caught sight of a slight impression in the
ground. A footprint, and then another. And yet another set. A patrol had cut through the area,
which meant that he had to be almost…Veering away from the trail of footprints, he slunk through
some brush.

Steve ignored the tiny sharp thorns that grabbed at his fur as he pushed his muzzle through and
instead took another deep inhale as he was finally able to see passed the leaves. There was the
scent of concrete, metal, men, and the sharp sting of chemicals. He wasn't surprised then to see that
just on the other side of the row of foliage the forest broke to reveal a huge clearing maybe five by five acres wide, the Hydra compound looming like a silent sentinel of industry in stark contrast to the wilderness around it. Steve wasn't scared off though. If anything, the sight of it made his blood boil with adrenaline. The hunt was on.

Releasing a low, soft growl, just loud enough to be picked up by the microphone in the earpiece, Steve checked the sky to make sure that he was entering from the north side before slinking the rest of the way out. He knew his brief message was received when Bruce came back over the radio. "Natasha, Steve is in position. You're up."

"Copy that."

"Steve, that patrol is coming your way. Be careful."

Natasha was on the move and Steve didn't have the luxury of hesitation so he went fast. Darting into the clearing, Steve quickly spotted the guards Bruce had eyes on and, after making sure that they had seen him, froze like a deer caught in the headlights. He had to play his part. A few hundred yards away the two guards stopped stock still and for half a minute they just stared Steve down and Steve just stared right back. Then, from across the way, Steve saw one of them slowly reach for their belt.

Steve took off like a rocket. But he made sure to run wolf fast, not Wolf fast. And, just like they had hoped, the guards followed. Letting out a sharp growl, he leapt back through the brush and paused, waiting for their racing footsteps to grow closer before weaving through the trees. He had to make sure they didn't lose him, but he also didn't want them close enough to injure him.

"Alright, Steve, they're following you out but I won't be able to follow the pursuit into the forest. Natasha, go as soon as you reach the clearing. The next patrol looks like it won't reach you for another seven minutes or so. Get in, locate Barton, then a computer."

"I'm on it."

Steve played his role perfectly. He must've lead the two guards about two and a half winding miles through the woods before he finally lost them by leaping into his top speeds and disappearing with a flash of golden fur. Steve didn't want to lead anyone back to the cabin so he made a wide arc through the forest before looping back around towards their temporary base of operations.

Tongue lolling out of his mouth, Steve bounded back through the last layer of trees as the front door of the cabin came into view, the wood lit up with an orange glow with the setting sun. He shifted back into his human form as he reached the threshold, a hard shiver racking through his body as the sub-freezing temperatures finally hit bare skin again.

Bruce glanced back at him from the bank of monitors as Steve punched in the code and slipped inside, the beta turning back around to give him a bit of privacy as he quickly hurried over to a spare change of clothes he had waiting for him on his bed. Once he had pulled on the pair of pants and shirt, Steve walked across the room to stand behind the scientist. "How are things going?"

"From what I can tell in here, she's doing good enough."

"Where is she?"

"She just reached the building itself."

Steve's eyes skipped from monitor to monitor before he spotted an aerial view of the compound and Natasha jog up to the concrete walls. "And the guards?"
"The two you led away still haven’t made it back yet, but there are two more security teams making rounds through the property."

Thoughts whirred around Steve's mind as he watched Natasha duck around the buildings, obviously checking inside windows. "Are they anywhere near Natasha?"

"One of them is making their way towards her but she's got time."

"You don't have to talk about me like I'm a third party; I can hear every word the both of you are saying."

Steve jumped as Natasha's voice hit him. Right. He was still wearing the earpiece. "Then stay alert. You have a few minutes, but make them count."

His fingers tightened on the back of Bruce's chair when she didn't bother to respond. Steve decided then and there that he hated this. He hated waiting inside while the mission continued without him. He wanted to be out there, wanted to help—

"I see Barton! He's inside. I'm going after him."

Steve leaned forward over Bruce's shoulder as they both focused in on the screens. He was ready to give her the go ahead to try and get Barton out but Bruce was the first to speak into the headset, his eyes on a different monitor than Steve was watching. "You might have found Barton but there's a small unit of guards coming around the corner. You need to get out of there before they see you."

"I'm going in."

By now Steve had located the two guards heading toward Natasha too. "Bruce is right and they're coming in fast. You have thirty seconds to disappear before they have eyes on you."

There was a moment of pressing silence before her voice came back on. "That won't be a problem. I already made it inside."

"What?"

Jerking his head down, Steve's gaze darted back down to the monitor he had been previously watching to find that Natasha was nowhere to be seen. Bruce looked up at him with a confused frown and Steve could only shrug. He had no idea how she had done that. But Steve was ready to think about that later. "Is Barton there?"

"He's in the next room over, but there's a computer here. I'm going to try and access the files. Be ready to receive the download."

They had sent Natasha in with a device that looked a lot like a normal USB key except that Bruce swore that it would wirelessly transmit any data loaded up onto it immediately back to the computers in the cabin. Steve wasn't exactly sure how it worked but he hadn't asked. He didn't need to be confused right now.

Bruce clicked open a new window on his computer screen. "Okay, Natasha, go for it."

"Commencing download now."

A loading bar popped up on Bruce's screen and Steve was afraid to blink as it slowly began to fill. 1%...2%...He looked up at the top screens showing the satellite image. There was a pair of guards rounding the corner. "Natasha, security is heading your way."
"I'm covered."

Sure enough, the guards passed right by her entrance point without so much a second glance at the window. However she had gotten inside she had done a good job at concealing it. With that disaster diverted, Steve's eyes shot back to the loading bar. 5%...6%...7%...

One of the top screens flickered out of the corner of Steve's eyes. Bruce's chin jerked up as another screen jumped to static before coming back on line, the beta's eyes narrowing. "That's weird…"

10%...11%...

Steve didn't even need to see Bruce's face to sense the unease begin to seep from the other Wolf. "What's wrong?"

All of the monitors flickered at the same time and Bruce pulled up another window on his computer screen, his eyebrows furrowed. "I'm losing the feed to the satellite. But there's no reason it should be—"

14%...15%...

Steve jerked back as a high-pitched beep from Bruce's computer's speakers suddenly pierced through the tension and Bruce's hands flew from the keys as his screen flashed blue then cut to black. Almost instantaneously all of the monitors around him flashed off, leaving Steve and Bruce sitting in shocked silence in the darkening room. Bruce's mouth fell open once before his fingers fell back to the keyboard. "What the heck…?"

Steve tried to keep his voice steady. "Bruce, what just happened?"

"I, I don't know." The beta pressed the power button on his computer and nothing happened. Biting back a curse, he pressed it down again, this time holding the button down until, finally, a blue light sparked on and the laptop hummed to life. "This is going to take a few minutes to load back up."

Shaking his head, Steve straightened up and put a hand to his earpiece. "Natasha, we're having some technical difficulties on our end. Are you alright?"

Steve swallowed and Bruce glanced up at him as his question was met with silence.

He tried again, this time forcing a sense of authority into his tone that he rarely had to use. "Natasha, do you copy?"

Nothing.

Slamming back in his seat, Bruce ran his fingers through his hair as his computer continued to boot up. "Shit, communications cut out too…"

"Can you fix it?"

"It might be a while; I don't even know what went wrong! And I still have to figure out what happened to those files we were trying to download."

"Forget about the files. Focus on getting communication back up." They needed to keep in contact with Natasha; anything could happen to her in the span of a few minutes.

Pushing himself away from Bruce's chair, Steve hurried towards the door, "I'm heading out. Keep doing what you're doing and let me know as soon as communications come back online!"
"Wait! It's too dangerous for you to go out now that we lost the video feed. Hydra's security might be behind our blow-out, they could already know about our break-in attempt."

"I can handle it."

"Steve-!"

"No! I need to make sure she's alright!" At this point they had no choice to abort the mission, but they were already losing Barton a second time, he wasn't going to abandon Natasha too. He wasn't going to let another teammate down.

"Steve…"

Stripping his clothes back off, just barely avoiding ripping the seams apart in his haste, Steve pressed a hand against his earpiece as he tore the cabin door open. "If you can hear me, hang on, Natasha! I'm coming out. Bruce, hold down the fort."

"Steve, I don't know if I'll be able to get any of this back online—!

"Don't worry about the gadgets. Just salvage what you can and we'll work on the rest later. It shouldn't affect my job too much. I'm used to working with less."

Steve's hand was on the door when he heard Bruce let out a long breath then spin back around to face the screens. "Then be extra careful. The first thing I'll get up and running is the wireless communications, but until then you're on your own."

"Understood." And Steve did, he understood completely. But he had no other choice.

He shifted into his wolf form before he had even gotten completely out of the door, leaving Bruce to close the cabin up again as he raced back towards the Hydra compound. Having been there once already that night he could've followed his old path with his eyes closed but now didn't bother weaving naturally through the woods. Now he just ran as fast as his four legs would carry him directly towards the compound and Natasha.

He only slowed as he reached the edge of the clearing, still self-aware enough to know that despite what his instincts were screaming at him he couldn't just burst in. He had to understand the situation first. But when he inched his muzzle back through the brush to see the scene made his stomach clench and the fur on the back of his neck to rise.

The second patrol, only one man this time, was coming around the side of the building and Natasha was crouched down outside the building with one hand pressed to her ear, obviously trying to talk into her headpiece. Steve couldn't quite hear what she was saying—she was whispering—but the tight frown on her face was enough for Steve to know that she needed help. And she didn't even seem to notice the patrol coming up fast. If he didn't act now it would only be a matter of seconds before they spotted her.

With a sharp growl, Steve came flying out of the forest edge and sprinted across the clearing, jaw snapping down on the left leg of the Hydra guard before the man had even realized he was in danger. He tasted a sudden rush of blood on his tongue as his teeth punctured skin but forced himself to let go before he did permanent damage. The man still howled in pain and Steve's ears fell flat against his skull at the sharp noise. He wasn't deterred though, especially not when he saw the man reach for his gun at his hip. Not giving him the opportunity to draw his weapon, Steve finished up his attack by tackling him to the ground and cracked his head against the rocky soil, knocking him out cold.
Taking a moment, Steve sniffed him to make sure that he was still breathing before bounding back off towards the place he had last seen Natasha. There were two more guards, probably the first patrol, coming fast—he could hear their footsteps growing closer—so he didn't have time to be discreet. Letting out a loud yip, Steve desperately scanned the wall of the building. He could smell her, so she had to be somewhere close—

"Steve, up here!"

Steve's ears popped up and his gaze shot upwards to find Natasha crouched down on a thin ledge above one of the windows. He jerked his head back, trying to get his point across. They had to leave, now. She seemed to get it and in the blink of an eye she had leapt down to the ground and was at his side.

"Hey, you two! Stop!"

Steve heard Natasha suck in a breath and they both spun around at the shout only to find themselves face to face with two more Hydra guards, both with their guns drawn. This time Natasha moved so fast that Steve didn't even catch the it as she whipped out her own pistol, her eyes narrowed dangerously.

The look alone seemed to intimidate the guards because they took a step back. But Steve wasn't about to let her do all the work. Snarling, he barred his teeth, bracing himself as the fur rippled up on his back.

"Drop your weapon and shift back! Now!"

Natasha's voice barely reached Steve's ears as she whispered low under her breath, "I'll get the one on the left. You take the right."

Instead of bothering to respond, Steve immediately leapt into action instead. Launching himself at the man on the right, Steve skidded to the side to avoid bullets as the guard open fired before jumping at the weapon itself. He managed to rip it right out of the guard's hand with his teeth and whipped his head around fast enough to send the gun sailing into the grass.

The man was well-trained and recovered quickly but just as he moved into a defensive fighting stance, Steve body slammed him to the ground. His claws dug into the guard's torso and he smelled more blood as he lowered his head to growl into the man's face, his threat clear with his teeth inches from his throat. He didn't want to hurt anyone, but he would do what he had to in order to get himself and Natasha out of this safely. Luckily the Hydra lackey took the warning to heart and threw his hands up in a sign of surrender.

While Steve had been rushing the Hydra guard he had heard more gunshots than the rounds shot at him and knew that Natasha had engaged her own target in a firefight. A quick check to the side revealed Natasha standing over the second guard as he clutched at a wound on his shoulder, blood streaming down his arm and down his leg from another gunshot wound just above his kneecap.

Seeing his look, Natasha gave him a curt nod and her eyes darted towards the woods. Steve blinked as an understanding passed between them and he was ready for it when she suddenly turned and sprinted for the tree line. Pushing off of the guard he taken down, Steve raced to catch up with her, his powerful legs making up the distance in a few strides. His heart was thudding in his chest as his ears caught the sound of the guards screaming into their radio, alerting the entire compound to their location but he knew that they would be able to get away with the head-start they had and their speed.
Natasha was fast in her human form but Steve had no problem matching her pace as a wolf. Despite the anxiety still pulsing through his veins due to their botched mission, Steve couldn't help but lose himself just a little to the exhilaration of racing through the woods with his teammate safe beside him. The trees streaked by as he and Natasha wove and ducked between the thick trunks, leaved whipping at his face. At the same time, he fought back memories of the last time he had felt this way, when he had been ran for help, leaving Bucky and his pack's broken bodies in a blood-soaked clearing. But Natasha's presence and the dull hiss of static in his ear kept him grounded and in the present. Just because he couldn't remember how they made their way back to the cabin didn't mean that Steve had to worry about flashbacks.

Bruce was outside waiting for them with worry rolling off of him in waves. As soon as they burst through the foliage, the scientist's eyes locked onto them and he let out a long, shuddering sigh of relief. "Thank God you're both alright. With the radio still out, I didn't know what to think. I was about to go out after you."

Steve shifted back to his human form as Natasha stopped to catch her breath. "It's a good thing you waited. They were coming after us and if you had gone to the compound you probably would've been taken along with Barton."

Bruce tossed a pair of shorts at Steve. Snatching them out of the air, Steve quickly pulled them on, "Thanks." He had been too worked up to be embarrassed but it felt good to be covered up now that the adrenaline was wearing off a bit. "We should get inside and lay low for a while, just in case Hydra sends a search party out this far."

Bruce nodded and he herded them all back into the cabin. "That's probably a good plan. Last night I read up on the specifications of this place and it seems like SHIELD has some sort of camouflage system set up to block it from aerial or radar scans."

"Good. Get it online while I call Agent Coulson."

Natasha's head jerked up, her red curls bouncing around her face as she gave Steve an incredulous look. "Why are you calling him?"

"He should know about this. Clearly something went wrong, and we need to work out how to fix it before I'm willing to send any of us back out there."

"But Barton-!"

"We'll rescue Barton, I promise. But getting ourselves killed for it isn't going to solve anything. We need to rethink our plan and we're not leaving this cabin until we come up with one. Not now that Hydra knows we're here."

"Fine," Natasha bit out, "call Coulson up then and we'll get this over with. I won't leave Barton rot in there for a second longer than he has to."

Steve's eyes narrowed. "I won't leave him there, Natasha. But I don't think he'd be very happy if you died trying to get him out."

Natasha's gaze finally fell away from his as some of the tension seeped from her body. Which was good because it had been riling Steve up. "...Fine, I get it. Just make the call."

Steve nodded, his muscles relaxing as Bruce shut and bolted the cabin door tightly behind them. While they were gone the beta had turned on the electricity and under the fluorescent lighting Steve could see just how pale the Wolf's face was and the sharp pinch between Natasha's brows.
Steve didn't want to know what he looked like himself. What he felt was defeated.

"Bruce, can you get a message through?"

The Wolf nodded and sat heavily back down in front of his computer. "My laptop is the only thing I was able to get working again so far. Here," He opened up a program that facilitated video calls and moved to get out of his seat as Steve walked over.

Putting a hand on Bruce's shoulder, Steve kept him there. "Stay. I might need you to help explain things."

"Yeah…"

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve watched as Natasha stiffly walked over to the kitchenette and yanked the fridge open. He hoped she would make enough food for all of them. He didn't have much of an appetite but they all should eat after this. "Get Coulson on the line."

A few strokes of the keys were all it took to connect the line. The line rang once, twice, then Agent Coulson's face appeared on the screen. He looked surprised. "Dr. Banner, Steve. I didn't expect to hear from you for a few hours yet."

There was a question in his voice and Steve felt a new wave of shame wash over him. "Things… didn't go as planned."

Coulson frowned through the screen at them, instantly on full alert. "What exactly went wrong?"

Bruce sighed and Steve was happy when the beta answered for the both of him. This went way over his head. "Agent Romanov was able to enter the building and locate Barton in an adjoining room. She first started downloading the files but that's when things went wrong. From what I could tell Hydra worked some sort of virus into the programming that completely shut down our computer system. I'm still trying to isolate the virus, but I just can't physically manage all the tech for this mission at once. If all I were doing was facilitated communication between us and watching the satellite feed," the 'as planned' went unsaid, "I would be fine but it becomes impossible when you add in trying to hack into Hydra's mainframe and negate the virus. It's just not my area of expertise."

Agent Coulson's shoulders dropped. "I was afraid something like that was going to happen…"

At that, Steve raised his head. "We got lucky this time, we all were able to get out without injury. I won't, however, run the same risk a second time. Until we figure this out, I'm not leading this team any closer to the Hydra facility no matter what SHIELD higher-ups want."

"And I wouldn't ask you to. Dr. Banner, do you have any ideas for finding a solution?"

All eyes turned back to Bruce and Steve was shocked despite himself to see the other Wolf give an assured nod. "I do, actually. It goes against SHIELD's standard protocol though."

"At this point I'm willing to hear anything out."

"I want to bring in a third-party consultant." Steve and Natasha across the room both blinked at Bruce, neither having heard anything about this before now.

Coulson closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "My supervisors definitely won't like it. As I'm sure all three of you know, we like to keep our business private and hiring a consultant could lead to fairly serious security breaches. But…who do you have in mind?"
Bruce swallowed and leaned a bit closer to the screen, holding his hands up placatingly. "Hear me out before you start arguing, but I think we should bring in Tony Stark."

It took Steve a moment to place the familiar name but when he realized just who Bruce was talking about he was sure that he looked about as surprised as Coulson, the agent temporarily rendered speechless. Tony Stark was the famous—infamous—heir to the Stark family business of technologically advanced transportation, green energy systems, and bio-electronics. While he was supposedly brilliant in his own right, he most often made it into the tabloids due to some ridiculous public stunt or wild party. The man seemed to be part of a world Steve had only read about and honestly didn't care much for.

Coulson finally seemed to regain his ability to speak but Bruce cut him off by raising a hand again. "He's a, friend, I guess you could say, of mine. And I know what everyone says about him and some of its true, but I can guarantee you that he is the best at what he does and if he were brought in to work the tech with me, there would be no chance of any aspect of this mission failing."

Steve furrowed his brow, his eyes no longer on the screen but on Bruce. "Why would someone like Stark be interested in helping a SHIELD operation?" While SHIELD was a powerful global company, it only really dealt with Shifter issues and made a point to stay away from larger politics. Most humans lived their whole lives without being affected in the slightest by SHIELD, save for the half a cent tax American citizens paid to keep it running.

Bruce barely looked over at Steve as he answered, "He has his own reasons, though I'm sure having a tax write-off would be high on his list. He actually asked me to offer his services if a situation ever came up that would require it, so I can't imagine that he would turn down the request."

"It would be a huge risk. We have actually considered enlisting Stark's help before but have decided against it. His personality alone is liable to cause problems. But this mission does have the potential to unlock some very important intelligence, as well as recover one of our top field agents, so maybe my supervisors will be in a compromising mood."

Bruce breathed a sigh of relief. "Will you let me know what they say as soon as you get word?"

That statement Steve agreed with completely. "We need to work this out as fast as possible. I'm worried what will happen to Barton." Who knew what Hydra was actually capable of if they had already stooped as low as kidnapping? If they grew worried about retaliation, there was a chance they would eliminate the problem, meaning the SHIELD agent.

Coulson seemed to be thinking along the same line. "Go ahead and call him, Dr. Banner. Sometimes it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission."

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"I still don't know about this, Bruce."

"I know you don't like it, Steve, but unless you have a better idea I'm going with it."

Steve grumbled but fell silent, somewhat pacified by the fact that the other Wolf had at least acknowledged his discomfort. It was true though, he didn't have a better plan, and he trusted Bruce enough already to give this a chance.

Taking Steve's silence as permission, Bruce turned back to his phone and punched in some numbers. The three of them had just eaten a quick dinner after the call to Coulson and Steve had
done the dishes. Now Natasha was back at the table looking over Barton's file while Steve had fallen on his bunk, suddenly exhausted.

Even from where he was laying on his bunk Steve could overhear Bruce's whole conversation without bothering to strain his ears. The phone rang once, twice, three times, and then just when Steve was sure that it would be sent to voicemail a voice echoed out through the speaker. "Stark speaking. Who is this and how did you get this number?"

"Hi Tony, it's Dr. Bruce Banner. Sorry to call you out of the blue like this."

"Bruce?" Stark sounded happy but confused, which was fair, especially considering his next few words. "You haven't called in a year. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Well, nothing really. Yet, anyway." Bruce ran his hand over his face and sat down across the table from Natasha. "We need your help, Tony."

"And just who's 'we'?"

Bruce closed his eyes and rested his forehead against his hand, his elbow propped up against the tabletop. "SHIELD."

"...Is this a joke?"

"No, and we could really use you."

"So they finally came crawling back, huh? This is great!" Steve frowned into his pillow at the pure, selfish joy in the other's voice. Bruce seemed to have expected it though and took the attitude in stride. "I have to record this conversation...How'd they rope you into this anyway? How much are they paying you?"

"They're not paying me anything, Tony. In fact, I'm pretty sure if they had any other option than me calling you they would've gone with that."

"Okay, fine, I'll bite. What do they want me for? Do they want a donation or access to one of my jets?"

"Actually, they just want you. Or, more accurately, I need you."

Just when Steve was about convinced that Stark was an immature jerk, he redeemed himself just a little as he finally seemed to sense that Bruce was serious as some of the arrogance left his voice and his pitch dropped. "So something is wrong. What happened?"

"They sent me out on a mission and it isn't going well."

"A mission? Really? You?"

"I know. My team and I need your help or we're going to be in a lot of trouble in a very short amount of time." Bruce hesitated a moment before he added one last incentive. "If you agree I'll give you full access to the mission files within the next ten minutes."

"As tempting as it is to get an easy peek into SHIELD's secrets, I don't get why they'd think I'd be able to do anything for you."

"Let's just say that we're in dire need of your ability to deconstruct computer systems...and viruses and firewalls. There's no one better than you, Tony, and right now we need the best."
There was a pause before Steve heard Stark chuckle. "What a fantastic stroke to my ego. You must be in trouble. But you've got me curious. There isn't any chance of death on this 'mission', is there? Because I have an important meeting next week with my overseas investors."

Bruce glanced over at Steve and the alpha stifled an eye roll as he shook his head. Bruce tilted his own head as he answered back. "Not unless you don't follow the rules."

"I'll have to behave then. Is there an airport anywhere nearby?"

"No."

"I'll figure something out. Send me the details and I'll meet you where you are in twelve hours."

"You don't even know where I am yet."

Steve didn't even know the man but he could hear the smirk on his face over the phone line. "Doesn't matter. There isn't anywhere on Earth or close-orbit that I can't reach in that amount of time. See you tomorrow morning, Bruce. I'll bring coffee."

"Wait, Tony—!" Before Bruce could get another word in, Stark had hung up leaving the cabin in a resounding quiet.

It was broken after a few long seconds as Natasha looked up from the paperwork with a frown on her face. "Is he always like that?"

Bruce sighed, "Pretty much."

Steve rolled over onto his back and gazed across the room to where the other Wolf was sitting. He wasn't very happy with the situation, but at least bringing Stark on was better than leaving Barton stuck in the Hydra compound. If the billionaire's presence could help them successfully wrap up this mission than any amount of attitude would be worth it. As long as he didn't push Steve too far. He wasn't sure how much he would be able to take before he snapped, especially when he was already so wound up. "Do you really think he'll be able to make it here by tomorrow morning?"

"Tony can do anything he puts his mind to, for better or worse."

"Then I guess we have some work to do." Steve hadn't counted on them being able to return to the field so quickly. If Stark arrived tomorrow morning, they could spend the afternoon creating a new strategy and then execute it that night. "But first we should all get some sleep. We'll need to keep a constant watch though." With Hydra possibly hunting for them, they couldn't stand to be too careful, even with the cabin's camouflage.

Natasha waved a hand at him as she looked back down to her pages. "I'll take the first shift and wake one of you up in three hours."

Steve agreed; he was already in bed after all. "Alright. I'll take the second watch. Bruce, get over here. I'll be waking you up in six hours."

Bruce nodded and he obediently walked across the cabin to the bunks but not without a tired grin in Natasha's direction. "Make sure to keep an eye out for Tony. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned up at the least convenient moment."
Chapter 4

O~O~O~O

"…Steve…"

"Steve, wake up."

Nuzzling his face into the thin pillow, Steve frowned as he slowly woke to the sensation of someone gently shaking his shoulder. He frowned and cracked an eye open to find Bruce staring down at him, the beta's face illuminated by the soft, butter-yellow light filtering in through the cabin windows. "Sorry to wake you, Steve."

"'S alright." Steve was just surprised it was taking him this long to wake up, usually he was an extremely light sleeper. He must've been more tired than he originally thought. "What is it?"

"Tony's here."

Stark. Perfect. Steve sat up in his cot as he rubbed a hand over his face before sliding his fingers up to comb through his hair. "What time is it?"

"Just about seven in the morning. Technically there's still an hour left of my watch, but I figured that you would want to be up when Tony got here."

"Yeah, thanks." Swinging his legs out from under the covers, Steve stretched his arms out while looking around the cabin. "Where is he?"

Bruce stepped back and motioned towards the monitors. "He's outside. I saw him come in on the screens. I spent the last couple hours getting the satellite feed back online." Sure enough, aerial views of the Hydra facility and the surrounding forest were back up on the monitors.

"Good work with the cameras. If you could go get Stark, I'll clean myself up and get Natasha out of bed." It was only right that they be somewhat presentable for their first meeting.

Bruce nodded, "Sure. I'll be right back."

Turning around to the bathroom as the other Wolf slipped out the front door, Steve was about to try and rouse Natasha in her bunk as he walked by but her eyes were already open, barely visible with half her face obscured by her pillow and the other half hidden behind a tangle of red curls. He wasn't terribly surprised. Wolf Shifters tended to be light sleepers so there was no reason why other Shifters wouldn't be. And he and Bruce hadn't exactly been whispering. "Did you hear all that?"

Pushing herself up onto her elbows, Natasha brushed her hair back out of her face. "Yes. Stark's
here and you want to make yourself pretty for the celebrity."

Steve's glare lost a bit of its heat when he saw the faintest hint of a grin tugging at the corner of
Natasha's lips. After the night they had just had he would take a little teasing for that. But only just
a little. Rolling his eyes, Steve pushed the bathroom door open. "I'll be right out. Knock if Bruce
brings him in."

Steve didn't give Natasha the chance to call him out. After cutting down to the bare necessities and
going through the remaining of his morning routine at double-time, Steve was back out into the
main portion of the cabin in less than five minutes. He was still surprised when he pushed the door
back open and only Natasha was there. She must've noticed his disbelief because she let out a little
snort. "It looks like they're doing a little catching-up outside."

"Actually, I was just warning him to behave himself." Steve and Natasha both turned to look as
Bruce opened the front door. He sent each of them a weak smile before stepping aside and letting
the shadow following after him in.

As soon as Stark walked through the door into cabin, Steve disliked him. He had no concrete
reason but there was something about his grin and his swagger that didn't sit quite right. Or maybe
it was the way he was wearing an expensive designer suit to a special ops mission in the middle of
the woods or that the man was wearing sunglasses before the sun was even really up. And if those
things weren't enough, Steve had actually done a little background checking of his own this time
around while he was on watch. Once he had figured out how to turn Bruce's computer on. And get
online. And run the search engine properly. It had taken a while.

Everything he already knew from newsstand tabloid covers and what little information Bruce had
given him checked out along with the fact that Stark Industries, the company Tony Stark owned,
was one of Hydra's largest economic rivals. That cleared up a lot of the questions Steve had about
Stark's eagerness to join their little venture. This was the man's chance to land a major blow on his
biggest competitor. There was a blatant conflict of interest there that Steve wasn't happy with.

Another reason Steve didn't like the man but was more afraid to admit to was that even though he
smelled human Stark was somehow managing to give off an alpha vibe. Maybe it was his obvious
arrogance, better-than-you attitude, or the way he seemed to instantly own the room, but not matter
the cause Steve wasn't fond of it. It made his inner wolf's hackles rise. Steve was the one who had
been put in charge of this mission and he wasn't about to cede any control over to a human
latecomer, no matter how brilliant or talented said human was. Steve could already sense that
Stark was going to have issues taking orders and that trait of his could possibly lead them into
some bad situations.

"Well it's a hell of a lot better on the inside
than the outside, not that that's saying much…"

Steve stepped forward and stretched out his hand. He was pretty good at human greetings but he
couldn't help but state his group position right of the bat "Hello, Mr. Stark. My name is Steve
Rogers and I'm in charge of this team. Thanks for coming out and joining us. I know the pay
probably isn't what you're used to—"

Stark eyed Steve's hand for a moment before reaching out and giving it a quick but surprisingly
firm shake and offered him a smile that could only be described as smug. "Nah, I'm doing this for
free. As a 'community service,' as Pepper put it."

Steve didn't know who 'Pepper' was but that…was actually a thoughtful thing to do. He felt bad.
Maybe he had jumped to conclusions about the billionaire unfairly. "Well we really appreciate you making the time for this then."

Tony's smile fell back into his smirk. "Don't thank me too much; I didn't do it entirely out of the goodness of my heart, but also so I could actually come out here. I doubt SHIELD could even afford my consulting fees."

Or maybe his conclusions were perfectly well-founded. A frown worked its way onto Steve's face but before he could respond Bruce closed the front door with an unnecessary amount of force, the sharp bang quickly bringing all eyes to him. "O-kay. Tony, you've met Steve." Stepping forward, the beta Wolf redirected Tony's attention to Natasha with a wave of his hand. "This is Natasha Romanov, my other teammate."

"Hello there." Steve watched as Tony eyed the redhead up and down and although the smirk stayed on his face, his eyes narrowed like he wasn't quite sure what to make of her. Steve didn't blame him. Natasha's hard stare didn't exactly match with her sleep-rumpled clothes and barely-combed hair. "Beautiful with an edge of psychosis. And here I thought this was going to be a boring job."

Natasha's gaze grew frigid. "If you have the time to be bored you aren't working hard enough."

Whatever Stark had to say to that was cut off as Bruce blatantly led him away from the comment by putting a hand on the billionaire's shoulder and turning him around so that he was facing the bank of screens. "And speaking of work, this is going to be your station."

With one glance back at Steve and Natasha, Stark let himself be walked over to their monitor display and raised his brows. "Pretty nice set up you got here. I mean, it's a little outdated but it looks like someone went to a bit of trouble to patch this altogether."

Unphased as ever by Stark's comments, Bruce moved to stand next to him. "Will you be able to make it work?"

"Of course I will, it just won't be quite as sophisticated as I want. It should get the job done though. Especially once I add this."

Steve blinked as Tony rooted around in the small bag he had slung over his shoulder and pulled out a sleek looking laptop. Bruce seemed impressed by the piece of technology, his own brows rising as he took a couple of steps closer. "What kind of computer is that? I haven't seen that brand before."

"That's because it's one of a kind." Setting it down next to Bruce's laptop, Stark ran a hand fondly over the top of the case. "I built her from scratch and she's about twenty years ahead of that clunky SHIELD hardware, no offense. I don't work with anything I haven't built myself, mainly because everything else is crap."

"Fair enough. What kind of processing power does that have?"

After that, Steve started to zone out Bruce and Stark's conversation. It wasn't intentional, it just sort of happened as they descended into technological jargon that might as well have been a foreign language was far as Steve's comprehension was concerned. He let them carry on for a few minutes and Natasha quickly lost interest as well. Seeing her attention was beginning to wander, Steve caught her gaze and motioned towards the fridge. They might as well be productive.

Natasha nodded reluctantly and the two met at the kitchenette, Natasha leaning on the counter as Steve swung the fridge door open, his hands immediately grabbing a carton of eggs and a package
of bacon. "It feels like we just ate."

"We have a long day ahead of us. We should pull in some calories to keep us going."

Letting out an amused breath, Natasha shook her head. "Sometimes I forget how much Wolves eat. You're like a swarm of locusts."

Steve didn't take the comment personally. It was true; an active Wolf in prime condition could easily consume over four thousand calories a day and not put on any weight. They needed at least five thousand if they were going to be running and shifting throughout the entire day and still feel comfortably full. "It's not our faults we have high metabolisms."

"You and Bruce better eat most of this then, because Stark and I will just get bloated."

Steve grinned back at her. If he and Bruce really put their minds to it together they could probably finish up the entire content of the fridge in a single meal. "That won't be a problem."

Breakfast turned out to be a very casual affair. Steve had made enough for four but the plate he offered Stark was waved off. He had to push a plate under Bruce's nose to get him to take it, the other Wolf so wrapped up in his conversation with the human that he hardly acknowledged Steve's presence. They seemed to have moved on to a different topic but Steve still couldn't make heads or tails of it so he retired to sit with Natasha at the table.

The two of them had eaten in a comfortable enough silence but by the time Steve was finished Natasha was clearly getting antsy, ready to get back to the Hydra facility. Steve couldn't blame her. After cleaning up from their meal, Steve decided that they had waited long enough. They had business to take care of and someone to save.

Walking over to the little table, Steve raised his voice to catch Bruce and Stark's attention. "Everyone gather around! Now that we're all here we need to get down to work."

Natasha was at his side in an instant and rolled out a map of the area over the table top. "It's about time." She barely waited for Stark and Bruce to walk over before stabbing a short knife Steve hadn't even seen her pull out into the map right where the Hydra compound was. "This is our target. Stark, you're staying here with Banner while Rodgers and I head out."

Stepping forward, Steve took over the conversation. "That part of the plan hasn't changed. Stark, we're grateful for your help but we don't need any human civilians directly risking themselves. Besides that, we called you in so that you could stay here and help Bruce with hacking into Hydra's computer system."

Stark snorted as he dragged his chair over, the metal legs screeching across the concrete floor in a way that made Steve want to plug his ears. "Yeah, thanks, I got that. Seriously, I have no interest in going out in the field."

Bruce cut the man off before he could add any extra sarcasm. "Did you have a chance to look over the files I sent you from SHIELD?"

Tony nodded. "Of course. I read through them all, some interesting stuff in there. You were right to call me in by the way; I doubt anyone else would be able to break into the Hydra security system without alerting those weirdoes. Honestly, I don't know how SHIELD expected you to manage on your own."

Steve grit his teeth. "I'm not going to take that personally."
"Don't worry, the insult was aimed at them, not you. But anyway, while we're doing all the work in here, what are you two supposed to be doing in the meantime?"

Steve bristled but kept his temper. Barely. "While you two work out our communications, surveillance, and breaking into Hydra's computer system, Natasha and I will be recovering our missing agent. Natasha was able to get eyes on him last time before we had to pull out, so assuming they haven't moved him in the last twenty-four hours that should give us a decent advantage. It's obvious that they are conducting a more thorough patrol of the perimeter than we had initially expected. Last time I was able to provide a distraction to draw the guards' attention away from the building but I don't think that they will fall for the same trick a second time. They'll be sure I'm a Shifter this time. And this time I'm going to let them catch me so they can be sure."

Bruce and Natasha instantly began to protest but Steve shook his head with a small, dry smile. "Don't worry. I don't plan on staying caught for long. If I just hung back in the forest I don't think they would rise to the bait and come after me again but if they actually engage me in a fight and then I run, hopefully the Hydra security team will assume that I was the one who broke in last time and that they've routed me so they won't be expecting any further activity from us near the compound itself. With any luck that will allow Natasha enough time to find a way inside. Last time you only needed a few seconds, so optimistically you won't need much longer than that a second time."

Natasha gave a firm nod. "I know where I'm going so this time I'll be even faster."

"Good. I'll try to outrun whatever tail I build up in the woods but this time I'll come back around and act as backup. I won't chance leaving you completely alone again."

Natasha had a serious frown on her face as she unrolled another piece of paper over the map. It was a rough set of blueprints of the west side of the Hydra compound. "I sketched these out last night focusing on the rooms I was able to see in to. When you come back around, this is where you want to come because this is where I'll be leaving from if everything goes to plan."

Bruce tilted his head as he leaned over the diagram, his eyes wide. "When did you have time to do this?"

"While I was on watch last night using a layover of satellite images we had printed out the night before."

Steve pursed his lip as he eyed the diagram. "Where did you see Barton?"

"Here." She gestured to a window along the wall of the compound near the middle of the image. "This is where the computer was."

As she gestured to a room next to the one holding Barton, Steve's attention was torn from the paper as Stark reached in slapped a hand over that half of the blueprint. "Well you don't have to worry about that anymore, sweetheart. I'll take care of it. You just focus on getting this Barton guy out."

Steve couldn't help but be impressed despite himself. He would've doubted Stark but the man sounded so sure of himself that it was impossible not to trust that he knew what he was talking about. Even if he was an ass. "Can you do that from inside the cabin?"

"Yeah." Taking a step back, Stark shot Steve this condescending smile as he shoved his hands into his pockets. "They invented this thing called 'wireless networking' a few years back. Then I reinvented it and made it better."
Steve narrowed his eyes but Bruce was already speaking, the scientist's head tilted in concern. "Are you sure you can handle something like this remotely? Hydra looked like it had some pretty heavy network security."

"It doesn't sound bad but I've built—and broken through—better. I got a pretty good idea from reading through the encyclopedia you call a mission file on the way over here. I won't know for sure what I'm dealing with until I actually access the system but it shouldn't be a problem."

Steve shook his head. There was a fine line between self-confidence and arrogance and Stark was jumping back and forth across it. "But it crashed our entire system."

"That's because Bruce didn't know what he was doing. No offense Bruce." Bruce gave a loose shrug as Stark patted him on the back. "But now that you've got me, so you just worry about Barton and I'll take on the rest."

Steve was ready to believe him. And honestly having that weight off his shoulders would be a bit of a relief. Giving a tight nod, he looked back over to the map and refocused on the plan. "Okay, so given that, Natasha, I'll come from the east fifteen minutes before you while you'll approach from the west. That should give me enough time to do what needs to be done. Do you have any idea of what kind of time frame you'll need to recover Barton?"

She shook her head, her lips drawn down in a thoughtful frown. "I can't be sure. I didn't get a good look at the security in the adjacent room and the hallway when I broke in the first time. Also, getting out with Barton might be a problem depending on his condition. Start to finish, I'll probably need at least twenty minutes."

That sounded like a short amount of time and Steve knew from experience how fast the minutes ticked by when you were on a mission such as this. The fact that Natasha was so sure she could break in then out of a highly secure, militarized compound in only twenty minutes spoke to her skill. "If you need help I should be back by that time to assist."

Bruce released a breath and nervously ran his fingers through his hair. "There are just so many unknowns..."

Steve couldn't deny that. But if they weren't going to start the mission until nightfall there was some time yet for them to work some of those unknowns out. "We have a rough plan and about ten hours left before we head out. We'll just have to use our time wisely."

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The hours had passed by slowly in a cloud of tension and annoyance. Tony Stark was an obnoxious, immature man and had the attention span of a spoiled child. He also got antsy after the first forty-five minutes and for the rest of the time alternated between intense focus as he and Bruce worked on the computers and walking around harassing the rest of them. It made Steve high-strung and he had to leave the cabin about a dozen times just to calm himself back down. Natasha did the same and was actually gone more time than she was in the cabin. When Steve asked her where she was going she just said "scouting" and since it sounded mildly productive Steve let it slide even though it wasn't safe for either of them to be wandering too far off.

The worst part of that whole day though was the knowledge that they had attempted a similar mission just yesterday and had failed miserably. The only thing that differentiated that attempt and this one was, ironically enough, the same man who had been driving him up the wall. As much as he now trusted in Stark's brilliance after hearing him and Bruce discuss the details of the job using words he could never hope to understand, Steve hated the idea of putting his faith in him.
But then, less than an hour before they were to set out, they had a minor breakthrough as Stark began to test the waters with Hydra's security network. Tony had set it up so that all transmission feeds from Hydra to SHIELD were rerouted through his computer to counter-act any virus that may pass through it. He also managed to use the information left over from the failed file download they did the night before to gain access to the Hydra network. By then they had all gathered around the computer and they were all disappointed when it turned out that the files were still locked.

Leaning back in his seat Stark frowned at the computer screen. "Okay, so they are a little more advanced than I gave them credit for."

Steve bit his lip. This wasn't good. "So you can't access the files remotely after all. Will it still be possible to download them?"

"Of course. It just won't be as straightforward." Bending to the side, Stark snatched his satchel off of the ground by his feet and began to dig through it. After a moment he let out a little sound of victory and pulled a small USB key from an inside pocket. He passed it over his shoulder to Natasha before knocking the bag back to the floor and returning his hands to his keyboard. "Plug that in to whatever computer you used before. It'll give me physical access to that computer and I can hack into it first and then gain full access to the network."

Natasha eyed it uncertainly. "Will I have to do anything on my end? Because after you told us we wouldn't have to worry about it, Steve and I didn't exactly leave time in our schedule to deal with this."

Stark shook his head, beginning to type lines and lines into the laptop. "Just literally plug it in. In fact, don't do anything else at all. Don't even look at the computer, just plug it in and leave."

"Great."

Steve felt his stomach slowly begin to drop. It looked like their new advantage wasn't quite as powerful as he had hoped. Bruce must've sensed his souring mood because he looked up at Steve from his seat next to Stark. "It's just a small setback. The good part of this is that when Natasha gets that drive plugged in it'll give Tony greater access to the network than he ever would've had otherwise."

"What do you mean?"

"It means..." Stark's words paused as he typed a few more words in and settled back in his chair again before looking up at Steve. "It means that hypothetically I should have full access and control over Hydra's security system."

Well, that would certainly change things.

"That's...amazing."

"I know."

Steve knew he was happy when Stark's snide comment didn't phase him. "Keep us updated over the earpieces about what you find. It would be enormously beneficial to be able to track security inside the facility as well as outside of it with the satellite feeds."

Nodding, Bruce relaxed as the mood in the cabin began to lighten. "Of course. We'll feed you a constant stream of information over the radio. Now there shouldn't be any way for anyone to sneak up on you."
Stark grinned up at them. "This is secret agent thing is great. We need code names. Steven, you can be 'Big Bad Wolf'."

Unsure of whether he should laugh or frown, Steve brows furrowed in confusion as he prayed that it was the billionaire's attempt at a joke. "And what are you? 'Little Red Riding Hood'?

"No, I'm the Huntsman." Steve huffed as Stark gave him a lascivious smirk before jamming a thumb in Natasha's direction. "Romanov's 'Little Red'."

Steve's eyes widened at Stark's sheer gall at teasing the assassin but thankfully Natasha just rolled her eyes. "Fuck off."

The man didn't seem to get the hint. "What's wrong, Little Red? Problem?"

For a minute there, things had been going alright. Jumping in before Natasha decided to do something, Steve tossed an imploring look back at his other teammate. "Bruce…?"

The other Wolf sighed before leaning over and resting a hand on the man's shoulder. "Tony, please shut up. The line is secure, we don't need code names."

"All of you take the fun out of life…"

Natasha scoffed, her hands on her hips and an angry look on her face. "Look, if we have time for this stupidity, why don't we just start early? The sun is setting and we're wasting time."

At that point it was all Steve could do to agree. It sounded like their technological advantages weren't going to increase until Natasha actually gained access to the building. And every second they waited he felt another pound land on his shoulders with the thought that it could be Barton's last. "We might as well. The sun is almost down and we don't have any other reasons to wait around."

"You are unbelievably demanding. But alright, fine. Brucey, let's get down to work." Stark pointedly snapped on a pair of headphones as he turned back to face his laptop, the blue glow from the screen casting an eerie light over his face in the darkening cabin.

Bruce shook his head but tucked his seat closer to the desk with a glance back at Steve and Natasha. "Are you two really ready to go?"

Natasha was ready to answer for both of them. "Absolutely."

"Okay, then. Good luck."

They could definitely use a little luck. "You too."

O~O~O~O

Nearly twenty minutes later, Steve pressed a finger against his headset as he moved in between the trees. He was practically at the Hydra facility, Natasha fifteen minutes behind him as per the plan. "Equipment check. Bruce, Natasha, do you copy?"

"I hear you, Steve."

"Read you loud and clear." And good, it sounded like Bruce was ready to go too.

"I can read you just fine too, in case you're interested." Steve jumped as a third voice answered back. Right. Stark. He was listening in on their frequency as well.
Steve ignored the smugness in Stark's voice and made the decision to just carry on with business. His breath clouded up from his lips as he spoke, his palm scratching against the rough bark of a tree as he slunk around it. "Sounds good. Bruce, Stark, keep the two of us updated on your progress. I'm about to shift, so you'll lose verbal contact with me."

Thankfully Bruce was the one to answer back to that. "Got it. Tony just started attempting to gain access to Hydra's mainframe and I've tapped into the satellite feeds. It looks like they've posted a few more guards since our last visit."

"Probably because of our last visit."

Steve could hear Natasha's frown. "They have more guards, but does it look like out entry plan is still the best option?"

"At this point, yes. I doubt Hydra was even able to figure out just how close they were to being broken into last time, which would explain the blanket security increase with the change in the number of men appointed to look around."

Steve shucked his pants off as he listened in. Natasha had come back with the outfit he had gone out in the previous night so he didn't feel bad about abandoning this set of pants and shirt. He shook off his shivers off as he tugged off his shirt and quickly shifted into his wolf form.

Loping over to the edge of the clearing, he found himself once again peering through the brush at the Hydra compound. It was no surprise that it looked much the same as the night before. The only obvious difference was the one Bruce had already pointed out: an increase in the amount of guards patrolling around the building.

"There are two guards coming around your side of the building, Steve. You only have a few seconds before they'll be able to see you." That was exactly what he had been waiting to hear.

Pushing off against a tree, Steve darted out and ran straight towards the compound. The coast was clear on the way there but he knew that wouldn't last.

Even though he knew he was going to be caught Steve still gave a violent start as the patrol appeared a moment later just as Bruce said they would. Steve froze misstep and for half a second they just stared at each other, Steve waiting for them to make the first move and the guards apparently shocked that they had actually found him there. But as well trained as they were it didn't take them long to jump into action.

One of them immediately grabbed their radio and began to yell into it as the other guard drew their gun. "Came back a second time? Where's your friend?" A low growl rumbled up in Steve's throat at the reference to Natasha. These weren't the same guards they had encountered last night but it wasn't surprising that they knew who he was. "You've got two options: come with us or I shoot you in the head. You have five seconds to choose."

Steve didn't need five seconds; he already knew exactly what he was going to do. Bracing himself, Steve let out one loud snarl in warning before jumping forward. Both of the guards evaded him but he hadn't intended to actually hit them. He landed directly between the two guards, putting himself close enough for them to hit him but positioned so that they wouldn't risk crossfire by shooting at him. And boy did it work.

Steve grunted as the guard who had been threatening him brought the butt of his pistol down hard like a club onto Steve's back. It smarted a bit, as did the kick from the other guard when he planted his boot into Steve's ribs. Wolves were naturally tough and Steve was even tougher than a normal Wolf so neither of the blows was going to result in anything more than a light bruise. But they
didn't need to know that.

Releasing an exaggerated yelp, Steve let the kick push him over and he rolled onto the ground. They were on him in an instant. Before he could scramble to his feet he was kicked again and pistol whipped in the side of the face. That last one had him seeing stars and was Steve's cue to scramble to his feet before the Hydra guards actually did some lasting damage.

Steve's claws dug into the rocky soil as he pulled himself up and out of their reach and he had to force himself not to run at full speed. It got even harder to fight the instinct as he heard the sound of gunfire and a bullet whizzed by his ear. Gulping, Steve checked back over his shoulder and, seeing them on his metaphorical heels, allowed himself to bob and weave a bit, his heart pounding in his chest as another bullet ricocheted off a rock less than two inches from his back paw.

As with the night before, the woods became his salvation. He wasn't the most agile Shifter in the world but any one of them would've been able to outrun a human. In the gathering darkness Steve could become a ghost amongst the trees and only appear to his pursuers when he wanted to. They should've counted themselves lucky that he wasn't hunting them.

Bruce's voice came back over the airwaves. "Okay. The patrol has been lured away."

"Morons…"

Blatantly ignoring Stark's interjection, Bruce continued. "Natasha, are you in position?"

"Affirmative, Bruce."

"Then you have approximately five minutes until the next patrol comes around. There appears to be some activity on the north side of the building, probably in response to whatever message was put out when they found Steve. I'll keep an eye on them and let you know if any of them are heading your way."

As Bruce's voice fell away, Steve turned his attention back to his own immediate problem. Now that he had lured the security team away Steve now had to shake them off his tail.

It wouldn't be hard.

The guards seemed to sense it as Steve picked up his speed, one of them shouting angrily into the trees: "If you come back, I swear to God I'll kill you!" If they only knew what the rest of the night held in store for them…

That was the last he heard from them, their scents lingering in the air for a few minutes longer before they too faded. Steve looped around instead of heading back towards the cabin. Avoiding his old path just in case a second or third patrol unit was arriving to help hunt him down, he ran about half a mile to the south before swinging back up and following his nose back to the Hydra compound.

He arrived back just in time to see a slim figure slink towards the concrete walls of the building. Even though he couldn't smell them yet he could immediately tell by sight that it was Natasha. As Steve remained half covered by the shadows of the trees behind him, Natasha flipped up onto the roof of the Hydra facility. Steve kept one eye on her as he scanned in his periphery for approaching guard patrols. His ears were perked up on his head, just waiting for the sound of footsteps.

There was a rustle off to the side and he turned to investigate it. When he looked back Natasha was gone. Cursing in his head, Steve waited a few seconds to see if she would reappear before reluctantly shifting back to his human form. He ducked behind a tree trunk as he pressed a hand to
his earpiece. "Bruce, I lost eyes on Natasha. Can you see her on the monitors?"

There was a deafening pause before Steve's headset crackled back to life. "Negative. Steve, I can't see her anywhere."

Hearing concern rise in Bruce's voice, Steve's alpha instincts made him hurry to reassure the other Wolf even as his own heart rate jumped. "It'll be alright. This was what happened last time and she was alright. I just had to check. She's a professional; she wouldn't have gotten caught so quickly." She had to be shifting, into what he still didn't know, but it was clearly a form that helped her infiltrate the building.

"You say that, but—"

Steve cut Bruce off as he saw something shift in the window of the compound. "Wait. I think—"

Yes, that was definitely Natasha. He could barely make her out, but she was pretty visually distinctive. She was in the room she had broken into yesterday, the one with the computer. "There she is. I have eyes on her, she's inside."

"How'd she get in this time?"

"I don't know, but let's just be happy she managed it again."

"I can hear you, you know."

Steve perked up hearing Natasha's voice. AS sure as he was that she had managed to break in, it was still reassuring to get verbal confirmation. Bruce didn't seem to appreciate it as much. "Then why didn't you say something?"

"I was busy. Now keep it down. With you two shouting in my ear I can hardly hear myself think."

Steve watched her cross through the room before Natasha's voice crackled back over the radio feed. "Alright, the USB drive is plugged in."

Alright, step one was over. Steve breathed a sigh of relief. "Stark, focus on hijacking their security and then handle the files. This team's safety comes first."

"A 'please' would be nice to hear."

"Don't worry, Steve, we're on it. Natasha, lay low until we access the security cameras. Steve, you can shift back to your wolf if you want." Steve did want. He had been trying to ignore it but the cold night air was not agreeing with his bare skin. "Okay, we now have access to Hydra's security cameras and have begun downloading those files. Wow, they have a lot of exterior cameras…but most of the angles are from inside the building. And there's the room Natasha said Barton was in. I can see form the hall that the door is under guard so Natasha you'll have to be careful."

There was a pause before Stark spoke up. "But I don't see Barton…"

Had they handled him already? Maybe Hydra slipped something out while the satellite feed had been out last night! Natasha's voice rang out before Steve could even express his concerns. "He's still in there and I'm going in after him."

She sounded so self-assured he didn't have it in himself to question her. But if she really was going after him even though the room was guarded, she might need some support after all. Steve knew he would be more useful as a wolf than as a naked man and swiftly shifted back. Creeping from the foliage, Steve checked around then crept across the clearing to the window Natasha had
disappeared into.

Bruce and Stark apparently spotted his movement from above and were quick to respond. "Steve, you'll have to watch yourself if you want to come in that close to the building. There's another patrol going around. Tony broke into their audio system too and it sounds like they also just sent a team out after the two you led into the forest so try to stay low in case they pass by too."

Reaching the wall of the facility, Steve kept his ears cocked to the side to pick up on any oncoming footsteps as he pushed himself up so that his front paws were resting on a small window sill, his claws clicking loudly against the glass. He all but pressed his nose to the window pane as he watched and waited as Natasha paused at the door of the room that led out into an interior corridor. She pressed hear ear against the door for a moment, took a long breath, then threw it open and burst out into the hall.

At that point Steve lost sight of her but from the sharp laugh Stark let out Natasha managed to take care out whatever guards were in the hall. Moving over to the next window, the room where Barton was supposedly kept in, Steve pawed nervously at the metal blocking the glass. They had seen it on the satellite image but luckily it wasn't welded on quite as well as it could have been. It was clearly quick and shoddy work and it didn't take much for Steve to force one of the metal panels off of the window. The sloppily welded joints fractured and snapped, falling away just in time for Steve to see Natasha slip inside.

Now that the room was revealed, Steve's eyes immediately caught onto a cage lit up by the moonlight now streaming into the space. He couldn't see inside it though due to a heavy piece of canvas draped over it, only the top corners visible. It was large though, about five feet deep and spanned nearly the entire wall of the room. Natasha had noticed it instantly as well and headed straight for it.

With a sharp, efficient jerk Natasha ripped the heavy sheet of fabric off of the cage. When the dark synthetic material fell away, Steve thought it was empty until he was able to make out a form huddled into one of the back corners. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light inside he realized that it was an enormous hawk, the bird of prey more similar in size to a condor. It was Clint Barton.

Natasha knelt in front of the cage and opened the chicken-wire door. Her expression was serious but even from where he was waiting Steve could tell that her eyes were softer than he had ever seen them. She reached a hand out toward the bird but then the unexpected happened. The Hawk jerked forward, his beak snapping at her fingers as his wings flew open aggressively.

The glass was soundproof but Steve could still hear what she was saying through the headset. "Come on, Clint...!" Russian tumbled from her lips and from the scowl on her face Steve didn't need a translation to know she was cursing a blue streak. The Hawk was struggling now, his wings flapping and sharp beak stabbing at her hands as she reached for him again. "We have a problem. Barton is conscious but appears to have gone wild. His human side is completely unresponsive."

Bruce and Stark must have been watching from Hydra's security feeds. "Are you sure it's even him?"

"One hundred percent certain."

"Do whatever it takes to get him out of there. Steve, you might have to shift again to help out. The guards outside the room are still unconscious but it won't be long until they're noticed. There are still security teams and researchers walking the halls."

Steve let out a muted woof and pressed his nose against the window glass, watching as Natasha
struggled for a moment more. There was no way she was going to be able to manhandle the Hawk without hurting him. They had to come up with another way to get him out and fast. Shuffling to one side of the window, Steve scanned the room to try and come up with a solution. There wasn't much there; a clipboard hanging from the wall, a table lined with books, two stools, a mini-fridge, and large boxes full of what looked to be chemicals—wait, those boxes would probably be big enough.

Whimpering, Steve bounced and scratched at the window, trying to get Natasha's attention. She was more than annoyed when she looked over at him but the expression cleared a bit as Steve gestured with his nose towards the stack of boxes. *"That will do."*

Springing away from Barton's cage, she sprinted across the room and quickly but efficiently unpacked the contents of the top box, piling up jars of dark-colored liquids on the floor next to her. Then she pulled out the knife she kept at her hip and stabbed it into the cardboard once and then three more times. Air holes, Steve realized. After the make-shift cage was prepared she moved back to the large cage and without any further ceremony climbed inside, grabbed the bird, and before he could even try and bite her Natasha shoved him into the box.

Through the earpiece Steve heard Barton's loud shriek of anger, his ears falling back flat on his head as the box jerked and shook in Natasha's hands as she folded the top of it closed. A wolf-whistle sounded over the airwaves. *"Well, well. Nicely done, Little Red. Remind me not to get on your bad side."*

Steve watched Natasha grimace as she put her weight on the box to keep it closed. *"Too late."*

*"Ouch."*

*"Not the time. Natasha, can you get out the way you got in with that box?"*

*"No. I had counted on Barton shifting back."*

*"Then what are you going to do?"*

*"What I have to."*

Steve cocked his head to the side as Natasha set the cardboard box down in order to pick up one of the stools then leapt back as she ran at the window Steve had unblocked. He moved just fast enough to avoid a shower of glass as she slammed the stool into the window pane and shattered it. Immediately an alarm went off from inside the building and Steve anxiously danced around as the redhead went back to retrieve the box.

*"Steve, incoming on your right!"*

Whipping around, Steve braced himself, hearing footsteps racing towards him. Before he had a chance to focus, Bruce's voice shouted again in his ear. *"Natasha, block the door!"*

Guards were coming from both angles. Natasha didn't hesitate and grabbed the second stool, jamming it under the door handle just as voices echoed out in the interior hall. Now worried more about Natasha than himself, Steve bristled and growled as three men stormed around the exterior corner of the building and ran towards him. Before he had pretended to be aggressive; now he intended to fight. They knew better, a part of his mind soothed his conscience. They knew what he was. And everyone knew better than to corner an alpha Wolf, especially when they had something to defend.

Guilt assuaged, Steve launched himself at the men. Using all his speed and all his strength he
knocked down a guard and bit down hard on his hand. The Hydra flunky let out a scream and the gun he had been holding fell to the ground.

A second man fired at him and Steve released an angry snarl as he leapt off of the first and tried to dodge the bullet. The round left a bloody streak across his flank but Steve ignored the superficial wound. His alpha instincts had almost completely taken over his mind, adrenaline shooting through his veins like fire as the second guard barely avoided being gored, Steve's claws missing him by inches.

Out of the corner of his eye Steve saw the third guard draw a weapon of his own. Too consumed with his current prey, Steve was unable to avoid being hit this time but instead of feeling a bullet rip through muscle he felt the sharp prick of a taser prong bite into his skin.

A sharp yelp burst from Steve's throat as thousands of volts of electricity instantly sparked through him. There was a moment of fear as Steve felt his legs buckle and his heart agonizingly skip a few beats but he fought through it. Not allowing himself to collapse, Steve pushed through the pain, reached back, and ripped the taser prongs from his side, the shock transferring to his muzzle for a few seconds as he clenched it in his teeth before he was able to spit it out.

That slight moment of weakness still would have cost him his life had Natasha not taken that chance to jump from the window, cardboard box in hand. Setting it down behind her, she immediately drew her gun and pointed it at the second guard but he was ready for her and knocked it from her hand. She didn't skip a beat as she returned the favor, grabbing the Hydra guard's own gun hand and twisting his arm almost to the point where it broke, his handgun clattering to the ground.

Thanks to the distraction Steve was able to survive long enough to rush guard number three. The man brought his arms up to protect his chest so Steve dove low, snapping his jaws down hard on the man's leg. Steve tasted blood, heard bone snap as his teeth sunk deep into flesh. Praying that he had managed to avoid hitting any arteries, Steve pulled away as the man screamed and fell to the ground. Steve heard another dull snap coming from behind him and a sickening gurgle, and he didn't need to turn around to know that Natasha had just broken the neck of the man she had been fighting.

By then the first guard was standing back up but Steve was on him in a minute and slammed into him, the force sending him flying back down. Natasha made sure he wouldn't get up again anytime soon with a quick kick to the man's head, quickly knocking him out.

Panting, Steve wished he could spit the foreign blood out of his mouth as the copper taste just sat on his tongue. Picking up the cardboard box again, Natasha turned to him and was about to say something when Bruce interrupted, his voice tense. "Get ready for a fight, it sounds like they have at least five more security teams running out to your location."

Steve swallowed as his eyes snapped back to Natasha's. Neither of them was in good enough shape to take on that many armed guards. His wounds would slow him down and with Natasha carrying Barton there'd be no way that she would be able to fight to her full potential. "Hold that thought, Bruce. Don't panic the troops just yet." It was obvious Tony was smiling from his tone. Before Steve even had time to process how grossly inappropriate that was a loud horn blast reverberated from inside the building and made him jump about a foot into the air. "And now all their doors are locked. That's what they get for putting electronic locks on with substandard protection against hackers..."

Closing his eyes, Steve huffed out a breath and lowered his head. No matter what he had ever thought or said, Steve couldn't deny in that moment that Tony Stark was a little bit amazing. He
shook himself off and nudged Natasha's leg with his muzzle. They got lucky but they didn't have the luxury of slowing down quite yet. The Hydra guards inside were trapped but he knew for sure there were at least four more nearby in the woods.

The run back to the cabin was again a blur for Steve but this time adrenaline was mixed with a dull but persistent pain through his body. They also ran a bit slower, Natasha due to her added burden and Steve due to his injuries. When they finally arrived Steve let Natasha run into the cabin first as he limped behind her. The multiple blows and lacerations he had sustained plus the lingering effects from the taser blast were making him a bit dizzy. Shifting back into his human form was rough, all of his wounds pulling and stretching causing blood to seep from his bullet wounds again. As he stumbled into the cabin the world spun a bit and Steve felt ready to collapse.

Luckily Bruce was there to catch him. The other Wolf's arms gripped his shoulders, holding him upright as he peered into Steve's pale face. "Steve! Are you alright?!"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Natasha. She had already cleared off the small table and set the cardboard box up on top of it and was busy peering into the slits she had cut into them. Steve shook his head to try and clear it. Bad idea. "I'll be okay…"

"Here, put these on."

Much to Steve's chagrin, Bruce had to help him pull on the pair of shorts Bruce had waiting for him and by the end of it Steve just wanted to go sit in a corner and lick his wounds. But he knew better. He needed slightly better care than that if he wanted to heal up quickly. "…We have a first aid kit, right?"

Stark appeared at his side, first aid box already in hand and a smirk still on his face. "And lucky for you, an ace doctor to go along with it."

For a moment Steve was confused as Bruce gently ushered him towards the cots. Since when was Stark a doctor? Then the billionaire passed Bruce the kit and Steve wanted to bang his head against the wall for his own stupidity. Of course. Bruce was the doctor. Bruce gave Steve a small, fleeting smile as he turned back and saw the alpha Wolf's expression. Opening the first aid kit, he began to pull out its contents even as he spoke over his shoulder to Stark. "Tony, can you get a message out to SHIELD while I take care of this? Now that we've got the files and Barton we'll need a ride out ASAP."

"Sure" For once Stark actually did what he was told. It was a miracle.

"Here…” Steve murmured a tired 'thank you' as Bruce passed him a cup full of water before turning to the antiseptic he had pulled from the kit. Gulping the water down, Steve used the last bit of it to wash his mouth out, spitting the now pink liquid back into the cup and setting it aside. He was already starting to feel better.

As Bruce got to work bandaging him up Steve watched Stark go back over to the computers and used Bruce's laptop to quickly log into the video chat program. He must've already known Agent Coulson's number because it took him mere seconds to set the call up. The speakers of the computer rang once, twice, then on the third ring the chime cut off and Coulson's voice filled the cabin. "Dr. Bann—? Mr. Stark."

Stark grinned into the lens and gave a sloppy mock salute. "Agent."

Steve heard a sigh. "And to what do I owe the pleasure? Is this about the mission?" Coulson's voice had transformed from mildly annoyed to serious as he undoubtedly braced himself for more
bad news.

"Yes, actually." Unplugging the laptop, Stark stood up and lifted it up into his arms. He smiled as he began to walk across the cabin towards Steve and Bruce. "I'm sure you'll be pleased underneath that dead, bureaucratic exterior to hear that the mission was a success. Sort of. Where it counted anyway. Everyone's alive, see?" Before Coulson could reply Stark spun the computer around so that the camera was on Bruce and Steve. "Say 'hi' Steven. I can only assume he managed to keep his shirt off in order to show off his abs."

Steve's face went red and he scrambled for the towel Bruce had used to dab some of the blood off, pulling it uselessly over his chest. "Stark!"

Frowning as Steve's fidgeting caused his new stitches to stretch, Bruce waved back at the man. "Tony, would you please not do that?"

"Prude." But Stark spun the computer back around before he turned his attention to where Natasha was still standing near Barton's new cage. "Moving on, we even managed to get your wayward son back, Agent. Check it out." Leaning in close, Stark pressed the computer's camera up against one of the air holes. A loud avian shriek came from inside along with a wild flash of feathers as the Hawk thrashed inside. "He's a little more feathery than we expected, but I'm sure we'll figure that out eventually."

As he began to zoom out, Natasha sped up the process by shoving him back and blocking his view of the box with her body. There was a scowl on her lips and a warning, dark look in her eyes. "Stark, get that thing out of my face."

"Hey, you're the one who put your face in my camera." As he moved back to the bank of computers, Stark turned the camera around so that it was back on him and grinned into the lens. "As you can see, we're all alive but apparently grumpy. I think they just need a nap. Either way it would be great if you could have someone pick us up. I would call a ride myself, but if you're already in the area it'd be awful convenient."

"I'll send someone out. Were you followed back to the cabin?"

"I'm not going out to check."

Steve heard another sigh from Coulson's end. "Just...Wait inside until you hear from us again."

"No shit."

Agent Coulson chose not to rise to the challenge. "I'll see you all soon. Stay safe and good work."

O~O~O~O

After the call to Coulson they had locked the cabin up and turned off the electricity, leaving them in darkness to avoid unwanted attention. Stark kept his computer running on battery power in case they needed to send out an emergency message. No one spoke much; even Stark seemed more intent to read from his screen and type an occasional line or two. Every once and a while Natasha would whisper something to Barton who was still trapped inside the cardboard box. Steve dozed lightly, still too wired on adrenaline to get any real rest. Even when he closed his eyes he kept his ears sharp, listening carefully for any foreign sound outside.

It was easy then for him to hear their sound of their rescue in the lingering quiet. Perking up as he heard what sounded to be a dull thumping noise, Steve tapped Bruce who was sitting next to him. The scientist gave a start at the contact but straightened up when he saw the intense look on Steve's
face. Natasha and Stark both turned to watch them as the two Wolves went on high alert. Stark raised a brow, his neutral expression doing a good job to mask the spark of worry in his eyes. "What's up?"

"I hear something…" Steve pushed himself off the cot despite his sore muscles and shuffled over to the door and pressed his ear to the door. It took the span of a few heartbeats for Steve to realize that the noise wasn't the sound of dozens of pounding footsteps but something else entirely. "It's a helicopter."

Bruce frowned. "Is it SHIELD or Hydra?"

A light ping echoed out from Stark's computer. "SHIELD. Just got word from the stuffed shirt that our ride is here."

As Steve pushed away from the door, Bruce looked back at him, a hint of confusion still turning the corners of his mouth down. "If they could fly a helicopter in, why didn't they just drop us off that way?"

Steve glanced back at him. "They probably couldn't risk bringing that much attention to themselves. I suppose now that we already tripped the alarm that whole 'keeping a low profile' idea is pretty much moot."

Stark snorted. "Moot? Did you really just use that in a sentence?"

"It's a word."

"That no one's used in a real conversation for half a century."

Steve growled as he hobbled over to his bag and began to stuff his gear back inside it. "I'm not having an argument with you about this. Everybody gather your things. I can carry Barton to the helicopter."

Shaking her head, Natasha grabbed her own bag. "Don't be stupid, Steve. You can barely hold yourself up. I'll carry him." Steve would've been insulted but her tone was surprisingly soft so he just gave her a short nod in return.

It took them less than five minutes to pack up. None of them had brought very much with them. By the time Steve peeked out the front door the sound of helicopter blades was almost deafening. The vehicle was landing directly in front of the small structure, the wind blowing off the rotors enough to make the tops of the trees around them bend out. Squinting to keep the dust out of his eyes, Steve motioned back to his team. "Let's get out of here!"

"About time…"

Steve snarled as Stark shouldered past him but before he made it two steps Bruce reached out from behind Steve and yanked the man back into the cabin. Stepping out of the doorway, Steve gestured for Natasha to head for the chopper. The doors slid open to reveal two men in suits waiting to help them inside. Meanwhile Bruce tugged Stark further back into the cabin to stand at the far end near the refrigerator. It was clear that he wanted to have a private conversation but Steve could still barely make out their whispers over the sound of the helicopter. They didn't have time for this little chat but if Bruce didn't think it was necessary he wouldn't have done it. Steve was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"What are you doing? You know better than to do that sort of thing!"
"Do what?"

"You know what! Force yourself in front of an alpha!"

Stark rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest like a berated teenager. "Relax, Bruce. I was just playing around."

"No you weren't!" Bruce jabbed a finger at Stark's chest which the billionaire quickly swatted away. "You were testing him! You've been doing it all day. Little things to try and push his buttons as an alpha."

"Call it an experiment then."

Bruce pulled his hand back and ran his fingers through his hair, the digits digging into the strands like he wanted to pull them out. "How is that an experiment?"

"I'm determining how far he can be pushed before he loses his shit. It's an important thing to know and a legitimate scientific inquiry."

"Tony, we both know why you're doing this and it sure isn't for science. Just, stop, please. Steve has an unusual amount of self-control for an alpha Wolf but one time you're going to push it too far and he really will snap. And then what are you going to do? It's not like you're going to be able to take him in a fight if he shifts and you're stuck like this."

Stark scoffed. "Are you kidding? I don't think that guy would hurt a fly much less attack a teammate."

"You saw what he did to those guards and you know how emotional and uptight Wolves can get over alpha-beta-omega dynamics. With how stressed he is right now, he might not be able to stop himself."

"You're worrying over nothing, but fine. If it stops you from having an anxiety attack I'll let off. For now."

"Since I think that's the best I can get from you right now, thank you."

Whipping his head back around so that he was looking back outside, Steve felt a blush touch his cheeks and hoped that he hadn't been caught eavesdropping. But if Bruce had noticed he didn't say anything as he walked back over to Steve. He held back a step to let Steve go first as a proper beta should and Steve responded by beginning to walk towards their awaiting getaway vehicle. Stark grudgingly followed a few paces behind them.

Bruce cleared his throat as he moved in close so that Steve could easily hear him. "Sorry about that. If I could put a leash on Tony I would, but I'm pretty sure if I tried he would end up choking himself trying to get out of it."

Steve could only shake his head. "I appreciate what you are able to do. Even my patience can only be stretched so thin."

As they made their way closer to the chopper Steve was struck with the thought that they might actually make it through this alive and well. Then with the thought that this wasn't a permanent thing, this team. Suddenly the helicopter seemed a little less like salvation and a bit more like the end of potentially a very good thing. He didn't want to be alone again. Taking a breath, Steve looked down at the beta Wolf. "Actually, Bruce, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."
Bruce looked surprised, probably that Steve wanted to talk now of all times but Steve wanted to do this before they had an audience. "Yeah?"

"Um, so, after this, I mean after this mission is over, I was wondering if you might want to spend some time together."

Swallowing, Bruce looked down at his feet. "I...I'd rather not."

"Oh." Steve's heart sunk. He hadn't expected flat out rejection.

Bruce waved his hand, beginning to ramble as he tried to explain. "Steve...it's not you, it's—"

"No, I get it. You're busy with your other work."

"It's not even that—although that is part of it—it's..." Bruce let out a heavy sigh. "I don't like other Shifters, Steve, with very few exceptions."

Steve blinked. He hadn't been expecting that either. "Why?"

"Because, because of so many reasons." Bruce dug his fingers into his dark hair, raking them through the graying strands at his temples. It was obvious now to Steve that it was a habit he had to try and relieve stress. "The interactions, the temptation to shift, the fear I see in their eyes when they realize there's something wrong with me. And...I can't trust myself to not bond to them, especially other Wolves."

Bruce looked absolutely miserable as he finished his sentence and Steve felt a wave of sympathy for him. Wolves naturally preferred groups to solitary living and had a powerful inclination to try and form the type of close relationships that were similar to those found in a pack. Stopping them right before they reached the helicopter, Steve leaned down and tried to catch the other's eyes. "Hey, look at me. I know what happened to you, what you are, and I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid of you, Bruce. And, I know what it's like to not be a part of a pack, and to want that so badly that you try and push relationships."

Bruce bit his lip but finally met Steve's gaze. Encouraged, Steve continued and words spilled out of him that he suddenly realized were truer than he had first thought. "I get why you can't get too close to people. But you seemed to have let me in, right?"

Bruce was quick to defend himself, but there was a certain glint in his eyes that said Steve was on the right track. "I had to, because of the job."

"Well, I don't see why we can't continue with this even after the mission's over."

"Look," Bruce sighed, "I don't want to talk about this right now, alright? I didn't come into this looking to join up with an alpha." Seeing Steve's expression fall again, Bruce rolled his eyes. "I appreciate the offer, Steve, but...All I can say is that I'll think about it."

It wasn't a 'no'. "That's fine. And I'd understand if you didn't want to start a pack." And Steve really would. He had just figured out how much he wanted to have a pack again but he knew Bruce had some serious baggage and issues to work through and he wasn't going to push the other Wolf. "At the very least though, I'd like to be able to say we're friends."

Bruce's distressed frown and furrowed brow slowly faded away and after a moment he tilted his head in acquiescence. "I suppose I can agree to that much."

"This is a really sweet conversation, but could we have it inside the helicopter please?"
Steve and Bruce both jumped a little and simultaneously looked back to see Stark eyeing them with a mixture of amusement and impatience.

Patting Bruce's shoulder to let him know he should load up, Steve returned his attention to Stark. He had never met a human like Stark before. Usually they were scared of Shifters, or at least wary, but Stark seemed to be perfectly at home with both him and Bruce. In fact, Stark seemed to find great amusement in trying to taunt Bruce, something that not even Steve was willing to do given the other Wolf's temperament. Even Peggy had been more wary of Steve when they had first met. It had taken years to build the levels of trust and familiarity they now had between them. But, despite all the attitude and annoyances, Steve had to admit that Tony Stark was good at what he did. Very good. If he wasn't so full of bravado Steve could see himself befriending the human. But Bruce had managed somehow so maybe one day it was possible.

Then the man noticed the Wolf’s eyes on him and sent Steve back a cheeky grin and a wink. Sighing, Steve shook his head as he turned back to the helicopter and the SHEILD agents waiting inside. No, it would be a cold day in hell before he and Tony Stark ever got along.
Chapter 5

O~O~O~O

The helicopter flew them back to the municipal airport they had landed in and from there they took the same jet back to the city. When they had arrived the whole team, Barton included, was quickly escorted into an awaiting car. Steve had nodded off on the plane ride which made the whole trip go by a lot faster. He came back to himself about ten minutes from SHIELD’s headquarters.

Murmuring a small apology to Bruce for using his shoulder as a pillow Steve straightened up and rolled his shoulder to work a kink out of his muscles. He, Bruce, Natasha, Barton, and Stark were all sitting in the back of a large SUV with two SHIELD agents sitting up front. Barton was still in that cardboard box which Natasha had placed in the space between her and Stark’s seats while Bruce and Steve had voluntarily squeezed into the back. Natasha was keeping one hand on the box lid even though the Hawk inside had fallen silent but Stark looked like he could care less. At the moment the man had his head tilted back against the headrest with his sunglasses over his eyes. Steve couldn't tell if his eyes were closed or not but the slow, steady rise and fall of his chest under his suit jacket suggested that he had managed to fall asleep himself.

For half a moment Steve wondered if he if should try to keep his voice down so that the man could continue to sleep without disruption but decided against it. Steve settled into his seat as he turned to look at Bruce. "So what happens now with Agent Barton?"

"I won't be sure until I get the chance to take a good look at him. I'll have him brought up to the Lab I use and we'll go from there. I wish I could give you a more detailed plan of action but there are just too many unknowns right now."

"I understand. Do you know how long it will take to figure out what's wrong with him?"

"I already have some ideas of what it could be but diagnosing the problem is only half the battle. The harder part is going to be trying to find a cure. The whole process could take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks."

Steve frowned at the news. He had been hoping that whatever this was it could be solved by the end of the day but a part of him had known that it was more serious. After all, Barton was a top
agent and to get him to the point where he was entirely unresponsive to human interaction was a very bad sign. At least Bruce was under the impression that it could actually be fixed. But Steve wanted to be there for the entire thing; it wouldn't feel right going home now. The mission might be over but they still had a long way to go before it was finished. "Would it be an imposition if I stuck around until this was settled out?"

The question brought an almost relieved smile to Bruce's face. "Not at all. I know SHIELD has some extra space in the dormitories since that's where I'm staying these days. I'm sure they wouldn't mind putting you up for a while, particularly given the circumstances."

Agent Phil Coulson met them in the lobby of the SHIELD building. He kept a straight face but his worried eyes snapped right to the cardboard box Natasha carried in. Agent Hill was standing at attention next to him, ready for Coulson's order as soon as he gave it. "Agent Hill, have a proper containment system set up for Agent Barton."

She gave a tight nod and spun around on her heels, already on her phone with other agents as Phil then turned to Bruce. "Dr. Banner, can I count on you to work with us to help him?"

"Of course."

"Then get me a list of supplies you'll need as soon as you can manage and I'll see that SHIELD provides them for you."

Steve stepped forward, "Sir, if it's not too much trouble I'd like to stay here until this is settled out."

"That won't be a problem, Agent Rogers. We'd be happy to have you. Agent Romanov, should I have a room set aside for you as well?"

"I'm not leaving until Barton's better." Coulson seemed to have expected her firm response and just nodded in return and stepped aside so she could hustle herself and Barton into the elevator.

Steve and Bruce were hot on her heels. None of them spoke a word on the ride up, Natasha tapping her foot anxiously with her eyes glued on the number panel as the buttons lit up one by one. As soon as they reached their floor Steve stepped out first, automatically scanning the hall for any threats before making his way to the Lab where he and Bruce had first met. He had been through the building just enough to remember the way.

When they arrived the room was locked but Bruce quickly stepped forward with his ID card and swiped them in. He had barely gotten the lights switched back on when Agent Hill appeared in the doorway. "Dr. Banner, this is the best I could find on such short notice." She stepped aside to let two other SHIELD agents come into the Lab carrying a large wire cage. The woman eyed it almost regretfully. "I know it's not ideal but we sent notice to a Shifter medical facility out of state and they should have a more acceptable containment system shipped out to us by the end of the day."

Natasha looked like she wanted to protest but Bruce answered back before she got her words out. "It'll do for now. It's better than a cardboard box anyway. Go ahead and set it up in the corner of the room." Hurrying over to the long desk in the middle of the room, Bruce swiped a stack of papers off to the side and replaced them with the laptop he had brought back from their mission. "Steve, could you help Natasha get Barton settled?"

Steve looked over to where Natasha was urging the Hawk from the cardboard box into the new cage with the help of the SHIELD agents. "What should I do?"

"Just, talk to him. Try and get him to respond."
Okay. He could do that. Crossing the room to stand next to Natasha he helped scoot Barton the rest of the way into his new enclosure. Once the transfer was complete and the door latched behind him Steve crouched down to peer into the large cage and watched as the giant hawk ruffled up his feathers then turn to stare back at him. Just as before there was no real sense of humanity left, just that wild, duller sense of a regular animal and Steve had to remind himself that this was a Shifter. He almost felt silly for talking at the hawk. "Agent Barton? Can you understand me?"

The bird cocked its head to the side, its predatorial eye glancing at Steve. Other than that there was no real sign of comprehension but Steve continued anyway. "My name is Steve Rogers. I and my teammates were sent in to rescue you from Hydra. We're from SHIELD. Can you give me any sign that you can understand me?"

Nothing. No response. But at that point Steve hadn't been expecting one.

Natasha shook her head, her arms crossing tightly over her chest like she was trying to physically hold herself together. "What's wrong with him? Why isn't he shifting back?"

Bruce rose from the desk and joined them in the corner. "Like I was telling Steve earlier, I do have an idea."

Natasha turned to Bruce, her eyes sharp. "What do you think it is?"

Letting out a long sigh, Bruce stepped up to the cage and bent down to peer inside. His gaze had taken on an impersonal, clinical edge. "I already got a quick look at some of the files Tony was able to copy over from Hydra and it pretty much confirmed my worst fears about the company. It seems like they're trying to alter the formula we were working on and change it into some new… thing. I'm honestly not even sure yet." Straightening up, Bruce returned to his desk and turned on the laptop. "What I do know is that they managed to create a second, subsidiary formula by working off our original plans. Apparently one of its side-effects—or its intended effect—is to keep a Shifter trapped in their animal form."

Steve he thought he understood, but he didn't get why this had happened. "Why would they do that? What's the point?"

"That's the million dollar question and unfortunately I don't think I'll be able to come up with an answer to it just yet. Maybe once we sift through the rest of Hydra's files. But as to why this happened to Barton? I'm guessing that it's because they caught him snooping and needed a test subject."

Steve shook his head. "Do you think they ever intended to kill him like we feared?"

Natasha answered back this time, her voice strained. "Is there a difference between killing him and what they actually did?"

"Yes. I can't bring the dead back."

A heavy silence fell between them, the dark cloud dispersing slightly as Stark took that moment to step into the room.

"Aw, look at that! Now the Hawk's in a proper bird cage. What an upgrade."

Steve turned to face the man when he had burst in and now frowned at him curiously. "Where have you been?"

"Around." Steve raised a brow and Stark rolled his eyes but explained further as he leaned against
the doorframe. "Agent Kill-Joy downstairs wanted to have a word with me. Did I miss anything?"

"Unfortunately, not much." Bruce only glanced over his shoulder once at the man. "Tony, since you're going to stick around and if you have the spare time, it would be great to have some of your help with this since it's a little above my pay grade".

Pushing himself up off the wall, Stark shrugged. "I suppose I have a few hours of spare time to act as a mad scientist."

Bruce opened his mouth, closed it, then tried again. "I have a feeling I'm going to regret asking you to assist me…"

"Hey, I'm a great worker!"

"When you want to be."

"Okay, I won't argue that. Just don't give me the chance to get bored and we'll all be fine."

O~O~O~O

The next few days dragged by so slow that Steve felt every second slide by like sandpaper on his skin. He was stuck in the position of being unable to help but unable to leave. So he spent most of his time roaming the halls of the SHIELD building like he was the caged animal. After he had passed by Agent Coulson's office for the tenth time the man had poked his head out and asked Steve if he had some energy he wanted to get rid of. Steve had immediately said "yes" and twenty minutes later he found both himself and Phil in the basement of the SHIELD building where the agency had built a small gymnasium.

Phil said that it was for agents to get some exercise in after spending too many hours behind a desk but Steve had the feeling it was also put in for exactly this situation. They didn't have a punching bag but Phil graciously offered to spar with Steve. It turned out that for his size, demeanor, and species Phil wasn't bad at hand-to-hand fighting. He even knew how to box and his form was textbook perfect. Though they were both wearing safety gear Steve didn't use his full strength, too afraid that he would accidently hurt the human. It was true that Steve himself was still healing but one over-zealous punch might knock the SHIELD agent clear across the room. But at least he was moving and Phil seemed to quietly enjoy the excuse to escape his office.

Bruce, Natasha, and Stark had all but disappeared. Every once and a while Steve would see one of them in the corridors or down in the small cafeteria but other than that he hardly had any contact at all. By day two he was already lonely. After spending just a few days in such close contact with other Shifters it was already hard for him to be without that. Luckily although Steve didn't run into the others he knew where to find them. Halfway through that second day he couldn't stop himself from at least hunting his fellow Wolf Shifter down.

Bruce looked up as Steve walked into the Lab and sent the alpha a wan smile before turning back to his notes. "What brings you up here?"

"I wanted to check in." As Steve made his way further inside his gaze was pulled to the clear plastic case set up in the corner of the room. SHIELD's contact had pulled through and sent the materials for them to construct it, the case set up to make the Hawk as comfortable as possible without allowing him the opportunity to escape. More than that though it was built so that Bruce had ready access to the Shifter so he could run his tests in a safe and sterile environment. Inside the case Barton watched Steve move about the room for a long moment before ducking his head down to preen through his feathers, apparently having made the decision that Steve wasn't a threat. Over
the last few days Barton had calmed down a bit. He still wasn't exhibiting any signs of higher human brain function or thought processes but at least the animalistic half of him had relaxed some in their company. "How's he doing?"

Bruce sighed. "His vitals are stable, we've got him on a good diet, and Natasha or I take him out every eight hours for some exercise. But he's still a bird."

Frowning, Steve walked to stand closer to Bruce. He could feel a subtle exhaustion ebbing off of the other Wolf. "And how are you holding up?"

"Hm? Me? I'm fine."

"Bruce…"

The beta let out another heavy sigh then leaned back in his chair to that he was actually looking at Steve instead of the papers strewn across the table. "Honestly, Steve. I'm alright. I know it might not seem like it right now—even to me—but I actually enjoy this. As long as the results turn out. It's like Hydra drew out a maze, threw Barton in the center of it, and now I have to go in and find him."

Bruce saw this as a mind-game. If it was one, it was absolutely above Steve's ability to comprehend. "Do you think you can? Find him, that is."

Bruce offered him another smile and this time it was a little stronger. "I don't want to start sounding like Tony, but if anyone can it's me. Whatever they did to Barton is definitely rooted in the serum I helped them develop. All I have to do is reverse engineer the rest to find out how they affected his genetic code and what I need to do to fix it. Luckily for me, I was the best researcher they had on the team and none of the rest of them were ever that creative. Whatever they thought of, Tony and I should be able to work it out between the two of us."

Steve tilted his head. "So Tony's helping then?"

"He's an invaluable resource. Plus he keeps me sane."

"Tony? Keeping you sane?"

"I know, it's a bit of an oxymoron, but in this case true. In all seriousness though, he's helped me puzzle some of this out and he's building the equipment we'll need to do an in-depth analysis of Barton's DNA since that kind of technology doesn't actually exist yet." Bruce motioned towards the other end of the Lab where Tony had clearly hijacked one of the desks to use as a make-shift workbench. Next to it there were several mechanical…contraptions. They were still under construction, one just a large, empty metal shell while the other had some pipes and some sort of computer parts already installed in it. Tony himself was nowhere to be seen but it was obvious that he had been busy at some point.

"You sound like you make a good team."

"We make do. It's nice to have him helping out this time instead of…" Bruce's voice trailed off with a flash of hesitation in his eyes.

Concern slowly welled up as the mood seemed to change and Steve put a hand on the Wolf's shoulder. "Bruce?"

Bruce shook his head as if coming back to himself from a daydream. "Sorry. I must be tired. I meant instead of, you know, being a nuisance." Throwing a grin up at Steve that was so forced it
only made Steve's worry grow. Bruce shrugged. "You've worked with him now, you know how he is."

"Sure…Listen, Bruce, if this is getting too much you can take a break. It's important that we get Barton back to normal but you're only human. Well, not human, you're a Shifter, but, gosh," Steve felt a flush rise to his cheeks at the fumbled attempt at comfort, "you know what I meant. All of us would understand if you needed some time to decompress." Especially considering Bruce's own condition.

Some of the lines on Bruce's face seemed to melt away as Steve stuttered. When he answered back Steve felt like he was finally being completely honest. "I'll keep that in mind. But I'm on a pretty good roll right now so I think I'll keep on powering through it. But I would be grateful if you could have someone send some food up. Usually food isn't allowed in the Lab but I have a feeling SHIELD might bend the rules this one time."

Steve smiled back, happy to have something to do. "I'll make sure that happens. What do you want?"

"Whatever is easiest."

Steve knew what the Wolf was really thinking. "Something with meat?"

"Perfect."

Steve ended up taking the opportunity to venture out into the city and pick up something a little bit nicer, two steaks from a restaurant three blocks away. When he brought the food back all the extra time and money he spent on it was worth it as Bruce's face lit up. They talked for a while over the meal but sitting in the Lab with Barton staring at them, it was impossible for them to forget there was still work to be done. Bruce seemed hesitant to send Steve away so Steve did the job for him and excused himself.

That small amount of social contact lasted Steve for about another thirty hours. He tried to be patient, tried to hold himself in and be useful in other ways but it seemed that once he had gotten a taste of being part of anything even resembling a pack he had to chase after it. He finally broke after tossing and turning in bed for what felt like forever, trying to get some rest but unable to even close his eyes. He had been feeling anxious and frustrated all week and the sterile, bleached smell of the SHIELD-issue sheets were doing nothing to lull him to sleep. So he stopped trying. Maybe Bruce could use some help. The excuse sounded hollow even in his own mind but Steve didn't bother mulling it over as he climbed out of bed.

The corridors were quiet and dark, almost eerily so, but Steve paid it no mind as he padded down the hall towards the Lab. The shadows were a lot less frightening when you were a Wolf; even if he couldn't see, his sense of smell was enough to let him know he was alone. Well, maybe not completely.

As he turned down the next hall there was one light on, the white glow cutting into the darkness through the thin opening underneath the door leading to Coulson's office. Since he had to pass by anyway Steve decided to stop in. He hadn't expected anyone except for Bruce to be working this late.

Knocking lightly on the door to announce himself, Steve pushed it open to find the SHIELD agent blinking up at him in surprise from behind his desk. "Phil, you're still here?"

Coulson relaxed as soon as he realized who Steve was. He leaned his elbows onto his desk and
nodded. "It's been a complicated week. I'm trying to finish up a report for my supervisor. I only have a few pages left but I figure they could wait a few more hours until tomorrow. What are you doing out and about though? You're usually in bed by now, aren't you?"

It was true, Steve usually was. He tried not to let it bother him that Agent Coulson was aware on some level of his daily routine. Steve didn't want to know just what kind of surveillance system SHIELD had or how often he was being watched. "I had some trouble getting to sleep so I thought I'd pay Bruce another visit."

"I'm sure he would appreciate a moment's break."

From the exhaustion leaking into the man's voice, Steve was pretty sure that they could all use a break. "If I can't help Barton the least I can do is watch out for Bruce. But the report's going well?"

"As well as it can. The tricky part has been cleaning up."

"What did you do?"

A dry smile flickered onto Phil's face. "Removed any trace of SHIELD's presence at the location." Steve furrowed his brow in confusion and Phil clarified. "We burned the cabin to ash. There's no way Hydra will be able to recover anything from the site even if they find it."

"Wow." Steve's eyebrows rose. That seemed a bit extreme.

Phil seemed to read his mind. "I will admit it might sound a little like overkill but it got the job done fairly efficiently. But I'll hold off on the official debriefing until we get a solid prognosis for Barton." Steve nodded. He had wanted feedback on the mission since they arrived but since Phil wanted to wait he wasn't going to push. The agent offered him a small smile of condolence before nodding towards the door. "But if you want to go see Dr. Banner, you should get moving. You don't want to be out too late."

"True. But you shouldn't stay here too much longer either."

"I'll do my best."

Steve smiled as his own words from what felt like so long ago were echoed back at him. "Good. Have a good night."

"You too, Steve."

Leaving the man to his business with the hope that he at least would be able to go home that night, Steve slipped back out into the hall and continued towards the Lab. Ever since they had returned from their mission, blinds had been drawn over the Lab's large glass windows to offer both Bruce and Barton some privacy. But there were lights on in there as well. Not that Steve had expected anything different. Bruce only ever seemed to leave to use the restroom.

With his thoughts distracted by his conversation with Phil, Steve didn't bother to scan the room before bursting inside. "Hey Bruce? Oh…!" Steve stopped short in the doorway as not Bruce but Stark leaned out from behind one of the larger machines. "Sorry!"

"Problem?"

"I just," Words left him for a minute as he took in Stark's appearance. Instead of a suit and sunglasses the billionaire was dressed in ripped jeans, an old t-shirt, and work gloves. Both the clothes and his skin were smudged with oil or grease, a black smudge across one of the man's
cheekbones making him look slightly ridiculous as he raised a brow. "Uh, I just didn't expect to find you here." And that was the truth. He had heard Stark agree to help Bruce out but that had been three days ago. Steve hadn't expected the man to stick around. "Where's Bruce?"

"Getting some sleep. We've both been up for..." Stark tilted his head then pulled off a glove with his teeth, checking the watch he had hidden underneath it. "Jesus, for forty two hours."

"How are you still even awake?"

"Coffee. Lots of coffee. Bruce was starting to get jumpy though so I told him to take a nap before he freaked out, shifted into a monster, and went on a bloodthirsty rampage."

"Hopefully you didn't say it like that..."

"I did actually. But he's used to me." Steve shook his head but a small smile slipped onto his lips at Stark's childish grin. Stark checked his watch one more time before pulling his glove back on. "So Steve, you're more than welcome to stay but I'm gonna get back to work."

"I wouldn't bother you?"

A moment of surprise passed through Stark's eyes, like he hadn't counted on Steve to actually accept his proposal, but he quickly adapted to it. "No, you'll find I'm pretty good at multi-tasking."

Steve's interest was piqued as Stark disappeared back behind the machine and so the Wolf walked around to watch him work. The man was bent down, working on the inner mechanisms of what looked to be some sort of liquid transfusion system. There were pipes anyway, and a set of computer chips. Stark was working on those chips with a slim soldering iron and a sharp attention to detail that Steve hadn't thought the other capable of. "I just finished speaking with Agent Coulson...."

"Yeah?" Stark didn't seem surprised that the agent was still in the building. "What'd he have to say?"

"He wanted to know about how Barton was doing but I'm pretty sure he already knew more than I did. All I could say was that you and Bruce were doing everything you could for him."

"Well you're probably right about Agent knowing more than you do." Perhaps realizing how that sounded, Stark tossed a glance back over his shoulder to where Steve was settling himself against a workbench. "Bruce sends him an update every day about our progress."

"Phil also told me that they ended up burning that cabin down for security reasons."

"That sounds about par for the course for SHIELD. And who's 'Phil'?"

Steve knit his brow. "Agent Coulson. Phil's his first name."

"Oh, so Agent is on a first-name basis and you still call me by my last name?"

"Well..."

Stark saved him from having to come up with some sort of excuse as he stood up and walked over to the workbench next to Steve. Reaching into a toolbox, the billionaire dug through it for a moment. "You don't need to answer that, I was just playing around. It's not like the reason's not obvious anyway."
Steve turned just enough to watch as he rifflled through his tools, his hands looking entirely at home as his fingers brushed over the greasy metal. "And what do you think the reason is?"

Stark's fingers paused for a moment before he continued his search. "It's not like I'm an idiot. I can see the way you look at me. If you're not annoyed you're usually disgusted. And I know most of that's my fault but it's been that way since I first saw you so you clearly had some preformed opinions about me."

Steve frowned. "It's true I don't necessarily approve of your lifestyle but—"

Before Steve could finish, Stark interrupted. "You believe everything you read in the papers?"

"They usually seem to have some pretty decent proof. Mostly pictures."

"I fucking hate paparazzi...." Stark found the tool he was looking for and turned back to the machine. "...So you clearly know me entirely already. That hardly seems fair when the only thing I know about you is your name, your species, and your strange hatred for dashingly handsome celebrity heirs." Stark waved a wrench back at Steve as he let out an amused huff. "If you're going to stand there you might as well help fill up some of this awkward silence with a little biography."

Steve wasn't about to pour his heart out to the man but he didn't see any harm in playing along for now. As long as he could steer away from sore subjects it would make for pretty easy conversation. "What do you want to know?"

"Your shoe size. I don't know. Tell me something interesting about yourself. How did you get wrapped up in all this SHIELD business anyway? You seem a little straight-laced for their usual brand of manipulation."

He wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean but, "SHIELD supported my pack. When they called on me to return the favor it was the least I could do."

Something in Stark's stance changed just slightly, a tension drawing at his shoulders, at Steve's first sentence and it took a moment for Steve to realize what it might have been. He had said 'supported', as in past tense. And Stark was smart enough to have caught that if he had really been listening. But to Steve's relief if he had caught the slip Stark didn't bring it up. "That sounds remarkably simple. And yeah, I can see you running a pack with the way you like to throw that alpha male authority around. But you must have been doing something good if SHIELD had your back."

So they had both slipped into the past tense then. If Stark wasn't going to make mention of it though, Steve wasn't about to. "I'd like to think so. We tried to help people, Shifters and humans like you."

"Sorry to break it to you, but I'm one of a kind. There's no one else like me." Steve rolled his eyes and was about to retort back when Stark grinned at him, a teasing spark in his eye.

"You know what I meant."

"Yeah. So back to story time. You were obviously one spandex-suit short of being a superhero. I want to hear about some of your exploits."

"What?"

"You have to have at least one interesting story, so let's hear it!"
"Uh, well…" A light laugh snuck out of Steve as he crossed his arms over his chest. He definitely had some interesting stories. But on the other hand he'd never done anything quite as extreme as what reporters wrote about Stark so he really shouldn't be embarrassed about sharing. "Yeah. There was that time when two members of my pack, Gabe Jones and Jacques Dernier, were on a mission by themselves while the rest of us hung back at the den. It was supposed to be pretty straightforward; they were to handle an alpha Wolf who had gotten a little aggressive all the way in Los Angeles. They ran into some trouble but we only found out about it when Dernier called halfway to sitting. The problem is the Wolf didn't speak a word of English and none of us spoke any sort of decent French. Another pack member, James Falsworth, had learned a little French in school growing up in England but he ended putting it on speaker phone and using Google Translate to work through what he was saying."

Steve couldn't help but laugh again at the memory, all of them crawling practically on top of each other to get a glimpse at the small computer screen. And there was Steve, their alpha, stuck as the most useless among them. He didn't even know the internet offered a translation service. "Long story short, they weren't in any real danger but they needed us to come out to help them. But Dugan was afraid of flying so we had to drive across the country. We only stopped at gas stations and took turns sleeping but by the end of it I'm pretty sure we were an hour away from killing each other. That many Wolves stuck in an enclosed space leads to a lot of brawling. It didn't help that Morita got car sick somewhere in Texas and had to sit in the front passenger seat with the window open and a bucket in between his legs!" Falsworth had given him crap for months about getting vomit on his sweater. Steve couldn't figure out why, he had taken the brunt of most of it himself and his shirt hadn't been salvageable. Smiling at the memory, Steve shook his head. "When we got to LA, we ended up packing ourselves into the back of a caterer's van to gain access to a high profile club downtown. Our target had been lying pretty low and that party was our best chance to nab him. But it all worked out in the end so everything was worth it."

"Wow."

Steve looked up to find Stark grinning at him. "What?"

"I'm pretty sure this is the first time I've seen you smile. You look about five years younger."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Sure, let's say so. Even alpha Wolves need a break every once and a while. You look good without that stick up your ass." Before Steve could respond, Stark plowed on as he turned his back to Steve again to continue working. "But I wish I had known you back then. I have a house in Malibu and can walk into to any party in LA. I could've gotten you and your pack in a lot easier and in a little bit more style. Although you do get points for creativity with the catering van."

"I'll keep that in mind in case that situation ever comes up again."

The words were out of Steve's mouth before he thought them through and when their meaning sunk into him Steve's good mood melted away like ice in the sun. Because that situation wouldn't come up again, there would never be a next time. Not with his pack anyway. Still, he reminded himself, this had been the first time he had been able to talk about them all without feeling like he wanted to cry. That was progress. Progress was good.

Stark's hands paused again and without even turning to look he proved to be remarkably perceptive. "I'll be waiting for the call. But in the meantime I want to hear another story."

"Why are you so interested?"
"I really need to give you a reason? I've never really heard about life from a Wolf's point of view. Sure, there's Bruce, but it's not like he shifts anymore. If I want to know what a researcher does for a living, I'll just go home and stare at my own computer screen for a couple more hours."

"Point taken…"

Stark smiled. "So regale me."

"Alright, alright, let me think…"

They managed to spend the next hour like that. Steve would tell stories and every once and a while Stark would toss one of his own in that even the paparazzi hadn't gotten wind of. Never anything torrid, just stupid or funny stories that Stark actually seemed proud of. It was almost nice, except that Stark kept interjecting these smart aleck remarks every time Steve almost felt like they might be bonding over something. It was a small thing but it was frustrating and after an hour Steve was happy he stayed but happy to let Stark get back to his work and happy to get back to bed.

Pushing off of the workbench and stifling a yawn, Steve was about to head out when Stark caught him with one last bit of conversation. "Hey Steve."

"What?"

"Now that I know you call the stuffed shirt by his first name I'm going to feel very excluded if I'm the only one not in the club. You better call me 'Tony' from now on or I swear I'm going to pitch a fit."

Steve snorted. "Is that supposed to be a threat?"

"You've obviously never seen a rich celebrity throw a fit before. It's nasty and downright embarrassing for all involved. There may be tears. From what I've seen on TV there will definitely be a drunken car chase with the local police department afterwards though. I'm not sure. I've never had the chance to try it out before."

"I guess I can't have that. 'Tony' it is then." The name felt weird on his tongue, overly familiar for a man Steve still wasn't quite sure he could tolerate for more than a day. Giving him an awkward wave and after one more glance over his shoulder, Steve left him alone to his devices. Steve needed to get back to bed anyway. At least now he was tired. But at the same time, after dredging up all of those memories about his pack Steve couldn't help but worry over what sort of dreams he'd be having that night.

O~O~O~O

Steve jerked awake as Bruce's voice filled the air via a small speaker near the door of the room. "Agent Rogers, please report to the SHIELD Laboratory immediately."

The SHIELD dormitories were pretty spartan in terms of their décor but they did have an alarm clock and a quick glance at it told him that it was well past ten in the morning. Surprised that he had slept in so late, Steve pushed himself out of the chair he had been slouched over in and rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he headed out of the door. He must've been more tired than he thought.

His feet quickly carried him back to the Lab, the path almost memorized now, and Natasha and Tony were already there along with Bruce. A quick inspection of the human made Steve wonder if Tony had ever gotten out of the room after their conversation last night. He looked a little ragged but all three of them seemed to be reinvigorated. Bruce looked up as Steve entered the room, a small smile on his face as he jumped up from his computer and bustled over to the other side of the
room where a series of test tubes and beakers were waiting for him. "There you are, Steve. Early this morning Tony was able to get his machines running and I was finally able to run my tests on Barton's DNA. Just an hour ago I administered what I hope is the first part an antidote and now Agent Barton is showing signs of waking. I thought you might want to be here for it."

"Of course. Thank you for calling me in."

"No problem. Now," Pulling a large syringe out of his pocket, Bruce carefully drew a few ounces of a green liquid from one of the beakers. Moving back towards the corner of the room where Barton was waiting in his plastic case, the Wolf waved the rest of them out of the way. "Tony, Natasha, if I can have you both stand back please. I'm going to administer one more dose of the formula I developed which theoretically should be enough to bring him all the way back."

Natasha raised an eyebrow but obediently took a step backwards. Just one step. "Theoretically?"

"Well, I've never really had a situation like this to test it in."

Bruce paused as he reached the cage and his smile fell into a thoughtful frown as he eyed the Hawk inside. Steve opened his mouth to ask what was wrong but Bruce didn't give him the chance to wonder. "Assuming this all goes to plan, we're going to need to get him out of the cage."

"Why?" Steve didn't think for a minute that the Hawk was going to be any more willing to be manhandled now than he was when they first rescued him even though his aggressive behavior had died down over the last few days.

"Because this should force him to shift back to his human form."

Natasha looked concerned again. "What do you mean, it'll 'force' him? This won't hurt him, will it?"

"To be absolutely honest, it probably will. But after getting a look at Barton's blood and genetic code, my suspicions were confirmed that Hydra used essentially the reverse formula on him before to force him to shift into his animal form. This will be the only way to not only get him back but to enable him to shift at will again."

It was clear that Bruce was just as uncomfortable with the idea of causing pain as Natasha was and that alone made Steve trust him implicitly. It took him, Bruce, and Natasha to wrangle Barton out of the case and onto an examination table Bruce requested be brought in. He had ordered it in the list of supplies he had given to Coulson and they hadn't skimped on quality. It looked like something from a first-rate hospital and came complete with a hanger for an IV with an added feature of padded restraints. It obviously had been made for possibly unruly Shifters. Unfortunately with the Hawk's unusual shifter form the restraints didn't reach and it took Steve and Natasha holding Barton down on either side to keep him on the bed while Tony acted as Bruce's assistant and quickly prepared the scene for whatever the aftermath might be.

Finally they were ready and all three of them watched as Bruce leaned over Barton's restrained form, the Hawk's large wings spread across the padding, and inject the pale green liquid still in the syringe into the bird's torso. Steve watched anxiously as the plunger dropped, forcing the chemicals underneath the Hawk's skin and into his veins. Bruce kept his hands rock steady and with the skills of a practiced surgeon quickly finished then smoothly removed the needle from beneath the layer of feathers.

There was a minute pause and then a slight twitch of a feather. Then another jerk. Frowning, Bruce took a step back just in time to avoid getting hit by a sudden wing spasm as the bird let out an
unexpected cry and flared both of his wings up with enough strength to force Steve and Natasha back. The entire bed rattled as the wings pumped up and down, almost as if the Hawk was trying to take flight. Steve hesitated as the bird began to thrash, not wanting to cause him further injury by holding him too tightly but thank God Bruce knew what he was doing.

The other Wolf all but leapt on top of the struggling Hawk and held each of its wings gently but firmly against the mattress, one appendage in each hand. Before the bird had a chance to completely lose himself Bruce had already started to talk to him, keeping his voice low and firm. "Agent Barton, calm down! You need to calm down. You're okay, you're safe."

Gradually the thrashing slowed then finally stopped altogether and Steve allowed himself to hope. That was the first time Barton had responded to their words. The Hawk let out one more sad sounding cry as Bruce continued. "My name is Dr. Banner. You've been taken into SHIELD custody. You were forced either to transform or to keep your bird form by Hydra but I've found a way to reverse engineer the serum they put into you. I need you to shift back into your human form so that I can make sure everything is going like it should. I need you to fight through whatever lingering effects are in your system. Can you do that for me, Clint? Let me know you can hear me."

Steve held his breath as the Hawk's feathers shuddered a few times then slowly, ever so slowly began to recede. Usually Shifters transformed so quickly that you could hardly see the transition between man and animal butAgent Barton was visibly struggling. His entire transformation seemed to be in slow motion. Steve had to wince as he heard the Hawk's bones began to snap back into place as his torso and legs elongated and slowly lost their plumage. The shift was so slow that Bruce wasn't knocked off and was able to hold on even as Barton's wings changed into toned, pale arms.

It took a good three solid minutes—forever and a day for a transformation—but by the end of it Bruce was leaning over a naked man, the Hawk's chest heaving as his body tried to curl up from the pain. Barton's face was chalk white and clammy, his eyes glassy as he tried to take in his surroundings. He appeared to be trying to fight it but a muffled whimper slipped passed his lips and a wave of sympathy and respect washed over Steve. To see what must be such a tough Shifter unable to control himself spoke volumes about how much pain he was really feeling right now.

Bruce gave him a minute to catch him breath before resuming his questions. "You're doing great, Agent Barton, but I need you to let me know you're alright. How are you feeling?"

The response took a while to come. Barton's lips moved in silence for one moment before he was finally able to form words. When he finally did manage to speak, his voice was hoarse and scratched. "...Like hell warmed over...

As the response came, Bruce removed his hands from where they were now positioned on Barton's forearms. There were bruises where his fingers had been. "I'll bet. Does anything in particular hurt? Do you have any migraines?"

The Hawk's eyes closed and he slowly arched his back but stopped with an anguished grimace."...It's, it's like my veins hurt."

"That's the result of Hydra's formula, and perhaps a side effect of mine. It should fade within the next few days."

Barton forced one eye open and his clouded gaze landed on Bruce's face. "...Who are you again?"

"A friend."
"…the hell happened…?"

"How about I explain everything after you take a short nap." Barton's other eye snapped open as Natasha spoke up. Pushing off of the wall where she had retreated to, Barton carefully tracking her movements as the redhead walked over to the hospital bed. "You've had a rough couple of weeks, Clint."

To Steve's surprise, a hint of a smile flickered onto Barton's lips. "So they sent you after me, huh, Tasha?"

She nodded then threw a towel over his lap in a half-hearted attempt to make him more decent. "Someone had to clean up your mess."

"…You took care of everything?"

"I had help. Now, go to sleep."

Bruce smiled at the exchange as he reached up and patted Barton's shoulder. "She's right. After what you've just been through, the best thing for you right now is some healthy rest." The Hawk hesitated and Bruce waved a finger at him. "Get to sleep Agent Barton, doctor's orders. Or I'll sick Agent Romanov on you."

Barton managed to roll his eyes but settled back down against the thin pillow that had been provided with the bed."…Now there's a decent threat, Doc…I don't suppose you got anything for pain, do you...?"

The happy quirk to Bruce's lips faded and honest regret sparked in his eyes. "Sorry. I can't prescribe anything more than ibuprofen or it might react with either Hydra's serum or my cure."

"…That sounds like my kind of luck."

At that point Tony nodded to Steve and the two slipped out of the room. Steve hadn't had the chance to speak, but just being there to see Agent Barton wake up was fulfilling enough by itself. It felt like closure and Steve felt a weight he hadn't even known he had still been carrying lift from his shoulders. Once they were out of the Lab, Steve let out a satisfied sigh. "Honestly, I wasn't sure if Barton was going to make it."

"I wasn't worried. Bruce is a miracle worker."

"That's high praise coming from you."

"It's the truth."

Tony seemed oddly insistent and Steve really couldn't argue, so he let it go. As they walked into the hall they fell into what he would almost call a companionable silence, both settled by the feeling of a job well done. In that moment Steve realized that sometime within the last few days he had stopped viewing Tony as an arrogant jerk. Now he was just more of a sarcastic smart-ass, but he was starting to see how Bruce was able to put up with him. The man had his moments.

"So I heard that the debriefing was being held off until Barton's condition stabilized. Since he's woken up, the meeting will probably be soon. Are you going to stick around for it?"

Tony looked up with a smirk and patted his shoulder. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss it. It'll be the first time SHIELD's willingly allowed me in a meeting room." Steve couldn't help but laugh at the response. He was in a good mood.
Just as Steve had predicted, twenty-four hours after he had been called into the Lab by Bruce another announcement was made over the speaker system for his team to immediately report to the conference room. This time Steve had been awake, speaking with Bruce in fact, so the two of them arrived together with Natasha and Tony appearing shortly after.

As they wound their way around the circular table, Phil gave Steve a small smile he seemed to reserve solely for the alpha Wolf before nodding to the rest of them. "Please, take a seat. I'm glad you all could make it."

Tony released an overdramatic sigh as he flopped down into the chair next to Bruce. He was out of his work clothes and back in the designer suit, the top few buttons of his undershirt undone with a pair of sunglasses hanging from the shirt collar. "Well the commute was a bitch. Those thirty feet I had to walk down the hall to get here were just awful."

Phil quirked an eyebrow at Tony's blatant sarcasm. "Next time I can make the trip more challenging if you'd prefer it to be."

Leaning forward, Steve physically pushed himself into the conversation as his body broke the line of sight between Tony and Phil. "I think that the halls are just fine the way they are."

"Thank you…" Natasha muttered under her breath as she crossed her arms. She looked better than she had in a few days. When Barton was still stuck in his Hawk form she had stayed pale and serious with gradually darkening circles under her eyes. She had spent hours just sitting up with the bird and speaking to him but she had apparently finally managed to scrounge up a few hour of sleep herself.

The first part of the debriefing was pretty much what Steve had been expecting. Phil reviewed their work, dissecting their progress hour by hour and had them fill in the gaps SHIELD hadn't been able to on their own. Steve knew that they had made some mistakes but it still hurt to hear them all laid out one after the other. Coulson wasn't cruel but he didn't sugar coat anything and went into detail about how they could have done things differently to get better results. Steve refused to let himself show any shame at their actions. He knew they had done the best they knew how. But as Coulson went on Bruce slowly sunk lower and lower into his chair. Steve wanted to reach over and comfort the beta but he restrained himself. Phil wasn't saying anything untrue or intentionally mean. They could take this. Next to Bruce, Tony had pasted on a bored expression and next to him Natasha was entirely stoic. This clearly wasn't the first time she had gone through something like this.

Eventually the SHIELD agent reached the end of his review and Steve was shocked when the hard edge of Coulson's face eased away and a hint of a smile played across his lips. "Despite all the slip-ups though, you all came together remarkably well. So well, in fact, that my supervisors are ready to assign you a new mission."

Steve felt something very similar to pride swell back up in his chest. He had been proud of his team from the start and while he had taken the agent's criticisms to heart as ways in which he could improve, Steve was glad that they had made a positive impression in the end. They had worked damn hard at it; a little recognition wouldn't hurt any of his team members. "Who is the mission for, sir?"

"All of you." Natasha's mouth fell open a little bit but before she could even voice her question Coulson was continuing. "As I've said before, each of you on your own is a good agent but together you're something greater than the sum of its parts. SHIELD wants you deployed again, as a team, on your next mission. We have, however, reviewed your case and found that the team is lacking in one area." Racking his brain, Steve tried to think of where their problem spots were. They definitely had some, Phil had just spent the last hour or so pointing them out, but he couldn't figure
out what SHIELD had specifically picked up on. "On your last mission, you were able to hack into
Hydra's security system but that won't always be an available option to you. Dr. Banner, Mr.
Stark," Bruce straightened up at his name while Tony just raised an imperious eyebrow, "while
your technological abilities are incredible neither of you have been trained in or seem particularly
skilled in field surveillance. Which is why SHIELD is adding one last member to your group.
Luckily, you are already familiar with him."

Turning towards the conference room door, Coulson pressed a button and the door slid open,
revealing Agent Barton. Between Bruce's formula, some light medication, and rest, he was looking
almost like new. His eyes were clearer than Steve had ever seen them, sharp and piercing even as
an almost shy smile flickered across his face before he pulled his lips into a determined line and
stepped into the room.

Everyone there seemed to be happy to just see the other man on his feet again as Agent Coulson
explained. "Agent Clint Barton has been SHIELD's top surveillance operative for almost three
years now. The abilities granted to him as a Hawk as far as vision is concerned has remained
unparalleled among all the Shifter's in our employment, and his sense of hearing is twice as sharp
as the average Wolf. Not only that, but he is skilled with a bow and arrow. I've never seen him miss
a shot. He should make a good addition to the group."

As all eyes settled on him, Barton nodded once in greeting before speaking. "When SHIELD asked
me if I wanted to join up with your team, I immediately said 'yes'. I've seen—heard—what you can
do and I want to be a part of it. I also want the chance to go after the bastards who drugged me and
make sure that it doesn't happen to anyone else."

If he was really everything Coulson had said, Steve was more than happy to include the Hawk, as
long as he wasn't driven entirely by revenge. "We would be happy to have you, Agent Barton."

"The rest of you go by your first names, so call me 'Clint'."

"Clint it is then. Welcome to the team."

Phil seemed to appreciate Steve's statement but his face had become serious again. They were back
to business then. "After reviewing the data you recovered from the Hydra facility it is clear to us
that this serum Hydra has been developing has the potential to affect far more Shifters than just
Agent Barton. Also, their resources are more far-reaching than we anticipated." Coulson flipped
through a stack of papers and sighed. "They have factories and research and development plants all
around the world. The one you visited was actually more of an auxiliary location."

Steve shook his head, his hands tightening into fists. Now that he was involved and knew what
Hydra was capable of doing to a well-trained special agent, there was no way he could just stand
by and let this continue. "They need to be stopped. That serum is dangerous and if they're planning
on using it on the public it could be devastating to the Shifter community."

"I agree, and so do my bosses. Which is why another mission is being developed for your new
team as we speak."

Tony looked incredulous. "How soon are we supposed to leave?"

"There are still some details to work out, so probably not for another week yet. For the moment I
think you've all earned a little time off. Rest up and regain your stamina. I'll warn you now though,
things will only get more complicated from here."

Steve met Phil's eyes with a brisk nod. "We'll be ready for it."
After the meeting ended and with Agent Barton back to a decent health, Steve, Tony, and Natasha no longer had any reason to stay in the SHIELD tower. Truth be told, Steve was ready for a good night's sleep in his own bed. It wasn't the best, but it was home. Maybe he'd run out and hit his old gym first though. That old punching bag had probably fallen out of use. Bruce and Clint followed them into the elevator to send them off and stretch their legs a bit.

They walked out of the building together as a group but before they could split up and go their separate ways, Tony slung an arm around Steve's and Bruce's shoulders. Natasha and Clint stopped to watch as Tony spun Steve and Bruce around so that the five of them were almost standing in a circle. "Come on, guys, you can't leave yet! Let's go out and celebrate!"

Steve frowned as he tried to wrestle Tony's arm off from around his neck. Steve didn't want to pull away too hard and actually hurt the other man, but Tony was remarkably strong for a human who was shorter than Steve was by about five inches. "I don't know, Tony. It seems a little… inappropriate."

Bruce and Natasha didn't look terribly interested in the idea and Steve wasn't a fan himself, for a number of reasons. It didn't quite feel right going out with his coworkers to celebrate. Also, he was pretty sure non-Wolf Shifters never went anywhere in groups so they would be sure to attract suspicion and unwanted attention if they were noticed by other Shifters. More than that though, Steve really was looking forward to just going home and relaxing.

Tony was persistent though. Releasing Steve and Bruce from his hold, Tony threw his arms up with a scandalized expression on behind his sunglasses. "'Inappropriate'? Come on, you killjoy, I'm sure your Mom will let you off curfew for a night. Bruce, you're with me, right? Natasha? And come on Clint, you need to celebrate not being a brain-washed animal!" Clint snorted, but there was a small smirk on his face. Seeing it, Steve heaved an inward sigh, resigning himself to the fact that he wouldn't be going home quite yet. As expected, Tony spotted Clint's grin and doubled his efforts. "Hey, first round of drinks is on me."

Steve still held on to a sliver of hope that he could get tonight off so he decided to play the last card he had: honesty. "I was planning on just heading home and putting my feet up."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Bruce took the opportunity to chime in. "It has been a long day, Tony. A long couple of weeks really. Maybe it would be best to postpone this until a later date. Besides, I'm not sure my bus back here will still be running in a few hours."

If Steve didn't know any better he would say Tony pouted at the other Wolf before his eyes filled with resolve. He had seemed to almost be joking a moment ago but it was obvious that the billionaire was used to getting his way, even with his stupid whims. "Now you're just making up excuses. Bruce, I will personally have a car pick you up from wherever we end up to drive you back here. I would offer a helicopter, but I can't be sure it would have a place to land. And Steve," Steve blinked as Tony turned to him with a smug smile, "with you I'm willing to compromise, to a point. If I find a nice place within five blocks of your house, will you stop protesting?"

This time Steve couldn't hold in his sigh or his smile. He knew when he was fighting a losing battle and the consequences of losing this one didn't seem too bad. "Sure, Tony. If you can find a restaurant that close to my place, I'll go."

"Which means the rest of you will. Awesome."

"Now wait just a minute—" Natasha's protest fell on deaf ears; Tony already had his smart phone out, a Stark Industries model that wasn't available yet in stores, and was typing into the small keypad. "What's your address?"
"1600 19th Street."

Natasha glared at Clint as the Hawk tried to cover up a laugh with a fake-sounding cough. Within thirty seconds, Tony let out a small, victorious noise. "La Vera's Italian-American Restaurant and Bar. Three blocks away. Yelp even gives in four and a half stars."

Wow. Steve hadn't even known that place had existed. But a deal's a deal. "Alright then, I guess I'm in."

"And I know Clint's in. So what about it, Bruce, Natasha? God knows you need to get out more, Bruce, and Natasha, if you're not there, who will keep Clint from getting completely trashed and going home with some stranger?"

Natasha practically bristled. "You don't even know Barton." She turned her icy gaze on Clint, "You wouldn't do anything so stupid, would you?"

By now, Clint wasn't even trying to hide his grin as he gave a loose shrug. "I can't promise anything. It has been a while."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Men…But you've both made a good point. If you're all going anyway, it seems like I'll need to be there just to keep all of you from embarrassing SHIELD and getting this team shut down before we get the chance to really start."

"There's the spirit. And Bruce?"

Now that everyone else had agreed Steve knew that there was no way Bruce would refuse. "Sure, what the heck. Just make sure I get home by midnight."

"You got it, Cinderella. And I'm glad that you all agreed, because here comes our ride."

Steve tilted his head in confusion as a black, expensive looking SUV pulled right up to the curb in front of the SHIELD building. "But, how did you-?"

Tony's smile quirked up, "I called for it right after we got out of the briefing." Spinning around, he tilted his sunglasses down to observe the vehicle, "I usually prefer my convertible, but I knew this one would have enough seats. Speaking of which, I call shotgun. You guys get to sort out the rest."

When they reached the restaurant, Clint didn't even bother sitting down at the table, instead motioning towards the bar at the front of the restaurant. "I'm going to grab something on Stark's tab now that I'm finally off those pain meds. Who else wants something?"

Natasha was instantly back on her feet, leaving her coat on her chair to stand next to Clint. "I'm ordering the most expensive drink they have…"

The threat didn't phase Tony; if anything, it amused him. "Be my guest. Steve, Bruce, you want anything?"

Steve declined with a quick wave of his hand and Bruce followed suit with a small wince. "I'd…better not."

Tony soothed the scientist with a nod. "No problem. I, on the other hand, will have scotch on the rocks please. Just have them bill it to the table."

And that was how it started. Natasha and Clint seemed to have made a pact together while visiting the bar to try and spend as much of Tony's money as they reasonably could throughout the dinner
but Tony answered the challenge by ordering two bottles of the restaurant's most expensive champagne. Steve almost choked on it when he realized that each bottle cost about a grand each which had just made Tony laugh. Apparently Steve wasn't drinking quite enough for the billionaire's tastes though because after they were finished eating the man invited Steve up to the bar with a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Come on, let's find out how much it takes to get you absolutely trashed."

Steve shook his head but followed Tony to the bar with a grin. His stomach was actually full, he had spent the last few hours in good company, and he didn't mind humoring the man for a few minutes. "It takes a lot to get a Wolf drunk."

Chuckling, Tony sat on the stool next to Steve's and leaned his elbows on the bar. "I know how much it takes, it doesn't take that much."

"Fine, it takes a lot to get me drunk."

"Sounds like another challenge."

Steve shook his head again, his smile not leaving his face as Tony waved the bartender over. "We'll see."

He let Tony order for the both of them. Steve never really felt comfortable in bars, though this one was all right since it was inside a restaurant and he had his team around him. In general though he tried to stay away from alcohol or any other kind of drugs. It was both a matter of principle and practicality. He didn't think it was right and as an alpha Wolf he had a responsibility to keep control over himself at all times. This time, despite Tony's immaturity, he was pretty sure that the man wouldn't allow him to become a danger to himself or others.

Tony started them with beers but after Steve easily downed it switched them to hard liquor. Once they had glasses in their hands, Tony rested his chin in his hand and leaned into Steve with a conspiratorial air. "So Steve."

"Hmm?"

"Tell me about James Barnes."

Steve felt the world stop for what seemed like a long moment before he slowly raised his glass and took a long, deliberate sip of whatever it was that Tony had served him. It tasted like pricy whisky. After swallowing it down he was horrified to find that he still could barely raise his voice over a whisper. "Where did you hear that name?"

Tony shrugged nonchalantly but he was watching Steve's reaction carefully. "I read your file. The SHIELD computer network needs to update their firewall."

"So then you already know everything there is to say."

"It had him listed as your beta in your old pack. To make him your beta, he must've been pretty special to you, but I haven't heard you mention him once. You've talked about all your other guys, but the fact that you avoided Barnes in particular piqued my interest."

Steve took another gulp of whiskey, probably more than he should have in one go. Just the sound of Bucky's name brought memories back though of their last few months together. They had been...good.

*Steve was starting to get strange urges around his beta. Well, not strange, they were perfectly*
natural, Steve knew that, they were just—nothing that he had ever felt before. He and Bucky had
always been so close that he didn't know if he was misinterpreting signals or was confused. But
there were times when their eyes would meet and Steve would see a certain flash in Bucky's eyes
that shot straight down from his heart right into the pit of his stomach in the best of ways. And
recently Bucky's scent had begun to change. Nothing anyone else in the pack would notice yet
but…Steve had never mated before but he was pretty sure Bucky was beginning to send some
subtle signs that he was interested. And if he kept being so playful when they shifted and giving
him that look when they were human, Steve didn't know if he would be able to resist come their
next mating cycle.
And speak of the devil: a low, amused growl broke Steve from his daydream and a rumble rose up
from his own chest as Bucky came up next to him and rubbed his muzzle up against Steve's
shoulder in an obvious attempt to get Steve moving again. Nipping at his beta's retreating ear,
Steve returned the nudge then resumed an easy trot as they moved further into the woods.
Steve ducked his head as the memory faded. "Look…Tony, I really don't want to get into it."
"Come on, it'll be good for you. How long did you know him for?"
Steve sighed into his drink. He apparently wasn't getting out of this one. Tilting his head back, he
downed what was left in his glass and set it back on the table. "…We knew each other since we
were ten years old. He was my best friend."
"Nothing more than that?"
Steve blinked up at Tony to find the other man searching his face for clues. "No. He and I—"
"—Really? Because I've only known you for a few weeks now and even I can tell that you felt
something for the guy. Are you sure you weren't—?"
Steve growled and slammed his hands on the bar, feeling his patience break, "—We were going to
be!" Tony instantly fell quiet and Steve found himself filling in the silence. "We, were headed in
that direction but before, he died before…before I could tell him how much I…" Steve was
shocked to feel his eyes growing wet and fought back the tears. He wasn't going to cry in front of
Tony. Not today anyway. Taking a deep breath, Steve shook his head. "Bucky was a good Wolf,
and a better man. I loved him like a brother. And yes, I wanted something more, and I think he did
too. Now I'll never know for sure. And that's all you need to know."
With a loud scrape of wood on tile, Steve pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. "I, would
appreciate it if you didn't look through my personal information anymore, Mr. Stark. And if you'll
excuse me, I think it's probably time I head home."
Tony's face fell and he shoved his stool back as if to follow. "Come on, Steve, I didn't mean it like
that. You can't blame a guy for being curious!"
Leaving Tony's protests at the bar, Steve shook his head as he made his way back to the table. He
waved Bruce's questions away as he grabbed his jacket, threw thirty dollars onto the center of the
table and headed for the door. He didn't feel like giving anyone an explanation right now, no
matter what their intentions.
He had almost made it all the way to his apartment and was half a block away when Tony's raised
voice reached his ears above the sound of the traffic in the distance. "Hey, hey wait a minute!
Steve, seriously."


Straightening his shoulders, Steve slowly stopped as the tone of Tony's voice finally changed to something resembling regret. Tony caught up and grabbed onto the sleeve of Steve's jacket as if he thought Steve would try to run. "I'm sorry, alright? I was curious, but I, guess I took it too far. I didn't realize how sensitive of a topic it was for you. And I guess I'm a little drunk."

Pushing down any lingering anger, Steve forced himself to accept Tony's apology now that the man was actually being sincere. Even though he had tried to use alcohol to make an excuse for his behavior. But there was no way he could've known about him and Bucky, that it physically hurt Steve to talk about him. Especially since he had spent all that time talking to Tony about his pack's exploits earlier that week. "...You're not that drunk, Tony." And, surprisingly the billionaire wasn't, despite all the drinks he had consumed. Steve could smell the booze on him but he could also tell that Tony was still in nearly complete control of all his faculties.

Tony looked like he wanted to argue the point for a moment until he gave a tight shrug. "Fine, you got me. I'm not that drunk, I'm just naturally an obtuse asshole. You're not the first person to think so."

"I didn't say that, and I don't think that. Most of the time." Something in Tony's face fell a little and Steve finally found it within himself to offer a flicker of a smile, just enough to show he was joking. But honestly Steve still wasn't feeling much like smiling. But he did want an answer to something. "Why were you so curious about Bucky in the first place? What caught your attention about him?"

Tony seemed to withdraw for a moment then stuck his hands in his pockets with a shake of his head. "Nothing much. He was just obviously important to you and I've never heard you talk about him. I guess I wanted to know just who was special enough to capture this big dog's attention."

A stifling weight seemed to lift off Tony's shoulders as Steve smiled again even as he tried to look affronted. "I'm a Wolf, not a dog."

Sensing that he was forgiven, Tony grinned back and gave Steve's sleeve a light shake before releasing him. "Please, you're more like an over-sized golden retriever."

"I take offense at that." And most Wolves would, they would take quite a bit of offense at being called a house pet.

But Steve didn't, not when it came from Tony, and he knew Tony could tell. "It was a compliment. It means you're cuddly."

Steve was almost surprised at himself when a harsh laugh burst out of him, the sound so foreign after he had nearly been in tears less than five minutes ago. "Cuddly? I've killed things with my teeth."

"A cuddly, vicious, lap dog."

"Okay, lap dog?" Steve was full-on grinning now as he moved close to Tony. Holding a hand out over his head, he moved it over Tony's own head to compare heights. "I would break your lap."

"You wanna test that?"

Before Steve could respond, their banter was interrupted as he felt a barely perceptible shift in the air, the disturbance radiating out from his apartment building. It felt...wrong. Somehow. He couldn't place it. If he wasn't a Shifter, he wouldn't have even sensed it, but...His head snapped around to face his home but before he could even think of something to say a fiery explosion
suddenly erupted from his apartment windows and tore through the night, the light from the blast almost blinding Steve as the heat pounded against his face.

Without even thinking Steve tackled Tony to the pavement, crouching over the smaller man on all fours and protecting him from debris with his body. Tony thrashed under him and swore as bricks and flaming chunks of drywall rained down onto the street but Steve just grit his teeth and ignored both Tony's protests and the sting of the rubble. His alpha instincts wouldn't let him do anything less as he smelled a spike of fear rip through his teammate.

When the numbness from adrenaline began to fade, Steve felt a hand on his face as another slid around the back of his neck, the shaking fingers not caressing but checking for damage. "Steve! Steve, are you alright?"

The sound of the blast was still making his ears ring but aside from a few bruises… "Yeah. I'm okay."

"What a pity."

It took Steve the span of a heartbeat to recognize that that hadn't been Tony's voice, but another coming from above them. Steve's muscles tensed up and he sprang back up onto his feet, using his body as a shield between the stranger and Tony as the human struggled to stand. Steve's hackles rose and a low, warning growl rolled up in his throat as he took in the newcomer.

There was no doubt he was a Shifter, but not a Wolf. He had been running into far too many non-Wolves recently but this was the first time the unknown of what the Shifter was caused Steve any fear. This Shifter didn't feel like an alpha, but the male was powerful. Full of a deep, darkened power that made the hair on the back of Steve's neck stand straight up. The strange Shifter eyed Steve right back before smoothing his longer black hair back, brushing off a thin layer of ash as his accented voice lilted through the dusty air. "You were supposed to be in that building when the bomb went off. I warned Hydra to use a sensor trigger instead of a timer, but you can only say so much to idiots before you begin to experience the sensation of banging your head against a brick wall."

Straightening up, Steve snarled low in his throat. "Who are you? Why did you try to kill me?" The attempt had almost killed him and Tony and who knew how many innocents.

A sinister smile spread across the lean Shifter's thin lips before he tilted his chin up in condescension. "My name is Loki, and compared to you I am a god. Why shouldn't I try to squash an ant like you?"

Steve felt fur ripple up under his skin as he growled, "I don't think you know who you're talking to."

"Actually, I do know. Much more than you would expect."
Steve stared the other Shifter down, his mind racing to try and plan his next move. He was at a major disadvantage: he had no idea what he was dealing with here, but Loki apparently knew more than enough about him. The very thought made Steve tense up further and his senses sharpened. From behind he could hear Tony's heartbeat, could smell small beads of sweat beginning to mix with the ash still coating his face. From Loki he could hear the steady pulse of a confident man and the lingering scent of trees and ozone. There was more but Steve had never encountered anything like it before and didn't know how to interpret it. He wasn't shifting. Why wasn't Loki shifting? Steve had to know what he was dealing with. The cold look in Loki's eyes told Steve that this face-off wasn't going to end without more violence and he needed to know what Loki was if he wanted his best chance for success.

As Steve paused to assess the situation Steve felt Tony surge up from behind him. "Hey! You're messing with the wrong people here, buddy!"

Steve threw and arm out to keep the billionaire from advancing any further. Loki was dangerous, and the fact that he was an unknown doubled that danger level. "No! Tony, stay behind me."

"I don't think so. Someone needs to teach this asshole a lesson!"

"I said stay behind me." This wasn't up for discussion. Concern for Tony's safety made Steve a little rougher than he should've been as he shoved the man back. He heard him stumble but didn't look back, didn't take his eyes off of Loki for even a moment.

His resolve was tested as the main doors of his apartment block were thrown open and people ran screaming from the building as a fire still smoldered in Steve's room. His neighbors, good, unsuspecting humans who had just been put in danger because of him. As they ran out into the street the smell of fear and panic permeated the entire block, almost drowning out every other sent in the area. Now, Steve knew he had to not only keep his eyes on Loki but keep Loki's eyes on him. God only knew what happened if he locked his sights on a regular human. And that included Tony.

The paranoid observation paid off and Steve immediately noticed as soon as Loki's hand so much as twitched. He jerked forward as the Shifter reached into his coat pocket and Steve prepared himself to face a bullet from a gun or a knife blade. Steve practically tripped over his own feet in surprise when Loki instead withdrew what looked like a slightly oversized pen. It was a cylinder maybe half an inch in diameter and eight inches long with a button on top. The dark haired Shifter gave a small, derisive laugh at Steve's stumble then tilted his head to the side as he cautiously played with the pen-like object. "Do you know what this is, Steve?"
From the tone of his voice and the careful way Loki was holding it, Steve found himself wishing that it was just a gun. Gritting his teeth, Steve stretched his arm out to discourage Tony from lunging forward again. "Why would I?"

"If you were smart you would. What about you Mr. Stark?" Steve clenched his jaw as he saw Tony slowly shake his head out of the corner of his eye and shifted his weight so he was blocking the human from view. Loki chuckled again and held the device up in front of him as if to admire it. "This is my newest toy and is rather ingenious in its simplicity. Would you like to find out how it works?"

Steve really, really didn't. But he didn't know what to say to stop him. If he protested, Loki could use it; if he tried to play along, Loki could use it; if Steve tried to jump the other shifter, Loki could use it before Steve even got to him. What if it was some sort of remote trigger for another bomb? There were still far too many civilians around. Steve couldn't take that chance.

A new sound reached Steve's strained senses but he didn't allow himself to relax as he finally recognized it as the sound of footsteps pounding on pavement. A second later a set of familiar scents brushed by and was followed shortly by a visual confirmation as his team raced around the corner, Bruce in the lead with Natasha and Clint only a step behind. They looked like they had sprinted all the way from the restaurant, their coats disheveled hastily thrown on. How did they-? The explosion, they must have heard the explosion and come running.

Steve's eyes flashed back to Loki and a sudden burst of fear hit his heart when he saw the complete lack of concern in the pale man's cold eyes. He was going to do it. Throwing his hands up into the air, Steve put every ounce of authority he had in his next command as he yelled across the street, "Stay back!

Loki's finger hit the button on top of the small device. Steve was expecting another explosion, some sort of gunshot from an assassin Loki signaled. What he didn't expect was a piercing, high-pitch noise to shoot through his skull. Immediately Steve fell to his knees as he slapped his hands over his ears, his vision swimming from the pain. It hurt, it hurt so bad. It felt like his head was going to split open. Out of the corner of his eyes he managed to catch sight of Bruce's blurred form collapse onto the sidewalk, the other Wolf writhing against the pavement.

Dully Steve felt a hand on his shoulder before two hands came up to cradle his chin and Tony's face appeared in front of his. The man's lips were moving but Steve couldn't hear a word. Shaking his head to try and clear the noise from his ears only made the pain worse. Luckily whatever Loki had done only seemed to affect Wolves; the sound cut off as quickly as it had begun and Steve jerked his head up just in time to see Natasha miss tackling Loki to the street. She had obviously tried to jump him and though she wasn't able to subdue him, she did manage to shake him enough to take his finger off of the button.

Steve forced himself back up onto his feet as Clint joined Natasha and the pain began to fade. Feeling something wet trickling down his cheek and across his jaw, Steve wiped the back of his hand across his face and growled as it came away blood red. Across the street Bruce rolled up onto his knees but still kept his forehead pressed against the concrete like he was about to be sick. As the alpha of the group, Steve couldn't give himself that luxury. Clint and Natasha probably had it handled though, so maybe they would be able to—

Before Steve could even finish his thought Loki swung his arm out, caught Natasha by the throat, and threw her from the sidewalk out into the middle of the road as if she were a rag-doll. Screams rang out from the surrounding crowd but no one moved in to help her, all of them too frightened of getting injured themselves to step forward. Steve instantly began to sprint over, all the fatigue and
nausea burned away by adrenaline as Clint just barely dodged a swing from the strong Shifter. He couldn't worry about unknowns anymore. With the way Natasha had gotten tossed to the side, Steve was pretty sure that Loki was even stronger than he was but he was going to be their best chance at least of scaring the Shifter off.

The other Shifter still wasn't transforming so Steve kept his human form as well as he all but crashed into the other man with a loud snarl. He had never seriously fought anyone in his human form before but his arms immediately came up into a fighting position that came from boxing at the gym nearly five times a week. Throwing out a textbook-perfect right hook, Steve caught Loki directly in the jaw and the Shifter's chin snapped up. It felt like punching a brick wall but Steve ignored the ache in his hands and swung his left arm out in a haymaker. This time his knuckles barely brushed against Loki's skin as the other jerked back in time to avoid the blow. Before Steve had time to recover, Loki had launched a counter-attack and Steve caught a fist right in the side of his face. It sent him stumbling back but managed to find his balance before he could hit the ground. He hadn't taken a blow like that since he was twelve years old and eighty pounds.

Clint took the opportunity to try and rush Loki from behind and managed to land one blow thanks to his speed alone. The Hawk dive-rolled across sidewalk to avoid being hit as Loki kicked out at where Clint's head had been a moment earlier. As Steve regained his senses a strange noise caught his ear and he turned just long enough to see Natasha limping over to Bruce. Bruce, who was still curled up against the sidewalk but no longer in pain as broken growls slipped from his throat. From just the quick glance Steve had risked taking he could see fur sprouting from the Wolf's arms, the skin exposed as his muscles began to shift and expand, tearing the fabric of his button-down shirt. Bruce was losing control.

This was not good.

"Natasha! Get him out of here! Now!" Loki was bad enough; if Banner went wild on them the situation would become completely unmanageable. Especially with the growing crowds of human civilians beginning to clog up both ends of the street.

She didn't need to be told twice. Seeing that Natasha was handling the situation and trusting her to do whatever was necessary, Steve refocused on the fight at hand. Clint had done a good job keeping Loki distracted but had been about as physically effective as a fly attacking a bull. Steve threw himself back into the brawl with renewed purpose and between the two of them double-teaming the stronger Shifter they actually managed to land some significant blows. But just as Steve thought that they might be gaining the advantage, Loki threw them a curveball.

Pulling away from the fight after catching Clint's fist in his gut, Loki let out a tight hiss between clenched teeth. "I have had quite enough of this!" Steve squared his shoulders at his threatening tone but took an involuntary step back as Loki suddenly, finally began to transform. Then Steve took another step back. It was nothing like he had ever seen before.

Instead of shifting entirely into an animal, only Loki's limbs were changing. Long, black feathers began to sprout from his arms as they quickly morphed into huge wings and the bottom of his pants and his shoes shredded as deadly looking talons burst from his feet. Behind Steve, Clint sucked in a breath. "Holy shit…He's a Bird! A Raven!"

Steve didn't even know Shifters could even be Ravens. And he could barely process why he was able to shift halfway. It was either human or animal, there was no in-between! Clint's shout startled him back into action. "Quick! Steve, don't let him fly!"

Without as so much taking the time to think, Steve launched himself at Loki as he spread his
newly-formed wings and began to take off. He caught the other around the waist before the Raven was less than three feet off the ground and the rough tackle sent them both slamming into the sidewalk. Something flew from Loki's torn jacket and only when he saw Tony dive for it did Steve realize it was the device that had let out that god awful sound.

Loki had noticed it too and with a sudden burst of strength he forced his wings out and broke Steve's hold. Then he flew at Tony and Steve swore his heart stopped. Each of Loki's talons was a good five inches long and looked sharp as knives; they would tear through human flesh like it was tissue paper and there was no way Steve or Clint would be able to move fast enough to get Tony to safety. A strangled shout ripped from Steve's throat. "Tony! Look out!"

Tony's head snapped up as his fingers closed around the device and his mouth fell open as he saw Loki rushing at him. There was no way, no time for him to escape and Steve braced himself for a splatter of blood. But then the impossible happened.

Tony threw himself into a sort of scrambled backflip that should've been impossible for a human, twisting his spine around so that he landed on his feet. Tony's eyes jerked back up to meet Steve's and both of their eyes were wide, Steve's from shock, and Tony with a look of horror. Before Steve could begin to question what had just happened, they were all startled by the sound of sirens blaring in the distance. What were—the explosion, the fight, of course the cops were responding, just as his team had.

Steve wasn't going to let that distract him too though and sprang forward before Loki had the chance to go after Tony again. But Loki wasn't having it. Shifting fully into a large raven, he beat his wings once, twice, and then began to take flight. Steve sensed Clint beginning to transform behind him, ready to follow their adversary into the sky but he never got the chance.

Neither of the bird Shifters made it higher than six feet into the air when the chaotic scene grew even more confusing as a booming voice echoed down at them. "Loki! Stop these heinous actions!"

Tony ran to stand back with the crowds as Steve, Clint, and Loki all followed the sound of the voice up to the rooftop of the apartment building across the street from Steve's. There, five stories up, a man—a Shifter—was standing. Even from that distance Steve could see the fierce scowl on the man's bearded face, his muscular body tensed on the ledge. Loki was the first to recover from his surprise, the Raven flying up to perch on a streetlight underneath the building. Steve, Clint, and Tony just watched as the bird's beak opened and his human voice came out. Again, nothing Steve had ever seen before. "Ah, brother. You have found me at last. It took you long enough."

The man's, Loki's brother's, frown deepened and then jumped. Jumped five stories down and landed on the sidewalk in a crouch with enough force to crack the concrete under his feet. Steve's eyes narrowed as the large blond Shifter straightened up, squared his shoulders, and glared up at the streetlight, his sole focus the Raven perched on top of it. He didn't even seem to notice the rest of them. "This has gone too far! Stop this nonsense now and I will speak with father on your behalf."

Loki's pitch black feathers ruffled up and when he spoke next his tone was mocking. "Such a kind offer for you to make. But I have no intention to return home or speaking with your father again, so your words are unnecessary."

The newcomer, who was as tall and broad as Steve was, motioned with a wide sweep of his arm toward Steve's apartment. "Look at all the damage you have caused! People are getting hurt! This is not who you are!"
Loki's voice was now ice cold. "You have no idea who I am."

Their conversation was broken as the police finally arrived on the scene, a fire engine following close behind, all their sirens blaring and lights flashing. Steve snuck a glance at Tony and the billionaire immediately hurried towards the first responders. He strained to listen as Tony turned on his charm and instantly began to conduct damage control. It was for the best; the regular city police force weren't properly equipped or trained to handle Shifters. That was what SHIELD was for. And right now, Steve and Clint were the only SHEILD agents around so this was on them. Natasha had disappeared with Bruce, thank God.

Up on the streetlight, Loki cocked his head to the side as he eyed the cops before turning back to his brother, his sharp beak clacking with every word. "I have changed much since we last met. Now more than ever I can see just how weak you are due to your sympathies."

"It is not a weakness, brother. My beliefs give me strength."

"We shall see. When the world is crumbled around your feet and the bodies of those humans you care for so dearly are lying in the rubble, then we will see who the strong one is."

His brother's hands clenched into fists of rage as he shouted back up at Loki. "You don't mean that!"

"But I do. And there is nothing you can do to stop me."

"We shall see about that!" Releasing a roar that sounded like thunder, the man grabbed a small coupe parked on the street, picked it up a good six inches off of the ground, then slammed it into the streetlight. The pole buckled from the blow, the top half snapping off and crashing to the pavement.

Loki took flight with a cawing laugh, the sound echoing down onto the street as he left his brother, Steve, Clint, and Tony behind. Clint, having returned to his human form, made a move to follow but Steve held out a hand to still him. Allowing their enemy to retreat wasn't the worst way that today could've ended, and they had enough to clean up already without starting the fight back up.

After a long pause that somehow seemed almost silent despite the wail of the sirens Tony's voice broke out from the end of the street. "So, Steve. I hope you weren't looking forward to turning in just yet, because it sounds like we're all going to jail."

O~O~O~O

Steve went willingly into custody, not wanting to cause any more trouble for the city officers who he knew were just doing their job. Even Tony seemed to sense that compliancy was the best option and only made a couple of snarky remarks as they slapped a pair of handcuffs on him. The cops went easy on him, able to recognize the celebrity heir from the media, and loaded him carefully into the front of a squad car. The rest of them didn't get treated quite as well.

Because they were Shifters, Steve, Clint, and the newcomer were subjected to special restraints, their wrists chained behind their back to their waist and leg manacles lashing their ankles together. Loki's brother seemed irritated and from two squad cars away Steve could hear the Shifter shouting something about unsuitable treatment, but Steve offered no resistance as was tucked away into the uncomfortable back seat of the car Tony had been placed in. He lost track of Clint as an officer joined him and Tony soon after and without a word switched the car on, steering them directly to the city jail. Steve only hoped that Natasha and Bruce had managed to escape the eye of the authorities so at least some of them would be able to avoid legal trouble.
When they arrived at the jail, each of them was booked and processed before being led into an individual holding cell. Steve caught a glimpse of Clint and Loki's brother arriving just as he was being led away. His eyes caught Clint's and he gave his team member a tight nod which Clint returned after a moment. They would be okay. They were out of physical danger, they could deal with whatever came next. Although they were in a potentially very bad position.

Steve didn't feel that he had done anything wrong, that he had just reacted as best he could to a dangerous situation, but the police were still in the right to arrest them. All they knew right now was that a group of powerful Shifters had been brawling in the streets—which was highly illegal because of the prospective danger it posed to normal humans, a bomb had gone off, and about a hundred thousand dollars' worth of property damage had been done. To top it off, Loki had fled so the only ones the police had to blame for the destruction was Steve, Clint, Tony, and Loki's brother.

With all this in mind, Steve was rather stoic as he was escorted into a small cell and locked inside. The wolf in him protested being enclosed and chained up like an animal but Steve suppressed the building feeling of aggravation with a couple of deep breaths. He needed to set a good example for his team by remaining calm. It would do no good to anyone if he started to get angry. Also, he had no interest in being more thoroughly restrained. If he showed any signs of aggression the officers would have no qualms with chaining him to the wall or muzzling him; a raging alpha was not something they took lightly.

He had no idea how long he sat there, the minutes and hours blending together as his adrenaline slowly came back down and exhaustion began to take over. Letting himself doze off, the next thing he was solidly aware of was that his bottom had gone numb from sitting on the hard metal bench and there was someone looking at him through the small window in his cell door. Steve jerked up and away from the concrete wall he had been resting against and was back on high alert. It nevertheless took him a moment to identify the figure standing outside, their scent cut off by the thick metal door, but when he did he felt his whole body relax.

"Peggy."

The SHIELD agent sent him a tight smile. Her voice was muffled through the door but Steve greedily absorbed the words that seeped through. "Hello, Steve. I must say, you've looked better."

Reaching up, Steve gingerly touched the side of his face where Loki had punched him. His eye felt tender and he knew it had to be swollen up. "To be honest, I've felt better." There was a moment of silence between them before Steve sighed. "So, I guess I have some explaining to do."

"Quite a bit, actually. But first let's get you out of there."

Steve perked up. "You're bailing me out?"

"SHIELD is bailing you out, all of you. But when I heard the news I volunteered to come and collect you; I decided that you could probably use a friendly face about now."

A sigh burst past Steve's lips. "Boy, you could say that again."

"Come on, then." There was a gratifying click as Peggy unlocked his cell and stepped inside. Closing the door most of the way behind her for privacy, she took the three steps it took to get to where Steve was sitting on the opposite side of the room, her short heels clicking on the concrete ground. "I'll get you out of those and then you can help me gather up the others."

Steve offered her a weak smile and shifted so that she could easily reach his wrists behind his
She obliged and he let out a soft sigh as he felt the cuffs fall away. Bringing his arms back around to his front, Steve massaged his wrists as Peggy deftly bent down to unlock his ankles as well. Steve couldn't help but envelop her in a quick hug as she straightened up and the woman laughed, placing a quick peck on his cheek before pulling away. "Here now, Steve, put on a strong face. You're an alpha after all."

He nodded his head with a self-depreciative grin. "It's been a long day."

"I know, sweetheart. But unfortunately it's not over quite yet. Now, chin up." His grin grew into something a little more real as her voice fell back into its usual no-nonsense tone. "I happen to know that you can handle a lot more than what you've been put through and still come out on top. Don't prove me wrong."

Pushing himself to his feet, Steve brushed off his pants, adjusted the collar of his shirt and straightened his shoulders. "I wouldn't want that."

"There now, much better already."

It was clear that Peggy had already worked the details out with the police department because the officers in the detainment area watched but didn't make any move to stop them from going from cell to cell and getting his teammates out. Steve had to wonder if SHIELD had paid their bail or if they had got their charges dropped but couldn't find it in himself to actually ask. Sometimes it was just better not to know.

They found Clint first. The SHIELD agent had been waiting calmly perched on the edge of his bench and was on his feet as soon as Steve appeared in front of his door. Steve clapped him on the shoulder after Peggy got the cell door open. "Are you alright?"

"No worse off than I was at the start of the week."

Steve couldn't argue with that. At least Clint had been able to keep his human form this time. "Did you see where they put Tony?"

Nodding as Peggy got to work getting his multiple cuffs of, Clint motioned with his head towards the cell across the hall from where he was. "Over there. They brought him some food about half an hour ago."

The fact that none of the rest of them had been given anything to eat or drink went unsaid between them. Whether it was a difference in the treatment of humans and Shifters or due to Tony's wealth, Steve was just surprised that Tony hadn't been able to order in a four-course, five-star meal and a few couch cushions.

While Peggy finished settling up with Clint, Steve made his way over to Tony's cell and peered inside. The remnants of a small take-out meal were piled up on the floor and Tony was sprawled out on the bench, his shackles-free arms under his head and one leg dangling off the edge in a subtle sign of defiance. Steve couldn't help but smile as he tapped lightly on the reinforced glass window. "Tony."

One of Tony's eyes cracked open and he observed Steve for a moment before pushing himself up. "Look who got released early. For good behavior, no doubt."

"SHIELD is getting us out."

"Lucky us. I guess it saves me a call to my lawyer. So do you have the keys to this cell or are you just going to will the door open?"
"Peggy has it."

"Who's Peggy?"

"It's Agent Carter, actually." Steve blinked as Peggy appeared at his side and stepped back to allow her access to the lock. "And it is good to see that you have made yourself so at home here, Mr. Stark, but I am afraid I'm going to have to pull you away."

Tony eyed Peggy then looked back at Steve before shrugging and pushing himself up onto his feet. "It took you long enough. I would, if I were you, see that our things are picked up from the boys in blue behind the desk because I came in with a certain piece of technology I think you're bosses will be very interested in, Peggy."

"It has been taken care of." Steve tried to hide his grin at Peggy's prim response. He should've figured she wouldn't be one to put up with Tony's snarkiness. "Steve, unlock the cell please. I am going to call ahead for a car back to headquarters."

Steve accepted the keys and he and Tony both watched as she pulled out her cell phone and walked a few steps away. Cocking a brow, Tony pushed his hands into his pockets and sauntered over to the cell door as Steve went to work on the lock. "Something I said?"

"Probably. Peggy doesn't deal well with smart aleck comments."

"So she's avoiding me?"

Steve huffed a laugh as he undid the lock and swung the door open. "It was probably either that or punch you, and she has enough sense that bruising you wouldn't look good for SHIELD."

Tony rolled his eyes, his shoulder brushing Steve's as he stepped out of the cell. "Smart woman. Pretty too, if vintage is your sort of thing. Seems like it could be your kind of thing."

"I suppose." Peggy was a very lovely woman. She would make some man very happy one day, if she ever gave up some of that sharp sense of independence enough to let one in. "She's been the closest thing I have to family for a while now."

Something in Tony's face lightened. "Family, huh?"

"That's right." Steve was confused now; he couldn't figure out why Tony would be so interested.

"Alright, well, good." Clint made his way over carrying a set of plastic bags containing their personal belongings and divvied them up appropriately. Snatching his, Tony immediately ripped it open and pulled out his sunglasses before slipping them over his eyes with a smirk in Clint's direction. "Thank you Jeeves."

"Shut up before I decide to take that back. Here's your stuff, Steve."

"Thanks." Accepting his belongings, Steve gingerly opened the bag and began to place things back into their appropriate pockets as Tony and Clint did the same. Steve noticed that Clint was still holding one unopened bag and it didn't take him long to realize who it belonged to.

Tony was either unobservant or just didn't care, the billionaire speaking up loudly as he stuffed his wallet into an inner pocket in his suit jacket. "This was fun and everything but let's get out of here. I've already filled my jail time quota for this month."

From the corner of his eyes Steve saw Peggy snap her phone shut with a frown on her lips, having
caught the end of their conversation. "Wait one moment, Mr. Stark. We have one more to pick up before we leave."

"What, him?" Tony jabbed a thumb towards the cell where Loki's brother had been sent to; so Tony noticed, he just didn't care. The billionaire snorted as Peggy nodded. "What the hell are you bothering with him for? As far as I'm concerned, he did as much damage as that freak brother of his. He can stay right where he is."

Steve was shocked at Tony's behavior. He knew that the man had an abrasive personality at times but there was a level of disdain in his voice that Steve had never heard before. Peggy didn't seem to be impressed either. "Then it is a good thing that I don't care much about your concerns, Mr. Stark, because he is coming with us."

Tony let out an ugly laugh. "You've got to be kidding me…"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then I'm calling my own ride." Tony whipped out the cell phone he had just tucked into his suit. "We're heading back to SHIELD, right?"

Before he could even press a button, Peggy snatched the phone out of his hand and tucked it back into its pocket. "I can't let you do that, Mr. Stark. My orders were quite clear; I am to bring you all directly to headquarters myself."

Tony sneered, "So what, I'm still a prisoner then?"

Peggy's eyes hardened. "You have two options; you can either participate like a grown, mature adult, or you can go right back in that cell. I'm sure your personal assistant will be able to gather up the proper amount of bail money in the morning."

Putting a hand on Tony's shoulder, Steve broke into the conversation. He searched Tony's eyes but they were just closed off and angry. "Come on, Tony. It's been a hard day. Can't you just go along with this so we can move on?"

Tony glared over at Loki's brother's cell before releasing a tight hiss and practically spat out his next words. "Fine, whatever. I'll be waiting out front."

As Tony stormed out, Steve could only shake his head. Clint look equally mystified at his behavior. "Well that's new. Though it has been a while since he's let his inner diva out."

Steve shook his head again as Peggy turned to him in a silent plea for an explanation. "We're all tired. Let's just get this done."

O~O~O~O

The ride back to SHIELD headquarters from the city jail was tense. Steve did his best to ease some of the strain but he wasn't in the best of moods himself. The best he could do was make sure that Tony and new Shifter weren't sitting next to each other so he herded Tony into the front passenger's seat and sat with the newcomer in the back of the vehicle. They didn't talk. In fact no one talked. Tony just sat in front with his arms crossed, Clint stared out the window, Peggy reviewed messages on her phone, and the blond next to Steve scowled thoughtfully, his eyes on the window but not really seeing beyond the glass. It was a huge juxtaposition to the car ride he and his team had taken just hours before out to the restaurant.

When they reached SHIELD headquarters Peggy left them in the lobby, saying that they were to
report back to the conference room and that she was off to do damage control. Too grateful to argue, Steve let her go with a wave goodbye. Tony stormed to the elevator and Steve let him go, waiting for the next elevator with Clint and their new companion. Steve could tell the blond Shifter was already irritated and add in his obvious confusion at being in a completely new environment, it was all a powder keg ready to blow. And since Tony seemed very willing to provide the ignition spark they didn't all need to be trapped in a small elevator together.

Steve was relieved but not surprised when he walked in and found Natasha and Bruce already waiting for them. Natasha was resting her head in her hands and Bruce attempting to send him a smile as Steve walked in though it looked more like a wince. It was an apology, probably for what had happened earlier, and Steve returned his smile to let the other Wolf know he was already forgiven. Tony had flopped down next to Bruce, his arms still crossed over his chest and blatantly ignored them as they walked in.

After Steve, Clint, and Loki's brother had all dragged themselves into the room and found a chair there was a long moment of silence amongst them until Agent Coulson walked in. The man looked at each one of them in turn as they sat beaten and worn around the table. His own expression was serious, his eyes narrowing as his gaze finally landed on an unfamiliar face. "And you are?"

Loki's brother straightened in his chair and lifted his head up. Whoever and whatever he was, it was clear he too was an alpha. "I am Thor Odinson of Asgard, a Lion Shifter like my father and his father before him."

A Cat Shifter. Steve had actually heard of those, he just never expected to meet one. Rumors of Cat Shifters came and went through the Wolf community like an elusive wild fire. At least once a year someone would always claim to encounter one but could never find them again even with their allegedly distinctive scent. Now that he was meeting one face to face, Steve could definitely confirm that Cat's had a unique smell; not bad, just not a Wolf's scent pattern.

Coulson's jaw tightened as his lips drew into a thin line. Thor's words had apparently meant more to him that Steve was missing. "Why is a son of Asgard on American soil?"

At that point Tony butted in. "Apparently this guy is the brother of the Shifter that attacked us. He said his name was Loki."

"Oh…Shit." Coulson bit off his curse and rested his hand against his lips to keep more from flooding out.

And now Steve was seriously concerned. Coulson didn't seem like the type of man to lose his cool even for a second so the explicative was a bad sign. Taking a moment to collect himself, Agent Coulson turned to face them again. "Someone tell me exactly what happened tonight."

Tony frowned then moved to cross his arms behind his head in feigned nonchalance. "What happened was that—"

Before he could even begin, Coulson cut him off. "I take that back. Steve, what exactly happened tonight?"

Glancing at Tony as he threw his hands up into the air, Steve answered back, surprised at how calm and clear his own voice was after the night's events. "After our debriefing Tony suggested that we all go out for dinner. "After our debriefing Tony suggested that we all go out for dinner." He was trying to be brief but thorough, though for his own sake as well as the others' cut out the reasons behind some of the decisions made. "We agreed and ended up at a restaurant near my apartment. We ate, had a few drinks, and I was the first to leave. Tony, decided to walk with me. We stopped to talk on the street outside my building but were interrupted
by a bomb going off in my apartment. It was then that Loki made himself known. The rest of the team came running, probably due to the sound of the explosion, and Loki brought out this… device."

Steve floundered at that point as he tried to find the words to describe what he had seen and felt but he didn't have the technical knowledge to describe it. But Tony did. Speaking up again, forcefully this time so he wouldn't be cut off, Tony took over. "It was some sort of device that emitted a high-pitched frequency that apparently Wolves can hear, like a dog whistle from Hell. I've seen something like it before but nothing with quite that same calibration. It instantly crippled Steve and Bruce though, so someone definitely did their homework on how to inflict the maximum amount of pain through audio alone. It's possible that prolonged exposure might have even killed them. Given that most Shifters out there in the world are Wolves, I don't think I need to go into how dangerous a weapon like that could be in the wrong hands."

Coulson grimaced, "And Loki has somehow managed to get a hold of it."

At that point Thor let out a low rumble of discontent. "My brother would not develop such a weapon on his own. Someone else must have given it to him."

The SHIELD agent nodded in agreement, "And they probably knew exactly the kind of trouble he'd cause with it."

A rebellious spark shone in Tony's eyes and Steve knew that he was about to make trouble as the billionaire turned to look at Thor for the first time since they had sat down. "Okay, who the hell are you? And who the fuck wants to tell me what the 'sons of Asgard' are?"

Phil stepped in quickly before Thor could answer as the blond's face drew into an indignant frown. "The Asgardians are an ancient line of Shifters from the European continent. They are very powerful, but as far as I know this is the first time any of them ever carried their business across the Atlantic."

Thor nodded, "My brother has disregarded tradition and I am here to bring him home before he causes any harm and forever loses the good graces of our family."

Tony sneered. "How is that your brother anyway? There is no resemblance between you two."

While this was definitely not the time for it, it was a fair question. The two brothers couldn't look more unalike; Loki pale, dark haired, and lean while Thor was tanned, golden blond, and muscular. Steve had been curious himself but had been depending on a private word with Coulson after this little meeting to clear up his confusion. About that and some other things. Like how Tony had managed a feat of impossible acrobatics to save himself from Loki.

Thor only scowled back at Tony and bit back a terse answer. "We are brothers in bond, not by blood. But he is my kin nonetheless and despite his actions I will not allow any to speak ill of him."

At that point Natasha looked like she wanted to chime in but wisely thought better of it, instead shooting Clint a sly look. Tony threw himself back in his seat. "Whatever. It's obvious Hydra's been experimenting on him. No one transforms in stages like that!"

"Loki does. Those are his own natural abilities. No one has been 'experimenting' upon my family!"

Coulson broke in before an argument could arise. "That's enough! Thor, no one means you or your family any disrespect, but even you have to admit that Loki's actions have been less than reasonable."
The large Shifter frowned but his shoulders slouched down in defeat. Taking it as a cue to continue, Coulson sighed. "The situation, as I am sure you are all aware, is quite serious. You were found brawling in the streets, some of you with high amounts of alcohol in your blood. And thanks to the modern world of smart phones, the fight was recorded from about ten different angles and is now breaking news on every major station in the city."

Steve's stomach clenched up as Agent Coulson turned to face the darkened screen behind him and flipped it on. Immediately the room was lit up from the glow of the monitor and Steve could only watch as a good ten seconds of their fight was broadcasted in HD, and anchorwoman's voice carrying over the lowered audio of the fight. "—captured just hours ago by a resident trapped in one of the surrounding apartments. Terrified for their lives, they could only watch as what had once been a quiet street on the outskirts of downtown erupted into violence between what appears to be a gang of Shifters and an individual Shifter. An outbreak like this has not been seen in nearly eight years and panic is beginning to spread through the city that the unknown Shifter minority might be starting to war amongst themselves. If so, it is only a matter of time before we humans get caught in the crossfire. The city police department has yet to issue a formal statement on the incident but report back that for now the streets are safe but that citizens should keep a watchful eye out for any suspicious activity."

Steve felt physically ill as Phil put the TV on mute. It looked like he didn't need to bother finishing his story. That one incident had already exploded into a city-wide panic amongst the humans. There was no telling what sort of repercussions this would have on the Shifter community.

And it was his fault; whether or not he had played an active role on making it come about, he had ultimately been the cause. From the bomb, it was obvious that he had been the intended target. Steve didn't wish for a minute that he had been inside that apartment when it had blown but he still wondered if he could have done anything to make a difference in the outcome. If he had been more focused on his surroundings and less on Tony, maybe he would've seen Loki earlier, or would've been able to get upstairs early enough to disarm the explosive. He didn't blame Tony though. None of them had known what was coming.

Subconsciously, he had turned to look at the man and when Tony realized he was being watched he glanced back at Steve then cleared his throat. "Okay, I'll admit, this isn't good. But it could be worse. We might have messed up, but we did our best. No by-standers got hurt and the only building that got ruined was Steve's. In my book, that's not necessarily a bad night. Now I know we still have to talk this out, but I think what we all really need right now is just to take a step back and think a little bit."

Next to Tony, the corner of Bruce's lips lifted up in an almost-smile. "You know, that's the smartest thing I've heard you say all night."

Tony lightly smacked Bruce's shoulder. "I am a genius. And after all, what can we really do about anything tonight, right? Except beat ourselves up I mean."

From the head of the table, Agent Coulson let out a long breath, before nodding. "As much as it pains me to say it, you might be right about that, Stark. As far as the media issue is concerned, we already have people working on setting up a press conference. There isn't anything any of you can really do there. And as far as Loki is concerned...we're still trying to work out his connection to Hydra. You can all be assured that you will be contacted once we figure out what needs to happen but as for now, consider yourselves still on break but on call. I never thought Hydra would retaliate so quickly, so you'll all need to keep your wits about you. I don't know how they managed to identify you or locate your residence so quickly, Steve, but it's obvious we can't take any sense of security for granted." Coulson sighed. "And Steve, speaking of your situation, we need to find you
a safe place to lie low for a while. I have a connection with a hotel downtown. You'll need to keep to yourself, especially since you were captured on film, but it should do for the time being."

Tony sat up with a dismissing wave of his hand. "There's no need for hotels. Steve can stay with me. I have a house outside of town that's big enough for an extra house guest. And that way he doesn't have to stay holed up in a room until this mess is sorted out."

The offer was completely unexpected and Steve had to admit that he was actually a little touched. The idea of being cooped up in a small room for the next week had made his skin crawl. "Really? That would be great, Tony."

A thoughtful look came over Coulson's face. "Just how big is your house, Stark?"

"Big enough for me, my tech, and my ego, which I assure you, takes up an extensive amount of square footage. There, I made the joke before you could so it's not funny anymore. Why are you asking?"

"Is it big enough to fit four more?"

Steve could see Tony's mind working in overdrive, not to figure out what was about to happen, but to try and find a way out of it. "Uh, four more besides Steve? That depends on the four people."

By now everyone in the room, including Tony, had caught onto where this was going. There were, after all, exactly six of them seated at the table. "It would be best if you all remained together since now it is clear that some of you are being targeted and that whoever we're up against knows where you live. I hadn't considered it an option before because housing the six of you together anywhere in the city would lead to suspicion and your eventual discovery, but if you have a more secluded near-by location that would be ideal."

Leaning his head back, Tony let out an overdramatic sigh before tilting his chin back and looking at Phil. "Alright, I get it. Bruce can come over. And Natasha and Clint, I guess, if they behave. I'm suing for any property damage done though."

"And Thor? Whether you like it or not, Stark, he is involved in this now and if we are really going up against Loki he may be our best bet at success."

Tony's response was immediate. "Sorry, but no can do on that one."

Bruce sighed, his voice almost a plea, "Tony…"

"Nope. I only have four guest bedrooms."

Was that really the problem here? Steve furrowed his brow, "I can take the couch if that will help."

That was the wrong thing to say. Now Tony was visibly aggravated as he snapped back at Steve. "No, it won't. You're getting a bed. And I don't see why Fabio over there needs to be involved in anything! He's not a part of this team!"

Thor growled from two seats down. "I did not ask to be a part of your 'team'. I only wish to retrieve my brother. No one else has a problem with me, so what have I done to you to warrant your anger?"

Tony leaned forward aggressively in his seat. "It's my house, so it's my right to decide who gets to be in it and who isn't. And sorry buddy, but I just don't trust you and you only have yourself to blame for that."
"It is no fault of mine if you are so insecure that you cannot stand to have another Cat in your territory!"

The room fell so quiet that you could hear a pin drop as all eyes except for Phil and Bruce's fell on the billionaire. Steve finally found his voice, the implication of Thor's words ringing in his ears. "...Tony? What does he mean?"
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

As per usual, thanks to all the readers out there who commented/left kudos/bookmarked the story! It's fun having conversations with you guys!

Speaking of which, if you have any questions for the characters themselves (be they fun, stupid, or raunchy), I have an Ask blog going here: http://askavengersshifters.tumblr.com/. So, ask away! I've already had some fun ones, but am always looking for more (though you may see some spoilers!)! :D

Btw, did anyone watch Agents of SHIELD last night? OMG, Coulson...just omg, you're ten kinds of adorable. ^^

Thor looked surprised at their confusion but seemed to sense that some line had been crossed and allowed Tony the time to answer. Which was just, fantastic.

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

The denial was instantaneous, out of his mouth before he could even stop it. A force of habit. Thor hesitated but had too much pride invested to let it go. "You do not like sharing your space with other Cats. I can only assume that is your reason for being so hostile towards me."

Fuck. Fuck his life, and fuck Thor and his stupid fucking Cat ass back to whatever country he came from. He had been doing so well. Pepper had warned him that this would happen but he had ignored her like the idiot he was. Leaning back, Tony closed his eyes and tried to massage out a building migraine. And this way he wouldn't have to look into any of their eyes. Okay, there was only one gaze he really didn't want to meet, but this was the simplest solution and he needed more simple in his life right now. "Okay. So...I...haven't been entirely truthful with all of you. I, uh, I'm not exactly human."

Steve sounded like he had had the wind knocked out of him. "You're a Shifter?"

Tony kept his eyes closed. "Yup."

He could practically hear the frown on Clint's face. "But, how did none of us sense it?"

Finally risking a glance, Tony forced his hand away from his face and settled on slouching down in his seat, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. "Don't feel too bad. I've gotten pretty good at masking it." In fact, Tony had been pretty sure he had perfected masking it but apparently he hadn't calculated in the sensory abilities of another Cat. Even with all his travel, he hadn't had the chance to test it; he hadn't run into another Cat since Dad had kicked the bucket. Of course, when he traveled it was usually to visit owners of multi-million dollar companies and who ever heard of a Shifter running a business like that?

Steve's voice snapped Tony back from his darkening thoughts, though the pure denial in the Wolf's words didn't exactly brighten his mood. "I don't believe it. There's, there's just no way I wouldn't have smelled it—"
"Like I said," it took a physical effort on Tony's part to lower the mental walls he had built up to stop himself from emitting a scent. Cats could do it, if they had to as a last minute survival technique. A way to make themselves virtually invisible from would-be predators, a way to find a dark corner to hide in to just die in peace. Tony had just figured out a way to keep it going even after that gut-wrenching fear had left his body. "I did a pretty good job masking it."

The result was instantaneous. Tony could practically see his scent wafting into the room as Steve, Clint, and Natasha stiffened up, their eyes wide in shock. He had only ever let himself go like this in the privacy of his own home. It felt wrong. He felt naked. And not naked in a good way. In a very exposed, uneasy way. Tony looked at Bruce and found his friend staring back at him with reassurance written all over his face. He could do this. Inwardly steeling himself, Tony reconstructed his grin and turned to look at his other teammates. He couldn't help it as his gaze skipped over Clint and Natasha to land smack dab on the last person he wanted to face right now. He had never seen Steve look as confused—betrayed, his mind whispered—before. The alpha Wolf was inhaling deep breaths through his nose and Tony knew that it wasn't because he was hyperventilating but because he was scenting the air. Dogs depended way too much on their sense of smell. "Let me break this down for you Steve, because I can see that you're struggling. I, Tony Stark, am a Cat Shifter, not a human. Surprise."

"But, you didn't...Even now, why don't you smell like Thor?"

Tony bit back a hiss. "It's because unlike King of the Jungle over there, I'm not a Lion. Like you couldn't figure Loki out; just because he and Clint are both Birds, doesn't mean they smell the same."

Steve knit his brow. "Then what are you?"

"I don't see why it matters—"

"Stark is a Panther." Tony glared at Coulson but the agent was unaffected. Coulson stared right back at him. Tony had only met him a few times before this but he was one of the few humans, SHIELD agents included, who refused to be intimidated either by him or his money. Smug bastard. "Now that the information is out, your form could be of great importance to the safety of this team."

Tony snarled back. "It's none of their business, and it isn't yours either."

"It is my business to know, Stark." Damn it. Fucking SHIELD. Coulson's eyebrows pulled together in a subdued sign of concern. "I hope that this revelation won't change your mind about allowing the team to stay in your house. After all, they would have realized everything as soon as they stepped foot inside anyway."

The agent's words only made Tony more apprehensive which just made him angrier. But he had already said the rest of them could come over and going back on that would sting even worse. "Just, stop talking, now." The words rumbled out of his throat in a low growl even as he snapped his walls back up, instantly cutting off his Shifter scent. It was easier to close himself off than it had been to let go. Pushing his chair back, Tony rose to his feet, suddenly hating being the center of attention. "Come over to my place tonight, seven o'clock. I'll forward Coulson the address. But for now, I'm out of here."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bruce reach out a hand, "Tony..."

Tony jerked out of range. "Don't." He didn't want to talk anymore. Didn't want to be touched. Just wanted to get the hell out. So that's exactly what he did.
Without waiting to hear Coulson's protests, Tony stalked out of the room, keeping his head held high so that he didn't have to look anyone in the face again. He didn't want to know if anyone would be silently asking him to stay. Or worse, judging him with heavy stares.

Seeing the door to the SHIELD conference room smoothly slide open automatically as he approached made Tony want to slam it back shut like an angry teenager. But when he stepped out into the hall he didn't run. He didn't let himself run. He just stuck his hands into his pockets and strolled off down the hall. Once he had gone around enough corners that he was sure he wouldn't be followed, Tony finally stopped and leaned back against the wall, just to take a breath. He needed a moment to breathe.

With a grunt he pulled the knot loose on his tie and undid the top three buttons of his shirt, his hand subconsciously moving down to rub the center of his chest. Shit. Of course this happened, of course nothing in his life could be simple. God forbid he actually feel like he was pulling his shit together.

Pressing his head back against the wall, Tony closed his eyes and blindly dug his phone out of his pocket. He needed to talk to someone and there was only one number on his speed dial.

"Hello, Virginia Potts speaking."

"I've really fucked this up, Pepper." Damn, his voice sounded bad.

"Tony? What's wrong? What do you mean?"

"They know. About me."

"But, how-?"

Tony grimaced and pulled viciously at his tie until it slid off from around his neck. "Some asshole Cat from Viking Land showed up and called me out in front of everyone."

He heard Pepper sigh. "Tony...Listen, it will be alright. If you want, you could come back to work. Actually, it'd be a bit of relief. Messages have been piling up for you and there is some paperwork I need you to go over."

"No, I," Tony took a breath, "I'm not quitting, Pepper." That was the one thing he wouldn't let himself do. Every time something was actually hard for him, Tony avoided it like the plague. Usually it didn't matter, it wasn't anything important, but this time it actually was important and he can't let himself escape.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line before Pepper finally spoke. It might have been Tony's imagination but she almost sounded impressed. "So what do you want to do?"

"I'm sticking with this, for now. Until I kill that Lion." Until this whole thing didn't seem important anymore.

"Please don't. I can't even imagine what sort of legal nightmare that would be..."

Pepper's dry joke rolled off of him. He barely even heard it, his thoughts still too tangled up. "...What am I supposed to do?" He was the best at a lot of things but...this kind of thing he hated.

There was another pause but it didn't take her too long to interpret his question. "It sounds like you've already made up your mind. Tony, if you want to see this through then do it. I know that people knowing you're a Shifter makes you anxious, but honestly if anyone had to find out I don't
"think you could've picked a better group. From what you've told me, they all have their own issues and as Shifters themselves I don't know how they could be in a position to judge you."

Tony shook his head, a mirthless smirk flickering onto his face. "You sound like a psychologist. Stop getting into my head."

"I've asked you to see a real therapist, but you refused so this is the best you're going to get. Now, I need to stop being your psychologist and go back to running Stark Industries for you so unless there's actually something I can do for you right now, I'm going to hang up. I don't have the time to just listen to you complain."

"You're a cruel woman."

"I'm a busy woman thanks to my boss not being in his office for almost two weeks." He heard her sigh again over the phone as a sharp ring sounded in the background. "I have to go, I'm getting a call from the CEO of our steel supplier. Take care of yourself, Tony. Despite everything, you know I worry about you."

Tony knew. No matter how many buttons he pushed, no matter how hard he tried to push her away, Pepper always stayed. And she could dish it out as well as she could take it. She didn't put up with his antics but she never walked away. And that's one of the things Tony liked best about her. Maybe that was what he liked so much about a certain Wolf too. Scowling as that last thought popped into his head, Tony snapped himself back to conversation. "I know, Pep. I'll call you later."

"Talk to you then."

O-O-O-O

Steve watched Tony storm out of the room, so shocked that he knew it had to be written all over his face. But Tony never saw it, the man, the Panther, not giving any one of them a single glance as he swept out of the conference room.

At a loss, Steve turned to look at Phil. Hoping for some kind of explanation that would make sense of any of this. Phil just shook his head and sighed. "That was an inevitable confrontation. Given Stark's history, that actually went surprisingly well."

Clint snorted. "That went well?"

"He is still allowing you into his home, so yes. In my book, that it is a positive conclusion to the whole mess. Assuming of course that the rest of you are comfortable staying at his residence knowing that he is a Shifter."

Finally Steve found his voice. Of this one thing he was sure. "It doesn't make any difference, human or Shifter. He is still a member of this team and if he has still given us permission to stay with him then it remains the best option."

Phil nodded, the barest hint of relief evident on his face. "I'm glad you agree. And after that little display, I am going to dismiss the rest of you. I'm going to trust that Stark will send us his information, so we will provide a car to take you all over to his location that will leave here at six thirty this afternoon. It's nearly ten in the morning now, so that should give you enough time to clean yourselves up and gather your personal effects."

It took a moment for Steve to process Phil's words, only fully recognizing that the meeting was over when everyone else began to get up out of their seats. Bruce was the slowest to collect himself, a fact which Steve was grateful for. He still had questions and he knew now that the beta
had the answers.

Hurrying to his feet, Steve chased Bruce out of the conference room and grabbed the other Wolf by the shoulder before he had the chance to disappear like Tony did. "Bruce, wait."

Bruce had started at Steve's touch but didn't try to shrug off his grip as he turned to face him. His expression was wary but resigned and Steve felt a flash of irritation. "I should go make sure Tony's alright."

Dropping his hand, Steve crowded Bruce up against the wall so that he could speak without everyone in the building listening in. He was having trouble remembering to whisper though, his voice taking on the shadow of a growl despite his efforts to reign himself in. "In a minute. We need to talk."

Bruce's shoulders hunched up defensively. "I don't really have anything to say about this."

At least he wasn't playing dumb. "I don't understand how we could have missed something this big! And you, you knew about this?"

"Steve, listen…"

"How could you lie to me?" It was bad enough that Tony had pulled the wool over all of their eyes, but Bruce had been in on it apparently from the start and it stung.

"Now, in my defense, I never lied to you. I never said he was human."

"But you didn't say he was a Shifter."

Bruce sighed and raked his fingers through his hair as he pressed himself back against the wall behind him. Realizing that he had gotten so close to the other Wolf that their chests were almost bumping, Steve grit his teeth and took a step back. "Okay, alright. But omitting facts isn't quite the same as a lie and, no offense Steve, but I've known Tony a lot longer than you. I made a promise to him a long time ago that I would keep his secret for him and I'm not the type to go back on my word. I would hope that you could understand that."

Much to his frustration, Steve did. But it still felt like a betrayal. Shifting was such an important thing, such a personal thing. Just when he thought he had been figuring Tony out, when he thought he might be close to understanding, he learns that he didn't even know the basics.

Taking another step back from Bruce, Steve gave him a tight nod. "I do…Sorry Bruce, I just…"

Bruce released a long breath. "It's alright. It must've been a shock and we're all stressed."

"Yeah."

Steve's voice must have sounded flat even to the other Wolf because after a pause there was a flash of concern in Bruce's eyes. "Are you okay, Steve?"

"I'll be fine." And he would. He just needed some time..."Sorry to keep you. I'll see you later tonight?"

"Yeah, I'll be here. Take care of yourself until then, Steve."

"Sure…"

Bruce gave him one more look before patting Steve on the shoulder and taking his leave. Which
left Steve alone to figure out what to do with himself. Since his apartment had gone up in flames he had nothing to gather up for his upcoming temporary move. But upon inspection…he kind of smelled. He could probably use a shower. And some rest. That actually didn't sound like a bad way to spend the day.

And as it turned out, it wasn't, everything considered.

After showering, Steve had bunked up in the room he had used in the SHIELD building when Clint was incapacitated. As soon as his head hit the pillow he was out like a light. After a dreamless sleep, Steve had woken six hours later feeling a little bit better about everything. Sure, their team was still in trouble after the showdown with Loki, but at least SHIELD seemed to realize that they had done their best in a bad situation. And Loki had escaped, but someone like that wouldn't lay low for long. And Tony…Tony still trusted them all enough to let them into his home. Whether or not he had been keeping a huge secret from them, if Tony still had that much faith in him than the least Steve could do was have enough faith to believe that Tony must've had his reasons for hiding that he was a Shifter.

The frustration he had felt earlier with Tony and Bruce had entirely faded. Ever since he had first met Tony he had never even considered him to be anything but human but now that he looked back on all of their interactions the hints had been there. From Tony's attitude, the way he held himself, how he behaved, his sharp sense of perception. He had been far more than human. But you know what they said; hindsight was always twenty-twenty.

In fact, he was almost back to his normal self by the time the others wandered back into SHIELD headquarters and Phil packed them all into a van headed just north of the city limits. Steve was happy he managed to get his head on straight because he was awful at hiding his emotions and when he opened the van door and saw Tony waiting for him in the driveway of a huge house, Steve was actually able to smile at Tony and mean it.

Tony himself seemed to be relieved at the reception and he relaxed his stance as he strolled over to them as Bruce, Thor, Natasha, and Clint piled out of the van behind Steve. The last time Steve had seen him, Tony had been upset—to put it mildly—but he seemed to have regained his standard brand of careless confidence. The biggest change was that he was no longer trying to mask his scent. Steve inhaled it greedily, welcoming any extra information it could give him about the surprisingly-mysterious billionaire. So this was what a Panther smelled like…Now that it wasn't such a surprise, it seemed to suit Tony so much better than the neutral scent of a human.

"I'm glad to see you managed to find the place."

"It's a little out of the way."

That was an understatement. Although Tony's property lay only a few miles outside the city it felt entirely secluded. The driveway in had been a good mile long in of itself, winding through woods and over a bridge crossing a large stream. The foliage felt natural but when Steve had looked closely he realized that the trees and bushes had all been carefully pruned recently. It had felt like he was driving up to one of those big historic English manors he had seen in period movies.

The house itself was about ten times more impressive than the drive. It was three stories tall and the exterior was constructed with sleek lines of steel, bedrock, and glass, the large window panes reflecting the gray sky and the tall, leafy trees that surrounded it. The modern structure stood in a bold contrast to the nature surrounding it but the two seemed to complement each other rather than compete. Tony's presence was obvious though, even from where Steve was standing. There was a long detached garage a few yards away from the main building and proudly parked out front were two Ferraris and a Lamborghini, all painted in obnoxiously bright colors.
Steve was pretty sure the total cost of all his personal possessions through his entire lifetime wouldn't be able to buy him even half of one of those cars.

Tony eyed Steve as he took everything in. "So? Does it meet your standards as a hideout?"

"Uh, yeah. " Steve grinned down at the Cat. "Yeah, it should do." Steve could already tell that this was easily going to be the best accommodations he had ever stayed in.

The billionaire's face brightened as a smirk found its way to his lips. "Good." Taking a step back, Tony shared the smirk with the rest of the team who had gathered around Steve. "I guess I'll be a good host and invite you in then."

Beside Steve, Bruce rolled his eyes but they all followed Tony as he led them towards the front entrance a few yards away. Pulling the double doors open with an exaggerated flourish, Tony motioned them inside. "Welcome to my humble adobe. Mi casa es su casa, unless you break anything, then you bought it. Now get in before I change my mind."

Steve knew he had to be acting like a country bumpkin, walking in with his eyes wide and mouth agape, but he couldn't help it. He was the first one to step in but stopped within five feet, stuck there in the foyer trying to take everything in as Bruce, then Natasha, and Clint brushed by him. The interior shared the same design aesthetic as the exterior, modern and minimalistic, black, white, and gray with smatterings of bright color. It wasn't usually Steve's style but it worked and was just so Tony that he kind of loved it.

Steve was so caught up in looking around Tony's house that he almost missed the billionaire's next words as Thor tried to enter behind them. Almost. "Alright, before you go in, we're going to set some ground rules."

Steve paused then let out a half annoyed, half amused huff. He shouldn't have expected Tony to be completely over his hang-ups about this, especially where the other Cat was concerned. Ahead of him, Bruce must've sensed Steve's change of mood but when the other Wolf turned around to check on him Steve just waved him off as he turned to walk back to Tony. As he arrived he could hear Thor responding, an expression of frustrated confusion clear on the Lion's face. "Tony, I believed that we had moved passed this."

Tony was standing in the doorway, blocking Thor from passing as he held up his hands in mock defense. "Hey, I'm letting you in, aren't I?"

"No one else received 'rules' upon entering."

"No one else in this group is an alpha who might think about trying and claim my space."

Thor gestured pointedly back to Steve who had come up behind Tony. Turning back to look, Tony's snort of complete disregard was almost insulting. "Please, I don't think Steve's going to go piss all over my property. Wolves can be dumb as bricks, but they do understand the concept of respecting claimed territory."

Pissing all over his-? Steve shook his head and put a hand on Tony's shoulder, trying to keep his voice level. "I don't think Thor has any intention of taking over your house."

Tony narrowing his eyes, his gaze never having left Thor's face. "You don't know Cats, Steve."

Thor shook his head in exasperation. "And you clearly do not know me. Steve is correct, I have no desire to make a claim upon this house. If nothing else, it has not my preferences in design."
Thor was clearly trying to make a joke and Steve, for one, appreciated it. It seemed to calm Tony a little too and though he glared up at the Lion, he grudgingly stepped back and let him by. Steve watched him go, hanging around just in case Tony changed in his mind and tried to wrestle Thor back out. But Tony controlled himself.

Grinning down at him, Steve patted his shoulder once more in a gentle congratulation. "You know Wolves don't claim territory by urinating anymore, right?"

Tony brushed off his hand, though the action lacked any real ire. "The key word there was 'anymore,' Steve, as in it actually happened sometime in the past." Striding into his house to catch up with the rest of the group, Tony jabbed a finger in Steve's direction. "Don't get any ideas, by the way, because I will make you clean up the mess."

"Keep bringing it up, and I might have to bring back some old Wolf traditions. I'll have Bruce help."

"Funny. You know, I could buy a couple of dog houses for the both of you to sleep in the backyard in too."

At that point the two had made it up to where Bruce had been waiting at a respectful distance. Catching the tail end of Tony's snide remark, the scientist raised brow and failed completely at keeping a smile off his face. "I don't even want to know how that conversation started or where it's going."

Steve laughed. "That's probably for the best."

Snorting, Tony stuck his hands in his pockets. "As long as everyone pisses in the appropriate receptacles we can consider that conversation closed."

Bruce was obviously still confused if Tony was being serious or not. "I think I can manage that."

"Okay then, moving on. How about a quick tour of the place?" It was only then that Tony seemed to look around and realize that it was only the three of them standing in the entryway. "Where the hell did everyone else go?"

Steve looked at Bruce who just gave a small, helpless shrug. "I guess they went off to explore on their own."

"Fantastic." Tony scowled then looked up at the ceiling. "JARVIS, you get all that? Where the hell are my ruder houseguests?"

Steve tilted his head to the side. Who was Tony talking t—

"Yes, sir." Steve jumped about a foot in the air as a voice answered back from nowhere, the sophisticated British accent tinged with what seemed to be a hint of amusement. "My sensors indicate that Agent Romanov and Agent Barton are unpacking in their respective bedrooms and Mr. Odinson is inspecting the pantry."

Steve's mouth had fallen back open as he gaped up at the ceiling. "Tony, who is that?"

"'What is that?' would be the more appropriate question." The billionaire waved up toward the top of the walls. "Steve, meet JARVIS. JARVIS, Steve. Bruce…"

Bruce gave a light smile, "We've met."
"It's a pleasure to see you again, Dr. Banner. And to meet you, Agent Rogers."

Steve strained his neck as he searched the ceiling for cameras and speakers, any kind of surveillance technology that this Jarvis could be using to watch him. "Uh, yeah. You too."

Tony laughed and patted Steve's back as he walked further into the house. "Don't hurt yourself, Steve. There's nothing to see. JARVIS is an AI I created years ago." At Steve's blank look, the grin on Tony's lips spread. He was enjoying this. "An 'Artificial Intelligence'. He's not real. He's like a computer program, but one that can think for itself. Just think of him as a high tech butler."

Steve shook his head. He could barely use a regular computer and Tony had built this, this whatever it was. "Is he always, always 'on'?"

"Yup. Twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty five days a year. But don't worry. If you ever want a little 'private time' just tell JARVIS to look away for a few hours," Steve flushed red as Tony winked at him.

Bruce distracted them by loudly clearing his throat. "So, about that tour, Tony…"

"Relax Bruce, you're a beta, not a chaperone."

Steve's blush only grew worse but he managed to fight through it enough not to stammer when he spoke. "Actually, I would like to get a handle of the layout of this place." And the house was big enough that it might take a few hours.

"You are no fun to tease. But fine, let's get started."

Steve thought that Bruce had been to the mansion before since he knew about Tony's robot butler but the other Wolf seemed just as curious as Steve was as Tony took them from room to room. Living room, media room, bathroom, kitchen, dining room, bathroom, study, office, bathroom, game room, Steve's head almost started spinning. Each space was filled with top of the line furniture, appliances, and technology. Tony described some of it in passing but Steve got lost as soon as the Cat started to explain how the thermostat panel also controlled the lighting in the room. While each room smelled like Tony, Steve could tell both from their scents and by sight that even with all the toys and gadgets he owned, Tony only really used a certain number of them. For instance, Steve counted nine couches in the entire house but only two of them looked like anyone had ever sat on them.

Luckily Steve had overestimated when he thought the tour would take a few hours, but it did take almost a full thirty minutes. As they started to wander towards the last few unexplored areas of the mansion, Steve's eyes caught on a staircase leading down. That in of itself wasn't out of the ordinary; the house was three stories after all, and they had been up and down a number of staircases already. But now they were on the main floor and Tony hadn't ever said anything about a basement.

"What's downstairs?"

"Downstairs is my workshop. You don't need to go down there, but if I ever disappear for a few hours—"

"Days." Bruce gently corrected Tony with a small grin.

"—Days, it's probably where I am. But moving on to places where you are actually welcome to explore…” Tony herded Steve and Bruce away from the staircase going down and back through the main part of the house to access the second floor. "Up there are the bedrooms and hopefully the
rest of my home invaders. Let's see what kind of mess they made."

With no further ado they were ushered up the stairs. At the top landing, the hall branched out in two directions. Down one end were the rooms Clint, Natasha, and Thor had already apparently claimed. The doors were all flung open and Steve could hear them unpacking inside. Down the hall in the other direction were three more bedrooms. Clearly Tony had lied about a lack of space during their meeting with Phil because Steve was pretty sure there were even more rooms that could easily have been converted into bedrooms on the first floor.

Tony's bedroom was at the end of the corridor, clearly marked because it was the only door that was closed. Tony waved to the two rooms that had yet to be claimed. "It looks like everyone else has already picked out their rooms, so you guys can fight over who gets which bedroom."

Looking at each door in turn, there didn't seem to be much to differentiate either space to Steve. "Is there a difference?"

Tony gave a loose shrug. "Not really. I think I recently had the sheets replaced in one of the beds but I can't remember which one..." Tony grimaced, "Actually, maybe it was the room Natasha got. Never mind, forget I said anything."

Shaking his head, at this point knowing it was better sometimes just not to ask, Steve motioned towards the door he was closest to on the right side of the hall. "Then I'll just take that one."

"Alright. Good enough for me." Tony clapped his hands together. "And that's pretty much the end of the tour, thank God, aside from the grounds. Oh, and I have no intention of entertaining either of you while you're here, by the way, so you should find some way to keep yourselves amused."

Steve and Bruce looked at each other before Bruce turned back to Tony. "Can I have access to your workshop? It's been a while since I've had access to that quality of equipment. Probably since the last time I worked with you."

Tony opened his mouth, paused, then started to speak again. "It's negotiable."

"Really?"

Bruce seemed surprised. Sensing that they were going to be a while, Steve silently bowed out of the conversation to inspect his new living area. The room was large and uncluttered with just a bed, a closet, and a desk and chair. Like the rest of the house there were large windows opening up onto what must be Tony's backyard and a full-size swimming pool. Of course there was a pool. Why wouldn't there be? Chuckling, Steve shook his head and sat down on the bed. The mattress felt like a cloud. It was easily the most comfortable thing he had ever rested on. This was definitely going to be alright.

It didn't take long for Steve to get antsy sitting in his room. But Tony had giving him a good hint of how he could spend his time. He had seen nearly every square foot of the mansion but there were still acres of land outside. And the best part was they were so far away from any other properties that Steve could shift and not have to worry about being spotted as a Wolf as he ran.

The sun was already setting by the time Steve made it outside but the lack of light and the drop in temperatures didn't bother him. With his eyesight he could easily navigate the shadows and his fur would keep him warm. He didn't usually like exploring new territory alone but he didn't know if any of his teammates would want to run with him. Besides, as long as he stayed on Tony's property he knew that he wouldn't run into any trouble. Steve wasn't sure if Cats guarded territory as well as Wolves did but knowing what he did already about Tony's personality he was pretty sure that he
wouldn't allow anything dangerous on his land.

Over the next few hours Steve found out he was right. And it was exhilarating.

He ran and ran, letting the stress and worries of the last few days roll off of him. He must have run around the property at least five times when he started to circle back in towards Tony's house. On one pass Steve saw a flash of something out of the corner of his eyes, someone standing out back on the edge of the pool deck just watching him. But the gaze felt familiar, comfortable, and Steve let the feeling of being watched wash over him like the breeze rushing through his fur.

After a few more passing Steve felt a strain finally begin to build in his muscles and slowed to a trot, meandering his way back towards the mansion. He had left his clothes behind a small copse of trees boarding the clearing Tony's house stood in and quickly shifted back to his human form and redressed. Goosebumps welled up on his bare arms now that he didn't have any fur to block the chill and he quickly made his way into the mansion.

Tony wasn't joking when he said they were going to be on their own. In a way Steve was glad because it would have been awkward for Tony to feel obliged to cater to them for the entire length of their stay. On the other hand, Steve felt just as awkward rummaging through Tony's kitchen to try and cook himself dinner. The Cat thankfully had a fully stocked pantry but finding the right pots, plates, and silverware was a challenge. Turning on the digital gas stovetop was another but Steve only burned himself once before he figured out how to get the right burner going, so he considered that a small victory.

Bruce drifted in when Steve was sitting by himself at the kitchen counter, eating the spaghetti he had managed to put together. A few minutes later Thor wandered in and the three of them managed some brief conversation as the beta Wolf and the Lion scrounged up their own meals. Both of them settled on quick snack foods instead of something that actually required preparation and quickly disappeared back to their rooms, leaving Steve to himself again. When he had finished off his plate, Steve made sure to wash everything that he had used before deciding that he could probably turn in for the night as well.

But there was one thing Steve had to do first. The alpha Wolf couldn't help it. Before he retired to his bedroom he did one last round about the house, just to make sure all the doors and windows were secured and that everyone was accounted for. Logically he knew that Tony probably had a decent security system and that even if he didn't Jarvis would probably ID an intruder pretty quickly but old habits died hard. Which was unfortunate because Tony's house was downright huge and even knowing his way around his little patrol took a good twenty minutes. Steve had never stayed in a house this big before and even though his entire team was packed into it the mansion still somehow felt empty. He couldn't imagine how Tony felt living here alone. But maybe Cats preferred the solitude.

When he was certain that everything was squared away downstairs, he made his way towards the main staircase leading up to the second floor. On his way back through the hall, Steve heard Bruce shuffling around in his room. The noises were sporadic and Steve could sense a strange, thin sense of anxiety seeping out from the beta Wolf's room. Pausing, Steve moved forward and was about to knock but then visions of his confrontation with Bruce earlier that day after the conference in the S.H.I.E.L.D building surfaced in his mind and his hand slowly fell away from the door. No, he had already pushed himself into Bruce's business too much; if the other Wolf needed Steve, he knew where to find him.

Steve closed himself up in his own room and stared blankly around. He didn't really feel like going to sleep yet but it seemed like the thing to do. And it wasn't like he had anything to distract him. He
didn't have any personal possessions left save for the clothes on his back and his wallet. He felt a sudden rush of gratitude that he wasn't a materialistic person. Otherwise losing his apartment would have been a lot harder to swallow. But he'd been in a similar situation before, with nothing but the support of some friends, and things had turned out alright. He would need to go shopping for some new clothes though...He could only wear one outfit for so long before it began to stink. Speaking of...Steve kicked off his shoes and pulled off his jacket, button-down, and pants, leaving him in just his undershirt and skivvies. They would work as pajamas for now.

Once he had wrestled himself into bed, Steve found himself unable to fall asleep. Instead he just stared up at the ceiling wondering every now and again if Tony's computer was watching him. It was unnerving and calming all at the same time. He was just starting to think about doing something bizarre just to see if he could goad a reaction out of the machine when Steve heard a faint rustle outside his door. Pushing himself up in bed, Steve listened harder to try and identify the noise.

It sounded like...someone was walking up to his door.

He was ready then when a light knock filled the room. Judging by the short distance the person had walked, Steve had a pretty good idea of who it was.

Almost glad for the reason to get up, Steve slipped out of bed. He went to grab his pants but then decided against it. He wasn't *indecent* as he was and Bruce had already seen him in less.

Crossing the room from his bed to the door in five long strides, Steve quietly opened the door to find Bruce, as expected. But the beta was staring down at his feet, his face drawn up in a small frown as he stood in a plain white t-shirt and flannel pants. When he heard the door open, his eyes flickered up to Steve's for only a second before returning to look at the ground. "Hey Steve..."

"Bruce." Steve kept his voice hushed, both out of respect for the others down the hall and so that he didn't spook Bruce. He looked like he was torn between bolting back for his own room and holding his ground and if he actually needed something Steve wanted him to stick around long enough to ask for it. "What can I do for you?"

"Um, I know this is kind of awkward given our previous conversation about...packs," Steve raised a brow in question but then it came back to him. Bruce meant when he turned down Steve's offer to start a pack. "but I, uh...I was wondering if I could sleep with you tonight."

It wasn't as weird as it sounded.

There was nothing sexual about it. It was common among Wolves when a member of a pack or a pack as a whole was stressed or scared that they all just pile up together. Steve had often shared a bed with Bucky out on missions and it hadn't been out of the ordinary for all of the Howling Commandos to crawl in with them by the end of the night after particularly rough days.

Bruce nonetheless hurried to explain, running a hand through his already-mussed hair. "It's just...with everything that's been going on, with the fight, and all the changes, I've been having trouble keeping my Wolf down and with other people being so close—if I lost control it could be bad. I don't, don't trust myself alone tonight, and I figured maybe being around an alpha Wolf would help calm my nerves."

Steve's answer was immediate. "Sure, of course! Come in."

Bruce nodded in thanks and shuffled inside, letting Steve close the door again behind him. Since it was *his* bed Steve climbed in first, leaving enough room for Bruce to comfortably lie down next to
him. Luckily it was a pretty good sized mattress so they wouldn't have any trouble fitting, although Wolves were notorious for piling up on top of each other to sleep if need be.

Bruce hesitated for a moment before giving in and clamoring awkwardly in beside Steve and they both pulled the covers up to keep out the cool night air. Seeing that the other was getting settled in, Steve closed his eyes and he inhaled deeply. Although he was supposed to be comforting Bruce, or at least the animal inside of him, the scent of a beta had a similar effect on Steve. There was a wholeness there, the shadow of a sensation of the security of having your pack around you, that his alpha instincts were responding to just the same as Bruce's beta instincts were. Nuzzling into his pillow, he softly motioned Bruce closer and after another moment of hesitation the scientist scooted in so that his forehead was almost resting against Steve's chest.

There was a slight sense of power there for Steve as Bruce took a more submissive position that he couldn't help but enjoy as an alpha. It wasn't as blatant as waking-hour pack dynamics since they were both exposed as they slept but it was still there and Steve was sure that it did both him and Bruce good. This was what they both needed.

It even seemed to lull Steve a bit closer to sleep and he felt himself beginning to drift off. He still was awake enough to register it when Bruce let out a small hum. Grunting a questioning noise back, Steve cracked an eye open to keep himself awake a little bit longer. As Bruce whispered quietly into Steve's shirt, Steve couldn't help but compare them to two young pups—er, kids having a sleepover and whispering secrets to each other. "This whole place smells like Tony."

"Yeah." Steve couldn't deny it. Even the sheets he was sleeping in had the lingering scent of the Panther on them simply because they had been in his house for a while.

There was a pause before Bruce continued. "…Do you mind it?"

It was surprisingly a hard question to answer and after a moment of thought Steve was a bit startled him elf with his own answer. But it was the truth. "…No. You?"

"No…but I've known him longer; he's a friend. But I'm surprised you don't…"

"…It's growing on me."

Bruce let out a soft sound of amusement before nestling down into the covers. Not too long afterwards his breathing started to even out and Steve felt himself following suit and drifting back off to sleep.

O~O~O~O

Steve woke slowly to the duel sensations of being in a strange place and the heat of another person curled up next to him. It took his brain a moment to catch up but a small grin spread across his face as his eyes finally opened and he caught sight of Bruce, the other Wolf still fast asleep beside him. Somehow during the night they had both tossed and turned enough so that the blanket was all catawampus on the mattress, barely covering any of Bruce's torso and bunched up around Steve's ankles as one of his feet dangled over the edge of the bed. It figured both of them would be restless sleepers…

As Steve pushed himself up, the slight jostling in addition to the sunlight streaming through the windows Steve forgot to close began to rouse Bruce. Scrunching up his nose, the beta buried his face in his pillow with a low groan that only made Steve's grin grow. "Good morning."

Bruce let out a grunt before responding, his voice sleep-worn. "'Morning…"
"Not a morning person?"

He shook his head in a few stiff, aborted movements. "Never was."

Steve took a moment to observe the other Wolf. He seemed alright but, "How did you sleep?"

Perhaps realizing that Steve wasn't going to let him continue to sleep in peace, Brush sighed heavily and pushed himself up onto his elbows so that the pillow wasn't absorbing his words any more. "Honestly, better than I have in a while. I've been running on too much stress and caffeine lately though, with everything that's been going on."

"Well, you're welcome in here whenever you want."

"Thanks." He sounded like he really was grateful. "But at this point I'm usually more comfortable sleeping on my own. It's something I've gotten used to over the last few years. It was just, like I said last night, I couldn't trust myself to keep control over my Wolf, so…"

As Bruce trailed off, Steve offered him another small smile. "I'm glad I could help. And I suppose it's good to know that as wild as your Wolf is, I can still calm it down as an alpha."

"Yeah, though I wouldn't want to actively test that particular theory."

This was the first time they had actually spoken about Bruce's condition and Steve was happy that the beta was willing to open up with him, even a little bit. "Why, do you think I wouldn't be able to handle your Wolf side?"

Bruce snorted then turned and gave Steve a watery grin back. "I think my Wolf would kick your ass."

Steve barked out a laugh. Bruce was serious and Steve believed him. "Then it's probably best we make sure it stays under control."

"Exactly." Bruce looked like he was about to continue but was interrupted as Steve's stomach suddenly let out an embarrassingly loud grumble. Steve flushed red which made Bruce's smile grow a little stronger. "Hungry?"

Steve smiled back abashedly. "Starving, apparently. What do you say we go get some breakfast?"

"Sounds good."

They both slid out of bed and Steve threw his pants back on as Bruce made his way to the door. Steve followed closely after and was right on his heels when Bruce stepped out into the hall. He was so close in fact that he almost bowled Bruce over as the other Wolf suddenly stopped short. Frowning, Steve was about to ask what was wrong when he followed the scientists' eyes and found Tony staring back from the end of the hall, a look of surprise on his face.

Tony had similarly frozen as he noticed Steve and Bruce but before Steve could raise his hand to wave a quick greeting, the Cat turned on his heels and hurried back into his bedroom, slamming his door behind him. Steve's mood fell, wondering if he had done something in that quick instant to make Tony that angry. "What was that about?"

When Steve looked back down he saw that Bruce was frowning at Tony's door but the beta only shrugged when he noticed Steve's eyes on him. "I don't know…I'm sure he's fine though. Let's go grab something to eat."
Over the next few days, Steve quickly learned a couple of things about his new teammates. First off, he had to be careful about asserting his alpha position over the others because at best that usually didn't deliver the desired results. At worst, it caused problems. Only Bruce was a Wolf who really understood the proper behaviors and the rest of them just didn't respond well when Steve made any obvious moves towards dominating the group. Steve tried not to let it bother him and be satisfied that they at least listened to him while they were out in the field.

Second, even if Tony and Thor hardly interacted it didn't mean that they hated each other. To a Wolf, the way they ignored each other when not on missions would've meant big issues for pack dynamics but Bruce had explained to Steve that the mere fact that the two alpha Cats were able to be in the same building together and not try to chase the other out meant that they actually had huge respect for each other.

Not that he had even seen Tony in a while. The last glimpse Steve had had of the billionaire was that morning he had blatantly avoided Steve and Bruce when they were headed down for breakfast. A couple of hours after that incident Steve realized that Tony had gone down to his workshop. Steve hadn't liked it then but had tried to not let it get to him. He had explored the property more and even had Clint drive him out to a local store to buy some more clothes. But since then his worry had only grown when he failed to see, hear, or smell any signs that Tony had emerged from the basement. It didn't feel right, not knowing what Tony was doing or if the Cat was even okay or not. He could've passed out a day ago from lack of food and sleep and none of them would even know.

Finally Steve's concern grew too much to contain. Another full day had gone by and Steve hadn't seen hide nor hair of Tony again and he realized that if he wanted something to change he was going to have to take action. Apparently he couldn't wait for Tony to settle down from whatever had upset him and come out on his own because the Cat was too darn stubborn.

With daylight having long since faded, Steve excused himself from his conversation with Natasha and Clint in the media room and made a beeline for the staircase leading down to the workshop. Steve ignored the sensation that he was entering somewhere strictly off-limits and strode deliberately down the steps. At the bottom of the stairs there was only one door set in a wall of glass. Peering inside, Steve could make out some tools and what looked like a computer station but he couldn't see into the main area of the room or Tony.

When he pressed his hands up against the thick glass, Steve could feel the base of hard rock music reverberating through the material and it was a testament to the good construction of the rest of Tony's house that the noise didn't penetrate through the ceiling of the basement and fill the rest of the mansion. There was a key pad next to the door and after yanking on the door handle a few times it was clear that Steve wasn't going to get the door unlocked without the key code.

Letting out a grunt of frustration, Steve slammed his shoulder into the door to test its strength, but wasn't surprised when it didn't even budge. "Come on...There has to be a way in..."

"I'm sorry, Agent Rogers," Steve jumped as a voice said his name. He still wasn't used to Tony's electronic butler,"but I'm afraid you don't have access to the workshop."

"JARVIS! Can't you just let me in? I'm worried about him."

The machine genuinely sounded regretful. "I would need Master Stark's permission and he doesn't seem to be in the mood for conversation at the moment."
For a minute Steve had hoped that Jarvis would be his ticket inside but it looked like Tony hadn't
given the computer program *that* much free will. "When he is could you ask him to come upstairs?
At least to get something to eat?"

*I'll do my best, sir."

Feeling defeated, Steve peered one last time into the workshop before turning and trudging back up
the stairs. When he reached the top he saw Bruce coming out of Tony's study, the other Wolf
starting as he saw where Steve was coming from. "Did you go down to Tony's workshop?"

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, I tried to. I'm…concerned he's not taking care of himself.
He's definitely down there but the door's locked and I would yell at him but the music's up too
loud."

Sighing, Bruce shook his head. "Sometimes it's best to just leave Tony alone until he's sorted
things out for himself."

"I've given him three days." Steve growled. "That's long enough."

Bruce winced then gave a reluctant nod. "Alright, let me try…"

"The door's locked tight and I don't know a way inside without doing extensive damage to the
door."

"No, I mean, let me see if I can get it unlocked."

Steve perked up. "Do you know the key code?"

"I did, though it's been a while…" Bruce stuffed his hands into his pockets and followed Steve as
he hurried back down to the basement. "If this doesn't work I'll find Pepper's number and have her
get him out of there."

"Pepper?"

"Tony's personal assistant slash nanny."

Steve wanted to laugh but he knew for sure that Jarvis was on and if he was on… "Don't say that
too loud; who knows if Tony's listening in or not."

Bruce just smiled. "He'd agree with me. Sometimes Tony forgets to take care of himself, Pepper
keeps him in line."

"I'd like to meet her." It would take a formidable spirit to control Tony Stark. It would be like
trying to bottle a hurricane.

"I'm sure you'll get a chance to. But for now…let's see what's going on here." Reaching the door
that had stymied Steve just moments earlier, Bruce tried the handle but finding it unsurprisingly
locked pressed his face against the glass, cupping his eyes with his hands to try and see better.
Steve waited patiently beside him but it didn't take Bruce long to pull back. "I see why you were
concerned."

Bruce shared a look with Steve before reaching forward and knocking on the door. "Tony?"

There was no answer but neither of them had been expecting one.

"Tony, I'm giving you one warning. If you don't come to the door I'm coming to you."
The warning was more of a courtesy than anything and Bruce didn't bother to wait for more than three seconds before moving over to the key pad. The beta hesitated for just a moment before reaching forward and punching in a series of ten numbers.

Steve held his breath then his face lit up in a smile when a green light flickered on and he heard a dull click of the lock being undone. "Bruce, you're amazing."

Bruce grinned. "Not so much. I just have good memory recall when it comes to numbers."
Reaching out, he grabbed the door handle and released a victorious hum as it turned in his hand. "Let's go get Tony and drag him out of there."

As the researcher pushed the door open and stepped over the threshold, Steve held back, feeling strangely unsure of how to proceed. "Should I stay out here or-?"

Bruce appeared to actually think the question over before tilting his head and motioning Steve forward. "...No, no you can come in."

It seemed so...private. Even more than his bedroom, Tony's workshop just had an aura to it that it was a space not to be entered without explicit permission. Maybe it was because Tony's scent was the strongest here, the Cat's presence solidly marked in every section of wall and every floor tile. For Wolves, every space in a pack's den was a public area where everyone had permission to enter and use. Tony's workshop felt closed off, his private space, his lair. It was a sensation Steve wasn't familiar with. But Bruce was going in and he had given Steve permission to follow. Between Steve's concern and curiosity there was no way that he was going to turn Bruce's offer down.

Bruce strode inside while Steve took a moment to inspect this final room in the sprawling house. Tony's "workshop" was enormous, even bigger than Steve had expected from his impression through the glass. Judging by the size and direction, Steve was pretty sure it not only took up the basement space under half of the house but stretched under the detached garage too. It was filled with large screens, scrap metal, welding equipment, and—was that a robot?

Steve jerked his head around as the heavy metal suddenly turned down and Tony's voice drawled out from the far end of the shop. "Well look who came down to visit. I'm impressed you remembered the access code."

He heard Bruce answer back and began to make his way over to the pair. "It seemed like an important thing not to forget."

"So what made you come down here after me, Doc?"

"Steve insisted. He was starting to get worried." By now Steve was close enough that he could see Bruce standing over Tony who was laying halfway underneath an old classic car. Again the Cat was dressed in work clothes stained this time with grease and motor oil, his hair a mess and a smudge of dust cutting across his chin and onto his beard. Steve couldn't help but think he looked better like that, although the suit was a pretty sleek look.

Tony snorted in disbelief as he wiped his wrench off on his shirt. "He was, was he?"

Tony hadn't seemed to noticed him yet and Steve decided that it was time to make his presence known. "Yeah, I was."

Tony sat up so fast at the sound of Steve's voice that he smacked his head on the metal fender of his car. Rolling off of the board he had been lying on, the Cat swore as he gripped his forehead. "Fuck!"
"Oh, jeez, sorry Tony!" Rushing forward, Steve assisted as Bruce pulled Tony all the out from underneath the car, the beta obviously trying hard not to laugh. It was a little funny but all Steve felt was a crushing sense of guilt as Tony moved his hand and revealed a red spot on his forehead. "Are you okay? I didn't mean to surprise you that bad."

Tony hissed then winced as he sat up. "I'm fine, stop fondling me, Jesus." Steve jerked back at the sharp reprimand but calmed when the billionaire looked up at him, saw his expression, and smirked. "Relax, big dog. I'm really fine, just didn't expect a Wolf to know what stealth is. Help me up and I'll call it even."

Happily accepting his terms, Steve grabbed Tony's arm and easily hoisted him to his feet. Once he was up, Tony sniffed as he straightened out his shirt. Bruce just stood back and watched the exchange with a small smile. Tony turned back around to face them once he had regained a bit of his dignity. "Now that's settled, what do you trespassers want?"

Steve furrowed his brow, his guilt not quite fading. "Sorry Tony. I just, I have to ask. Did I do something wrong? Because you seem to be avoiding me, all of us really. If there's a problem, I want to sort it out. This is your house, after all. You shouldn't feel like you have to hide down here."

After watching him for a long moment, Tony let out an exasperated sigh. "Alright, get this straight. You didn't do anything. I don't think you could manage to be insulting if you tried. I pull this shit on a regular basis so don't worry about it." Tony's gaze fell away from Steve's during that last part but the alpha Wolf was pretty sure the first part of that was sincere. Tony had obviously been upset by something but a weight lifted off of Steve's shoulders at the thought that he wasn't necessarily the cause. "But I doubt you came down to apologize for nothing, so what else you got?"

Steve had a ready answer. "How about you come up and get something to eat, something to drink, and maybe some sleep?"

Tony looked confused for a minute before his lips quirked back up. "Those are some pretty extreme requests, Steve."

"I know. I'm a terrible person."

"The worst. But I have a feeling that the only way I'm getting the both of you back upstairs is if I leave with you, so let's get the hell out of here."

O~O~O~O

Steve slept a lot better that night and when he woke up the next morning he practically bounced over to Bruce's door and woke the other Wolf up. Ever since their first night Bruce had taken to sleeping on his own and Steve respected his choice and let him alone. Except for this morning.

Bruce answered with a sleepy glare that lacked a lot of the ire the beta tried to put into it. A few quick words and a bright smile were all it took for Steve to convince Bruce to come downstairs with him and half an hour later found them both in the kitchen cooking enough breakfast for a small army.

Bruce fried bacon with one hand while he kept a mug of coffee clutched in his other hand. He still seemed half asleep but he was doing a decent job and Steve tried not to be too distracted by the scent of cooking meat as he finished stirring up the pancake mix. Tony, who had shown up about ten minutes ago, was slouched over the table with his own cup of coffee and just watched them work.
Clint walked in just as Steve started pouring the batter onto the griddle and perched on a chair next to Tony. "Smells good. What brought this on?"

Steve gave a light shrug as he dug a spatula out of a drawer. "We haven't really eaten as a group yet. I figured it was about time we change that."

Rolling his eyes, Tony took another sip of his coffee. He was already looking better than he had last night which made Steve hopeful that the Cat had actually had a good night's sleep himself. "He's trying to make us 'bond as a group'."

Bruce let out a small hum as he flipped the bacon. "It's a good thing, Tony."

"Debatable."

Steve just grinned and shook his head. If Tony didn't want to be there he wouldn't be there. So despite his protests, Steve was pretty sure that the Cat didn't mind all that much. "All we need now is to make sure everyone gets down here while the food is still hot."

Clint reached across the counter and snuck a piece of bacon off of the plate Bruce had placed it on to let some of the oil run off. "Natasha will be down soon."

Tony snorted. "I don't even want to know why you have her schedule memorized."

Glaring back at the Cat, Clint stuffed the bacon strip into his mouth. "I passed by her room on the way down here."

"Sure."

Steve glanced back over his shoulder and Clint gave him a guilty smile as he finished off the remnants of the bacon. Deciding to let the theft go unpunished, Steve moved on to more important topics. "Does anyone know if Thor's awake?"

Tony was quick to answer. "Don't care."

Clint was a little more constructive. "I heard him moving around in his room. He should be here soon."

As if summoned, the large blond Shifter suddenly strode into the room, a large smile spreading across his face as he took in the scene. "Good morning! Steve, Bruce, you have outdone yourselves! But what shall the rest of you be eating?"

Making a big show of clearing out his ear, Tony shook his head. "First off, you need to learn the meaning of 'inside voice'. And second, if you eat all of that, I'm sending you out for donuts."

"I jest. And Tony, it is good to see you out and about again. Panthers can be such solitary creatures but I am happy to see you here for this."

Steve nodded in agreement. "This will be good for all of us. I think we need to start doing more as a group. The better we learn to work together, the more successful we'll be out on missions."

"And food sharing is an important part of creating cohesion. This idea was an excellent one."

Tony slouched over his coffee cup in defeat. "And I can't even count on the Cat. God, I'm surrounded by communists."

Before Steve could respond, Natasha finally slunk in, looking about as awake as Bruce. Clint
opened his mouth to greet her but before he could speak a word, Natasha held up a hand to silence him. "I'm not even going to talk to you until I get coffee."

"O-kay."

Since they wouldn't all fit at the counter, Steve shooed everyone out to the dining table after Natasha had filled a large mug up with freshly brewed coffee. Clint offered to help out by taking plates out to the others, though Steve was suspicious that it just allowed the Hawk the chance to swipe another piece of bacon and soon the middle of the table was covered with food. And it was a good thing that Steve and Bruce had made so much because it went fast as everyone made a grab for it.

Sitting in between Steve and Clint, Tony was no different than the rest of them and quickly made his claim on a large pile of flapjacks and four strips of bacon, possessively pulling his plate close to his chair. Though maybe it wasn't such a bad idea with Clint eyeing it with a playful grin.

Tony seemed aware of the look though as he stabbed his fork into the pancake stack as if to keep others from trying to go after it "This is mine."

Chuckling, Steve dug into his own food. Before he could take more than a few bites though, they were interrupted by a soft chime.

"Master Stark, Agent Coulson is on the line. Should I put him through?"

Tony looked up with a mouth full of pancakes. Swallowing the bite, the Cat lazily flicked a hand in permission. "Sure, go ahead, though the man has the worst timing ever…Video call?"

"Yes, sir."

"Put it on the TV."

Swallowing his own bite, Steve craned his neck around to peer at the TV screen in the next room over. Luckily it was huge so there was no problem in making Phil's face out as it flickered onto the screen.

The SHIELD agent looked confused for a minute until he realized where his team was sitting. "Sorry, it looks like I'm interrupting."

Steve shook his head. "It's alright, sir. This takes priority."

"We've received a rumor of Loki's whereabouts."

Tony scoffed as he bit angrily into a piece of bacon. "Why are we so focused on this guy now? We sort of have a bigger problem on our hands, like, oh I don't know, Hydra and their new genetic mutagen?"

Phil frowned. "You're right. But Loki is associated with Hydra and we need to have him secured before Hydra can use him to their own ends. He's a dangerous variable. Thor," across the table from Steve, the Lion straightened up, "if we get you to Loki do you think you would be able to convince him to go home, or at least to break his ties with Hydra?"

Thor nodded. "I will do my best but my brother can be…fickle. If he doesn't come willingly I will remove him forcibly."

"Do you think you could?"
All of their eyes fell on the Lion who gave a firm nod. "I have done so before and I know his tricks."

"Good. Judging by what you reported back about your previous encounter with Loki, it seems as if he already has a decent position in the Hydra organization. If we can remove him from the equation that would be good but it would be ideal if we could get some information out of him."

A growl rolled out of Thor's throat at this and Steve smelled a burst of anger spill off of him. "I will not allow you to interrogate him like some common criminal."

"If we bring him into custody you have my word that he will be treated with the utmost respect, within reason. He is criminal, after all."

Deciding to move away from that topic before Thor got any more riled up, Steve cleared his throat. "Where does the mission begin, sir?"

Phil looked grateful for the distraction as well. "The data you recovered points to Hydra having an administrative building near Arlington, Virginia and it matches what we've learned about Loki's presence. As you can imagine we are concerned for multiple reasons, one of which certainly being its proximity to Washington D.C."

Steve furrowed his brow. "You don't think Hydra will attempt an attack on the Capitol, do you?"

"Not directly, no. There are no signs that they are that powerful yet. But if they let Loki or their mutagen loose in the area there is a chance that a significant amount of chaos could hit the city. With as much press as your tussle has caused in this city, a similar event in D.C. would instantly become nation-wide news and could spark a panic about Shifters everywhere."

The agent's words struck home. All of a sudden the food stopped smelling so good as his stomach began to knot up again. "Understood."

"Good. Stark, could you provide a car to the airport for the team? It would be much faster."

Tony smirked and leaned back in his seat. "I can provide a ride to Washington, and it will definitely be much faster. Just have things ready for us when we get there."

"Thank you. Get here as soon as possible. I'll debrief you further on site."

With that the screen cut to black, leaving the house with a dark cloud hanging in the air. The break had been nice but now it was back to business.

Looking down at his plate, Steve sighed. He finally got the group together and now they had to rush out the door. Oh well. There would always be next time. Steve straightened his shoulders as he picked up his fork and took a breath. "Alright everybody, finish your food, then pack your things and suit up! We're leaving immediately."

Ignoring Tony's angry protest Steve began to shovel pancakes into his mouth, barely tasting the food before swallowing it. The others began to follow suit, realizing that if they didn't eat fast they wouldn't get to eat at all, then one by one dashed off from the table to their respective rooms.

As he finished up himself, Steve left Natasha and Clint at the table and sprinted up to his bedroom, taking the stairs two at a time. Luckily he didn't have that much to gather up but he still made sure he had the proper supplies stuffed into a duffle bag. A small first-aid kit, some safety gear, a knife, all supplies he had bought at the store when he had gone off to get his new clothes. He didn't quite know what he was going up against yet but he wanted to be prepared for whatever might come his
Changing into mission-appropriate clothing in record time, Steve jogged from his room back down to the main living area only to find that Tony and Thor were already waiting. And they weren't waiting patiently.

In fact it seemed that Steve had arrived just in time.

A low, angry, inhuman rumble rose from Tony's chest and he closed in on Thor, the two Cats circling each other in the foyer of the mansion in mid-argument. "I don't remember you being put in charge of this team."

Thor growled back, his voice lower and louder than Tony's but no more intimidating. "No one had to. I am obviously the best choice. No one knows my brother as I do."

"Having a brother-complex doesn't mean you're leader material."

"I have no 'complex,' and I have led many men into battle."

Tony's eyes narrowed and he let out a hiss. "Listen, Simba, you can't just waltz in here and take over. I'm not following you anywhere."

Steve snarled and strode forward, pushing roughly past Tony to put himself right in the middle of the fight. There was only so much he could let slide and he wasn't about to let Tony fight his battles for him. He respected Thor but Shifters ran on hierarchies and Steve needed to establish his place at the top.

Getting right up in Thor's face, so close that their noses were almost bumping, Steve pushed a deep growl into his words. "I have been named leader of this team. You can either work with us or we can work without you, but neither of those options involve anyone but me giving orders. Am I understood?"

At this point Bruce, Natasha, and Clint had slunk back down stairs as well, giving the three alphas a wide berth. Steve didn't blame them. This could get very bad very quickly. And things had been going so well.

Steve heard Thor snarl but held his ground. To be honest, the large Cat did intimidate Steve a little but he would fight to keep his position if he had to.

But Thor remained quiet and Steve took it as a sign of submission. Taking a step back to relax the situation, Steve jerked his chin down in a quick nod. "Good. If you have a problem we can talk it over, or you can take it up with SHIELD, but I won't have any more fighting over this. Is that clear to everyone?"

At that, Steve pulled a little further back again from Thor so he could look everyone in the eye in turn, paying special attention to his alphas. He couldn't risk another confrontation like this. "I said, is that clear?"

Tony just rolled his eyes, Bruce gave a firm nod, while Natasha gave an exasperated 'yes'. Beside her, Clint gave him a mock salute and after a dangerously long pause Thor growled once more before nodding. "Very well. But if I do not feel that you are doing a sufficient job, I will step in again."

"Duly noted, but I don't plan on giving you that opportunity."
Watching the exchange carefully, Bruce waited until he was sure Steve had finished speaking before risking talking himself. "Now that's settled, um, Tony? You said you could get us to Washington?"

With one more glare at Thor, Tony snorted then raised his chin in a slight show of defiance. After the opposition Steve had just faced the action made his hackles rise but forced himself to release the anger that started to boil back up. Tony had just been defending him—or just defying Thor's dominance. But either way he didn't let himself feel threatened by the Panther.

"I have a plane."

That stopped Steve's thoughts short. "Wha—You have a what?"

Bruce looked equally incredulous. "Where are you keeping it?"

"In a private hanger four miles away. I can call on the way over to have it prepped for flight. Now come on, I thought we were in a rush or something. Let's get in the damned car."
The ride out to the airport was tense, but by the time they had boarded Tony's private jet their social interactions had begun to settle back down into the status quo. Thor hadn't made any more attempts to usurp Steve's control and was being thoroughly ignored by Tony. The other Cat had instead found a bottle of scotch from a liquor cabinet he kept on board. The only reason he hadn't drank the whole thing was because Bruce had snatched it up before he could drain it and, allowing the Panther only one shot glass full, capped it and physically sat on the bottle to keep him from getting at it.

When the jet touched down at the Washington National Airport, Steve was relieved to see Agent Coulson himself waiting for them on the tarmac. The SHIELD agent gave Steve a private little smile as the alpha Wolf made his way down the staircase leading down from the jet door. "Agent Rogers, I trust your flight went well?"

Steve glanced back at the jet, the side boldly emblazoned with the Stark Industries logo. The tension between them hadn't been great but the accommodations had been first class. "It wasn't bad."

Phil tilted his head in understanding. "I suppose adding a billionaire to the team has its benefits after all."

Tony was hot on Steve's heels coming down the steps and gave a little snort when he heard the agent's words. "So happy me and my money are useful."

Worried that they had offended the Panther, Steve turned to soothe him but found that there was a small grin on Tony's face. It seemed he hadn't taken it personally, for which Steve was grateful. They already had their fill of emotional drama for the day and they hadn't even started the mission yet.

Phil only smiled again and waited for the rest of the team to clamor out of the plane before slipping on a pair of sunglasses. "I hope you all had a restful few days because we're heading directly to the mission location. I'll tell you more about the case on our way there and you'll have time to work out a more detailed plan on site. We've prepared a temporary command center where Stark and Dr. Banner can manage communication and surveillance. It's a bit smaller than the one you had in the woods, but you should all fit."

Clint raised a brow as he reached them, the Hawk adjusting the quiver of arrows he had slung across his back, his collapsed compound bow held tight in his other hand. "With the way you're talking, it sounds like you're not going to be staying with us."

Nodding, the agent motioned for them all to follow him towards a small parking lot for official vehicles on the edge of the airstrip. "Unfortunately, you're right. I'm not exactly a field agent.
anymore, and as such it is not my job to be present during your operations, but I figured I could at least meet you here in person. Besides that, in the likelihood that we are able to retrieve Loki from Hydra’s possession I need to remain close by to mind the administrative aspects of bringing him into custody. My supervisor has placed me in charge of the taskforce to negate any potential damage related to the Hydra corporation and I want to be on the frontlines to make sure things are done correctly."

Steve felt a bit of that familiar pressure to succeed return two-fold. "We'll do everything we can."

"I know you will. It's not you all that worry me anymore, it's the unknown variables."

Natasha nodded, "Which explains why you're so concerned about Loki."

"Exactly."

Frowning, Thor held his head a bit higher. "I will see to it that my brother is subdued. If he is here as you say, we shall retrieve him no matter his protests."

Phil looked happy to hear it, though the smile in his eyes didn't quite reach his lips this time. "We're counting on it."

With that said, he led them into their transport, an inconspicuous dark SUV. Remembering the scuffle for dominance that morning, Steve was quick to claim the front passenger’s seat, leaving the others to sort out the rest. Inside they found a series of duffle bags which Phil instructed them to use to hide their weaponry while walking around the city. Clint didn't look thrilled about it but pulled off his quiver, nearly jabbing Natasha in the eye in the process, and stowed his arrows and his bow in the bag. Bruce used another to hide his laptop and other technical equipment from prying eyes. The rest of them had their gear relatively concealed so they went without.

Coulson drove them from the airport straight toward the city center. The entire way Steve fought hard not to look like a complete country bumpkin but he couldn't help feel a little awe-inspired. This was his first trip to the nation's Capital, or, close to the nation's Capital since they weren't actually in Washington D.C. proper. Everything looked so official and established, deep with a history and authority Steve had always admired.

It took them less than twenty minutes to make it to their mission location, an older neighborhood set up with multi-story buildings made of brick and concrete. They didn't drive directly to the building Hydra had set up operation in, instead veering off course a few minutes shy of their final destination and onto one of the many backstreets that slithered along perpendicular to the main road. Pulling to a stop, Agent Coulson cut the engine and soon they were all being herded out of the car.

Steve eyed the buildings around them as he stepped out. Any one of them could've been adopted by SHIELD for their current mission, but none of them stood out as a possible center of operations. Looking back over his shoulder, Steve caught Phil's eyes and nodded towards the structures. "Which one is ours?"

"None, actually."

Tony scoffed as he freed himself from the middle row of seats. "So did you just bring us down this side street to show us the sights or to mug us?"

For just half a second there was a grin on the SHIELD Agent's face before it flickered back into its neutral position. "Neither. We're going the rest of the way on foot so as to attract less attention."
"Oh, yeah, because we're so subtle as is."

Tony gestured abruptly back at Thor as the Lion climbed out followed shortly by a slightly ruffled looking Clint and Natasha. As Bruce joined them, Steve had to admit that they weren't the least conspicuous group out there. Thor physically stood out pretty drastically from the average crowd and even though Natasha and Clint had their weapons hidden they definitely still gave off a dangerous vibe. And then there was Tony who was in the news so often Steve realized that it'd be a miracle if they weren't stopped for a photograph unless Tony kept a low profile. Which the Cat was currently failing at as he stood back in his designer suit. Really, out of all of them, Bruce was the only one who could really walk around and not be stared at in any sort of normal society. Unless that society included Shifters, because then Bruce's scent, twisted as it was from his genetic mutations, might cause a scene.

Basically, there was just no way they weren't going to stand out.

During the short time Steve was processing this Agent Coulson seemed to come to the same conclusion. "Good point. Let's go around the back." With a swift nod, his waved at them to follow him not back towards the main road but down a connecting alleyway.

It smelled foul, the chilled air doing little to subdue the smell of trash and urine although it wasn't the worst Steve had ever experienced in a city. It just didn't help that his over-developed sense of smell picked up on every lingering molecule of refuse. He was pretty sure that Bruce, Tony, and Thor at least could smell it too as Bruce let out a small choking noise he tried to disguise as a cough and Tony flat out swore and covered his nose with his sleeve. Like Steve, Thor was clearly doing his best to ignore it, both of them unwilling to break rank in front of the others.

After winding them through three right turns and two lefts, Coulson gestured around one more corner. Steve stepped around first, although when he did he wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to be looking at. The only real thing of note was a vehicle parked in a larger alley that led back out to the main road. It was the size of a small moving van and from the outside looked pretty decrepit. There was rust on the metal bumper and the sides were covered in graffiti. There was even trash on the front dashboard of the cab, a few fast food wrappers balled up while an air freshener dangled from the rearview mirror. Steve's nose wrinkled up in disgust at the smell—it was worse here by far—and was about to question whether or not Phil was leading them to the right location before remembering SHIELD's penchant for camouflage.

The alley it was parked in was abandoned save for a dumpster belonging to what had to be a Chinese restaurant judging by the pungent scent wafting from it. It was a weekday, mid-afternoon in the business district and so people were constantly passing by on the main sidewalk. Most of them were looking sharp in suits and corporate casual, the majority looking like politicians or young entrepreneurs and interns. Since they were right next to Washington D.C., it was likely. Just like in any big city though, none of them seemed phased by the seven of them as they ducked down into the alleyway, all too jaded and consumed with their lives to bother with strangers in their periphery.

Just as Steve suspected, Coulson stopped them in front of the van and waved towards it. "Here we are."

Bruce pursed his lips, his eyes flashing up to Steve's as if to gauge his reaction. Masking his own uncertainty, the alpha Wolf offered Phil a smile and a nod. Even if he wasn't quite sure about the van yet, he had faith that the agent wouldn't leave them with less than appropriate resources. "Thank you."

"It was the least I can do. Now, the Hydra building is just down the block," Phil pointed west,
"separated from this alley by about five other buildings. If you want to drive the van closer, the main engine is activated by having the key in the ignition and simultaneously typing in an access code in the back. A little complicated, but it's meant to prevent any clandestine hijacker from getting away with our control center. The keys are tucked into the front cup-holder should you need them. I'd recommend, however, that you stay out of sight and not get any closer. Hydra's security is likely to pick up on you. If you have any questions or anything goes wrong, those of you with cell phones have my number and I'll be observing from near-by in case of emergency."

"Hopefully we won't need to take you up on that."

After a brisk goodbye and final check, Agent Coulson slipped away, leaving the team to its own devices. Everyone ended up looking to Steve for direction so, at a loss of what to do without a more detailed strategy, ushered them into the back of the van.

As the others began to squeeze into their makeshift headquarters, Steve held Tony back with a hand on the Cat's suit jacket. Tony looked surprised but obliged him and waited until everyone else had disappeared into the truck. Quickly pulling his hand back, Steve stuck it into his pocket though his gaze kept the Panther pinned where he was. "Listen, Tony. Now that I know you're a Shifter, I wanted to give you the opportunity to go into the field with the rest of us. I can't promise it will be any safer than our last mission but since you're not just a human you should be able to withstand whatever happens when we're out there."

Steve had never seen a Cat in action first hand but he had to imagine they'd make formidable field agents. Tony had proved his agility in their fight with Loki, and he definitely had the brains and ingenuity for it. But Tony just shook his head with a dry grin. "That's nice and all but I'd really rather just stick back here with Bruce."

"Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent, actually."

"Alright." Steve couldn't help but be disappointed with Tony's choice, but he would respect it. Honestly though, he had been hoping to have the Cat at his side today to find out what he could do.

When Steve climbed inside after Tony and closed the door behind them, he wished he could say that it was bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside but it really wasn't. At least it was a little more high tech though. One of the inside walls was taken up by a bank of computer monitors and a long desk, almost identical to the set-up they had in the SHIELD cabin. Bruce had taken up his station at a chair at the desk and Clint had temporary claimed the second seat that Tony would undoubtedly be inhabiting come mission time. Natasha was sitting on the desk next to Clint and Thor was crammed awkwardly back in the far corner, the Lion Shifter's large frame making the space look even smaller. Once Steve and Tony climbed in, there wasn't much room left to move around.

Ignoring the close quarters, Steve pushed his way to the middle of the room. "Okay, you all know as much as I do about this situation. Now we need a plan." If they all put their heads together, they were sure to come up with a decent one. Or at least a functional one. And although Steve was more cautious than ever about keeping his dominant role, they were a team first and foremost and would only work properly if they worked together.

Bruce uncertainly shook his head as he pulled his laptop out of his duffle bag and set it on the desk. "There are too many civilians walking around right now."

Natasha scoffed as she scooted over a few inches to give Bruce more room to maneuver his
equipment. "This is a city, there are always going to be people."

Steve was somewhat surprised when Tony was quick to offer a solution. "But there's hardly anything around here but office buildings and the occasional restaurant. I'm willing to bet that after five o'clock when all these companies send their employees home for the day, the streets will empty out."

Steve frowned thoughtfully at Tony's words. He sounded certain but…Turning to the rest of the team, he made sure they were in agreement. "Natasha is right, but if what Tony says is true then there might be a way to at least mitigate our risk. Either way there will always be the chance that we'll be in danger of involving the public but if we wait until after business hours are over it makes sense that there will be fewer humans around."

Bruce didn't look as if he liked the idea but he just gave a small shrug as Clint frowned next to him. "I don't see a better way to avoid it…But let's wait until six, just to make sure."

"That's fine. Six may be the perfect time, actually. Late enough that all the commuters will have left the buildings but before dark."

Clint cocked his head, "Wouldn't we want the cover of darkness?"

Steve smiled as an idea began to build in his mind. "That's what they'd be expecting since we did it last time and on the surface it would make the most sense. We should make our move at six, when the sun is just beginning to set. We might catch Hydra off guard and the glare from the sun setting might help us more than it hurts us. It'll provide decent cover from any look-outs and the changing shadows might hide our movements." There would be constant, subtle movement with all the shifting sunlight and neon signs and streetlights flickering on. It might work.

"Okay, if you all like the sound of it, here's an idea of what we can do. Tony and Bruce will stay here and manage communication, security, and surveillance. Natasha, you and Clint will act as one team and scout out the location, eliminating any threats along the way. Thor and I will act as a second team and come in from behind. From what SHIELD found out, Loki is staying in this building working as a partner of Hydra's project."

"Yeah, we all got that part."

Steve motioned for Tony to be quiet and continued on. "What we don't know exactly is where Loki will be inside."

"Yet, anyway." Steve straightened up as Bruce gently cut in, the beta waiting for Steve's nod of approval before continuing. "Tony, why don't you tell them what you've been working on?"

Tony rolled his eyes but leaned forward off of the wall of the van. "Way to ruin the surprise…"

"It wasn't going to be a surprise."

"You don't know that."

"Tony." Steve shook his head, unable to decide if he was annoyed or amused. "Can you just get to the point please?"

"Spoilsport. But fine." Squeezing past Steve, Tony reached into the bag Bruce had carried in and pulled out something roughly the size of a handhled camcorder. "When I was held up in my workshop this past week I was working on multiple things, but one of the more successful experiments was a new kind of live visual imagery. I won't get into the technical details because
only one person in this room would even begin to understand it, but basically this camera uses a combination of thermal imaging, infrared light, and electronic frequencies to display an image that not only shows individual life forms via their heat signatures but their surrounding in HD detail. The best part is it can actually see through anything from grass to concrete. Think of it like Forward Looking Infrared—FLIR—imaging, except better. It does seem to have some issues getting through thick metal plating but within a couple of months I should have that worked out too."

"So," Steve's forehead furrowed as he tried to pick out any words that made sense to him. "You made a camera that can see through walls."

Steve was expecting a haughty smirk; the almost fond grin that slipped onto Tony's face caught him off guard. "Sure, let's go with that."

Steve couldn't stop himself from grinning back. "Okay then. That will help. Will you and Bruce be able to use it from a stationary location?"

"That shouldn't be a problem."

"Then you two will guide Clint and Natasha straight in to help clear the area around Loki before Thor and I enter. As soon as we have him, you two exit the building and take up positions nearby in case we need assistance getting out. I can't be certain how much resistance Loki will put up or how many armed guards there will be at this location, but it never hurts to be too careful."

Clint bit his lip then frowned with a quick shake of his head. "No matter where Loki is being held, we should enter in from the top of the building."

Rolling his eyes again, Tony relaxed back against the wall. "I'm so shocked that the Bird wants to approach from above."

"Like Steve said we don't know how many guards they have waiting for us in there but I'm already certain that they have someone at the front entrance. They wouldn't leave their main door open for attack. There's no point in making things harder on ourselves from the start, so gaining access from the roof would already be simpler than trying to gain access via a street-level entrance."

Steve had to admit, the Hawk made a good point. "It makes sense."

"Then we shall do as the Bird suggests." Steve jumped at Thor's voice boomed through the confined space. The Lion gave him a confused look before continuing. "Doing so may increase the likelihood of drawing human attention as well."

No one seemed to have any further protests so Steve moved the conversation on. "Will we be able to take control over Hydra's security system like we were out in the woods?"

Bruce looked to Tony who gave a thoughtful frown. "Assuming that their system isn't much more advanced than the other, it shouldn't be a problem. To play it safe, you'll have to plug in another flash drive into a network computer for me though so I can have a more secure link into their systems." Reaching into his pocket, Tony pulled out a slim thumb drive and tossed it to Natasha.

She eyed the drive before looking back up at Tony. "I know our primary goal here is to retrieve Loki, but if we're going to all this trouble, you might as well see if you can gain access to Hydra's files again."

Steve hesitated. "Would it be worth the risk?"
Natasha glanced at him. "If we're hacking into their system anyway, the added risk of having Stark look into their files would be negligible."

Turning his head, Steve double-checked that with his current authority on the matter. "Is she right, Tony?"

"I would say so. It's pretty much the same the same process, breaking into the cameras and accesses their files so Natasha has a point. If I'm doing one I might as well be doing the other. Though I probably would've anyway."

From there, the conversation rolled on into the details; how they would get to the roof, how would they time themselves, plans for communication, back up plans in case things went wrong. Most importantly what to do with Loki if they succeeded in locating and taking him into custody. The best they could come up with there was let Thor handle him. The Lion was the only one among them who really knew what they were dealing with when it came to Loki, and Thor was insistent that the powerful Shifter had tricks up his sleeve that SHIELD wasn't even aware of. Steve was inclined to believe him.

Looking back on it, Steve wasn't quite sure how they all managed to stay cooped up together in that van for as long as they did without another fight breaking out. It probably helped that Steve was standing in between Thor and Tony so that they weren't even able to see each other without craning their necks around the alpha Wolf. It probably also helped that Tony was noticeably better behaved than on their last mission. He was still snarky but he didn't actively try to press their buttons and was no longer starting arguments for the sheer sake of the debate.

Throughout the course of the afternoon, they all took a shift patrolling outside to get a better lay of the land, each returning to the van with a new piece of information to add to their plan. It didn't surprise anyone that Clint, the first to go out, made his way up to the rooftops and came back with a route mapped out for them to get to the Hydra building. Natasha made a loop around the entire city block, Thor spent his time searching for signs of his brother, Steve wasn't sure what Tony actually did, and Steve himself spent his shift just causally sitting at a bus stop across the street from the Hydra's buildings entrance, just to observe the flow of traffic and to get a feel for the place. If nothing else, he was able to show that Clint was right. There was a guard, two in fact, watching the entrance of the building, one outside the front door and one posted just inside the lobby. They were dressed up as doormen but by the way they carried themselves and greeted people Steve could tell that wasn't the job they were trained for.

When the sun started to duck low towards the western horizon and the eastern skies began to grow dark Steve decided that it was finally time to act. Leaving Bruce and Tony inside Steve led the rest of them up the fire-escape of the building next to where the van was parked. As Tony had predicted, the streets were a lot emptier and though there were a few people left they didn't even glance up at the four Shifters as Steve, Thor, Natasha, and Clint padded up the metal stairs.

As they reached the roof, their earpieces crackled to life. Phil had provided another so that Thor was wearing one as well and they all heard it as Tony sneered into the line. "I want it noted officially on the record that Clint's sunglasses are ridiculous." It seemed like Tony was behaving but only so much.

Clint adjusted his shades with a scowl, the low-laying beams of sunlight glinting off of the reflective glass. "Shut up. At least I don't wear them at night like some douchebag."

"Don't be ashamed. Not everyone can pull it off."

Natasha cut that conversation off before it could go any further. "Let's reserve communication for
actual business, boys."

Steve thanked her with a nod and got back down to business. They only had a slim window of opportunity and he wasn't going to let them miss it. With a gesture he sent Clint and Natasha out on ahead while he and Thor held back for a few moments. Having stepped forward to the edge of the rooftop to make sure they were alright, Steve heard Thor fidget behind him before he spoke, his voice strong but subdued. "Steve, I will not apologize for my actions this morning. I only wanted what was best for us all."

He had waited until he had Steve alone to say so, but Steve was willing to let it go since Thor had at least acknowledged it. "As long as it's not a common occurrence, it's not a problem."

After that, Thor didn't bring it up again and neither did Steve. A sort of understanding had passed between them that it was something to be put in the past and Steve was happy to do that.

Blocking the setting sun from his eyes with his hand, Steve narrowed his eyes and watched as Natasha and Clint disappeared over the rooftops. They were both incredibly agile and made the jumps between the buildings look about as easy as kids playing hopscotch. Steve knew he wasn't quite that nimble himself but what he lacked in agility he was pretty sure he could compensate for with speed and strength. With this thought in mind, he turned to look at the Lion standing behind him. Thor had one foot propped up on an air-conditioning unit and, with the sun on his face as he stared out over the neighborhood, looked for all the world like a man surveying his kingdom. When he felt Steve's eyes on him he met his gaze with a small smile. "Your team, it is very good! They move swiftly and with purpose."

'Your team'. Thor said he wouldn't apologize, but the subtle word choice followed by the compliment spoke volumes. From what he had already learned from Thor and Tony about a Cat's sense of pride, it was like the Wolf equivalent to Thor baring his throat. A sign of deference. Steve nodded and Thor joined him at the edge of the roof. "Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"In my youth my friends and I would race up mountains. This is not so very different. Have you?"

Steve took a deep breath to steady himself. It was just about time for them to go. Just don't look down at that six story fall between the buildings. Steeling himself, Steve smiled back at Thor. "No. But there's got to be a first time for everything."

Without giving himself another minute to think about this, and all the reasons he shouldn't be doing it, Steve stepped up onto the wall and jumped with everything he had. Just like he had coached himself, Steve didn't look down, found solace in the way the wind rushed past his ears, and before he knew it he had landed on the other roof about ten feet from the edge he had feared he would never reach.

Huh. That wasn't so bad.

Steve looked over his shoulder as he heard Thor let out a booming laugh before the Cat leapt across to meet him. Where Steve had been stiff and efficient with his movements Thor had all the grace and poise of his namesake animal as he landed. "You have spirit, Steve! I like it!"

Steve grinned back. "Thanks. Now come on, we have some catching up to do."

A few more rooftops later and Steve caught sight of Natasha and Clint again. They had crept up to the building adjacent to the building Hydra had adopted and were preparing themselves to make that last jump. Steve held his breath, watching from the next roof over as Natasha's voice crackled
on over the headsets. They had seen what Steve had just noticed. "It looks like they have a guard up here too, but there is no chance of getting close enough to subdue him without giving him time to put out an alert."

She was right. Even from where Steve was standing he could tell that there would be no way to sneak up on the armed man with the way the surrounding buildings were laid out. "Is there any way we can take him out from a distance?"

He saw Natasha shake her head and her voice answered back a moment later. "I have my gun but it's likely the shot would attract too much attention."

He heard Clint answer back as across the way the Hawk pulled his bow from his duffle bag. "This is where I come in. Give me a little room, Natasha."

Next to Steve, Thor furrowed his brow as together they watched Clint expand his compound bow with a sharp flick of his wrist and notch an arrow he pulled from his quiver. "That would be a difficult target at that distance even for one wielding a gun."

Steve nodded, but he had faith in Clint's abilities, and the faith Agent Coulson had had in him when he was first introduced to the team. And the Hawk didn't disappoint.

Pulling the bow string taut, the Hawk released it and the arrow flew silent and deadly, directly into the center of the guard's back, right between his shoulder blades. The man crumpled instantly and if Steve was a betting man, he'd say Clint had managed to sever the human's spinal column.

"Whoa! Nice shootin', Legolas!"

Steve released a breath as Tony's voice echoed over the line. It was a good shot, the best Steve had yet seen. Without even looking he knew that Thor was impressed too. Together they watched as Natasha leapt over to Hydra's roof and hurried over to check the man's pulse but there was no doubt in Steve's mind that the man had died immediately when the arrow hit. And when Natasha looked up from her inspection, he knew he was right. Clint jumped over to her and gently extracted his arrow from the man before they grabbed the keys off his belt and disappeared into the door leading into the building.

That left him and Thor sitting on the rooftops, waiting for a signal that they could proceed. Steve was having a hard time just staying there and listening to the silence on the line. Natasha and Clint worked well together and that was great for the mission but terrible for his nerves. Because they were so in sync they rarely spoke a word to each other but because of that Steve had no idea what was happening or if everything was going well on their end. The only hints he got came from Bruce and Tony who occasionally chimed in. Tony was using his fancy camera to guide them through the building, apparently having ascertained with a decent level of confidence where Loki was.

Finally, finally, the words Steve wanted to hear came. It felt like it had taken years but in reality less than five minutes had passed. Natasha and Clint didn't mess around. "Alright, the pathways are clear."

Pressing a hand to his earpiece, Steve nodded. "Copy that. Thor, let's move."

They leapt over the last few rooftops and burst through the door that their teammates had left unlocked for them. The plan was for Natasha and Clint to take out any armed men and drag them out of sight of any potential camera views without allowing them to raise an alarm. They had done their job well.
Natasha's voice whispered through the earpiece as Steve and Thor tried to run through the building as quietly as possible. It was austere and sterile inside and the footsteps echoed like gunfire as they jogged through. "Steve, we hear you coming in towards us. We're stepping out into the hall."

"Understood." That had been part of the plan as well; constant communication. That way they didn't accidentally injure each other along the way.

A second later Clint popped his head out from a doorway down the corridor and in the next moment he and Natasha were hurrying up to meet Steve and Thor before pulling them into another side-room that looked a lot like an executive office. Wiping away a drop of blood from her cheek as causal as anything, Natasha looked up at Steve when they got inside. "According to Stark we've gotten everyone on this floor, except for one. Loki should be holed up at the end of this corridor."

"Alright. Thor and I will go. Clint, you make sure the roof stays clear. Natasha, you have to find a computer. We need the security system on our side." They only had a few moments before the other Hydra employees on the lower floors noticed the silence from above and came to investigate. A quick inspection of the room they were in showed that whoever worked there had taken their computer—likely a laptop—with them.

The two assassins nodded and they were all off again. Thor and Steve moved swiftly down the hall to where Natasha had indicated as they refocused on their part of the mission. Tony and Bruce were obviously monitoring their progress when he heard Bruce speak. "Steve, Thor, you're getting close to Loki's location. It's at the end, on the left."

Steve swallowed, his instinct on high alert. "And you're sure it's him?"

This time it was Tony who answered. "Definitely. It's a very distinct heat signature."

As they ran closer, Thor took a deep whiff of the air. "It is him! I can smell him now."

"I can't smell—oh!" Steve cut himself off as the errant Raven's scent finally reached his nose. It was subtle, maybe a few hours old already, but unique enough that it was unmistakable as any other. But how had Thor picked up on it before he had?

Before Steve had time to puzzle it out, he was distracted as Thor suddenly rushed forward with a burst of speed towards the door at the end of the hall, sitting just as Bruce had described. Steve called as softly as he could manage for Thor to stop and to his surprise, the Lion did. Slow down at least. Enough for Steve to catch up and slip in front of the other. He wanted to try to maintain their element of surprise for as long as possible and Thor didn't seem like the most subtle person out there.

Steve placed his hand on the doorknob and could practically feel a pulse of power reverberating through the metal from within the door. Loki was definitely in there. His smell was stronger than ever and Tony's camera confirmed it. Besides, now that he knew it, there was no way of mistaking the thrum of energy that the Raven possessed. Everything else was replicable, but that was a unique quality Loki himself possessed.

"Steve, wait." Thor's words stopped Steve's thoughts short. For once he was keeping the volume of his voice low, undoubtedly so as to not have it carry through to Loki. The Lion rested his palm on the door above Steve's as if to keep Steve from opening it. "I would have a word with my brother in private."

Steve's eyes narrowed. "I couldn't leave you alone with him, Thor. Even if you are relatives, he's a dangerous Shifter and he has already proven that he's willing to do a lot of damage to get what he
wants."

"He will not listen to me if others are present. If I am to have any chance of convincing him to submit himself peacefully we must be left alone."

Steve bit back a growl. "Why didn't you bring this up earlier?" This was definitely something that should have been addressed in their planning stages.

"I did not think that you would agree and the others would not challenge you on my account." He was right about that. Darn it.

Steve released his grip on the door handle and forced himself to take a step back. "I'm giving you fifteen minutes. After that, I'm coming in and we're getting Loki out one way or another. We can't afford to do it any other way."

"Very well."

Listening in on the conversation through their headsets, Tony and Bruce could only look at each other before Tony covered up a microphone and huffed a huge sigh. "Lions…"

Bruce's lips quirked up in a smile as he flipped back to the satellite feed to check on Clint, momentarily covering up his own mic as he watched as Steve went up to check on Clint in person. "You know many?"

"Nope. Just the one, but that's more than enough."

"I'm plugging in the flash drive, Stark."

Tony started as Natasha's voice snapped through the speakers to his laptop. It seemed like she had managed to find a computer after all. Bruce sent him an amused look but Tony only rolled his eyes as he uncovered his microphone. "Good. Once you stick it in I'll be able to access the computer from here."

Sure enough, a second later a pop-up alert flashed up on Tony's laptop screen and he clicked it open. Another second later a new window came up, this time an identical image of whatever computer Natasha had found. Bruce moved to stand behind him as Tony got to work hacking into the security system while simultaneously trying to open up the protected files. This time it was a little harder to hack into the secure folders but Tony had developed programs powerful enough to break into the Pentagon's computer system, given the right opportunity. If nothing else, he could do it manually. It would take more time, but it would ensure that the job was successfully completed. "Watch and learn, Bruce, and prepare to be amazed."

Bruce shook his head but he was still smiling. "It's good you're so humble, Tony."

"You know you love me."

"Only sometimes. This is fairly impressive though."

Tony grinned as his programs cracked one password after another. Every once and a while he was hitting a firewall but they only take a few minutes to get through. Apparently it wasn't fast enough for Natasha though. "Come on, Stark. How long is this going to take?"

"Relax. It's going as fast as it can."

Bruce leaned back to give Tony some physical space. Tony was grateful that the Wolf had enough
sense. While Wolves tended to draw strength from others and close contact, Cats were the opposite. Having people in his personal space when he was getting stressed only wound him up more.

Focused on his own work, Tony only spared half a glance over at Bruce. "Can you get a visual of the rooftop?"

Bruce moved to sit back down at his station and quickly pilled the feed back up. "The satellite feed is up and active. It looks like Clint managed to handle himself and there goes Steve back into the building. How's your view on Thor and Loki?"

"They just look like they're talking. Boring."

"And Natasha?"

"Uh…" Tony looked back to his camera feed and did a quick visual scan of the image. Where'd she go? "Let's see…"

At least she was still in audio communication. "I could actually use a little help down here."

Bruce frowned as he leaned forward in his seat as Tony fought against that sick feeling in his stomach. "What's wrong?"

"Four or five men just came in the room I'm in. I can't tell if they're guards or just regular Hydra employees but either way they're blocking my escape."

Tony furrowed his brow and zoomed in and out on the multi-colored image on his screen. There were multiple figures on screen, but none of them were Natasha. As a female Shifter, she was almost as distinct as Loki had been. "What floor are you even on?"

"The second."

"The second…? Hold on." With a few keystrokes, he pulled up images from Hydra's own security feed, now having access to the whole thing. "There we go. But wow," the hope that had flared up in Tony's chest was snuffed out as he got his first look at the angles available through the feeds. "these point of views are shit. I can't make out a damned thing except the stairwell." It wouldn't be of any help, though it did mean the team didn't have to be as cautious as they were. The lackluster security had to be due to the building being used for Hydra's administration activities versus the active research and development being practiced in their facility out in the woods.

Returning to his only other option for visual reconnaissance, Tony scanned the image on his camera again then let out a frustrated sigh. He just figured out why he couldn't see Natasha. "I don't suppose you're behind some sort of refrigeration unit?" There was a large dull blue rectangle blocking out whatever was on the other side of it on the second floor.

"Yes, I can hear it humming. I think they're keeping chemicals inside."

"Fuck. Well, that's a flaw to work out."

Bruce's brows drew together and he glanced at the Cat. "What's wrong?"

"The coolant inside the unit is distorting the heat signatures behind it. I'm blind."

The Wolf gripped his hair and Tony could tell he was getting anxious. "Tony, we're going to have to get a better angle on this!"
"Alright, I'm on it." Grabbing his camera, Tony shoved his chair back and rose to his feet. He was going to have to leave the van to make this work. "You'll be okay on your own?"

"Yes, just go!"

Tony didn't argue, not wanting to stress Bruce out any more than he needed to, and slipped out the back of the van. He tried to keep himself calm even though his heart was beating in his chest. Pull it together. There was no reason to be scared. He was turning to walk onto a major city street for Christ's sake. A Hydra agent wasn't going to jump out from behind a trashcan and shoot him. Someone might see. Right? Right.

Walking quickly down the block so that he was standing in front of the building his teammates were currently invading, Tony checked his surroundings before tucking himself slightly behind a bus stop shelter. Act casual. No problem... He didn't have eyes on any of the doors into the Hydra building, which was a little nerve-wracking, but it was the perfect spot to get eyes on anything hiding behind that refrigeration unit. As soon as he pulled his camera up to check the screen, Tony proved himself right. He loved when that happened. "Alright. Little Red, I can see you now. It looks like you got yourself trapped in a meeting or something because there's a bunch of humans sitting around a table in the room next to you. Or maybe our cover's been blown it's some higher-ups hiding from us."

Bruce's voice crackled out through the headset. "I would advise not getting involved if you can help it. Things are complicated enough already."

Tony shook his head. "Someone's going to need to draw them away so she can get out."

"Who's free?" There was a pause on the line and Tony knew Bruce was eyeing the satellite feed. "Clint is holding down the roof, Thor should still be with Loki; where's Steve?"

Before Tony even had time to wonder before he heard a soft growl from behind him. He instinctually tensed up, his spine straightening at the noise. But it had been familiar sounding, more curious than aggressive, and as Tony cautiously, slowly tilted his head to see behind him he wasn't surprised to see a large golden Wolf padding towards him from the alleyway next to the Hydra building. How did he get—? Tony grunted in surprise. The Wolf must've jumped out of one of the third floor windows—where Tony had last seen him. That was probably why he shifted, to make the landing easier.

Even though he knew it was Steve from the smell alone, the tension remained in Tony's muscles. Wolves were fairly cognizant, but all Shifters were naturally more susceptible to their baser instincts in their animal form and he wasn't sure how the Wolf in Steve would treat him. The dog had at least one hundred pounds on Tony, easy, not to mention the claws and the teeth.

Continuing to keep his movements slow and deliberate, Tony turned to face Steve, keeping the camera held tight in one hand while holding up the other in what he hoped was a passive stance. "Hey there, Goldilocks. I'm just here to do some recon." Jesus, he actually couldn't keep the sarcasm out of his voice even if his life depended on it.

Steve paused, one ear flicking back as if confused, before continuing towards the Cat, his steps a little less hurried. Eyes narrowing, Tony swallowed down a hiss and kept his fingers from tightening into fists. He could practically feel the tail he never let loose lashing about anxiously behind him. As the Wolf approached Tony realized just how big he was. In this form, Steve's head came up to Tony's stomach; if he jumped up on his hind legs he would probably be able to rest his front paws on Tony's shoulders. Tony didn't like it one bit. It was intimidating as hell and the Cat inside him was writhing to get out, to shift and face off the rival alpha in order to defend himself.
But it seemed Tony was worrying over nothing. Steve sniffed at Tony as he drew close then, just like the golden retriever Tony accused him of being, Steve butted his head against Tony's hip with exaggerated gentleness. A laugh burst from Tony's throat at the greeting and Steve's tail began to wag. "Oh my god, don't you have work to do?"

Steve cocked his head to the side then released a small growl that sounded more like a bark. Tony couldn't help himself. Crouching down so that he was on eye-level with the Wolf, Tony clapped his hands together with a smirk on his face. "Come on, boy, what is it? Did little Timmy fall down the well?"

He laughed again as Steve growled low and slammed into him, not hard enough to hurt but enough to knock him off balance and onto his ass. Steve clearly didn't approve. Bruce didn't either if the rebuking huff from over the headset was any clue. "Tony, don't provoke him. Steve, you don't need to bother staying with him, he'll be safe outside. I doubt Hydra will try anything if he's out on the street where anyone could walk by. You, on the other hand, should be back in. Get Natasha out and then Thor might need your help. It sounds like his negotiations with Loki aren't going well."

Steve's eyes flashed up at Tony before he turned tail and bounded back towards the Hydra building after checking the street once to check for passers-by. Tony shook his head as he watched him go wondering why Steve had taken the risk to come out to check on him in the first place.

Back in the building after having clawed his way back up the side of the building, Steve shifted back into his human form then snatched his clothes up from where he had left them just next to a window on the third floor. He yanked them on, grateful that he had opted for the pull-over rather than the button-up shirt. He had overheard Natasha saying she was on the second floor so with his pants just bared zipped up, he hustled to the staircase, taking the entire flight of steps in two leaps. Now that Tony had control over the security system, he didn't have to worry about being inconspicuous.

He knew he was on the right track when he heard Tony's voice. "The hallway is clear Steve, except for the congregation of men third door on the right. When you go in, be careful. I can't tell if they're armed or not."

A grim smile spread over his face as he broke out from the stairwell and into the main corridor. "I'm not going in. I'm bringing them out."

"What?"

"You'll see." Not bothering to silence his steps, Steve raced down the hall, counting doors in his head until he reached the right one. When he did, he stopped just long enough to bang his fist against the door, the impact strong enough to dent the wood. He heard a shout from inside and chairs being pushed back on a tile floor.

"Congratulations, you got their attention. They're all going for the door."

"Good." Making sure that he made his footsteps particularly loud, Steve ran down the opposite end of the hall, counting on them to follow him. He heard the door slam open and dove into a side room. It had a few desks in it, but Steve's eyes caught on a window. It wasn't big but he would be able to squeeze through. Slamming it open, Steve scrambled out, his human fingers doing a poor job at digging into the brick exterior as he held on with one hand, using the other to close the window again. Hoping that he had given Natasha her opportunity to escape, Steve scrambled up the side of the building towards the floor above. He was confident this would work—because he had just done it—but it was definitely harder without the claws. Though the thumbs helped.
"Nice work, big dog! Red's out and being sane, taking the staircase to get to the next floor."

Thank god. "Copy that. I'm heading to Thor."

"Don't fall."

He didn't bother to respond to the Cat, just focused on clamoring up into the same window he had climbed through as a Wolf and left open for this specific purpose. Puling himself through, Steve rolled up onto his feet and slammed the window shut before heading straight to Loki's room. This time, he didn't pause at the door, his pulse pounding through his veins and his ears ringing with Bruce's warning that Thor could be in trouble. He knew he shouldn't have left him alone with the Raven.

Steve burst into the room only to find that Loki had practically backed his much larger brother into the far corner. The two were so engrossed in their conversation that neither of them seemed to notice Steve's presence even with the door slammed against the wall. Loki was shouting at Thor, the Lion's shoulders hunched defensively but expression earnest. The Raven was clearly incensed and the cool, aloof exterior he had shown the last time Steve had seen him had shattered. Now he looked almost desperate with anger, and betrayal? "When everyone, even my own family, turned their backs on me, Hydra was willing to accept me for who I was."

Thor snarled at him but held himself back. "They're just using you!"

Loki shoved at Thor's chest, knocking him back into the wall. "Like you weren't doing the same?!!"

Thor's hands came up, but he didn't push Loki back, just held his hands up, palms out in the international stance of surrender. "Brother, you have my word that I never—"

"Ha!" Loki let out a bitter laugh. "Your word. What good is your word to me?"

"It used to mean everything…"

Loki narrowed his eyes, taking a step back as he spat out a response. "Those were different times."

"I won't give up on you, brother."

"You already have! You left me to face your father alone!"

"I didn't—"

Loki cut Thor's protests off with a hiss. "Go ahead, say it! I'm a freak of nature, an abomination! Say it! I hear those you would call your friends say it often enough when they think I am out of range. They say such things and then you, you would laugh along beside them."

Steve shook himself off and snapped into action. As much as he wanted to hear more they didn't have the time for that. "Thor, we need to go, now!"

Loki whipped around but before he had time to yell at Steve too Thor sucked in a breath, grabbed Loki around his waist, and threw the slim man over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Winded, Loki screamed something at Thor that Steve didn't understand but Thor just tightened his grip and pushed passed Steve out into the corridor.

Steve raced up the stairs after Thor, catching sight of Clint and Natasha waiting for them as they burst out onto the roof. The Hawk was crouched down next to Natasha and it was then that Steve saw blood streaking down her forearm. Steve's eyes widened in concerned. "Natasha, are you
alright?"

She gave a light hiss as Clint pressed a piece of fabric against the cut to try and stem the bleeding. "I'm fine. It's just a scratch."

Glancing up, Clint noticed Loki bundled up, though it would be difficult not to with the way he was still trashing about. "Are we done here?"

"Yeah, we're leaving. Either way they know we're here so it's time to leave. " Pressing a hand against his earpiece, Steve called into it as he waved for the others to keep moving. "Bruce, Tony, get the van ready. And Bruce, can you pull out the first aid kit? Natasha has a cut that needs tending to. Tony, call Phil and let him know we've got Loki."

"You got it."

Before Steve even had time to finish getting his words out, a shrill ring had started to go off inside the building. It sounded like a fire alarm but Steve was fairly sure that it hadn't been set off by smoke.

When they got back to the van the engine was on, Tony on the phone in the driver's seat and Bruce waiting for them in the back. Clint jumped into the passenger's seat in the cab as Steve helped Thor wrestle Loki into the back and Natasha joined them. As soon as they had the doors closed in the back, Tony floored it, making the whole van jerk as he peeled out of the alleyway.

Steve glanced up at Bruce as he helped Thor tie Loki down to one of the chairs. "Where are we going?"

Bruce met his eyes as he pulled a bandage out of his first aid kit. "Tony's set up a rendezvous point with Agent Coulson. We're heading there now."

Phil must've been telling the truth when he said he would stay close by because he and an entourage of SHIELD agents met them in an empty corner of a parking garage less than five minutes later. He and the other agents quickly took custody of Loki who began his complaints all over again. He even tried to shift but Thor had tied him down to the chair in such a way that it would have crushed his wings and he would have gouged himself with his own talons.

Thor wasn't happy to hear that they already had a cell prepared for his brother but was soothed somewhat when Coulson promised to personally insure that he would not be treated poorly. It was only then that Thor released Loki to them, making sure that everyone knew that he would be checking in. Steve had also taken the time to explain to Phil that he was pretty certain they had been compromised and seen at the end of their mission. The man had frowned but nodded and said that he would see to it. They should just hurry back home before Hydra was able to track them back somehow.

They took his advice and borrowed one of the lower-ranked SHIELD agents to transport them back to the airport. Steve was filled with a mixture of happiness and anxiety on the flight back, his mind running a hundred miles an hour thinking of everything that had gone right and wrong. It hadn't gone as he wanted but in the end they had succeeded. But even with the slipups, the more he thought about it the more he realized how easy it had all been. Something wasn't sitting right with him, but he couldn't figure out what exactly felt wrong.

The only thing that distracted him was when Bruce nudged Tony in the seat next to him and motioned back to where Thor was sitting behind them. The blond Shifter had been unusually quiet since he had surrendered his brother and apparently Bruce was starting to get worried. "You could
say something nice to him you know."

Tony snorted and leaned back in his chair. "I really couldn't."

"Tony…"

"What? Don't look at me like that!"

Bruce sighed but turned to look out the plane's window. "Just try to get along? He's had a rough
day and I think a kind word from you would mean a lot."

Steve watched, amused despite himself, as Tony begrudgingly turned around in his seat and caught
Thor's attention. "You didn't do too bad out there today, Simba. Almost like you knew what you
were doing."

Bruce rolled his eyes and looked up in a gesture of helplessness at the insulting praise but it was
enough to rouse the Lion from his thoughts. "It was a little different from my usual sort of venture,
but I do think I managed well enough."

Adjusting himself so that he could look back more comfortably, Tony raised a brow. "What sort of
'usual ventures' did you have?"

The Panther didn't have the entirety of Thor's attention, his mind clearly drifting back to his brother
as he glanced out the window. "Shifter clans are far more entrenched in territories than here in your
country. If we had performed a similar mission to this in my homeland we would have first had to
request permission from nearly ten other families in order to step foot on land that was not claimed
as our own. Most of my experience thus far has been in border skirmishes with other Shifter clans
under the direction of my father and my family."

Steve tilted his head as Tony sat back a little in surprise. "So, actual fighting?"

Steve wasn't so much surprised—he knew by the way Thor carried himself that the Shifter had the
type of confidence in his physical abilities that only came with experience—but confused as to why
a Shifter society would choose to live in such a way. Tradition, he supposed. Still, it just sounded
like a lot of unnecessary politics and bullying to him.

Nodding slowly, Thor finally turned his eyes back on them. "The battlefields are never too large
nor the losses too egregious, but yes, 'actual fighting.' I have seen a few fine Shifters fall in service
to their families."

Tony let out a breath that sounded like it would have been a laugh had he been able to put any
humor into it. "How is the human population of Europe alright with any of that?"

"We keep it silent. More than any other, the worst rule to violate is to expose our presence to the
masses. Which is why my father allowed me to come out and search for my brother before Loki
shamed us all and he was forced to cut all ties with him."

"Harsh family." Turning back around, Tony flopped back into his seat. "And you all are like the
fucking Illuminati or something with your secret wars. You guys are why humans are scared of
Shifters."

"I am beginning to think that you are right…"

The plane ride back to Tony's mansion was a lot more relaxing after that, particularly compared to
the flight out. Once Tony had broken the ice with Thor, it was almost as if the rest of them were
given permission to speak and small conversations broke out. It was almost enough to make Steve forget about his worries about their mission. It didn't quite work but it put him in a better mood by the time they landed.

When they reached Tony's home everyone slowly dispersed to put away equipment and lick their wounds, both physical and emotional, eventually leaving just Tony and Steve downstairs. Tony had laid out on the couch after asking Jarvis to order some pizza and Steve hesitantly joined him, sitting on the arm of the couch by his feet.

"So Tony…"

Having closed his eyes, Tony flicked one eye open with a frown. "Uh-oh. No good talks start like that."

Steve smiled softly down at him. "I'm just curious, Tony."

"About what?"

Resting his weight back, Steve leaned back on his hands. "Bruce doesn't shift because he knows that if he does he'll lose control. Natasha doesn't shift because she says that she's more effective in her human form than her animal form. I understand both those things. What I don't understand is why you don't shift."

Tony's eye snapped shut again. "I'm not really a 'sharing is caring' type of guy, Steve."

Steve's brows drew together. "I told you about Bucky."

"Yeah, after I all but forced it out of you."

"I don't want to force you—"

"Which is why you'll never hear anything."

Steve clenched his teeth then released his frustration in a long sigh. "Look, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I would hope that you'd trust me to understand whatever you're going through too." But Tony remained silent and Steve figured it was time for him to leave before both of them got stressed. Rising to his feet, Steve nodded down at the Cat. "If you ever change your mind, if you ever need someone to talk to, just know that I'm ready to listen."

O~O~O~O

After his encounter with Tony, Steve had gotten something to eat then returned to his bedroom, suddenly feeling exhausted. He had trouble actually falling asleep though and ended up wrestling with his sheets for what felt like hours. In the end he didn't so much as fall asleep as slowly drift off into unconsciousness.

It felt like only seconds later when Steve bolted up in bed as he woke to another presence in his room.

Nostrils flaring, he followed the foreign scent to the doorway and his eyes locked on the figure of none other than Tony Stark standing on the threshold. He had thought that it could have been Bruce but seeing the Cat there was a bit of a shock. Even when over-tired, he was always a light sleeper and the fact that Tony had been able to approach his door and then actually get it open without him noticing was…unsettling.
Tony was in his sleeping clothes, a rock band t-shirt and boxers, his hair a mess, and smelled not panicked, hadn't burst in because of an emergency, but instead strangely resigned with a hint of dissipating fear. Calming his nerves, Steve forced himself to rest back against the headboard and ran a hand through his hair to try and comb it back into some semblance of decency. "Tony… what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Sorry for scaring you."

Instead of leaving with some excuse though, Tony stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Steve watched him for a moment before shaking his head. "Not scared, just startled." Looking over at the clock on his bedside table, his eyes narrowed when he saw it was just past one in the morning. "Why are you here?"

Scratching at his arm almost nervously, Tony rocked back on the balls of his feet. "…You said you'd be ready to listen when I was ready to talk."

"You couldn't have waited until morning?"

After the words slipped past his lips, Steve realized how harsh they might sound but luckily Tony seemed to take it as a joke, the corner of his mouth jerking up in a wry smile. "I'm naturally inconvenient like that."

It was obvious that Tony was really bothered by something so Steve gave in to his instincts to protect and patted the bed beside him. It was proof that Tony was feeling even worse than Steve thought when the billionaire actually accepted the offer and sat down. Sitting as close as they were, Steve's shoulder was brushing up against Tony's but instead of feeling weird it seemed strangely comfortable. Almost intimate. Maybe it was just the mood Tony was setting as he spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "I've only told one person about this."

"Pepper?" Steve knew that Tony and his personal assistant were close; if anyone else knew about Tony's past, it would be her.

Tony nodded, his fingers fiddling with a loose thread on the hem of his shirt. "Yeah…"

Steve saw Tony swallow and involuntarily reached over to touch the Cat's knee. Tony twitched at the contact and Steve pulled his hand away, surprised with himself. He was a Cat, not a Wolf. Tony wouldn't appreciate it. "Sorry. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"No, I…" Closing his eyes, Tony ran his hands through his hair, his fingers raking through the dark tangled strands. He sounded lost and so unlike himself. "I think I need to. I had another goddamn nightmare tonight… I need to talk to someone."

And Tony had chosen him. Feeling something warm bubble up in his chest, Steve offered the other a soft smile even though Tony's eyes were closed and he wouldn't be able to see it. "I'm listening."

"Okay…" Taking a deep breath, Tony leaned his head back, his shoulder pressing a little more into Steve's. "It started… Hell, it started when I was born I guess. Right from the start, I was in rough shape. My father was a Cat, like me, but my mom was human. I obviously inherited my dad's ability to shift but when my mom gave birth to me, it not only killed her but I ended up with a severe heart defect. Basically only half my heart was working."

Steve swallowed in surprise. He never would've guessed Tony had ever had health problems by looking at him now.

"If I had been human I would've gotten an emergency heart transplant but because I was a Shifter, a
Cat Shifter, it was impossible. Even with all the money my dad had, you just don't find extra Cat hearts lying around. So I had to grow up with it. My extra healing abilities from being a Shifter probably were the only thing that kept me alive because between the ages five and fifteen I had eight heart attacks serious enough to land me in the hospital. I remember every single one of them…"

The Cat took another breath before continuing. Steve didn't even think of interrupting. "My father was a mechanical engineer and chemist, but he started getting into bioengineering to try and come up with a cure for me. It took him over a decade to make any progress but he finally started to get somewhere. Then, when I was fourteen, just before I hit my growth spurt, he hit a breakthrough." A mirthless chuckle burst past Tony's lips. "I'd never seen him so happy. But before he could test it, the shit hit the fan. His business partner, a Wolf named Obadiah Stane, found out about it and wanted to sell off the formula. My dad refused and the next thing I knew I was jumped on my way home from school, pulled into an unmarked van, drugged, then woke up chained down in an empty warehouse."

Steve felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. "Jesus, Tony."

"We found out later that Stane had worked with an extremist group to kidnap and ransom me back to my father for his formula. To say they weren't very accommodating hosts is an understatement but one night after they were done with me I managed to escape by shifting and breaking through my restraints. I got as far as a highway before I collapsed. I honestly thought I had died but I woke up in a hospital. It turned out I was only half right. Technically, I had died, about four times, once on that highway because I had a massive heart attack while shifting, worse than any I'd had before, then it flat out stopped on route to the hospital after a passerby called an ambulance, and twice again on the table in surgery."

Steve stared down at his lap in shock as Tony cleared his throat as his voice began to shake. "I was in a coma for six weeks and apparently while I was under, my dad had found out about Stane's involvement and they had shifted and fought. Stane wound up dead, and my father was hardly any better. I don't know if he actually could've pulled through. My doctor told me that he, uh…that he had himself taken off life support."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because I was still in a coma and he had finally found a good enough heart to give me."

Oh God. "…He took himself off life support and had them transplant his heart into you."

"That's what they said anyway. So I woke up with a brand new heart, no dad, and a multi-billion dollar company to run. I gave up shifting the day I woke up. I didn't want it anymore, didn't want anything to do with it. My dad and I had always been private about our shifting so it was easy to pretend like I was and had always been human. The PR folks at Stark Industries told the media that me, my dad, and Stane had gotten into an accident in our private jet and I was the only one who survived the crash. The public ate it up. SHIELD knew about me, obviously, but they've always been good about keeping things to themselves. As long as I didn't cause trouble as a Shifter, they let me do whatever the hell I wanted as a human."

For a long moment Steve wasn't quite sure what to say. He finally settled on speaking from his heart and hoping that nothing he said would offend the Cat or make him regret sharing his past. "I'm sorry, Tony. No one should ever have to go through something like that, especially not as a kid. It must've been hard, to lose your dad. " Steve had never known his parents but couldn't imagine a child having to deal with the loss of theirs after having known them.
Tony gave a weak shrug. "We had our problems. Cats…don't make the best parents. I knew he loved me but he was always distant. We hardly spoke and when we did it usually ended in an argument, especially as I started to mature. I know I sound like a heartless jackass, but it was harder for me to accept that I now had to run the family business than it was for me to accept that my father was dead."

It did sound a little heartless, but Steve didn't allow himself to judge. Everyone grieved differently and it seemed to him that at least a part of Tony was still grieving, even if he himself didn't realize it.

"So…that's the story. That's why I don't shift." Tony was shaking, though he was clearly trying to suppress the barely-there tremors. Again, without thinking Steve moved to comfort him with a touch. This time though he realized what he was doing about half-way through. But he gave into it, and ended up pulling Tony into a tight hug.

Tony tensed up in Steve's arms like he had been given an electric shock but after a moment allowed himself to give into it, just a little, and that was enough for Steve. Pulling away slowly, Steve gave Tony's wrist a light squeeze before releasing him entirely. "Thank you, Tony, for explaining things. You didn't have to, but…I understand things a bit more now."

Tony shook his head, still looking somewhat shocked from the hug. "I'm glad at least one of us does."

There as a hint of fear remaining in the Cat's scent but Steve felt better knowing that it had been caused by whatever nightmare Tony had instead of a real danger. Now he mostly just smelled tired, the Cat's natural musk heavier than usual from his exhaustion, especially since Tony had stopped trying to mask it around their team. Steve didn't mind though. It was strong and virile like any alpha's scent, but compared to a Wolf's more woody smell, Cats—at least Tony—smelled somehow cleaner, like the air on a clear summer night in the country. Usually Steve found other alpha males' scents distasteful at best, but Tony's was more exotic and intriguing than anything.

Catching himself leaning closer to get a better whiff, Steve shook himself off and out of that train of thought. It couldn't have been leading him anywhere good. Tony gave a little start of his own as Steve jerked back and he cracked a tired grin. "I guess I could actually let you get some sleep sometime tonight, huh?"

The offer to have Tony sleep in the same bed thankfully died on Steve's lips before it burst out. It had worked with Bruce and was the same offer he had made to Bucky, and vice versa, whenever one of them was shaken or feeling bad. But Tony wasn't Bruce or Bucky and probably would appreciate the tight quarters even less than the touches. So instead Steve just shrugged. "I don't mind staying up for a while."

"But what kind of host would I be if I kept you up?" With that said, Tony scooted off of the bed and rose to his feet. "Besides, you won't be very entertaining after you fall asleep and I can already see your eyelids drooping."

O-O-O-O

Tony didn't really bother thinking through his actions until he woke up the next morning. And after going over the events from the night before he could've kicked himself. He didn't regret telling Steve about his past because he knew Steve wouldn't hold it against him, but he did regret that he had let himself get to the point where he had to tell someone at all. He was a lone Cat, an alpha, and a pretty tough bastard all in all; there was no way to mentally justify the
need to go sniveling to another alpha, particularly a Wolf, and basically cry on his shoulder. Alpha's didn't show weakness, Cat's didn't show their feelings, and usually Tony was pretty good about keeping up with those two expectations without even trying.

But there was something about Steve that made him feel...trustworthy. Like an equal Tony could confide in, tough enough to handle anything Tony threw at him. And that scared Tony more than a little. He was getting attached to the dog.

He was sitting in the kitchen eating the leftover pizza he had ordered the night before when Steve walked in. Tony had been dreading it a bit but Steve remained casual, like nothing had changed between them and Tony happily rolled with it. Offering the Wolf a piece of pizza, Tony grinned as Steve scrunched his nose up at the idea of eating it for breakfast before taking a small, cautious bite.

Swallowing, Steve made a face then shrugged and took another bite before a thought seemed to strike him. Tearing a bite off his own slice, Tony watched in amusement as Steve, ever the gentleman, made sure to chew and swallow before speaking. "I just realized something. When you first told us all about your shifting in the SHIELD briefing room, everyone looked surprised except for Bruce. But you said you'd only ever told Pepper about the things you told me last night."

Tony wasn't bothered like he thought he might be when Steve brought it all up. Instead, his lips quirked up in amusement. "Is that jealousy I detect?"

Tony's grin widened as Steve's cheeks flushed red from the teasing. "No. I'm just curious is all!"

Deciding to spare him any further humiliation, Tony kept his voice low. He didn't need any extra ears listening in on their conversation. "I never told Bruce. He knew from the start."

"What do you mean?"

Tony shrugged and grabbed another slice as he finished his. Good thing he had ordered an extra-large pizza. "He had just got into med school and because he was so damn smart had been able to join my dad's research team only a few months before they reached their breakthrough. Because he was a med student as well as a bioengineer and a Shifter, he was also there for my surgery and the heart transplant. Apparently he spoke with my father right before he died, but he likes to talk about it even less than I do."

"Oh."

Steve was sorry he asked. He hadn't thought it would turn back onto those darker memories. But Tony just shook his head. He didn't seem upset. "That's enough of that though."

Reaching over, Tony clapped Steve on the shoulder, his hand warm as it lingered on Steve's arm. "Come on, big dog. Let's go see what everyone is doing. They've been quiet for too long."

Chuckling, Steve obliged Tony and rose to his feet, making a mental note that even as he stood, Tony kept his hand on his shoulder.

It was unexpected, out of character for the Cat.

And it felt good.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I feel bad about not having anything deep and meaningful to say except for: Thank so much to the people who have been leaving comments and in other ways expressing their enjoyment. Writing is, of course, fun in of itself, but knowing that other people are liking it is why I post stories online! :D

Thanks and enjoy the next chapter! We're finally starting to earn that "Mature" rating!

For twenty-four hours after they returned from their mission, everything went well enough. Thor continued to be unusually reclusive but Steve didn't linger on the issue. From what he gathered from the small bit of conversation he had caught between Thor and Loki, the two of them used to be close. To have to confront someone you care about must've been hard so Steve was happy to give Thor all the time he needed to heal himself.

To be honest, Steve might have worried less than he usually would about Thor because something else was occupying his thoughts. The feeling that the something had been wrong with their mission, that something had been off, never left Steve's mind. He didn't know what, he didn't know how, and had no idea what the consequences were going to be. And when he let his thoughts linger in that place for too long, it scared him.

Bruce seemed to be aware of his worries to some degree because the Wolf seemed to constantly trying to distract him and keep him busy. But it was Tony who really succeeded. Bruce had called the Cat out to join them and to Steve's shock, Tony had agreed. They ended up outside and lazily throwing a ball around turned into a game of full-contact football when Clint suddenly appeared and side-tackled Steve. Natasha had followed Clint out but stayed out of the game as it quickly turned into a free-for-all. With winter slowly fading into spring the ground was thawing and all the dirt turned to mud as soon as they ran over it.

By the time Steve called it quits they were all coated in mud. Bruce laughed as he took all of them in, his eyes and teeth shining out from his face, totally brown from where Tony had tripped him and made him face-plant right into the grass. The Wolf looked happier than Steve had seen him in a while and made him wonder just how long it had been since Bruce had laughed like that. Tony himself was just as filthy and once the game ended the Cat actually looked shocked about just how much mud he had gotten on him. But he couldn't keep a smile off his lips as he scraped a handful of mud off of his shirt and threw it at Clint. Clint had stayed the cleanest out of all of them and easily dodged Tony's attack, smirking at the billionaire before tugging off his stained shirt and bounding back over towards where Natasha was sitting on the deck.

That night as Steve tucked himself in to bed he was still glowing. He hadn't felt that close to a group of people in a long while. It was a bit bittersweet, to be reminded of how good it could feel while knowing at the same time that this wasn't the same as an actual pack and that it probably wouldn't last. But the content feeling of a day spent just relaxing was a welcome distraction from his worries over their last mission. For the first time since Bruce had crawled into bed with him Steve fell asleep easily.

O~O~O~O
As soon as he woke up the next morning Steve knew something had gone horribly wrong.

Sucking in a deep breath, Steve gasped and almost choked. It felt like there was fire running through his veins, his toes and fingers alternating between hot and freezing cold as his pulse pounded through his arteries. And the scents—he could smell *everything.*

A snarl ripped from Steve's chest as he rolled onto his side, his hand reached out to claw at his sheets. This wasn't good. This was *not* good. Why was this-?

Loki.

The thought hit him like a truck and sent him reeling. It had all been too simple, too easy. Somehow, some way, Loki had done this to him. To him—What about the others? Sucking in another breath, Steve held it in, counted to five and then slowly forced it out. It was difficult to stifle the low growl that tried to roll out with it. It was even more of a struggle to get to his feet and stumble to the door. Steve really didn't want to leave his room, not like this, in this condition, but he had to make sure everyone else was alright.

He didn't have to go far to find out. Just the smells seeping out from underneath the others' doors were enough to confirm his fears. To make sure he bent down and sniffed the air coming from the space underneath the doors but, no. They hadn't escaped this either.

Swallowing, Steve steeled himself and made his way down to the first floor on unsteady feet. He was nearly dizzy with the sensation of his muscles tensing and his knees feeling as if they were about to buckle. Sweat had begun to bead up on his skin despite the cool morning air and he wiped his trembling hands off on his shirt before grabbing Tony's home phone. It was cordless and Steve took full advantage of it, heading outside where hopefully he could find a bit of relief from the fever that had gripped him.

He sucked in deep breaths of clear, crisp air outside but the smell of the grass and trees was nearly entirely drowned out by the thick, heavy scent seeping off of him. Shaking his head, Steve turned back to the phone and punched in a series of numbers, his fingers still shaking.

The phone only rang twice before he heard the line pick up and Steve spoke before they had the chance to, his voice desperate. "Hello? Agent Coulson?"

"Who is this?"

"Steve, it's Steve."

"Steve." It almost came out like a question, as if Phil was surprised. "I didn't expect to hear from you for a few days yet. Unfortunately Loki is still proving to be uncooperative so we don't have any new information to go on yet. We're going to keep at it and the official debriefing will be within the next few days regardless."

"I appreciate the update, sir, but that's not why I called." His voice sounded terrible, low and growling like some animal. No wonder Phil was surprised. Taking another breath, Steve retreated further out onto the deck outside Tony's house. Steve could tell Phil was already concerned but was keeping his calm.

"What is it? You don't seem the type to phone just for a social call."

"Unfortunately not. We, uh, we have a situation."

He could almost hear Phil frown, his tone suddenly serious. "What's wrong?"
Steve gripped the phone with both hands to keep it steady against his ear. "The team is going to have to be put on medical leave for the next two weeks or so."

"Medical leave? For that long? Is everything alright? I know you have Dr. Banner on site, but if you need another doctor, we have access to a number of Shifter specialists we could send to Stark's place."

"No!" Realizing what Phil must be assuming they had all been injured, Steve rushed to clarify. "No, it's, it's not that. Everyone's fine, it's just…um, you know." Steve's cheek's flushed. He couldn't say it. Clearing his throat, Steve tried again. "With the state we're in, the only thing to do is wait it out."

"I still don't—Oh." Understanding flooded Phil's voice and he let out a little cough. "Right. Are all the alphas present and accounted for?"

Thank goodness he didn't have to say it out loud. The thoughts running through Steve's head were bad enough, he didn't know if he would be able to voice any of it. "Yes."

"And Dr. Banner is safe?"

"Yes." Everyone, including Steve, had left him alone so far so there was probably no immediate danger.

Phil sighed and Steve imagined the man pinching his brow. "Good. Perhaps we'll do the debriefing over a video conference."

"That'd probably be best." Leaving the house as they were might be problematic, even if they were just going to the SHIELD building.

"I will call ahead to make arrangements later on. Send a message out if any of you require suppressants or if anyone needs to be removed from the area."

"Will do, but I think we have everything under control here."

At least Steve really hoped so.

O-O-O-O

Shifters went into heat. Unlike with animals, where the term "heat" usually applied to females, and something akin to "rut" to males, the term "heat" was applied across the board for Shifters these days because it all amounted to the same thing: they just became ridiculously sex-crazed and fertile. Shifters had just as many sexual identities as normal humans and in the modern world any further distinction than "heat" led to social protest in the Shifter community.

When it came right down to it, Steve didn't really care what it was called; it was just something he had to endure. As an alpha male he had a difficult time keeping himself reigned in during the annual event though he had been successful so far. Although his heats varied sometime between spring and summer, Steve was always able to prepare for them because it took a couple of days to really settle in. During those first few days he would notice himself becoming more agitated and restless than usual…and a lot more easily aroused, which often led to some amount of embarrassment, but he had always been able to sequester himself before it got too bad.

His last one had hit him late, probably because of the trauma of losing his pack. With that, he hadn't been expecting another for quite a while. This time it came on so fast Steve didn't know what hit him. Apparently when you cram too many Shifters into one house, as soon as one of them
goes into heat whatever pheromones they pump out triggers the rest of them.

It didn't take any of them long to figure out that it was Thor who had set off that chain reaction. After that it wasn't hard to logic out what exactly had happened. As far as any of them could figure it had been Loki, just as Steve had initially suspected. Somehow during the few minutes he and Thor had been alone in the Hydra building in D.C., he had done something to set off the right hormones in Thor's brain that told his body it was time to go into heat. When questioned, Thor hadn't been able to give them an answer. The Lion seemed a little shell-shocked himself. Whatever had happened the most obvious reason why was that Loki had done it in order to put the team out of commission. If that was true, his plan worked.

After his initial call, Steve had Bruce email Agent Coulson with their hypothesis. He replied back that when they questioned Loki about it the Raven had just laughed. He agreed that they were probably right. The entire SHIELD regional network had been put on high alert and in the meantime Steve was forced to put his own team on lockdown. Shifters could venture out in public during their heats but there was an overwhelming risk that they would hurt themselves or, more importantly, another Shifter or, even worse, a human. Steve had to keep an especially close eye on Thor, Tony, and himself. Alpha Shifters in heat could be downright dangerous.

Phil had been worried over Bruce because as a beta surrounded by alphas, he was the most likely target for all of them to try and, well, jump. Even if a beta wasn't naturally submissive, an alpha in heat could easily be driven to try and mount the lower ranking Shifter and would probably be able to do it with the extra strength coursing through their bodies. Luckily neither Thor nor Tony seemed interested in touching him and Steve knew he had it in him to resist. It helped that while Bruce's scent was that of a beta, his unique condition set an unpleasant tint to it, like a hint of old copper or sulfur.

None of this stopped Steve from checking in with his fellow Wolf. It was his job to make sure Bruce was protected and felt safe, even from Steve himself.

As soon as Steve walked into the study, Bruce's head jerked up from the book he had been reading and his eyes immediately flew to Steve. Steve sent him a weak smile and after a moment Bruce returned it.

"Steve, hi. I didn't expect you to be in." Since Steve had woken up in heat he had tried to spend as much time as he could outside where the atmosphere wasn't quite so heavy and he could stay upwind of the others.

"I wanted to see if you really were alright."

"I'm fine." Bruce instantly seemed to understand Steve's underlying question. "No one's tried anything. I trust Tony and I don't think Thor has even noticed me, to be honest."

"And how's your control?" Another point of concern for Steve. He wasn't sure how Bruce's heat would affect his control over his inner Wolf. With this mess, they didn't need an excessively strong Wolf running around causing havoc.

Bruce let out a sigh and shrugged. "I'm managing. Luckily I've had a few heat cycles since I administered the formula, so I've gotten pretty good about keeping myself in check. Why? Are you worried?"

"No." Steve trusted Bruce to come to him if there was a problem and since the other Wolf hadn't approached him he had assumed that Bruce had it handled. It never hurt to check though. Smiling again, Steve rested against the chair Bruce was sitting in but was careful not to invade the other's
personal space. The other's scent filled his nose but it was just off-putting enough not to be a temptation. "Honestly I'm relieved. I don't know if I could let you sleep in the same bed as me this week." This was actually the first time that Steve had gotten so close to a beta Wolf while in heat. He was happy that he was able to contain himself but didn't want to tempt fate by putting either himself or Bruce in that situation.

Bruce readily agreed. "Yeah. We don't need to go there."

Steve smiled then shook his head. It was only then he realized that he hadn't spoken to Bruce one-on-one since Tony had revealed his past to him. His smile faded away and he leaned a bit heavier against the chair. "Tony told me. About what happened to him, about how his dad passed. Were you really there?"

Bruce paused again before closing his book and meeting Steve's gaze. "Yeah. I was just a kid myself at the time."

"He said you were part of his dad's research team?"

Nodding thoughtfully, the scientist let out a long breath. "Yeah. Howard hired me on after seeing a presentation I gave for my university at a bioengineering conference." A hint of a smile flickered back onto his lips, though it was a bit sad. "Despite what they said about him in the news, he could be a great guy. The first Cat I'd ever met. When I heard this project he was working on, I jumped at the chance to work with him. He was one of the major researchers and funders in the field then."

So that's how it all started. "Did you help him figure out that formula for Tony?"

Bruce tilted his head. "I was one of the lead assistants on the team, but I'd like to think I contributed as much as any of the senior scientists. Howard actually did most of the brainstorming himself, but towards the end there we were all practically living together in the lab. I actually didn't know Tony that well at the time, had met him once or twice, but the cure Howard was trying to develop was fascinating and I just remember letting my imagination run away with all the medical applications for Shifters that we would be able to offer."

Even though years had passed, Bruce still sounded excited. He must've been something to see when it was actually going on and Steve found himself wishing he could've been there. But then he would've had to witness Tony getting kidnapped and he didn't know if he would have been able to stand that. "It still must've been a shock, what happened to Tony."

Bruce sat back in his seat, his gaze growing distant. "You can say that again. The whole team was torn apart. Howard was a mess. After we finally got Tony back, Howard ran off and the next thing I know I'm being called in as a medical consultant. The human doctors at the hospital hardly knew what to do and aside from Stane I was the only Shifter on Howard's team..." Bruce shook his head. "Tony was my first real surgery...Honestly, the whole thing scared the crap out of me. I hadn't even finished my degree yet and I was so sure Tony was going to die on my operating table."

Steve wanted to ask about Howard's death, about whatever might have passed between Bruce and the Stark patriarch in his final moments. But Tony had said that Bruce didn't like to talk about it and Steve didn't want to bully him. Especially when he already seemed upset over the memories he was already reliving. "How did you and Tony get so close?"

A little of Bruce's bad mood seemed to lift. "After he woke from his coma, I helped him through most of his recovery process. We spent a lot of time together in those days. But as he grew healthier we started drifting apart. We've worked together a few times since then but this is the first time I've really got to personally see him in action."
Steve cocked his head to the side. "And what do you think of him now?"

A grin finally appeared back on Bruce's face. "That he's a lot like Howard. With less responsibility and more to prove. And maybe even a little smarter, but don't tell him I said so. Tony's ego is big enough as it is."

Steve grinned back, happy that Bruce seemed to approve of Tony's progress. The Cat could use all the extra emotional support he could get.

By the end of the day they all eventually ended up in the media room. The large television on the wall was dark, no one able to gather the motivation to turn it on. Even Thor had ventured out of his bedroom, although he was sitting silently in the back, still unwilling to talk to anyone. Steve was slouched over on the couch while Clint sat in an armchair adjacent to him and Bruce sat in yet another chair on the far side of the room. Steve would have been appalled at his own terrible posture but as it was he was stuck wondering about how it could feel like it was over one hundred degrees in the house when the thermostat said it was only sixty eight.

Steve glanced up automatically as Tony stormed into the room, the billionaire looking a strange combination of feverish and hung-over. He had been scowling since Steve had first seen him that morning and it looked like his mood hadn't improved. As he stepped in, Tony stopped for a moment and flinched like he had gotten smacked in the face. "For fuck's sake...Can someone open a window? Is that too hard for you to manage?"

The Cat waded across the room to a large bank of windows and wrenched them open before sitting down heavily on the far side of the couch Steve was using. Steve swallowed as he was hit with a wave of the Cat's scent and suddenly that four feet between them didn't seem like quite enough distance.

Clint smirked at all of them from behind the magazine he was pretending to read and broke the silence that had settled after Tony's stomping. "So...How's it going?"

Snorting, Bruce slid down lower into his chair with his arms crossed, not bothering to dignify Clint's question with a response. Steve followed his example while trying not to let Clint irritate him. Heats were a mammalian thing; as a Hawk, he was apparently free from all of that. Which was not fair. On the other hand, one less male roaming the halls of Tony's mansion like a caged animal was probably for the best.

Tony didn't bother holding his annoyance back, his scowl deepening as he angrily grabbed the remote and began to flip through television channels. "My life is a living hell right now, that's how it's going. Thank you very much for asking."

"That's a little harsh, don't you think?" Clint grinned, clearly enjoying the moment. "No. It's a perfectly legitimate statement. Thanks to Thor," Tony jerked his head back to where the Lion was sitting and Thor responded with a growl but Tony just kept talking, "I'm two months early. Do you know how many meetings I've had to cancel? I was supposed to go into the office a few times this week. Pepper is going to kill me. And, and I have to sit here and stew in this wonderfully saturated air with five other Shifters." Giving up on finding anything good to watch Tony switched to the news and threw the remote down onto the couch. "There are too many fucking alphas in here…"

Steve raised his brows but didn't say anything in return. He couldn't feel insulted; the same thing had crossed his mind after all. Between him, Tony, and Thor, it was starting to get pretty thick in the house. Steve just considered them lucky that Bruce at least was a beta. Not to say that he wasn't
putting out his own scent but it was less overwhelming than the rest of them.

Natasha chose that moment to wander into the room and state the obvious. "Ugh! It reeks in here! You boys need to go out and just get laid, because I am not going to live here with all this testosterone in the air."

Rolling his eyes, Tony kicked his feet up onto the coffee table in front of the couch. "Oh, shut up, Natasha. Like you're one to talk."

Bruce glanced at Natasha then over at Tony. "Actually, Tony, she hasn't shown any signs yet of going into heat."

Tony snorted. "How'd you swing that?"

Waving her hand, Natasha rested next to Clint. "Please. If I hadn't figured out how to mask my scent, how long do you think I would've lasted in an enclosed space with male Shifters?" Steve knew different but he allowed Tony to argue. Natasha wasn't showing any signs of heat because she didn't go through it. Just like Clint, she wasn't a mammal Shifter. He still didn't know what she was, but she wasn't a mammal. Lucky her.

"Hey," Tony was quick to defend himself, "I haven't made any moves on you yet."

She sent him back a knowing smirk. "You haven't because I'm not the one you're interested in."

During his conversations with Phil, Steve and the SHIELD agent had decided together that while Clint and Natasha could've been sent out on a mission alone it was best to keep them at Tony's place. The type of assignment they would be given wouldn't play to either of their strong suits. Natasha and Clint needed the rest of the team, so they weren't going anywhere. Just like the rest of them.

O~O~O~O

Phil sighed as he stared into the glass room where their prisoner was currently being housed and willed his face not to show his building fatigue. Though they had Loki captured and firmly locked up, the Raven was still wearing him down. Without the threat of physical retribution for noncompliance the interrogation was…not going well.

Loki answered barely any of their questions and when he decided to speak it was in riddles and vague responses. On top of that, Phil now had the health of his team to worry about. Heat was a natural annual stage for Shifters to pass through but with all of them crammed into Stark's house, as spacious as it was, things could turn ugly pretty quickly. But Steve had assured him that they were alright so Phil was going to leave them alone for now. He had enough to worry about as it was.

From where he was standing now Phil was able to keep an eye on Loki but wasn't close enough to have to hear him speak. Over the past couple of days he had more than enough experience with the Raven's silver tongue. He had learned that unless he had to, it was best to keep his distance. But not so far away that Loki was left unsupervised. Phil didn't trust the Shifter to be alone for even a second.

Hearing hurried footsteps come up behind him he glanced back and saw Agent Hill heading towards him, the brunette woman looking grim. Whatever news she was bringing with her wasn't going to be good.

"Sir! News just came in from our western branch that Hydra's serum has been released into the water supply of central Los Angeles!"
Phil's heart dropped. "What?" Out of the corner of his eye he saw a dark smile unfurl on Loki's face and motioned for another SHIELD agent to take his place while he simultaneously began to usher Hill away. "Outside, now!" Once they had a door between him and Loki, Phil turned back to Agent Hill. "Now, what happened?"

She shook her head and drew a tablet out of her pocket, quickly pulling up images from Southern California news agencies. "Reports are coming in of Shifters losing control and running through the streets. Hydra has completely separated themselves from the crime but there is no way that anyone else was the cause. SHIELD agents managed to contain the Shifters and section off the contaminated water pipes but one Shifter died, eight humans are in critical condition, and another dozen Shifters and humans have been sent to the hospital for injuries sustained. We've sent them vials of the antidote Dr. Banner created but the damage has already been done."

His thoughts were racing but Phil kept his exterior calm and collected. He had feared that Hydra would strike while they were distracted but after two days of calm he had let himself grow optimistic. It was a personality flaw. "Then we'll do everything we can to mitigate that damage. Have any extra resources rerouted to our West Coast division and ensure that our agents are working with local authorities. Make sure that those Shifters who were involved have good legal representation."

Agent Hill nodded, already typing a message out on her tablet as she kept her sharp eyes on Phil's face. "We need to inform the Director."

Phil knew they did. This had gone too far for him to handle alone anymore. "I know. You focus on Los Angeles. I'll call Fury myself." Then there was one more call that he had to place. Steve and the others would have to be informed of this.

O~O~O~O

The sun had finally set on their first full day of their heat and Steve was more than happy to retire back to his bedroom earlier than normal. It was a blatant escape from the others but he didn't have it in him to be subtle. Unfortunately sleep was doing a decent job at completely eluding him. Neither his mind nor his body was ready to rest and so he was left just waiting for one of the two to tire out.

Sitting on his bed, Steve desperately tried to think clean thoughts. Just for one moment he wanted to be able to focus on something that wasn't his body and its urges. Especially now that he had a moment alone. Usually he was pretty good at ignoring his carnal pulls but right now resisting the impulse to act out on his desires was quickly becoming impossible. At least to unbutton his fly and touch himself. Just a bit.

"Master Rogers?"

Starting so bad he nearly threw himself off the bed, Steve let out a breath as he realized it was just Jarvis. Shock quickly morphed into a relief and Steve almost felt himself smiling as he readjusted himself under his covers. Thank goodness for distractions. "What is it?"

"I apologize for interrupting," Steve blushed, "but Agent Coulson called the house asking for you. Should I put him through?"

"Sure. Thanks."

"My pleasure, Master Rogers. One moment please."
There was a soft click as the AI transferred the line and Steve waited patiently for Coulson's voice. It was a little weird talking at the ceiling instead of into a phone and Steve felt strangely exposed as Phil's voice replaced Jarvis's. "Agent Rogers?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Is this a good time?"

The question was a courtesy Phil didn't usually extend but it made sense that he would be particularly sensitive to Steve's condition this week. After all, he had almost given in and wouldn't that have been awkward if Phil had called only five minutes later. Shaking his head to rid his mind of the thought, Steve returned to the conversation. "As good as any other."

"Good." There was a pause and suddenly Steve was wary. "Steve...I have some bad news."

He almost hated to ask. By Phil's tone he could already tell that something serious had happened. "What is it?"

"We just received words from SHIELD agents on the west coast. It seems like Hydra initiated the same sort of attack we were trying to prevent from happening in Washington D.C."

Steve's blood, which had been boiling all day, turned to ice. "What? But, how? Where?"

"Los Angeles. We weren't able to figure it out in time and since I was distracted with the Washington D.C. mission, I didn't see the signs."

"The entire thing, was it a diversion?" They had talked about that possibility but Steve had been hoping that they were wrong.

Phil released a heavy sigh. "It's likely, yes. As far as I can figure it, Loki was left in their building as bait, and we fell for it."

Was there a chance then that there was never a threat against Washington? That Hydra had carefully staged the whole thing, knowing now that SHIELD was actively looking into their files and running surveillance? "And when he triggered our heats?"

"It looks like it was a way to keep you all occupied while they put their real plan into motion."

Steve had never regretted being a Shifter until that moment, stuck like he was as a slave to his hormones. " Were there any injuries?"

Phil was so reluctant to answer that Steve knew the answer before the SHIELD agent even gave it. "...Yes. Shifters and humans."

Steve opened his mouth then closed it, unable to form the words to ask how many of those injured had died. Swallowing, he changed the question. "If...if we hadn't been, in heat, could we have stopped this?"

"Steve, it doesn't do any good to ask questions like that."

Closing his eyes, Steve pressed himself back into the pillows. "Please, just, answer the question."

Phil sighed again but when he replied his tone was firm. "You can't blame yourself. The fault lies predominately with me and with SHIELD. We narrowed our focus too far and forgot to pay attention to our peripheries."
"But if we hadn't been stuck like this, could we have helped?"

"The likelihood that we would've discovered the Los Angeles attack before it happened would have increased had your team been in full commission. I had my team look into the files Stark managed to get this time around and after enough digging we managed to find some intelligence about Los Angeles. Stark would have spotted the information hours before we did had he been able to go through the files himself. And it's possible that we could have sent your team out in time to stop Hydra. But it's just as likely we still wouldn't have made it in time."

There was his answer then. How many lives had been lost because he couldn't keep his sexual urges under control? "What happens now?"

"There is no legal evidence for pinning the attack on Hydra. The government is calling it an isolated incident of domestic terrorism but the media is focusing on Shifter's going on a rampage. S.H.I.E.L.D. is doing everything they can to mitigate the damage."

"Okay. Is there anything we can do?"

"Focus on taking care of yourselves. Steve, I called solely to keep you informed, not make you feel any sense of guilt."

He must've heard something in Steve's voice to make him say so. Taking a deep breath, Steve made sure his voice was steady even though his body was still shaking. He couldn't tell anymore whether it was because of his heat or the news.

"Yes, sir."

He never did get to sleep that night.

It was no surprise to Steve then when was in a bad mood the next morning. His emotions were all over the place, shifting erratically from depressed to angered to lusty, leaving him all the more annoyed. He felt unstable which meant he was unreliable and what good was he then? Steve had taken just enough time to inform the others about the content of Phil's call before making a beeline straight for the wooded area in Tony's backyard. He didn't dare shift, not while he could barely been a hold on himself in his human form. Instead he stripped down to his pants and just ran. Ran until he was out of breath, ran until his muscles screamed for rest, ran until his feet were numb.

He was careful though to keep himself on Tony's property and so when he had finally worn himself down it didn't take long to stagger back towards the main house. By that time it was well into the middle of the afternoon but Steve still wasn't ready to go back inside. Instead, he just laid himself out on the grass just past the tree line and dozed.

The next thing he was completely aware of was waking up to a darkening sky and a loud rumbling in his stomach. Right. He hadn't eaten all day. And after all that running, he felt like he could eat a meal meant for ten. Unfortunately the hunger didn't do anything to kill all the other feelings still whipping through him like a cyclone.

Pushing himself up to his feet, Steve brushed some dirt off of his pants and slowly, reluctantly made his way back towards Tony's house. But he didn't quite make it all the inside.

Steve could smell Tony coming a full minute before he actually saw him coming around the corner in his peripheral vision. All he wanted was to be left alone for just a few more hours, but apparently that was too much to ask. Steve tried to smother the unusually hot burst of frustration that flared up at the thought of being disturbed. He recognized it the hormones from the heat, tried to tell himself
that he shouldn't be annoyed, but the Wolf in him was snarling at having his territory invaded.
Invaded by someone that couldn't—shouldn't—be a potential mate. Couldn't he? No, no. But yet-?

Shaking his head, Steve let out a quiet growl. He could hardly think straight anymore and that
made the anger worse. Everything was getting worse. Yesterday he had been able to handle it,
being around others, but things had just built up and up and now he didn't know what was going to
happen next.

Tony's eyes quickly found his and the Cat scowled and stalked towards him. "Where the hell have
you been? Have you seriously been moping out here all day like a little girl?"

Usually Steve would've let Tony's words wash over him, but he was not exactly in a good mood
either. He wasn't up to putting up with Tony's nonsense. "Could you cut the attitude for once,
Tony?"

By then Tony was within three feet of Steve and well into his personal space. He was close enough
that Steve saw every detail as the Panther's eyes flashed then narrowed. "Sorry, what?"

Deep down Steve wanted to stop talking but he just couldn't. "I'm tired of your backtalk and I just
can't put up with it this week."

Tony started forward and got right up in Steve's face, making his hackles rise. Don't do that. God,
Tony, please don't do that. Steve ground his teeth as Tony jabbed a finger into his chest. "You don't
talk to me in that tone on my property."

He didn't want to fight the Cat but how dare he-"I'll talk to you however I want." A red veil was
falling over Steve's eyes as his alpha instincts leapt to the forefront. His heat was making him
unable to keep his temper checked, but Tony was definitely not helping his control. The Cat's angry
glare just spurred him on and he could taste the pheromones the other alpha was exuding because
the smell was so strong.

"You're about ten words away from seriously pissing me off."

Steve snorted and looked down at Tony who was nearly a head shorter than him. "That's not much
of a threat."

"We'll see about that!"

Tony's voice had dropped into a low growl and Steve was so distracted by it that he almost missed
it when Tony swung his fist towards Steve's gut. A rush of air left Steve's lungs and he doubled
over from the blow. Tony was a lot stronger than he looked, but Steve had an even higher
endurance. He didn't even wait for his breath to return before launching himself at the Cat,
forgoing punching and kicking in favor of wrestling him to the ground. Even in all his anger, Steve
didn't want to hurt him.

They hit the ground with a heavy thump, both scrambling for dominance and traction. Tony had
never turned his anger on Steve before but even now the Cat didn't seem to want to actually hurt
Steve either. Steve was proven right when he left his side open to attack after trying to pin Tony's
arms. He saw Tony's eyes dart to the exposed spot but instead of striking a blow—even though he
had every opportunity to do so—Tony just clenched his jaw and focused on trying to break his
captured arm free of Steve's hold.

Steve didn't have any time to think on it, not as distracted as he was. His skin burned wherever
Tony touched it and he expected sparks to zap between them as he threw Tony off of him just so
that he had the chance to breathe. He couldn't be around people in this condition, hadn't been able
to stand it since puberty. He hadn't even let Bucky near him and now Tony was all over him and
his emotions were everywhere and he needed air.

Momentarily gaining the advantage, Tony jerked his fist free from the tangle of limbs but before he
pin the alpha Wolf Steve grabbed hold of his hand and flipped them over so that he was on top.
Steve could feel Tony's heart beating through his chest as they both paused to take a breath at the
same time. It wasn't until then that Steve realized he was aroused, and if the press against his leg
was a telling sign, so was Tony.

This wasn't good.

Steve really shouldn't be touching anyone in his condition. Just touching was making him…

Swallowing, Tony leaned his head back against the ground, briefly exposing a column of tanned
skin. The Cat still seemed angry but that didn't stop Steve from chasing his lips down. Tilting his
head to the side at the last minute, Steve felt Tony shiver under him as his own lips brushed against
the light dusting of stubble beginning to grow on Tony's cheek. He barely recognized his own
voice, it sounded like he had gargled with a bucket of gravel. "Tony…"

He felt Tony swallow again, the Cat's voice almost as wrecked. "Sorry I hit you."

Closing his eyes, Steve took a deep inhale of Tony's scent. It was heady, almost choking, and it
smelled so much like an alpha that it should've been off-putting. But it wasn't. It wasn't an alpha
Wolf, maybe that was it. Maybe that was it, but Steve suddenly wanted. Somewhere throughout all
of encounters they had shared Steve's feelings about Tony had morphed from disgust, to
annoyance, to admiration, and then…Ever since Tony had come to him that night, it had changed
into something else. But it couldn't be—love?

Steve drew in deep breaths, his mouth open to get a better scent. "It's our heats." He said it both for
Tony and for himself. He couldn't remember any more if he had felt this way toward the feline
alpha before his heat set in or if it was just a chemical reaction in his brain but he could hardly
think anymore. His hormones were going haywire. And it seemed like he wasn't the only one.

Tony bit his lip before narrowing his eyes. "I have a proposition."

"What?"

"You should kiss me."

"Huh?" Steve wished he could've been more articulate, but all the blood in his body just flooded to
the wrong brain.

Tony's cheek brushed against his and Steve shuddered at the feel of his breath against his ear.
"We're both on edge, so let's take off some of the pressure."

But, no matter what his emotions were saying, they were just fighting. Weren't they? "Tony, I don't
think we should—"

"Look," Tony tilted his own face so that his lips brushed up against Steve's in a way that made a
bolt of electricity run down his spine, "I'm still pissed at you, but neither of us can keep this up.
You're, the only one here I can ask. I'm one day away for going out for a quick fuck so—umph!"

Steve cut Tony off by shoving their mouths together. The thought of the Cat finding another
partner when Steve had him right here made him almost blind with a possessive rage he didn't
even know he had. This was bad and if Steve had any ounce of brain function to spare he would've been afraid as he quickly began to lose control over to his heat. One thought stuck though: he really did need to get a handle on this. And, like Tony had said, Tony was the only one Steve felt he could ask this of.

Their kiss, which had started with a hard press of lips, turned almost vicious as they both began to lose themselves to their instincts. Steve jumped when he felt Tony's lips opened and the Cat's tongue press against the seam of his mouth. He tentatively parted his own lips and Steve's eyes fluttered closed as their tongue's tangled together and Tony moaning underneath him. God, that was nice. Like getting a tall glass of water after a week of walking through a desert. The way Tony reached up and pulled on his hair somehow made it even better.

The Cat rolled them so that they were both on their sides, allowing Steve to wrap his arms around Tony and pull him tight to his chest in an effort to get even closer. It still wasn't enough, wasn't nearly close enough. Steve couldn't control his hand as it trailed down Tony's side until it reached his hip, his fingers tightening on Tony's waist.

The fingers digging into his skin seemed to shake Tony a little out of his haze. Pulling away from Steve's mouth, Tony still moaned again as Steve licked at his bottom lip. "Jesus…Jesus, Steve."

"Please, Tony." Steve didn't even know what he was begging for. For him to just shut up and go back to kissing, for something more. He was so hard he was aching and his blood was humming through his veins. Tony's eyelids fell shut and he growled before pulling Steve's head closer by the back of his neck for another heated kiss.

But he seemed determined to talk as he physically pulled Steve far enough back to separate their mouths again. "Steve, fuck." Both of their chests were heaving as Steve licked his lips. Tony looked ready to snap again at the action but somehow reigned himself in even as his eyes followed Steve's tongue. "If we don't stop now, I won't be able to."

Steve wanted to say that was fine just so that he could get some relief but there was just enough sense in him to take Tony's warning seriously. Closing his eyes, Steve took in a deep breath before rolling onto his back and falling free from Tony's grasp.

In turn, Tony let him go, his only protest the burning drag of his fingertips as they slipped across Steve's mouth. The cold grass felt good against his heated skin and he finally was able to start catching his breath. It still felt like there was fire in his veins and now all he could smell was Tony laying right next to him, stinking of Cat and arousal. It smelled so good. "I don't…I don't know if that took the edge of my heat, Tony."

The Panther let out a husky chuckle as he turned onto his stomach so that he could watch Steve. "Yeah, that was a stupid solution. Short term: great, long term: blue balls."

Steve couldn't help it, he laughed back. Not because it was funny, but because it was true. "I thought you were supposed to be a genius?"

Opening his eyes, Steve rolled his head so that he could look at Tony only to find the Cat staring back at him, the corner of his darkened lips quirked up in a smile. "I take no responsibility for what my brain comes up with while I'm in heat."

Steve watched the way his lips moved but managed to smile and remember he was still mid-conversation. "I'm not listening to you anymore then until all this blows over."

Tony's grin spread. "That's probably smart since the only thing I can think of now is a very dirty
suggestion for something you can blow instead."

Steve could only shake his head, too heated up still to be embarrassed by the blatant innuendo that usually would have made his face turn red. "You're terrible."

"I know."

Shaking his head again, Steve closed his eyes. But the visual deprivation only made him to focus more on Tony's smell. Which didn't help the situation. But he didn't open his eyes. "Hey, Tony?"

Tony released a low hum. "Hmm?"

"We're okay, right?"

"...Yeah, we're good."

But they weren't good. Not when Steve wanted to roll over, run his fingers through Tony's hair, and pull him back in for another kiss. This was new. This was dangerous. But if Tony said they were good, Steve could pretend. Besides, there was another question on his mind. "...How come you didn't go to Bruce with this? The two of you seem close."

He heard Tony fidget in the grass next to him. "I could say the same thing to you."

"It's not like that between us." Tony made an unconvinced noise and Steve opened his eyes to look the Cat in the eyes. "It's just a Wolf thing. I promise." He didn't know why it was so important to him that Tony understood and he was unduly relieved when the Cat rolled his eyes but nodded. They both lay there for a few minutes more before Steve's stomach decided to remind him that it needed food. Tony laughed at him but helped him up and they made their way back into the house together. Leaving Steve in the kitchen to get started, Tony excused himself to "change his shirt". Steve was pretty sure he was doing more than that, unless Tony kept his shirts in the bathroom, but he didn't say anything. It took him five minutes standing in front of the open fridge while "deciding what to make for dinner" for his own arousal to start going down.

Hearing footsteps come up behind him, Steve glanced over his shoulder with a smile expecting to see Tony. Bruce looked surprised but gave a small smile back. "You look like you're feeling a bit better, Steve."

Steve kept his smile, fine with sharing it with Bruce, as he returned to cooking. "Yeah, a bit."

"Good." Bruce shuffled over to the coffee maker and after a moment's thought grabbed the decaf instead of his regular fully-caffeinated mix. It was a smart move; none of them needed any extra energy right now. As he started the machine up Bruce's nose twitched and he turned to look over at Steve. Steve swallowed but tried to look innocent as the beta's brow furrowed and he scented the air again.

It didn't work; Bruce had him figured out. Looking surprised, Bruce reached up and grabbed a mug out of the cabinet. "...I still might not be able to tell everything about the others, but if there's one thing I do know it's how to read a Wolf's scent. And yours says that you've been messing around."

"Well, I, uh..."

Steve was saved from answering as Tony strolled into the room. The Cat had indeed managed to change his shirt but he also seemed significantly more relaxed than he had when Steve had last seen him. A grin lit his face when he saw Bruce standing in the kitchen next to Steve and he
walked over, patting Bruce on the shoulder as he passed by. "How's it going, home-wrecker?"

Bruce looked confused. "What?"

Tony raised a brow as he leaned back against the counter top. "You're pretty oblivious for the third side of a love triangle."

"Honestly, Tony, it's way too late in the day for—" Bruce cut himself off as Tony brushed by him, the Wolf's eyes widening as his nose twitched again. It took a moment for Steve to realize what dots had just connected in the scientist's head but when he did his whole face flushed red. Bruce opened his mouth once, closed it, then tried one more time after looking from Tony to Steve. "Did, did you two…?"

Tony tilted his head. "Did we fight then make-out and rut against each other like horny teenagers? Yes."

"And why would you-?"

"Because Mother Nature is a bitch and decided it was funny to compel us to fuck anything with a pulse for two weeks every year."

Bruce looked between the two of them then sighed. "Somehow I'm not surprised at you Tony, but Steve, I have a feeling this is a new low for you."

Steve could only shrug. "I'm not exactly proud of what happened…"

"Hey!" He smiled and fought to keep his pan on the stove as Tony shoved him.

The coffee maker beeped and Bruce gratefully turned back to pour himself a cup. "It's times like these I'm grateful for not having been born an alpha…"

"Tell me about it." Pulling away from Steve, Tony waved to the two Wolves. "Unlike some of you, I managed to feed myself properly today so I'm going down to my workshop. If you have to come down, knock first. For your own sake."

"Sure…" Bruce began to stir cream and sugar into his coffee then suddenly looked up as Tony was about to leave the room. "Hang on, what was that about me being part of a 'love triangle'?"

Tony grinned as he slipped out of the room. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not in love with either of you!"

The Cat winked before disappearing down the hall. "It's alright, honey. I'll let you down easy."

Steve watched the whole exchange with a smile and shrugged again when Bruce turned back to him. "You know I'm not in love with him, right?"

"It's okay, Bruce."

"Alright. Good. Anyway, I'm going back to my room to hide under my sheets. Have a good night."

"Good night, Bruce."

O~O~O~O

The next day started out significantly better than the last had. Steve had escaped back outside but
with his emotions a little more settled out than the day before. This time he didn't run but instead settled on doing simpler exercises in the yard. One of the others occasionally came out and got curious about what he was up to but today Steve didn't mind the lack of alone time as much. His heat was still at the forefront of his brain but the anger had significantly dwindled.

He almost considered himself calm when that façade was shattered. He was completely taken off guard by a flap of wings and the shriek of a hawk. Clint.

Steve's head snapped up to see a giant hawk land in front of him, Clint quickly shifting back to his human form with a panicked look on his face. "Steve! Steve, we have a situation."

Muscles instantly tensed, Steve leapt to his feet. "What's wrong?"

"Mammal Shifters is what's wrong. Tony and Thor are about to kill each other!"

"What?! Why?"

"Who knows? They're both too jacked up on pheromones to listen to us though. You need to come break it up!"

Steve didn't need to hear anymore. Motioning for Clint to lead the way Steve raced after him as the Hawk shifted back into his animal form and took flight. Steve followed him all the way around the front of the mansion to the front drive where, sure enough, Tony and Thor were in a full-on fight. As he drew closer Steve understood why Clint had shifted to come and find him faster. The Cats were both swinging real punches and he saw blood staining the front of both of their clothes.

A growl ripped from Steve's throat and he threw himself into the mix, shouting to be heard above the din. "Stop, right now! The both of you! Right-!

Steve was cut off as Thor's fist swung into his face, the punch meant for Tony. It sent him reeling back, the Lion matching him in strength, and he snarled as he struggled to keep his feet. Before he could launch himself at the other blond, Tony beat him to it as he jumped at Thor with a fierce growl. "You son of a bitch, I'll-!"

"Tony, enough!" Steve's shout caused Tony to falter for half a second, just long enough for Steve to force himself between the two Cats. He was facing Thor and their chests bumped as Tony pressed against his back, still eager for the chance to strike at the Lion. Steve wasn't about to give him that chance though. Shoving them both back with his shoulders, Steve turned and threw his arms out to separate them by another few feet. "Stop! Enough!"

Blood tickled at Steve's nose and he could taste it on his tongue. But his nose didn't feel broken so he ignored it. He could feel Tony's chest heaving underneath the palm he had pressed against the Panther to keep him at bay and he similarly ignored the tremors that ran through his body at the physical contact. Now was not the time, especially when he couldn't allow this to go unpunished. This was the second fight they had had in three days and he couldn't let it continue like that. Bruce had jerked forward when Steve had been hit and now he reached in and grabbed Tony's shoulder, Clint moving in to do the same to Thor. Once he was sure that neither of the Cats would attack again, Steve slowly lowered his arms and pinned each of them in turn with a sharp glare. "I don't know what started this fight," he held his hand up as Tony's mouth fell open, "and right now I don't want to know. We're all on edge but that doesn't give anyone the right to resort to physical violence. I don't want to remove either of you from this team," they were both invaluable, "but I will if have to!"

Thor with still growling deep in his throat, his eyes narrowed in a heavy glare. He could practically
feel Tony's own stare drilling into the back of his head and he made sure that he met both of their eyes before continuing. They had to know that he was serious. "Now, we're going to talk this thing over inside, but you can consider yourselves on notice. One more incident like this and I will be having a talk with Coulson about your reassignment."

Without any further conversation, Thor turned and stalked back into the house. Wiping his face as blood streaked down from his nose, Steve grimaced. It probably looked bad, but it wasn't anything close to what Tony and Thor had done to each other. Speak of the devil… Tony tucked up next to him as Thor disappeared back inside the mansion. The billionaire's brow was pinched in concern, his golden brown eyes skimming over Steve's face and angrily taking in every detail. Seemingly oblivious to his own wounds, Tony reached up and thumbed at the red smudge on Steve's cheek. "Did that bastard get you too bad?"

Steve shivered at the touch but forced himself to slap the Cat's hand away. He couldn't allow himself to be distracted. As the leader he was obligated to keep order and discipline and he wouldn't let his own heat debilitate him and keep him from performing his duties. "I'm fine. Just… go inside, Tony."

"Steve—"

"Please."

Steve had spoken under his breath, quiet enough so that only Tony had heard him. The Cat eyed him once more before growling and turning on his heels to follow Thor back into his home.

Checking back with Bruce and Clint to try and give them an ounce of reassurance, Steve shook his head then slowly made his way towards the front door of the house. He wasn't looking forward to this.

Thor and Tony were both waiting for him in the living room. They both had their arms crossed and were standing on opposite sides of the room, but at least they had both did as he asked. Now that they were both standing still Steve could tell that while their cuts had bled a lot it looked like they were mostly flesh wounds, which was good for all involved. Nevertheless, after they were done here he was going to call Bruce in to take a look at them.

Both Cats looked up as he entered the room and Steve decided to cut right to the chase. "Listen, we're this team's alphas. We can't bicker amongst ourselves like this, it isn't good for group dynamics."

Tony snorted as he dropped down into a chair, one leg lazily propped up on the cushioned arm. "Easy to say when you are the one in charge."

"I'm serious." Steve put his hands on his hips. "The others look to all of us, not just me, as alpha Shifters for leadership. How are they supposed to trust any of us to make decent decisions together if we can't go for forty-eight hours without breaking into a brawl? So what is it? What is going on between you two that you can't get along? And I don't just want to hear it's because you're Cat Shifters. There was more to it than that and they could only blame the current state of things on biology for so long.

Thor frowned down at Tony and cross his arms over his chest. "I demand to be treated with more respect. I am a prince of-!

Unable to keep his mouth shut, Tony threw his hands into the air in exasperation. "Of fucking what? Some village in Scandinavia humans don't even know about? Congratulations, that's a hot
Steve shook his head. "Tony, Thor has a point. This isn't going to work if we don't have some respect for each other." The 'and you can be kind of an asshole' went unsaid but judging by Tony's expression he received the message loud and clear.

"This isn't all on me. He needs to learn his place! He can't lord over us just because he has delusions of being royalty."

"I have no intentions of 'lording' over anyone!"

Tempers were beginning to rise again and Steve tried to cut it off before they could start swinging again. "Okay, okay! Both of you! You're letting your heat get the better of you!"

Thor snarled back. "As if either of you are in any position to lecture me on losing control of one's self during a heat!"

"I—I don't kn—" Steve's eyes flew to Tony's, suddenly unable to form a proper sentence.

Thor continued, waving his hand wildly towards Tony as he kept his eyes on Steve. "If you had not chosen to seek release from each other, you would be no better off than I."

"How did you…?" He wasn't a Wolf like Bruce, he wouldn't have smelled it on them!

Snorting, Thor straightened up. "You think me a child! I have seen many courtings in my lifetime and I know the signs. At first I did not believe it possible, a Wolf and a Cat, and two alphas besides, but there is no mistaking the way you act around each other."

Tony growled from his seat. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"I know exactly what I speak of. And it is little wonder now why you, a Cat, have supported a Wolf as you have. This has been going on for longer than this heat, has it not?"

Tony jerked up in his chair. "Shut the hell up!"

"Tony!" As much as he didn't like where Thor was taking this conversation, he couldn't allow Tony to speak to the Lion like that, especially since they had just had a talk about respect.

Apparently it's not what Tony wanted to here. Lurching up out of his seat, Tony glared at Steve. "Listen, if you're not actually going to do anything more than scold us, I'm going back to my room."

"Tony. I'm not done."

"Too bad, because I am."

With that Tony stormed out of the room, leaving Thor and Steve in an awkward silence. It didn't take long for Steve to call Bruce in and leave himself. He let his feet carry him out onto the back deck where he shakily took a seat and put his head in his hands.

He just wanted to forget. Forget about the fighting, about Loki and their botched mission. About Los Angeles and the Shifters and humans who died or were injured there today because his team was falling apart at the seams because of a chemical reaction in their brain that turned them into hormone-crazed animals. About Tony and how good it felt to kiss him and how intoxicating his scent was.
Steve let out a heavy sigh and closed his eyes. It would be over soon.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who left comments and checked out my Tumblr page! One of the best parts of writing for me is interacting with my readers. I really appreciate your feedback on everything and your getting involved with the story. Some of you are really perceptive and I love it! ^_^

Anyway, onto the next. Just as a warning, this chapter is where this story begins to earn its Mature rating, so I hope you enjoy.

_Dad…?_ 
_Dad, where are you…?_

The shackles around his wrists clanked as Tony tried to push himself up off of the dirty concrete floor. His bare arms were streaked with blood, some of it dried and caked into his welts and covering his bruises. He could feel it more than see it, one eye swollen shut and the other filled with even more blood.

Oh God…he was going to die.

He was going to die covered in his own shit and urine and gore.

A wet cough bubbled up in his throat and the force of it threw him back to the ground.

No…

No, he wasn't going to go out like this. Not like this—

Tony eyes snapped open as he gasped.

Fuck…He could still smell it. He shouldn't have gone to bed agitated like that. That's when the dreams always came.

Subconsciously rubbing at his chest, Tony used his other arm to prop himself up in his bed. He could feel the healing cuts on his skin from his fight with the Lion pull tight at the movement and a shiver ran down his spine at the sensation, his mind still buzzing from memories of much deeper wounds.

Once he had taken a moment to regulate his breathing his hand automatically flew to his phone but before he could speed dial Pepper his fingers paused. Talking to Pepper wasn't what he wanted. He had been wanting something else since that afternoon and this might be a way to kill two birds with one stone. Get the nightmares out of his mind and get some damned relief from his heat. His phone said it was just passed two in the morning. That wasn't too late, not for what he had planned.

Once he had gotten a scent, a male Panther was relentless in finding potential mates. Tony usually didn't mind it because the men and women he ended up imprinting on were usually oblivious humans he met at parties that were more than happy to go home with Tony Stark. It was a gamble
Pepper never liked very much—going out when he was in heat—but so far he had tight enough control over his Shifter side to fool his partners into thinking that he completely human, just a little extra enthusiastic. As long as he never drank at those parties and wore protection during, he was fine.

But today, that thing with Steve, that had been different. Rolling around in the grass, using his full strength, and being able to scent and bite as much as his hormones were screaming at him to do; that had been completely different. And he wanted more. He wanted so much it was burning a hole inside him right where his heart was.

Panthers were fucking tenacious when they set their sights on a potential mate. It was the result of their typical solitary life patterns. They could stalk their target for miles and miles without hesitation. Luckily Tony's target was just down the hall, because he didn't have that kind of patience tonight.

O~O~O~O

It had been a quiet, tense night after Tony had stormed away from the conversation he, Steve, and Thor had. Once Steve had calmed himself down he had rejoined Thor in the house and had sat with him as Bruce finished cleaning and wrapping the Lion's cuts.

With Tony out of the room, he and Thor actually managed to have a good talk and Steve learned that the fight had started because Thor was trying to leave the property and Tony didn't want to let him go. They had an argument about it which had quickly devolved into the fight.

Steve asked Bruce to go check on Tony but when the beta followed the Cat up to where he had disappeared into his bedroom the Wolf was rebuffed. Steve decided then it would be best to just let everyone settle down and to call Bruce off. Both Wolves agreed that Tony's wounds may have been extensive but they weren't grave. He would be alright.

Not long afterwards, Steve had retired early himself, hoping that some rest would put his mind to ease and give him a break from the fights, from thoughts of Los Angeles, and from his heat. And that night it actually seemed to work. Just not for very long.

He knew that not many hours had passed when he was roused from sleep.

Steve's eyes flickered open but he kept himself still as he tried to determine what woke him up. The room was quiet and dark. No where near dawn yet. He was laying on his side, his back to the door and he could sense a presence behind him. As his senses adjusted he could hear them breathing, could smell them…Tony.

Relaxing, Steve rolled over so that he was facing the Cat and, sure enough, there Tony was standing inside his room by the door. Somehow he had managed to sneak in and close the door behind him without Steve noticing again. It was no less impressive the second time around. Rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand, Steve pushed himself up into a sitting position. "Tony? What is it?" He was too tired to be wary, despite the fact that he should be considering that the last time they spoke the conversation had ended in an argument.

Steve's words were slightly slurred from sleep but as he slowly came all the way back around he realized that Tony was back in his pajamas. Except unlike the last time this happened, when Tony had come to him after his nightmare, Tony didn't look or smell frightened. No, this time his expression was decidedly different.

Swallowing a little, Steve backed himself up against the headboard and tried not to let his body
react. Tony looked like he wanted to eat him. And not in an entirely bad way.

"Steve." Just the sound of the Cat's voice had sweat beading up on Steve's skin. "I would say I'm sorry to wake you but that would be a blatant lie."

"Is, there—What—" Swallowing, Steve tried again. He should be able to talk, for heaven's sake. But it felt like his tongue was caught in his throat. "What are you doing here?"

"I think you know." Tony's voice had dropped to a low growl and just like that Steve was fully aroused again. The situation was only exacerbated as the Cat stalked towards the bed with a predatory look on his face.

Steve was pretty sure that he should tell Tony to leave, to just turn around and walk out of the room before Steve physically forced him out. After their kiss, Steve shouldn't risk it. He had gotten a taste and there was no way he would be able to resist temptation after that if he let Tony get close to him, especially with the way he was looking at him.

But he just didn't have it in him. He was at his wits end and when Tony crawled up onto his mattress he could do little more than grab Tony by the collar of his shirt and haul him up to meet him.

Tony growled happily as their lips collided, the Panther reaching up and burying his fingers in Steve's blond hair to hold him in place as he licked his way into Steve's mouth. Moaning, Steve could only grab hold of Tony right back as the two tumbled back onto the bed in a tangle of limbs.

With a sharp nip at Tony's lip, Steve tilted his head to break the kiss and catch his breath, his lips moving against Tony's jawline. "I'm supposed to still be mad at you."

Tony pulled back far enough to send him a smug grin, his voice a low, teasing drawl. "And how's that working out for you?"

"Not so good..." Steve growled as Tony chuckled. The sound was ridiculously sexy. "This isn't some sort of apology, is it?"

Tony smiled as he ducked back down for another kiss. "Definitely not." His fingers tightened in Steve's hair, almost to the point of being painful. "This is me taking what I want."

Alpha pheromones were rolling off of Tony and crashing over Steve in waves. Snarling at the sensation, Steve rolled them over so that he was on top then yelped as Tony flipped them right back over. Steve was about to get angry but then he realized that Tony was laughing against his cheek, the sound a husky rumble. "Not yet."

Snorting in frustrated amusement, Steve pulled Tony in for another kiss, dominating the action instead of their position. His human brain was screaming at him to slow things down a bit but his animal side was roaring twice as loud not to let this opportunity to go by. Who was he to deny Tony when the Cat had come to him looking for attention? Instead of breaking the kiss to breathe again, Steve inhaled deeply through his nose and went almost dizzy with Tony's scent. It was only growing stronger as things heated up.

Steve balked as Tony pulled away and then both sides of his brain short-circuited as Tony scooted back just far enough to whip the bed sheets off Steve's body. The night air felt frigid against his heated skin and as Tony climbed back on top of him the shock of the temperature change was just enough to knock some sense back into Steve.

Swallowing, he grabbed Tony's shoulders and held him at bay even as the Cat growled unhappily.
"Tony—Tony, shouldn't we talk about this?"

Tony frowned but didn't fight too hard against Steve's hold. At least the Panther was still aware enough himself to talk. That wasn't always the case with alphas. "I don't see why."

"This is big. A big change."

"Not that big."

The Cat clearly didn't want to waste any extra breath speaking but Steve changed tactics before his own body betrayed him and released Tony to crash back into him. "Just answer one question for me first then: why did you get so mad earlier?"

Tony's eyes narrowed in confusion. "What, during the fight?"

"No. Afterwards when Thor mentioned that whatever was going on between us started before our heats did."

Shaking his head, Tony ducked down and licked a line up Steve's arm up to his wrist before nipping gently at his thumb. "Forget about that damn Lion."

Steve blinked dumbly as he tried to remember why he would be worried about a Lion at all. Right. Thor. Earlier. "No, wait—Tony, I want to know." It was important, otherwise he wouldn't have asked. Right?

Tony rolled his eyes as he realized that his distraction wasn't having the desired effect then sighed. "I was embarrassed, alright? I thought that was hellishly obvious at the time…"

Tilting his head to the side, Steve watched Tony as emotions flickered across his face. It was hard to make anything out through the lust which did nothing to lower Steve's own libido. "Why would you be embarrassed?"

"Because maybe it hit a little too close to home."

Steve grinned. "So you liked me before the heat? What's wrong with that?"

Growling, Tony nipped at Steve's thumb again, this time a little harder. Not enough to be painful, just a little more than necessary. "...Because I like to put myself in a constant state of denial. Now, you're going to shut up and let me kiss you again or I'm leaving. What's it going to be?"

The answer rolled out of Steve's lips before he had even heard the whole question. "The first one."

"Okay. Good choice."

Sitting back from his position still on top of Steve, Tony let out a breath as he snuck his palms under the hem of Steve's nightshirt. "...Couldn't stop thinking about your mouth and your damned abs..." Tony slid his hands up and underneath Steve's night shirt, pushing the cotton fabric up to bunch under his arms.

With darkened eyes, Tony leaned down and pressed his lips to the newly exposed skin and Steve's stomach muscles jumped as the Cat licked a path from his navel up to his chest. "T-tony."

Chuckling, Tony leaned back up and pressed a hot, open-mouth kiss to Steve's lips. "You're such a virgin."

"...Is, is that bad?" Because it was true. He was...inexperienced. Unheard of for an alpha of his
standing. But Steve just hadn't been all that attractive for a long while and after he had hit his
growth spurt he had been fine with just himself and his friends. Then, then there had been Bucky,
seeing Bucky as a potential mate, not just a friend, but then—

Steve was roused from his thoughts by Tony's low chuckle and the burn of the Cat's palms as he
slid them further up Steve's chest. "No, I actually love it. But you're going to have to loosen up if
you want to fuck me tonight."

"W-what?" Steve didn't even have it in himself to be embarrassed when his voice cracked.

"Don't make me repeat myself otherwise I'll change my mind. I don't offer to bottom for many
people."

"No, no, don't! Tony, just…" Steve swallowed. Mating. Tony wanted to mate. With him. Were
they ready for this? Did Tony actually want this? Before Steve's inner-monologue could continue,
Tony pressed their mouths together and kissed Steve so passionately that it had him seeing stars.
Nope, okay. Okay, they were ready. God, was Steve ready. "Tony, just…come here!"

Grabbing Tony tight around the waist, Steve threw him so that they were both laying on their side.
Just like he had in the grass earlier that day, Steve pressed as tight against Tony as he could,
burying his nose against Tony's skin and just breathing deep between kisses, licks, and nips to
wherever his skin could reach. Just like earlier, it still wasn't close enough but this time Steve
could fix that.

He hastily tugged his shirt the rest of the way off over his head then slipped his hands down to
clutch at Tony's own night shirt. Steve needed skin to skin contact now, wanted to see the Cat's
bare chest and stomach. Wanted to see everything and commit every single square inch, every tan
line and freckle to memory with sight, touch, and taste.

But then Tony's hands were on Steve's pulling his fingers away from the hem of his shirt.

It was the first sign of rejection that Tony had shown all night and it was like someone had
dumped a bucket of cold water over Steve's head. "W-what's wrong? Did I do something wrong?"
He hadn't even been thinking, just moving. What if he had messed this up before they even started?
What if-?

"No, it's, you didn't do anything. You're fucking perfect."

The words were harsh but they sounded genuine. But now Steve was worried. "What is it?"

"How about we just do this with my shirt on, huh? Call it a kink."

Tony was trying to smile but he wasn't that successful. Frowning in concern, Steve rested back on
his elbow and could only watch as Tony brought his arms up to cross over his chest. An extra
barrier of protection against Steve getting his shirt off, as if Tony thought he was still about to try.
The mood had decidedly taken a turn but Steve kept his voice soft as he gently reached out to
touch Tony's face. "I would never hurt you, you know that right?" Maybe Cat's were sensitive
about showing their soft spots to strangers? But Thor didn't seem to have any issue with it…

"It's not you. It's just—" Tony sighed and, almost against his will, leaned his cheek against Steve's
hand as he cupped the Panther's face. "Remember when I told you I had heart surgery?"

Steve nodded. He didn't think he would ever forget that story.

"It not only turned me off hospitals for the rest of my life, but it let a scar about the size of Texas
on my chest too. It's, because I'm a Shifter. The scar tissue isn't as pliable as it should be so every
time I transformed it just, made it worse. To fix it, I'd have to go through a couple of skin grafts
and I didn't want to go under the knife again so—"

Steve shushed Tony by gently covering the Cat's mouth with his own. Nuzzling his nose as he
pulled back, Steve smiled over at him. "It's okay, Tony."

"But I—"

"I don't mind it."

"It's disgusting."

There was so much self-deprecation in Tony's voice that it made Steve's heart hurt. Reaching up,
Steve combed a strand of unruly hair out of Tony's face before letting his fingers slide down to rest
against the side of Tony's cheek again, the stubble there lightly scratching against his palm. "You
went through hell when you were younger and it left a scar. It's not disgusting, it's a sign of how
strong you are that you even survived it. You don't have to show me but…I'd like to see it."

"…You are disturbingly sappy when you talk like that, you know that right?"

"Is that a 'yes'?"

Tony frowned then, after a long moment, gave a tight nod. "Don't say I didn't warn you…"

Shaking his head, Steve dipped his head to kiss Tony once more before reaching for the hemline of
Tony's t-shirt. He tugged it up gently and in stages, giving the Cat every opportunity to stop him.
Tony's fingers twitched a few times but he didn't, didn't even try to stop him. Both of them
swallowed as Steve finally pulled Tony's shirt off over his head, but for entirely different reasons.
Tony's face was tense, cautious but Steve was just trying very hard not to make any sudden
movements. Just seeing Tony's bare skin made the butterflies in his stomach jump back to life and
his heart rate start pounding again.

The scar Tony was so worried about instantly drew his eyes. It was paler than the skin around it,
the main part about the size of Steve's fist and positioned perfectly in the center of Tony's chest
with thin lines of scar tissue snaking out across his pectorals and down towards his abdomen.

Realizing he had been staring too long when Tony let out a light hiss, Steve finally moved.
Ducking his head, Steve kissed the center of the distorted skin then traced out one of the tendrils of
scar tissue with his tongue. The texture was different, but it still tasted like Tony. It was a part of
Tony just as much as his hands, his eyes, or his smile and Steve loved it.

He heard Tony's breath hitch and then there were fingers tugging at his shoulders and Tony pulled
Steve back up to press their lips together, Tony's grip tightening on Steve's skin as he swept his
tongue into his mouth.

Once skin touched skin, Steve couldn't get enough and it seemed like Tony was the same, now
convinced that Steve wasn't about to kick him out of bed. The more they touched the more
Steve wanted and any and all thoughts were completely wiped from his brain. That rush from their
heats surged back through their bodies and their pants were ripped off and thrown across the room.

Panting against Tony's shoulder, Steve's gasps were broken by an embarrassingly high-pitch
whimper as Tony slipped a hand down his body and palmed his crotch through his underwear. His
hips automatically jacked forward, instinct driving them forward just from the simple touch. He
heard Tony chuckle in his ear at his whine, his breath hot and huffing against Steve's cheek.
"Come on, let's get those briefs off of you."

"Tony…"

Another husky laugh. "…Easy, boy."

Tony's ridiculously clever fingers made short work of slipping both of the rest of their clothes, leaving them both naked in the sheets. Steve was almost afraid to look down, and when he finally did it turned out he was right to be worried. The amount of emotion rolling through him at seeing Tony, ready and eager, almost caused Steve to shift right then. He actually felt his eyes begin to change and fur begin to prickle at his skin and heaved a breath, frantically blinking to keep himself in check.

"Everything okay in there?"

Yes and no. Definitely maybe. Shaking his head, Steve lunged forward and rolled Tony onto his back so that his stomach was facing up. Immediately Tony tried to turn back onto his side, but Steve held him down, his fingers tightening on the Cat's shoulders. "Don't."

Tony's own eyes flashed and his legs twisted up, subtly trying to find a way to throw Steve off. When he spoke next, his voice had lost its teasing lilt. "I know I said I'd bottom but-I'm not a big fan of this position, Steve."

"I know."

But Steve was. Steve's arousal was quickly rising off the charts seeing Tony stretched out and exposed in such a submissive position. Especially knowing that Tony himself was an alpha. Steve was rock hard as he switched his hold on Tony's shoulders so that he was pinning the other down with one arm pressed down against Tony's collarbone, freeing up one hand. Tony squirmed again as Steve tilted the other's chin up so that his throat was bared. Releasing a trembling breath, Steve struggled to maintain any sort of composure, the Wolf in him writhing, desperate to just take and take and take. "Jesus, Tony, look at you…"

He saw Tony swallow before a scowl spread across his face. "Okay, you have five fucking seconds to do something before I lose it. And not in a good way. In a T'm going to rip your throat out way —"

Steve cut off his threats by leaning down and running his tongue across Tony's own throat. He heard Tony's heart rate shoot up as Steve lunged down at his exposed vitals, his pulse not slowing much as Steve's tongue on his throat was quickly replaced by teeth. Steve was careful not to bite down too hard but couldn't resist the urge to nip his way up Tony's neck. In a small act of repentance, he nuzzled against Tony's jaw, his nostrils flaring as the Cat's lust spiked at the action. Releasing Tony from his position, Steve brought both hands up to cup Tony's face as he licked his way into the other's mouth to seal their lips in a deep kiss. He smiled as Tony instantly rolled back onto his side as soon as he was able but then gasped as Tony's thigh came up to settle between Steve's legs, pressing up tightly against his groin and knocking the air right out of Steve's lungs.

The noise apparently triggered something in Tony because he let out a low rumbling noise Steve could only describe as a purr. "By the end of tonight, there isn't going to be an inch of you that doesn't smell like me…"

Steve growled but didn't respond—couldn't respond as he was bombarded by emotion and instinct. As Tony rubbed his cheek against Steve's chest, Steve bit down lightly on Tony's shoulder, nipping...
and sucking on the patch of skin until a red bruise began to blossom.

The next few hours were a blur for Steve. The last few moments of cognitive thoughts he had were trying to be gentle but then Tony said "Harder" and Steve just lost it. It had felt so good and at one point he literally couldn't remember what he had done aside from a feeling of bliss and setting a brutal pace. And Tony had taken it and liked it, which had just fired him up even more. Steve had been worried he had hurt the Cat but he never smelled scared or hurt, just content and as desperate as Steve was for release.

The next thing Steve was really aware of was blinking his eyes up at the ceiling feeling completely and utterly blissed out and the feel of a warm body pressed up against his side. The sensation faded slowly and was replaced with a cooling sensation of finally being able to breathe properly. The fever from his heat had broken.

As if he could sense what Steve was thinking, Tony let out a small, breathy laugh. "Feel better?"

Steve blinked again, distracted for a moment by the feeling of sweat cooling on his skin. "...Yeah, actually." It was like a haze had been lifted from in front of his eyes. His heat had stopped. Steve didn't know a heat could be stopped. He had never tried to stop it before.

"Good. It should last a few hours." Well, maybe not stopped then, but certainly satiated for the moment. No wonder all those mated Wolf pairs disappeared during their heats. Sex was mind-blowing and this temporary respite from the heat was almost as addicting.

Tony squirmed next to him and Steve reached out a hand, worried that the Cat was getting ready to leave. He didn't want him to go. Not yet.

At the hand on his wrist, Tony paused then released an exaggerated sigh. "Wolves...Should've guessed."

Before Steve could question the comment the Cat wrapped an arm around Steve's shoulders and hauled him close. Steve was surprised by how good Tony's lithe muscles felt against him.

"Hey...Tony?"

Tony let out a questioning grunt, the stubble on his chin a slight burn on Steve's skin as he nuzzled against the Wolf's cheekbone. "Hm?"

"It's just...I don't, feel any different. I mean," Steve hastened to correct any misconceptions, "it was good! I don't mean it wasn't, but I just always thought that there would be this, deep connection or something with the person I mated with."

He felt Tony smile against his skin. "I'm gonna stop you right there, sport. What we did was fun, and good, and all that, but it was just sex. Not mating."

"But I thought—"

"Nope. If Shifters mated with everyone we had sex with during our heats, we'd be screwed, pun intended."

Steve fell silent for a moment, still staring up at the ceiling. It was a bit of a blow. It was probably for the best, now that he could think a little more clearly. It probably would've been a mistake to mate with Tony of all people. But he had been so ready in that instant that to come away without that connection was a little...disappointing? No, it wasn't quite that. It was an emotion Steve couldn't put his finger on.
Apparently he was quiet for a moment too long. Frowning, Tony pushed himself up so that he was looking down at Steve. "Are you mad about it?"

"No…" He wasn't mad. Who would he even be mad at? "Just, not what I expected."

A corner of Tony's lips curled up into a small smirk. "Trust me, it's better this way." The grin melted away faster than usual, the Cat's eyes growing serious as they danced over Steve's face. "Mating is a serious thing and it might not be considered entirely consensual if it always happened when you were in heat."

"That's actually surprisingly thoughtful."

And just like that, the smirk was back. "I have my moments."

Steve smiled back and skimmed his gaze over the lines of Tony's body. Now that he could rationally focus on the Cat, he appreciated him even more. Not just for his physical appearance, but more for the fact that Tony had trusted him enough to show Steve everything, particularly his scar which definitely seemed to be a personal hang-up for him. It was true Tony had been in a heat-induced fog then, but even alpha Shifters maintained some degree of decision-making power.

Ans then there were the healing cuts he had gotten from Thor that he hadn't noticed before. It looked like Tony had cleaned them off himself and they were already closing up nicely. Steve was glad that their activities hadn't aggravated any of them too much. Noticing a dark mark on Tony's shoulder as his gaze shifted over, Steve pushed himself up into a sitting position against the headboard so he could get a better look at it. It looked like a bruise but it—Oh. Following the mark down, Steve blushed as he realized that there was a trail of bruises meandering down Tony's body. Well, they weren't exactly bruises. Not all of them anyway.

"Jeez, I'm sorry, Tony. I didn't realize it would be that…obvious."

Tony looked down at his body and saw the smattering of hiccys that ran from his neck down to his hips but to Steve's surprise only shrugged. "Don't be too sorry. I wasn't exactly subtle either."

"What do you mean?"

Steve looked down at his own body. The only marks he saw were a couple of light scratches.

Rolling his eyes, Tony reached a hand up around the back of Steve's neck and pulled the Wolf in close before closing his eyes and inhaling deeply through his nose. "You're covered in my scent, Steve. And I have to admit, it's a big improvement over smelling like dog."

Steve blushed again, self-consciously bringing his arm up to try and scent himself. It was always difficult for Steve to pick out his own smell since to him it was a neutral; it was just the smell that was always around him. But now all he could smell was Tony, and that definitely wasn't normal. Even as close to Tony as he felt now, it didn't sit quite right with Steve and he had to hold himself back from running to the shower. If they were mates though, would he have minded it?

Clearing his throat, Steve turned to look back at the Panther who was staring up at him as he lazily lay back against Steve's pillow. "So…If we're not mates now, what are we?"

The word 'boyfriends' sounded muted, a human term for a human relationship that hardly summed up the feeling Shifters could have for each other. Then again, 'friends with benefits' was even worse and made whatever this was sound cheap and hollow.

Tony thought for a moment before shaking his head and pulling Steve down for a quick kiss.
"We're just 'us'. Don't try putting a label on it."

Steve closed his eyes, savoring the feel of Tony's hand in his hair. And there were the lingering shadows of his heat already creeping back in. "Are we, just going to pretend like this never happened? I mean, if it wasn't because of our heats, we'd probably never have-"

Tony snorted. "Don't be stupid, Steve. It doesn't suit you." The genius's fingers tightened in Steve's hair and gave a light, almost reassuring tug. "Maybe this wouldn't have happened if we both weren't jacked up on pheromones right now but to be honest, I'd probably have jumped you eventually." Steve fought back another blush. "Either way it happened and since we're both okay with that I don't see why we have to pretend about anything. Besides, everyone in this house already knows."

That made Steve's eyes snap back open. "What do you mean? We haven't even gone outside of this room yet."

Tony sent him a disbelieving look. "Uh, did you hear how much noise we were making?"

Steve's flush came back in full force. "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

Well…that answered the question of how Steve was going to break this news to the rest of the team. He was counting on their scents outing them but if they had really been that loud…Good lord, how loud were they? What did everyone else hear? Steve didn't even remember what sounds Tony had been making much less what might have been coming out of his own mouth!

Shaking the thoughts away, Steve sat up away from the headboard as he tried to distract himself with different thoughts. A glance at the clock told him it was just passed four in the morning. That was a little early for breakfast but Steve was suddenly starving. And he actually was, it wasn't just a way to avoid the situation. It felt like he had just run a marathon. Looking down at Tony, Steve offered the Cat a small smile. "I'm going to go grab some food. Do you want to come with me? I can make pancakes, with bacon again." The kitchen was far enough away from the bedrooms that Steve wouldn't have to worry about cooking noises waking the rest of the team. They had undoubtedly been kept awake for too long that night already.

Tony just nestled further back into the bed and made a show of stretching his arms up over his head, Steve's eyes racing across Tony's bare body on their own accord. "Actually, I'd really just like to not move for a bit, if it's all the same to you."

"Could I bring you something?" Steve knew Tony didn't eat as much as him, but if Steve was this hungry, Tony had to at least want a little something. After all, they had both just expended about the same amount of energy.

Tony smirked at the offer. "Breakfast in bed? Sure. I wish all my lays were as nice as you."

"You're too easy to rile up! But sure, I'd take a bite to eat. Something with a lot of protein and carbs, if you're cooking anyway."

"I'll see what I can do."

Steve ended up just making scrambled eggs and bacon, not wanting to be away from Tony for the few extra minutes it would take to make pancake batter. After he had brought the food up and they devoured it in record-breaking time, Steve finally excused himself for that shower. A part of him
hated the idea of washing away the evidence of the first night he shared with someone but a bigger part of him, the alpha in him, really wanted to not smell like something claimed. Even if it was Tony.

Once Steve had scrubbed himself down he gathered up their plates and, leaving Tony to continue to shamelessly lounge in his bed, made his way back down to the kitchen to clean up. A few hours had passed since Steve had come down to cook in the first place so he wasn't startled to see that he wasn't the only one up anymore.

Bruce was sitting at the kitchen counter looking like he had just sat down with his morning cup of coffee. The beta's nose scrunched up as Steve walked into the room and any thought that the team didn't know what had happened disappeared like a puff of smoke.

"Steve, wow. Did you think of taking a shower before coming out?"

"I did shower." Dumping his dirty plates in the sink, Steve sent Bruce a sheepish look back over his shoulder at Bruce. "Is it bad?"

Bruce raised a brow as he lifted his mug up for a sip of his coffee. "The smell is pretty strong. As in, I can't even smell my coffee anymore strong."

Steve sighed and ignored the fact that a flush had returned to his cheeks as he filled the sink with water. He was, however, heartened by the fact that Bruce didn't seem disapproving. More resigned than anything. But since he had caught him and Tony after they had made-out, he probably wasn't all that surprised that it had come to this. Shifters were fairly predictable when they were in heat. "I don't get it. It's not like Tony smells like me."

"It's because he's a Cat and you're a Wolf."

"What?"

Bruce sighed. "Have you never had this conversation?"

Again, he sounded more resigned than surprised. But Steve had no idea what he was talking about. "What conversation?"

"This is not something anyone should have to explain to an alpha..." Shaking his head, Bruce took a long sip from his mug before continuing, "Wolves and Cats both have very clear ways of marking their mates."

"But Tony said we're not—"

Bruce held up his hand and Steve fell silent. "Potential mates then. Whatever it is you two are. I don't need to know the details. Anyway, Wolves leave visual cues, bites, scratches, whatever. From what I've read, Cats leave scents as marks instead. Strong, pheromone-rich scents apparently."

An awkward silence fell between them until Steve broke it with a small sigh. "How long am I going to smell like this?"

"I'm sure it will fade within the next twenty-four hours."

It took seventy two hours, three whole days.

Of course, it didn't help that Steve never really stopped touching Tony. His heat was back in full swing by noon that day although he was able to resist the urge to just grab the Cat, pull him into a
room or behind a tree and just have his way with him. Which is what he really, really wanted to do. Tony seemed to have a better handle on himself but didn't complain about how handsy Steve was being. That was saying something, considering how intense the Cat usually was about maintaining his personal space.

But time marched on and several blissfully uneventful days passed. Tony's scent was just barely lingering in the strands of Steve's hair when Steve found Tony and Bruce sitting next to each other at the dining room table. There were blueprints to something mechanical-looking scattered across the table top but it was clear that whatever business they had planned to discuss had been abandoned long ago, neither of the two Shifters capable of maintaining their focus mid-heat even as smart as they both were.

Sidling up right behind Tony, Steve leaned his chin over the Cat's shoulder and wrapped his arms around Tony's waist. Bruce huffed out an exasperated noise but made an obvious point of scooting his chair over a few inches. Steve's actions had been less about seeking comfort and more about staking a claim. Just because Bruce might've been sitting a little close—not that Steve thought there was anything going on between the beta and the Cat. He just, his alpha side needed to show some ownership there despite his human brain's protests.

Tony rolled his eyes at the entire exchange before his gaze flickered up to Steve's face. "Can I help you, or are you just going to use my shoulder as a chin-rest all day?"

Steve couldn't help himself and buried his nose against the crook of Tony's throat, taking a deep breath. A shiver slipped down his spine as the Cat's scent filled his senses and he almost found himself wishing he was still covered in it. Almost. "What are you two talking about?"

"Coulson called while you were asleep. Jarvis was annoyingly insistent that someone answer, so I picked up the line. They managed to get a little more out of Loki last night."

"Steve's eyes sharpened. So they were still talking business after all. "What did they learn?"

Bruce looked up from the piece of paper he had snatched up from the table. "Agent Coulson confirmed that he was the one who leaked information about the Hydra base near Washington to SHIELD."

Steve frowned. "I would have thought that was Hydra's idea." Looking back at how he acted during their very first encounter, it didn't seem like Loki had wanted to be near his brother or any of the rest of them. Steve hadn't thought that the Raven would have set Hydra's trap on his own initiative. "Why would he do that?"

Shrugging, Bruce tossed the piece of paper back onto the table. "He must have wanted to be found."

"But why? I don't get it." If Steve understood what Thor had said, Loki had run away from home. If Loki was trying to escape his family, why would he try to lure the team back in?

Tony snorted and rolled his shoulder so that Steve's chin was bumped off. Steve growled but let him wiggle away. "Isn't it obvious? It's because of Thor."

"What?"

"He wanted to be found because Thor was the one looking for him."

"So, wait." Leaning against the table, Steve frowned in confusion, his brain back to feeling sluggish. "I thought Loki brought us there to trigger our heat and put us out of commission so
Hydra could act in Los Angeles?"

Bruce spoke up again this time. "That's what Tony and I were just talking about. It's pretty obvious that was definitely his goal, but there would've been easier ways for him to try and distract us from Los Angeles. He chose this method specifically for a reason."

"And what reason is that?"

Bruce tilted his head. "Loki and Thor, they are—or were—more than just brothers."

Tony furrowed his brow. "And that's just, nasty."

"Why?" The news wasn't actually that much of a surprise to Steve. He had just hadn't put the facts together in his mind that way yet. He had heard the conversation Thor had with his brother in Washington D.C. He had seen the open, pained look in Thor's eyes and the sharp betrayal in Loki's. Steve was just starting to learn what love was, but he imagined there wasn't much else in life that could've inspired either of the Shifter's reactions. To tell the truth, what confused him was Tony's reaction to the whole thing. "What's wrong with that?"

Bruce grinned up at Steve as Tony just shook his head. "Steve, you're cute, but you can be dense as a brick. He's talking about incest."

"I know. But, technically they're not related, right?"

"Technically, whatever. It's weird."

But it did explain a lot. The depth of Thor's emotional pain after the mission ended that had caused the social Cat's reclusive behavior. His concern over Loki's treatment. Even his desperation to leave Tony's house a few days ago. The Lion had probably wanted to leave to see Loki. If Thor really loved Loki, being in heat without him must've been nearly impossible to deal with. Steve was only experiencing a shadow of that need himself; he couldn't even fathom what going through a heat cycle must be like for a Shifter who actually developed a strong bond with another partner. "It's not that strange…"

Love was love. You couldn't control it. It just happened.

Tony didn't look convinced. "It's weird, and you're weird."

Bruce smiled ruefully at Tony. "I've never known a Shifter who could still sound so jaded when in heat."

"I'll leave that sappy stuff for the rest of you."

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The team waited a full two weeks. Two weeks for their heats to fully pass.

The more extreme issues went away after seven or eight days but Shifters' heats typically trailed out in one form or another for another seven. Tony never sought refuge in Steve's bed again but since they had already opened that can of worms, Steve let off steam throughout the rest of the week by goading Tony into kissing him absolutely senseless whenever they had a moment alone. It wasn't too difficult; Tony was usually pretty willing and happy to reciprocate.

When a full fourteen days had ended, Steve had Bruce give them all a quick physical and only declared them back in fighting condition after the beta reported back an all clear. Coulson had been
just as pleased with the news as the rest of them and within twenty-four hours had lined a new job up for them. The SHIELD agent hadn't bothered to describe it at a distance, just told them to be ready for a pick-up at oh-eight-hundred hours the next morning.

The early wake-up time didn't damper even Tony's spirits, every last one of them ready to get back out and into the action. The entire team was up and waiting for Phil in the front driveway of Tony's mansion when he finally pulled up in a black luxury transport van.

Clint grinned at Tony as the Cat all but threw his bag into the back of the van before clamoring into one of the middle seats. "You seem excited."

Tony glanced back at the Hawk with a smirk of his own. "You're damn right I am. Our quarantine is over and now we get to beat the crap out of some Hydra assholes. What's not to be excited about?"

"Actually," Phil chimed in as he watched them as they all piled into the back of the van through the rear view mirror, "we're going to start you out again a little slow. We were going to pull Romanov and Barton for this if we had to but your timing was perfect and now and you're all going since you're back in field-ready condition. Which, honestly, is better. Welcome back, by the way."

Steve, who claimed the last seat between Thor and Natasha in the back row, nodded at Phil with a genuine smile on his face. He was just as enthusiastic as the rest of them. "Thank you. But what's the mission?" He didn't think it was essential that they start out slow again, they were all back in peak physical condition, but he accepted that SHIELD might think it was necessary.

Phil continued as he started the van back off and headed off down the road. It felt almost surreal to be leaving Tony's property after being stuck on it for so long. "It's a reconnaissance mission. It will be every bit as important as your previous missions, just without the same opportunities for physical exertion. Hydra is holding a gala event in New York City for their investors. It's an annual event but the date for this year's party is suspiciously close to their anonymous 'success' in Los Angeles. SHIELD thinks that now that they've tested their product with what they view as good results they are ready to start tempting buyers."

Bruce leaned forward in his seat and leaned against the back of Phil's chair with a frown on his face. "They couldn't actually legitimately be selling the serum though. Most of Hydra's investors are regular businessmen who would definitely be willing to report them to the police, especially after those people died."

Nodding, Coulson spared Bruce a quick glance before returning his eyes to the road. "You're right. Most of their investors are entirely ignorant of the whole thing but the upper crust isn't. We've had SHIELD agents on them for years now and there are a few among them who would definitely be willing to pay a hefty price to be a part of Hydra's biological warfare."

Steve shook his head. That didn't sound good. "So what are we supposed to do exactly?"

"We need to get an idea of exactly what Hydra has to sell. Also, we need to start gathering some hard evidence that would be admissible in court so that we can work on bringing the company down. They've been remarkably good at cleaning up their trail so far."

Steve understood to an extent but it seemed like Hydra had already done plenty. "What about what was in the files we have from our last two missions? And the fact that they kidnapped Clint? That all seems like decent proof to me."

Phil sighed and for a moment Steve glimpsed the exhaustion on the SHIELD agent's face. "While
they files have been invaluable, they weren't exactly obtained in a way that would be viewed as completely legal from the standpoint of a federal court. Although it was under SHIELD jurisdiction to do so. And as far as Barton's kidnapping is concerned, it would be too easy for Hydra to disavow that particular branch and say that the company at large had nothing to do with that singular incident. We need to build up as strong a case as we can, something that even their lawyers couldn't refute."

Thor leaned back in his seat and shared a concerned look with Steve. Over the last few days, the Lion's mood had greatly improved and he had grown to be an active participant in their team as it adjusted back to its normal dynamics. Even though Loki had been captured Thor had insisted on coming with them. "This is all far more complicated than I had anticipated. It seems your enemy has planned their moves with great care."

"Yes, unfortunately." Coulson slipped on a pair of sunglasses as the road broke out of the tree-lined drives around Tony's home and back onto the highway leading towards the city center. "By the way, Dr. Banner, you'll be in the field for this one."

Bruce jumped back in his seat, Tony smirking next to him at his reaction. "Wh-what? Me? But who will be-?"

"Stark will maintain control of the communication and surveillance center. This is going to be a public event so we can't go about this in our usual fashion as risk putting civilians in danger, especially after the Los Angeles media fallout. Since you are the only one with actual medical training we need you to pose as a research consultant on Hydra's projects. The company is large enough that they shouldn't question you too much as long as you keep a low profile and with your experience you should be able to use the right sort of diction to avoid suspicion. To be safe, we'll send Agent Barton in with you as your 'assistant', just in case anything happens."

"But, couldn't you send Tony in? Like you said, we shouldn't risk the safety of the civilians and if something does happen and I couldn't control myself—"

Phil gave him a small, reassuring smile. "Barton would be there to make sure things didn't get to that point. And we could send Stark in, but he is such a high profile celebrity that it wouldn't take long for his cover to be blown, especially since he typically would never be seen at such an event."

Tony's smirk widened as he slid his own pair of sunglasses over his eyes to block out the glare of the pale sunlight reflecting off the asphalt. "Too true. Stark Industries doesn't associate with those kinds of scumbags. Unless I'm there to heckle—Did that before. Got kicked out pretty quickly though." The Cat shrugged. "They actually might not even let me in after what happened that one time…"

That seemed like something Tony would do. But Steve couldn't help but smile at the thought.

Redirecting the conversation, Phil turned the car towards the interstate to take them out to New York City. "Steve, Thor," both alphas perked up in the back seat as their names were called. "We've set up false identities for you as well. The two of you are going to be foreign business investors from Norway."

"Norway?" Now Steve was concerned. He could do a lot of things, but espionage was not high on his list of skills. He was terrible at lying in general and now he was supposed to pretend to be some business man from a foreign country? "To be honest, I don't know if I can pull this off either. I've never really been outside of the States!" Except that one time his pack ended up in Canada for a few days. But that was beside the point.
Phil just sent Steve that same reassuring smile he had given Bruce a minute ago. "Don't worry, Steve. Just stick to what you know. Thor, I trust that you'll be able to answer most questions about that part of the world?"

The Lion smiled broadly, clearly excited to be an integral part of the plan. "Yes, it would not be a problem. I even speak the language should we require it!"

"Perfect. Last but not least, Natasha," the redhead looked away from the window with one brow raised imperiously, "you're our ace in the hole. We've set you up as a reporter from a well-regarded science journal. Your job will be two-fold, to act as back-up for Dr. Banner and Barton as well as to gather information yourself. Anyone there should be more than happy to talk to you about their research."

She pursed her lips but Steve knew her well enough now that he could tell it was just Natasha's halfhearted way of trying to hide a smile. "Especially when I'm in the undoubtedly seductive dress you've chosen for me, right?"

Phil tilted his head in acquiescence. "Technically Agent Hill picked the dress, but the fact that some of the scientists may be more willing to brag about their exploits to a beautiful woman didn't go unnoticed."

Clint grinned back at Natasha before craning his neck to look at Agent Coulson. "I assume you picked up some duds for the rest of us too? We aren't really dressed for a gala event."

"Everything's been taken care of. All we need now is you."

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Phil hadn't been joking; everything was prepared for them. SHIELD had established a small command center put together in a building for rent down the block from the hall Hydra had booked for the evening. It was going to be located in a large, well established science museum, which Steve thought was grimly appropriate for the company. Inside their command center was the standard set-up accompanied by what was by all accounts a dressing room.

It was a little disconcerting that SHIELD somehow knew what sizes they all were but Bruce, Thor, and Clint's suits were tailored perfectly and Natasha's dress fit like a glove. Steve opted to be the last one to get changed as the others filtered out to discuss the upcoming mission. Steve had held back for multiple reasons. First, because as the leader he wanted to make sure that everyone else had what they needed before he settled himself out, and second, because he had never worn a suit before and wanted some time on his own to figure out how to put it on right without everyone watching.

After about ten minutes of fiddling with the different layers, Steve stepped out from the small changing room and tried not to look as awkward as he felt. He didn't mind wearing nice clothes but this suit was a little more than he was used to and he just didn't feel like he was doing it justice. He was in a tight white button-up shirt, a black suit with a modern cut, and a blood red tie. He would have preferred something a little more...traditional, a little less flashy, but he was going in to play a part and this is apparently what his role was supposed to look like.

Steve wasn't too surprised to find Tony waiting in the next room, the Cat the only one of them left since he was the only one staying behind and not needing a wardrobe change. He felt a little better as Tony raised his brow as he watched Steve walk out. "Well...You clean up nice." The Panther strolled closer until he was standing right in front of Steve before reaching up and smoothing down the collar of his suit jacket. "Not quite 'you', but not bad. Come here though, you are way too clean
Tony popped the first button of Steve's shirt open and loosened the tie so that the bottom of his throat was showing. Then he reached up and swiped his fingers through Steve's combed hair so that his bangs fell back over his forehead. "Better."

Checking himself in the small mirror that had been set up for them, Steve wasn't so sure. "This is better?"

"Trust me on this one. Now you look like you can actually breathe in that monkey suit."

"I think I liked it more the other way."

Tony rolled his eyes with a smile on his face. "You can wear it however you want when you're not going undercover."

Steve couldn't help but smile back at the attitude. It didn't annoy him so much anymore. "You're kind of bossy."

"That shouldn't be a surprise to you."

"It's not."

Steve shook his head then leaned down and gave Tony a quick kiss. Neither of them brought up the fact that they weren't in heat anymore and had no more excuses for affection.

Pulling away, Tony patted him on the shoulder with a wink. "Knock 'em dead, big dog. But remember, I'll be watching."

"I'll keep that in mind."

And Steve did keep that in mind. It was hard for him to forget even as they got the mission underway, though it quickly morphed from being due to fondness to a comfort that at least someone was keeping an eye on him.

They went in separately, first Natasha, then Bruce and Clint, and finally Steve and Thor. Steve tried not to fidget too much as they waited for the others to go in. They had to give it enough time so that no one would suspect that they were together or even knew each other. Tony was the one in charge of the timing. Unlike the Hydra buildings they had previously infiltrated, the museum's security system was a piece of cake for the Panther to break in to. At least the cameras they had in the front rooms; according to what Tony said over the earpiece, it looked like Hydra had installed a second system in the back rooms that it would take him a little longer to hack into. Either way, Tony watched from overhead as first Natasha then Bruce and Clint walked in and melded seamlessly into the collecting crowds in the museum.

Finally, word came that they could follow the rest of the team inside.

Steve held his breath as he fell in step with Thor and walked up the flight of stairs and into the museum lobby. The place looked fantastic inside, decorated up just enough to maintain a high-class feel without detracting from the museum's displays. There were humans milling about everywhere in suits and cocktail dresses, obviously all members of the upper-crust of society. Hydra kept their company presence at the forefront though, large banners emblazoned with their logo hanging from the ceiling.

Subtly scenting the air, Steve was relieved not to smell another Shifter other than those he knew. If
there had been a Shifter around, their cover would've been blown right away; no matter how nice all of them dressed up, they wouldn't be able to hide their scents. Except for Tony, he was good at that. But he wasn't even here, so it didn't count.

Unlike Steve, Thor fit in instantly, the Lion seeming perfectly at home in the ritzy environment. It made sense; Thor had essentially been a prince where he came from. Of course he would know how to behave, even among humans. But, as expected, Steve felt like he was the odd man out. Well, odd Wolf out.

He squared his shoulders prevent himself from awkwardly shuffling around as they made their way to the center of the room. Steve wasn't intimidated per say—he knew that he and his team were easily the most dangerous people in the room—he was just entirely out of his element. He could handle Shifters fine but when he had to interact with a group of humans he was never sure what he was supposed to do. They couldn't sense hierarchy and had strange motivations and desires. Especially humans with too much money and time of their hands.

Trying to avoid watching Bruce, Clint, and Natasha, reminding himself that Tony was doing that for him, Steve focused on the group of socialites he and Thor were approaching. He didn't know who they were but it was clear they were important judging on how everyone else in the room was paying them attention. The two of them must have made a decent impression because one older man's eyes flashed to them as they drew closer and a smile spread across his face. Steve would've been comforted but the man's eyes were like ice, cold and calculating.

"Now here are two new faces. Who might you gentlemen be?"

The man had a woman hanging off his arm and, despite the fact that she looked to be a few good decades younger than him, she had to be his wife, what with the matching rings on their fingers. The blonde smiled warmly at Thor as the Lion quickly picked up the conversation. By the tone of the Cat's voice, Steve could tell that he was genuinely enjoying this, undoubtedly having fun with the sense of intrigue. His booming voice actually fit right into the atmosphere of the party and strengthened Steve's own resolve that they just might be able to pull this off.

"Indeed, we are new! My cousin and I," Steve managed to stay upright as Thor slammed a hand into his back, "are here to represent our own company! We wish to expand our investments to your country and this event seemed a fine way to begin our endeavors!"

All of them, but especially Steve and Thor, had been coached thoroughly about what they were to say to people. Phil had made them repeat it back to him five times before he was satisfied that they had absorbed the information.

"Oh?" The trophy wife batted her eyelashes at them even as she held onto her husband's arm. Sometimes Steve really didn't get humans. "You're family then? Where are you from?"

"We are originally from Norway. Our business has done so well that we have decided to expand our interests across the Atlantic!"

The older man nodded. "Well, you've certainly come to the right place! What are your names then?"

"My name is Henrik Olsen. And—"

Steve stepped in so that Thor wouldn't be talking to him for the whole night. "Hello, I'm Sven Olsen." Pretending to be family made it easier because they could have the same fake surname. Steve figured they could pull it off because to the average person, he and Thor did have similar
characteristics. Well, they were both blonde and had blue eyes. Most humans didn't pay attention to too much else. "It's nice to meet you."

The woman turned her eyes on him and Steve wished she hadn't. "My, you speak English so well! I can't even hear an accent!"

Thor was quick to cover for him. They had thought of that one too. "He has been living in New York for a few years now as our eyes and ears. He has become very proficient in your language, has he not? We were both very good students."

The man humored them with a nod, getting back to business quicker than his wife seemed to prefer. "Have you looked around at other investment opportunities?"

Steve tilted his head, hoping they didn't dig around for too many details. "Of course, but Hydra seemed like the best option."

"What others did you look at?"

Shoot. "Well," Steve cleared his throat and peeked at Thor. Nope, he wasn't going to help him with this one. "For example..." He didn't know business, didn't care to get involved with that whole mess. He didn't even know any good names he could throw out—Wait. He did know one. "We tried Stark Industries but they, uh, weren't as ambitious in terms of project development as we had hoped."

"Hey!" Steve saw Thor grin as Tony's voice burst out over his earpiece. "R and D is the largest division in Stark Industries! If you're going to lie, at least pick a different company. Like Oscorp, no one gives a shit about them..."

Ignoring the Panther, Steve and Thor continued on with the conversation, slowly turning talk to Hydra and their newest developments, just like they were advised to.

They actually did better than Steve thought they might. It turned out the man they happened to come upon was one of those "upper-crust" investors Phil had warned them about. It was obvious he knew much more than he was telling them but they slowly began to wheedle the truth out of him.

As it turned out though, Bruce was the team's real asset. The other Wolf was too far away for Steve to pay attention to what he was doing but when Bruce's voice whispered through his headset he had clearly managed to gather some real intelligence. "It sounds like they have something waiting in the back, but I don't think I'll be getting an invitation to go check it out with the rest of the investors."

Unable to stop himself, Steve casually scanned the room until he spotted Bruce standing over by a table serving drinks, his head turned away from the crowd with his hand over his mouth to hide the fact that he was speaking into his microphone. Clint was loitering nearby acting like he was getting a drink while blocking Bruce from prying eyes.

Tony's voice answered back soon after. "Can you get anything on where exactly they're keeping it?"

"They're being pretty tight lipped about the whole thing."

"Let me handle this, boys." Natasha.

Following her scent, Steve caught sight of her in the slinky black dress SHIELD had picked out for her. She was on the outskirts of a large group of businessmen as if she had just pulled herself away.
Steve tracked her out of the corner of his eyes as she excused herself then sauntered her way towards the men Bruce must have just been speaking to. Immediately all of their eyes landed on her and Steve watched as her red lips curled up into a seductive smile.

Honestly, Steve didn't have the slightest idea why anyone would ever want to get that close to Natasha. At least when they were no more than acquaintances. Sure, she was gorgeous, especially in that dress, but she had an edge of danger to her that was palpable from across the room. Of course, it seemed like some humans were attracted to that in a woman. They certainly weren't turned off by it, evidenced by the way one of them was brave enough to rest a hand on her hip. Good Lord, they were brave. Or stupid. Very stupid.

Steve and Thor continued working their mark but kept their ears open for news that Natasha had gotten what she needed. It didn't take long.

"They have a room behind the museum's archives. It's usually used for housing the museums more important artifacts; completely temperature and moisture controlled. Hydra pulled some strings and managed to rent that room as well. They're definitely keeping their product in that room."

Excusing himself from his own conversation, Steve wandered over to a vacated display about nuclear power and subtly pressed a hand against his ear. "Tony?"

"I'm on it. It'll take me a moment to get this set up. Since we're trying to be subtle here I can't exactly just take over the security system like normal."

"So how is this going to work?"

He could hear Tony typing over the line. "I'm accessing their system so that way I'll be able to tag on to their security feed. I won't be able to stop it but this way I should be able to guide you through so that you can stay out of the way of any cameras."

Steve heard Bruce whispering into his own communication device. "Hydra is bound to have this place wired, especially if they really did bring that serum. Is there any way you could alter the video feeds with anyone detecting it?"

"Sure. It's possible. It'll just take a remarkable amount of skill and technical talent to do."

Steve frowned. "So, can you do it?"

"Of course. But I'll need someone to provide a distraction for security for half a second. When I alter the feed, there will be a small blip on the screen that they might be able to catch if they're not complete morons."

"One distraction, coming up." That had been Clint. Looking back into the main hall, Steve searched the large space until his eyes landed on the Hawk. He was on the opposite side of the room but Steve could still see him reaching casually into his suit jacket, pull something out, and slip it up underneath the counter of the bar Hydra had brought in to cater the event.

Clint kept himself in a relaxed stance as he strolled towards the center of the room, back to where Bruce was once again speaking with some scientist. Steve didn't quite get what was going on until five seconds later there was a high-pitched whine and all of the glasses stacked behind the bar shattered, men and women nearby yelling as glasses burst in their hands. Immediately all the security staff in the room, who until then had blended in with the mingling crowd, rushed towards the disturbance. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Natasha drawing away one of the investors, the older man's hand in hers as she gave him a sly, sultry smile.
All part of the plan.

Pushing his way through the chaos, Steve forced himself not to rush as he made his way through the room, following Natasha and the business man further into the museum. A few people stopped him to ask where he was going but easily bought his excuse of searching for a bathroom, distracted as they were.

Following their scents, Steve stayed far enough behind Natasha and her mark so that they wouldn't see him but close enough so that he wouldn't lose them. They had come up with this plan so that instead of hunting around on their own with a very small window of time, someone would lead them directly to Hydra's storage. And it seemed like it was working like a charm, the man Natasha had spied out eagerly wanting to impress the redhead. Steve could hear him continuing to boast about his influences within the company even as they snuck through the darkened museum. Luckily the place was deserted aside from the three of them. If there had been any guards patrolling in the back, they had to have been drawn towards the front hall by all the commotion.

Tony's voice whispered out over his earpiece. "I pulled up the blueprints of the building through the city's database. The moron's actually going right for the only room I saw on the plans that would fit the description of the one we're looking for. Hydra didn't install a camera inside though so I can't confirm either way."

Steve shook his head, ducking behind a corner as he saw Natasha's skirt disappear down an unmarked hallway. It seemed odd that Hydra wouldn't have made sure that there was a camera watching the room but, then again, maybe they did have their reasons. Maybe they wanted to make sure that there was no video evidence of their products that the museum might have been able to access after the gala event was over. Or maybe Hydra was starting to learn from their mistakes as far as protecting themselves against SHIELD agents went. Their team operated so well because of Hydra's security systems and the amount of camera angles they had in their facilities. Steve really hoped it was the first option because if Hydra was getting wise to them it could spell bad things for their future missions.

"Okay, Steve, that guy's about to unlock the storage room. Go ahead and catch up."

Not hesitating for a second once Tony gave the go-ahead, Steve jumped out of his hiding space and raced around the corner. His eyes immediately locked on Natasha's investor, the man having just finished punching in a code into a keypad by a reinforced door. Perfect.

Natasha took a casual step back away from the man just in time to avoid Steve as he side-tackled the man, instantly taking the human down to the wooden floors. The poor guy never even knew what hit him and was out like a light as soon as his head collided with the flooring. Steve winced as he sat up, his fingers quickly moving down underneath the man's suit collar to check for a pulse. Good, definitely still alive, just unconscious. "I hit him a little hard. I guess I just got used to wrestling with Shifters or men in padded armor."

Natasha gave him a wry smile as she pulled open the door. "Don't feel too bad. He was a pig."

That did make him feel a little better. Hoisting the man's limp body up into his arms, Steve dragged him into the room as Natasha pushed the door open. It didn't take more than a quick glance around to know that they were in the right place. It was filled with metal cases and hard plastic containers labeled "biohazardous". On a heavy metal table in the center of the room there was what looked to be a display set up with Hydra's newest merchandise. Unlike the reception hall though, there was not one Hydra company logo to be seen on anything. Because they were smart. It was just another way they could disassociate themselves with the product should they ever have the need.
"Alright, Steve, Natasha, I've officially lost visual contact with both of you via the cameras, so don't do anything stupid."

Natasha gave Steve a look as she closed the door behind them and the investor. Steve just shrugged back and began to tug his tie off from around his neck. As Natasha began to inspect the room, Steve used the tie to bind the unconscious man's hands together against the leg of the table. They had come into this not wanting to actually kill anyone, but they couldn't have their mark running off and alerting security as soon as he came to.

Straightening up, Steve turned his attention back to the matter at hand, knowing that they would have to work fast. Natasha already had a small camera pulled out of her handbag and was snapping dozens of pictures as Steve approached the table. On display were things he had never seen the likes of before lined up on pedestals, clearly for sale. Most were objects, small, handheld pseudo-weaponry. As he scanned down the line, Steve's eyes caught on something he actually recognized. That pen-like device Loki had used on them during their first encounter. And there another one was, sitting out with hundreds more undoubtedly in the boxes stacked up around them.

The thought that such a thing might fall into so many hands put a shiver down Steve's spine but nothing froze his blood quite like the center-piece of the whole display. A small vial filled with a leaf-green liquid. Steve didn't need to smell it, didn't need to get any closer; he instantly knew that was what had turned Clint from Shifter to animal, that was what had been released into the Los Angeles waterways. That was Hydra's serum and that combined with everything else in this room was a veritable death sentence for thousands.

Shaking his head, Steve picked up one of the devices he didn't recognize, a small, boxy thing that sort of resembled a taser, and pocketed it. "I don't like the looks of this…"

Natasha nodded grimly. "It's worse than we thought. This must just be a fraction of what they actually have."

"Steve, Natasha, you've got foot traffic coming your way. You should get out of there."

Steve didn't want to leave just yet. He wanted to pry open all of the boxes and destroy every single thing in this room. But that wasn't why they were here. "Yeah. Okay." Swallowing, he shook himself off then motioned for Natasha to head out. "Okay, we're leaving now. Let's get out of here."

Slipping her camera back into her purse, Natasha poked her head out of the door to make sure the coast was clear before waving Steve forward. As Steve secured the door behind them after they stepped out into the hall, the redhead pressed a hand against her earpiece. "Clint, what's the environment like in the main hall?"

"They're starting to settle down and security is dispersing so there's a better chance we'll be running into some company. I think it's time the Doc and I get going."

Steve nodded, "Thor, make your way towards the entrance but wait for Natasha and me to come out before leaving."

"Understood!"

Steve winced a bit at the volume of the response but couldn't help but grin as Tony answered back, "I'm lowering the volume on your microphone, Thor, because that was ridiculous. Anyway, Steve, Natasha, you two look clear on your way back to the hall but like Clint said, security is starting to spread back out again. I'll keep an eye out for anyone getting too close."
"Thanks! Come on, Natasha."

Together they quickly began to retrace their steps back towards the front of the building. Every once and a while Tony would warn them against an approaching security officer and they would veer slightly off course before continuing on. It wasn't actually until they were a few hundred feet away to the goal that they ran into any sort of problems.

Tony was just able to warn them before a man in a suit walked around the corner from the reception hall. He stopped short when he saw Steve and Natasha coming out from the darkened museum and Steve swallowed as a hard glint passed through his eyes. He wasn't security but he was clearly someone important. They were so close; they couldn't afford to have their cover blown now!

"Hey! What are you two doing back there?!"

Before Steve could even begin to stammer out an explanation, he jumped and stifled a yelp of surprise as he felt a cool hand slip under the hem of his shirt and up his back. Steve's eyes snapped down to find Natasha plastering herself against him, her other hand moving up to where his shirt collar had fell open when he had pulled his tie off earlier. He blushed red she reached up further and pulled Steve down into a kiss, every alarm bell in his head going off until she pulled away and turned back towards the man with a shy grin on her face. "Sorry, sir, we were just looking for a little privacy."

Steve just stared, unable to move and looking every bit like a deer caught in the headlights as the man passed a look between the two of them. Finally he scowled and waved an angry hand towards them, "Then rent a damn hotel room! That area's for authorized personnel only, get back to the main party!"

They did just that. Forcing life back into his limbs, Steve grabbed Natasha's hand and slipped passed the man, his face still burning. As soon as they were out of the human's sight, he dropped her hand and snuck a nervous glance at her only to see that she was trying to hide a smile. Steve relaxed a bit but shook his head as they all but ran back towards the front hall.

When they arrived, Clint and Bruce had already left and Thor was waiting by the front door. When the Lion saw them he gave a quick nod then ducked out the entrance himself. Slowly, trying to be as discreet as possible, Steve and Natasha wound their way through the mass of people who were just beginning to settle back down from the explosion of glass. The whole way Steve kept expecting to hear someone shouting after them to stop or to be attacked with one of those special weapons he had just seen.

It felt like it took hours to get to the entrance. But no one came for them. No one tried to stop them. Steve counted his blessings as he finally pushed the front door open and breathed in the New York City night air. It wasn't all that pleasant but for the first time Steve found it refreshing.

The SHIELD van was out on the curb waiting for them, the rest of the team piling in as Steve and Natasha hurried over. Tony was waiting outside and gave Steve a disapproving once over as he drew close.

"You have lipstick on your face."

And just like that Steve was blushing again. "W-what? I—" Steve scrubbed at his face with his suit sleeve.

Clint was laughing as he and Natasha climbed into the back of the van where Thor was already
waiting. Tony scowled back at the both of them before batting Steve's hand away and wiping off the remaining smear of red. Rolling his eyes as he waited by the van door, Bruce waved for them to get in. "Tony! Steve! Come on!"

To save himself further embarrassment, Steve practically jumped into the van behind the beta Wolf. Once again in the driver's seat, Agent Coulson gave Steve a sly glance before turning on the ignition as Tony slid into the last open seat and slammed the van door closed behind him.

Turning around in his seat, Tony pinned Natasha with a stern glare, though the effect was kind of ruined as Clint continued to giggle next to her and Thor was grinning at the both of them. "I'm not happy with you."

Natasha raised a brow, looking entirely unaffected by Tony's glower. No one had to ask Tony to clarify. "Good. That's for putting this team out of service for two weeks."

Tony scoffed. "Like I did that all by myself."

"You were the noisiest about it."

"Mm…If I remember right, Steve was actually a little noisier."

Natasha gave him an odd look. "What? You were the one doing all the complaining."

As Tony smirked and raised his own brow, Steve continued to blush. Tony was talking about them in bed. The worst part was that Steve couldn't remember if the Panther was right or not.

But luckily now that he was in his normal frame of mind, Steve didn't have to dwell on it.

After all, there were more important things to think about now.

From what he saw inside, Steve knew now that Hydra was about to start something, something big. This wasn't just about protecting his territory anymore, or even just his city or the United States. Assuming the product Steve saw in that backroom was just a sample of Hydra's full inventory then they easily had the firepower to escalate this.

They could start a war, a war that could very quickly swallow up not just the nation but the entire world. A war between humans and Shifters with Hydra giving a select group of humans a way to easily eradicate their enemies. And Steve and his team, they were positioned to be on the frontlines. It was going to be up to them to make sure that Shifters and humanity alike came out on the other side of this unscathed.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who is checking out the story!

As a side note, I am now going to post the remaining chapters of this story! Keep asking me questions on the Tumblr though—the story can go on! (Or alternatively, you can ask the characters all about their innermost feelings.) ;)

"Make sure you're lifting with your knees, not your back. You don't want to hurt yourself."

"I'm trying here. What's it look like I'm doing?"

"You must brace yourself a bit more. Stand with your feet spaced properly."

"Fuck it." Dropping the barbell to the ground, Clint doubled over with his hands on his knees to take a breath. Steve sympathetically handed the Shifter a towel to wipe the sweat from his face as Thor moved in to reset the weight on the bar. "Shit, I don't know how you guys do it."

Thor shrugged as he picked the weight up with one hand. "Do not feel too discouraged, my friend."

Nodding, Steve patted Clint on the back. "That's right. We can work on it. We'll get you there."

"No way." Clint shook his head and tossed the towel back to Steve. "You all can keep your weight training. Birds aren't built for it. As long as I can pull my bowstring back, I'll stick to my regular workout routine."

They had been training fairly extensively ever since they had gotten back from New York City and Hydra's gala event. With the knowledge that something big was on the horizon, Steve wanted them to be ready. No one really seemed to mind about the extra prods to hone their skills—well, Tony and Bruce had quickly excused themselves from the physical training and had thrown themselves into...whatever it is they did instead. Steve still wasn't quite sure but in all honesty he hadn't really taken the time to figure it out yet. Something about computer programs and using satellites to track signals...Steve's mind started to shut down about a sentence in when Bruce had tried to explain it to him once.

Currently, Steve, Thor, and Clint were gathered a spare bedroom Steve had converted into an in-home gym. Phil had been great about getting some equipment delivered overnight specialized for Shifters. It wasn't like they could just go and buy regular gym equipment from the store; it was always built for humans and not even close to a challenge for any of them, Clint included. The four hundred pounds he had just been trying to deadlift was apparently a little too much though. But Steve didn't hold it against the Hawk; Clint was built for agility and speed, not strength like he and Thor were.

Steve looked up as Natasha strolled into the room. She came and went as she pleased from their training sessions, never engaging any of them too much except for particular occasions. Those exceptions mostly consisted of her one-on-one sessions with Clint which could last for hours.

Noticing the new presence in the room, Clint nodded at her as he grabbed for a bottle of water at
his side. "Hey, Tasha."

The redhead walked over to where they were standing and raised a brow at the sight of the barbell resting nearby then at the sweat rolling down the Hawk's forehead. "Overextend yourself, Clint?"

Even Steve could tell that she was baiting him. Scoffing, Clint took a large gulp of water then shook his head. "I'd like to see you try and pick that up."

"I don't think so."

Thor answered her instant refusal with a broad grin. "Are you worried you would not be capable of such a thing? I can help you if you wish."

"Thanks but no thanks. I don't see the point."

"Why, it is to build your strength so that you may face your foe with a greater chance at winning a fight."

The Lion's genuine confusion made Natasha smirk as Clint watched on in amusement. "I don't rely on brute strength for fights." Steve had seen that first hand. He didn't know how strong Natasha actually was, probably not even as strong as Clint, but she definitely made up for it in other ways.

Thor had never seen her in action first-hand. That much was clear as he continued his argument with righteous enthusiasm. "Not entirely, certainly, but shall we be honest? If we met on a field for battle, surely you must admit I would be the victor?"

Natasha was still smiling but her eyes sparked at Thor's words. "You think so?"

"Of course!"

"Well, how about we test that theory?"

Steve eyed the both of them but didn't sense any malice in either Shifter. There was no anger there, just friendly competition. And it was obvious Thor had a lesson to learn. So Steve shared a look with Clint before he took a step back, giving them the space to spar and his silent consent. He didn't have any complaints as long as they didn't have any intention of hurting each other.

They cleared a space in the center of the room large enough for Natasha and Thor to stand facing each other with about ten feet between them. The Lion grinned as Natasha set herself in a defensive stance. "I feel as if you would break should I grab onto you too strongly."

"Go ahead. I'll let you know if it hurts."

Clint walked over to stand next to Steve with a smile on his lips. "Remember your safe word, Natasha!"

Shaking his head, Steve didn't bother to chime in, instead watching as Thor and Natasha sized each other up as Thor finally got into position. There was a moment's pause between them, one single still breath of air, before they both suddenly moved. Thor rushed forward with the clear intention of grabbing hold of Natasha but she cleanly sidestepped him and gave him an almost playful smack on the back. Growling, Thor spun around and whipped a hand out and clipped Natasha as she tried to dive back out of the way. She stumbled, momentarily caught off balance, but as he punched out again Natasha moved with the motion instead of away from it. Grabbing hold of Thor's arm, she used it to stabilize herself before taking advantage of his momentum by spinning around so that her back was to the Lion, pulling his arm over her shoulder, and flipping the huge Shifter into the air
and flat onto his back in front of her.

Steve could only blink, stunned, as Thor hit the ground with a loud *thud*. Keeping one hand down to keep Thor pinned, Natasha reached over to where Steve and Clint were standing and grabbed Clint's water bottle right out of his lax grip. Before any of them could move, the redhead flipped the bottle over and pressed it against the Lion's head. "If this were a gun, you'd be dead."

The threat snapped Thor from his shock and he glared up at the redhead. "You caught me unprepared."

"That's the idea."

The tension that settled between them faded away as Clint began to softly clap his hands. "Good work, Tasha. I'm impressed."

The redhead jerked her head up to look at the Hawk and smiled. "I'm glad you think so. You'll get a taste of it later."

"Oh boy…Sounds like fun."

Steve didn't envy Clint but he was sure that the challenge would be good for him. It looked like it had been good for Thor. Slowly pushing himself up off of the bed, there was an expression on his face that said he was beginning to rethink his own training regime. They had all learned an important lesson here on learning that they needed to hone more than their strength. That, and that you should never underestimate your opponent.

To try and salvage some of the Lion's pride Steve didn't offer a hand to help him up, instead waiting for Thor to get back onto his feet before giving him a consolatory pat on the back. He gently brushed Steve off. "I believe I shall continue to train for a while longer."

Steve accepted the rebuff without taking it personally. "That sounds like a plan. I'm going to take a short break." They had been at this for few hours straight and Steve was beginning to feel a bit of cabin fever from being cooped up in the same room for that long.

The three others in the room waved him off and Steve grabbed a towel by the door and took his leave. Wiping his face and the back of his neck off, Steve made his way into the main part of the house in the hopes of finding the last two remaining members of his team. He hadn't seen Bruce or Tony for nearly half a day now and while he wasn't concerned, he was curious as to what they were getting up to.

The sun was shining brightly outside and pouring through the large windows in the living room. Spring had set in and Steve was happy to see it. He couldn't wait for the warmer weather to come. It meant more time spent comfortably outdoors, not that a chill kept him inside for long anyway.

Steve lazily searched the entirety of the first floor of the mansion for Bruce and Tony. Their scents, particularly Tony's, permeated the house so thoroughly that it was hard to trace where they had been recently. By the time he figured out that they weren't there the sunlight had dried the sweat on his skin he hadn't wiped off earlier. It had also left Steve with the realization of where the two were hiding. The last place left in the house.

Trotting down the stairs to the basement, Steve peeked through the glass windows into the lab. Sure enough, there Tony and Bruce were, looking at what appeared to be some sort of holographic screen Tony had projected in the middle of the room. Their heads were bent together in conversation but they both looked up as Steve tapped on the glass. He actually remembered the
access code Bruce had punched in the other night—he had a pretty good memory—but it felt more polite to request permission rather than just barging in.

Tony looked up, undoubtedly saying something to Jarvis, before Steve heard a click and the door to the lab swung open. Steve smiled as he walked in, wrapping his towel over his shoulders as he sauntered inside. "There you two are! I was wondering where you were hiding. You missed Natasha taking Thor down while they were sparring."

Steve's smile fell away as he took in the last two members of his team. They had somber expressions on their faces. While it wasn't uncommon for Bruce to look serious, the fact that Tony was sharing such a look didn't bode well. "What is it?" Bruce swallowed, concern flashing in his eyes, and immediately Steve was on guard. He was right. Whatever they had been working on, it wasn't good. "What's wrong?"

Tony straightened up from where he was leaning up against a desk and the cautious way the Cat eyed him didn't do anything to ease Steve's anxiety. "You might want to sit down, Steve."

"I'll stand, thanks." Steve's voice was stiff but he couldn't help it.

Tony shrugged but carried on as Bruce gave him an encouraging nod. "Okay. Then, first off, I want to apologize."

"What did you do?"

"I might have peeked into your files a little bit more."

"Tony…" It was true that he felt close to the Panther now, but he had asked Tony not to investigate him any further. It felt like a violation of his privacy. But the worst part was Steve probably would have told Tony everything if he had just asked him directly.

"I know, I know," raising a hand, Tony flicked through a page of text on one of the holographic screens. It was only then that Steve realized that it was a copy of SHIELD's personal files. "But I needed a distraction, got curious again, and I had a few spare hours on my hands after we got back."

Closing his eyes, Steve urged himself to calm back down. He was afraid he knew where this was going. "…What did you read?"

"I know about that night."

Tony didn't have to specify. There was only "one night" he could mean. The night Steve's pack died. Steve's jaw tightened and he fought to keep his hands from curling into fists. He didn't succeed, his knuckles turning white from the pressure. It felt like his claws were about to rip out right through his skin. Bruce looked between the two of them before he finally focused on Steve. "Listen, Steve. I don't know what happened, I didn't read the file, but that's not important right now. Tony found a connection between what happened to you then and what's going on now."

Steve's eyes sharpened and locked on the Cat's. "What is he talking about, Tony?"

Tony met his gaze evenly, his voice low and steady as he closed the window he was working on, another quickly popping up to replace it. "Does the name Johann Schmidt mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?"

"Steve, he was the Wolf who killed Bucky."
The world froze around Steve and for a minute it was hard to breathe, like someone had grabbed hold of his windpipe and was squeezing tight.

He had a name. He finally had a name.

"Red…"

"What?" Steve jumped as Tony rested a hand on the small of his back and the world came slamming back. Tony had somehow made his way over to where Steve was standing. Bruce was still across the room watching him anxiously.

Tony's touch helped ground him but Steve could still hear his own pulse pounding in his ears. "I called him Red. I never knew that SHIELD had a name. Why didn't they tell me…?"

Bruce shook his head. "They probably had a reason, Steve. But from what Tony is telling me, this Schmidt guy is also involved with Hydra."

Tony nodded, rubbing his hand in a circle on Steve's back before letting his arm fall. "When I was reading your file the name seemed familiar but I couldn't quite place it. Then last night I was reviewing the mission file and decided that I didn't have enough information, so I decided to get some more from the SHIELD database."

"You hacked them too?"

"'Again,' actually. I hacked into them 'again' as well. But that's beside the point. The bottom line is that I had read that name before because SHIELD has him listed as a major player in Hydra." Steve looked up as Tony snapped his fingers and a picture of a man Steve had never seen flickered onto the screen. A wave of Tony's hand brought the image over to where he and Steve were standing and Steve stared hard at the image, straight into the eyes of the man in the picture. "They didn't have him listed under a specific title, but he's definitely responsible for a good deal of their illegal activity."

Steve tried to form cohesive sentences in his head, but nothing was coming. Johann Schmidt, the man who had killed Bucky and the rest of his old pack, was his enemy again. And soon he was going to get the chance to hunt him down. "I need to call Coulson."

"Steve—"

Ignoring Bruce's plea, Steve turned and stormed back up the stairs. He grabbed the phone Tony kept in the kitchen and tucked himself in a corner of the dining room. He didn't hear that anyone was following him but he wanted a little privacy. He had been shaken and he didn't want his team to hear him like this.

Dialing the SHIELD agent's number, Steve pulled the phone up to his ear and leaned back against the wall. The phone rang twice before Phil picked up. "Agent Coulson speaking."

"It's Steve Rogers. We need to talk."

"Of course." Ever unflappable, Phil's tone was neutral but considerate.

It did nothing to divert Steve's course. "Tony and Bruce, they just told me about Johann Schmidt. Did you know? This whole time, did you know that this Schmidt Wolf was involved with what happened to my pack?"

There was a long moment of silence as Coulson processed Steve's hurried sentence. Then his voice
came back over the line, "…We weren't one hundred percent sure."

"But you suspected that he was."

It wasn't a question and Coulson didn't bother to deny it. "Yes."

A snarl ripped out from Steve's throat and he slammed his free hand back against the wall. "I should have been told. Immediately."

"No, you shouldn't have."

It was like a slap in the face and Steve's snarl grew louder as his rage boiled up to the top. "How could you-?"

"Steve, calm down." It was an order, not a suggestion and Steve struggled to do just that. He wasn't usually this angry but this was just so personal he was having trouble thinking logically about it all. "I would like to believe that we're friends. Are we?"

"I think so." They had been. Steve hoped they would be in the future.

"Then trust me, not just as a member of SHIELD, but as your friend, and listen to me for a moment. We made the decision not to inform you for multiple reasons. The first was because we didn't want to accuse any Wolf, even Schmidt, of such a serious crime without undeniable evidence that he was the one who perpetrated the event. If you are actually able to identify him as the Wolf who did it, that solves that issue, but it leads me into the second one. We couldn't afford to have you leave to hunt Schmidt down. Not when there was a team to lead."

Steve shook his head, "I wouldn't just leave."

"Are you sure? I expect that the thought is crossing your mind even now as we speak. If I told you his exact location, tell me you would have it in yourself to resist searching him out and taking revenge on him."

Taking a deep breath, Steve tried to imagine himself in that position, of knowing all that, and how he would react. Not matter how he tried, he could not escape the fact that Phil was right. Steve knew even he wouldn't have it in him to resist the temptation of getting revenge on the Wolf who had destroyed everything he had loved.

After a moment's pause, Phil continued, his voice a little softer. "I don't blame you for wanting to do that, Steve. I really don't. But we need you here. The team needs you here."

Steve willed the SHIELD agent to understand. He wasn't a Shifter himself, only a human, but he had to understand. As strong as it sat in Steve's heart, surely this was something even a human could understand. "This is something I need to do, Phil. I need to find him."

It seemed he did. "It will happen in due time. You have to have faith in us; we want to bring Schmidt in almost as badly as you do."

"Then I'll wait." What else could he do without destroying his team? "I'll wait until you give the word that we're ready, just promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"I get to be the one to take him down."
"I promise that I'll do everything in my power to make that happen."

Steve knew that was the best he was going to get. It was the most Phil could promise. "…Thanks."

"Of course. Push Schmidt out of your mind now though, as best you can. You can't allow yourself to be distracted."

"Yes, sir."

Hanging up, Steve rested his forehead against the phone and released a long breath. He knew why Phil and SHIELD had done what they had, why they hadn't told him, but it didn't make it sit any easier in his stomach. But he would just have to work his way through it. There wasn't anything else to do. And he wasn't going to let himself sit around and mope about it.

Steve pushed himself off of the wall and wandered back into the kitchen to put the phone back. He did trust Phil and hoped that the agent would come through for him. He doubted SHIELD was able to advocate murder though, and Steve wasn't sure if he would be able to stop himself from killing Schmidt if they ever did meet again. He didn't like to kill, usually avoided it at all cost, but there were certain crimes that were unforgivable. Certain offenses that Wolves just couldn't let go. And after slaughtering his entire pack, Steve would be almost driven to kill Schmidt.

Steve was startled from his dark thoughts as Clint jogged down the stairs. The Hawk gave Steve a funny look as he moved to refill his water bottle. There must've been something showing on his face because after a few seconds of silence, Clint glanced back over at him, his brow furrowed. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Everything's fine." Steve wasn't convincing anyone. That much was clear from the next look Clint shot him. If it hadn't been Steve's expression it was probably his tone; his voice sounded hollow even to him. Sighing, Steve rested his hands against the counter. "It's personal." And he didn't really feel like sharing everything at the minute. Sighing again, Steve tilted his chin up to find the Hawk still watching him closely and Steve could only think of one thing to say. "I need to run."

Run to get his mind off all of this. To burn off some of the restless energy pulsing through the veins. To pretend just for a few hours it was something he could escape.

"Then how about a flying partner? My wings could use some stretching too."

For a moment Steve wondered if he'd rather be alone. But Wolves were social creatures at their core and even if he didn't want to talk, he didn't want to be alone right now. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Wouldn't have offered if I did. Tasha and I have a big sparring match scheduled this afternoon, this will be a good warm up."

"Then, yes, I would love a running, er, flying partner."

The two set off not too long after. Undressing privately in the backyard, they met up in their animal forms in the woods just a few steps beyond that. It had been a while since Steve had run with anyone simply for the sake of running. Well, technically Clint wasn't running, he was flying, but the sense of companionship was still there. The Hawk let Steve set the pace, lazily gliding on the
breeze just above the tops of the trees and occasionally swooping down to dance around tree trunks next to Steve.

It did Steve good, to get out. The young spring grass and green leaves under his paws was refreshing, his inner Wolf revealing in the momentary feeling of freedom. Maybe Clint actually added to it, flying through the air above him. It made it seem like the entire world, land and sky, was opened to him. Steve had never really cared for flying, running was usually enough, but in that moment he had to admit he did envy Clint a little. Maybe Steve would ask Tony if he could teach him how to fly in his private jet.

Thinking on it…maybe not. Steve snorted as he bounded over a broken branch. That sounded like a good way for Steve to break a very expensive piece of Tony's property. And the worst part is that Tony would probably let him.

Now intimately familiar with the extent and lay of the land within Tony's estate, Steve deftly led Clint around. He let his mind wander and relied predominately on the scents he had left behind on previous runs. The last time he had come through he had been in heat, so the smell was pretty distinctive and still very present on the landscape. It struck something deep and possessive inside his heart to know that any Shifter who came on Tony's property would have to smell him first.

When they finally ended their rounds, Steve and Clint both shifted back into their human forms and separately redressed before heading back towards the house. Clint seemed genuinely pleased with the exercise and Steve was glad that he was able to share it with him. While he had bonded fairly tightly with Bruce and Tony, it satisfied something in Steve's soul to get to know every member of his team. It undoubtedly came from living with a pack and knowing intrinsically that every single member was vital to the strength of the group in their own way and that loyalty and familiarity were earned, not demanded. Clint wasn't reclusive but he only ever seemed to truly relax around Natasha so to see him as comfortable as he appeared now was nice.

As they reached the house, Steve excused himself and made his way back up to his room to shower off. The sweat from earlier was still lingering on his skin and was now mixed with mud on his hands and feet and dirt under his nails from the run. Now that he was back in the house it was once again impossible to ignore the facts that now faced him. Turning the shower hotter than he usually preferred, Steve stepped under the spray and watched as his skin slowly turned pink from the scalding temperature.

Red, Schmidt, was working for Hydra. Hydra was in possession of a number of technological and biological weapons that could start and end a war between humans and Shifters. Schmidt was just a part of a much larger problem. Steve had to keep things in perspective so he wouldn't lose sight of the overall mission. If that happened, he might be in danger of losing himself too.

By the time he got back downstairs, washed and dried with a new change of clothes, it seemed that the other inhabitants of the house had switched up their activities as well. He could hear Clint and Natasha prepping a room downstairs for their sparring session and his nose told him that Bruce had momentarily tucked himself away in his bedroom. Probably for a nap. He and Tony kept all sorts of weird hours.

Speaking of the Cat, Tony was out of his workshop and almost seemed to be waiting for Steve to show up in the dining room. Steve's suspicion we heightened even more when the Panther's eyes immediately snapped to him as soon as he began to make his way down the staircase. "You okay?"

Steve nodded. "I'm okay."

"Really? Because Clint seemed concerned that you had a lot on your mind." Clint had obviously
had words with Tony. Hopefully he hadn't said anything too revealing. There was little doubt in his mind that Tony already had it figured out though. It would be pretty obvious to the genius why Steve might be out of sorts, especially since the Cat had delivered the bad news himself.

But that didn't mean he wanted Tony to worry over him. "Everyone seems really concerned about me today."

"It's because you're being unusually moody." Tony paused long enough to inhale deeply through his nose. "And you smell like you're pretty upset."

No matter how upbeat he tried to act, Steve couldn't mask his scent like Tony could. Of course everyone would be picking up on it. It must've been bad if Clint had actually noticed, so it shouldn't be a shock that Tony did too. "Ah, I…" Sighing, Steve rubbed the back of his neck, unable to meet Tony's eyes. But there was no use in denying it any longer. "…Yeah, I guess I still am upset."

Tony bit back a frown and instead crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you need to talk about it?"

"No. Not right now. This is something I need to work out myself."

"Good, because that would be awkward."

Steve shook his head as Tony grinned back at him. "Thanks."

The Cat's smile spread at Steve's thick sarcasm and he took a smooth step closer to Steve. "I could kiss it better. Would that help? Because I would be happy to do that."

"So, you'll kiss me, but you don't want to listen to me?"

"Yup. That about sums it up."

"I guess I'll take what I can get then." Tony's smile quirked up but Steve had their lips pressed together before the Cat could come up with another sardonic remark.

The kiss was soft and slow, Steve closing his eyes and taking the opportunity to actually relax into it instead of making it a competition like usual. Tony let out a soft grunt then tilted his head a bit more to deepen the kiss. The gentle play of lips and tongue was soothing and a bit of the anxiety melted from Steve's veins. It was a welcome change after coming back from his run just as wound up as when he had set off. Funny how Tony seemed to be the one thing that could calm him these days…

Breaking away slowly, reluctantly from the kiss, Steve nuzzled Tony's nose and snuck in one more quick peck. Unable to separate himself too far just yet, Steve leaned back into to wrap his arms around the Cat, resting his chin on the other's shoulder and closing his eyes. It felt nice.

"Are you falling asleep on me? Or is this just a way to remind me how much taller you are than me, which is not cool by the way."

Trust Tony to not let a gentle moment last too long. "Neither…And you're the perfect height."

He felt Tony laugh quietly against his neck. "You're a bold-faced liar. But I respect that."

"I meant it."

Steve's arms tightened unconsciously around Tony's waist as the Cat laughed again before licking
a short stripe up his throat. "You really want to have this argument with me? Because you know I won't let it go. I live for contention."

Steve laughed back this time and let Tony pull himself out of his embrace. "Point taken."

Tony grinned up at him as he took a step back. "You're smiling again."

Huh. "I guess I am."

"You, Steve, are too easy to read."

Steve felt his smile soften as Tony jabbed an accusatory finger at his chest. "Maybe it's just you."

The Cat paused for a moment at his words. Then he gave Steve a lazy grin and slid his hands into his pockets. "I am an extra special snowflake. But that's enough serious stuff for today, huh? Now that Clint's taken you out for a walk, how about we relax a bit? Strange concept, I know."

Steve knew that Tony was diverting the conversation but he let it happen. After all, a distraction wouldn't be the worst thing in the world right now. "I did see a book in your study that I would like to read."

"Great. But how about you read it in the media room so I can not be completely bored?"

Steve raised a brow as they began to walk towards Tony's library together. "You don't like to read?"

"Of course I like to read. Why else would I have all those books?"

"Why don't you just read a book then?"

Tony shook his head with exaggerated exasperation. "Because I've read them all. Re-reading them would be boring."

"Then why do you keep them around?"

"Because they're mine."

"Fair enough."

They'd continued their banter as Steve grabbed a classic historical fiction book off of Tony's bookshelf in his study and, at Tony's insistence, across the house to his media room. When they got there their conversation was cut short as they realized they weren't the first to lay claim to the space.

Clint looked up in surprise as Tony pushed the door open and shot up from where he had been crouched down behind a large armchair. "Steve! Tony! Uh…Weren't you guys doing something somewhere?"

Tony gave Steve a look before frowning at Clint. "No. And don't be annoyingly vague."

Tilting his head, Steve took a quick look around the room. It looked like Clint had rearranged the furniture in the room to make small practice obstacles and hiding spots. He had been sure he had heard Clint and Natasha earlier though. "Weren't you and Natasha going to spar?"

"Yeah. She, uh…she stepped out for a moment." She must've been coming back soon because Clint was still suited up in his mission gear, bow in his hand and sweat on his brow as if he had just been
running through an intense practice session.

Tony narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." Clint's response had been a little too quick, a little too neutral.

Tony was right, Clint was acting odd. Especially since he had seemed so calm just half an hour ago when he and Steve had finished their run. "Is it alright if we come in?"

"Well, I mean," Clint's fingers drummed nervously on his bow, "Tasha and I are still, er… I mean, when she gets back… Sure, I guess it's alright."

Tony faked a low bow as he strolled into the room. "Well thank you. I would hate to not be granted permission to sit on my own couch."

Taking one more look around the room to try and see if he couldn't understand why Clint was behaving so strangely, Steve cautiously stepped inside and walked over to the couch.

Tony watched him for a moment as he settled back and cracked his book open, stared for a little while longer at Clint, then shook his head. "I've done way too much thinking already today, I'm gonna go grab a drink. Steve, you want anything?"

"No thanks."

"Clint?"

"Uh… No, I'm um… I mean…"

The Hawk's eyes darted up towards the ceiling as Tony headed back towards the door, the Cat still watching incredulously as a multitude of different emotions passed over the marksman's face. "Seriously, did you just hit your head on something? You're acting flakier than normal. Maybe you should start wearing a helmet when y—"

Whirling around so that he was facing forward, Tony's sentence abruptly cut off with a grunt of disgust as he ran face first into something. Steve's eyes darted up at the sound just in time to watch as Tony reeled back from… a spider web? Immediately Tony swiped it away from his face only to pull his arm away to look up and find a large, black spider sliding down a crystalline-colored web from a ceiling tile. "Oh fuck."

For a spider, the thing was quite big, more the size of a large tarantula but in the shape of a… Steve's gaze sharpened as he caught a flash of a little red hour-glass on its back. It was a black widow. Even from the couch Steve could sense the shiver of disgust that rolled down Tony's back. "Hold that thought Clint, I need to take care of this."

"Tony, wait!"

Before Tony even had time to brace himself Clint leapt over the couch and slammed into his back, knocking the Cat straight to the floor. Steve was already up on his feet but stalled when Clint reached up from his spot on Tony's back and snatched the spider up, cupping it gently in his hands as Tony shoved him off with a growl. "What the hell was that, Barton?"

Clint glared right back, all anxiety gone. "I was stopping you from killing your teammate, asshole!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"
Hurrying over, Steve helped haul Tony to his feet and subtly put himself between him and Clint. But Steve was pretty sure he already knew what Clint meant. He knew it as soon as he had laid eyes on the spider. "Natasha…"

Clint's eyes flickered over to Steve then he gave a stilted nod and opened his hands. The spider had curled up on itself a bit to fit within the Hawk's grasp and slowly unfurled itself as he flattened out his palms. It was even bigger up close, the legs easily reaching the ends of Clint's fingers. "…She's a Spider Shifter."

The corner of Tony's lips pulled down as he leaned around Steve's shoulder to try and get a better view. "They have those?" Steve wasn't quite as surprised. He knew she was different, just didn't know how. And after meeting Tony, Thor, Clint, and Loki, Steve figured that any sort of Shifter form was possible. It was just a matter of how rare it was.

"She's the only one I know…"

"Gross."

"Tony!" Elbowing the Cat in the stomach, Steve glared back at him before kneeling down next to Clint so that he was eye to eye with the spider cradled in his palms. Once he thought he had its, her attention—it was hard to gauge with all those eyes-Steve gave the spider an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that, Natasha. And sorry about him. You know how Tony is. It won't happen again."

Steve bit the inside of his cheek to stop from retreating as the spider—Natasha's front legs waved in the air, like she was trying to communicate. He didn't get it, but he could guess at what she wanted. Straightening up, Steve nodded at Clint who had protectively pulled her closer to his chest. "Get her back to her room so she can change. And Tony—"

"—I'm getting that drink now. It's officially overdue."

Steve shook his head but didn't stop Tony from leaving. After his footsteps had receded down the hall, Clint gently bent down and let Natasha crawl out of his hands to hurry out of the room herself. Hopefully she would make it up the stairs to her bedroom alright by herself. As soon as he had that thought Steve wanted to kick himself. Natasha was completely capable of handling a flight of stairs, no matter her form.

Watching her go with a frown on his face, Clint turned the expression on Steve once she had left the room. The look was guarded bridging on protective and Steve knew he had to be mindful of what he said. After his breakthrough with Clint this morning, he didn't want to throw that all away with a careless remark. "You could have told us if we were interrupting your training."

"I figured I'd let her decide."

"You can communicate with her?"

"It's not hard. You just have to pay attention. And look up. People never bother looking up."

Something to note for field missions. Steve cleared his throat; if he didn't mention what he had just seen it would only create an awkward elephant in the room. "I have to say, I wasn't expecting that. Though it is nice to finally see her shift."

"Tasha says she doesn't like to shift because she's smaller and weaker in her Spider form than her human one but I think Stark's reaction is exactly why she doesn't."
"You seem to be used to it."

He shrugged. "I've known her for a few years."

Even so…"She seems to play her Shifter form pretty close to the vest though. How did you first find out?"

Clint seemed to war with himself for a minute and it was only then that Steve realized he might have asked an overly personal question. But after a minute the Hawk just gave another shrug and continued to speak. "…It was the third time I met her, we were sent out on the same mission by SHIELD. We were put into a bad situation and, well, to make a long story short the only way we could escape is if she shifted so she could slip out and come back for me. I'll admit, when I first saw it even I was a little weirded out but once you get to know her a little bit it makes sense."

"You seem to know her pretty well."

"As good as anyone can, I guess. We bonded over Shifting. We both have such rare forms that we both sort of felt alone."

"I think I can relate." Steve had experienced a loneliness in his life because of his shifting. Both as a child, growing up with the body of an omega and the spirit of an alpha, and just recently after the loss of his pack. Surrounded by a sea of humans, there was a definite lack of companionship he was familiar with.

"No you can't." As Steve opened his mouth to protest, Clint gave him a tired smile. "You're a Wolf. The world is crawling with Wolf Shifters. Even the couple hundred Cat Shifters out there run into each other every now and again. I've traveled all around the world with SHIELD and Loki is the first Bird Shifter I've met. I looked it up once; there're about a dozen of us around." Clint rested his chin in his hands and cast a look towards the main door to the room. "For Spider Shifters the numbers are even lower. As far as SHIELD knows there's only three in existence and Natasha's one of them."

"…I never thought about it that way before." Now that Clint phrased it that way, Steve was having a difficult time even imagining what that would be like. To not only be a rare breed of human but to feel entirely alone in your subspecies.

"Not many people have to."

Steve and Clint both turned to look at the voice coming from the doorway. Natasha met their gazes evenly as she finished buttoning up a blouse she had put on. She hadn't bothered to put shoes or socks on, just walked in barefoot to stand next to Clint.

She looked okay but Steve still felt obligated to ask, "Natasha, are you alright?"

"I'll live."

Steve scooted forward to sit on the edge of the couch, his hands clutched in his lap. "I just want to say sorry for our reactions. I-"

Before Steve could even get started Natasha cut him off with a sharp shake of her head. "Save your breath. This isn't the first time I've…surprised someone and it won't be the last. I'm just glad Clint stepped in when he did."

Steve nodded as Clint looked up at her with a strange look in his eyes. "So am I. I don't think Tony would ever have forgiven himself if he had actually hurt you."
Natasha shook her head again, her lips twitching up into a sardonic smile. "That's not what I was referring to. I probably would’ve bit Tony if he had gotten closer."

Worry began to ebb into Steve's mind. He didn't like how she had phrased that. "What do you mean?"

"If Tony had actually tried to crush me, I probably would’ve bit him on instinct. There's enough venom in one bite to kill a man in ten minutes. Clint didn't save me, he saved Tony."

Steve's worry morphed into protective anger for Tony. It hit so suddenly and intensely that Steve had to look down at his hands, focus on something physical, to remind him that Natasha didn't actually intend to be a threat. That she was a part of his team as much as Tony was. That he trusted her.

Steve trusted her. He did. Inherently. And with that thought in mind he was able to regain his voice and turn his face up back towards Natasha. "You sound pretty certain about that."

"I am."

The way she said it and the way her eyes were closed off told Steve all he needed to know. She was sure about it because at one point or another it had happened. Maybe even multiple times. Steve didn't want to ask about it. More than that, Steve knew now that this potential danger Natasha innately presented was that dark edge the Wolf in Steve had picked up on since the very first day he had met her. She was deadly in the most literal of ways.

But again, he trusted her. And he intended to make that clear. Pushing down any lingering misgivings, Steve looked up at Natasha with a small smile that he made sure was genuine. She blinked in surprise and for the first time Steve thought that he had really and truly caught her off guard. "Natasha, thank you for sharing this with us. You could've stayed up on the ceiling and neither Tony or I would probably have noticed you, so it means a lot that you trusted us both enough to show yourself."

He watched as Natasha swallowed then lifted her chin with one raised brow. "We've been working together for a while now. I figured it was only fair. Although I'm not sure Stark would agree with you."

"He does. He just doesn't like surprises."

Clint grinned as he let his knee bump against Natasha's leg. "You just pulled that out of your ass."

"Okay. I might've guessed about that, but that doesn't mean it's not true. But I should probably go talk to him to make sure."

Releasing a small breath, Natasha shook her head again, though there was a hint of a smile on her face. "That would probably be a good idea. Who knows what sort of trouble rich, dramatic Shifters can get into?"

"Exactly."

Happy to leave her on an upbeat note, Steve rose to his feet. "Besides, I'm fairly sure you two weren't done with your training, so I'll let you get back to it."

Clint smiled, appreciation shining bright in his eyes. "You're a slave-driver."

Holding up his hands in surrender, Steve smiled back as he made his way out of the room. "I just want my team to be in top, fighting condition. No one said it was going to be easy."
He left the room to the sound of Clint's laughter and the knowledge that both Natasha and the Hawk were well aware of how much work went into getting yourself battle ready. After slipping out into the main foyer it didn't take Steve long to find Tony. The Cat obviously wasn't even bothering to try and hide from him. Instead he was waiting just outside the large sliding glass doors on the back porch, laying out on the deck on his back like a giant housecat. And Tony called him a lapdog…

Sliding the glass door open, Steve strolled across the porch and sat down next to Tony. The Panther acknowledged his presence with a low grunt but kept his eyes closed even as Steve began to speak.

"I don't see a drink in your hand…"

"I got distracted by the sunlight. Sometimes I get the feeling I spend too much time in my workshop."

"Sometimes?"

"Yeah, but the feeling passes pretty quickly."

Rolling his eyes, Steve didn't stop himself as he reached down and brushed a strand of hair off of Tony's forehead. The Cat hummed low in his throat and Steve remembered why he came out in the first place. "You should go apologize to Natasha."

Tony finally flicked one eye open. "Why? I didn't actually hurt her." Steve frowned and Tony huffed. "Oh, come on, Steve. Lighten up. The girl's tough, she can handle a few comments. Her Shifter form is pretty nasty. It's not like it's news to her."

There was definitely a very thin filter between Tony's brain and his mouth. "That's not a good enough of a reason for you to not say something."

"I'll order her an apology fruit basket."

"Really? That's your response?"

"Yup."

Steve frowned and removed his fingers from Tony's hair. "I don't know why I'm surprised…"

"Honestly, I don't either." Pushing himself up into a sitting position, Tony clapped Steve on the shoulder before standing all the way up. "If this little talk is over, I'm going back down to work with Bruce. We were getting close to something when I came up for a break."

Steve tilted his head and rose to his feet. "I smelled Bruce in his room. I thought he was taking a nap."

"Nah, he was just changing his clothes. They were getting a little ripe. He's probably back down in the shop by now."

"Don't you two ever sleep?"

"Sure. Every now and again."

As Tony began to make his way back down to the basement Steve tagged along, having little else to do at the moment. "You're going to make yourselves sick that way."
"What are you, my mother? Don't worry about it."

Sure enough, Bruce was waiting for Tony downstairs just like the Cat had predicted. The beta Wolf looked over as the two walked in and Steve was comforted by the fact that he had a bag of jerky in his hands. If he wasn't getting the sleep he needed, at least he was eating. Albeit not that healthily, but something was better than nothing.

"Hey, Steve. You don't look too happy. What happened?"

"Tony is being a jerk."

A dry laugh burst out of Bruce as he spun back around in his chair to face the computer he was in front of. "So nothing new then."

Tony only smiled at the reply and sauntered into his shop. "Sticks and stones, Bruce. Now, what are you working so diligently on?"

"I think I finally made a breakthrough…" After a few more taps on his keyboard, the Wolf's face lit up as a new window popped onto the screen. "Yeah. I got it. I think I got it."

"Really?" Steve followed Tony as he walked over to stand behind Bruce's chair to look at the screen. "Nice work."

"Well, those tracer programs you set up did most of the heavy-lifting."

Waving a dismissive hand, Tony leaned onto the back of Bruce's seat to get a closer look. "Details. What've you got?"

"This."

Steve blinked as a satellite map of the United States appeared then began to slowly zoom in on the north-eastern portion of the country. It seemed to be following some sort of computer program, colored lines and dots forming patterns across the states on the screen as the image continued to zoom. "What is it?"

Bruce nodded towards the screen and ignored Tony as the Cat reached over his shoulders to type some sort of code into the computer. "It's a building complex in the Great Lakes region. I can't tell if that's where Hydra is producing all of their goods, but the serum definitely seems to be under production at this site."

Now that Steve understood. "Alright, it looks like we have a new mission already." And perfect timing too. This would definitely get his mind off Schmidt. "Bruce, can you use your computer to call Agent Coulson?"


Nope. Steve still wasn't used to voices coming down from the ceiling. "Yes, sir. Shall I upload the image to the main screen in your workshop?"


"I always forget it's there."

"You need to work on that. But I guess everyone needs at least one flaw."
The three of them called Coulson together and he was very enthusiastic about the plan of them following up on the lead. Apparently Bruce and Tony had uncovered a factory SHIELD wasn't even aware of yet. And that was saying something. Between all of them they had decided that this next mission had to be different than the rest of them. With the other ones it had always been a "get in, get out" mentality, quick, calculated strikes against Hydra. This time they had to eliminate the problem. After leaving those vials of the serum at the museum, Steve was more than happy for the opportunity to take out their production hub so they wouldn't have to worry about anything coming out of it again.

They arrived at the site the next day, or near the site. Like their very first mission they had to hike to their temporary control center. They had mostly waited a day to allow for some quick planning and transportation, but it was also good since it gave Bruce and Tony the chance to sleep which made them easier to live with on the hike to their new station. Although Tony had stayed up a little later than he should've to make a few last minute gadgets.

The factory—and there really was no better way to describe it—was on the outskirts of the city bordered by a small forest that was creeping slowly towards the Hydra building, tree roots and grasses already cracking the edges of the concrete. SHIELD set them up so that they would be approaching from the rear which suited Steve just fine. It meant that they would be coming through the trees rather than making their way to the factory via the single paved road leading to the facility.

As per usual, Bruce and Tony were to stay behind and manage the technical and surveillance aspects of the mission from the outpost SHIELD established. While the set-up was similar, it was clear that this station had been set up in a much shorter time span. Considering the amount of time they had to do everything, Steve was impressed. It lacked the exterior décor SHIELD typically strove for and stuck out like a sore thumb in the middle of a small clearing amongst the thin trees. Inside was just enough equipment for Bruce and Tony to make things work. For example, instead of a huge bank of monitors, they only had the two connected to the laptops they brought in. But there were tables and chairs along with a small case of water bottles and some dried food. There was also a lock on the door, bars on the windows, an electric generator, and a small transmitter attached to the roof that apparently Tony could use to set up a high-speed internet connection with Stark Industries satellites in space.

Once he was sure Tony and Bruce had gotten their equipment set-up and running, Steve led the rest of the team out. Since they wanted to keep their clothes for the mission ahead, Steve, Thor, Clint, and Natasha darted through the sparse foliage in their human forms. Steve was glad to see the woods. Although there was nothing wrong with having work to do in the city, it was a comfort to know that they would have the cover of nature as an advantage. There was something about the greenery that made Steve a little less tense.

The plan was for Steve and Thor to run a perimeter around the ten-foot high electric fence around the research complex while Natasha and Clint snuck in close. It worked well. Just as they had expected, there were a number of guards actually outside the fence and Steve and Thor quickly took care of them. They had to be quiet so that meant no guns, which meant that Steve had to get up close and personal with the men as he took them down. He tried his best to just render them unconscious but when it came down to it, he couldn't risk them making noise or coming to halfway through the mission.

He didn't bother to ask for the details as he met back up with Thor and the Lion confirmed that he had cleared his area. There was no blood on his clothes so Steve took that as a good sign. Radioing
their status in, Steve and Thor then crept back up towards the fence to wait.

By then, Natasha and Clint had managed to clear the electrified fence by climbing the closest tree and jumping. Steve probably wouldn't have made it but they were both lighter and more agile than either he or Thor were and they just barely made it over the top. The first thing Natasha did was sneak over to the power box and switch the fence off as Clint quickly scaled the side of the two-story factory building and pulled out his bow. Then Steve watched from the ground as Natasha and Clint silently picked the guards off one-by-one.

Natasha quickly eliminated those on the ground outside with a few clean sweeps of a blade she slipped from a slim sheath at her thigh and Clint handled all of those further away with his bow, his arrows finding their marks right in the gaps of the armor the men were wearing. It was absolutely incredible to watch and they were so good that the other guards around them didn't notice them or their comrades as they fell.

There were multiple structures in the building complex but they focused all of their attention on the one Bruce had identified as the actual factory based on the amount of the traffic in and out of the building that he was able to track by satellite. Once Bruce confirmed that all of the guards patrolling the exterior of the building were down, Steve and Thor clamored over the wire fence.

The next step was to infiltrate the factory itself which they also did in paired teams. Natasha joined Clint on the roof and together they snuck in through a skylight that had been cracked open to allow steam to escape while Steve and Thor took the more direct route straight through the front doors. It would've been a lot stupider if Natasha and Clint hadn't already been on the inside dealing with the employees. Luckily they had planned for this to happen at night so there far fewer people then there would have been during the daylight hours. Tony was able to deal with the coded lock on the front door and Steve shoved it open, taking the last two conscious men who were guarding the door out, attending to one while Thor dealt with the other.

Inside, the building seemed huge. Physically it took up about the same amount of space as a football field but there was just so much going on inside that it looked a lot bigger than it did from the outside. It was colder too and Steve could see his breath clouding up in front of his face as he stepped further into the building. The temperature took Steve by surprise but he quickly guessed that it due to whatever chemicals they were processing and for the enormous amount of technical equipment and vats Hydra had crammed into the space. Most of the machines that stood in long rows were turned off but a few were still whirring and beeping. In front of one of them there was a man in a mask, gloves, and a lab-coat slumped over a control panel and an arrow in his back.

Steve looked up to find Clint and Natasha crouched down on a thin catwalk that ran along the length of the large rectangular room. Noticing that she had been spotted, Natasha gave Steve a quick thumbs up then pressed a hand against her headset. "Okay, we're all clear inside."

Steve nodded and pressed a hand against his own earpiece. "Tony? Bruce?"

"Roger, Rogers. All clear on our end as well." Tony, obviously. They were still keeping an eye on the activity on the outside. "Go for it."

Nodding again even though the Cat couldn't see it, Steve motioned to the Cat currently at his side and kept his voice at a low whisper even as Thor drew close. "Remember, we need to be as stealthy as possible. Just because we took out everyone in this room doesn't mean that there aren't more around. The less attention we bring to ourselves, the easier this will be."

"Understood!"
Even Thor's attempt at a whisper resonated throughout the large space like a clap of thunder. Steve saw Clint shake his head despairingly. "Well, that 'stealth' lasted all of a minute..."

Knowing that he wasn't going to be getting any better, Steve just waved Thor off and focused on his own tasks. Crouching down, he used the production equipment and large vats labeled with chemicals he couldn't pronounce to make his way across the warehouse towards his target location. The next stage of the mission consisted of him and Thor each planting a small incendiary bomb on opposite corners of the warehouse. The bombs themselves were more than just simple explosives; they were what Tony had stayed up late to create. For someone who ran a business specializing on bio-technology Tony had a remarkable talent for creating weaponry. According to the Cat, these would send out a directional blast that would ensure the destruction of the warehouse while mitigating the potential lethality to those outside the blast zone. Steve was especially appreciative of that last part since he was pretty sure Tony had designed it just for him.

Steve soon lost sight of Thor but assumed that the Lion was doing his part since no one was saying any different. Thanks mostly to Clint and his arrows there weren't any more guards patrolling the ground level but Steve did his best to stay hidden as he snuck across the room. After all, they had only cleared this one room and the rooftops. If another employee or guard happened to wander in Steve wanted to be able to catch them by surprise.

Reaching his target location, Steve slipped one of the explosives Tony had rigged up out of his pocket and knelt down next to a large transformer Bruce had been able to identify via thermal imaging and placement of electric cables on the exterior of the building. They had gone over how to do this next part on the way here, but, "Just to be sure I'm doing this right, Tony, walk me through this." It wasn't just an issue of pressing simple button; there were a series of tiny switches and knobs and some sort of magnetic function to attach it to the wall...there was a lot to try and keep track of.

"Really, Steve? We talked about this, it's easy. Just activate the electromagnetic function via the small toggle near the base of the digital read-out—"

"In English?"

Steve could almost hear the annoyed look Tony was sending him over the airwaves. But really, not everyone on the team was a whiz with electronics. "There's a small white switch below the little screen. Push the bomb against the wall and toggle the switch. The bomb will stick to the metal wall."

"Okay." Following Tony's directions to the letter, Steve sat back on his heels. "Now what?"

"Now we activate the bomb."

It took a good few minutes for Steve to finish up, every second that ticked by feeling like an hour. The only thing that kept sweat from beading up on his forehead was the cool, dry air. It felt like he was performing surgery but even when one of them got frustrated with the other, Tony was able to walk him through it. After he was finishing Steve realized that it hadn't actually been all that difficult but working while stressed had made it seem five times more complex.

Steve sighed in relief as he pressed the last little button and the bomb clicked to life, a small digital read-out showing that they had four minutes until detonation. Plenty of time to clear the blast zone.

"I have just found my proper location and require direction as well."

Steve cringed as Thor's voice whispered loudly through the headset and he heard Tony heave a
frustrated sigh. "Jesus, I'm tagging out. Bruce, you're up."

Steve shook his head before standing and hurrying to Thor's location. He remembered most of it; he'd probably be able to help.

O~O

Tony shook his head and pulled off his headset to rub at his eyes as Bruce finished up with giving the Lion directions. He had been standing by the whole time to help if needed but luckily Steve had apparently reached Thor about halfway through and got Thor through the most complicated aspects. Thank God for small favors.

Leaning back in his chair, Tony swung his feet up onto the desk as he focused his attention back on the satellite image of the compound. He and Bruce both had it up on their screens, having expected that they would need two eyes to track everything but so far it had been quiet. Almost too quiet. Usually he would be willing to count it as good karma and move on but this time there was just too much about it that didn't make sense. This was one of Hydra's main production plants. Sure, Steve, Clint, Natasha, and Thor had taken out a bunch of guys but why weren't there twice as many? Why weren't they more alert? Where were all the security measures?

Rubbing his face again, Tony looked over at Bruce. "Something doesn't feel right about this."

The Wolf gave him a weak smile. "You think so too, huh?"

Great. Bruce had noticed it too. Tony had really been hoping that it was all in his head. "Thoughts?"

He shrugged, his arms crossing over his chest as his eyes went back to his screen. "I don't know. It could be normal, but it seems like we missed something."

But what did they miss? What didn't they catch? Tony was sure with Natasha and Clint keeping an eye on things that the team wasn't in immediate danger but at the same time…

"Both explosives set to detonate in sixty seconds. We're leaving the factory now."

At least that was one thing he didn't have to worry about. Snagging his headset from the desk, Tony rested back in his chair and watched as four figures darted out of the factory building on the satellite image. "Good. Make sure you get at least one hundred yards away."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bruce bite his lip, a small furrow in his brow, everything in his body language saying that he was just waiting for something to go wrong. It put Tony on edge and he wanted to tell Bruce to knock it off. But that would make him a hypocrite. "Do you think Hydra's somehow going to reactivate the fence and try to trap them in?"

"I hope not." But of course now that was all Tony could think about. The team grabbing onto the fence and having enough volts of electricity to knock out an elephant shoot through their bodies.

But he watched as the small figures on the screen grabbed onto the fence without incident. He heard Bruce let out a breath but Tony couldn't move his eyes from the screen, his eyes darting from side to side to try and spot something, anything. Was there something wrong with his bombs? Was Hydra going to try and tamper with them somehow?

But then there was the dull *boom* echoing through the walls of their trailer and a burst of white fire on the screen.
"Your explosives worked well."

"Yeah…"

If it wasn't that, then what was it? What was it?

Tony was so engrossed with the screen that he almost missed it. He would've missed it if he hadn't seen Bruce absently scenting the air. There was a subtle smell of lead and gunpowder wafted in through the thin crack under the front door. He hadn't used gunpowder or lead in his bomb.

They were so busy watching out for the others, they forgot to watch out for themselves.

Flipping his feet off of the desk, Tony sat straight up in his chair. "Shit, they're coming. Bruce, come on, pull your stuff together." Scrambling up, Tony grabbed his headset off of the desk and clicked it on as Bruce yanked his own headset off as he all but fell off of his chair. "Steve, Steve, do you copy?"

"Tony? What's wrong?"

"Steve, I don't know how it happened but we're in some deep shit." Running over to the windows, Tony peeled back the blinds to see that, sure enough, they weren't alone. Dressed in all black, the others were hard to see but Tony's sharp eyes picked them out from the shadows. Damn; there were a lot of them. "Hydra soldiers have this place surrounded and I don't have a weapon."

"Stay calm, Tony. I'm coming! Block the doors and windows and stay low."

"Get your ass over here." Pulling away from the window, Tony hunched over and whispered harshly into the microphone. "If you didn't remember, I'm stuck here with Bruce."

"What's wrong with—oh. Oh! Tony, just—try to keep him calm. I'm going to shift so I won't be able to talk, but, please, just keep talking so I know you're alright."

"Oh I'll keep talking, I'll talk your damn ear off if it'll get you here faster." Hooking the earpiece over his ear and leaving it on, Tony scrambled across the room and began to shove his laptop back into its case as Bruce crammed packets of paperwork into a knapsack. Raising his voice so that Bruce could hear him, Tony tried to ignore the sound of footsteps shuffling towards their shelter. "Did you get all the important paperwork?"

"I have everything that they could use to trace any of this back to us or SHIELD. Come on, we need to get out before they have us completely cornered-!" Bruce cut himself off with a shallow gasp as there was a loud bang against the front door.

"They've got us completely cornered in this box. Where the hell are you, Steve?" Steve, what had Steve told him to do?
Launching himself into action, Tony flipped himself over the table and made it to the front door in a single stride. Making sure it was bolted tight and ignoring another sharp bang against the wood, he grabbed a nearby metal chair and jammed it under the door handle. There was nothing more he could do for the windows, but they already had bars across them thanks to SHIELD's natural paranoia so that was at least something. "Okay, door's blocked, windows are...okay. Hopefully it'll be enough to—nope, never mind."

Tony jumped back an unnaturally far distance, the Cat inside of him thrumming with energy, as the glass between the metal bars shattered as one of the soldiers slammed the butt of a rifle into the window pane. Kicking over the desk, Tony grabbed Bruce and pulled him down behind the metal table just in time to avoid a bullet flying into his skull. "And they're shooting at us. Steve, they're shooting at us."

But he was supposed to be calm. Had to be.

Taking a deep breath, he glanced over at the Wolf hoping that he didn't look as scared as he felt. "Alright, Bruce. We're going to be fine. Steve and the others are coming. We'll be fine."

Bruce shook his head and dug his fingers into his hair as if he was trying to hold himself together. "Just, just stop—I need to relax!"

"Relax, good. Good. Just take a couple of deep breathes, go to your happy place..."

"Tony...I can't-!"

Words weren't enough. How the hell did you calm a Wolf down? Tactile, he had to think tactile. "Sure you can! Come here," grabbing his hand with one of his, Tony rested his other hand on Bruce's face. He could feel the skin and muscle tissue shifting underneath his palm and knew he had to act fast. "Feel this? Focus on this. Listen to me. Bruce, I know I'm not a Wolf, but I'm still an alpha. This time it's my turn to take care of you, alright? I'm going to get us both through this."

The Wolf was unresponsive and Tony fought down panic as he gently shook the beta. "Look at me, Bruce."

Finally, finally Bruce was able to meet his eyes and release a shaky breath. He was fighting it off. Thank God.

"There you go. Keep it up."

"...Th-thanks." Bruce's voice was rough, unnaturally gravely with a dark, growling undertone that sent shivers down Tony's spine. "Tony, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Stop. Shut up. This isn't your fault."

Before Bruce could protest, Tony shushed him with a sudden realization. Waiting a moment to make sure he was right, he returned his attention to the Wolf. "They've stopped shooting."

"W-why?"

"Maybe they're out of bullets."

Almost as soon as the wishful thought left Tony's lips he heard a soft *tink tink tink*, the sound of a light metal bouncing on concrete.

"What was that?"
Tony shook his head. "I don—" His voice caught in his throat as he saw a small metal can roll out from behind the desk. Except it wasn't a can. It was a grenade. "—Damn it."

The whole world seemed to run in slow motion as Tony threw himself over Bruce, his hands automatically moving to cover the beta Wolf's vital spots as the grenade erupted with a deafening bang and a ball of white-hot fire. Tony felt a sharp burning on his back, heard Bruce scream out something, then the world sped back up to leave Tony flying through the air, tumbling over head over heels and slamming into something hard.

He must've been knocked out for a second because the next thing Tony was aware of was opening his eyes when he hadn't even remembered closing them. Coughing, he blinked tears from his eyes and tried to see through the smoke that now filled the room.

Was he alright? His leg, Jesus. It hurt. What the hell had…?

Looking down, Tony swore as he saw one of the metal tables had gotten torn apart by the blast and landed on his legs. More importantly, one of the jagged metal edges had sliced straight into his left calf muscle, blood bubbling out from the six inch gash.

A whimper burst from Tony's throat against his will as he pushed at the table. Damn, it felt a lot heavier now. Grimacing, Tony braced himself and gave it another try, trying to push through the pain as the table cut his skin open another inch before he managed to get it all the way off. It definitely needed attention. Maybe Bruce could…Bruce. Shit.

Rolling his head to look around, Tony swallowed as he caught sight of Bruce laying not five feet away from him. "Bruce?"

Tony's murmur got a small twitch in response and then he heard it. A low, rumbling growl. "Bruce…? You okay?" The growl dropped even lower. It wasn't human, it wasn't even animal. "Clearly not." Swallowing again, Tony tried to pull himself up to go to Bruce, to get ready to run, he wasn't sure. "Alright, Bruce, you've got to pull yourself back. Fight your way through it! Please Bruce, I'm begging you here. Just, don't…! Ah, shit!"

He had just enough time to cover his face as Bruce shifted, the dust the change churned up momentarily blinding Tony. But when he scrubbed the dirt away and forced his eyes open, Tony sort of wished he had just kept them closed.

Bruce was frightening as hell. He wasn't grotesque, just—huge. Huge and a Wolf, but entirely unnatural. He looked more similar to those stupid werewolf costumes humans used to make for horror movies. Covered in dark brown fur, he was hunched over as small rumbling growls escaped him, his large claws digging into the remains of the tiled floor of the trailer. Then he looked up and his eyes met Tony's.

There was no sign of Bruce left there, just animal. Swearing again, Tony felt his scent close off, for the first time in a long while against his will. It was his own body trying to protect him from being found but there was no way he was escaping with the Wolf so close and already had him in his sights.

The growling grew louder and Tony held his breath as the Wolf moved closer, his gigantic muzzle coming down to sniff at his chest. Tony wanted to roll up into a ball, to do something to protect himself but found that he was unable to move as he broke out in a cold sweat. The Wolf sniffed again before rearing back and releasing a blood-curdling howl, revealing a line of razor sharp teeth in the process.
Sure that he was about to be eviscerated it was like a slap in the face when instead the Wolf jumped over him and bounded straight for what was left of the front of the trailer with an angry roar.

Thank God for small favors.

O-O

Steve ran, ran so fast his lungs burned and his paws barely touched the ground. He knew Thor, Clint, and Natasha were en route, having heard the entire conversation over their own earpieces but he couldn't wait for them to catch up. He couldn't wait that long. Tony couldn't wait that long.

The fur prickled up on his back as screaming and shouting reached his ears. And then a roar that chilled him right to the bone. Bruce.

Breaking through the tree line, Steve barreled right into the heart of a warzone and in the center of it was Bruce. It had to be Bruce. It smelled like the beta, sort of. From what he was able to scent over the stench of blood. Steve's body involuntarily hunkered closer to the ground at the sight of the mutated Wolf. It was surrounded by Hydra soldiers, all of them emptying the magazines of their guns right into the nine-foot tall creature but it didn't seem to be doing much but enrage the beast. As Steve forced himself closer, it let out another fearsome roar and swiped at one of the soldiers. The Wolf's claws shredded the man's armor like it was made of cardboard and the force of the blow sent him flying back nearly twenty feet, leaving him bleeding out on the forest floor. No one ran to his aid, too busy fighting for their own lives and trying not to trip over the dozen or so other bodies littering the clearing.

Steve could see slivers of the cabin, Tony's last known location, through the chaos. He could see yet more men heading towards it, guns raised. But he couldn't get there without getting through Bruce first.

With his decision made for him, Steve threw himself into the fight but just as he was about to sink his teeth into the leg of one of the Hydra men firing at Bruce, he caught a sharp flash of light in his peripheral vision and turned to see the cabin being lit up with gunfire.

No. **NO!**

**TONY!**
Chapter 12

Tony was in trouble.

Everything in Steve's mind had narrowed down to that single thought. Tony was in trouble and he needed to get to him now.

Digging his claws into the earth, Steve propelled himself forward, making sure to give the thing Bruce had shifted into a wide berth as he ran for the cabin that was still being lit up with bright flashes of gunfire. His vision had tunneled so far that he didn't catch the rustle in the bushes around him and only noticed the new unit of Hydra guards arrive when they stepped directly in his path.

Guns raised, the five men formed a wall of armed human bodies between Steve and the cabin but if they wanted a fight he was more than willing to give them one. He skidded to a stop directly in front of them, his teeth flashing as he snarled and snapped at them. That was the only warning he was going to give.

The soldiers didn't back down and responded in kind by beginning to fire at him. Feeling a bullet graze his shoulder, Steve rushed forward and bit down on one of the men's arm, tightening his jaw muscles until he heard the man scream and the gun he was holding fell from his hand and clattered to the ground. Steve released him in just enough time to dodge another shot and bite at another man's leg. His teeth snagged the man's skin just above his knee, making him stumble forward and miss a shot that otherwise was sure to have gone straight into Steve's head.

By now the men had broken their line formation and gathered up in a circle around Steve, trapping him inside and cutting off his escape routes. Steve knew he was in trouble. He should've waited for the others. He hadn't been smart about this but even now in his mind the danger he himself was in didn't seem half as important as getting to Tony. Hackles rising, the fur on the back of Steve's back pricked up as he readied himself for another fight. He was going to get himself out of this mess. He needed to. Tony was in trouble.

Suddenly he was reminded that they had another problem.

Steve felt the ground begin to shake before he caught sight of any movement but only realized that the Wolf-monster Bruce had become was charging straight at them when the thing let out a low, angry roar that cut through the sound of the gunfire. All of the Hydra guards surrounding Steve swung around, their guns now pointed at the larger Wolf and, still trapped in between them, all Steve could do was duck down to the ground as Bruce slammed into two of the soldiers.

Steve heard bones snap and screaming, felt the rush of air as the men were knocked back right over Steve's head to land hard on the forest floor behind him. Bruce let out another howl and slashed at another Hydra gunman as the rest of them began to panic. Steve felt hot blood splatter onto his fur and looked over to see the man's body crumble to the ground.

Rising up to his full height, Steve's gaze snapped up to Bruce, to try to calm him down, but the Wolf was already lashing out again, this time aiming at the man still standing behind Steve. Unfortunately the Wolf didn't seem to care that Steve was in the way.

Steve caught the blow full on his side, letting out a sharp yelp as his paws left the ground and he was sent flying a good ten feet. He had been lucky; Bruce had caught him with the pads of his paw and not the claws, but the blow still knocked the air out of him. If he hadn't been as big as he was, Bruce probably would've broken a rib or two. Hitting the ground with a _thud_, Steve rolled over
himself once before coming to a stop. Stunned, it took him a second to blink spots from his eyes and reorient himself. He hadn't been thrown that way since he was just a pup.

Shaking himself off, Steve forced himself back up onto his feet only to find that while he was down three more soldiers had appeared. They and the one guard who had made it through Bruce's onslaught were firing straight at the other Wolf. The bullets didn't seem able to puncture Bruce's skin but the impact made him flinch back with an angry snarl, one of his paws coming up as if to swat the munitions away as his ears fell back and he hid his face. Despite the fact that Bruce had just hit him hard enough to make Steve see stars, Steve knew that he had to help Bruce before he was seriously injured. There was only so much that even that beast would be able to endure.

Before Steve even had the time to take a step an arrow zipped in from amongst the trees, catching a guard in the back right between his shoulder blades. The man's gun slipped from his grip as he fell to the ground with a choked gasp. Whipping around, Steve turned in time to see Clint and Natasha burst into the clearing. Clint already had another arrow notched in his bow and in a flash Natasha was sprinting over to the Hydra soldiers. Ducking out of the way of another wayward swing of Bruce's paw, she slipped up behind one of the guards and before he even had time to turn around pulled out a knife and slid it right in the slit between the man's helmet and his tactical flak jacket, neatly cutting his carotid artery.

Rushing to join her, Steve jumped at one of the two remaining guards as Clint let loose another arrow to take out the second one. It was then that Natasha really seemed to take in Bruce's form, Steve hearing her let out a sharp hiss as she leapt back to land where Clint was standing. That left Steve standing alone near Bruce but he didn't mind. Neither Natasha nor Clint would withstand a blow from Bruce in his current state.

As it turned out, Steve didn't have to stand alone for long. Clint didn't even have time to string another arrow before a thunderous roar echoed out from amongst the trees. Not a second later Thor bounded out, standing tall in his Lion form. The Cat didn't hesitate before running right up to stand next to Steve and Steve was happy to see him. Clint and Natasha were probably too lean to take a hit from Bruce but Thor's animal form was huge; with the thick golden mane around his neck, he was a good foot taller than Steve's Wolf was. He would be more than able to take any beating that Steve could.

With the added back-up, in addition to the knowledge that Clint and Natasha were supporting them from a distance, Steve now felt capable of handling Bruce. In his Wolf form Steve didn't have the human ability of speech but he and Thor didn't need it to work together. They relied instead on body language and quick head motions, and when Steve indicated that Thor should flank Bruce from the left while he approached from the right, Thor understood.

Bruce snarled at each of the alphas before rearing back onto his hind legs and howling at them. He didn't seem to be behaving quite as viciously anymore but it was clear he still didn't recognize them as his teammates. And that apparently made them his enemy.

Thor was the first to make a move, jumping at the creature with a commanding growl. Bruce turned to swat at him and that was when Steve took his own chance. Darting at the side Bruce left exposed to try and get at Thor, Steve crashed into Bruce's side. The force caused all three of them to tumble to the ground. Bruce almost landed on top of Thor but the Lion managed to slip out from underneath the other Wolf before he was crushed. As soon as he hit the dirt, Bruce's rage seemed to return and he began to flail his limbs. Steve tried to keep him pinned but it was difficult. Even with Thor there, he couldn't rely on his usual strategies of clawing or biting; no matter what harm Bruce did to them, Steve couldn't get past the fact that this was his friend.
Bruce's rage continued to build and soon despite their combined weight it became impossible for Steve and Thor to hold him down. Feeling Bruce free one of his back limbs, Steve rolled off of him just in time to avoid having his stomach slashed open by the other Wolf's claws. Thor didn't stand a chance of holding on and none of Steve's snarls were enough to distract Bruce from swinging at the Lion. Thor didn't have any more luck avoiding Bruce's paw than Steve did earlier and was swatted halfway across the clearing. It was frightening, seeing a Shifter as large and powerful as Thor batted away like a fly. And now Steve was left alone with Bruce again. Except this time the other Wolf was angry.

In his periphery, he saw Natasha draw her gun and Clint pull back his bowstring, a grim look on both of their faces as Thor struggled back to his feet. The two were ready to do what they had to in order to stop Bruce but Steve wasn't about to let them, maneuvering his body so that he was between Bruce and the rest of his team. He wasn't giving up on Bruce just yet.

Letting his hackles rise again, Steve gathered up his courage and faced Bruce head-on. Subduing him physically obviously wasn't working so it was time to change tactics. And he had to act fast. Every second that passed by could make a difference for Tony's safety. There was one other way Steve could think of that they could settle this out. He knew if Bruce was able to pull himself out of this, if he was able to overpower his animal side with his humanity, he would've done so already. Steve wouldn't be able to reach Bruce without getting through to Bruce's Wolf first.

Steve steeled himself then pushed out every alpha pheromone he was able to and tensed his muscles so the fur along the back of his neck stood up, lowering down into a powerful stance that would be a clear signal to the other Wolf. The message was received. Drawing himself up to his full height, Bruce snarled at the challenge and Steve responded with a deep growl. This was a battle of wills now and Steve would be damned if he didn't win.

Bruce seemed confused at the lack of fear. The Wolf's ears drew back and growled low in his throat, the large beast flinching back in surprise as Steve barked loudly at the noise. Furrowing his brow, Bruce sniffed the air in Steve's direction then growled and snapped his jaws. Steve snarled and quick as he could manage brought his front paw up and boxed Bruce's muzzle. It wasn't meant to hurt, just to rebuke, the sort of smack you'd give an unruly cub testing his boundaries. Bruce reeled back in surprise, the Wolf's ears flicking up before falling back again as he reassessed Steve. Redoubling his efforts, Steve squared his stance and brought himself up to his full height.

Bruce's Wolf might be huge but before he had administered the experimental serum to himself, Bruce had been a beta, and at his center that's what Bruce still was. Feeding every ounce of worry he was feeling for Tony and every ounce of anger he felt towards both Hydra and himself into a new sense of authority, Steve saw his chance and took control back over the situation. Steve snarled and jerked forward, faking a lunge and making it clear that it wasn't an attack, but a promise of one if the other Wolf wanted to go.

But something had finally reached the other Wolf past the rage and, after letting out one more warning growl, put his ears back and slowly lowered himself onto his belly. If Steve was a human, he would've laughed in relief. It was a sign of submission.

Even on his stomach, Bruce was still as tall as Steve was standing up. But he stayed down, even as Steve motioned for Thor, Clint, and Natasha to come over. Motioning again towards Bruce, Steve kept his stance strong to make sure Bruce behaved himself as Clint jogged over and cautiously reach up to put his hand on the monstrous Wolf. Bruce rumbled but didn't do anything more than twitch an ear as Clint's fingers settled in his thick fur. Only relaxing when he saw his hand wasn't about to be bitten off, Clint looked down at Steve. "We have this, you go check on Tony."
Nodding his thanks, Steve turned and immediately sprinted off to the cabin. A chill spread through his body when he realized that at some point while he had been distracted with Bruce the cabin had gone quiet and fallen dark. All the fear he had pushed aside when subduing Bruce came back tenfold and he felt like there was a hand squeezing his heart.

The cabin was close but the run seemed to take forever. The whole way he breathed in deep through his nose and mouth, desperately scenting the air, but all he smelled was human blood and smoke. Every step he took brought him farther away and it wasn't just Tony anymore. It was Dernier, Jones and Dugan. It was Kruger, Morita, and Falsworth. It was Bucky.

Again, he had led his team into a trap. Again there had been bloodshed. And now the person he wanted most to protect might be dead.

After what seemed like forever Steve reached what was left of the trailer SHIELD had installed for their use. The condition of the burnt out room stole his breath away and Steve found himself pausing at the door, afraid of what he might find inside.

He couldn't hear any heartbeats.

Swallowing, Steve shook his head and nudged the remnants of the front door opened with his muzzle. It was difficult to see inside. As a Wolf he had pretty decent vision even at night but there all the electric lights had burst and what little moonlight seeped in from the holes in the walls was blocked out by a thick haze of dust and smoke still floating in the air. Steve huffed out a breath before putting his nose to the ground and scented the space out. There were empty shell casing and broken glass mixed in with the debris covering the floor.

It didn't take him long to find the first body. His breath fled from him when he first spotted the limp hand draped over the leg of an overturned table but it returned quickly once he realized that it wasn't Tony. It was a Hydra soldier. It was clear that there had been a scuffle there, but with one man dead, where was Tony?

Sniffing closer at the blood spattered around dead man and the overturned furniture, he discovered his first signs of the Panther. There was blood there, a good deal of it, but on closer inspection not all of it in the cabin was human blood. Some of it was distinctly different; it was Shifter blood. It was Tony's.

Tony had been wounded but he wasn't anywhere to be found.

The blood trailed out and away from the carnage. It was hard to follow with all the junk and the mix of scents but it was definitely there. And there—was that?

There, amongst the charred dust and scattered bits of wood, was a large bloody paw print.

Hope welled up in Steve's chest and he sniffed the print. Tony. It too was Tony's blood. But did that mean—? Steve slowly lifted one of his own paws then stepped down, pressing the pads of his foot into the dust next to the bloody print. When he pulled his paw away again, his suspicions were confirmed. The paw print didn't match his. It was of a similar shape and about the same size, but it didn't belong to a Wolf. It was a Cat's. And since Thor hadn't ventured over that left only one option. It was Tony's.

Tony had shifted.

But where did he go?

O~O Ten Minutes Earlier O~O
Tony focused on breathing as he listened to the sound of Bruce rush out of the trailer and heard the
Hydra soldiers begin to scream. He needed to come up with a plan. He could move on his leg if he
needed to but he was really hoping that it wouldn't come to that because it was going to hurt like a
bitch.

Reaching up to try and turn his headset on, Tony wasn't entirely surprised to find that it had been
knocked right off of his head. So much for communications…At least he had called Steve earlier.
Steve and the others had to be coming still. Hopefully they wouldn't run into Bruce on their way in…

Hearing the sound of boots hurrying up to the door, Tony let out a short sigh of relief. He wasn't
alone anymore. It was about time. Tony pushed himself up onto his elbows with a tight wince and
leaned over to try to see around the broken tables to the front door. "Steve?"

The footsteps paused then began to hurry over to him. Forcing a laugh, Tony reached up with a
shaking hand and brushed some of the dust off of his shirt. "I'm back here…God, Steve, took you
long enou—"

"We found one!"

Tony's hand froze on his chest and his eyes snapped up. That wasn't Steve. Apparently Bruce
missed some soldiers on his way out. And Tony and his damn mouth had just blown his cover.

Four men dressed in black tactical armor came around the corner, the laser sights on the guns
cutting red beams of light through the haze inside the trailer. Scrambling back, Tony hissed as the
gash on his leg stretched and another stab of pain shot through his torn calf muscle. "Shit…!"

One of the men, obviously the one in charge, stepped forward as the others gathered around him,
his gun pointed right at Tony's head. The man's face was covered by a tinted piece of glass but
Tony saw a flash of white as he sneered. "Well, well, well. What do we have here? I don't know
how you survived that grenade, but I don't really care."

Tony's fingers clenched behind him, searching the rubble around him for anything he could use as
a weapon. They came up empty. His mouth felt like he had downed a whole bag of cotton balls as
he swallowed and tried to keep a growl out of his voice. "Do you know who the hell I am?"

"Sure do, Mr. Stark." Damn it. "And it sure was a shame you had to die when your freak teammate
shifted and tore you to shreds."

"That didn't bode well. He had to stall. He just needed a bit more time. Steve had to be close.
Hunching his shoulders to try and look smaller, he put his hands up in a sign of surrender. "Listen,
you want money? Sure you do, who doesn't. Just let me go and you'll have enough to buy yourself
a nice little island somewhere in the Caribbean."

Tony fell silent as he saw the man's finger tighten around the trigger of his gun. "You think I'd fall
for that? Besides, your dog went fucking psycho and killed a friend of mine. I figure I should return
the favor."

"Hey, I'm serious—"

"Shut up!"

Twitching at the shouted command, Tony swallowed again. Okay. Okay, new plan. No one was
coming for him. He was on his own for this one and he was one second from having his head
blown right off his shoulders. There was only one ace left up his sleeve, only it was a card
he really didn't want to play. "Don't do this. You'll regret it." Tony really didn't want to do this either. God, he could already feel himself beginning to shake.

"You don't look like much of a threat."

"And that's where you're wrong."

Tony didn't have a choice. A gasp burst from his lips as he had to almost push his Cat out for his first transformation in years. It hurt after so long; he could feel his muscles stretching and bones crack and rearrange themselves, stiff from disuse. He felt every single piece of fur get forced up through his skin and the sting in his gums as his teeth sharpened and lengthening. The prickling of a thousand needles down his back as his spine lengthened and his tail whipped out behind him.

The change didn't take any longer than a second but it left Tony dazed and disoriented. But he had shifted out of sheer determination to live and the Panther's heart rate was already pounding double time, ready for fight or flight. Releasing a yowling shriek, Tony ripped through the remainder of his clothing with his claws, the fabric shredding like paper.

The Hydra agents around him had frozen. They had clearly been trained on fighting Shifters but looking back on it Tony would bet that they hadn't expected him to be an issue. The midnight black fur rippled up on his back as he let out a low, warning hiss, his lips curling up to show his long canine teeth. In this new form, Tony could smell their sudden uncertainty, their fear, and he used it as best he could.

Quickly narrowing down the weakest link—the slight trembling of the man's hands giving him away—Tony launched himself at the soldier with a sharp scream of rage. As Tony landed on him, the impact threw the man to the ground and the helmet he was wearing cracked as Tony bit down on the hard plastic, his powerful jaw puncturing material that was supposed to stop bullets as his claws dug at the soldier's vest as the man screamed to try and find any flesh to sink into. Then, as quick as lightning, Tony threw himself off as he heard the guard next to him ready his rifle to shoot.

As soon as he separated from the lacerated man the bullets started flying but Tony was ready for them. Using the wall as a launching pad, Tony leapt over one of the overturned tables so that he was clear on the other side of the room. His speed and dark coloring made it difficult for the men to keep up with his movements and their fear made them crap shots. Though they were certainly still trying. They fired bullet after bullet at him as he darted through the destroyed furniture, the bright flashes of light making it so that he could barely tell where he was going. But he could smell fresh air up ahead and he let it guide him right to the front door.

He'd like to see them try and catch him now.

O~O~O~O

Steve paid the rest of his team one more passing glance to confirm that they were all still alright before hurrying to follow Tony's scent from the cabin and back out into the woods. It was hard to fathom that Tony had managed to sneak by him sometime in the last few minutes but he hadn't been watching for a Panther. Honestly, he hadn't been watching at all, too consumed with Hydra and Bruce.

Once he got in amongst the trees Tony's trail became more difficult to follow. Steve couldn't tell for sure, but it definitely seemed like Tony was using the ground and the larger trees for travel which didn't make things any easier. Stuck on the ground, he wasn't able to confirm anything and only caught a firm lock on Tony again whenever he apparently touched ground.
A soft growl of frustration rolled from Steve's throat. More than a lack of a trail, the Cat was staying upwind, only allowing him a whiff of the Panther's scent when the breeze shifted through the brush. It was…unsettling, like chasing a ghost. Or being hunted by one. He had no idea what state Tony was in, but the only reason the Wolf in him was alright with the idea of stalking an angry alpha was the slight undercurrent of blood mixed in with the Cat's musk. If Tony was hurt, Steve needed to find him. And from the amount of blood he had found in the trailer, Tony had been decently hurt.

With every minute he spent chasing after Tony, Steve grew more and more anxious. He was being drawn into unfamiliar territory and away from the rest of his team. However injured Tony was, it was clear he could still move very quickly and if he wanted to he could lead Steve for another couple miles out before he managed to catch up.

But Steve would follow. No matter how many hours it took, he would find him. Keeping his nose to the ground, Steve continued to trot forward. The Cat's scent was beginning to grow stronger as if he were spending more time on the ground than in the trees. Maybe he was growing tired. He definitely seemed to be getting a little sloppier. Steve was putting no effort into masking his own presence but up until now the Panther had been good about not leaving so much as a footprint on the ground to mark his path. But now there were definitely prints again and stronger scent signals. And, the trail stopped?

Steve looked up in confusion as he reached the end of the scent trail. There was no Tony in sight though. Then what…? Going back over his steps, Steve followed the path again and realized that the scents hadn't ended, they had double-backed. Tony was behind him now.

Spinning around, Steve just barely kept himself from moving into a defensive stance. He wasn't stalking Tony anymore; it was the other way around and he hadn't even noticed. It was an unsettling thought. But now that he knew, he kept his eyes trained on the trees in front of him, back towards the direction he had come from. There. Steve's eyes caught something. A flash of a black darker than the shadows, a soft rustling amongst the brush.

Steve let out a soft growl of acknowledgement. There was a still pause and then a low, growling hiss in response. It seemed to echo off of the trees around him but Steve kept his gaze focused on where he had last seen sign of movement. It turned out to be the right choice as another moment later Tony stepped out from behind a thin copse of trees.

The Panther was gorgeous. The dark color of his fur reminded Steve of Bucky's coat, but it looked so much more luxurious, like black velvet stretched over the Cat's lithe muscles with black spots shining out from the dark charcoal hue of the rest of the coat. He was a little shorter than Steve in his animal form but was still large and obviously of alpha size and strength.

He was limping with his back left paw and the cause wasn't hard to figure out. Blood was streaking down the limb from a long cut on his lower leg. Part of the wound was hidden by the Panther's fur but from where he was standing it looked bad, but not immediately life threatening. Despite the injury, he was still holding himself strong, his muscles tensed and ready for anything. The low growling had started back up and it sounded like a warning. The Cat's stance made Steve wonder how in control Tony's human side was at this point, but the sharp glint of intelligence in its golden brown eyes was all Tony.

Steve whined beseechingly, his ears falling back against his head. He didn't want to fight the Cat. Slowly, the Panther seemed to realize this and ever so cautiously the growling silenced and the tension melted away from his muscles. Then, in a show of trust, the Cat relaxed into a sitting position even as his slim tail was still lashing at the air behind him.
Taking it as a signal he could finally approach, Steve padded over and, once he was sure the Panther wasn't going to strike out at him, gently rubbed his head against the Cat's in greeting. Tony let out a low rumble but rubbed back, ducking his head to nuzzle at Steve's chest as he moved closer.

Feeling a weight lift off his shoulders, Steve let out a long breath and shifted back, moving his now human arms around Tony's shoulders as he felt the Panther follow suit. As soon as Tony began to shift back in his own human form Steve could feel that the other man was trembling, his breaths coming a little too quick and a little too shallow. Pulling him closer, Steve kept a hand wrapped tight around his shoulders as he tried to support some of Tony's weight. "Hey, hey, take it easy."

Tony sucked in a breath and let it out in a sharp burst, his voice a hoarse whisper. "Fuck, that took a lot out of me…"

"I've got you. Now, let me see your leg." Now that the fur coat was gone, Steve could already see that the wound was a little more extensive than he had hoped but not as bad as he feared. It was still bleeding a little, probably because Tony had gone and been an idiot and ran on the thing.

"So you're a doctor now, huh?"

"Stop fussing."

"You stop fussing."

Shaking his head, Steve leaned over with one hand on still on Tony's shoulder and the other on Tony's knee to make sure he wouldn't try and jerk the leg away. There was a bit of dirt in it and it would definitely need some stitches, but it didn't look like any major arteries or bone had been hit. Tony let out a small hiss and Steve realized that he was gripping Tony a little tighter than was necessary. But he couldn't help it. A part of him had been sure that he was going to reach the end of the trail only to find that the Panther had bled out and died.

With a start, Steve felt tears beginning to well up and quickly reached up and scrubbed them away under the pretext of rubbing his tired eyes. When Tony let out a questioning grunt it was all Steve could do to shake his head again and wrap Tony up in a tight hug. "God, Tony, I was so worried."

The Cat scoffed but one hand came up to wrap itself around Steve's back, just for a moment. "You do realize you're smothering me?"

A mirthless laugh burst from Steve's throat. Tony was trembling and he was still acting like a jerk. "Shut up and let me hold you. You made me chase you all the way out here, you owe me one."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Steve pulled away just enough to see Tony send him a weak smirk. "Once I started running I just didn't feel up to stopping. You're not a bad tracker, by the way. Terrible at stealth though. Sounded like a rhino coming through here…"

"I wasn't trying to hide, unlike someone."

Now that the adrenaline was finally beginning to settle, Steve was starting to feel the rocks and twigs he was kneeling on digging into his skin. From where he was practically sprawled across the forest floor, Tony had to be even more uncomfortable, and it wasn't doing his wound any favors. Squeezing the Cat's shoulders, Steve began to pull Tony up. "Come on, we need to move. We're going back to the group and getting out of here."

Brushing off Steve's hands, Tony struggled back to his feet on his own, leaning against a tree for balance as his bag leg almost gave out underneath him. "We're running away? Seems unlike
"We're not running. We did what we came here to do and we took care of the rest of the guards. I'm just not waiting around for reinforcements to arrive." Falling silent, Steve considered Tony for a moment. It didn't look like he would be able to support much weight on that leg. "Can you walk?"

Tony scowled back at him. "Of course I can walk, I'm not an invalid." Pushing off of the tree, Tony hobbled forward. He got all of two steps before his left knee buckled and would've fallen if Steve hadn't dived in to catch him. "Shit…"

Quickly pulling back once Tony had regained his balance, Steve crossed his arms over his chest. "Look, don't strain yourself just to prove a point."

Tony grit his teeth as if he were biting back an insult. "I'm sorry, do you have a better suggestion? Even if I use you as a human crutch, me limping along is not going to get us anywhere fast. And like you yourself pointed out, we're a bit far off the beaten path here."

He had a point. He wasn't about to let Tony shift and run all the way back on that leg. Steve could easily support Tony's weight but it'd be a cumbersome way to move through the woods. In fact, even if Steve were to carry him it'd still take a long time to get back. He undoubtly wouldn't be able to run, not while carrying Tony. In his human form anyway. But if he were in his animal form, it might be a different story. His Wolf form was plenty tough enough to take the weight and he'd still be able to run. "Well, you could ride me?"

Tony's eyes flashed to his and a strange expression passed over his face before settling into a teasing smirk. "Wow. You know I'm actually tempted, but I can't exactly say I'm in the mood."

"What?" What was he…? Oh! "No! No, Tony, no, not like that!" Steve threw his hands up into the air and fought back a blush. Now wasn't the time. "You knew what I meant! I can shift and you can ride on my back."

"I think I'd prefer the innuendo."

Steve didn't doubt it judging by the sour look on Tony's face but it was the best option he had come up with so far and they didn't have forever to sit around and think of a better one. Before Tony could continue his protests, Steve shifted and made the decision for him.

Crouching low to the ground, Steve motioned back with his muzzle. Shaking his head, Tony hobbled over with an annoyed frown on his face. "You do realize I'm naked, right Steve?"

Steve nodded. He'd noticed. And as much as it might have mortified him in another situation, this was Tony, and even Steve knew better than to place propriety over survival. "And you do realize that unless you magic a saddle and some reins out of midair, I'm going to be pulling on your fur pretty hard to stay on?"

Snorting, Steve nodded before motioning once again towards his back. Tony huffed and as he opened his mouth Steve cut off his next complaint with a growl. They didn't have time for this. Tony seemed to get the point and slowly, reluctantly limped over the few remaining steps and cautiously sat down on Steve's back, loudly vocalizing his displeasure all the while.

Steve stood up carefully to make sure that Tony really did have a good grip on him before breaking into a brisk trot. Communication was down. Steve didn't know where the rest of his team was and didn't really know where he himself was. But luckily that same trail that brought him out here was
Steve heard Tony curse in his ear as he picked up his pace a little and didn't complain when he felt Tony's fingers dig further into his fur and his knees grip him even tighter around the waist. He knew it couldn't be easy for the Cat to hold on and didn't begrudge him for it, even if it did hurt a little. If nothing else, Tony had given him fair warning. Steve made it easier on the both of them by making sure not to make any tight turns and to go around fallen branches and bushes instead of jumping over them.

The way back didn't seem to take nearly as long as the way out, although Steve was pretty certain that had more to do with the fact that he had Tony relatively safe in tow rather than the worry of whether or not the Cat was still alive. Once they got going Tony stayed pretty quiet, probably too focused on not falling off to let his mouth run. That changed though when Steve finally began to close in on their starting point.

Feeling a sharper than usual tug on his fur, Steve glanced over his shoulder to find Tony frowning down at him. "Steve, stop for a minute."

Steve growled and jerked his head forward. He could smell the others, they were right up ahead!

"Yeah, I know. I do have a nose too. But I'm not going over there like this."

Confused and concerned, Steve slowed his pace until he had come to a complete stop and twitched as Tony slid off of him, turning to look at the Cat with an inquisitive whine. Steve didn't get it. Tony was wounded, but that was nothing to be ashamed of. He was naked, but they were Shifters. It wasn't the first time they had seen a naked man and more importantly, they would understand. But then Tony gestured at his chest and Steve knew what the problem was. The scar on his chest. He didn't want the others to see.

Lowering his ears, Steve padded over and licked a small stripe up the center of the round scar. But Tony just rolled his eyes and gently shoved his head away. "Not up for discussion…"

Steve growled his displeasure at the decision, but gently since it seemed Tony's mind was already made up. He would've preferred that Tony not shift since doing so would only aggravate his wound further, but Steve also knew how to pick his battles. They were now within fifty yards of the rest of his team and they didn't have time to dawdle. He wasn't going to waste precious minute arguing with Tony about this, especially knowing how stubborn Tony could be and would continue to be since the Cat already had to make one concession that night.

Tony and Steve shifted at the same time, Tony into his Panther form and Steve into his human form. He was going to need to talk for this next part, particularly if Tony wasn't going to be able to. Steve sent Tony a rebuking frown as they finished pushing their way through the underbrush.

"You take it easy on that leg."

Sure enough, the gash had reopened yet again and new lines of blood were dripping sluggishly down Tony's hind leg. Tony just let out an annoyed rumble and batted at Steve with a front paw, his claws retracted so as not to actually hurt him.

"Steve? You copy?"

Steve jerked in surprise at hearing Clint's voice in his ear and had to actually reach up and touch it to remember that he still had his earpiece in and had left it on to listen for Tony. It was the only thing that had stayed on him during his shifting. Right; that had been the first time he had actually spoken for almost an hour. Of course the others would respond.
"Yes, this is Steve. We're almost back to you now."

"You got Tony?"

"Yeah." Steve looked down at the Panther beside him who met his gaze questioningly. "Yeah, Tony's here. A little more feline than normal, but here."

"Thank God for that."

Natasha answered back, having apparently just switched her own earpiece back on as well. "We'll meet you back behind the trailer."

"Sounds good. We'll be there in two minutes."

Steve had given them a conservative time estimate and it turned out to be the right thing to do. Tony was moving much slower than normal and Steve was happy to keep him at that pace. It was actually Tony who tried to push them ahead faster but Steve physically slowed him down. Tony was putting up a brave front but now that Steve was looking for it he could see the small shivers of pain that went through Tony with every step he took.

He was about ready to grab the Panther and throw the Cat over his shoulder just so Tony wouldn't have to endure it anymore when they Steve heard a hushed conversation just past the next copse of trees. The voices were familiar, as were their scents, so Steve wasn't surprised when he and Tony emerged from the foliage to find the rest of his team. Natasha was waiting in front of the others, clearly having anticipated the direction Steve and Tony would be coming from, while Thor and Clint were on either side of a very exhausted-looking Bruce who had one arm slung across both of their shoulders.

Steve was relieved to see Bruce back in his human form, although he did look worse for wear. He and Thor had both managed to recover what was left of their clothing but even through his ripped shirt and torn pants, Bruce looked downright haggard.

As soon as Steve and Tony stepped out all of their eyes snapped to the black Cat but surprisingly it was Bruce who made the first move forward. Pulling away from Clint and Thor, Bruce stumbled forward and fell to his knees in front of the Panther, whether it was from exhaustion or so he could be eye-to-eye with Tony Steve couldn't tell. But then Bruce was wrapping his arms around the Panther's neck and pressed his forehead up against the Cat's. "Oh my god…Tony…I'm so sorry…"

Tony nosed Bruce's cheek, the whiskers on his nose twitching when Bruce just shook his head.

Pulling his eyes away from the exchange, Steve made himself focus on the matter at hand as he looked back over at Natasha, Clint, and Thor. "Does anyone have any spare clothes? Tony's wounded and lost some blood, so I want to make sure he stays warm in his human form." It wasn't entirely a lie.

Bruce looked up then back at Tony. As the only practicing doctor in the group, he would've been the one to question Steve's request but he didn't look surprised to hear it. Either it actually was a good idea or Bruce knew about Tony's issues with his personal appearance. "I, I brought, some extra clothing, just in case. It's in my, my bag."

At that Clint pulled a half-charred duffle off of his shoulder and began to dig through it. They must've gone back and dug it out of the wreck of the trailer before leaving. It didn't take the Hawk long to find what he was looking for and quickly tossed Steve two pairs of pants and a hoodie. "A pair of pants for you and some sweats and a hoodie for Tony. It's the warmest thing in here."
"Thank you." Pulling on the pair of pants himself, Steve redirected his attention back to Bruce. "You don't have any medical supplies in there too, do you?"

Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head as he sighed against Tony's neck. "The first aid kit was separate. There may be a band-aid in there but..."

"Here," Reaching back to a small pocket on the utility belt she was wearing, Natasha pulled out a tightly gathered ball of gauze. "There's not much there, but you're free to use it if it helps."

"Thank you." Steve gratefully accepted the small bundle. It wasn't much, but it would do better than nothing. They just had to patch Tony up as best they could so that they could get him to a real hospital with fewer complications. "Bruce..." Looking at the beta, he was still shaking even as he removed his arms from Tony's neck, his face ashy white with dark circles under his eyes. He looked like he was about to keel over himself and was in no shape to be worrying about anyone else right now. This was something Steve would have to do himself. He wasn't the best nurse, but at least he had patched up a few wounds with the Howling Commandos before so he wasn't totally new at this. "Sit tight. I'll take care of this. Natasha, can you figure out some way to get us out of here?"

"Already taken care of. A SHIELD helicopter is on its way for a pick up. I signaled them as soon as you said you found Stark."

"Thanks." Looking down, Steve motioned for Tony to follow him back into the trees. They wouldn't go in far but he figured Tony would appreciate the privacy. "Come on, Tony."

The Panther's tail whipped about behind him but Tony obediently got back up on his feet and limped after Steve with all the grace he could muster. Once they were out of view, Tony shifted back and snatched the hoodie Steve was holding for him out of his hands. After he pulled it on, he all but collapsed onto the ground, using the bottom hem of his sweater as a barrier between his butt and the dirt. "Let's get this over with."

Steve crouched down beside him and made Tony hold the second pair of sweatpants as he got to work unrolling the bandage Natasha had lent him. "This won't do much except help compress the wound."

"Agh, god!" Tony slapped Steve's hand away as Steve gently tried to brush some of the dirt away that had accumulated near the gash. "Stop it! If I knew you wanted to torture me, I wouldn't have come back here."

Steve frowned. "It's only going to get infected if—"

Steve didn't have it in him to be annoyed at Tony's demands, especially not when underneath the irritation there was an audible undercurrent of pain. Keeping his movements quick and efficient, Steve did his best to wrap and tie off the bandage. Tony bit his lip as Steve manhandled his leg but managed to stifle any noises that would have otherwise escaped, only grunting once as Steve pulled the bandage tight to make sure that it wouldn't just slip off after he finished. The white fabric was already beginning to be stained red but the blood flow was slowing again and that was all Steve
Grabbing Tony's sweats back, Steve slipped one pant leg over each of Tony's feet. "Here, put these on."

"I got it!" Wiggling where he sat, Tony scooted far enough back so that he could pull the pants up his own legs. "Jesus, Steve, I'm not two years old."

"I know. Just, let me..." Catching the fabric before it slid over the bandage, Steve helped hold the elastic waist band up so that it passed over the wound instead of dragging across it. Tony rolled his eyes but didn't try to swat him away. That was enough to tell Steve that the help was appreciated.

Once the pants were up, Steve took a moment to just lean up against Tony, to let them both rest for a minute before going back to the others. "...Does it hurt bad?"

"I've had worse..." Steve closed his eyes as he tucked his nose against Tony's throat and took a deep breath. He knew Tony wasn't just saying that. He held still as he felt Tony reach up and wrap an arm around his back, holding him close.

Keeping his eyes closed, Steve pressed a kiss against Tony's jaw. His skin was salty and clammy and he smelt like ash and leaves. "It'll be okay."

Tony sighed against Steve's neck, grudgingly retracting his arm from around the Wolf. "Are you telling me or you?"

Steve shook his head; he didn't know.

O~O~O~O

After they recollected themselves, Steve and Tony had returned to wait with Natasha, Clint, Thor, and Bruce until the SHIELD helicopter arrived to pick them up. There wasn't a clearing large enough to fit the chopper's rotor blades behind the trailer so they had to return to the scene of the carnage in front of it so that the helicopter could actually land. Bruce seemed about ready to pass out at the sight of all the bodies scattered around and Thor had to practically carry the beta up inside.

They were lucky in that one of the SHEILD agents staffing the helicopter had also been trained as an EMT and was able to attend to Tony's wound. They offered to land at a hospital first but Tony wouldn't have any of it, saying that it would just be a waste of time now that they had cleaned the gash out and stitched it up. Steve had tried to push the issue, just so they could make sure that nothing had actually gotten infected, but it was a lost cause. To be honest, Steve found himself agreeing to a degree with Tony that the best thing for him now was a night back in his own bed. After everything that had happened, the Cat deserved a comfortable night. The same held true for Bruce and the faster they could get the both of them home, the better.

Once they touched down at Tony's mansion and were cleared by the SHIELD agents, Steve herded his weary team out and into the house. Everyone dispersed fairly quickly but Steve's attention was focused solely on Tony. He half-carried, half-walked the Cat back to his bedroom. Bee-lining straight for the door at the end of the hall, Steve pushed it open, only taking a moment to observe the new space.

This was the only room Steve hadn't been in yet, had never even seen inside. Tony always kept the door closed. The Cat's scent was heavy here and it was decorated surprisingly comfortably. It was still modern like the rest of his home but the bed was large with a cozy looking comforter and there
was a large padded headboard behind it. There were windows on both sides of the room and the blinds automatically drew closed as they staggered inside. Feeling Tony's arm tighten around his shoulders, Steve postponed his inspection to turn back to more important matters. "Come on, let's get you to bed..."

Tony grunted in protest as Steve picked the Cat up as they reached the bed so that he could gently lay him out on the sheets. And if Steve didn't let go after Tony was resting on the mattress, well, he didn't think that anyone would blame him. He just wasn't ready to let go just yet.

"How about a little space, huh? I'm wounded, I don't also need to be asphyxiated."

Shaking his head, Steve leaned his weight onto his elbow so that he was lying on the bed beside Tony instead of on top of him. "Sorry." Even if he really wasn't... "I just want to make sure you're okay."

"Okay?" Tony scoffed, the expression morphing into a grimace as he moved his left leg to wave at his calf. "No, I'm not okay. Look at my leg! It'll be an annoying inconvenience for at least a few hours."

"I'm serious, Tony!" Steve hadn't meant to shout but he couldn't take Tony's snark. Not after what could have happened.

He felt Tony's chest rise then fall in a heavy sigh before the Panther turned to actually look at him. Their eyes met and Steve saw something in Tony's break a little. "You're obviously thinking about something, so just say it."

Freeing a hand from where it had been trapped under Tony's shoulder, Steve ran his fingers through Tony's hair before sliding his palm down the Cat's jaw. "This is the first time you've shifted in years, right?"

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?"

"What, with shifting?"

Steve nodded and Tony sighed again, taking a moment to close his eyes and really think it over. Taken off guard that he was really considering the question, Steve leaned forward until their foreheads were pressed together and allowed Tony the time to think.

"...Yeah, yeah, I am."

"You sound surprised."

A wry smirk spread across Tony's lips and his eyes flickered open to meet Steve's gaze again. "Considering the last time I tried I had a small psychological break down, yeah, I kinda am. Of course, I was nineteen then so god knows what sort of emotional problems I was dealing with anyway."

"Don't—" stopping himself before he got upset again, Steve took a breath to calm himself down before trying again. "This isn't something you should joke about."

"It's how I cope. That and avoidance."

"Tony..."
Frowning, the Cat rested his own hand against Steve's cheek, his brown eyes flicking across the Wolf's face. "Steve, are you okay?"

"I—" Closing his eyes, Steve pressed his face into Tony's palm. He was mortified to feel tears prick the corner of his eyes for the second time that night. "...No. I'm really not. I thought you were going to die back there. That I wouldn't, wouldn't be able to get to you in time."

"Don't talk like that. I'm right here still, you can't get rid of me that easily."

Steve could tell Tony was smiling at him but he just couldn't meet the other's eyes. "I just, when I realized it was an ambush and I couldn't protect you, any of you, I—"

"Hey, Steve, look at me." Tony's hand slid down to his chin and forced his gaze back up. "Come back to me. You're letting yourself get pulled back into some dark memories. I know that look." All the words Steve wanted to say stuck in his throat. "This is about the Howling Commandos, and Bucky, right? Steve, you made it. You made it back in time. Everyone pulled through."

"But you were—"

"I'll be fine. And, as a side-note, I'm pretty damn hard to kill when I put my mind to it."

Steve had to close his eyes against Tony's gaze. It was too perceptive. Too aware. "I just—I can't lose you, Tony."

"You won't."

"You're the only one who's made me feel whole since...since Bucky."

"Hey, look at me. Open your eyes." Steve obeyed, unable to do anything else and Tony kept their eyes locked together. "Look at me. I'm right here."

"But—"

"Stop talking..." A whine slipped from Steve's lips as Tony pulled him down into a light kiss. His eyes fluttered closed again as he responded but Tony allowed it as Steve's kisses began to be tinged with desperation.

Too close, he had been too close to losing someone else he cared too deeply about without realizing—without being able to tell them... Steve pulled away just enough to free his lips from Tony's, his breath starting to come in pants as he felt Tony's hands slide up to bury themselves in his hair. "I can't, I can't lose you too...I love you, Tony."

Grunting, Tony fingers tightened, pulling lightly at Steve's hair, before he pressed himself closer and deepened their kiss. As their kisses grew more serious and the tension between them grew thicker, Steve felt something warm begin to blossom in his chest, the warmth slowly spreading down through his arms and legs until it had filled him entirely. It almost felt like he was in heat but less fevered and was a welcome relief after the chill that had frozen in his veins since he had first thought Tony had been shot.

Pulling back enough to suck in a breath, Tony pressed his lips against Steve's jaw as he let out a husky murmur. "Damn...We really should've stopped all of this when our heat ended."

A rumble rose up in Steve's chest and logically he had to agree. "That probably would've been best."
Two alphas in any kind of relationship was a terrible idea. The logical part of Steve's brain knew that, and knew for a fact that he and Tony weren't an exception to that rule, but the other part of Steve's brain was insisting that Tony was everything he had ever wanted and that he'd rip the face off anyone who came within five feet of the Cat with romantic interest. Which, going back to his earlier thought, wasn't good, because that's how you treated a beta or an omega but certainly not another alpha. He shouldn't even want another alpha. Omegas were fertile as anything and made great caretakers, betas made some of the best partners a Wolf could ask for, and alphas…other alphas were just showboating, testosterone-driven jerks who constantly tried to compete with each other. That's how it should be. That's how it should've been.

But it wasn't.

O~O

It was different this time.

The worst part is that Tony was pretty sure he knew why. He could tell Steve felt it too. And Tony wanted more. He could sense that Steve was still shaken up and if he wanted to be honest with himself, so was he. But he had a pretty good idea of what would help fix that. And the way Steve was kissing him told him the Wolf did too.

Growling softly, Tony slipped his hands down to begin to pull at the hem of Steve's sweatpants. The Wolf let out a sharp murmur before he backed his head up enough to be able to speak. "Tony, your leg—"

"It's fine."

"Tony."

"Steve."

Steve grit his teeth as Tony tried to tug his head back down for a kiss, feeling the Wolf's arousal pressing up against his thigh. "I don't want to hurt you."

God, Tony didn't have the patience for this. Leaning himself up, he yanked off his hoodie and caught Steve's eyes fly down to his chest. Finding a smile spread unbidden across his lips, Tony tugged at Steve until the Wolf was straddling him. "Then why don't we just do it like this?" His leg was free from any weight or pressure like this but at this point it was more for Steve than himself. He'd be willing to get stabbed in the other leg if the Wolf would just start touching him again.

"With you…?" The blush that had appeared on Steve's cheeks seeped across the bridge of his nose as Tony bucked his hips up, biting his lip as his arousal slid up against the curve of Steve's ass. "Oh! You, you mean…?"

Sucking in a deep breath, Tony found himself shaking for a completely different reason than why he had been shaking earlier. "Yeah."

"Okay."

Tony looked up at Steve from where the Wolf was hovering over him. He hoped to hell that he looked at least half as sexy as Steve did right now, because good God the other Shifter was hot. Tony's heart was pounding dangerously fast in his chest at the prospect of mating with a Wolf of all things, but his body wanted it so bad it felt like he was going to combust if he didn't get inside Steve right the fuck now. But he couldn't rush things, couldn't force things. It wouldn't feel as good if one of them didn't have their hearts in it.
Licking his suddenly dry lips, Tony stared back up at Steve, deliberately meeting his eyes and holding his gaze. "You sure this is okay? We could do it differently."

"N-no." Steve's voice caught in his throat and he reached up to grip the headboard. The Wolf took a deep breath and when their eyes connected again Steve's looked like blue fire. The expression of pure want on the other's face made Tony's hips involuntarily buck up again, their arousals brushing together and making them both moan. Steve turned to muffle his groan against his bicep but Tony stroked a hand up the Wolf's thigh urging him to turn back. He wanted to hear everything. Recovering his voice, Steve shook his head and looked back at Tony. "This—this is good."

"Then come here, cowboy."

If sex with Steve had been good before, it was fucking fantastic now. It took everything he had to hold out longer than ten minutes, although the pain from the two or three times he forgot he was injured and tried to move his legs certainly helped. Steve had been understandably hesitant at first but Tony had taken it slow and been as careful as he could manage with him and Steve had held up like a champ. Tony had been worried that Steve wouldn't enjoy receiving but after watching Steve's expression change from discomfort to pleasure he was convinced otherwise. So convinced that it all it took was one particularly loud gasp from Steve to push Tony over the edge.

Steve came only a second later, his release stripping up onto Tony's chest, his neck, then his face. Tony would've been disgusted, but this was Steve, and he recognized a claiming ritual when he spotted one. He knew he was right when Steve ran a hand through his own come, smearing it into Tony's skin. Tony was shocked when another sharp spike of arousal sparked in his stomach and then it hit him. Oh fucking hell, they were really mating. And he didn't mind. Wasn't even nervous. He was too consumed with the need to claim Steve so thoroughly inside and out that no one would be able to tell them apart.

Mindless of the mess between them, Tony hauled Steve down to meet him in a sloppy kiss, the Wolf's weight on top of his body almost suffocating but he loved it. He raked his nails down the other's back as his skin began to pump out so much scenting oils that it felt like he was sweating. Which he also was, and it had to look gross but he couldn't bring himself to care as he rubbed against Steve's neck, ran his fingers through his hair, soothed a hand down his spine, over his ass, and down his thigh.

Steve didn't seem to mind either as he suddenly surged forward, knocking the air out of Tony as he ground him down to the mattress and opened his mouth to press his teeth against Tony's shoulder, close to the crook of his neck. Nosing him, Steve pulled back just enough to pant hot, heavy breaths against Tony's skin, a desperate whisper tumbling from his lips, his words broken as he licked and nipped at Tony's collarbone. "Please, please, Tony. Please. Please."

Tony's stubble scraped against Steve's smooth cheek as he lifted his head, biting gently at the Wolf's jaw before whispering soothing nonsense into his ear as he slid his hands into Steve's hair. His entire world had narrowed down to Steve, his smell, his weight as he pinned Tony to the mattress, his heartbeat pounding against Tony's chest. He knew what Steve wanted and fuck it if Tony could deny him.

Steve pressed his teeth against Tony's skin again then hesitated, his whole body shaking, until Tony gave him silent permission by smoothing a hand down his shoulder and squeezing his arm. Then Steve's jaw closed on Tony's skin and bit down hard, hard enough to break the skin, hard enough to leave a scar. A Wolf's ultimate mating mark. Tony tensed at the pain but Steve was quick to soothe him, pulling his teeth out and apologetically running his tongue over the wound, lapping at the blood that welled up and leaving Tony gasping for air.
It was different, entirely different than anything Tony had ever been through before. He'd had a lot of sex but this was the first time he felt something inside him physically reacting to it. It scared the hell out of him but the only thing that felt right was to wrap his arms tighter around Steve and just hang on as he felt something change deep in his psyche.

Good god, this is what mating did to you? In that instant, he had become someone other than himself, someone he didn't recognize and didn't know how to deal with.

Minutes passed and the high Tony was on wasn't fading, the sound of their heaving breathing and the smell of sex filling the room. He could only whimper as he felt Steve whisper against his shoulder. "...Can I stay?"

Turning his head, Tony nuzzled against Steve's hair as the Wolf rolled off and nestled up beside him. "If you leave now, I'll kill you…"

"Good."

O~O~O~O

Steve woke up slowly, his body still humming from the night before. The blinds were still closed but he was pretty sure it was later in the morning than he usually woke. He didn't feel too bad about it though; they had had a rough night, though it had actually ended better than he could've wished for.

Looking over his shoulder, Steve smiled as he caught sight of Tony curled up on his side next to him. His mate. Rolling over, Steve wrapped his arms around Tony's middle and pressed his nose up against the back of Tony's neck. The Cat smelled different. Mostly the same but…it was almost as if there was a little of Steve's scent mixed in there too. He really hoped it was permanent because it was something he could get addicted to.

A quick check under the covers and under his bandages confirmed that Tony's leg was already beginning to heal up. Thank goodness for Shifters' quick healing abilities. He wouldn't be able to stand it if Tony had to be any extended amount of pain.

Steve felt Tony begin to move about as he retightened Tony's bandages and just managed to wrap his arms back around his waist as Tony began to wake.

"Oh my god…That wasn't a dream, was it?"

Smiling against Tony's neck, Steve snuggled closer. "Are you happy or disappointed?"

"Neither…Er, happy I guess. Slightly confused maybe too."

"You don't sound too certain about that 'happy' part."

An amused grunt burst from Tony as his hands moved down to rest on top of Steve's. "Trust me, I'm happy. If nothing else, turns out you make a pretty good lap dog after all…" Steve blushed and hid his face against Tony's shoulder blade as the Cat laughed.

Tilting his head back with a grin still on his face, Tony pressed a kiss against Steve's lips, taking a moment to slow down and enjoy it before he pulled away. "I want coffee."

Steve smiled at the quick change of topic and tightened his arms around Tony's waist, his fingers splaying out across Tony's stomach underneath Tony's hands. "I'm guessing that's a hint for me to get you some?"
"You shouldn't have set a precedent last time."

Steve snorted but didn't move. He didn't really feel like moving. There was a not entirely unpleasant ache at the base of his spine and his thighs and he was really enjoying the feeling of being pressed up against Tony from his chest to their knees. The Cat seemed to fit perfectly against him, just like he was built for it. Like they were meant for this. Maybe it was the afterglow of mating talking but whatever it was Steve didn't mind it.

"Steve?"

"Hmm?"

"Coffee?" Steve grunted and the corner of Tony's lips quirked up as he glanced back again. "I'll make it worth your trouble."

Steve's flush returned at the suggestive tone and he quickly determined that Tony wasn't going to let this go or get up himself. Reluctantly pulling his arms out from around Tony, he pushed himself up so that he was sitting up against the headboard. "Just coffee?"

"Cream and a little sugar please. Not too much though, I want it to be coffee still, not dessert."

"You do realize I'm not your butler, right?"

"Obviously. That's why I built JARVIS. And thank you, by the way. Is that what you were looking for?"

"Yes."

"Then thank you. And I'll be even more grateful when I have some caffeine." Steve laughed then nipped Tony's shoulder over the bite mark he had put there last night. A possessive shiver ran down his back at seeing it in the pale daylight. Tony was marked now, marked as his and only his. Any Wolf who saw that would know. And he imagined that every Shifter who smelled him likewise knew that Tony had claimed him too. It was funny; today he was definitely in no hurry to take a shower.

Swinging his legs out from underneath the covers, Steve stretched before rising to his feet. "If I keep this up, I'm going to spoil you…"

"Hey, I'm wounded, remember? Put some pants on by the way, don't need to give the whole team a show for free." Tony grinned and grabbed Steve's pillow, hugging it close to his chest as the Wolf sent him an unimpressed look. "I mean, 'thanks, hugs and kisses, you're the best'."

Rolling his eyes, Steve did manage to pull the sweats back on and then steal a t-shirt from Tony's closet before leaving. Everything was quiet in the halls as he made his way passed the bedrooms and down to the kitchen and he hoped that despite the later hour, the lack of noise meant that everyone else was sleeping in as well. Lord knew they all deserved it.

But it seemed that one member of the team was already awake at least.

Reaching the first floor of the house, Steve was about to head directly for the kitchen when a light coming from Tony's study caught in his peripheral vision. The house was still unusually quiet, especially for someone being up, so Steve changed course. Curiously peeking into the room, he tilted his head when he found Bruce slumped over in an armchair, a book lying forgotten in his lap as he rested his head in his hands.
The beta looked awful. His skin had regained none of its healthy pallor and if anything the circles under his eyes had only grown. The other Wolf jerked back into the seat as Steve rushed in to get a better look at his friend. Up close things were no better and Steve could smell exhaustion wafting off of the Wolf in waves. "Bruce! What happened? You should get to bed."

Rubbing at his eyes, Bruce slid his hands back into his hair and when he finally met Steve's gaze Steve didn't like what he saw. Bruce looked shell-shocked. Haunted. "I, uh…didn't exactly sleep well…or at all last night."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I…I, er, I guess I was afraid to." Bruce let out a weary sigh before tossing the book on his lap onto a small end table next to him in defeat. "I've never just, gone on a rampage like that before. I was worried that I, that I might not be able to keep that thing locked away if I went to sleep."

Reaching out, Steve rested a hand on the beta's shoulder to comfort him, to ground him. Anything.

"Why didn't you come get me?"

Bruce looked up at that and sent Steve a weak smile. "You seemed a little busy last night."

Guilt crashed over Steve's head. He didn't regret mating with Tony but he should've pulled himself out of bed afterwards and checked on the rest of the team. Steve didn't know what expression Bruce saw flashing through his eyes but the other Wolf's brows drew together in concern. "Hey, I'm not mad. That was important, and a long time coming. I was alright."

"I could've helped." If he hadn't been so wrapped up in his own needs.

"Maybe. But the night probably wouldn't have been any easier. I still would've remembered…" Bruce's voice trailed off. Shaking his head, Bruce closed his eyes and wearily rested his hand on Steve's arm still clasped tight on his shoulder. "I can't remember what I did. But I remember seeing those men afterwards. Some of them were, were almost torn in half. And I did that. And the bruises on you and Thor. And Tony; I can still see the way he looked at me when I started to shift after the grenade blew."

Crouching down so that their eyes were level, Steve tightened his grip on Bruce's shoulder. "You did what you had to. And Tony's fine now."

"I could've killed him."

A lot of things could've killed Tony that night. "But you didn't. He must've been nearly completely defenseless but you…You protected him."

Biting his lip to keep something in, Bruce closed his eyes and jerked his head down. "Not so much the same with the rest of you though."

Steve's eyes softened. "If you had wanted to kill me, you could've. The same goes for Thor. The bottom line is that somewhere inside you, you were able to gain enough control to keep the Wolf in you from killing us."

"I hate to burst your bubble, but I was completely out of it. The Wolf did all that on his own."

With a quick shake of his head, Steve ducked down so that he could meet Bruce's eyes again. "I'm not entirely sure. But even if that were true, it's not necessarily a bad thing. It means that your Wolf side is able to maintain some level of control all on his own. He protected Tony, and I don't think he would've attacked Thor and me if we hadn't provoked him. Most of all, he recognized me as an
alpha and responded to it." Steve smiled and something settled in his chest as Bruce dimly returned the gesture. "That counts for a lot in my book."

"Maybe…"

"Definitely."

Bruce's smile grew a little stronger and after a moment the other Wolf relaxed back into his chair as his exhaustion seemed to return to him in full force. "So, last night…you and Tony went for it. Do you think that's a good idea?"

Steve's own smile grew almost pained but didn't shy away from the change in subject. "I know it's not. But I, uh, I love him. After what happened, I'm sure of it. We'll make it work."

For a few seconds Bruce remained silent before he smiled again. "…For what it's worth, I think you guys will do great together. I mean, it's a little weird, two alphas, a Wolf and a Cat, but if anyone can do it, you two can."

"Thank you, Bruce. It, means a lot." And it really did. It was strange, what he and Tony had done, verging on the unnatural, but it felt right and it meant the world to think that someone supported them. "I thought it might scare you guys away, what Tony and I have going."

Bruce raised his brows in acquiescence. "I can't speak for everyone else, but it'd take more than that to scare me away, considering. Besides, I think it's actually pretty fitting."

"What is?"

"You guys. With such a weird pack, it's only right that we have an unorthodox alpha pair."

Steve opened his mouth to speak then froze, his eyes widening. Did Bruce just-? There was a lump in Steve's throat and he had to swallow it down to get his next words out. "So we're a pack now?"

Bruce smiled again at the alpha's shock. "After all this, we better be."

Steve blinked, trying to find the right words. It was a serious declaration to a Wolf, what Bruce had just said. It was huge. Thinking of only one way to properly express his gratitude, Steve shook his head. "Well, it seems to me that something still missing to make this a proper pack."

"What's that?"

"Tony's my mate now, and an alpha. I still need a beta."

Bruce tilted his head thoughtfully then shrugged his shoulder. "Natasha would probably be willing to take the title."

"Maybe she would and she wouldn't be a bad choice, but I was kind of hoping that you would instead."

Bruce jumped back in his seat like Steve had just given him a small electric shock. "Me? Steve, I don't—"

Grinning, Steve grabbed Bruce's other shoulder. "Don't sell yourself short. I trust you, Tony trusts you. You're ridiculously smart. Plus, you're a Wolf and a natural beta."

Bruce shook his head. "Sure, Dr. Banner is, but the Wolf is definitely not. You saw it. You don't need a beta who can't even shift."
"It might not be what I need but it's what I want." Usually Steve went with what his mind told him was right, but over the past few weeks he had started listening more and more to what his heart wanted instead. It had led to a few mishaps but overall the results had been good. He just had to have enough faith in himself to believe that his choices would be good ones. He knew that this decision was the right one.

The smile that had begun to light up Bruce's face faded a shade as a cloud of suspicion passed over his eyes. "...You aren't offering this out of pity, are you?"

"No. Not at all. I honestly can't think of anyone I'd want more to be the beta of my pack." Pulling his hands off of Bruce's shoulders, Steve stood up and reached a hand back down, leaving it open for Bruce to take. "Let's do this together, Bruce."

The other Wolf looked at the hand, then up at Steve with something akin to disbelief in his eyes. Then Bruce laughed, actually laughed, and reached up to clasp their hands together. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. Okay."

Smiling, Steve hauled the beta—his beta—up out of the chair and pulled him into a tight hug. Bruce's grip on him was just as strong. When they finally separated, the other's eyes were wet but there was a teasing smile on his lips. "God, Steve, you really do need to take a shower."

Steve grinned back even as a blush settled on his cheeks. "Coffee first. Otherwise Tony will kill me."

Bruce laughed again, softer this time, as he pushed his hands into his pockets. "Don't let him push you around. You're stuck with him now."

"I know." And Steve really wouldn't have it any other way. "While I go get some coffee, you take a power-nap then get everyone up for a meeting down in the living room. I think we have some things to talk about."

"Absolutely."

The morning passed by fairly quickly as Bruce did what Steve asked. After bringing Tony back some coffee and a small plate of food for himself, Steve had allowed himself a few more minutes of just resting beside his new mate before he pulled himself out of bed and made use of the en suite bathroom Tony had. Tony decided to join him halfway through, which about twenty minutes later led to a second shower, but Steve couldn't find it in himself to mind.

After he had gotten dressed and convinced Tony that he should do the same, the two walked downstairs together to find the rest of the team already assembled and waiting for them. Bruce already looked a little healthier, for which Steve was grateful. As soon as he and Tony walked in, it was clear that everyone knew what had taken place that night. Whether they had heard it, could smell it on them, or if Bruce had told them, Steve didn't care. It made everything easier now since they could skip over that explanation.

Motioning for Tony to take an open seat left next to Natasha, Steve walked into the center of the room and cleared his throat. The gesture was unnecessary; everyone's eyes were already trained on him. "Yesterday was rough, but despite the set-backs we kept it together and made it out. Having been through that and everything that's led up to it with all of you I know I'm not alone when I say that we've developed bonds that are stronger than any 'team' I've ever heard of. That name doesn't fit anymore, and so I think it's about time we change it."

Taking a breath, Steve set his shoulders back and met everyone's gaze as he kept his tone serious.
He meant what he was saying. "We're a pack now. I honestly don't know what that means to all of you, but to a Wolf it means everything. We stay together, we run together, we fight together. This is a big change, so if you want out I won't stop you."

There was a moment of silence before Clint cocked his head to the side. "This doesn't seem SHIELD sanctioned."

"It's not." Steve didn't know what SHIELD would think of it, but he didn't really care. This ran deeper than SHIELD could ever hope to manage.

The Hawk raised his brows at Steve's quick answer, then shrugged his shoulders with a smile. "What the hell...I'm in."

Shaking her head, Natasha folded her arms over her chest even as a smile slipped across her lips. "This should be interesting."

Knowing he had her support, Steve grinned over at the other Cat in the group, hoping that he would follow suit. "Thor?"

The Lion thought for a moment before meeting Steve's eyes with a smile. "I have never grown as close to others as I have to you, save for my own family. Though in the future I may not be able to devote myself solely to you if my clan should call for me to return, I would be proud to call myself a member of your 'pack'."

"Thank you." Turning to the last alpha in the group, Steve smiled down at his new mate. "Tony?"

The Panther quirked a brow, obstinate to the last. "Do I have a choice?"

"No, not really." Not any more, anyway.

The Cat rolled his eyes but even he was unable to keep a grin from spreading across his face. "As long as none of my things are suddenly considered 'communal property'."

"We'll talk about it later."

"Not up for negotiation."

"Tony..."

Across the room, Bruce tried to cover up a laugh with a cough as Tony threw his hands into the air in exaggerated frustration. The rest of the team, of his pack, looked like they were enjoying the moment as well. "Fine! I'm in. Yay, go pack. See? I can be a team player."

Steve's smile broadened as he tilted his head in acceptance. "We'll work on it."

O~O~O~O~O

On the other side of the city, Phil Coulson sighed as he flipped to yet another file that needed to be filled out about his team's latest mission.

He had just gotten back the final report from Steve and to say that the entire thing hadn't gone smoothly was an understatement. Letting Steve and his crew handle it wasn't working so well anymore and Phil was worried that if he started to step in with SHIELD they would lose faith in themselves as well.

The hard thing about it all was that in the most basic of senses, their missions were all successes.
But they were starting to come at greater and greater costs. It didn't help that Hydra seemed to be upping their game and learning from past mistakes. If something didn't change soon, Phil would be forced to contact the Director about the matter and in all likelihood he would want to personally step in. That would be good because it would get him and his team access to better resources but it would also mean that Phil, and likewise Steve, would lose all control over what the team did and how they chose to run their missions. He had a feeling that wouldn't go over particularly well with certain members of the team…

Phil looked up from his paperwork as a chime rang out from the intercom on his desk. "Sir, you're two o'clock appointment's arrived."

Happy for the break, Phil closed his file and tucked it back into his desk drawer as he pushed a button on the intercom. "Send him up, please."

He was a little too high ranking to be conducting check-up appointments like this, but Phil always made sure to schedule a few in every week. They kept him connected to the Shifters SHIELD was created to help and it made him feel more involved with the process. Solving some of the simple problems they faced in their day-to-day lives also gave him a fulfilling respite from tackling matters of national security that were not so easily fixed.

A minute passed before there was a knock on his office door and a beta Wolf named Savin stepped through. He was still young, maybe in his late twenties, but had been having problems adjusting to civilian life after he finished his tour of duty with the army. A lot of Wolves went into the armed services because of their added strength, agility, and ability to heal, but it was often even harder for them to deal with normal life afterwards than it was for human veterans. "Sergeant Savin, thank you for making the time to come in."

The Wolf relaxed into the chair across from Phil with a small smile. "No problem. It worked with my schedule."

"Glad to hear it. Now, as you probably know, I asked you in to see how your new job placement's been going. Any problems at work?"

The Wolf tilted his head then rubbed at the back of his neck. "No, it's, it's been really good. I feel like I'm actually starting, starting to turn my life around, you know?"

Sgt. Savin was usually fairly collected when he came but his words seemed a little stilted today and he hadn't stopped scratching at the back of his neck. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah." Wincing, the Wolf pulled his hand away from his neck and sniffed at it. "I think so. I, some bug or something bit me right when I was about to walk in today. I feel kind of weird… Maybe I was allergic."

Phil hadn't heard of Wolves being allergic to anything before, except occasionally chocolate. "Can I see?"

"Sure. It's right here…"

Phil got up out of his seat to walk around his desk as the Wolf dutifully spun around in his seat and pulled back the collar of his t-shirt so that the agent could see the back of his neck. Walking over, Phil pushed his shirt further out of the way and inspected the area of skin only to see that, sure enough, there was a slightly swollen puncture mark. The area around it was pink, probably because the Wolf had been scratching at it, but it also seemed to have an unnatural greenish tint to it. "Hmm… I can send you down to our clinic. I don't suppose you happen to remember what kind of
bug it might've been or when it happened?"

Savin shook his head and adjusted his collar as Phil took a step back. "It was literally just a few minutes ago, when I was about to, about to walk into the...the building."

Hearing the Wolf's speech beginning to slur, Phil pulled away further so that he could get a good look at the Shifter's face. "Sgt. Savin?"

"I...I don't...f-feel, right..."

He had gone pale, the veins on his neck and lower face standing out, almost glowing with a nearly green hue. Green. Hydra's serum. Phil jerked back just in time to avoid a clawed limb as the Wolf suddenly shifted with a frightened snarl.

Sliding across his desk, sending papers and pens flying across the room, Phil rolled over it and landed in a crouch on the carpet behind it, one hand going for the gun he kept in his desk drawer as his other reached for his cell phone in his suit jacket pocket. He heard the Wolf howl in rage as he speed-dialed the security desk, his attention momentarily stolen away by a scream and an answering howl coming from a room down the hall. There was more than one. The question was, how many more?

"Security. How can we help you?"

Peeking around the corner of his desk, Phil fired one round in the Wolf's direction just as the Shifter was about to lunge forward at him. The bullet didn't hit him—Phil hadn't wanted it to—but instead did what it was intended to and startled the Wolf just enough to make even his animalistic brain rethink his actions. There was nothing human left in the Shifter's eyes but he was still under Phil's protection and he wasn't about to hurt Savin unless it became absolutely necessary. "We have a security breach on the administration floor, code seven. Repeat, code seven."

"Understood. Six incidences reported on level three, another five on level two. Sending out request for aid."

Before Phil could even hang up, the PA system surged to life and began to emit a shrill alarm. The building had been compromised. All his employees had been trained for a similar emergency but they were going to need help, more than the local human emergency task forces could provide.

There was only one team close enough to respond; Phil just hoped that Steve could mobilize his team in time.
Chapter 13

After their impromptu meeting and everyone agreeing to join in as pack-members, Steve was in good spirits. And how could he not be? They had just been through a hard time but within the last twenty-four hours Steve had received everything he had ever wanted. He had gotten a new pack, he had an established beta, he had gotten a mate, and everyone was safe. There was nothing more an alpha Wolf could need.

Now everyone was taking a moment to just settle down and relax after their last mission. Steve kept close to Tony who seemed content to lounge on the couch watching a baseball game on TV while Steve kept an arm around him and his chin on his shoulder. Bruce was sitting nearby reading a book and Natasha was leaning against the wall checking messages on her phone. Thor was sprawled out in the middle of the room with his arms crossed behind his head as he lazily watched what was happening on the screen and across the room Clint was perched on the window sill cleaning and preparing his bow and arrows.

It was quiet and bridging on peaceful and so it was a shock when the calm was broken by a sudden, piercing alarm.

Jolting up in his seat, Steve slapped his hands over his ears, his teeth clenched as everyone jumped up. "What is that noise?"

Tony grimaced next to him as he grabbed a pillow off of the couch and folded it over his head to try and block out some of the sound. "I honestly have no idea! JARVIS?"

Steve tentatively took his hands away from his ears as the volume of the alarm lowered and JARVIS began to speak over the noise. "It's an alert coming in from SHIELD, sir. Our systems have been momentarily taken over, attempting to regain control now."

"Do it faster!"

"I am working as fast as I am able, sir."

"Damn it..." Pulling himself away from Steve, Tony ran over to a control panel on the wall and with one hand yanked the cover off of it to access the electronics inside it, still holding a pillow over his ears with his other hand. "This is ridiculous!"

Thor glared up at the ceiling, his arms tensed at his side as if he was ready for a fight. "What is that noise? Where it is coming from?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out! Some crap from SHIELD trying to get in through my security system. I don't know how the bastards even got in."

"What?" Natasha's eyes narrowed and in a few steps at Tony's side. "There's more to it?"

Tony shot her an annoyed look, his fingers still buried deep in the electronics in the wall. "It looks like there's a visual message trying to get through my security along with the audio."

She grabbed Tony's arm, her fingers gripping at his shirt. "Put it on screen, now!"

"Alright, fine!" Tony shook her off. "JARVIS, forget it. Let it through."

"As you wish, sir."
Steve held his breath as there was a short pause before the baseball game flickered off to be replaced by a white screen with a black SHIELD logo in the center. The alarm hadn't stopped but JARVIS at least seemed to be maintaining the lowered volume. "Is that it?"

Tony tisked and threw the pillow he was holding at Bruce who caught it easily. "How the hell should I know?"

"I don't know, I just thought-"

Steve was cut off as the image on the screen switched into a bright red block of color offset by large black letters, all capitalized: CODE SEVEN, REPORT TO BASE IMMEDIATELY.

Tony scowled up at the text as if it personally offended him. "I don't even know what 'Code Seven' means or why I should care. JARVIS, let's get this thing off the screen and-"

Across the room Clint sprung up to his feet with his bow in hand, his wide eyes meeting Natasha's from across the room. "Code Seven? SHEILD's under attack."

Breaking her gaze with Clint, Natasha turned away from Tony to face Steve. Her expression was deadly serious and left no room for disagreement. Not that Steve was about to disagree. "We need to get down there."

Mind racing, Steve tried to calculate the fastest way to get to SHIELD headquarters downtown. If they were under attack he wasn't about to wait for someone to come out and give them a ride. This time they would have to arrange for their own transportation, and the faster the better. Taking a second to nod at Bruce and Thor to go get geared up, Steve turned the question over to the person who knew this area the best. "Tony, what's the fastest way to get downtown?"

The Cat was still frowning as he slammed the wall panel back shut, apparently done with trying to remove the image from his television screen. "It'd take too long to go for the jet. We'll have to take one of the cars."

Natasha shook her head in exasperation. "That'll be too slow!"

At her words the corner of Tony's lips quirked up in a dry smirk. "That depends on how you drive."

It took them moments to get themselves ready and down to Tony's garage. If Steve wasn't so preoccupied with worry over what was going on downtown he would've been impressed. It was the fastest they had ever gotten ready for anything.

Tony hadn't bothered to do anything except change into a more practical set of clothing and was waiting for them by what looked to be the largest vehicle he had: the black SUV that they had all ridden in to the restaurant the night Loki came into their lives and Steve's apartment was destroyed. This time though there was no driver and Tony himself jumped into the driver's seat. Something in Steve balked at not being in control but then Tony shot him a look that had the alpha Wolf silently climbing into the front passenger's seat instead. Thor clamored in next and Bruce, Natasha, and Clint quickly slid in after him, Thor and Bruce taking the middle seats as Natasha and Clint slipped into the back.

In the long run it was probably best that Tony drove. Whereas Steve tended to drive fairly defensively, particularly when his pack was on board, Tony apparently considered speed limit signs as mere suggestions. He tore out of the garage like a bat out of hell, Steve's hands flying to the dashboard in an attempt to hold on as the Cat whipped the SUV out of the driveway and out onto the country road that led out to the main highway.
Even Natasha seemed impressed in the back as Tony punched the gas. If Clint and Thor weren't so serious Steve was sure they'd be laughing. Bruce on the other hand looked a bit alarmed as he gripped his seat, the poor beta looking as if he were biting his tongue to keep himself from shouting at Tony to slow down. Steve would have been the same but the faster they could get to SHIELD, the better. Besides, as fast as Tony was driving he seemed to have pretty good control over the car.

Steve watched the road disappear under their tires as they raced out of the countryside and towards the city with is jaw clenched. He wouldn't have been so worried if he hadn't seen Clint and Natasha's reactions earlier. The fear in their eyes had been genuine. Steve tried not to think about everything that could mean. He hadn't been involved with SHIELD for long to know if this "Code Seven" emergency was common or not but Clint had said it meant that they were under attack. The SHIELD downtown wasn't built to withstand any kind of serious attack. And it was the middle of the afternoon; it was sure to be filled with employees and who knew how many civilians would be caught up in something like that?

Tony weaved in and out of traffic at near break-neck speeds with other cars swerving out of their way. Steve was pretty sure that he had seen some of the other drivers pulling their cell phones out, probably to call the cops, but it would take less than ten minutes for them to reach the city limits at this pace and he wasn't sure the police would be able to catch up with them anyway.

The faith Steve had in that thought lasted only until they actually reached the city limits and they found themselves faced with a wall of traffic. Tony slammed his hands against the wheel as Steve's grip tightened on the dashboard. "Shit, it's the start of rush hour! We're not getting through here."

There was only so much they could plan for and day-to-day human life was left out of their calculations. The road ahead of them was entirely blocked by taillights, a sea filled with sedans and mom vans. The flow of traffic was almost non-existent, slowed to an aggravating stop-and-go pace as everyone left work at the same time and struggled to get back home. Leaning forward, Clint grabbed Thor's seat in front of him, his eyes flashing behind his dark sunglasses. "Drive in the break-down lane!"

Tony let out an annoyed hiss and gestured violently at the traffic ahead. "There is no break-down lane on this section of the road! We'll be running over pedestrians!"

Steve knew he was right. There was just nowhere to go. Endangering innocent civilians by driving off-road would go against every reason they were rushing out in the first place. But they didn't have this sort of time to waste so there was only one thing to do. "Everybody out."

Tony gave him an incredulous look like he was out of his mind. "What about the car?"

Right. They couldn't all abandon the car in the middle of traffic. "Bruce, you take the wheel and get there as fast as you can."

Tony shook his head as he realized that Steve was serious. "Shit…Fine. Bruce?"

Stifling a weak curse of his own, Bruce unbuckled his seatbelt then crawled over Thor's lap and up over the stick-shift to position himself in between the front seats. Glancing at the Wolf over his
shoulder, Tony shook his head as he reached under Bruce to shift the car into park. "This is ridiculous..."

Unbuckling his seatbelt as soon as the car stopped rolling, Steve waved back at Clint, Natasha, and Thor. "Let's go, now!"

"Fuck..." Clint swore behind him as three more belts came undone and a heartbeat later the doors slammed open as they jumped out of the vehicle.

Tony watched as they began to weave their way through the traffic as he struggled with his own belt, his gaze snapping back to Bruce as a wave of car horns began to go off around them. "What are you waiting for? Get in here."

Bruce growled lightly and reached to steady the steering wheel. "I can't go anywhere until you get out."

"Just, hold on!" Scooting across the seat, Tony opened his own door and nearly tumbled out into oncoming traffic. A horn blared right in his ear as the car in the lane next to them slammed on their breaks and started screaming out of their window. Growling, Tony righted himself and banged his hand against the hood of their SUV. "Shut the hell up! We're trying to save people!"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bruce slide into the driver's seat. Leaving his car in the Wolf's care, Tony chased after Steve and the others.

~O~

Steve stayed light on his toes as he ducked in between cars and slid over hoods on his way towards the pedestrian walkway. His eyes were glued straight ahead but he kept his other senses primed on the progress of his pack.

It was the first time they had been out as a pack and for the first time in a while he was able to stretch out that almost extra-sensory perception of what his pack was doing. Sure, they had run as a team many times now but for a Wolf there was something expressly different in something as seemingly simple as a name change. They had accepted Steve as their alpha and Steve had accepted them as his pack; now he couldn't just see them and hear them, it was like he could feel them.

So he could feel a sudden spike of adrenaline from Clint as a car found a break in the traffic and swerved blindly into the lane he was cutting through. He was too far away for Steve to reach him but luckily Clint had others watching out for him as well.

There was a sharp squeal as the driver of the car slammed on the breaks but it only stopped when Thor rushed up from behind the Hawk and banged his hands down on the hood of the car to stop it. The impact was so strong that the car's back wheels flew up off of the asphalt and the front hood dented under Thor's fists. Steve caught a glimpse of the driver's face-shock and terror-before he turned his attention back to Thor and Clint. Both were remarkably unharmed,

Thor smiling grimly at the Hawk. "You must watch your step more closely, brother."

"Yeah, no kidding!"

Grabbing Clint's arm and breaking the starting contest he was having with the driver, Natasha pulled him towards the sidewalk, a scowl twisting her lips down. "Keep moving, both of you!"

They made it through the rest of the traffic without any more serious incidences although they
were serenaded the entire way by a deafening amount of honking. They didn't cause any less chaos when they made it to the sidewalk. Humans who had been walking along and had witnessed the whole thing openly stared and Steve felt a ripple of panic roll through them. He felt bad but at the same time they had bigger troubles. So Steve ran. Tony caught up and ran beside him, Thor hanging back only a half step to ensure that Natasha and Clint were able to push through the crowds as forcefully as the alphas.

The city was humming with energy, folks flooding the walkways as they ended their workdays or shopped. Some made way instantly as they came rushing through, undoubtedly recognizing them as Shifters. Others created human blockades as they walked side by side that Steve had to push his way through. With the large population, none of them were able to get up to their full speed but they were still traveling faster than the lines of cars clogging the streets.

When they finally arrived on scene they found barely controlled chaos.

The SHIELD building looked like it had been evacuated with men and women scattered about with low level badges on. People were shouting everywhere and an alarm coming from the SHEILD offices was blaring out into the streets below through windows that had been left open. The police were already there also and were erecting barricades and trying to control the mass of humans who had flooded towards the tower with morbid curiosity. That explained why there weren't any cops available to come and stop them on the road. While the police were controlling the crowds, it was clear that a SHIELD security team had taken charge of securing the building and the front door was surrounded by uniformed guards.

There was so much happening and so many people talking and moving about that it took Steve a few seconds to find someone he actually recognized. Appropriately enough, it was Clint who actually spotted them first, the Hawk grabbing onto Steve's sleeve and pointing Agent Hill out. Steve had only met her in passing on a few occasions but he knew she was fairly high ranking, up there somewhere in the hierarchy with Coulson, and the way she was stalking about now barking orders at her staff proved that she at the very least was important enough to take temporary command of the situation.

Changing course, Steve ran over to her, Tony hot on his heels. "Agent Hill!"

She spun around on her heels, ready to let lose another barrage of orders but relief softened her features as she realized who had called her. "Thank god. Agent Rogers, Stark. Is your whole team here?"

Steve nodded and motioned back to where the others were taking stock of the situation. "Yes ma'am."

"Good." Her eyes immediately lit on Natasha, Clint, and Thor before she turned back towards the building. "We could use all the help we can get."

"Is it bad?" It seemed like a stupid question as soon as the words left his mouth. Of course it was bad, why else would they have been brought in?

"Yes."

Her flat, matter-of-fact tone spoke volumes. Things were very bad. "What exactly happened?"

"A security breach."

Tony scoffed at the simple answer. "We're gonna need more than that."
Agent Hill turned her sharp eyes back to the Panther, staring at the alpha without an ounce of hesitation. "Part of Code Seven is that it is mandatory that the entire building be evacuated. I don't know the specifics except that we're being overrun by Shifters who seem to have been injected with Hydra's serum. They've completely lost control. I was on the third floor and evacuated as soon as the alarm sounded so I didn't encounter any of them myself. Most of the incidences started on the upper floors."

Steve stared up at the SHIELD building, wishing that he could see through walls like Tony's technical device could. "Are all the Shifters still confined to the upper floors then?"

"Unfortunately not. According to the reports I'm getting, they panicked and the building when the alarm went off."

Beside Steve, Tony let out a short growl. "So what exactly are we supposed to do?"

Hill leveled him with another stare. "Everything you can. There are crazed Shifters, SHIELD agents, and untrained employees still trapped in that building. People could die, Mr. Stark. I hope that even you recognize the severity of the situation."

Steve jumped into the conversation to keep Tony from talking back, to stop Agent Hill from antagonizing his mate further, but most importantly to keep things moving. "Where do you need us?"

"Inside. Our security goes through intense training on how to handle Shifters but dealing with a Shifter who had essentially gone wild is another matter entirely. All our security members are human; they might need a few Shifters on their side."

"Understood."

"We could use some help out here too, just as a precaution."

A quick look around answered any questions Steve might have had about why that would be. Even in the few minutes they had been speaking the mob of humans had almost doubled. There weren't going to be enough police officers soon and the SHIELD guards were going to need help holding the ranks. "Tony, you stay out here with Bruce after he gets here and help Agent Hill. The rest of you are with me."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Before Steve had even finished, Tony grabbed onto Steve's shoulder and spun him around so that they were facing each other. The Cat's eyes were narrowed, a dangerous glint sparking through them. "Steve! You're crazy if you think I'm letting you go in there without me!"

Steve pinned Tony with an equally serious stare. "Tony, you're leg isn't healed all the way yet. I'd only be crazy if I let you come in with me."

A low growl rumbled up from Tony's chest. "Don't start treating me like this just because we're mated."

"It's not that. Not entirely. "You're wounded still, end of story."

Tony snorted in disbelief and Steve couldn't blame him. They had just run about ten city blocks together without Steve or Tony bringing up his leg once. But Steve stood firm and Tony miraculously relented. "We're talking about this when you get back."

"Fine."
Tony growled angrily again before grabbing Steve behind the ears and hauling him down for a hard kiss. Grunting in surprise, Steve closed his eyes as Tony bit his lip hard enough to bring up a small bead of blood. Steve heard Agent Hill shift impatiently behind him as Tony finally broke their kiss and shoved him away. "You're an ass."

Steve was pretty sure that meant 'Don't get hurt, be careful.' At least that's how he interpreted it. Letting Tony separate them, he turned back to Thor, Clint, and Natasha and gave them a sharp nod. They had to move in, now, before Tony changed his mind and decided to be more difficult.

~O~

Pacing in front of the police line, Tony kept his eyes glued to the SHIELD building. He could hear noises coming from inside, could sense motion, but he couldn't make it out. He was soothed a little when Bruce caught up with him, the beta ruffled and out of breath but otherwise unharmed. Tony didn't bother asking what happened to the SUV, he didn't really care right then. He could always buy a new one. It wouldn't be so easy to buy a new Bruce or a new Steve.

Bruce remained beside Tony, watching on concernedly with his arms crossed over his chest and one ear tuned into Agent Hill as she continued to give terse orders over her radio. Tony could hear the entire conversation as well, all his senses primed to pick up every sensation. "Update on the situation inside?"

"The four Shifters you sent inside just arrived at our location. I'm sending them to the upper floors."

Hill stopped pacing and gazed up at the building. "Understood. Is the first floor secured?"

"Personnel are patrolling the halls to confirm."

The SHIELD agent resumed her pacing. "Contact me back as soon as you have confirmation. Second floor and above, do you read me?"

"This is second floor, the Shifter agents just arrived. Third floor, they're coming your way."

"This is third floor. Agents received. Situation still hostile."

Tony tensed. He was happy to hear that they had all made it up but he didn't like that 'hostile' part. He still didn't quite know what was up there waiting for them and he was torn between grabbing the radio and demanded second by second updates or smashing the damn thing so that he wouldn't have to hear it.

"First floor, do you have confirmation that it's been cleared?"

"This is first floor. Patrol has not yet returned. I'm going out now to investig-Oh f-Shifters heading towards the front gate! Block the doors!"

Security was screaming into the radio and the sheer panic in his voice had Agent Hill, Tony, and Bruce sprinting towards the front of the building. Before they could take more than a few steps, the front doors burst open and four Wolves spilled out onto the street.

It didn't take Tony more than a second to realize that the Shifters had gone wild, victims of Hydra's serum which was very, very bad. The Wolves behaved like animals, hunching down and snarling, their teeth flashing as SHIELD agents hurried to surround them.

The humans in the gathering crowd began screaming, terror rushing through them just like they
were a herd of spooked gazelle at the sign of the Shifters. It definitely didn't help the situation. All
the noise only worked the Wolves up more, the fur on their backs rippling up as their claws dug
into the concrete sidewalk.

Tony's heart was pounding in his chest, his eyes meeting the brown, blank eyes of one of the
Wolves defiantly. They were just a bunch of betas. Hell if he was going to back down.

The cops separating the Shifters from the human populace instantly drew their guns but SHIELD
agents began calling for them to lower their weapons almost as quickly. Instead of handguns, the
agents drew a different sort of weapon from holsters under their suit jackets. High powered stun
guns and what looked like modified tranquilizer guns. Incapacitating but virtually non-lethal. It
was sickeningly like SHIELD to try and pull that off.

"Keep them contained!"

Tony felt his lip curl up as he maintained eye contact with one of the Wolves. "That won't be a
problem."

"Tony, wait-" It took him a moment to notice that Bruce had his hand on his arm. "There are too
many people around."

Why the hell did that matter? Oh. Right. Shit. He couldn't shift, not with all of these people
watching. Only as a very last resort. There was too great of a chance that someone had their phone
camera running and currently the world thought Tony Stark, owner and CEO of Stark Industries,
was human and this wasn't a good time to whip up a media firestorm. Especially considering they
and SHIELD would be doing enough damage control just trying to cover up the current circus in
front of him.

Tony grimaced at the thought. Without shifting he was only going to be able to be so helpful. But
all of the SHIELD agents were human and if they were holding their own there was no reason he
shouldn't be able to do the same. Once he had a weapon. "Hey!" With his eyes still locked on one
of the Wolves, Tony snapped his fingers at Agent Hill as the other SHIELD agents began to slowly
move forward and close in on the other Shifters. "Give me two of those stun gun things!" One for
him, one for Bruce.

Agent Hill didn't even bother to look at him. "I'm not authorized to—"

"We're both officially SHIELD agents and right now you can use all the help you can get." By this
point the Wolves realized that they were being surrounded and one of them panicked, lunging at an
agent who quickly fired two rounds of the tranquilizing solution into its flank. The Wolf let out a
yelp as it stumbled, spooking the other three and causing their desperation levels to visibly rise.
"Come on, lady, give me a gun!"

It seemed that Agent Hill could only take so much verbal battering before just caving into giving
Tony what he wanted simply in order to shut him up. Gesturing stiffly back to a SHIELD agent
who had been assisting her, she roughly shoved two pseudo-weapons she was handed towards
Tony. "Here." Tony caught them easily and immediately tossed one towards Bruce. The Wolf
fumbled with it for a minute before cautiously readjusting his grip as Hill continued to speak. "The
tranquilizer is strong but you won't get many chances to use it. Aim carefully."

Seemed simple enough. Though his pack member was looking down at his tranquilizer like it was
going to bite him. "Bruce…?"

"I'm okay."
It was a little less self-assured than Tony would have normally liked to hear, but beggars couldn't be choosers. "Good. Let's go." Maybe they could actually make a difference now.

With one of the Wolves down, there were three left to go. The serum-affected Shifters were starting to get scared at seeing one of their own go down and their viciousness increased in kind. When SHIELD agents focused their energy on the most violent, the other two began to turn on each other. Growling and snapping their jaws, one of the two jumped at the other and sent the both of them flying towards the crowds. Tony scrambled out of the way, pushing Bruce back along with him just in time to avoid an errant swipe of a clawed paw. But now was their chance.

He had to act fast before they reached the crowds. Rolling himself up into a crouch with just a touch more grace than a human could manage, Tony raised his tranquilizer gun and shot round after round into the mass of Wolf fur that had just rushed passed them.

The Shifters let out a small yip and they sprang apart, their fight momentarily forgotten under Tony's barrage. But as the Wolves shook themselves off it was unfortunately obvious that not one of his shots had actually landed.

"Oh my god, you're a terrible shot!"

Tony rolled his eyes at Bruce even as the Wolves refocused their attention on him, targeting him as their newest and biggest threat. "Hey, I'm trying here!"

Beside him, Bruce tilted his head in uncertain agreement before firing his tranquilizer gun three times, the first shot burying itself right into the flank of one Wolf while the third shot landed smack dab in the middle of the second Wolf's neck. It was flat out unfair. Not that Tony was really about to start complaining since those three rounds ended their little escaping Shifters problem.

"Don't get too comfortable, we've got more coming out!"

Shit.

Seconds after Agent Hill shouted out, Tony heard the main door to the building slam open again and more growling. More Shifters had gotten out. Damn, there was only so much that he and Bruce would be able to handle in their human forms, and even the SHIELD agents could only hold the line for so long. They needed help.

Bruce automatically moved up to cover Tony as he stepped up to yell at Agent Hill. He was surprised she even managed to hear him over the shouting and sounds of tasers and tranquilizer guns firing off. "Get Clint, Agent Barton! Whatever the hell his name is! Get him out here!"

Clint might not be able to psychically do much for the team but Tony was already sensing that they weren't going to be able to keep all the Shifters sneaking out from slipping past the line. When it happened, because it was pretty much inevitable at this point, they were going to need some eyes in the sky to keep a lock on everything. Particularly if SHIELD wanted to keep enough control over the situation so the city police didn't feel obligated to step in.

Agent Hill seemed to agree with Tony, or was at least too desperate to doubt his judgment. With one hand holding up a stun gun in case any of the rouge Shifters got too close, she used her other hand to bring her radio up to her lips. "Third floor, do you read?"

"Affirmative."

"Do you have a visual on Agent Barton?"
"Yes, Ma'am."

"Get him the radio, immediately."

"Understood. One minute."

Tony held his breath, part of him listening intently as static-filled whispers seeped over the line, greedily searching for the familiar cadence and tone of Steve's voice. Just to make sure that he was okay. But Tony didn't have that kind of luck. Hearing Clint's voice come over the line wasn't a terrible second though. "Agent Barton here."

At Clint's voice, Tony snatched the radio from Agent Hill, moving too fast for her to protest. "Clint! We need you in the skies. We've got some Shifters slipping through the cracks!"

And now it wasn't just Tony's prediction, it was actually happening. Three Shifters had charged out of the front door all at once and while SHIELD agents struggled to deal with the leader, a particularly aggressive male beta Wolf who leapt right for their throats, the two Wolves behind him peeled off and bolted towards the sides of the building where their barricades were the weakest.

"I'm on it!"

Tony nodded at the radio even though he knew Clint couldn't actually see him through it and shoved it back into an indignant Hill's hands. This clusterfuck really couldn't get much worse...

~O~

Steve glanced over as Clint passed his radio back over to the SHIELD agent who had been put in charge of managing the floor. "They need me outside."

"Then go." Steve could use Clint's eyes in this mess, but he had heard Tony's voice come over the line and the Panther wouldn't have asked for him if they didn't need him more. The rest of the averted their gaze slightly, turning their attention back towards the hall leading further into the building, as Clint stripped down. Naked, the Hawk made a tight bundle of his clothes, bow, and quiver and passed it off to Natasha before in one smooth twist, shifting into his bird form and flying out through an open window behind them.

That left them one pack-member down but Steve had faith that they would still be able to handle themselves. They had encountered three Shifters so far, each managed easily enough between the four of them. The hard part had been incapacitating them without actually injuring them.

The other SHIELD agents had been working with them but as they got further and further into the building they seemed to be encountering more dangerous Shifters. Steve wasn't sure why, but he had a feeling the weaker ones had instinctually tried to flee down to street-level while the stronger remained where they were to fight. Which meant the upper floors were exactly where Steve needed to be.

Motioning for the others to follow, Steve hurried back into the stairwell and began to run up, taking the steps two at a time. Inside the building, the mood was definitely charged. The main lights had been shut off when the alarm was sounded, replaced instead by red strobe lights, the pulsing light almost making Steve dizzy as he sprinted up the stairs. All of the electronics had instantly been shut off as well, the blaring of the alarm interspersed with deathly silence instead of the constant hum of computers. It all had Steve set on edge and had him lunging at shadows. But it was better to be paranoid than caught off guard.
Steve stopped when they reached the fifth floor. According to the SHIELD security in the lobby, this was the uppermost floor they had received reports of serum-affected Shifters from. He felt Thor right behind him and heard Natasha jogging up the last few steps to meet them as he slowly opened the stairwell door and peeked into the main hall.

It was empty.

Cautiously slipping out, Steve waved for the others to follow. It was quiet, but he could hear bits of movement echoing down the corridor. He just couldn't figure out where they were coming from yet. But they definitely were not alone. Any SHIELD agent able to should have evacuated so that left only so many options as to the identity of their company.

Steve's eyes narrowed in realization as they continued down the hall. This was where Agent Coulson's office was. He hadn't seen the senior agent outside and by the state of things, that didn't bode well for him. The hallway was a mess with papers scattered everywhere, claw marks on the floor, and all of the doors thrown open. Every door, that was, except for Coulson's.

But there were noises slipping out from inside. The same noises he had heard earlier. Now that he was up close, it sounded like growling. Spinning around, Steve motioned for Thor and Natasha to join him at the SHIELD agent's door. Keeping his voice as low as possible, Steve met their gazes. "Something's not right. I'm going in."

Thor nodded, his expression tense. "Do so quickly! We must continue on."

Steve didn't need to be told twice. Breaking into the room with one swift kick to the door, Steve's eyes widened as he caught sight of Phil being pinned between his desk and the wall with a large Wolf trying to claw at him through the furniture. "Phil!"

Agent Coulson's eyes snapped away from the Wolf and over to Steve. He was holding a gun in one of his hands but he obviously hadn't used it yet, the Wolf still entirely unharmed and determined to get at the SHIELD agent. "Steve, he's not in his right mind!"

"I know! I'll distract him! Thor, Natasha, get Phil out!"

Without even taking the time to shift, Steve launched himself at the other Wolf, throwing his full weight into it and side-tackling the Shifter. The impact was enough to send the Wolf rolling across the room and Steve took advantage of its momentary shock to make sure that he was in a good position to avoid any direct hits from teeth or claws. He and his old pack had often wrestled in both their human and Wolf forms so Steve knew a few tricks. He also had the advantage of being an alpha while the Wolf under him smelt distinctly like a beta. A tough son-of-a-gun, but a beta nonetheless. Even in his human form, Steve was able to give him a run for his money.

Seeing that he wasn't going to be instantly torn apart, Thor and Natasha obeyed Steve's directions and rushed over to help Phil. The desk keeping him pinned was large and looked like it weighed a good amount but Thor lifted it off of the agent like it was made of cardboard. While the Lion pulled the furniture back, Natasha slipped in and pulled Phil out of harm's way, letting Thor slam the desk back down.

As soon as he saw that Phil was free and that Thor, Natasha, and the SHIELD agent were making their way back towards the door, Steve released the Wolf and sprang back. Thor grabbed the door handle but left it open just long enough for Steve to squeeze out before slamming it shut. Half a second later, the door gave a violent shudder as the Wolf slammed against it, an angry howl crying out as he tried again. It wasn't solid, but it would work as a temporary solution. It would take him a while to break through the wood. Shifters could open and unlock doors, but only when they were
in their right minds. Their animal brains wouldn't be able to figure it out. So unless that guy shook off the serum and shifted they'd be alright.

Panting, Steve looked over at Coulson as he righted himself and brushed off his suit. The left sleeve of his jacket had four large tears spanning from the shoulder to the elbow where the Wolf's claws had gotten a little too close for comfort. It didn't look like there was any blood though.

Natasha raised a brow as she checked the man over for other wounds. "How long were you pinned there for?"

"Only about twenty minutes."

Natasha's brow rose a little higher. Twenty minutes was a long time to fend off a raging Wolf. "Are you alright?"

Coulson nodded and looked up at all of them with a grim smile. "I'm fine. I'm more concerned about my people."

Steve shook his head as Coulson started walking back towards the stairwell. "What exactly is going on?" He knew the basic logistics, but he still didn't understand why.

Straightening his tie, Phil let out a tight sigh. "From what I can tell, this is an attempt by Hydra to take us down from the inside out. I'm not exactly sure what their end game is yet, but their use of Shifters against us is fairly obvious. With the number of Shifters they managed to infect, there was no way we'd be able to control them quickly enough and it was nearly inevitable that one or two would escape out onto the streets and become visible to the public. Now that the public has become involved there will be little we can do to keep this out of the news and unless we begin to mitigate press interference immediately this will very shortly become a media firestorm. The public will become even more anxious about Shifters, particularly if they are made to believe that even SHIELD is incapable of handling them."

That wasn't good and went deeper than Steve had feared. But it all made sense. Maybe that was the worst part. "What can we do?"

"Exactly what you're already doing. We'll worry about the press later; what's important right now is securing this building." Phil paused at the door to the stairwell and looked back hopefully at Steve, Thor, and Natasha. "I don't suppose any of you are carrying a radio, are you? I need to send someone up to collect Savin."

Thor's forehead furrowed in confusion. "Who?"

"The Wolf in my office."

Oh. Steve shook his head again. "We don't have a radio, but there should be an agent downstairs with one."

"Great. Let's go."

Coulson was pretty spry for a man who had just spent twenty minutes trapped under a desk and only slowed them down a little as they hurried back down the stairs to the fourth floor. Sure enough there was a SHIELD agent posted there, his attentive eyes flashing away from the main corridor and to the stairwell as they burst through the door.

Steve was happy that they were trained to think before the shot because otherwise he would've gotten a tranquilizer dart right between the eyes. Coulson remained as unfazed as ever and waved
towards the security guard. "Agent Harrison, your radio. I need to send someone up to collect a Wolf trapped in my office."

The agent absorbed the information and tilted his head even as he passed what looked to be an extra radio over to Agent Coulson. "I can go, sir."

"Are you sure?" Phil motioned towards his ripped sleeve with a mirthless smile. "He's pretty rowdy."

"I have it handled." Flipping open the front of his jacket, Agent Harrison revealed a series of small canisters hooked into his belt. "I still have half a dozen gas grenades, sir. I'll just toss one in and wait fifteen seconds before collecting him."

"Do those contain a strong enough dosage?"

"Enough to K.O. an elephant for five hours."

"That should do."

Steve agreed. That should definitely do. Even in his current state, that should at least keep the Wolf, Savin, under long enough to extract him from the building. Correctly assuming that he had been dismissed, Agent Harrison spun around and moved to retrace their steps back to the fifth floor.

Once he had gone, Phil turned back towards the rest of them, a serious, stoic frown settled on his face. "Alright. With that taken care of, we should do a careful sweep of the rest of the building to make sure that we've cleared every room, nook, and cranny of Shifters and staff. No one gets left behind. Then we can reassess the situation when everyone is outside."

"That sounds smart." People's safety had to be the number one priority here and Steve was happy to see that Phil agreed. 'Let's split up to cover some more ground. We'll all stay on the same floor to minimize the change of major trouble, but Thor, you and Natasha take the rooms on the right side of the hall while Agent Coulson and I take those on the left." They would each have half as much to look through so they would be able to be twice as thorough. "Don't just use your eyes; remember to scent it out too." Lion's noses weren't quite as developed as Wolves, but they weren't bad. With the way Steve divided up the teams, each would have one good scenter and one good pair of eyes. Not to say that Steve and Thor didn't have sharp eyes, but Phil and Natasha in particular had both proved themselves remarkably perceptive.

Thor nodded his agreement but before any of them took so much as a step Steve's entire plan was thrown out the window in an instant. Coulson's radio crackled to life but they weren't able to hear a word as an instant later the entire building shook as a deafening boom rent the air. Steve rocked on his feet as the floor rolled underneath him and reached out to steady Natasha as Phil was thrown against the wall and Thor stumbled forward. New, louder screams rang out from the street below and Steve's eyes flew to the windows only to see smoke billowing out from the floor above them.

"-ort! Repeat, please report, upper floors!"i

Catching his breath, Steve realized that someone was shouting through the radio, their tone desperate. Shaking himself out of his own shock, Coulson noticed the voice a second later and managed to respond in a remarkably calm voice, "This is Agent Coulson. Evacuate the building immediately. Agents, civilians, and Shifters, everyone, through whatever means necessary. Status report on every floor!"
"Floor four, clear!" That had been Agent Harrison. He must've cleared the fourth floor before he had gone up to get Savin. Hopefully he had gotten the Wolf and was heading down the stairwell now.

"Floor three, clear!!"

"Floor one, clear."

"Floor two?" Natasha and Thor shared a concerned look as Steve watched Phil's face carefully as silence stretched on the other end of the line. "Floor two, report!" More silence. Shaking his head, Phil met Steve's eyes. "Something's wrong."

"We'll go find out. You make sure the rest of the building in properly cleared then get yourself out."

"Steve-"

Steve cut off Phil's protest before he could even voice it. "No offense meant, sir, but you're human. We can take a hell of a lot more abuse than you can." Including, to a small degree, heat. Whatever explosion had gone off on the floor above them had definitely started a fire. Steve could already start to feel the changing temperatures.

"Point taken. At least take this." Coulson passed his radio over to Steve who knew better than to refuse it. "Keep in touch."

"Yes, sir."

Natasha watched the exchange, her face set into a stern frown and her eyes like obsidian. She was in full mission mode, more serious now than when they had first entered the building. "We need get going. I don't trust the floor above us to hold with that fire."

Neither did Steve. "Alright. Agent Coulson, see you outside."

"I'll be waiting for you."

With that they left Phil to make his own way out and ran down toward the second floor. Steve had a bad feeling about it all, making the hair rise on the back of his neck. The whole time they were in the stairwell they could hear the echo of the footsteps of SHIELD agents rushing down to the ground floor at Coulson's orders. After this last one stop, Steve and his pack would be joining them.

Thor was the first one out this time around, the Lion barreling out onto the second floor with a stifled roar. It wasn't the best entrance as far as stealth was concerned, but at least it had the potential to catch any enemies off guard.

As it turned out, it didn't matter either way. When Steve chased Thor out, he found the second floor as silent as the fourth had initially been. Except this time, the hallway wasn't empty. Steve's eyes immediately landed on a form slumped over against one of the walls. It was the SHIELD agent who hadn't responded earlier to Phil. And now it was clear why.

Natasha was the first to rush over to the man, Thor and Steve holding back to watch for Shifters. Because something had clearly torn into this man. The human was bleeding out, his suit streaked with red from the blood leaking from multitudes of lacerations scratched across his chest and arms. He looked like he was even better equipped than Agent Harrison had been but the protective vest visible underneath his white button-down shirt hadn't done enough to block claws and teeth. The
man had been mauled, there was no other word for it. It was a startling visual reminder of just how much damage Shifters could do to humans if they wanted to.

Natasha pressed her fingers against an unmarred portion of the man's neck, feeling carefully for a pulse. "Still alive, but just barely. We have to get him downstairs."

Steve kept his eyes locked on the far side of the hall. He suspected that whatever Shifter had done this had already moved on though; if they had truly lost all sense of their human halves and had been in enough of a rage to do this much damage, they wouldn't have abandoned their prey unless they were moving on. But that didn't mean that it was safe. "Thor, help Natasha carry this man down the stairs!"

Apparently Natasha didn't think that it was safe either. "You're not staying in here alone, Steve."

Steve shook his head. "This man need help."

Natasha frowned right back. "I can carry him myself. You need Thor here with you."

"Are you sure?" Steve didn't mean to doubt her, but the downed man looked like he was almost six feet five inches tall and two hundred and thirty pounds. They had already established that while Natasha was very skilled, strength wasn't necessarily one of her strong suits and carrying that man down the stairs wouldn't be an easy task.

But she looked so certain about it that Steve felt bad for asking. "I'm sure."

She was smart enough to know her own limits and if she thought that she would be able to handle it than Steve was willing to trust her. After all, he did need to clear the floor and it would be considerably safer if he had Thor with him. "Okay. Thor, you're with me. Natasha, if you need any help-"

"I'll find some. It's just one flight of stairs, I can manage. You two just watch yourselves."

Thor looked like he would have smiled had the situation not been so grim. "And you as well."

Steve watched on carefully as Natasha tucked her arms under the SHIELD agent's arms and began to dig him out of the hall. He resisted the urge to step in and help her for both their sakes. He knew Natasha wouldn't appreciate it and he needed to know that she could actually do it on her own so he wouldn't have to worry about her for the next few minutes. Thor looked as if he were similarly restraining himself, both of them fighting their alpha instincts.

But Natasha made it to the door without their help leaving Steve and Thor alone to finish a sweep of the second floor. As they began their search, Thor voiced a question that had been bothering Steve as well, the Lion whispering so as not to draw too much attention to themselves. "I followed Coulson's explanation as to why Hydra would choose to loose Shifters on SHIELD, but what purpose would detonating a bomb serve?"

"I'm still trying to work that one out." It could be a way to try to make SHIELD look more incompetent, make it seem like an ordinance of theirs exploded as they tried to deal with the Shifters roving through their offices. Or they might be trying to physically destroy SHILED while they maimed their reputation among the humans. Or it could have just been to create further chaos. "I don't think we'll know until this is over."

"Do they mean to raze the building?"

"It could be. Or-" Steve cut himself off as he heard the sound of glass shattering. Spinning around
showed that the glass window pane at the end of the hall behind them was still in tact, so it must've come from the floor above them. The growing heat might have caused the glass to break but-

"Agent Rogers! Do you copy?"

Steve raised Phil's radio up to his lips at the sound of Agent's Hill's voice. "Yes, ma'am."

"Agent Barton just reported that masked men are breaking into the building from the back! They're likely Hydra agents. We're sending people around the block to stem the flow now but you and Thor need to get out, immediately."

Oh jeez..."We just need to check the rest of this floor first!" The bomb wasn't to destroy the building, not right away at least. It was a way to make sure that it was empty of both humans and Shifters.

Now that Steve knew what to listen for he could hear racing down the hallway in the floor above them. Scenting the air, Steve clenched his jaw. They were men, but they had an unfamiliar scent to them. They weren't SHIELD agents. Hill was right; they had to be with Hydra. Looking back up, Steve motioned for Thor to pick up his pace. "I don't know if we'll have the time to be thorough. Let's make this quick."

The Lion looked unsettled by the idea and took an extra moment to scent the air as they all but ran past a side corridor. As soon as he inhaled though he stopped short, his eyes wide-opened in shock. "Steve! Wait!"

Steve almost tripped over his own feet at the command but caught himself before he could fall flat on his face. Spinning around, the rebuke on his lips died as he took in the look on Thor's face. If he didn't know any better he'd think the brawny Shifter looked scared. Thor was usually so bold, so unshakable, that seeing him like that made a shiver shoot straight down Steve's spine. "What is it?"

"I think it's-" Turning back to the hall, Thor sucked in another deep breath. "Can you smell it?"

"What?" Steve hadn't smelled anything particularly remarkable.

"I thought I smelled..." The color suddenly slipped from Thor's face and Steve grew more anxious. "Are they keeping him here?"

"Who?"

"Loki! Are they holding him here?!"

Oh! Oh no. "I think so."

"Damn! Steve, I must find him!"

They didn't have the time for this, but the combination of desperation and panic flashing through Thor's eyes made Steve unable to deny him. Though he had never seen them on Thor's face, Steve knew those emotions far too well; they were the same he had experienced when he thought Tony was being killed in that trailer. "Okay. You lead, I'll cover you."

Those were the only words Thor needed to burst back into a sprint. They ran down the corridor to a section of the building Steve had never been to before. The municipal white walls took on an even more sterile hue, the red flashing lights casting harsh shadows through the haze that was slowly filling the air. Thor ran ahead like something possessed and it took Steve about a hundred more yards to pick up on what the Lion had sensed. The unique scent of a Raven. Steve had only
smelled it once before but it had been ingrained permanently into his brain after what had happened the last time he and Loki met face to face.

The hall turned a corner and Steve looked up to find Thor stopping at a particularly well-reinforced door. The SHIELD building as a whole didn't seem like it had been built for holding criminals but this one door looked like it had some potential. Thor met Steve's eyes briefly, almost frantically, before turning back towards the door. "He is through here, I am certain of it!"

"Go ahead."

Reaching out, the Lion grabbed the handle and pulled. It wouldn't budge. Switching his position so that he was leaning more of his weight up against the door, Thor tried again. The door groaned a little in protest but held fast.

Of course the door was locked. Yes, there was a slot for swiping a key card on the side of the door. That SHIELD agent they had found bleeding out had probably had the right card, which would make sense why he was better equipped than the others had been. He had probably been tasked with getting Loki out but had gotten distracted by an unexpected Shifter then had gone down trying to subdue it. But Natasha was already hauling that man downstairs and they didn't have the time for Coulson or Agent Hill to realize the problem and send up another man with a key card.

Moving in to stand beside Thor, Steve steeled himself and grabbed onto the handle as well. The door had undoubtedly been made to keep in Shifters, but he and Thor were stronger than almost every other alpha he had ever met. "One more time, give it everything you got!"

Thor did, and Steve did, his muscles straining from the strength of the metal. The door groaned again before there was a sharp squeal of metal bending and Steve felt something snap inside the locking mechanism.

Letting out a triumphant laugh, Thor bounced back before kicking the door square in its center, nearly sent it flying clear off of its hinges as it snapped open. The Lion rushed in without so much as glancing back at Steve, sprinting through what looked to be some sort of processing room into a narrower corridor in the back lined with cells with clear walls. A second later he gave another triumphant cry and Steve couldn't help the smile of relief that slipped across his lips despite everything that had happened.

He didn't care much for Loki-as to be expected after the Raven nearly killed his team and had a hand in the destruction of his apartment-but he respected the fact that he was Thor's mate and knew what it meant to Thor that they had been able to find him. Steve slowed his steps and lingered in the processing room. He felt as if he owed them a little privacy but given circumstances he wanted to stick close by and herd them out quick. From the sound it was making, the building was getting close to coming down around them.

Steve could easily hear their conversation as Thor got to work trying to get Loki's cell opened. He couldn't see the Bird's face but he sounded genuinely surprised to see Thor there. "Thor. You came for me?"

"Always. Even when you do not wish it."

There was a moment of quiet broken only by the sound of Thor undoubtedly fiddling with whatever sort of locking mechanism they had on the door to Loki's cell. "Quickly, quickly, you oaf!"

"Your commentary is doing nothing to aid me in my progress."
Steve was just about to go help because they did not have the time. But then Thor let out a frustrated growl, "Enough of this!" and threw himself at the cell door.

Steve hurried forward at the sound and arrived in time to see Thor throw himself at the door again, this time with enough force to bend the clear, hard plastic and dislodge the lock from its socket.

Steve felt himself tense as Loki smoothly stepped out, an involuntary reaction from their past encounters. He only relaxed again when Thor took a firm hold of Loki's shoulder and began to hustle him out of the door. "Quickly! We must leave."

Glancing at the hand on his shoulder, Loki looked back to sneer at the Lion. "And what will you do with me after, dear brother?"

Thor stared grimly back. "I will do what I must: return you to SHIELD custody."

"Thor-"

"You are a criminal and I have accepted that. Though it has not changed my love for you I realize that you must redeem your actions here before I am able to attempt to repair our bond."

Steve felt like was intruding simply by listening in but he didn't have the luxury of being courteous. "We need to keep moving."

Thor nodded and picked up his pace, pushing Loki along ahead of him. It struck Steve as they ran that while SHIELD had made an effort-aborted as it was-to retrieve Loki, Hydra hadn't, even with all their agents beginning to swarm the building. They must have known he was being held there, but they were going to leave the Raven there to die.

Along with the sound of heavy footsteps racing above them, Steve could hear the metal beams moan in the floor below him as the smell of smoke grew thicker. The floors and ceilings between the levels of the building were thick and were doing as good a job as possible to keep the fire on the upper floors contained but the structural integrity of the whole structure was starting to fracture. Hydra probably knew exactly where to hit the building to give them enough time to get in and get out.

Then, amongst the creaking of steel, Steve heard another sound. It was a low, dull whine. It could've been just a new noise as the building came apart but...No, that was definitely coming from a living creature. Specifically a Wolf. A very tired, likely-injured Wolf.

Thor didn't look like he had heard it and turned back in surprise as Steve called out to him. "I hear something! I'm going to go back to check it out!"

"Steve, the whole structure may collapse at any moment!"

"I know!" Boy, did Steve know. He had to shout just to be heard above the sound of the building getting ready to crumble around them. "This won't take long!"

Thor's brows drew together in concern. "Steve-!"

"Go! I'll be right behind you!"

Steve understood the Lion's trepidation but he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he passed this by without investigating. Thor still appeared reluctant to go on without him but seemed to sense that Steve was set on this and didn't try to stop him as the Wolf spun around and headed back into the heart of the building.
Steve's blood was pounding thick in his veins as he followed the soft, broken noises. They led him past the side-corridor they had taken to rescue Loki, getting louder all the while until they were loud, desperate snarls.

He had almost reached the other end of the building when he saw it. A Wolf trapped under a patch of ceiling that had given way from heat exposure, leaving a hole in the ceiling leading right up to the next floor. She was scratching at the ground, trying to free herself but unable to get the right amount of traction. More than that though, there were three men standing around her almost as if they were inspecting the Wolf. They were dressed all in black with gas masks pulled over their faces and guns strapped to their backs. Hydra.

Steve didn't know why they were crowding around the she-Wolf like that but it couldn't be good. A snarl rolled up in his throat and he squared his shoulders, his feet moving right towards them as if on their own accord. "Hey! Get away from her!"

The men whipped their heads around to stare at him through tinted goggles strapped over their eyes. When they spoke, their voices were mechanical and muddled through their gas masks. They had come prepared for the fire. The sound was downright eerie but Steve wasn't about to back off. That Wolf was an innocent and didn't deserve whatever further abuse Hydra wanted to cause her. "This building was supposed to be cleared."

"Looks like some stayed behind."

Steve's jaw tightened as his voice lowered into a growl. "I'm only going to warn you once, back away from her and leave."

"Seems we got an alpha on our hands."

"He looks strong. Take him."

Steve saw red. How dare they even threaten to do anything to him? If they expected to win in a fight against him, even with those guns on their backs, they had another thing com-

Every thought in Steve's head stopped in an instant as one of them drew something from their pocket, pressed their thumb down, and suddenly a piercing ring shot through Steve's head. It was that dog whistle thing, the one Loki had used. Steve felt his knees give out as he slapped his hands over his ears. It hurt so bad! It felt like it was about to break his skull open. The pain was so intense, just like last time, except now it didn't stop. It just kept going.

Steve couldn't move, couldn't do anything more than whimper as he heard the men walk over to him carrying a large bag he hadn't noticed earlier. Behind them he could hear the trapped Wolf yelping in pain and Steve couldn't bring to think about how much worse it might be if he were also trapped in his animal form.

His vision was starting to blur in and out but he saw it as the men pulled a length of chain out from the bag, the strobing light glinting off of the cool metals before the world went black again. Steve fought as best he could but couldn't do enough to throw the Hydra agents off as they trussed him up with the chain. The metal links dug hard into his skin as they pulled it tight, pinning his limbs against his body and by the time he dully felt them strap a muzzle onto his face he could also feel blood begin to trickle from his nose. He hoped it made their job that much harder because at this point there wasn't much more he could do to fight back.

~O~
Tony could feel his heart beating dangerously fast in his chest, could hear blood rushing in his ears as he rushed back towards the main building. The whole thing was coming down soon and the trickle of people escaping out the front was trailing off. But there were still no signs of Steve and Thor. Where the hell were they?!

It was fucking killing him to not know, to not be able to hear and see what was happening. There was no way he was just going to sit back and wait for them to get their asses out like some omega when god only knew what was happening insi-Wait.

Tony caught sight of a tall flash of blond through the sea of panicked faces. It had to be Thor! Pushing through a line of uniformed guards, Tony barely resisted snarling at a SHIELD agent who tried to grab him, instead ducking around the man before the agent was able to stop him.

Somewhere in the back of Tony's mind he registered Bruce jogging up behind him, his eyes focused on scanning the front entrance as Thor emerged with who else but Loki in his arms. Clint was out, Natasha was out, Thor was out, the Bird was out, but where was Steve?

"Steve?"

Tony felt a hand grab at his elbow but tugged himself away as Steve continued to fail to appear. He felt panic welling up in his chest and he couldn't stop it. It was choking him, blinding him, Jesus, why did he ever mate? "Steve?"

Tony charged right for Thor, pushing forward even as a SHIELD agent reached the Lion first to take custody of Loki. The human barely had time to pull Loki away before Tony crashed into Thor. Shoving the larger Shifter roughly up against the wall of the building, Tony pushed Thor back once more to slam the Lion's head back against the bricks. He didn't know what was happening or what he was doing, just that Thor was here, Steve wasn't, and he was going to start fucking killing people until that changed. "Where the hell is Steve!?"

Thor blinked down at Tony in shock then shook his head. "We separated and lost contact. I was hoping you had seen him escape from the building."

Tony surged forward again and grabbed the taller Cat by the collar of his shirt, his knuckles turning white as he shook him hard and yelled right into his face, "You damn Lion, you just left him in there?!!"

"Tony!" Bruce finally caught up, the Wolf's hands flying to cover Tony's on Thor's shirt. Later, Tony would have to give Thor credit because he didn't try and strike him, just froze and let Bruce pry Tony's fingers off of him.

Swallowing, Bruce doubled his efforts and managed to get the Panther off of the Lion. "Tony, calm down! It's not Thor's fault!"

Thor nodded in confirmation, his face serious. "No, indeed if I had so much as suspected Steve was not on his way out I would have gone back to assist him. You must believe me. Your reaction is understandable, Tony, but it is not productive if we wish to come up with a plan to retrieve him."

Tony didn't realize that he was shaking until Bruce had his arms wrapped around him. He growled and shouldered Bruce to escape his hold. "Don't! Don't..."

Heaving a breath, Tony tried to straighten his thoughts out. It was like his brain was being torn up by a tornado and he hated it. "I'm going in there to get him."
Now Thor was reaching out to him too. "I would not recommend it. The structure has become unstable-"

"I don't give a damn about what you think!"

More hands were on him now, Bruce grabbing his shoulder as Natasha suddenly appeared at his side to hold his elbow. Tony strained against them and broke free but they jumped forward to grab him again. It was like a fucking nightmare. Steve was alone in that building, filled with fire, smoke, and Hydra agents, and Tony couldn't stop the blinding panic from rising in his chest.

Natasha's stern voice broke through the haze clouding over his mind. "Tony, we can't let you go back in there! If Steve can come out, he'll come out."

If Steve could-? If?

Bruce's fingers tightened on his arm. There was real regret in his voice but the traitor stood firm with Natasha. "She's right Tony. If you went in, you would...Can't you hear it? The building's collapsing!"

Tony could hear it. But it didn't matter. Even though it should've. It should've, but any logical thoughts were stamped out by the damned Panther in his head roaring at him to get in there and get his mate out.

"Everybody get back! For your own safety, get back!"

Tony barely heard the voice come over the bullhorn. A firefighter maybe, some human. The crowd ran screaming, and even the SHIELD agents abandoned their posts. Humans, what did they understand about this? Like hell Tony was about to listen to him. He felt Bruce and Natasha trying to pull him back but Tony was stronger than either of them by far and wasn't about to run away. But then a thick pair of arms wrapped around his waist and hauled him up into the air.

Tony thrashed against Thor's hold, hissing and snarling like an animal as the large Shifter picked him up and carried him away. Away from the building, away from Steve. "Thor, I swear to God I will kill you! if you don't-!"

The Lion rumbled in his ear just as a deeper rumbling shook the air around them. "I know your pain, brother. Believe me. But I shall not lose you. Perhaps someday you will forgive me."

"What? No! Steve!" There was still time! He could still-!

For a second time seemed to still, almost as if all the air had been sucked out of the city block. Then there was a ground-shaking boom and Tony's world collapsed around him as the SHIELD building finally gave way and fell. The top floors gave way first and Tony watched it all as the concrete and steel crumbled, the impact hitting the weakened floors below it with such force that they almost seemed to explode, the whole structure falling like a house of cards.

A giant wave of dust-filled air rolled out over the street, almost knocking Thor off of his feet, and ash, concrete, and drywall began to fall from the sky like snow. Somewhere in the background Tony could hear the wail of fire trucks but they were drowned out by another sound. Someone was screaming.

Oh shit, it was him.

"Steve! Steve!"
Tony felt his skin ripple as he struggled not to shift even as he clawed at Thor's arms. An actual claw must have come out because Tony saw a spatter of blood and Thor released him with a tight hiss. Immediately Tony bolted towards the pile of rubble where the building once stood. Bits of material were still on fire but Tony didn't care, just pushed them aside as he began to dig desperately through the rubble with shaking hands, searching for any sign of Steve. Fuck, fuck, fuck! Where was he?

The others followed him up but just stood by as Tony dug. He wanted to yell at them, scream at them to help. Why weren't they helping?

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Clint land beside them, the Hawk shifting back to his human form as Natasha passed him his clothes. "What's wrong?"

"We didn't see Steve leave the building."

Tony heard the frown in Clint's voice but didn't turn around. He had to keep going. He had to. "There were people slipping out of the windows near the back, like rats from a sinking ship."

Tony snarled at the implication that Steve was one of them. "He would've come back around to the front!" If he had been able to, he would have. He wouldn't have left Tony to deal with this shit by himself.

Clint thought hard for a moment, cogs turning in the Bird's head. "Well...Some of the Hydra agents were carrying bags. I figured they were just raiding SHEILD tech or information."

A sickening amount of hope bubbled up in Tony's chest and for the first time he looked away from the shattered pieces of concrete and up at Clint. "Was one of them Steve? Did they have him?"

Clint shook his head regretfully. "I don't know, I wasn't looking for Steve. I was just trying to track as many of them as I could."

"But one of them could've been Steve?"

Tilting his head to the side, Clint eventually shrugged. "Yes. Some of the bags they were carrying out were large enough."

"That has to be it." It had to be. Somehow they had gotten Steve into one of those bags. It didn't make sense-Tony couldn't imagine how humans would ever be able to kidnap the alpha Wolf-but it was the only answer Tony could think of that would mean Steve was still alive. And he was still alive, he had to be.

Natasha frowned. "We have to consider the possibility that Steve didn't make it out."

"No! He's not dead!"

Her frown deepened and something akin to pity flashed in her eyes. "Tony..."

Pushing himself up onto his feet, Tony growled at her. "Don't look at me like that! It's not just wishful thinking. He can't be dead! He doesn't feel dead." He couldn't describe it. He didn't even understand it, which was driving him crazy. Everything just felt wrong but everything in him was saying Steve wasn't dead. He really hoped it wasn't just wishful thinking.

Bruce leveled him with a solemn gaze. "You honestly think Steve's still alive?"

Sighing, Tony ran his hands over his face. It felt like his heart was about to come out of his chest.
"Yes. Bruce, I don't know how, but it doesn't feel like he's dead."

"Then I believe you."

Natasha pursed her lips. "Bruce..."

The beta held up a hand in protest and Tony felt a wave of relief sweep over him. Bruce believed him. Level-headed, scientific Bruce. Thank god. "Hear me out. Tony and Steve mated, recently. They have a strong bond right now. If Steve had actually died, Tony might really have been able to tell."

Thor nodded, his hands crossing over his chest. "I believe him as well. A mating bond is stronger than you can imagine. You can feel things, emotions, actual physical sensations as your mate does. If Steve had passed it would have felt like a stab through your heart."

Tony didn't know about all that feeling emotions nonsense, but that part about getting stabbed through the heart sounded about right. "Then he's still alive. And we're going to get him back."

Clint surveyed the destruction around them then looked back at Tony. "So, what do we do first?"

"Follow me."

Sliding off of the pile of rubble, Tony tried to refocus all his worry and panic into energy to get this thing done. There was a chance for Steve and if anyone could hunt him down and bring him back it was going to be him. There was nowhere those Hydra bastards could hide that he wouldn't find them and if they hurt Steve he would wipe them right off the surface of the earth.

This time Hydra had picked the wrong Shifter to fuck with. If they wanted to play this game, Tony was only too happy to oblige.

"Stark!"

Tony growled as Agent Coulson ran up to him, the man's suit covered in a fine white dust. He had been too close to the building when it had come down. "Steve's alive. You stop me from going after him and I swear to God I'll—"

Tony felt the other members of his pack come up behind him but Coulson didn't seem to care, keeping his eyes on Tony's. "It would go entirely against S.H.I.E.L.D. regulation if I let you go now that we've been compromised without first consulting my superiors. And it would be on the verge of illegal if you were to find a pair of keys that I accidentally dropped in all the chaos that belonged to a mobile attack unit van S.H.I.E.L.D. keeps parked around the block for emergencies and decided to use it to save your fellow agent." Pulling a key ring out of his pocket, Agent Coulson held it out and let it fall to the pavement. "And I could lose my job if I told you to access the S.H.I.E.L.D. database in order to find out the location of a warehouse Hydra owns down by the shipping yard that we never told you existed."

Tony blinked then bent down to swipe up the keys. "Thank you." And he meant it. He never would have thought a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent would break regulation, especially not for him.

Coulson gave a small nod then widened his eyes in feigned ignorance. "For what?" Reaching down, he patted his jacket pockets. "Damn. I seem to have lost my keys in the midst of all the fighting."

Tony grinned as he slipped the key ring into his pocket. "I'll keep my eyes out for them."
Steve never lost consciousness as they rolled his body into a dark canvas bag, was able to watch as they lashed it shut over his head, leaving him in near total darkness. After they had him inside they had turned off that dog-whistle device but prolonged exposure to it had given him a sharp, lasting pain in his head that was only fading very slowly. The chains they had fastened around him were so tight he could feel circulation being cut off to his legs and hands and with the muzzle on he couldn't even speak and made it twice as hard to breathe. He felt like he was suffocating and forced himself not to panic.

Wherever they were taking him, they weren't gentle with him. He was slammed against what felt like metal and concrete and rolled head over heels like a sack of potatoes. Not being able to see or breathe made him nauseous and the only way he was able to keep himself from vomiting was the knowledge that it would just get caught in the muzzle.

It seemed like years before all the movement stopped and he was allowed a moment to rest. As soon as they dumped him out of the canvas bag Steve knew why. It took him only a second to orient himself and realize that they had arrived at their final destination.

It looked like some sort of concrete bunker filled with medical equipment. No medical equipment he had ever seen before, in SHIELD or elsewhere. Machines that looked hand-built with mismatched parts. There were beakers, monitors, tubes running everywhere along with operating equipment and a blood-stained, steel operating table sitting under a set of white lamps.

Steve didn't understand what they had brought him here for until he saw that the operating table was equipped with a series of leather restraints.

He was going to be their new experiment. And judging by the blood, it didn't look like their last one hadn't gone well. But Steve wasn't going to make it easy for them.

Thrashing against the chains wrapped around him, Steve snarled as five men armed with guns picked him up off the ground and carried him towards the table. He managed to elbow one of them in the stomach, the man dropping Steve's arm and sending his shoulder crashing to the ground. It stung but Steve tried to make the best of the opportunity and wiggle away. But they were on him too quickly. The man he had elbowed reared back, grabbed his gun, and slammed the butt of it right between Steve's eyes. Steve let out a shout as he heard a sharp crack and felt the bridge of his nose snap under the muzzle.

"Now, now, don't damage him too much. We need him intact to maintain the integrity of our results."

Steve heard the voice drawl out from somewhere out of his view, ignoring the pain in his nose and growling as he was lifted back up and dropped onto the table. He managed to elbow one of them in the stomach, the man dropping Steve's arm and sending his shoulder crashing to the ground. It stung but Steve tried to make the best of the opportunity and wiggle away. But they were on him too quickly. The man he had elbowed reared back, grabbed his gun, and slammed the butt of it right between Steve's eyes. Steve let out a shout as he heard a sharp crack and felt the bridge of his nose snap under the muzzle.

"Ah, the prodigal Wolf." Panting, Steve lifted his head up as far as he could saw four people walk into the room. Three of them were in long white labcoats, but it was the fourth that Steve was suddenly focused on. Steve didn't recognize him but there was something about him, something that instantly set Steve on edge. He was a Shifter, a Wolf, an alpha, but he felt off. He smelled like..."Funny we should meet again under such circumstances."

Of course. Steve's eyes flashed as the Wolf reached down and pulled Steve's muzzle off of his mouth. He was finally face-to-face with the Shifter who had destroyed his life and he could barely
In his human form, he was a middle-aged man with dark hair and piercing black eyes sparking with an intensity bridging on insanity. He was wearing a stiff, dark grey suit and black leather gloves but something about him seemed barely contained underneath it all, almost as if there was something rolling underneath his skin. His voice was calm and his tone light when he spoke, eerily so, like he was discussing the weather with a friend. "Unfortunately I cannot stay long, but know that I'll be keeping a very close eye on your progress throughout all the phases of the experiment. Your endurance will make you the perfect test subject, I think. Perhaps you'll last longer than the others have recently, and we'll finally be able to get some real results."

Steve grit his teeth and tested his restraints. There was nothing he wanted more than to rip Schmidt's smile right off of his face. "Why are you doing this? What's Hydra promised you?"

"How little you know. I am Hydra, Agent Rogers. And I am doing this because I can."

The humans in the labcoats, who had been shuffling around in the background the whole time, seemed as if they were preparing something. One of them began to draw a liquid out of one of the beakers into a syringe and when Schmidt saw it he motioned towards the man over his shoulder. "Increase the dosage."

The man looked up in surprise, pushing his glasses up on his nose in a nervous twitch. "This is twice as much as we've ever administered in one dose!"

"I am aware."

"Yes, sir."

Steve bit his lip as he watched the scientist drew more of the liquid into the syringe before moving towards him. The other two were already gathered around him, holding him down further as the man with the syringe approached. Steve tried his restraints again, his muscles straining as he pulled at the leather bindings. "No. No!" He had a pack now. He had a mate now! He couldn't let this happen.

But there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He could only watch as the man jabbed the long syringe needle into his arm and pushed the plunger down, sending the liquid inside shooting straight into his veins. Steve shook his head, did what he could to try and stop it but he could feel it burning through him, spreading faster as his heart began to pound in his chest.

All of his baser, animalistic emotions were rushing through him like a flash flood and Steve could feel himself slipping away, like he was drowning in his own mind. There was rage with a powerful undercurrent of fear and desperation to escape. He snarled and lunged forward, the force this time ripping one of the leather bindings, and snapped his jaws down on one of the Hydra scientists. Steve tasted blood, heard screaming, but he couldn't even see where he had bit the man, no longer cared as he tore at their flesh. He just had to get out. There was a sharp jolt of pain and he yelped, releasing his victim as he jerked back onto the table. He had to get out, he had to get out!

With one arm, limb, paw free, Steve turned and bit desperately at the other binding, growled and scratched at the leather strap holding him down, but it wouldn't budge. But he knew what would.

Before he could sink his teeth into his own wrist there was another sharp jolt but this time he felt his body give out as everything faded to black.
Chapter 14

For the first time Tony followed Coulson's hurried instructions to the letter. The SHIELD agent had been telling the truth both about the presence of the mobile attack van and, once Tony had the pack inside and the vehicle careening out of the private lot it was parked in, about the existence of a warehouse SHIELD had pinned as a Hydra hideout. Information on the building wasn't hard to find once Tony had broken into their database via an onboard touch-screen computer. From what he could tell from the files, SHIELD had had the building under observations for a few weeks now but had been waiting to act until they could gather up enough evidence of illegal activity occurring at the location. Coulson was right to suggest it though; it was close enough to the SHIELD building downtown that it would be a logical place for them to lug a captive to. If they took captives.

The whole way there Tony tried not the let himself think of the possibility that this was all a hopeless, desperate attempt to chase after someone who had already died. Because he recognized that realistically it was bridging on delusional to think that Steve had been able to escape from the SHIELD building before it collapsed. But Bruce believed him, and Thor believed him, and while Natasha and Clint hadn't outwardly expressed their belief that Steve was still alive, the fact that they had bothered to come along had to mean something.

The last thing Tony had said to Steve was that he was an ass. That couldn't be Steve's last memory of him.

Tony had Natasha drive while he sat in the back of the van, focused instead on breaking into SHIELD's database. It wouldn't have taken so long if he had his own equipment with him but as it was he was forced to work with what he had. It took him a few minutes to navigate his way through the menus and he finally just gave up, snapped the plastic cover off, and dug his fingers into the wiring.

Bruce was hunched over his shoulder, watching his movements which turned out to be a good thing. Tony's mind was frazzled and though he still got the job done, he made a few rookie mistakes along the way that even Bruce noticed and gently corrected him on.

Even in the state he was in, Tony had made a good choice in giving Natasha the wheel. She made good use of the sirens and lights attached to the roof of the van and barreled through traffic like it was a slalom course. The shipping yards were located just beyond the city limits amongst a tangled mass of highway intersections and industrial complexes. Hundreds of big-rig trucks passed through the dozens of large warehouses every day. With the constant flow of new, anonymous faces, it was the perfect place to hide in plain sight.

By the time they were within half a mile of their destination, Natasha cut the sirens and lights, slowed her pace, and pulled them off the main roads and back onto side-streets. Thor gripped his seat and stood a bit to better see out the front windshield and take in their new surroundings. The Lion, like the rest of them, still had ash and dust streaked across his face, his blond beard streaked with white and gray, artificially aging him and matching the grim look in his eyes. "If Hydra is indeed occupying one of these structures, we should not proceed much further, else they may become aware of our presence."

Tony came back to himself at the other Cat's deep voice. Where they there already? Shit...Running a hand over his face, Tony looked up from the console he had put all his focus into. Over the last however long it actually took them to drive out here, Tony had also managed to access all of the files SHIELD had archived about the warehouse. The had a blueprint but listed right in the file that
it was probably inaccurate due to unauthorized renovations made by the owners. Hydra didn't
officially own the building but the money to pay for it had been traced back to them, the large
corporation instead listing it under a smaller shipping company they had probably started up just
for this purpose. The blueprints provided did show that instead of just being one big, empty room
inside, the warehouse was divided up into three stories and was probably used more as a research
lab than any sort of factory judging by the utilities plugged into it. For the past month or so,
SHIELD had been trying to track who went in and out of the building and while a few thuggish-
looking guys were noted, the majority of the employees seemed to have a "Doctor" in front of their
name. "You're right, I guess. We'll have to walk. Uh, damn it, we can't just leave the van by itself.
Bruce…?"

The beta's lips tightened into a thin line but he nodded. "I can stay if you need me to."

"Good. Do that. Thor, you get to stay here too."

Four pairs of eyes spun around to stare at Tony's face in shock and though Thor definitely looked
the most insulted Bruce was the first one to speak up. The Wolf's surprise settled into a quizzical
frown as he searched Tony's face for answers. "You should take Thor with you."

Tony tilted his head, acknowledging his suggestion then dismissing it. That would be the obvious
move; as the other alpha on the team, Thor would be a prime choice to send in to retrieve Steve. He
was built like a tank and could probably break right through walls if he tried hard enough. But after
looking at the specs and the type of people they would be dealing with, that sort of approach didn't
fit into Tony's plan. They couldn't just burst in, arms swinging and guns blazing, although that was
definitely appealing. Tony knew that they would have to be more careful than that though, least of
all because they had a very important hostage whose safety he wasn't about to risk. "Nope. Not
happening."

Anger followed closely by guilt washed over Thor's face. "If your decision is due to your feeling
that I had in some way chosen willfully to abandon Steve in favor of my brother, I can only try to
convince you once more that those were never my intentions."

Tony held up a hand as he bounced up to his feet, walking through the back of the van up to the
driver's seat to take a look out himself. "Save it. It's not because of that." Tony hadn't thought that,
not even when it was happening. Maybe for a minute. But despite his mixed feelings about the
Lion, he knew that Thor was loyal to a fault and was dumb enough that, had he realized that Steve
was falling behind, he would have gone back for him before he made it out.

Bruce's frown deepened at his words. "If it's not that, Tony, you're not keeping him here to babysit
me, are you? Because I can't even begin to describe how stupid that would be. You could use his
help a lot more than I need him here to protect me."

"I'm not having him stay to protect you…" Bruce leveled Tony with a look. Clearly he hadn't been
convincing. Growling, Tony explained himself in full. They needed to go, so he needed this
argument to be over. "Okay, I am, somewhat. But not in the way you're thinking. I'm sure you'd be
able to make it through whatever Hydra would be able to throw at you."

"Then why don't-?"

"Because I don't want you to have to shift back into that giant Wolf to do it. Thor needs to be here
with you, to handle whatever might come up so that you don't have to. More than that though, if
you don't hear from us in an hour, the both of you will need to make the choice to either come in
after us or go and get some help. I don't want you to have to make that decision alone."
Bruce opened his mouth in protest but when words failed to come, he closed it again with a somber glower. Thor still didn't seem pleased either but both of them seemed to take Tony's words to heart. What they were doing was reckless, impulsive, and this time they didn't even have a SHIELD safety-net to rely on. If worst came to worst, Bruce and Thor would have to make a very hard call. But Tony had faith that between the two of them they would do the right thing. Even if it meant leaving them behind.

Assuming that he knew had them on his side, Tony pulled his phone from his pocket and made sure that it was working right. "Keep your phone on, Bruce."

"Huh?"

Tony shrugged as he slipped his phone back into his pocket. "We don't exactly have our headsets, do we? If something happens, text me."

Bruce winced but obediently checked his own phone. "This is so archaic."

"You don't have to tell me."

Assured that they would be able to maintain some sort of communication between them, Tony decided that it was time to go. There wasn't anything to gain by waiting any longer. He, Natasha, and Clint piled out of the back of the van and Tony began to lead them through a maze of trucks and loading docks. Natasha and Clint were like two shadows behind him, barely making a noise as his own shoes crunched over gravel and asphalt. There were only a few people around to hear them, but so far everyone looked like they were honest employees from neighboring buildings just going about their work. Tony still made sure that he was well out of sight though, sneaking behind cargo boxes and truck tires with a speed impossible for normal humans.

The van ride over seemed to have passed by in a matter of mere minutes but now the trek over to the warehouse seemed to stretch on for hours. It took forever for the right building to come into view and when he finally saw it, it did nothing to help settle his nerves.

Tony swallowed down his anxieties and glanced back to Natasha and Clint to make sure they were still following him. He wasn't worried about being in charge; he knew he was smart and he had no problems giving orders. It wasn't that he was worried for himself; he knew for a fact that his instincts and sense of self-preservation would carry him through hell and back—they already had. No, it was the fact that Natasha and Clint were coming with him. That their well-being was on him along with his own. He wasn't good at taking care of other people. He didn't know how to work as a team, a pack. That, compounded with the worry that they wouldn't find Steve here, or worse, that he would be here but they wouldn't make it in time. The stress wasn't doing Tony any good.

But he was going to suck it up, for Steve's sake. Taking a deep breath, Tony looked up at the side of the warehouse. "Okay, how are we getting in?"

Natasha let out a quiet snort, keeping her voice low so as not to attract any unwanted attention. "You don't have a plan for that?"

"Of course I do," Lies, "I just want to hear yours first so I can shoot it down."

Tony could feel a strained amusement radiating from Clint as Natasha glared back at him. The redhead grabbed a gun from her leg holster. "There's a small window there on the second level. You or Clint boost me up, I go in, shoot who I need to, and figure out how to open a door to let you too in."
"That's a terrible plan." And he wasn't just saying that. "You're not running through there by yourself."

"You mean I'm not going in there without you."

"Say it however you want, you're not going to change my mind." But parts of it did have promise. "I boost you and Clint up, then the two of you haul me up. We shouldn't separate right at the start like an episode of Scooby Doo."

Clint rolled his eyes but scooted forward so that he was crouching down right next to Natasha. "Try not to compare our work to a kids' show."

"You get the job done and I won't. Now, who's going first? Little Red or Feathers?"

Natasha didn't encourage him with a response, instead moving in as Tony bent down, linking his fingers to form a foothold. She instantly understood what he was going for and neatly stepped up into his hands and with a soft grunt of exertion Tony stood and launched her into the air. She was pretty lightweight and with her natural agility scrambled up to the window with little trouble. Tony and Clint watched from below as she made short work of breaking the glass with the butt of her pistol and slip her hand through the shattered window pane to unlatch it from the inside.

Tony pursed his lips as Natasha jimmied it open and crawled inside. For half a second he thought that she was going to go with her plan instead of his and disappear but after a minute she reappeared in the window, waving for Clint to come up after her. Tony obliged, the Hawk weighing even less than Natasha as he boosted him up.

Once Clint had scrambled inside, they both poked their heads out and reached a hand down to Tony. Tony meanwhile was looking up, judging the distance he had to jump. It was probably about twelve feet from the ground to their hands but it shouldn't be a problem. Well, maybe after he got a running jump. Jogging back a few steps, Tony didn't give himself the time to doubt and sprang at the wall, putting as much power into the jump as he could muster and stretching out his hands.

Tony was a little shocked when he made it, Natasha and Clint each clasping a hand and heaving him up through the window. It had been a while since he had tried any sort of acrobatics in his human form—probably since he was a teenager—and he was mildly impressed with himself that he could manage it.

It took both of them to haul Tony inside and when he tumbled inside it took him a second to orient himself. They had ended up in what looked to be some sort of side office. It had a desk and bookshelves filled up nearly to the ceiling with binders and notebooks. The concrete walls not covered by the bookcases were layered with charts and graphs. Tony's eyes skimmed over them as took in the space, his mind buzzing, hurrying to interpret the colored lines and numbers. They seemed to be measuring heart rates and some sort of accumulation of some biological substance. They were in code but if Tony spent a few minutes with it he probably could have figured it out. But he didn't want to spend any extra time on anything other than finding Steve and getting the hell back out.

Now that he was inside, Tony had gone on high alert, all of his senses straining to see what was just beyond the next door. They were at a distinct disadvantage. Though Thor and Bruce were waiting in the van, they didn't have the equipment they needed to do anything more than access satellite feeds. That meant that Tony would be running blind through the warehouse. But he had to find Steve, and he had to keep himself, Clint, and Natasha safe while he did it. Those were two good goals there, something to focus on.
Motioning for Clint and Natasha to wait by the window, Tony crept forward towards the closed door of the room and pressed his ear against it. He didn't hear anything. With a glance back, he tested the doorknob and—finding it locked from the inside—cautiously flipped the lock, pulled the door open, and peeked his head out.

There was an empty hall that seemed to run the entire length of the warehouse. The stench of chemicals wafting from somewhere out of Tony's line of sight made his nose burn. Looking at it strategically, there was nowhere to take cover, meaning that they would have to be more careful than Tony had thought. But at least there didn't seem to be anyone around—

Pulling himself back inside as a figure stepped out into the hall from a side-room at the far end, Tony spun around. His first instinct was to slam the door to their room closed but as instantly as the thought came so did the realization that if he did that he'd definitely bring attention to them. Natasha and Clint's eyes had snapped back to him at his sudden retreat and didn't question it as he whispered out a sharp command. "Hide!"

Tony automatically dove under the desk, more thankful than ever for his reflexes as he ducked out of the way a heartbeat before he heard footsteps approach the room from outside. They were walking at a quick, measured pace in what sounded like heavy boots, the footfalls echoing off the walls and making it sound like four men instead of just the one Tony knew he saw. Judging by the way they were walking, they were probably some sort of soldier or guard, someone who definitely might object to their skulking around.

He had no idea where Clint and Natasha were, hoped to hell that they had figured out a place to hide despite the fact that the room was practically bare beside the desk he had claimed. His nose twitched as the smell of the guard reached him, musky and thick. A Wolf Shifter, a low-level alpha, similar to and yet entirely different from Steve's scent.

The footsteps slowed as they drew closer and Tony held his breath, focused on masking his own scent, and listened with everything he had. Somewhere close-by he could hear Clint's heart pounding, the sound like thunder in Tony's ears. But not Natasha's. Where was she? He closed his eyes, willing the stupid dog outside to just keep walking, just ignore any strange scents or sounds and just move on.

And then the impossible happened.

The Wolf did.

Tony didn't let out his sigh of relief until he was sure the Hydra guard was gone and out of hearing range. Crawling out from underneath the desk, Tony's jaw clenched as he saw Clint climbing down from where he had squeezed himself between the top of the bookcase and the ceiling. It figured he would head up when looking for a place to hide. But Natasha... "Where is she?"

Clint straightened out his holsters as his feet finally made it back down to the tiled floor, barely glancing up as he fixed his gear. "Behind you."

Tony furrowed his brow. "What are you talking about? I didn't see—" Turning back to check, his heart gave another jolt as a large spider dropped down from a web to rest right in front of his face. "Agh! Shit!" His hand flew up to his chest as Tony let out a long breath. Freaking Spider Shifters. "Listen, Shelob, I'm not in the mood! Where the hell are your clothes...?"

A glance at the ground around him revealed a pile of fabric and weaponry pooled in the corner of the room. Tony and Clint both turned back towards the door to allow Natasha a moment to shift back and change in privacy. As she did so, he used the time as best he could and strategized with
Clint. He would never call the Hawk the brightest crayon in the box, but he did know how to draw out a plan of attack. Not nearly anything at Steve's level, but he wasn't bad.

"This hallway is going to kill us."

Clint tilted his head so that he could glimpse the layout of the corridor. "It's definitely not ideal, but if we move fast and quiet, we should be able to slip through without anyone noticing."

Tony nodded, comforted by the fact that Clint thought it possible. "Good. The faster we get to Steve the better."

There was a soft rustling behind them before Natasha joined them at the door. "Just where is he?"

Tony paused at Natasha's question. It was a good one. They were in, but now they needed to find Steve in this giant building. Assuming that he was even here. For a moment Tony regretted leaving Bruce in the van; he could have used the Wolf's nose. But then he scented the air himself and was reminded that he didn't need one. Wolves were certainly the best scent trackers among Shifters but Cats were a close second. They usually did better when there was also some sort of visual trail to follow but if there was one smell Tony had committed to memory it was Steve's. And he could smell it lingering in the hallway, faint remnants of his mate mixed with hundreds of others.

The relief he felt was overshadowed by a wave of anger rolling through his chest, his instincts raging at the thought of his mate being dragged through this hall in god only knew what condition. The scent was too weak for Tony to make anything out about what sort of state Steve was in but Tony knew that Steve wouldn't have gone anywhere with Hydra on his own free will.

Remembering that he wasn't alone, Tony shook himself off with a growl. "He came through here and headed down this hall."

Clint's eyes narrowed as he slipped his sunglasses off to see better down the dimly-lit corridor. Now that they knew what direction they needed to head in, he could get down to business. "I can hear movement down that way."

"How much movement?"

"At least five people, maybe as many as ten. There's an echo so I can't be sure."

"Can you tell who they are?"

It seemed ridiculous that Clint would be able to, but Tony had seen what the Hawk was able to do, what he was able to see and hear, and he wasn't about to doubt that the Bird could manage it. It was like what Tony did earlier with the Wolf, except at a far greater distance. Clint focused for another moment before shaking his head. "Not entirely. Some of them aren't soldiers, they don't have the right cadence in their step. But others definitely are, so you have a mix."

"Perfect. Natasha-?"

The redhead glanced at Tony from the corner of her eye, the majority of her attention on the path ahead. "Clint and I will take care of anyone in the way. How should we handle non-soldiers?"

"Honestly, I don't give a damn." Usually Tony would've hesitated at the question. He wasn't usually one to support taking out possibly unarmed men. But they had crossed a line and he wasn't feeling particularly charitable. Natasha tilted her head in understanding. He would leave it up to her own morality to decide who to kill or not.
Natasha nodded her understanding and beside her Clint silently pulled his bow out. "Then we'll do what we need to."

With that decided, they got to work. Tony led again as they dashed out into the corridor due to necessity. He was the one who had Steve's scent and because of that was the only one of them who knew which way to go. That scent guided them around the corner, down a flight of stairs, and through a series of doors. They ran into a few Hydra guards on patrol along the way but most times Natasha or Clint had killed them before Tony even realized that they were there, and that was saying something for how on edge he was.

The lower floor was much like the one they had first gained access to. It still had that harsh chemical smell and laboratory feel. Somewhere in the back of his mind Tony had the thought that, under different circumstances, Bruce might find it all fascinating. Tony's dad would have loved it too. With all of the equipment they had, it seemed like a medical researcher's paradise, save for the oppressive, paramilitary overtones. By the time he passed multiple boards and cabinets full of supplies, Tony was pretty sure from the glimpses of names and numbers that this warehouse was being used as a place where scientists were experimenting on living Shifter subjects. God only knew what they were doing to Steve.

Speaking of Steve, as Tony followed his scent it began to get stronger and stronger. They were getting closer. The only problem was that the halls were also getting more crowded. Tony's nose twitched as the smell of humans and Shifters grew along with Steve's scent. He knew that he wasn't the only one who sensed it either; behind him, Clint was getting more tense as they walked, the Hawk's head constantly turning this way and that trying to track all the sounds.

Natasha was watching Clint, her face drawn into an intense frown. "How many?"

"Five, maybe six."

Tony scented the air again. They were close enough now that he was able to pick through the different smells to distinguish individuals. "Six: three humans, three Shifters." And there was something else, something distinct and different…Tony's heart skipped a beat in his chest as he placed it. "I smell blood."

Natasha's eyes jumped to him. "Steve's?"

"I don't know. Jesus, I don't know." Tony swallowed and tightened his hands into fists to keep them from shaking. Now that he figured it out, the blood was all that he could smell. What if it was Steve's? He hadn't let himself think that Steve could have survived the building collapsing down on him only to be cut down in this place.

Sharing a look with Clint, Natasha brought her handgun up into a readied position. "Okay, Clint and I will go in while you, Tony—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence." Tony growled low in his chest. "I'm going in there."

"Then at least stay behind us."

"I'm not promising anything." He wasn't even sure what he would do if there was any sign that Steve was anything but whole and intact. With his emotions as they were, he was afraid he would lose it. He had heard of Shifters snapping when something happened to their mate, but he had never thought that he'd be tested in the same situation. Tony sucked in a deep breath as Natasha put a hand on the door to push it open. Please, God, just let Steve not be dead.
As soon as the door swung open, Natasha and Clint swung their weapons up and the breath Tony had been holding rushed out in a gasp. He hardly saw the startled, frightened looks of the human scientists inside or the way the Shifter guards raised their own guns. Instead Tony was entirely focused on a table in the center of the room. A metal, medieval looking thing surrounded by puddles of crimson.

Tony's vision tunneled as he stumbled forward, pushing past Clint and Natasha as he bolted in the room. The gunshots that began to ring out sounded like whispers, his ears too full of the sound of his own heart beating chaotically in his chest. He barely registered the shape of someone rushing at him and his body automatically twisted out of the way to avoid them, the bones in his spine shifting momentarily to a Panther's to facilitate the inhuman move. Grimacing as his skeleton rearranged itself, Tony slid to the table and fell to his knees in front of the blood and dragged a hand through the mess. Tony brought his fingers up to his nose, taking a deep breath, desperately scenting it. Please, please, just don't—

It wasn't Steve's.

"Stark! Damn it!"

Tony grunted as something solid slammed into his side, a bullet ricocheting off of the metal table right where his head was a second ago as Natasha tackled him to the ground. Clint was immediately in front of them, losing an arrow at the guard who had tried to shoot him as Natasha angrily shoved at Tony, "You stupid ass! You almost got yourself killed!"

Clint clenched his teeth. "Now's not the time. We've got some runners!"

Sure enough, Tony looked around Natasha to see the four human doctors taking off back the way they came, their white coats flying up behind them. Natasha let out a tight hiss and sprang to her feet. "We can't let them escape."

It was impossible to ignore the urgency in her voice as Tony pushed himself up. "Then go!"

Clint grimaced. "What about-?"

"Steve's scent ended here." For the first time, Tony actually looked at the room he was in. The two Shifter guards were dead, slumped over against the wall riddled with bullet holes, arrows stuck neatly in areas of exposed flesh. Other than that though, the room did seem empty, which didn't make any sense. Steve's scent was thick in here; he had been here no more than a few hours ago. But where were they…? Taking a closer look at everything, Tony's eyes caught on a door tucked into the corner of the room, nearly entirely concealed by a shelving unit. It was the only other exit in the room and the only explanation. "They must have him in there. You two go and I'll check on Steve."

"But—"

"I'll text if there's a problem. Just go before those guys get away from you."

Natasha and Clint both seemed hesitant to leave even as Clint gave a smug smirk. "They may have a head start but they're only human. We'll catch them."

"Then go!"

Tony's tone of voice left no room for disagreement and after one more glance they took off. Tony waited a moment to listen to their footsteps disappear down the hall before he turned his attention back to the side door. Anticipation began to knot back up in his stomach as he moved closer to it.
Steve was right behind this door, had to be.

"Steve?" Tony tisked under his breath as the words came out weak and quivering. Clearing his throat, he made a second attempt. "Steve? Can you hear me? You in there?"

His ears caught on a soft sound coming from the other side of the door. Too excited to check, Tony grabbed the handle, yanked it open, and found himself face to face with the barrel of an assault rifle.

For a moment Tony could only stare stupidly at the Shifter guard who had seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Then his mind began to catch up. He must have heard the scuffle coming from the main room and stayed hidden, knowing that they were coming for Steve and waiting to ambush them. And look at that, it worked.

Tony went to raise his hands then realized that they were covered in blood that wasn't his and knew his case for survival wasn't strengthened as the Shifter's eyes darted back to the crumpled form of his companions in the next room. The guard's grip on his rifle tightened, his finger jumping over the trigger. "Who the fuck are you?"

Despite the gun pointed at his chest, Tony gave him a grim smile. "What, you don't recognize my scent?" He saw the guard's nostril flare as the beta Wolf smelled the air and Tony felt a rush of dark satisfaction as the other's face went pale. Tony knew his scent still had to be strong on Steve no matter what they did to him. "I'm the guy whose mate you stole."

"You can't be. He, he was an alpha." The implication was clear. An alpha's mate should be a beta or an omega. Much less of a threat. If you stood between an omega and their endangered mate, they'd probably run for help. If you stood between an alpha and their endangered mate, they'd tear you apart.

"And so am I." Using the beta's surprise to his advantage, Tony grabbed the barrel of the gun and swung it up towards the ceiling just fast enough to take avoid taking a round straight to the skull as the guard's finger tensed on the trigger. The Wolf wrestled his weapon back but by then Tony had already started to Shift, stripping off his clothes even as black fur began to push out from his skin.

The guard tried to get in another shot but Tony was already up too close, slipping underneath the length of the gun to rake his claws down the beta's legs. The guard jumped back with inhuman speed and threw off his body armor as he shifted into his animal form as well. Tony hissed, his lips curling up as a grey Wolf emerged from a tangle of fabric. The dog wasted no time in launching itself at Tony, knocking both back into the main operating room. They slammed back into a metal table and Tony heard the sound of glass falling to the ground and breaking around them, but he was too wrapped up in the fight to even begin to care.

Tony kicked out with his back legs, his claws tearing at the Wolf's soft underbelly and he rolled the dog off of him. The Wolf let out a sharp yelp but came back at him, trying to latch onto his jugular but Tony slid around the attack and instead the Wolf bit down on Tony's back. It hurt, a yowl bursting from Tony at the sting and he tucked himself into a roll to try and dislodge the smaller Shifter, sending them tumbling into another wrestling match.

The beta had obviously been trained to fight, both in his human form and in his Wolf form, but he didn't stand a chance against Tony. Not just because he was an alpha and had the dog beat in weight and size, but also because Tony was fighting with a viciousness he had never felt before. The only thought in his mind was Steve, reaching him and making sure that he was alright. He bit and scratched, his curved claws digging into the Wolf's flanks. The Hydra guard did his best to counter the attacks but after a few minutes was overpowered and slowly he stopped fighting and
Once the guard had stopped moving, Tony pulled himself free. He didn't bother if the other was still alive or not; a person like that wasn't going to stop fighting until he couldn't anymore. Shaking himself off, Tony pushed passed the instinct to wash his fur and stepped over the prone body of the grey Wolf to make his way back into that side room.

Tony pushed the door aside with his nose, his eyes quickly adjusting to the light levels as he sniffed the air inside. Steve. Steve was here. The room was long, narrow, and almost completely dark, illuminated only by a dull yellow light bulb hung in the center. It didn't matter. His eyes dilated and suddenly he could see down the entire room, all the way into the shadows at the end.

There, behind a series of boxes and tubs of unknown chemicals, was a large cage with thick metal bars. And more than that, there was a large Wolf drowsily sprawled out on the bottom of the cage, his golden pelt looking dull in the florescent lighting. Even though he physically seemed different somehow there was no mistaking his scent. It was Steve. But there was something wrong. Something...something he couldn't quite make out.

Tony head fell as he crept over, his whiskers tickling his face as he sniffed, trying to assess his mate from a distance. It was weird that Steve hadn't responded yet and it set Tony on edge. He knew he walked nearly silently, but still...

Tony's tail flicked out behind him as he huffed out a light, questioning growl. One of Steve's ears perked up at the sound and finally the Wolf lifted his head and turned to look at him.

If he had been in his human form he would have gone pale. Tony felt the blood drain from his face as the Wolf's eyes came into view. Somewhere in his mind he knew that this was a possibility, that this was actually one of the better outcomes, but he still hadn't mentally prepared himself to see it. The Wolf's blue eyes looked empty and cold. They had done something to him. Hydra had done something to Steve.

Reaching the cage, Tony rubbed his head against the bars in greeting. In response, the Wolf inside leapt to his feet and leaned against the far side with a low, dangerous snarl. It was a warning not to get any closer. Fuck. Shifting back into his human form, Tony gripped the bars with his newly formed fingers. He could feel himself trembling now and all he wanted to do was reach inside and run his hand over Steve's fur. But he couldn't. Not with the way Steve was acting, like he didn't even recognize him. "Hey there, Steve…"

The Wolf's growls deepened as his hackles rose. Tony lightened his tone, hurrying to soothe him. "Hey, it's alright. You know me. It's alright, sweetheart, I'm going to get you out of there." There was no trace of humanity left in Steve's eyes, and that scared Tony more than anything else. But his tone seemed to have relaxed the Wolf a bit. His snarls had faded to a soft rumbling growl and his muscles weren't quite as tensed. Maybe he was actually getting somewhere.

Deciding to test his luck, Tony reached a hand through the bars and into the cage, moving to pet the ridge of Steve's back. The Wolf watched him warily but Tony thought he was in the clear until his fingers were mere inches away and Steve lunged for his arm. Whipping his arm back before Steve could sink his teeth into his flesh, Tony snarled back, angry at Steve for trying to bite him, for treating him like this, and angry at himself for trying. "Hey! Calm it down, Cujo! I'll bite you right back!"

Shit, he wasn't handling this right. He wanted Bruce here to talk him through it. Or, hell, even Thor to help him wrestle Steve out. He needed to calm Steve down because he wouldn't be able to carry the Wolf out by himself if he was fighting back the whole way. Tony could do this. He had to do
Tony shook his head and he tried to quell his anxiety. For god's sake, Steve had managed to bring Bruce down after he had freaked out, Tony could do this. Even if he didn't have that same presence his mate usually did. He was more accustomed to riling things up.

Adjusting his stance, Tony rested his forehead against the bars. What would Steve say if their positions were reversed? Swearing under his breath, he waited for the Wolf to meet his eyes. "Steve, please. Just, come back to me, okay? I know you must be scared and trying to be a big, tough alpha dog, and I know you probably can't even understand me, but trust me. I'm not going to let anything else happen to you."

The Wolf had calmed again at the lulling tone of his voice. So Tony tried again.

Slower this time, Tony reached his arm back into the cage, making sure that Steve saw his hand the whole time, before gently reaching out to touch his back. When his fingers finally made contact with Steve's fur, Tony felt the tension rush from his body. He was touching him. Steve had let him touch him. He could do this. "Good boy, Steve."

The Wolf sniffed then turned his head to smell Tony's arm. Tony forced himself not to stiffen up but watched carefully as the Wolf investigated. Then Steve opened his mouth and Tony's breath caught in his throat, preparing to have teeth sink into him. But instead all he felt was a warm, soft tongue.

Steve was licking him.

Huffing out a sigh of relief, a small grin slipped onto Tony's face as Steve let out another rumble, this time more accommodating, before standing up and rubbing against Tony's arm. He wasn't sure, but it looked a lot like Steve had recognized Tony as his mate. Finally. "There, you see? Moron, I'm here to rescue you."

Steve let out a short whine as Tony withdrew his hand and moved around to where the lock was. "Now that I know you won't try to rip out my throat, let's get you out of there."

The lock on the cage was remarkably simple but there was no way Steve would have gotten out himself without a pair of thumbs. As soon as Tony swung the cage door open Steve zipped out in a blur of gold. For half a second Tony was afraid that Steve was going to attack him after all but the Wolf just hurried over and rubbed up against his legs. "Hello to you too—ah! Hey!"

Tony straightened up as the Wolf tried to sniff his bottom. Spinning around, he glared down at Steve, the Wolf just staring blankly back at him. "No, none of that! I better get my clothes. Who knows what you might try to pull on me…"

Steve stuck close to his side as he made his way back to the operating room. Steve hunkered down as he drew near to the door, as if he was afraid, but when Tony put a hand on the Wolf's back Steve forced himself forward in front of Tony and trotted out. Rolling his eyes at the Wolf's domineering antics, Tony shuffled over to the pile of clothing he had left in the main room. His underwear was the first thing to get pulled on. He trusted Steve, but the Wolf had been a little too interested for his tastes and he didn't know how the alpha Wolf would react without his human side controlling him.

The next thing Tony did was fish his cell phone out of his pants pocket, using one hand to text Bruce and Natasha while he clumsily pulled his pants on with his other. Got S, meet

Tony paused as he picked his shirt up off of the floor. Where should they meet up? It wouldn't
make sense to go back up a floor and jump out the window they had come in through. Now that he had Steve all they needed to do was get the hell out however they could. *Got S, meet at van.*

Sending the text, Tony tucked his phone into his pocket and pulled his shirt on over his head. "Alright, Steve, let's blow this popsicle stand."

With the dark cotton of his shirt still over his eyes, Tony felt a sharp tug on his pants. "I meant in a minute. Let me get decent fir—" Tony's voice hitched as a low growl filled the air. It was Steve but—Tony yanked his shirt down so hard he heard a seam rip but was too worried to care. "What is it?"

The Wolf growled again, his ears going flat against his head as his eyes locked on the door to the operating room. Tony figured it out just a heartbeat later as another Hydra guard wandered into the room, clearly unaware of the slaughter waiting for him inside. The man, the human's, eyes widened in shock. "What the—augh!"

The man didn't even have time to finish his demand before Steve was on top of him, the gun he had pulled flying from his hand. Tony's eyes went wide at the sheer savagery in Steve's attack as he knocked the human to the ground and went straight for his throat. This was worse than what Tony had done earlier. Steve wasn't just protecting Tony. He wanted blood.

The guard screamed, instinctively trying to cover his neck but Steve ripped and tore at the man's armor, found a soft spot between the kevlar, and dug his teeth in to the soft, exposed skin underneath. Blood spattered across the room as the man tried to curl up, all thoughts of going on the offensive apparently forgotten as he tried to keep from having his internal organs gouged out.

Feeling sick, Tony tugged his shoes on. As much as he hated Hydra right now, no one deserved to die like this. More than that though, he wasn't about to let Steve have this on his conscious when he came back to himself. "Steve!" There was no response. Trying again, Tony lowered his tone, pushing an authority into his voice that he knew would get Steve's attention. "*Steve! Leave it!"

The alpha Wolf spun on him, blood drenching his muzzle and rage in his eyes as he bared his teeth. Tony sucked in a breath at the sight but buried his horror and straightened his shoulders. This Wolf wasn't Steve anymore, but they could bring him back. They had to. Making sure that both his gaze and voice were stern and unwavering, Tony repeated himself. "*Leave it! We need to go.*"

Steve snorted blood from his nose but obeyed the command and after one more glance back at his prey before trotting back over to Tony's side. Just like that, the Wolf had switched from ruthless to affectionate as he rubbed his head against Tony's hip as if expecting praise. Tony shied away instead, causing Steve to let out an unhappy growl.

"Not now." Not when they were both covered in blood. "Let's just get out of here."

Tony tried not to look down at Steve as they ran out of the room and down the hall. They were empty and quiet save for the sound of Tony's shoes hitting the ground and Steve's claws clacking on the tile. The two of them would have been able to move faster if Tony was in his animal form but he stayed human so that at least one of them would be able to open doors. Natasha and Clint had obviously done their job well though. The only people they did come across were either unconscious or no longer breathing. He had to draw Steve away from the bodies more than once as they ran by.

Tony made for the first exit sign he saw and ended up shouldering his way out through a worker's entrance out to a side yard. There was a fence separating them from the rest of the shipping yard but Tony easily cleared it. There was a moment when he wasn't sure how he was going to get Steve
over but the Wolf solved the problem for him. He was so determined to stick close to Tony that he figured out a way to use a dumpster as a jumping platform and clumsily scrambled the rest of the way up the fence. His fur caught on the barbed wire but he pulled himself free and tumbled down on the other side of the fence to stand near his mate.

After that it was a long, tense run back to the van and Tony did his best to ensure that neither of them were seen. A blood-stained man would be suspicious enough; a giant, gold, blood-stained wolf who was obviously a Shifter would be even worse. Everything was fine until he caught sight of a figure moving in the corner of his eye. Stopping short, Tony tensed for a fight until he realized that it was Clint. Natasha, Bruce, and Thor were there too. They had reached the van.

Tony felt his knees go weak in relief and laughed as the others whipped around to look at him. "Sorry to keep you waiting!"

They all smiled but Tony watched as Bruce was the first to lose the happy expression, concern rising in the beta's eyes as they drifted down to Steve. "Tony, is he…?"

"It's a bit of a story but—Hey!" Tony's attention was forced back to Steve as the Wolf made a sudden leap forward. Clint, the closest too them, had leaned in to try and pet the alpha but Steve hadn't taken kindly to it.

"Woah, hey! Hey! Steve! Easy!" Tony grabbed hold of Steve's neck, just strong enough to hold him back as he lunged for Clint with snapping jaws. Steve tossed a glance over his shoulder and snarled at Tony, his teeth closing down instead on the Panther's wrist without actually biting down. It was a clear threat but Tony chose to ignore it, instead growling back as he tugged Steve a little further away. "Clint, for the love of god, just keep your distance."

Bruce looked like he wanted to move in, eyeing Steve's teeth putting pressure on Tony's arm. "Tony..."

"It's alright." Tony swallowed. "He won't actually bite me." He better not, the bastard.

It was like Steve could read his thoughts because he clenched down just slightly, as if to prove he would bite down if Tony really deserved it, before letting go.

Making sure that everyone was still keeping their distance, Tony maneuvered himself so that he was crouching in front of Steve and looking straight into the Wolf's eyes. He stared back but there was still nothing there, no humanity. Just an animal. A smart animal, but an animal none the less. But it never hurt to try. "Listen Steve. You're going to need to relax. This is your pack, remember?"

From behind them, Bruce cleared his throat. Steve looked sharply at him and Bruce made an obvious point to lower himself, kneeling down and tilting his head up to expose his neck. Slowly Steve relaxed, accepting the interruption and it was only then that Bruce spoke. "Tony, Steve knows we're his pack. He just has stricter expectations of us. Right now he's all Wolf and the animal in him expects complete obedience. If we want to get him back to the lab so that we can start helping him, he needs to be compliant."

Tony snorted, "So, what are we supposed to do?"

"Everyone gets to act like a real pack until we get back to the mansion."

Clint's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "I thought we were a pack?"

"We are. But now we need to behave like one."
Natasha was watching Steve just as carefully as he was watching the rest of them and had the same wary expression on her face. "And what does that entail exactly?"

Bruce tilted his head. "Stay behind Steve by a few steps. Try not to meet his eyes, and if you do, get down low or show him your neck. Don't try to force him into anything; in fact, don't interact with him at all unless he directs you to something first."

The others frowned, clearly not pleased with Bruce's instructions. Particularly Thor. Tony couldn't blame him. He wasn't interested in listening either. It was too demeaning for him to even consider. "Yeah, I'm not doing that."

Bruce gave him a sly look when Steve was momentarily distracted. "I think you're the only one who can get away with that, Tony."

"And I'm going to take full advantage of it. Now let's get going."

Steve wasn't safe yet.

~O~

There was no longer a SHIELD facility in the city to bring Steve to and it wasn't a hard decision for Tony to make to have them drive back to his mansion. Honestly, they might have had better equipment at the city hospital but they were in no way staffed to handle something like this. It was better that they bring Steve back into a controlled environment and anything they needed Tony could have sent in. Maybe he could have part of his workshop converted into a separate hospital room to try and replicate the space they had set up for Clint when he was stuck in his animal form.

These were the thoughts racing through Tony's head as Bruce drove them back to his home. He would have driven himself but it had quickly been determined that Tony needed to sit in the back with Steve. The alpha wasn't trying to attack the others anymore but he would only settle down when Tony was near him. Currently, he was lounging across Tony's lap, his muzzle resting on Tony's thigh and his tail occasionally brushing up against Thor's arm.

Tony occupied himself during the drive with cleaning himself and Steve up, Natasha helping him wipe the blood off of the Wolf's muzzle. It was then that he also learned that while they had been in Hydra's warehouse, Bruce and Thor had some troubles of their own. Apparently the van had been approached by Shifters masquerading as truck drivers who patrolled the outer grounds of the shipping yard as an extra protective measure for Hydra. According to Thor, Bruce had kept them distracted by babbling some technical jargon as he tried to pass himself off as an environmental consultant for one of the other shipping companies while Thor snuck around and knocked the Shifters unconscious. The Lion had proceeded to drag the two Shifters behind a dumpster filled with packing supplies and had been very proud of the fact. Tony let him have his minor victory; it was a softer memory to focus on rather than what he had seen in the warehouse.

The first thing Tony made sure of when they pulled into the driveway of his mansion was that Steve was attended to. It took both him and Thor to coral Steve into the house and down the stairs to the lab. Luckily as soon as they stepped inside the house Tony had given instructions to JARVIS to have Dummy help him build some sort of temporary containment system in the workshop, making life much easier for him and Thor. It hurt Tony to put Steve back inside a cage and he had to remind himself over and over again that not only was this for the safety of the team, it was for Steve's own safety as well.

While he was getting the basics set up, Bruce ran around to try to gather the necessary tools to try and get Steve back. He enlisted Natasha to help him call up local hospitals and used the Stark
Industries checking account, at Tony's request, to pay for anything they needed. What was the point of having money if you didn't use it when someone you cared for was in trouble?

It took eighteen hours for them to get everything delivered to the house. Tony never left Steve's side the entire time. The others drifted in and out of the workshop, for the first time the basement being open to everyone to access as they pleased. Clint came down to play a round of cards with him and Thor brought them down enough food to feed ten. Tony might have drifted off at one point and woke to the sound of the large garage door installed at the far end of his workshop rolling up to allow a delivery truck to drop off a load of medical equipment.

Bruce came down a few minutes later to get everything into place and in after two more hours and Tony's help, they were ready to go. Things had gone a lot faster due to the fact that this wasn't the first time either of them had gone through this. They knew exactly what needed to be done. Tony had the designs for the machines memorized and Bruce had kept copious notes on what had worked when he had treated Clint and had gotten liters of the anti-serum he had created from an antidote bank SHIELD had set up in the city's main hospital.

When the time finally came for the big moment the rest of their little pack had filtered down and gathered around the hospital bedBruce had ordered in. Bruce had donned a lab coat, his reading glasses perched on his nose as he read the displays on a machine listing out Steve's vitals. Steve himself was sprawled out on the bed, the alpha momentarily content to rest on the cushioned surface as he curiously observed the events around him. There were a series of wires attached to the Wolf to read his heart rate and the electrical activities in his brain. Tony had pulled a chair up so that he was sitting right near the head of the bed, one hand resting on the mattress to keep Steve calm.

Sighing, Bruce turned to face them and adjusted his glasses. "Alright, Thor?" The Lion straightened up as Bruce addressed him. "You stay close. If he starts putting up a fight, we'll need your help. Tony, you get on top of him."

Tony raised a brow. He was tired. Maybe he misheard. "Excuse me?"

"Climb up on top of him and hold him down. Like I did with Clint. We need to stop him from moving or else he might pull his IV out and he won't get the complete dosage. He could also hurt himself if he thrashes too much."

"Okay, okay, I got it."

The Wolf eyed Tony as he kicked off his shoes and as gingerly as he could crawled up onto the hospital bed. Steve growled lightly at the sight of Tony on all fours over him, but didn't make a move to dislodge him. Natasha hummed as she leaned back against the wall, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. "It's a good thing you two mated after all. None of us could get away with that."

Tony had to agree but didn't say anything, too focused on trying to ensure that he had all of Steve's paws accounted for. If he actually started to thrash, he didn't want to get accidentally gouged. "How should I hold him?"

"Just like you'd hold a Cat down."

Tony scowled at Bruce's distracted response. "I've never held a Cat down either!" Cats didn't wrestle like Wolves did. What opportunity would Tony ever possibly have had to pin a Shifter down while they were in their animal form and he was in his human form?
Bruce glanced over as he began to prepare a vial of the antidote. "Just grab his limbs."

Easier said than done. A quick check to his side confirmed that Thor was waiting just to his right in case of emergencies, which was good. If Steve really started to struggle, Tony wasn't sure he would be able to keep control over him in which case he would definitely need the Lion’s help. "Okay, this is as good as it's going to get."

Bruce shook his head but moved in, sucking the antidote into a syringe. "Alright then…here we go."

Tony grimaced as he watched Bruce's concoction slip into Steve's veins and begin to seep into his body. Steve twitched in his hold at the prick but after that nothing seemed to happen. A second went by, then two, then five. Bruce frowned and lifted his wrist up to check his watch. Fifteen seconds…thirty seconds…a minute.

Tony furrowed his brow. "Bruce, are you sure that was the right stuff?"

"Absolutely. I ran the batch through a series of tests. I don't understand. It should be wor—"

Bruce's voice fell away as a low whine escaped the Wolf's mouth. Then all hell broke loose. One moment Steve was calm in Tony's arms, the next he was thrashing and twisting. Thor lurched forward and had to grab onto Steve's legs to let Tony focus on the Wolf's upper body. Tony felt Steve's skin rolling under his fur and scowled as a long, pained howl burst from the alpha's throat. Tony remembered what Clint had gone through but this seemed different. "Bruce, it's hurting him! Cut the flow!"

Bruce was already rushing around to check the machines and Steve's vitals. "They must have altered the serum!"

Tony's breath rushed out like he had been punched in the stomach as Steve's body began to contort unnaturally. Bits and pieces of Steve seemed to be transforming while others just spasmed uncontrollably. It was terrible to watch, but the worst part was the sounds. No longer able to howl, Steve was left making these horrible gasping noises, like howls mixed with screams as his throat and vocal chords were caught somewhere in between animal and human. "Bruce!"

"Wait!" Bruce grinned triumphantly. "It's still working!"

"It's going to fucking kill him!"

"He can handle it!"

Tony grit his teeth and prayed that Bruce was right. He had to watch as Steve continued to writhe and it seemed to take an eternity before finally, finally, the human features began to settle out and reform over their canine counterparts. The cries became more defined, more like screams and Tony found himself pinning Steve, human Steve, down, his fingers slipping on the thick layer of sweat coating the other's skin. Then, with a stifled shout, Steve collapsed back against the mattress and fell quiet.

Feeling as exhausted as Steve looked, Tony rolled off of him and pressed tightly against his side, Steve's sweat instantly dampening his clothes as he wrapped his arm around his mate. Steve's chest was still heaving, his body wracked by small tremors. But his skin had stopped rolling and the pained groans escaping his pale lips were entirely human. As Thor stepped back and Bruce stepped in to remove the IV, Tony used his spare hand to brush Steve's sweat-soaked bangs from his forehead and wipe the tears lingering in the corner of his eyes off with his sleeves, all the while
murmuring softly into Steve's ear. "It's okay, big dog. You're alright. I've got you, just breathe."

Beside them, Thor let out a small grunt, his voice sounding shaken. "Is he well?"

Bruce shook his head as he moved in again. Steve murmured as the beta pressed two fingers against his throat, fevered blue eyes slipping open to take him in. "Not yet...But he's alive."

Clint tilted his head, his hand subconsciously rubbing up and down his arm as he remembered his own ordeal. "If it's anything like what happened to me, he'll be hurting for a while."

Nodding his agreement, Bruce pulled his hand away to grab a bottle of ibuprofen. "We'll have to see if there are any unexpected side-effects but if your recovery is anything to go on, he'll be alright in a day or two." Bruce bit his lip then pushed his glasses back up his nose. "Steve?"

Steve twitched as if he registered Bruce's words but didn't respond as his eyes slid back closed. Bruce sighed then looked down at Tony. "Can you see if you can get him talking? I just need to ask a few questions before I let him rest."

Tony looked at Steve then frowned back at the other Wolf. "I don't think now's a-"

"Tony, please. He's the most likely to respond to you. I know you're feeling protective, rightly so, but this is important. You know I wouldn't be asking if it wasn't."

Tony snorted at Bruce's accusation of him being overprotective. Excuse him for worrying about Steve when he looked like he would pass out if someone coughed too loud. If everyone just got the hell out he'd be just fine. Who knew what the hell they would do if they-Tony mentally slapped himself as he realized where his thoughts were going. He was being way too overprotective. "Fine."

Squeezing Steve's arm, Tony pressed closer so that his chin was resting on Steve's shoulder. "Steve. Steve, can you hear me? Let me know if you can hear me."

At the sound of his name on Tony's lips, Steve's eyes flickered open again, a grimace forming on his face.

"I'm going to take that as a 'yes'. Bruce needs to ask you some questions because he's a dick." Bruce scowled down at him but Tony continued on, undeterred. "Do what you can to answer him, alright?"

He might've been imaging it, but Tony swore he saw Steve give a slight nod. Either Bruce saw it too or he was just anxious to get things over with because he stepped closer, resting a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Steve, I'll try to make this quick. Do what you can to answer. Clint described his pain as being 'in his veins' after we turned him back. Does this sound like what's happening with you? 'Yes' or 'no' is fine."

Tony looked on carefully, watching Steve's profile as he swallowed down another grimace before his lips parted and he tried to form words. Tony felt so damn helpless. The amount of pain Steve was obviously in made something pull tight in Tony's chest. And what was worse, there was nothing he could really do to fix it.

Steve let out a rasping "'yes", the sounds rushing out in a dry gasp and Bruce nodded. "Okay. Good. That's good. It means we're probably dealing with more or less the same thing, although I still need to figure out what was different between the two of you though. You had a much stronger reaction."
"...M-more..." Steve sucked in a breath and his whole body shuddered. ".They...they used...more..."

Tony gripped Steve tighter still as Bruce leaned forward, his eyes flashing behind his glasses. "More? They gave you more than they should have? Did they tell you that?"

Tony felt sick to his stomach as Steve gave his beta an aborted nod. Those sons of bitches. They had experimented on him like some lab rat. If Tony didn't have more important things to take care of he'd have gone back and clawed all of those damn quack doctors open. "Bruce, are you done yet? Steve could use a break, don't you think?"

"Yes, of course. That's good enough for now. Here," Pulling a pill bottle from the pocket of his lab coat, Bruce unscrewed the cap and poured out two pills. "Steve, these are light painkillers. They won't kill it entirely, but they'll hopefully take the edge off enough for you to get some decent sleep."

Steve murmured his thanks and Tony passed him a small glass of water Natasha had produced. He had to help Steve take the medicine, the Wolf too weak to even hold the glass, then scooted back close when Steve was done as he felt his mate begin to drift off. They could all use some rest...

O~O~O~O

The next few days found Steve slowly recovering under Bruce's care and Tony's attention. Bruce applied one more half dose of the antidote just to ensure that the effects would remain permanent but thankfully Steve's reaction to it was not nearly as dramatic as his first. After thirty-six hours passed by, Tony had Steve moved up to his room, Thor helping him carry the alpha Wolf up the stairs despite Steve's halfhearted protests.

Now it was the morning of the fourth day. Steve had improved to the point where he could stay awake for more than an hour at a time and his pain had dropped to manageable levels. Tony tried not to hover, distracting himself by helping Bruce clean up the workshop or work through the results of Steve's reaction to the serum, but he found it hard to resist checking in on Steve. Although he always came up with a decent excuse. It wasn't hard when he insisted that Steve used his room.

This time around though he actually had a legitimate reason. Tony had been ignoring his calls, no matter how much JARVIS protested, but Natasha had received a call from Phil requesting that he and Steve make an appearance at the temporary office SHIELD had set up after their old one crumbled to the ground. She had checked in with them hours after they had recovered Steve but they hadn't made contact since, too busy with cleaning up their own mess. Apparently good things couldn't last forever because now they were hounding them again.

Tony had come in to tell Steve and had somehow ended up lying next to him in bed. He blamed it entirely on Steve.

Eyeing Steve, Tony rested his head back against the pillows to match his mate. "So, you feel like moving?" He had already filled Steve in on the situation at hand.

"No. But I should go anyway."

Tony smirked, unduly pleased at Steve's answer. Maybe it was because it was proof that the Boy Scout was comfortable enough with him to be so honest. "I won't tell on you if you want to play hooky."
Steve smiled against Tony's shoulder, his voice still husky from sleep. "What would we even do?"

"I don't know. Go get ice cream. Or I could do dirty things to you with my mouth."

Tony's grin spread as he felt Steve's face heat up against his arm. "Uh, I should...I should probably go. Maybe later though."

"Which one? The ice cream or the oral sex?"

"Um, both, I guess."

"What, at the same time? Steve, I never would have guessed."

"Stop it!" Laughing even as a blush continued to stain his cheeks, Steve pushing himself up and smacked Tony with his pillow. "You're the worst!"

Happy just to hear him laughing again, Tony could only grin back as he pushed the pillow off of the bed. "If by 'worst' you meant 'best', then yes, yes I am." Steve rolled his eyes but let out a small hum before he leaned down to press a soft kiss on Tony's lips. Tony felt something embarrassing flutter in his chest at the sensation and told himself that it was just because he had come so close to losing Steve. That was it.

Steve bumped their noses together as he pulled back, his blue eyes dancing over Tony's face. "...That's exactly what I meant."

It took a second for Tony to connect that up to their previous conversation but when he did he forced down the blush that threatened to spread across his own face. Tony Stark didn't blush. Not even for blond-haired, blue-eyed, strong, super-model look-alikes. "Damn right, it's what you meant. Now, since you're going, we both better get up off of our asses for this meeting."

O~O

Steve smiled down at Tony, grateful beyond words that he was here. He was far too aware of the fact that he had almost died, both at the hands of Hydra and then when Bruce had injected him with the cure.

He couldn't remember anything about what happened in between those two events but they themselves were still clear in his mind. Well, 'clear' was the wrong word. His memory was hazy and jumbled, but the physical sensations had been cemented in his brain. He could still feel the ice cold metal table against his back, leather straps wrapped too tightly around his limbs, and the burning heat of Hydra's serum snaking through his veins. Likewise, the sensation of being forced back into himself, of being torn apart at the molecular level before being fused back together, and waking up to see the desperation and fear in Tony's eyes above him was something he'd never be able to forget either. Steve was just as grateful to see that terrified expression gone from Tony's eyes as he was to be alive. Tony was so strong, Steve hated the fact that his mate looked so broken because of him.

A frown had overtaken his face at the somber thought and Steve hid it by burying his face against the crook of Tony's neck and inhaling a deep breath. Tony smelled so good. He smelled like home.

Steve felt Tony's hand slide up his back to run gently through his hair and he relaxed into his mate's hold. With a low chuckle, Tony nosed his cheek and gave his ear a quick nip. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah..." Steve wasn't feeling one hundred percent yet, but a quick flex of the muscles in his legs
let him know that they should be functional at least. "Yeah, I should be fine."

"This conversation sounds familiar."

It took Steve a moment to figure out what he was talking about, but then he remembered his own advice to Tony after he had been injured during their last mission. "We obviously just need to stop getting ourselves hurt."

Tony snorted, his short beard tickling Steve's cheek as the Cat rolled him off. "Not in your line of work."

Raising a brow, Steve let himself be pushed onto his side. "Not 'our' line of work?"

Tony gave him a cheeky grin and a wink. "I'm just a consulting business executive. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Steve couldn't help but smile back. "I don't believe you." He was definitely more than that.

"Once this is all over, I'll fly you to my office in New York and write a couple hundred thousand dollar checks in front of you to prove it."

Steve's smile softened at the offer. He would be willing to walk halfway across the world if it meant he could learn more about the Cat. "It's a deal."

Tony's eyes skimmed over his face, searching for something Steve couldn't place, before he let out a quiet grunt and leaned up to pressed a hard kiss on Steve's lips. Steve melted into it, closing his eyes and letting Tony control the pace and depth of their kiss, just for the moment. After a long minute, Tony pulled away with a husky laugh. "You're making me really regret agreeing to go to this meeting."

Steve grinned against Tony's lips, pecking him once more before sitting back. "Sorry."

Steve counted it as a major accomplishment when he made it down to the front door of Tony's mansion on his own. If he was leaning on the railings a little too heavily, well, everyone was nice enough not to point it out. Before they left, Bruce made sure that he had a fresh supply of painkillers tucked away, just in case, and Tony had his driver pull right up to the front steps so that Steve wouldn't have to limp out to the garage.

He napped on the way there, hoping to save his energy for the upcoming meeting. He had been slowly regaining his stamina which he was unduly grateful for. Steve had never spent so much time in bed, ever, even when he was young and constantly falling sick with some illness or another. He was pretty sure he had done a decent job hiding his irritation and it helped that it was only recently that he was able to stay awake long enough to actually get irritated.

The building SHIELD had appropriated as their new office turned out to be a small wing of City Hall. Tony subtly wrapped an arm around Steve's waist after he had exited the car and walked him up the steps. There was a low-ranking SHIELD agent waiting for them in the lobby. Picking up premade guest badges from the security desk, she led them through the municipal building to a hall marked by a piece of paper with the SHIELD logo printed on it.

The hall was lined with doors, agents scurrying from room to room with papers and boxes tucked under their arms. It was clear that they were still getting settled in their new location and Steve felt the lingering scent of ash and smoke. They must have salvaged what they could from the rubble of old building.
As they worked their way down the corridor, Agent Coulson himself appeared. Phil blinked in surprise as he recognized them then gave Steve an honest smile. "Steve, it's good to see you up on your feet. Agent Sanders, I'll take it from here."

The woman leading them in nodded and left them in Phil's custody. Waving for them to follow, Phil walked them to a door on the left. "I apologize for our new accommodations. We're already drawing up plans to rebuild, with a few new modifications, but this is the best we could find on short notice."

Tony raised a brow from behind the sunglasses he had obstinately worn indoors. "Why not just buy up another building?"

Phil's smile softened as he turned it towards Tony. "Because on some level that would be admitting defeat. Besides, it was time we made some renovations. This can be our opportunity to modernize and customize our base of operations."

"There's a silver lining for you…"

Phil only smiled again then motioned them inside what must have been his makeshift office. It was about the size of Tony's walk-in closet with an old pressboard desk and three chairs, one behind the desk and two jammed up against the far wall. There were papers stacked everywhere, undoubtedly things that Phil had to go through.

Steve quickly took the seat Phil offered him, already tired from the short trip. Tony eyed him from behind his shades but didn't say anything, just plopped down in the seat beside him and swung his feet up onto the desk as he crossed his arms over his chest. He was the picture of indifferent arrogance, but Steve knew better and apparently so did Phil. The agent didn't even rebuke him for putting his shoes up onto the desk in favor of ignoring the billionaire's antics. After closing the door, Phil scooted around the room to sit behind his desk. "Thank you for coming. I know it probably wasn't easy."

Steve inclined his head, an acknowledgment without admitting the truth behind the man's words. "Given the circumstances, it seemed necessary."

"That's his opinion." Steve sighed as Tony narrowed his eyes. "I don't see why we were called here."

"It's to discuss what happened at that warehouse was not an official SHIELD mission, and I don't think either of us wants it to go down in the books."

The mood in the room had suddenly changed and a tension Steve didn't understand settled between Tony and Phil. He was suddenly hit with the feeling that something had happened that he hadn't been made aware of while he was under. "Tony…"

"It's fine, Steve."

Steve frowned. "It's not fine."

"Steve. Don't ask questions you don't want answers to."

Phil stepped in before their argument could escalate. "We don't have to discuss the specifics if you don't want to, but we do have to discuss it. I need to know what happened and what you saw in there."
Tony rolled his eyes but acquiesced. He began to run through the events of that day. Steve had heard a watered-down version before but still listened as intently as Phil did. He was still surprised when the agent raised a hand when Tony got to the part where he, Natasha, and Clint were making their way towards what Tony had dubbed the "operating room" where Steve had been kept.

Phil interrupted as Tony reached a brief pause, the man's eyebrows furrowing before shooting up to his hairline in shock. "What do you mean you weren't sure where he was? Do you mean you couldn't sense him?"

Steve tilted his head at Phil's reaction and felt Tony tense up beside him. "I could smell him—"

"But you couldn't sense him. Even though you're mates?"

Huffing out an annoyed sigh, Tony threw Steve a questioning look but he couldn't think of anything to say; he didn't know what Phil meant either. He could sense Tony insofar as he could sense the other members of his pack, but there was no way that feeling would be concrete enough to guide him through a warehouse to find Tony had their positions been reversed.

Tony's lips were pressed into a thin line as he bit back a response. "Look, you emphasizing that word won't make me understand what you're try—"

"It's because their bond's defective."

Steve and Tony both straightened up in their seats as the Cat was cut off by the door to the room slamming open and a man stepped inside. He was human, tall, broad-shouldered, with dark skin and a darker glower on his face. He was clearly dressed to intimidate in his long black trench coat, the image made all the more unsettling by the eye-patch covering what looked to be a series of scars—claw marks?—carved over one side of the man's face.

Whoever he was, he carried himself with a commanding air that immediately had Phil snapping up to attention. "Sir-!"

Steve's eyes narrowed as the man strolled into the room and took charge of the conversation. For a human, he had mastered a Shifter alpha stance. With the way Phil had responded to him, he had to be fairly high ranking in SHIELD. And apparently the man didn't approve of him and Tony. "Alphas aren't meant to mate with other alphas. Wolves aren't meant to mate with Cats."

Steve felt a sharp spark of anger in his heart at the man's words. There was fear there too, but the instinct to come to his mate's defense instantly outweighed it. "With all due respect, sir, I think we're doing alright."

He saw Tony give a nod at his words, the Cat flipping his feet off of the desk to glare at the newcomer. "And just who the hell are you, anyway?"

"My name is Nick Fury, Director of SHIELD. I've been meaning to speak with you for a while but this latest stunt of yours pushed it over the edge."

Tony fell silent then pulled off his sunglasses, stood up, and walked so that he was standing right in front of Fury. In their human forms, Tony only came up to the man's nose but his glare had hardened, his voice unnervingly low. "I would watch that tone of yours."

The man raised an imperious brow. "Yeah? Why is that?"

"Do you know who I am?"
"Yes, I do. You're a thorn in my side. Now that that's over, you'd better fix your attitude or I will make your life hell, Mr. Stark."

Steve was up on his feet in an instant, the sound of his chair scraping back making Phil jump in surprise. He respected Fury for his position as Director but he could only take so much. Putting himself between physically Tony and Fury, Steve leveled Fury with a cool stare. "Sir, I am going to have to ask you to stop threatening my mate."

The man stared right back. He was brave. "Get him to behave himself, and I won't have to."

Steve's eyes narrowed as Tony let out a stifled hiss behind him. "Understood. Agent Coulson," Phil looked up as Steve addressed him without ever moving his eyes from Fury's, "if that's all for now, Tony and I are going to take our leave."

~O~

They drove back to the mansion, Tony fuming all the way. Steve could tell he was really mad because he didn't rant, he was just absolutely silent. If he had been a lesser man, he might even have been a little frightened. But he would be kidding himself if he didn't admit to being a little upset himself. In more ways than one. He was angry at the way Director Fury had addressed Tony but there had been something in his words that hit home.

Steve had heard stories growing up about Wolves finding their mates. About the deep, unbreakable bond that formed between them emotionally and spiritually. He and Tony had mated so recently that Steve hadn't stopped to think about it before but now that he did…he had heard older Wolves say that the connection you had with your mate was supposed to be so strong that you could feel what they felt. Experience their joy and pain. Psychically feel them out through a crowded city.

He loved Tony but they didn't have that.

Those thoughts haunted Steve all the way to bed and had him lying awake despite his exhaustion. The mattress dipped as Tony joined him with a long sigh, lying himself out to rest beside him.

The Cat let a comfortable silence stretch between them before he decided to break it. "Something's obviously on your mind…"

"It's…it's nothing…"

Tony snorted and rolled over so that he was facing Steve. "You are the worst liar."

Shaking his head, Steve met Tony's eyes. He knew he couldn't hide this from the Cat so he struggled to find the right words for his thoughts. "Tony…You heard what he said. I think…There's something wrong with us."

Tony narrowed his eyes. He didn't need Steve to specify what he was talking about. "Stop it. There's nothing wrong with us. They're the ones with the problem."

Steve bit his lip and wished that he could believe it as much as Tony did. Tony's frown morphed into fond exasperation and he moved over to wrap an arm around Steve's shoulders in a half hug. "Come here, big dog." He leaned in to press their foreheads together, his voice softening. "We'll be alright."

Steve smiled in appreciation. It felt good to hear Tony say that. If Tony said they'd be alright, then there was no way he could ever think differently. Tony was his mate and Wolves mated for life. They were both in this together and as long as the love was there, they could make it work.
Reaching out, Steve ran a hand down the side of Tony's face. "I love you, Tony. You know that, right?"

"I know." Tony pressed his cheek against Steve's hand before letting out another, exaggerated sigh. "This cuddling thing is my fault. I started this." Steve growled as Tony gave him a playful shove. "Get off of me. We've done enough of that already today."

"Tony, we haven't slept together in almost a week." It was almost a whine but Steve didn't mind letting it out when Tony was the only one around to hear it.

Tony sniffed as he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "What are you talking about? I've crashed in here for a couple hours every day."

Really? "I, I don't remember that…" It must have been when he had been passed out.

Something in his voice or some expression on his face must have been especially pitiful before it made Tony pause. The billionaire observed him for a long minute before rolling his eyes and standing up. Steve watched, confused, as Tony began to strip. When he had said "sleep together" he had literally meant sleep together. As much as he would like to say otherwise, Steve didn't think he was quite up to sex yet and he had been pretty sure that Tony had known what he meant.

Then he understood as Tony rid himself of his last article of clothing, shifted into his animal form, and crawled back up onto the mattress as a Panther. Tony must still be really worried then. Not only was he humoring Steve, but he had shifted on his own free will to do it.

Steve smiled as Tony crawled over him to curl up behind him, his dark fur soft against Steve's bare back. The Panther's nose nestled in against the back of his neck as his tail flicked around Steve's thigh. "You know you're a better spooner like this." Tony rumbled, his whiskers tickling the back of Steve's head as he plastered himself up against Steve's back, his hips tucking up against his backside. "Don't get any ideas, Tony."

Behind him Tony let out a large huff that only could have been a laugh before he cuddled closer, one large paw coming up to hold Steve's shoulder as his sandpaper-rough tongue came out to wash the side of Steve's face. "Gee-whiz, Tony, come on. I already took a shower."

Another huff of laughter and as Tony pulled away Steve smile softened as he heard and felt a low, rumbling vibration as Tony's breathing fell into an easy rhythm. It sounded like he was purring. Deciding not to say anything in fear that any mention would cause it to stop, Steve settled back in and let his eyes close, more than ready to get some sleep.
Steve woke to the feel of something warm and soft tucked up around him. It took him a moment to place the sensation and only really came to him as he glanced down at a dark, spotted paw draped over his waist. Right. Tony had shifted. And had apparently stayed a Panther through the entire night because that was definitely sunlight peeking through the thick blinds drawn across Tony's bedroom window.

Even though Steve had kept his movements to a minimum, he felt Tony's warm nose nestle into his neck as the Panther began to wake himself up. Steve smiled but held still as the Cat slowly began to move. The last thing he wanted after everything they had been through recently was to get his skin snagged on an errant claw as the toes on Tony's paws flexed.

It took a moment or two for Tony to pull himself free from where he had cuddled up too close to Steve, especially since he wasn't exactly in a rush. After lazily rolling to the side, the Panther stretched out its back while simultaneously releasing a wide yawn, revealing for just a moment a line of razor-sharp teeth. Then there was the sound of cracking bones as Tony began to shift back.

Steve waited until the noises stopped before turning over to face his mate. In his human form, Tony still looked relaxed, his eyes languidly staring up at the ceiling as he let his hands come down to rest on his chest. He seemed oblivious to Steve's eyes on him, but Steve knew better. There was something in Tony's face—the way his lips moved or the slope of his eyebrows—that told Steve he was very aware he was being observed and didn't mind.

"That's the longest I've ever held that form. It actually wasn't all that bad."

Steve blinked in surprise at the confession. "You've never slept as a Cat before?"

Tony tilted his head. "No. Never even thought about it."

It was an odd thing to hear but the more that Steve thought about it the more he had to admit that it wasn't entirely unexpected. From what Steve had heard of Tony's past life, being a Shifter actually had very little to do with who he was. Or, rather, it wasn't a part of the life he had let himself be very involved in. Steve had been the complete opposite. "I used to sleep as a Wolf all the time, especially when they guys all climbed into bed with me."

Tony finally met his eyes. He was trying to project annoyance but it was completely ruined by the teasing tone in his voice. "You realize you just told me you habitually slept with other men in the same bed, right?"

"You know what I meant."

"Theoretically, yes. But I'm still struggling with the practicality of it."

Steve knew Tony had meant him sleeping with his old pack, but seemed like Tony didn't understand why anyone would prefer to sleep in their animal forms with other people in general. Which was a shame because those were some of Steve's favorite memories from the Howling Commandoes. "It can be comfortable. You can pile up on top of each other without restricting breathing as easily as you would in your human form." Tony still didn't seem convinced—or all that impressed by the concept. "Tell you what, next time you want to shift, I'll shift too and I'll prove it."

Tony snorted as he reached down and grabbed the pair of pajama bottoms he had tossed to the
floor last night. "You'll probably be waiting a while."

"That's alright. I can be patient." Steve smiled as Tony glanced back at him. The expression faded a bit when Tony bent down to snatch up his shirt as well. "Where are you going?"

Tugging the shirt on over his head, Tony ran his fingers through his hair in an attempt to tame some of the more wild strands. Then he scooted off the bed and stretched as he stumbled to his feet. "I am going to get some coffee."

Steve pushed himself up onto his elbows and raised a brow as the bed sheets pooled around his waist. He saw Tony's eyes dart down to his chest and made a promise to himself to actually get some exercise in today. The fiery look in Tony's eyes made him want to make sure this illness didn't knock him out of shape. "You're going to get your own coffee? You must really be worried about me still."

Tony licked his lips distractedly before his eyes bounced up to meet Steve's, the Cat faking nonchalance even as the scent of his arousal began to seep through the room. "How do you figure?"

Trying hard not to react to the smell, Steve attempted a playful smile. "Because otherwise you'd be sending me down for it like usual."

"You got me there." Tony admitted defeat a little too easily then physically shook himself off and began to walk towards the door. "Anyway, I'll be right back. Hang in there, champ."

"I am feeling a lot better, you know."

Reaching the door, Tony swung it open and grinned back at Steve. "You need to learn to keep your mouth shut before your honesty earns you a coffee run. Now let me try to be considerate. It's hard enough as it is."

Steve laughed, knowing that the Cat was talking about more than just sending him down for coffee. He watched Tony leave with another look over his shoulder then settled back into the bed, though he left himself propped up against the headboard. He had a whole day ahead of him with no real plans and he was pretty sure that he actually had the energy to do something. He would definitely make it to the room they had converted over into a gym and if he was still holding strong after that he could go for a run. It had seemed like forever since he had made a circuit around the property and he wanted to check that everything was still secure. He could take Tony with him and they could run together.

It only took Tony a few minutes to reappear. He opened and shut the door with a dull slam, a mug of coffee in his hand and a frown on his face. Steve's own expression settled into a frown at seeing his mate apparently irritated so quickly. "Is everyone else up?"

"Yeah..." Tony's eyes darted back to the closed door with his brows drawn low over his eyes. He didn't seem angry but almost flustered. Steve cocked his head to the side. "What's wrong?"

Tony didn't even try to pretend like he wasn't bothered about something as he moved across the room to sit on the edge of the bed. "Bruce is acting weird."

Steve let his surprise show on his face. "Bruce is?"

Waving his hand, Tony took a sip of his steaming coffee before speaking again. "The rest of them are too, but that's to be expected. Bruce is somehow involved though which is what has me
Steve tried to imagine what Tony must have encountered on his short trip down to the kitchen. He hadn't been gone that long, and he wasn't that worked up...maybe he had just misinterpreted some comment Bruce had made in passing. After all, Bruce didn't seem the type to suddenly start behaving strangely. "What do you mean, 'weird'?"

"I think they're conspiring against us."

Steve raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips to try and hide a smile. Tony's paranoia seemed half for show and Steve couldn't help but poke a bit of fun at the Cat. "Against their alphas? That's a pretty serious offense." Tony smirked back at him and Steve was happy he hadn't taken offense to being teased. "Maybe we should go investigate."

Tony eyed him out of the corner of his eye. "You feel up to it?"

"Yeah. It seems a night's rest did me a world of good."

Tony tilted his head in acknowledgement. "This is a high quality mattress. And the sheets are one hundred percent silk. The best bed money can buy."

Smiling, Steve twisted around in those expensive sheets of Tony's so that he could wrap an arm around his mate's waist. He pressed a kiss against his back through the fabric of his t-shirt and rested his forehead against Tony's shoulder. "Maybe it had more to do with my sleeping partner."

Tony tensed up under his ministrations before relaxing back into his hold. "Or that." Tony took another long sip of coffee before placing the empty mug on the bedside table. "Now are you going to come down there with me or not? Because I'm half afraid I'm going to walk downstairs to a surprise party or something."

"You don't like parties?"

"I don't like surprise parties."

Steve was a little taken aback by Tony's emphatic insistence and filed away the fact that he should never, under any circumstances, plan a surprise party for Tony. "Why? You seem to like to surprise other people."

"I don't like being on the receiving end. Of surprise parties that is." Steve just rolled his eyes as Tony's annoyance melted away and he sent him back a lascivious wink. With Tony, it took just a little more than that to get a blush to rise to his cheeks now. Not much more, but a little.

"How about we go downstairs and foil my pack's mutiny then?"

"Sounds good."

Tony distracted himself by looking up work messages on his phone while Steve cleaned himself up a bit in the attached bath and got dressed. He was quick about it and didn't keep Tony waiting too long. He didn't want to keep himself waiting either. After what Tony had said about the others, he wanted to get down there and see just what was going on.

When he and Tony made their way back downstairs together, Steve could see why Tony's suspicions were raised. The others were all up, all sitting in the same room in fact, and looking unnaturally peaceful. As if they had all been sitting around talking and then clammed up as soon as they had heard Tony and Steve approaching. But they didn't seem anxious or nervous. In fact,
Clint and Thor looked as if they were trying to stifle smiles.

Deciding to cut straight to the chase, Steve planted himself firmly in the center of the room and crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, so who wants to tell me what's going on?"

All of their eyes settled on Bruce and with a long-suffering sigh, he pushed himself out of his armchair with a shy smile that immediately set Steve at ease. Whatever they had to say wasn't bad news. "So, we were talking this morning…"

"Clearly."

"And we think that you two should go out tonight."

Steve blinked in surprise as Tony walked up to stand next to him with his hands on his hips. "What?"

Taking a deep breath, Bruce plowed on even as Clint began to snicker at the whole awkward encounter. "You guys never really had a 'honeymoon' period. We were talking and we think you at least deserve a night out. Since there aren't any pressing emergencies tonight, I figured it would be as good as any."

Blushing, Steve uncrossed his arms and rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh, Jeez, I don't know. Shouldn't we be training?"

Clint spoke up from across the room. "Even heroes deserve a night off every once and a while."

"Besides," Natasha added, "who knows how long the quiet will last."

Thor gave a firm nod. "She is correct. You must make use of such opportunities when they are presented to you."

Steve appreciated their worry but at the same time he still didn't know if it would be appropriate for him and Tony to disappear for a night when there was so much else to do. It wouldn't be training, it wouldn't be team-bonding, it would just be the two of them. And that seemed—odd, that they should be able to do that with everything the way it was.

Bruce apparently saw the conflict in his eyes because his smile softened and he motioned for Steve and Tony both to follow him out of the room. Once they were out of earshot, Bruce turned to the both of them again. He kept his voice low and gentle, like he was trying to explain this to them without insulting them. "I'll admit, I came up with the idea."

Steve returned Bruce's gaze, curious as to what brought this on. "What prompted it?"

Tony rested his elbow on Steve's shoulder as he leaned in. "And why now?"

With both of their eyes on him, Bruce bit his lip, trying to find the right words. When he spoke again, his voice was even quieter. "After what happened, I think there's a chance some alone time together might do you two some good, physically and mentally, as individuals."

Tony scoffed and Steve wanted to smack the back of his head for it. "What?"

Bruce took a breath and averted his eyes to examine his wristwatch. "I did a bit of reading and, at least for Wolves, it's important for mates who experienced a high degree of trauma to spend some time together to reseal the bond. Otherwise you'll just continue to be overly worried for each other and in some cases some mated pairs developed a sort of PTSD where they began to have trouble
even being in separate rooms. I'm not sure how it is for Cats, but I imagine it'd still be a good thing."

Tony didn't look any more convinced. "What are you, a psychologist now?"

"You know I'm not that kind of doctor, Tony. I'm just...concerned. I'm concerned." Looking up to find Tony staring incredulously, Bruce continued in a huff of air before the Cat could jump in. "I'm a beta. It's what I do. And that's my personal medical advice but you're free to take it or leave it."

Steve opened his mouth then, finding he had nothing to say, closed it again. Were he and Tony spending inordinate amounts of time together? He looked over at Tony and realized that the Cat was still pressed against his side and that somehow during the conversation his hand had slipped around Tony's waist. And technically, they hadn't spent any significant time apart save for brief visits to the bathroom and Tony's coffee run this morning. At least, they had been together for the most part whenever he was awake. Maybe Bruce was right. Because the idea of separating from Tony to try and prove the beta wrong made Steve's stomach twist up into a knot.

He lifted his gaze to Tony's face to try and judge what Tony thought about the whole thing. He knew the Cat trusted Bruce's opinions on things but he also knew that Tony had a prideful streak a mile wide and that admitting that Bruce was right would be admitting a weakness.

Feeling eyes on him, Tony glanced over to meet Steve's eyes. He seemed to be searching for something and must have found it because he turned back to Bruce a second later with a smirk on his face. "You know, I hated it at first but the idea is growing on me. I'm going to call Pepper and set things up."

Steve was glad that Tony was game for it but he wasn't sure that it would be alright for them to leave the pack for an entire night. "I still don't know, Tony."

Pushing off of Steve, Tony poked his forehead. "Shut up, stop thinking. Although the way you wrinkle your nose when you're morally conflicted is a little adorable."

Bruce looked at each of them in turn before smiling and Steve hardly noticed as he slipped away, leaving him and Tony to argue about whether or not Tony had the right to call him 'adorable'.

O~O

For the rest of the day, Steve and Tony stuck close together. It seemed neither of them were in a real hurry to test out Bruce's theory. Tony had pulled away for a moment to call Pepper and Steve had distracted himself by pulling out his neglected sketchbook. Tony had only teased him for fifteen minutes when he saw it but had eventually settled back with a tablet that looked too technologically complex for Steve to even guess how to operate.

No more than an hour had passed when Steve's head snapped up from his sketchpad as the sound of the doorbell chimed through Tony's mansion. Hopping up from his seat, Tony tossed his tablet aside and waved for Steve to stay where he was as he went to get the door. A moment later Steve heard the door open and Tony greet someone, a female human judging by their scent. It must be his "Pepper."

Steve leaned forward in his seat on the couch to try and see through the doorway to the main hall but the angle was wrong. He wanted to give Tony some alone time with his...secretary? Friend? Personal assistant? Steve wasn't quite sure. Either way, Steve was sure that they had some catching up to do. From everything Tony had said about her, they were pretty close and to Steve's knowledge they hadn't seen each other since he and Tony met. That, and Tony might take offense
if Steve started guarding his house like he wanted to. It was Tony's house, Tony's guest, and Steve should leave them alone. Even if he really wanted to investigate.

Returning to his sketchbook, Steve tried to refocus on the drawing of the view from his old apartment as Tony and Pepper's footsteps traveled up the stairs. It was a challenge to do it from memory but he had started on it with the thought that it would make a nice memento of a place he'd never see again. The task grew even harder as tension began to build in his body. Was Tony alright? What a stupid question. Of course he was. They were just upstairs. He could even smell them. Nothing was happening. Nothing was wrong.

But all the same, Steve really just had to check.

Setting his sketchbook down next to Tony's tablet, he walked quickly out of the room, over to the stairs, and hiked up to the second floor. There were voices filtering out into the hall from the room at the end and Steve strained to hear what was being said. Before he knew it, he was standing right outside the door to Tony's room, his hand immediately going out to knock. The voices inside paused before Tony's rang out. "Get in here!"

So much for not being wanted. Steve opened the door and slipped inside, closing the door behind him to maintain some amount of privacy like he knew Tony would prefer. "I hope I'm not interrupting." Steve searched out Tony's gaze to check if he actually was interrupting or not.

But Tony only smirked at him and waved him over. "We were just talking about you."

Steve smiled back. "Good things, I hope."

"You say that like there are bad things. You're a freak of nature, Steve, there are no bad things."

Steve would have argued but the look on Tony's face told him that if he spoke up, the Cat was more than ready to start up a debate. So Steve just shrugged and instead turned to the other occupant. Pepper was a tall, elegant looking woman who seemed like she definitely didn't take crap from anyone. She was wearing a very professional looking pencil skirt and tailored suit jacket, her strawberry blonde hair drawn back into a ponytail and a polite smile on her lips.

Tony watched Steve watching Pepper for a moment before turning to the woman and crossing his arms. "So?"

Her smile spread and she glanced back at the Panther. "I'll admit, it looks like you made a good decision this time."

Tony scoffed in mock annoyance. "This time?"

Before his mate could make an ass of himself, Steve jumped in with a hand outstretched towards the redhead. "Hello, Ma'am. I'm Steve."

She accepted his handshake with a surprisingly firm one of her own and a happy glimmer in her eyes. "Virginia Potts, but everyone calls me Pepper. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you from Tony."

"Tony talks about me?"

A warm flame flickered in his chest and Steve looked up at his mate even as he spoke to Pepper. "More than he'd like to admit. I feel like I should warn you, you're in for a bumpy ride with him."
Steve laughed. "I figured that out the day I met him."

"As long as you know what you're in for. As far as I'm concerned, I'm just happy that there will be one more person trying to keep him under control and out of trouble."

Steve grinned. He had no doubt that this woman had had her hands full with Tony for a while now. The fact that she was still around and that they were both on such good terms spoke volumes. "I'll do what I can."

"That's all I can ask."

Tony butted into the conversation, having been remarkably quiet up until that point. "I can hear you, you know."

Pepper pursed her lips. "I know."

Tony snorted. "Cute. Did you pick up what I asked for?"

"Yes." Leaning down, Pepper picked up what looked like two garment bags off of the bed where she had presumably set them earlier. "And, by the way," She glared playfully at Tony as she shoved one of the bags into his arms. "I'm your assistant, Tony, not your maid."

"I'm pretty sure I had personal-shopper listed in the fine-print of your required duties in the application."

Steve couldn't help but be amused as Pepper completely ignored Tony's response and just continued on unaffected. She was clearly used to dealing with him. He blinked as she then turned to him and handed Steve the other garment bag, unzipping the top so that he was able to see the neckline and lapels of a high-quality suit and the edge of a blue tie. Her smile softened as she took in his awed look. "Here, Steve, these are for you. I didn't know which colors you liked so I just went for something classic. From what Tony has told me, it seemed like you."

Tony tossed his own suit back on his bed. "Hey, what the hell? Why does he get an 'it seemed like you, honey' while I get shit thrown in my face?"

Pepper rolled her eyes and tried to look annoyed as she turned back to Tony although she couldn't hide the teasing sparkle in her eyes. "Maybe I like Steve more. And that 'shit' is an eight hundred dollar suit so don't wrinkle it after I just had it dry cleaned."

As if solely to be contrary, Tony sat down on his bed on top of the suit, his arms crossed over his chest. "It's my suit, I'll wrinkle it if I want. And that's my mate, by the way, too, so stop trying to poach him. And on 'Date Night' of all things. You're shameless."

"Oh yes, I'm the shameless one here." Pepper shook her head fondly then looked between the two of them. "I suppose my job is done here then. Tony, I booked you a table at that restaurant you wanted for six thirty, which means you have two hours to get yourself ready and there. Happy is free today so he'll be driving you. Now, is there anything else you need me for, or can I get back to managing your business?"

"Nope, that sounds like it'll do."

Pepper shared a look with Steve before turning and walking passed Steve to the door. "Then have fun." That had sounded genuine. For a minute Steve found himself wondering how often Tony had allowed himself to have some fun. "And don't embarrass Steve too much, Tony."
Tony waved her away even as he sent her a fond smile. "Shoo."

She did just that, closing the door behind her with a brief wave of her own. Once she had left, Steve looked back over at Tony and smiled. "I like her." She reminded Steve a lot of Peggy. He was going to have to call her soon. They were long overdue for a decent visit of their own.

"You would." Tony huffed as he stood and shook out his garment bag. "I can already see an unholy alliance forming between you two against me."

Steve grinned back. "It's for the best."

After that, they took their time cleaning themselves up and changing into their new suits. Tony tucked himself away into the bathroom first to shower and shave and when he came out with only a towel wrapped around his waist Steve was too tempted to grab his mate around the waist and force him back into the shower. But he resisted and managed to satisfy himself with a quick kiss instead as he brushed by. For some reason it didn't feel right to mess around before their dinner. Maybe it was silly but Steve felt proud of himself as he stepped into the shower himself, the room still humid from Tony's use of it.

He spent a while after his shower shaving and trying to get his hair dry in a way that wouldn't cause it to lie at odd angles, even though it was a problem he had never had before. He felt himself growing anxious—no, giddy was a better word, about their night out. He suddenly had the urge to make sure that he looked nice enough for Tony, even though the Cat had already seen him at some of his worst moments. This whole thing, it was a new experience for him and he wanted to get it right.

When he came out of the bathroom he found Tony already fixing the buttons on his white button-up undershirt with careful efficiency. He couldn't help himself when he stopped and admired his mate for a moment, his heart warming at the thought that Tony was paying such close attention to his clothing just for him. Maybe he wasn't the only one too excited about dinner.

Picking up his own suit, Steve snuck back into the bathroom before Tony could catch him in conversation. Again, maybe it was silly, but he wanted Tony to see the final product. The image might have been ruined a bit if he had to watch as Steve fumbled his way through putting the suit on. He made sure that all the zippers and button were fastened, that his undershirt was tucked in just so and that when he put on his suit, the sleeves of his button-up didn't get all bunched up inside the jacket. The tie was a small battle all its own but after five minutes Steve had managed to fix it in a knot that looked presentable. He thought about leaving the top few buttons undone like Tony had suggested when they had gone undercover at Hydra's gala event but in the end decided against it. Tonight he was being himself, not a false persona, and he was going to dress like it.

Steve was just finishing trying to get his hair to fall right when there was a soft rap on the bathroom door, Tony's voice drifting through the wood. "Steve, you ready? The car will be waiting for us in five minutes."

Sighing, Steve took one last look in the mirror and, deciding that he was finally presentable, responded. "Yeah."

Opening the door, he stepped out to find Tony waiting for him, looking absolutely amazing fully dressed up. Tony looked equally impressed with him which made that warm feeling in Steve's chest grow. "Well," Tony grabbed Steve's hand, pulled him out of the bathroom, and slowly walked around him, "look at you. I should have put you in a good suit weeks ago."

"What do you think?" It was an unnecessary question. Tony wasn't bothering to hide the lust
coming off of him in waves. Steve's mouth suddenly went dry and he had to remind himself that the point of all of this was to go out to dinner.

"I think I like it. It shows off your ass very nicely."

Steve grunted to cover up a growl. Tony wasn't helping his resolve. Licking his lips, Steve tried for an actual response, though he couldn't cover up the husky rumble in his voice. "You look really good."

Tony came back around to his front and reached up to smooth out Steve's lapels despite the fact that they were perfectly straight. There was a heavy look in his eyes and Steve fought hard to resist picking him up and throwing him onto the bed. They just got dressed up, after all, it would be a shame to strip out of everything so soon. "I'd better, otherwise someone's going to try to steal you away from me."

Steve swallowed. "I was just thinking the same thing."

Tony stepped closer until there were mere inches between their bodies. "I think you were thinking of something else…"

He couldn't deny it. Not when his arousal had to be so obvious. "Maybe…"

"I think I like your way of thinking. But I also think we're going to be late for dinner if we don't leave now."

"Alright." Unable to stop himself, Steve bent down and pressed their lips together. Tony growled and pushed back up against Steve, his hand coming up to grip the Wolf's arm as he licked his way into Steve's mouth. A moan escaped Steve and it took more willpower than he thought he had to pull back. Tony had said that a car would be waiting for them, after all, and as it was they were probably already five minutes late.

"…We should go."

Tony growled again but relented. He made quick work of tucking his phone and wallet into his pockets before ushering Steve out the door. They made their way to the car without incident—although Clint had catcalled out to them as they passed by the media room—and before Steve knew it they were being whisked away back into town by Tony's personal valet, Happy Hogan. And, yes, Steve learned that was really his name.

The ride passed in comfortable silence, Steve and Tony simply enjoying the moment of private company. It was then that Steve realized what a good thing this dinner might be. He loved being part of a pack; it was what every Wolf longed for. But at the same time, it was always difficult to get a moment to yourself, or with his mate. The thought brought a flutter of nerves in his stomach. He hoped Tony still liked him when they were alone.

It wasn't until they were nearly at the restaurant that Steve realized something. Taking a particularly deep breath through his nose, he looked curiously over at Tony. "You closed off your scent." It was a statement more than a question. Tony smelled neutral now, like any human might to a Shifter.

A frown flickered onto Tony's lips as he shrugged. "Sorry about that. I have a very human reputation to uphold."

"No, it's alright. It just caught me off-guard. It's been a while since you hid it." Steve hadn't meant it to be accusatory.
"Yeah. I'll admit, it's almost been nice."

Steve looked back over at Tony to find him looking almost wistfully out the window as the car began to slow. He couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't sound sappy to Tony so instead he settled on resting his hand on Tony's shoulder and give it a gentle squeeze. Tony's head jerked back around and they exchanged a small smile before Happy's voice rang out from the front seat. "We're here, Mr. Stark."

Shaking himself out of his staring contest with Steve, Tony looked up at his driver. "Great. Be back in an hour and a half." Unbuckling himself, Tony scooted forward and passed his man a hundred dollar bill. "Meanwhile go get yourself something fried and dripping with calories to eat. The new diet you're on is starting to make me feel self-conscious."

Happy smirked back at his boss as Steve and Tony climbed out of the car. "Yes, sir. Call if you need me here sooner."

"Will do."

Happy had pulled the car right up to the front of the restaurant so they only had five steps to walk before they were inside. Steve felt his cheeks flush a bit as Tony opened the door to the restaurant and ushered him inside with a bow. "Tony…"

"Relax." Tony let the door close behind them and immediately they were both immersed in the comfortably warm air of the restaurant and the smell of delicious foods. "You look like you have a stick up your ass. And, before you ask, no, that was not an innuendo."

"I, this is just a nicer place than I'm used to." In reality, this was nicer than any place he had ever eaten in. Ever. He had never stepped inside a place like this before. Everyone was in suits and dresses and even the waiters looked like they were classier than anyone he had known in his old life.

Tony snorted before he let a comforting hand slide across Steve's shoulders as he walked by. "Don't worry about that. Just be yourself."

People were already shooting them glances from the dining area and the host had just snapped to attention, no doubt because he had just recognized Tony. Because Tony was basically famous. Something Steve had forgotten. "But—"

"How about this? I'll publically humiliate myself so that whatever social faux pas you're worried about will pale in comparison."

A choked laugh bubbled up from Steve's throat against his will. "That wouldn't help!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"Then like I said, just relax and enjoy it."

Steve's eyes widened as Tony boosted himself up onto his tip-toes and pecked a quick kiss on Steve's lips. Immediately whispers began to spark in the dining room but Steve was able to shut them out, all of his attention narrowed down to Tony and the warmth of the Cat's palm where it gripped his forearm.

Before Steve was ready for it, Tony had moved away and was speaking to the host about their
The man was quick to oblige and led the two of them through the restaurant to a private little nook towards the back. As they walked, Steve was pretty sure that he recognized some of the other diners which, considering the amount of attention he paid to popular culture, was pretty impressive. In a booth in the corner there was a couple who he was almost positive were both A-list movie stars and he recognized a man sitting in the corner as a famous singer from a hit band.

Swallowing, Steve managed to take his seat without messing up the tablecloth and smiled weakly at the host as he handed them each a menu before taking his leave. For a minute he was able to calm himself back down until he noticed something important missing from the menu.

His eyebrows drew together as he checked again, just to make sure he hadn't missed it so he wouldn't make a fool of himself right off the bat. "Tony, there are no prices on the menu."

The Cat just smiled as he studied his own menu. "Nope."

"How are we supposed to know what things cost?"

"You're not supposed to care." Tony smirked at Steve's indignant huff and murmured under his breath. "You're mated to a billionaire, get used to it."

Steve shook his head but with a sigh pushed the issue from his mind. It would be rude to argue the point further. And it would be an interesting experience to order something without any concern for what it costs. That is, if he could figure out what he was ordering. Biting his lip and fighting back shame for his continued stupidity, Steve lowered his menu and tapped on an item that definitely had a French name. Or maybe Italian. "I don't know how to pronounce this…"

Setting down his own menu, Tony leaned over the table to see what Steve was looking at. "Which? Let me see?"

"Here…"

Before Tony could respond, a waiter appeared at Tony's shoulder. "Gentlemen, have you decided what you would like to order?"

Steve gaped, sure that he was about to make his stupidity public but Tony jumped in and took over with his usual flippancy. "This thing here with the ridiculous name, two of those please. Bring the meat out rare. Steve," Steve almost jumped as Tony met his eyes, "you want a salad or anything? Of course you don't." Turning back to the waiter before Steve could get a sound out, Tony sent the man a tight smile. "I, though, will have scotch on the rocks and my companion will have a beer. Anything else?"

That last part had been directed at Steve again but he didn't find himself with anything to say now that he finally had enough time to say it. "That should do it."

The waiter nodded and tucked away the small pad of paper where he had written down their order. "Yes, sir. I'll have your drinks out in a moment."

Tony hardly waited for the man to disappear before speaking again. "You're good with beer, right?"

"Sure." He liked beer well enough, but…”I could have ordered for myself though."

"What would you have ordered?"

"…A beer. But that's not entirely the point." The point was that Steve wasn't about to let himself
get shuffled into the position of a submissive partner, even if he was entirely out of his depth here.

"Yeah, yeah, you're a big boy, I know."

The remark came out gentler than Tony perhaps meant it to be. Their knees bumped under the table and Steve looked down at his silverware why a shy smile. It was a little thing but out in public it suddenly seemed like a bigger deal. Like the whole world was watching. It probably didn't help that people kept glancing over at their table.

Seeing that he was getting distracted, Tony rolled his eyes before reaching across the table and taking Steve's hand in his own. Steve jumped at the contact then relaxed, smiling as Tony hesitantly intertwined their fingers. "Hey. Eyes on me tonight."

"Sorry."

"Don't be." The answer came back so quickly that it was more of an impulse than a thought-out response. And for whatever reason that made Steve even happier.

Feeling a little brave, Steve lifted Tony's hand a placed a soft kiss on the Cat's knuckles. "I guess I'm not very good at this. It's my first real 'date', so you'll have to let me know if I do something wrong."

Tony's jaw fell slack for half a minute before it snapped shut and he pulled his hand away. "You're doing a damn good job so far."

Their drinks came soon after and it offered them a momentary distraction. It didn't take long for them to strike up a conversation and by the time their dinners arrived Steve felt himself entirely relaxed. They were arguing and teasing each other just like they did when the others were around and he hardly felt the eyes on them anymore. They talked about things they had never touched on before. Nothing heavy, just stories. Tony told him about one of the visits he took to Japan for business and the multiple social catastrophes he had caused there. Steve in turn had told him all about the time when he and Bucky were kids and decided that they wanted to spend a whole week camping by themselves, which had led to them crawling back home three days later, practically starving and covered in poison oak.

Towards the end of their dinner there was a lull in their conversation and Steve noticed that the corners of Tony's lips were curled down in a pensive frown. Steve didn't understand it; he thought everything had been going well. "What's wrong?"

Tony jumped and his frown was quickly replaced by a small smile. "Nothing."

"Come on, Tony…"

Sighing, Tony looked down at his plate before meeting Steve's eyes. "I was just worried this wouldn't work out."

Steve furrowed his brow. "That what wouldn't work?"

Tony shrugged and his gaze fell back to his plate. "This. Us. This is our first 'couple' thing and I was worried that it was going to be a complete disaster. Which would have really sucked since we're already tied to each other."

Steve relaxed and leaned back in his seat. "Luckily for both of us, I think the night was pretty successful."
"Well, it's even luckier for us that the night's not over yet." Tony's voice had dropped into a low rumble and it immediately brought Steve's eyes back to his. They held filthy promises of exactly how Tony would like to spend the rest of the night.

Steve's fingers tightened on his fork so much that he thought he was going to bend the utensil right in half. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to get back to Tony's house. "Did you want to order dessert or-?"

Tony cut him off with a sly smile. "I can think of a couple things I'd like to have for dessert, but unfortunately they don't seem to have them on the menu."

"Uh…"

Steve realized he wasn't being fairly articulate as all the blood rushed to the wrong parts of his body but Tony didn't seem to mind. "Let me just pay our bill and we can get out of here."

His mate made impressively short work of flagging down their waiter and without even letting Steve see the number on the bottom of the check he just slapped down a credit card and passed the bill back to the waiter so that he could ring it up. Within minutes they were pushing out their chairs and walking back to the door. And if Steve walked a little closer to Tony than entirely necessary none of the people who watched them leave said anything about it.

It was a beautiful night out. The weather was finally warming enough so that it was a pleasant temperature even now that the sun had gone down, his suit jacket sturdy enough to keep away any chill that might have been present. The city was quiet, with only a few people strolling up and down the sidewalk and if Steve stared really hard he could almost see the stars through the light pollution from all the buildings around them. Tony checked his phone and let out a soft hum. "We finished a little early. I'll give Happy a call and have him pick us up."

"Let's walk for a little bit."

Tony gave Steve a look that clearly said that the Cat thought he was insane but he played along and stuck his phone back into his pocket. Steve smiled in thanks and moved in to bump his shoulder gently against Tony's. This was nice.

"So, how far are we going?"

Steve shrugged happily. "I haven't thought about it."

He heard Tony tisk beside him and glanced down at his mate. "What the hell are we doing? I thought we were trying to get home as soon as possible. Or was that just me?"

"It definitely wasn't just you, but—"

"Great. I'll call the car to—"

A sudden thought struck Steve. He wanted to get back to, to finish up their night, but first, "I want to take the subway. At least to the Market Street station. Then you can call Happy back."

"What?"

Steve grinned at Tony's shock. "You've been treating me way too good all night."

Tony snorted. "This isn't 'good', Steve. Next time we have a night out I'll fly us to Paris and really show you a good time."
"Exactly, Tony!" Steve shook his head. "You're used to doing all these extravagant things." He wanted to share part of himself with Tony, just like the Cat had been doing with him all night. "I want to show you my side of the world."

Tony raised a brow. "The poor, carless side?"

"Yup."

Steve watched as Tony mulled it over before grudgingly reaching a decision. "Fine. If this is how you get your rocks off. But if I catch some disease from a homeless person you're nursing me back to health, and I'm warning you now I'm a bitch patient."

"Shifters don't catch human diseases. But even if you did, I'd still take care of you no matter how difficult you acted."

"Aw, you're so sweet." Tony smirked and reached up to pinch Steve's cheek. Steve yelped then laughed as he shoved Tony away. Tony shoved him back with a spirited growl which led to an embarrassingly long play fight as they walked, trying to keep their parries and blows subtle so that passerbys wouldn't pay them too much attention.

It lasted until they had reached the subway station, the sign for the outbound train lit up like a spotlight across the street. Steve let Tony get one more shove in before stopping at the crosswalk to wait for their turn to cross. "Alright. Alright! Tony!" Steve laughed as Tony grinned back at him. "We're here. Come on, I'll buy you a ticket."

"I can afford my own ticket."

Steve shook his head and tucked his hands into his pockets. "It's like a dollar fifty, just let me pay for it."

A moment of quiet stretched between them as they waited for their turn to walk. Steve watched as the streetlight changed from green to yellow, but right before it turned to red he felt a hand grab his arm.

Steve gasped in surprise as Tony gripped his shoulder, swung him around, and almost threw him across the sidewalk and down into a side alley. "Oh jeez! Tony What-? Umph!" Steve was cut off as Tony's lips were suddenly back on his, the Cat forcing his tongue into his mouth. Closing his eyes, Steve instinctually tilted his head to the side to deepen the kiss further. His hands moved up, one burying itself in Tony's hair while the other tightened on his waist to pull him up a little higher.

His body thrummed as arousal surged back into his body, just as strong as it had been earlier that day. But, they were in an alley and…Pulling back just enough to break the kiss, Steve moved his mouth so that his lips brushed up against Tony's cheek as he spoke. "Tony, I thought we were going to wait."

"I changed my mind." Tony smirked as he leaned back against the wall, tucking his thumbs into the belt loops of Steve's dress pants to pull the Wolf on top of him.

His heart was pounding a mile a minute at the sudden proximity and the spark of heat in Tony's eyes and Steve fought to maintain some sense of decorum. "Someone could see…"

His excuse sounded weak even to his own ears, so Steve wasn't surprised when it just made Tony's smirk spread, the Cat looking ridiculously smug. "No one's going to look back here. Besides, there's got to be a little voyeuristic streak in you somewhere."
Steve felt his resolve slowly being broken down as Tony tugged him closer still. By now they were pressed together from chest to thigh, one of Tony's hands wrapping around the back of Steve's neck while the other kept a tight hold on his waist. "I don't actually think there is…"

"Come on…" Tony dragged his fingers down Steve's side. "Every alpha has one. The need to own your mate in front of everyone so they know they're yours."

Steve swallowed thickly. "Is that what you're doing now?"

"Maybe. What are you going to do about it?"

Steve looked into Tony's eyes, willing himself to step back. They should get to the subway, so they could get home. And do this behind closed doors. But Tony was here, teasing him, challenging him, and he just couldn't…he couldn't fight against this. Oh God…

Sucking in a breath, Steve crowded Tony against the filthy brick wall of the alley. He wished he could smell Tony's real scent but by his expression it was still pretty clear that he was enjoying this as much as Steve was. His eyes narrowed though as Steve braced his arms against the wall on either side of the Cat's head, trapping him there. Instead of trying to slip away he changed tactics and spread his legs just enough to create a spot for Steve to slide into before attacking his mouth again.

Steve's hips began to rut up against Tony's thigh on their own accord, the Panther letting out a pleased rumble as his hips began to move in response. Gritting his teeth, Steve forced himself not to come right there in his pants like some young pup, especially not in his new slacks, but good Lord was it hard. Tony was panting heavy, hot breaths against his ear now. "Fuck…Steve…” He stretched his arms out to grab at Steve's back, his fingers sliding under his suit jacket and griped at the white undershirt like all he wanted to do was tear the thing off. "I want you so fucking bad right now."

A whine rolled out of Steve as Tony began to nuzzle at his throat. "Me too."

"Tell me."

"Huh?"

"Tell me what you want."

Steve turned his head so that his embarrassed moan was half-muffled against Tony's jaw. "Tony…"

"Come on, Steve." Tony's tone was insistent verging on desperate and it left Steve without any other choice than to say something.

"I, ugh…I want you in bed. I, I want you spread out on the sheets. I want us to, to do it so many times neither of us can walk right tomorrow."

Tony seemed to choke before a husky laugh burst of out his throat between heavy gasps for air. "Ha! Oh my god, you are so bad at dirty talk but holy shit, I'm still getting off on it. What the hell is wrong with me?"

That was it. Steve was going to lose it and either come in his pants or rip off both of their pants and get down to it right there in the alleyway. But then a rustling from further down the alleyway managed to catch his ears. With the state he was in, he would have ignored it but the sound was accompanied by the scent of Wolf Shifters wafting through the garbage-tinged air. Four of them.
Another pack. He was really out of it. A second later he felt Tony's short fingernails dig into his back and knew that the Panther had noticed them too and was less than happy about the interruption.

It almost physically hurt to separate himself from Tony but he could feel the other Wolves' presence at his back and the alpha inside him wouldn't allow him to do anything other than turn and acknowledge them. Especially since they had caught him and his mate at such a private, potentially vulnerable moment.

Tony clenched his jaw as Steve untangled himself and slowly spun around, both of them straightening their shoulders so that they were standing taller. The approaching Wolves didn't seem intimidated though, undoubtedly because they believed they had strength in numbers. Just from a quick glance, Steve had them figured out. They were just another intercity pack, more like a street gang than anything else. He had run into a few of them before with the Howling Commandos. Some of them were good kids, just a little misguided, but some were no better than their thuggish human counterparts.

Their alpha strolled up to Steve, insultingly close, and cocked his head to the side. "What do we have here? Who do you think you are, wandering into another alpha's territory?"

Steve felt part of him settle as all of the Wolves' attention fell on him. It wasn't a surprise; given that Tony was still repressing his scent, they probably thought he was human. But Steve wasn't about to get disrespected. Not with Tony watching. But he wasn't going to stoop to their level either. "This is a city street and public property. The law states that it can't be owned by any one alpha."

"Looks like we got ourselves a do-gooder on our hands."

One of the Wolves hanging back, a high-ranking beta, sorted and crossed his arms over his chest. "He didn't look so do-gooder with his tongue down that guy's throat."

It was all the encouragement the alpha needed and he spun back around on Steve. "So, what, you think you'd just stop in for a quickie with your chew toy? 'Fraid it don't work like that around here."

Taking a breath to calm himself down, Steve held up his hands in what he hoped was a placating gesture. "Listen, fellas, I don't want any trouble." This was his and Tony's one night out for who knew how long. He had no plans on getting into a fight. All he wanted to do now was get down to the subway so that he and Tony could get home and continue with what they had started in the alley. Even with the interruption, he was pretty confident that they could get back into the mood fairly quickly if Steve was able to get these guys to leave them alone. They might be thugs, but even Shifter gangs weren't known to jump other random Shifters.

"Hey, Joey," another one of the Wolves suddenly perked up, Steve's attention jumping over to him as he snapped his fingers and addressed the alpha. "I recognize this guy. He was on the news a couple weeks ago."

Steve's eyes narrowed as the other alpha's brows knit in confusion. "What of it?"

"He's that Wolf in the gang that messed up Nineteenth Street in the Shifter fight."

The alpha's attitude changed in an instant; if Steve was any less of a Wolf he would have stepped back at the alpha's sudden burst of rage. He jabbed a finger at Steve's chest and Steve growled low in his throat. "That true? You were there?"
"Yes. But I can—"

The alpha snarled, baring his teeth. "If you say 'I can explain', I'm gonna knock your fuckin' teeth in. You know what that story did to us? Humans crackin' down on Shifters, can't even go into the shops no more without getting dirty looks. They're treating us like fuckin' monsters."

Steve clenched his teeth and he felt the tension in Tony's body next to him. "I'm sorry but we were doing what we had to do." He wasn't going to apologize more than that. The aftermath of the fight was unfortunate but Steve still didn't think they had done anything wrong. At least, they had done their best. They had protected people, potentially including the Wolf standing in front of him.

But the alpha just growled and balled his hands into fists. "Yeah, and now we're doing what we have to do. Come on, boys," he motioned back at his pack, "let's show these two what sort of monsters we really are."

Steve tensed and prepared to defend himself. But before the pack could move there was a rustle of cloth beside Steve and Tony stepped out in front of him. His brows were narrowed into a dangerous glare and his voice had dropped low. Steve didn't think he had ever heard Tony sound so menacing. "You take one step closer and we're going to have some serious problems."

The pack was visibly thrown off balance by Tony's sudden declaration. They hadn't expected a second opponent. Steve watched as they quickly measured Tony up, saw their noses twitch as they took in his scent. Their opinion of him was clear as the alpha's lip curled up into a sneer. "Aww, look, his bitch is protecting him."

Tony remarkably kept his calm and this time it was actually he who had to hold Steve back from making a move. "I know you're just a bunch of dumb animals, but let me try to explain something to you. I could buy you and use your pelts in front of a fireplace in one of my eight mansions and if you lay a hand on either one of us you can be damned sure that I can pay a lawyer to have you all put away for life."

The next few seconds seemed to go by in slow motion. The alpha's face went red with rage, angry to the point where fur pricked up under his flesh. The whole pack started forward but the alpha threw out an arm, his fist flying straight for Tony's face. But before the punch landed on its mark, Steve caught the alpha's fist just inches from Tony's nose.

Steve couldn't remember being so mad in his life. It was one thing to threaten him, to attack him, but no one—no one—was going to hurt his mate in front of him. The pack betas skidded to a halt as the alpha just blinked at him in shock. Steve was unusually strong, even for an alpha Wolf, and now he was going to prove it.

Snarling, out of his mind with anger, Steve whipped the other alpha's arm back so fast he heard a dull snap of bone. The Wolf howled in pain and wrestled his arm back from Steve to cradle it against his chest. One of the betas lunged forward to defend his alpha but Steve knocked him down with one solid blow to his jaw. The beta was sent flying back onto his ass, blood spurting from his nose from where Steve had clipped it. Steve felt like tearing them apart, like knocking them to the ground and beating them all into a bloody mess.

But he wouldn't. Because he would rise above his primal urges, just like he always did.

To a certain extent.

Stepping forward, Steve hauled the alpha up to his feet by the collar of his shirt and growled into his face. "You do not hit him. Now turn around and go before I make you."
He dropped the Wolf and he and Tony waited in silence as the wayward pack turned tail and scrambled back down the alleyway. Then Steve grabbed Tony's arm and pulled him back to the crosswalk, then hauled him across the street to the entrance to the subway station.

It wasn't until they were seated inside an outbound train car that Steve finally relaxed his shoulders out of his defensive posturing. Leaning over his lap, Steve sighed and rested his head in his hands, his arms propped up on his knees. Tony glanced over at him before letting out a light sigh of his own and resting back against the seat, letting his thigh brush up against Steve's in a small sign of comfort. It took a few moment for Steve to work some words out of his throat and when he finally managed his voice was barely audible. "...I'm sorry I made you take the subway."

Tony hesitated then smiled. "It's alright, you can make it up to me later. Besides, I tend to attract mobs and riots whenever I go out into public. Usually it's in a club or at a conference but an alleyway downtown isn't too different I guess..." Steve shook his head but Tony was being so lighthearted about it that he couldn't help but smile a bit back. "And I did like the way you nearly ripped that Wolf's arm out of its socket."

"Yeah, I still feel bad about that..." And he did. Now. Less at the time, but now that he had time to reflect on it all he hadn't needed to be that rough with the other alpha. Although he hadn't intentionally broken his arm. It had just happened...

"Don't. He was an asshole. Of course he was a Wolf, so that statement's a little redundant." "Uh..."

Steve looked over at Tony but the Cat waved off his confusion. "You and Bruce are exceptions."

"You seem to have a thing against Wolves."

Tony shrugged. "I haven't had the best experiences with them."

Steve was about to ask what Wolves had ever done to him to make him feel this way but then remembered that Stane, who had orchestrated Tony's kidnapping when he was a teen, had been a Wolf. That was one example he didn't want Tony to have to give so he swallowed the question and tried another. "But you mated with one?"

"Like I said," Tony met his eyes and his thigh pressed a little closer against Steve's, "you're an exception..." O-O

Steve was never so happy to get back to the house. Tony looked equally relieved and threw open the front doors with a dramatic flourish. Steve winced and smiled as the double doors slammed against the wall. The sounds summoned Bruce and Thor from the living room and Steve amused himself with the thought that the two were waiting up for them. "Have a good time?"

Steve and Tony looked at each other for a long moment before Tony lifted a shoulder and smiled at Bruce. "For the most part."

Thor grinned but the expression sobered a moment later as the large Shifter scented the air. "Steve, why do you smell of blood?"

Blood? Steve gave himself a once-over and found that, sure enough, there were specks of blood on his knuckles. Oh, the beta's nose. "It's, uh..." Shaking his hand out, Steve clumsily tried to mimic Tony's nonchalance. "We just had a little scrap with a small Wolf pack on our way back. That's
Bruce raised an incredulous brow. "Someone started a fight with you?"

"Yeah. They had their alpha with them and recognized me from the news when they were airing footage of us fighting Loki a few weeks back."

Thor flinched light at the mention of his brother then narrowed his eyes in concern. "And what they saw gave them cause for violence?"

"They said their lives had been affected by the story and all the recent hype about Shifter violence. After everything, including what happened to the SHIELD building, I can't say I blame them for being angry."

Tony snorted. "I can. Just because they're angry doesn't mean they had to take it out on you. Besides, the morons are only perpetuating the idea that Wolves are dumb, raging animals. Not exactly the smartest road to take."

Okay, that was true but…"I'm not condoning their actions, I'm just saying that I can understand their point of view. Not specifically about their reaction to me being in that fight, but all of it. We've been separate from it all here in the mansion, but I wouldn't be surprised if it's rough out there in the city now for all kinds of Shifters."

Bruce broke in. "Well, I think the important thing for now is that you two made it back unharmed. It would've been a shame for your date night to end at the hospital." It figured that Bruce would be the one to change the subject. Steve was grateful. It had been a long night and the last thing he wanted to do was get into a debate about Shifter politics and Shifter-Human relations. That was not the way he wanted to end the night.

And speaking of which…Tony grinned. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Bruce. It's only eleven o'clock. We still have plenty of time to get into trouble." The look he shot Steve left little doubt as to just what kind of "trouble" he was really talking about.

Bruce's nose wrinkled up in disgust before he brushed it off with a light shrug. "If you end up in the hospital, you're doing it wrong."

At Bruce's remark, Thor's face lit up in understanding. "Oh! You were speaking of-!"

Bruce cut him off before the Lion was about to finish his sentence. "Yes. He was. And I, for one, am going to stay up for a while and watch a movie or something."

By then Steve was fighting down the blush that seemed to have sat on his cheeks for a good half of the night. Tony, on the other hand, thanked Bruce with a wink and grabbed Steve by the shoulders to lead him back upstairs. There was still a whole hour left to their night alone. Steve was just thankful that it was going to end on a good note after all.

O~O~O~O

Tony grunted as he was woken up by the sound of his phone going off. Finding himself trapped in a knot of limbs, half of which weren't his, Tony twisted and squirmed his way out of Steve's hold until he was able to grab his phone from the nightstand. Then he promptly slid back into the warm spot in the bed he had left behind before answering the incoming call. "Hello?"

He was still groggy so the word didn't come out as well-formed as it should've, but it seemed to get the point across well enough. "Tony? Tony, it's Pepper."
Sighing, Tony nestled back into Steve's hold. The Wolf murmured something in his sleep then pressed his forehead against Tony's shoulder. They were both naked under the sheets, their legs horribly intertwined and Tony was still covered in unmentionable things that were sort of starting to itch on his skin now. They probably should have jumped in the shower after they had finished but it had already been three in the morning and Tony had sort of just wanted to pass out. So he had. Maybe he could get Steve to change the bed sheets for him once he woke up.

Last night had been pretty amazing though. Tony hadn't wanted to admit it at the time, but seeing Steve go all alpha on that other Wolf did something for him. Maybe Tony had liked to see his mate showing off and dominate another alpha. It certainly hadn't hurt knowing that as strong as Steve was, Tony could make him get on his knees and beg, especially in bed. Because that had definitely happened at one point last night. Not that Tony hadn't done his fair share of begging. But none of that would ever leave the four walls of this room. He had even remembered to tell JARVIS to take the night off so nothing had been recorded on the security system. Which was kind of a shame now that he thought about it.

But back to the present. "Hey Pep."

"Tony, there's a media firestorm outside our building. I really need you to come back into the office and help me sort this out!"

"Well, hello to you to."

"I'm serious, Tony! Someone noticed you at the restaurant last night with Steve and saw that little scuffle you had with those other Wolves. They've posted photographs all over the internet."

She did legitimately sound overwhelmed, which meant that he was actually going to have to get out of bed. Leaning over, Tony saw that it was ten thirty in the morning. Which meant that it had taken just over twelve hours for the press to blow his whole date night out of proportion. Usually they had a faster response time than that. Readjusting his hold on the phone, Tony ran his fingers through Steve's hair as the Wolf began to wake, probably because of Tony talking. He hadn't exactly bothered to keep his voice down. If he had to be awake, Steve might as well be too. "So, what's the issue for the reporters this time? That I'm seeing someone, I'm bisexual, or the Shifter thing?"

"All of it! But the 'Shifter thing' seems to be a pretty big concern for them, especially with what's been going on in the city. Shifters aren't that popular right now and you being seen with one…"  

Tony hissed under his breath. Steve's eyes flickered open to give him a bleary, curious look but Tony only shook his head. "That's a load of bullshit. Chauvinistic parasites…"

"I'm not arguing with you on that one, but they're basically demanding to see you so you either need to come down here and talk to them yourself or tell me what you want me to say to them."

"Alright, alright, I'll be there in an hour."

Tony ended the call before Pepper ordered him to be there sooner. An hour was pushing it as it was. Especially since Steve was pushing closer to plant a lazy kiss against his lips. Tony hummed and closed his eyes as Steve parted his lips and their tongues met as the kiss deepened. Damn, was it going to be hard to leave. But Pepper would kill him if he didn't show up.

Leaning back, Tony broke the kiss and rested against the pillow. He hadn't planned on ever sharing his bed when he had bought it but he had never been so thankful he had splurged on the mattress and sheets. Steve had said that it was Tony, not the bed, that made it so comfortable to sleep but
the feeling of silk against his skin certainly didn't hurt. Except when you had to leave it; then it almost hurt. "I knew this was too good to last…"

Concern was back in Steve's eyes as he looked over at Tony with those ridiculous blue eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"Sure." You know, in the grand scheme of things. "But I've got to go in to work."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Except I think I just made front page of the next Star magazine."

Steve quirked a brow but didn't protest as Tony grudgingly slid out of bed and stumbled into the bedroom. Twenty minutes later he was cleaned up and back in a suit, albeit not his favorite—he had worn that one last night. He left Steve in the bedroom and went downstairs, skipping the coffee in favor of a shot of whisky. He needed the extra fortification and he always handled the press better when he was slightly tipsy.

Happy was waiting for him with the car outside, no doubt sent by Pepper to ensure that Tony actually made it. Tony gave the man a tired wave before snatching his sunglasses out of his pocket and slipping into the back of the sedan. "I'm guessing Pepper filled you in this morning."

"She sure did." Happy met his shaded gaze in the rearview mirror. "You want to go straight to the office or make a stop first?"

Bless Happy and his fantastic, well-trained self. Usually Tony wouldn't hesitate to tell him to swing by the donut shop first but the few extra minutes he had taken to say goodbye to Steve had put him behind schedule. Pepper had helped him plan yesterday out for his date with Steve so Tony didn't have it in his heart to stand up to her this morning. "Straight to the office, Happy. See what you can do to get me there in under half an hour."

"Sure thing, boss."

Leaning back against the cushioned seat, Tony tried to put himself in the right frame of mind for what was coming up as Happy hit the gas. Pepper had said some asshole with a camera had caught him out with Steve last night. That didn't really bother him. He wasn't embarrassed about it, and he and Steve would have gone out eventually, probably with the same result. Maybe they had been prodded into going out a little sooner than they would have wanted, but it definitely been necessary.

Tony felt alright, being away from Steve after spending so much time attached at the hip. To be honest, it was a bit of weight off his shoulders. A niggling feeling in the back of his mind told him that Bruce had been right all along about that stupid trauma separation-anxiety nonsense between mates. And he and Steve had definitely reconnected, particularly late last night into the morning. Now that tension Tony had been feeling whenever he was away from Steve was more or less gone. He didn't have to worry about Steve's health or if he was looked-after. He could go on, almost like normal. And that was a relief.

It certainly made it easier for Tony to focus on what was waiting for him at his office.

Happy pulled up the curb right in front of Stark Industries and Tony stepped out before his driver could come around and open the door for him. Luckily the press wasn't lying in wait for him—Pepper must have herded them inside to one of the conference rooms—so he didn't have to force his way to the front entrance. A few steps in, a bold-printed title caught his eye in the newspaper
stand posted on the sidewalk.

He didn't usually bother with the newspaper, choosing instead to get most of his news online, but he found this one hard to ignore. **SHIFTER WAR EMINENT?** Fishing in his pockets for loose change, Tony found a quarter, shoved it into the machine, and ripped a copy of the city's leading paper out of the box.

Tony flipped the paper open as he stalked towards the front door of his building. Shit. *With the recent and shocking increase in violence among the Shifter community, residents of the city fear that it is a matter of time before an all-out war breaks out between Shifters and humans. Worries increased exponentially with the destruction earlier this week of SHIELD's office here in the city, the damage having been accredited to rouge Shifters who managed to gain access to the building by posing as clients of the organization's many social programs. SHIELD has assured residents that it was an isolated incident and had no connection to the fight that broke out on 19th Street, nor the increase in local Shifter gang violence, but how can humans put their faith in a group that is unable to contain and control Shifters even within their walls?*

Fuck…Swallowing down a snarl, Tony looked up to find that he had reached the elevator. Stepping in and punching in button for the top floor, Tony leaned back against the wall and skimmed the rest of the article. It was full of interviews with panicking humans and skittish, brown-nosing politicians who simultaneously tried to calm the readers and pander to their mostly human-based contingent. They were all playing right into Hydra's hands, the idiots.

Turning his phone on, Tony accessed his personal security network. "JARVIS?"

"*Yes sir?*

"Start tracking all the local and national newspapers and stations for stories about Shifters and send any links directly to my phone."

"*As you wish, sir. A preliminary search indicates that thirty seven stories have been published within the last week."

"Fine. Good. Send them to me."

"*Yes sir."

A series of messages popped up on his home screen but Tony signed off before he even bothered to look at the titles. He had just reached his floor and he wasn't going to waste his time on that right now.

As soon as the elevator doors pinged and slid open, Pepper was there waiting for him, her hands on her hips. Yup, she was mad. Pasting on a wide smile, Tony shoved his phone back into his pocket and strolled into his office. "Hey, Pep."

"*Tony."

"What's with that face? You should be happy I showed up at all."

She rolled her eyes but her hands dropped to her sides. "I suppose I should be grateful for small favors. I have the reporters waiting in the main conference hall. There's a lot of them in there, from magazines, television stations, newspapers…Tony, it's like your Tokyo scandal all over again!"

"Oh, good. This should be fun then."
"Tony, this is serious! And you're not the only one with a reputation on the line this time."

That sobered Tony up. He was well aware that he wouldn't be the only one under the gun. Usually he wouldn't care, but this time the other person was Steve. And he cared. "I know. I'm not going to throw Steve under the bus."

Pepper let out a breath then paced over to the large windows looking out over the city. If you looked hard, you could see the pile of rubble that used to be the SHIELD building. She looked out for a long moment and sighed. "What are you going to tell them?"

"The truth."

She whipped her head around to stare at him. "The tru—how much of 'the truth'?"

"Fuck it," Tony threw his hands up into the air, "all of it. I'm a Cat, Steve's my mate, and paparazzi are terrible wastes of human lives."

Pepper walked back over to him. "Now let's just think about this for a minute, Tony. Do you really want—?"

"What I don't want is to keep on having to keep up this damned charade anymore, Pepper! I don't have anything to prove to anyone. I'm not human, I'm a Cat, and if they suddenly think I'm less of a man for that then fuck them!"

She swallowed and rested her hand on his arm. "Tony, think about this company and your investors."

Tony hissed. He hated that he already knew where she was going with this. "What about them?"

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "In this kind of political climate, Tony, I don't know if even Stark Industries could stay afloat. After everything you and your father put into this business you can't just throw it away like this."

"So you're saying I should keep on hiding?"

"No! I mean, yes. Tony," Pepper sighed, "you know I love you. You're the smartest man I know, human or Shifter. I never want you to feel any less about yourself but, think about the big picture. It's a fact, Tony, Shifters make humans nervous and they have restrictions. Think of everything you can do because people think you're human. I don't think it's morally right to have you keep lying but it might be the smartest option."

He knew she was right. That's what made it so hard to hear. Ever since he recognized that there was a difference between humans and Shifters, Tony knew that there was a difference in how they were treated. It's part of why his dad had played his own animal form so close to the vest and why Tony had chosen to live as a human. As a Panther, as an alpha Panther, the world might not accept his business. Shifters weren't supposed to be smart, or rich, or successful, and they didn't run companies. ".I'm telling them about Steve though."

"What do you mean?"

"That we're an item. That I'm off the market. That he's a Shifter and if they have a problem with it they can suck it."

Her fingers relaxed on his arm and she actually smiled at him. "That sounds good. Are you ready now?"
"Will you let me have a drink first?"

"No. I can smell whatever you had earlier and you don't need another."

"Then, yes, I'm ready. Lead me to the executioner's block."

"Stop being so dramatic…"

Despite her protests, Pepper escorted Tony back to the elevator and down to the second floor where metaphorical wolves were waiting for him instead of real ones. There was a door leading to a stage on the far side of the room that was separate from the main entrance to the conference room which let Tony sneak inside to—look at that—a podium that had already been set up. He felt like he was running for office.

Murmurs and camera flashes instantly exploded in the rather large crowd as Tony appeared. He gave a dismissive wave as he sauntered over to the podium, watching out of the corner of his eye through his sunglasses as Pepper hung back to allow him the spotlight. Fine, suit herself.

Reaching the podium, Tony leaned onto it and adjusted the microphone. "Testing, testing. Oh great, the audio's working. Alright, who's first?"

Among the mass of reporters and paparazzi, Tony saw three, no, four men and women dressed in dark suits with sunglasses over their eyes. It looked like SHIELD had sent a small army to fact check him, undoubtedly prepped for damage control.

"Mr. Stark!"

Ah, the first taker. Tony flashed a broad smile at the annoying man, representing a celebrity gossip forum online. He really should remember the guy's name for all that he wrote about him. "Please, call me Tony. Mr. Stark was my father."

"Tony, who was that man you were with? Are you really dating a male Shifter?"

Right to Steve then. Perfect. "No. We're not dating." Tony saw Pepper's posture stiffen up behind him as he let his statement hang in the air for a moment. "We're in a committed, long term, sexual and emotional relationship."

Just as expected, the room blew up in a flurry of flashing lights and scribbling of pens.

"So you're gay?"

The question rang out anonymously from the crowd, but Tony was pretty sure that it had come from a pretty brunette standing in the third row. "I'm whatever I want to be. And you saw the pictures, he's gorgeous. Who could blame me?"

Another woman, a spry-looking blonde, shot her hand up then spoke before Tony could so much as point to her. "But he's a Shifter! What do you have to say about all the recent Shifter violence in the city?"

Tony swallowed. His thoughts instantly raced back to the newspaper article he had read just minutes before and half-wished he had taken the time to glance at the articles JARVIS downloaded for him. He hadn't expected that this conversation would go there. That they would already know that Steve was a Shifter. Of course, if someone had caught sight of them in that alleyway there would be no doubt in any observer's mind that Steve was a Shifter. Humans didn't break bone like that.
Adjusting his tone into a more serious one, Tony straightened out of his relaxed stance. If they wanted to get political, he could go there. "You can't let a few isolated incidences mar the reputation of an entire subspecies. There are good and bad humans and there are good and bad Shifters. End of story. I am fully supportive of the Shifter communities in this city and elsewhere and I would ask the human media to stop making a nationwide crisis out of private matters and to stop blaming the victims. As humans, we have an opportunity in this moment to stop being afraid of something just because it's different than us and to step up and support a group that has been persecuted for centuries for abilities they were born with."

"If you feel so strongly about this, how come we're only hearing about it now?"

Another anonymous shout, and Tony felt his temper rise. "Stark Industries has supported foundations and community centers for Shifters since my father founded the company. You vultures just don't give a damn about my business until I'm in a club with a drink in my hand!"

Pepper hurried up to the podium and elegantly shoved him away from the microphone so that she could take over. "That will be all the questions for now. Feel free to submit any further inquiries to Mr. Stark in writing or arrange a private interview with him at a later date."

Abruptly calling an end to the little press conference, Pepper hustled Tony out of the room amidst the cries of further questions. Tony let her push him out, too irate to do much else. He hated how they treated Shifters. How they were treating this whole situation.

He didn't try to hide his bad mood and Pepper didn't fight him about it, just brought him downstairs and loaded him back into his car with directions for Happy to take him back home. Tony knew that he'd have to actually get back to work at some point, but today wasn't that day. No way would he be able to get anything productive done.

When Tony arrived back home he walked in to find everyone sitting on the couch in the media room watching the news. The news which was currently airing the last few seconds of the speech he had just given.

Slipping off his sunglasses, Tony wandered in and everyone's eyes turned to watch him as he gestured at the TV. "Did you get to see who whole thing, or did they edit it down?"

Natasha raised her brows from where she was sitting halfway across Clint's lap on the couch. "The whole thing."

Tony nodded and sat on the arm of the chair Steve was sitting in. Steve instinctually reached over and wrapped an arm around Tony's waist, whether for support or comfort Tony didn't know but both were appreciated. Bruce offered Tony a smile which he returned. "That was really good, Tony."

"Thanks, Bruce."

Clint grinned. "And delivered with your usual sophistication and eloquence."

Snorting, Tony turned back to the TV where they had cut back to the news anchors who apparently had nothing more interesting to talk about that day than his love life. "It got the point across."

Thor watched the anchors bicker back and forth for a moment about whether or not Steve was a gold-digger before shaking his head. "Do you think it will make a difference in the treatment of Shifters in your country?"

"Who knows?" Tony hoped so. He wasn't used to using his status to speak about something
important—which was sort of sad now that he thought about it—but at the very least it would bring
the idea of Shifter rights into the public view. If they were lucky some hipster group would grab
onto it and make it mainstream. "It depends on the spin the media puts on it."

Steve sighed. "It would sure make our lives easier." At least he didn't seem bothered by being
shoved into the limelight by association.

Before Tony could respond his phone rang. Rolling his eyes, he pulled it out of his jacket pocket to
find that it wasn't the person he expected calling him. Instead of Pepper harping on him about his
little temper tantrum, it was a certain Agent.

Tony grinned, muted the TV, and put his phone on speaker as the rest of his pack looked over with
interest. "Agent Coulson! By your timing, I'm assuming you saw me on the news?"

"I did, as a matter of fact, but that's not the reason I'm calling. The world doesn't always revolve
around your antics."

Tony growled as he felt a small sting at the reprimand. Steve glanced up at him then to Tony's
phone. "Then why are you calling? Is something the matter?"

"Hello, Steve. And yes, you could say that. Using the intelligence you gathered on their warehouse
as evidence, we launched an official raid against Hydra. We seized all of their files and documents,
as well as all of their research based on the experiments they'd been conducting in the buildings.
We found some…disturbing news."

Grimacing, Tony looked up to meet Bruce's gaze as Steve's eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

"That facility was where Hydra apparently tested out their new, cutting edge experiments. But they
have a larger location where they carryout broader experiments based on the results they received
at the warehouse. In the Hydra files, they refer to it as 'the Factory'. From the information we
found, they could have conducted illegal experimentation on over one hundred abducted Shifters,
many of whom have likely already passed. It seems as if 'the Factory' is also where Schmidt
operates from."

Damn. That many Shifters had been taken? What about their friends and families, had they not
reported them missing? Why was this not on the front page of newspapers instead of stories stirring
up fear and violence? "Where is it?"

"Upstate New York. Steve, you've actually already been within a mile of it."

Tony's eyes fell back to his mate as the Wolf stiffened up. Steve had been that close to something
so huge? Something that dangerous? Steve shook his head, confusion written clearly all over his
face as he searched through his memories. "What? When?"

"When the Howling Commandos were attacked. You nearly stumbled across the Factory that
night, which is probably what prompted the assault."

The blood drained from Steve's face and Tony rested a hand on the Wolf's shoulder, honestly afraid
that he was about to pitch forward and fall off of the couch. But Steve took a breath and collected
himself, though the color didn't return to his cheeks and his eyes had that haunted look that Tony
hated back around them. "Tell me we're being sent out."

"Your pack's presence is requested tomorrow morning at City Hall for debriefing. Then we're
sending you out. Schmidt will be there, Steve. You'll have him. It'll be over."
Tony watched as Steve shut his eyes and the hand that had been wrapped around his waist balled up so tightly that Steve's knuckles turned white. "Thank God for that."
Chapter 16

Steve made sure that he and his pack arrived early to City Hall. Tony was particularly unhappy about being roused at such an early hour but he understood that this was important so he only complained for a few minutes as he rolled out of bed. The others were a little more prepared, although Bruce did look a little groggy as they loaded up into the car. Maybe he hadn't slept well. Steve certainly hadn't. Maybe that was part of the reason Tony had been so cranky that morning; he had probably kept him up a while with his tossing and turning.

Steve was the first to step out of the car as Tony parked it in a spot reserved for City Clerk in the lot out front. Thor was next, the Lion anxious to stretch his limbs, and the rest piled out behind him. Clint was grumbling something about driving a separate car next time but Steve ignored him and started straight for the main steps. The last time he had been inside City Hall, he had needed Tony's help to even make it to the door but now his strength seemed to have returned in full-force, bolstered by the promise of the mission ahead.

Thoughts of what exactly lay ahead made Steve pause for a moment on the second to last step. How long had he been waiting for this moment? How many hours had he spent thinking about it? Not this coming mission exactly, but getting the opportunity to avenge his pack. His old pack.

Steve was pulled into the present as Tony bumped his shoulder as he brushed by him. Raising a brow, the Cat cast a glance back at him as he strolled on. "C'mon, big dog. Let's get this over with."

Tony wasn't wearing a suit today, just a t-shirt over a long-sleeve shirt and a pair of dark jeans, but he still pushed open the doors and sauntered into City Hall as if he owned it. Shaking his head, Steve hurried to catch up and overtake his mate so that he would be the first one to talk to any municipal employee. He wanted to keep any extra drama to a minimum today; they were dealing with enough already.

There was no one waiting for this time—probably because they were a few minutes early—and Steve weaved past Tony to get to the receptionist first. As he walked up to the desk, the young woman's head jerked up as if in surprise before she gave him a winning smile. It took Steve half a second longer than it should have to realize she was a Wolf, a beta by the smell of it. He couldn't believe that City Hall would have hired a Shifter to be the first one to welcome all of their clients, but then again maybe SHIELD was already exercising some new control over the local government's employee policies now that they were temporarily housed within the same building.

Resting his hands on the counter, Steve returned her smile as best he could. "Hello, my name is Steve Rogers. My pack and I are here to meet with Agent Coulson?"

His voice lilted up into a question at the end when he realized that she might not know who he was talking about. But her face just brightened and with a quick nod she fished out guest passes. "Hello, Agent Rogers, and I know. We've been expecting you. I have to say, it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Steve heard the rest of his team shuffle into the lobby as she stood to pass him the badges. "Thank you. The pleasure's all mine."

His voice lilted up into a question at the end when he realized that she might not know who he was talking about. But her face just brightened and with a quick nod she fished out guest passes. "Hello, Agent Rogers, and I know. We've been expecting you. I have to say, it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Steve heard the rest of his team shuffle into the lobby as she stood to pass him the badges. "Thank you. The pleasure's all mine." He swallowed as he tried to take the passes from her and she hung on a little longer than necessary so that their fingers brushed.

The secretary bit her lip to try to stifle a smile as his shoulders bunched together nervously. Was she flirting with him? What, what was he supposed to do if she was? Oh jeez…He could just be reading it wrong. He never was good with this sort of thing. Her nose twitched and her smile
widened. "With the way people are talking about you around here, you can't imagine how good it feels to finally have a positive role model."

See? That seemed genuine. Steve tried to cover up his uncertainty with a smile. "I, uh, I'm just doing what I can."

"If there is anything I can ever do for you, please don't hesitate to ask—"

But, no, now she was definitely leaning over farther to the point where her cleavage was very visible and very noticeable beneath the blouse she was wearing. Oh good Lord, she was flirting with him. Steve's mouth went dry as he stammered out a response. It wasn't the first time but hadn't known what to do then either but now he was actually mated and Tony was standing right behind him and what if he had heard—He was an alpha, why was he so bad at this?!

Steve swallowed sharply as a hand clasped possessively around his waist and Tony appeared at his side with a tight smile on his face, effectively putting an end to Steve's pathetic stuttering. "Excuse me. Hi. Steve, on the brink of cross-species war, remember? Come on." Tony plucked the passes from Steve's hand and urged him away from the desk with a nod back at the now-pouting secretary. "Thanks for your help, kid. You can go back to typing or doing your nails or whatever it is the city pays you for."

Clint was sniggering as Tony handed out the badges to the rest of the pack, all the while keeping his hand on Steve's waist. Once they began to walk again, Steve jumped into an explanation. Tony had definitely heard all of that, and probably gotten a decent eyeful too. "Tony, I didn't—"

"I know."

"She just—"

"I know."

"Are you-?"

"I'm not mad." Steve finally looked down at the Cat to make sure he was telling the truth and, sure enough, there was a smirk on Tony's face instead of a frown. "I was just trying to save you from further humiliation. If she had kept on going you might've had a fainting spell."

Well, it was better to have Tony laughing at him than to have made him mad. Although it did sting his pride a bit more. It was a skill he just had never developed, talking to women. Or men, anyone attracted to him. People just hadn't paid him any attention for such a long time that it had never been an issue. But then suddenly he had grown into himself and people started...started to hit on him. At least it seemed like now he had Tony around to help him deal with it. Maybe he'd learn a thing or two.

The wing of City Hall SHIELD had commandeered was starting to look a little more put together than the last time Steve had seen it. The agents were settling in at their new workstations and there was less chaos in the hallways.

Before they could get too far, a voice echoed down the corridor. A female voice. "Steve!"

Steve jerked his head around at the sound of his name, his eyes widening in surprise just as Tony heaved a dramatic sigh and threw his arms up in defeat. "Oh my god, another one. Since when did you become a chick magnet?"

Steve cheeks flushed in embarrassment and he shook off Tony's hold as he hurried to defend
himself. "I'm not. And it's just Peggy." And boy, was she a sight for sore eyes as she hurried towards him. As anxious as he was to get to the meeting with Phil, he wanted to have a minute or two with Peggy first. "Take the others down, I'll be right there."

Tony frowned, spun around to glance sharply at Peggy, then rolled his eyes. Steve had no idea what series of thoughts just went through his mate's head but whatever it was he seemed to get over it. "Hurry up. Don't spend too long flirting."

"I'm not flir..." Steve let his protest trail off as Tony walked away. Thor and Bruce each cast him curious looks but Steve motioned for them to follow Tony. As their footsteps faded away, Peggy's grew louder and Steve turned to face her again as his pack turned into Coulson's office. She reached her hands out and Steve pulled her forward into a tight hug, taking care not to hug too tight and actually hurt the woman. God, he had missed her.

It seemed like the she returned the sentiments because she hugged him right back with nearly the same enthusiasm, a wide smile on her face and a sparkle in her eye as she pulled back. "Steve! It is so good to see you again. It feels like it's been ages."

Steve grinned back. Peggy looked great. She looked a little more weary, a little more worn, since the last time he had seen her but it was understandable. She worked with SHIELD after all; even if their paths hadn't crossed over the last month or so didn't mean she hadn't been affected by all the trouble SHIELD had recently become embroiled in. Particularly the collapse of their building. A sudden thought hit Steve that Peggy could have been in the SHIELD building at the time that Hydra had launched their attack and a wave of relief crashed over him that she was unharmed. "That's because it has been."

Peggy was observing him just as closely as he had her, her eyes dancing across his face. "How are you doing?"

How was he doing? The last few weeks had been...tough. None of the missions had been easy. Getting captured was no picnic. But so far his pack was whole and healthy, as was his mate. So, "Good, considering."

Her eyes narrowed at his hesitation and she rested a palm against his cheek. It was a comforting touch, it grounded him. She was a rock he had depended on since he was a teenager and the only good thing left from his past. "Your nightmares, are they still there?"

"Not so much anymore. I think it helps that I'm not alone."

The corner of her mouth curled down before she schooled her features, settling simply on raising a graceful brow. "Ah, yes, I heard about your recent attachment to Mr. Stark."

Steve frowned. "You don't like him?" As soon as the question left his lips, the memory of Tony and Peggy's last encounter came to mind. It had been when Peggy was bailing them out of jail after their fight with Loki. Tony had been...difficult that day. Even for him. And other than that, how could Peggy actually know the real Tony? Steve himself had flat out disliked Tony for a longer time than he would like to admit now. He couldn't blame Peggy for being skeptical.

"I think he can be a fine enough fellow when he cares to be. No," Her hands slid down to his shoulders as she held him out at arm's length, "I suppose it is simply hard to imagine anyone being good enough for you. But it is a comfort to see you happy again. You deserve some amount of peace in your life and if Stark is the person to do it, then so be it. There must be something wonderful in him if he managed to capture your attention."
Her words and her reluctant approval really hit home. He could tell that she meant what she said and Peggy really was the closest thing he had to family left in his life. He knew she would feel better about it when she got to know Tony better. "He's...He's just, great. Complicated, but...I think he's perfect for me."

"Good. I wouldn't have it any other way. Now, what brings you here?" As she spoke, Peggy took another step back so that they were just beyond arm's reach, conscious of her surroundings again.

Steve sobered at the reminder. "We were called in by Agent Coulson. It sounds as if we are going to be assigned a fairly important mission that might help to settle out this whole Hydra business."

An odd look came flashed through Peggy's eyes but it had passed before Steve was able to pinpoint it, replaced instead by a tight smile. "Then I shall not keep you waiting. I'll call you later. Can I assume you have access to a phone now?"

She was teasing him and Steve smiled back in response. "I do have a phone. And a talking, emotive butler-computer to answer it for me."

Peggy's lips pinched up in confusion before her smile brightened. "Ah, Stark's creation no doubt. What a strange, new world you must find yourself in, living with him."

"You have no idea!"

Peggy's smile said that she had some ideas but was too polite to speak any of them out loud.

After a quick goodbye, it took Steve just a short moment to catch up with his pack down the hall. Although Phil had been the one to call them in, Steve wasn't entirely surprised to find Fury waiting for him inside Coulson's office. The two agents were standing while everyone else was squeezed around the desk that had been pushed into the center of the room to act as a table. A heavy tension had settled in the room and only Tony offered him a smile as Steve stepped in, closing the door behind him.

Taking the only available seat between Tony and Natasha, Steve redirected his attention to Phil as he lightly cleared his throat. "Thank you for getting here so promptly. Most of you already know Director Fury, but for those of you who don't," he eyed Bruce and Thor. Clint and Natasha must have already been introduced at some point, "Director Fury is ultimately in charge of field operations in SHIELD and requested to personally debrief you on the upcoming mission."

Fury nodded and reached into his trench coat to pull out a plain manila folder and, without any ceremony, threw the folder full of paperwork down onto the center of the table. All of them, Phil included, stared at the stack of documents in surprise before Tony's hand shot out, flipped the folder open, and pulled the documents inside over to his seat. "What the hell is this?"

Phil started for the folder but held back as Fury gave him a reprimanding look. "Sir, do you really think we should—? I didn't think they were authorized to—"

"Coulson, if they're going to do this right, they need to know everything." Straightening up, Fury paced to the other side of the room before turning back to Steve as Tony skimmed over the page. "These are documents you were never meant to see."

Steve frowned. "Then why are we seeing them?"

"Because it's time you knew the truth about what you've gotten yourselves into. I'm tired of dancing around it because of what politicians want or don't want."
Tony had already flipped through the front pages of the thick stack of papers but stopped with a
confused little grin on his face, his brows furrowed like he couldn't decide whether he was amused
or annoyed. "We have code names?"

"What?" Steve leaned over into Tony's space and his mate tilted the paperwork so that he could
read it better. Across the table Bruce snatched up a loose page while Natasha and Clint shared a
dubious look. Thor just looked distracted, like he wasn't fully focused on what was going on in the
room.

But Tony was right; instead of listing their real names, SHEILD's document had rewritten their
various deeds and tasks using code names. A small blush dusted Steve's cheeks as he deciphered
which one was his. "'Captain'?"

Fury's expression hadn't changed the entire time even as Coulson fidgeted beside him. When the
SHIELD agent realized his supervisor wasn't going to respond to Steve's question, Phil cleared his
throat and answered instead. "It suits you, don't you think? You're the leader of the crew."

Tony wrinkled his nose. "'Iron Man'? Seriously? How does that fit?"

Phil shrugged noncommittally. "We've had that name on file for a while. You were pretending to
be human after all."

Tony didn't look convinced that was all there was to it. "And the 'Iron' part?"

"You're good with machinery…That, and you're hard-headed and closed-off."

Snorting, Tony looked back down at the paperwork. "Why do I get the feeling that you're the one
who came up with most of these names?"

Steve looked up as he felt an ebb of disappointment from his beta to find Bruce staring down at the
page with an expressionless mask on. "I guess I can figure out why you called me the 'Hulk'
then…"

Steve understood why he would be upset; to be named after the part of you that you hated and were
ashamed of must be a hard blow to take. Thankfully, Agent Coulson was quick to notice. "I assure
you, Dr. Banner, it's not a reflection on your most useful role in the field, just of your most unusual
attribute. The same goes for 'Hawkeye' and 'Black Widow'."

Fury had apparently had enough and loudly cleared his throat, "Alright, let's move on. We have
more pressing issues at hand than your code names."

"Why do I not have a code name!" Thor's voice boomed out from where the Cat was sitting if he
had finally just realized what they all were talking about. He had gotten a hold of the papers Tony
had already discarded and had spread them all over the desk. "All of this text makes use of my
name!"

Phil held up his hands. "We didn't initially expect your involvement and by the time you were
formally labeled as a member of the team we—"

"Agent Coulson." Fury hadn't yelled but his warning tone made Coulson snap his mouth shut. "As I
was saying, how about we move on to something that actually matters?" Phil tucked his chin down
and hastened to put the packet of papers back into some semblance of order.

"Sorry, sir." Steve refused to cower, even though the intimidation in the man's voice was
impressive for a human, but was certainly willing to apologize. He had let his pack get a little off
track after all.

Waiting for a moment, as if to make sure that all the interruptions had actually finished, Fury eyed in of them in turn before continuing. "You all know why you're here. Our sources finally managed to track down where Hydra has been hiding out after the information we gathered from the lab where they experimented on Rogers." Steve straightened up in his seat as he felt Tony tense beside him at Fury's casual mention of that experience. "As Coulson has already informed you, it's in upstate New York in a heavily forested, low-population area."

There was a screen on the wall and as Fury spoke, Coulson used a tablet he pulled out of his pocket to pull an image up onto the screen. It looked like a satellite aerial of a rocky patch of woods. Steve felt a shiver of anticipation run up his spine. The landscape was the same, the same sort of trees, brush, and rocks that he had ran through the day his old pack had died. So it was true. He had been that close…

Tony frowned then spun around from the screen to glower at Fury. "I appreciate nature photography as much as the next guy, but are we supposed to be seeing something here or just some treetops?"

"This is 'the Factory', Stark." Fury motioned back for Coulson to switch the image and the next one he pulled up was some sort of thermal image. The landscape was instantly filled with outlines of rooms and halls that made up a sprawling complex with at least a hundred humanoid heat signatures wandering around inside. Steve blinked, scooting closer to the screen until he was perched on the edge of his chair to try and get a better look. All of that had been on the first image? But how-?

"Hydra built their facility into the side of a small mountain in the forest. We don't know if it was for camouflage or protection, but the landscape provides both. It also explains why we were never able to find them during any of our previous searches of the area."

Tony raised a brow as Fury spoke; even he looked mildly impressed. "That's a bit Hollywood, don't you think? It's like Schmidt thinks he's a super-villain out of a Bond flick."

"Yeah, because he's the only one with money to spend and a flair for the dramatic." Steve didn't need to look back over at Tony to know that the Panther scowled as his comment was tossed back into his face. Fury wasn't about to be distracted any further though and carried on with his talk. "Your team has been assigned to take care of this because you already know the area and you already know the enemy better than any of our other agents. You'll need to infiltrate the Factory, find Schmidt, eliminate him, and destroy any chance Hydra has of getting back on its feet. I shouldn't have to remind you about how important this is."

Fury snagged Phil's tablet and with the press of a few buttons pulled up a video feed of about a dozen men and women in suits sitting around a table in a richly-furnished room. They seemed oblivious to the fact that they were being watched as Fury handed Phil's tablet back to him. The other agent had lost a bit of color in his face and Steve knew that whatever they were looking at wasn't good. "The world doesn't know it yet, we're closer to a species war than even the press likes to think. Some of the more disgruntled politicians are as we speak plotting out a new law that would martialize humanity against Shifters in order to bring Shifters back under control. We're talking about Shifters being forced to publically register with their cities, being unable to own property or businesses, and ordinary citizens having the right to defend themselves with deadly force if they feel they are being threatened by Shifters without legal consequence."

Steve's mouth fell open. That, that couldn't be right. Humans having the right to legally kill Shifters? And if they already knew where they lived…Steve swallowed. "They can't do that; it's
unconstitutional. It would violate our basic rights as citizens of—!

"It would if you were human. When this country was founded, Shifters were still thought of as monsters you could kill with silver bullets and holy water. If Hydra launches another attack against a city or poisons some Shifters with that serum of theirs and makes them go wild, you can bet that those politicians in Washington will push their bill forward and the country might just be scared enough to let it through. It wouldn't be the first time."

The tension was so thick now that it seemed to hang over the table like a dark cloud of smoke. Clint, Natasha, Thor, Bruce, even Tony; they were all watching Fury with somber expressions on their faces. In turn, Fury's own gaze was set on the thermal image on the screen. "To ensure that you had the best chance of success, we decided to bring in a specialist for the mission."

That caught Steve off guard. Now that they were a pack it would throw their dynamics off to suddenly throw in another consultant. "Who are you-?"

Just as Steve was beginning to speak, the door to the room swung open. Thor stood up so quickly that his chair toppled over behind him with a dull thud, his eyes wide in shock. "Loki."

The Lion's rough gasp was correct. In the doorway stood none other than Loki, the Raven conspicuously free of any sort of restraints though it did appear that he had been escorted to the door by a SHIELD agent. As all eyes fell on him, Loki raised his chin with a small, smug smile and Steve felt the hair on the back of his neck rise up.

A low rumble built up from behind Steve as Tony released a growl and spun back around to glare at Fury. "Why? How is this a good idea?"

Waving for the Raven to come in, Fury didn't bother to even look down at Tony as he responded. "He's been there before. And he's finally decided to cooperate. Believe me, it's not my ideal situation either, but he's a trump card we can't ignore."

There were no available seats but Thor, still standing, quickly stepped back, picked up his own chair, and silently offered it to Loki. Their eyes met and Steve sensed some unspoken message pass between them as after a long second, Loki gave the Lion a tight nod and all but snatched the chair from him. To her credit, Natasha didn't shy away as he sat down in the empty spot next to her. She just shot him a warning look out of the corner of her eyes and then proceeded to pretend like he didn't exist. Bruce, who had been sitting on Thor's other side, wasn't quite as nonchalant about the whole thing but managed to hide his trepidation well. It probably helped that Steve was clearly willing to leap across the table at a moment's notice if Loki tried anything funny.

But for now Loki didn't seem to be harboring any malicious intent so Steve was okay with playing along. He knew Fury was right. If Loki could give them a leg's up on hunting Schmidt down, it'd be foolish to turn him away. Steve leaned forward in his seat into what he knew was a dominate stance to address the Bird. "You know Schmidt?"

If Loki noticed the underlying aggression in Steve's position, he didn't show it. Maybe he was too used to dealing with alpha posturing from Thor to be affected by it. When he spoke, his voice was calm and smooth. "I would call him an acquaintance, yes. But we never particularly saw eye to eye."

"Why's that?"

"Because he is mad."
Loki had said it like it was the simplest thing in the world. Tony snorted, his arms crossing over his chest as he rested back in his seat. "So are you."

The Raven raised a brow. "Not quite in the same way, I assure you."

"Loki's right." Speaking up from the corner of the room, Coulson nodded towards the files he still had in his hands. "Schmidt is certifiably insane and it seems to be getting worse with time."

Steve knew what they were both talking about. He had only met Schmidt for a few minutes on both of the encounters he had had with the Wolf so far but even in that short amount of time there had been something distinctly wrong about him. Steve's hands clenched up in his lap at the memory. "I sensed it…when I met him in the forest with the Commandos. He was…off somehow. What happened to him?"

Fury seemed to anticipate his question and was ready with an answer. "Schmidt got a hold of the early serum research, the one Dr. Banner helped Hydra to develop." Bruce sunk in his seat a bit as Clint and Thor looked at him in surprise. They hadn't known about Bruce's involvement with it. "Like Dr. Banner, he decided to do some private experimentation with the serum, using himself as the test subject. But his version went wrong in a different way. Instead of giving him advanced abilities and mutating his Wolf form, it gave him advanced abilities and began to attack his human mind. And he called it 'power' and embraced it."

Bruce swallowed and shook his head. "There's no telling the damage that it could have done to his mind and body. It was all so unstable…He's lucky he's not dead."

"He might be, but we're not. This would all have been a hell of a lot easier if Schmidt had died that day." Fury let his words settle over them and Steve found himself wishing the same thing.

If Schmidt had died, his old pack would still be alive, after all. His life would be entirely different. Different pack, different mate…Steve glanced over at Tony. The Cat was gazing at the layout of the Factory on the screen, his eyes flicking from detail to detail. His face was blank but Steve could tell that Tony's mind was whirring, busy analyzing, calculating, and planning. Steve felt a swell of pride roll up in his chest then tried to imagine that instead of Tony it was Bucky sitting next to him and the Howling Commandos seated around the table instead of his new pack. He was shocked when instead of the wistful longing he expected, his chest instead drew tight in something similar to panic at the thought of everyone seated around the table disappearing from his life.

Fury's voice echoed in the back of his mind as Steve wrestled with that strange realization. "I'm officially declassifying all of the information we have on Schmidt, Hydra, and the Factory, not that that stopped you from looking at it before." The man tossed Tony a look which he gracefully ignored. "But all the same, I'll forward the files to Stark's computer. So go home, do your homework, and come up with a plan of attack because we're sending you out tomorrow and you better be ready."

It was as clear a dismissal as Steve had ever heard. Tony was already up on his feet with Bruce following close behind him, both eager to be out of the cramped office space. Thor guided his brother up from the chair and out after the two scientists. Natasha leaned in to help as Steve began to gather up all the pages that had been left scattered about as Clint stood, stretched his arms over his head, and wandered out after the rest. Murmuring his thanks to her, Steve accepted all the paper Natasha had collected and passed them, along with what he had picked up, to Phil before turning to head out himself. Just as Steve was about to step through the door, he heard Fury speak over the conversations the others had started up in the hall.

"Agent Romanov, a word."
Steve froze as did Tony and Bruce's conversation as Tony noticed that Steve had stopped walking. His mate raised a questioning brow but Steve just nodded for him to continue down the hall without taking his eyes off of his pack's female as she was called to Fury's side. Natasha looked entirely unaffected at being singled out and maintained a firm, professional tone as Fury stared down at her. "Yes, sir?"

When Fury spoke next, he had lowered his voice but Steve had no doubt that the Director still knew full well that Steve would be able to catch every word. "We're pulling you off of the team. We have a job in Russia that requires an agent with your particular skill set."

Steve and Natasha both narrowed their eyes, Natasha also resting his hands on her hips as she looked up at the imposing man. "Isn't there another agent who can take it?"

"None better than you."

Steve watched as she bit her lip, his eyes moving over to the screen that was still lit up with the thermal image of the Factory. "With all due respect, this seems fairly important. Doesn't it take priority?"

"Not for you. And this wasn't a request," Fury's voice lowered, "Agent Romanov, you're being reassigned."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

Fury's visible eye narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"I need to see this one through. Besides, I'm part of a 'pack' now and I've been told that means everything." Natasha kept her walls up in front of Fury but her eyes flickered over to where Steve was waiting in the doorway.

That was all the incentive Steve needed to step in. He knew that Natasha could handle herself but there was no way he could let this slide by. Fury knew he could hear, and he should have also known that he didn't have the right to ask that of Natasha anymore, especially if she declined. Striding across the room, Steve planted himself firmly next to her, holding in the instinct to crowd Fury up against the wall. Instead, he tried to press all of that physical strength into his voice. "If you want to reassign one of my pack members, sir, you need my permission. And right now I need her here with us so my answer is 'no'."

Fury scoffed. "You can't apply Wolf morality to a Spider Shifter, Rogers. She doesn't understand what a pack means. Hardly anyone in your 'pack' understands. Hell, not even your 'mate' does."

Steve felt the hair on his arms bristle up, fur threatening to ripple up underneath it. "But I do. And they can learn. And I will fight to keep them as long as they're willing to stay, even if it means fighting you."

A heavy silence hung between them, the air almost crackling with electricity as Fury held his gaze. Steve had never experienced this kind of reaction from a human before and it put him on edge. Finally Fury fell back with a small, knowing smirk. "You're brave, I'll give you that much."

Glancing at Natasha he waved her away. "You're excused, Agent Romanov, but I expect you to be more compliant the next time you're giving a direct order."

She only nodded and Steve led her out of the room, anxious to rejoin the others. As they left Coulson turned his head to eye Fury warily. "Sir, we're not currently running any missions in Russia."
"I know."

Phil sighed as it dawned on him just what his supervisor had been doing. "It's a hell of a time to be testing them."

"It's the perfect time. Pull together every file you can get your hands on about this whole mess and send it to Stark. The more we send him, hopefully the less he'll try to hack into our network. We already have enough security threats to worry about, we don't need him adding to the problem."

"Yes, sir. I'll see what I can do about it."

Leaving Coulson to his work, Fury walked out of the Senior Agent's office. By that time Roger's team was long gone but another familiar face met him in the hall instead.

"Director Fury, a moment if you please."

Carter seemed to have been lying in wait for him. He wouldn't put it past her. "What is it?"

Peggy pursed her lips. "I would like to know why I was not notified about this mission by you directly as soon as you wrote it up."

He kept walking towards his office and she kept pace with him, easily matching his stride. "Because it doesn't fall under your jurisdiction."

"You know very well that I have a personal investment in the matter."

"Vice-Director, no disrespect meant, but that's exactly why I did not bring it to your attention."

Peggy bit her lip as if to keep some less than professional words in before taking a deep breath and trying again. "I want it seen to that the very best precautions are taken to ensure their safety."

"I know Rogers is your personal pet-project, Carter, but you can't keep him under your wing forever. He's ready for this—they all are—and interfering with their mode of operations any more than necessary won't help the situation."

"You know as well as I do how difficult going back to that forest may be for him. The trauma he experienced there is not something many Wolves would recover from and sending him back in so soon is a risk to his health. Especially after he was kidnapped from our own building just a few short days ago."

Fury shook his head. "He'll be fine. He has a whole new pack to support him."

Peggy glared back. "You sound so certain of that fact now. I heard Coulson's comment and I'll not have you testing them. They don't need to doubt themselves."

"I haven't told them anything beside the absolute truth."

"With your history, you can hardly expect me to believe that."

That drew Fury up short. Just steps away from the door to his office, he stopped and turned to give Carter his full attention. "Believe what you want. Besides, I wouldn't be the only one lying to them. Rogers doesn't even know what your position is in this organization, does he?"

A hint of a flush appeared on Carter's cheeks. "That is not your concern. If Steve knew he might think that I was interfering too much with his life."
"Aren't you?"

Her eyes narrowed again and she took a step closer. "I've known Steve for a long time and I knew that if I didn't help him get his life back together he might lose himself to his grief. He deserves happiness. You have been the one interfering with him lately."

"He's a good soldier."

"He's a good man. Do not take advantage of that fact now that he is finally healing."

"That sounded like an order, Carter."

"It was a warning, Director Fury."

O~O

The rest of the day passed slowly back at the Stark house. About an hour after they got back from the city, Tony received a link from Phil outlining everything SHIELD had on Schmidt, Hydra, and the Factory. The whole team had poured over the information, save for Loki who had decided not to follow them back to the house. Steve didn't know where the Raven was now and he didn't really care as long as he showed up on time tomorrow morning.

They spent hours going over everything from every possible angle they could think of. Tony used his computer to generate maps of the building based on the information known about it which helped a lot. They painstakingly began to develop a plan for how they were going to handle this. It required some extra thought. Not only was Schmidt going to be there, but despite its name, the place seemed to be built more like a fort than any sort of factory. There were going to be more guards, more defenses, and more weaponry. Not even SHIELD really knew how extensive the Factory was and because of the way it was built—directly into the landscape—they wouldn't find out until they were actually in it.

By the end of the day all Steve wanted to do was turn in early and get a long night of sleep to try and get rid of the headache that had been building steadily since that morning. But even lying on Tony's ridiculously comfortable bed wasn't enough to lull him to sleep. His thoughts were everywhere at once and all his senses were on high alert even though they hadn't actually started the mission yet.

Which is why he was able to smell and hear Tony coming before he even reached his bedroom door.

The Cat gently pulled it open and peeked inside, then dropped all pretenses at being quiet when he saw that Steve was still awake. Shaking his head, Tony closed the door behind him and made his way over to the bed. "There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you. You missed the game."

Steve wasn't too concerned. If Tony had really wanted to know where he was, he would've just asked JARVIS. "What game?"

"The Yankees, you missed the baseball game. Didn't you hear Clint screaming at the TV?"

"No." Well, sort of. Steve had heard some noises from the media room but since it didn't sound like anyone was in trouble he hadn't focused on them enough to make them out. He hadn't remembered that the baseball game was on tonight. He always tried to watch it when he had the time but tonight it just slipped his mind.

Sitting down on the bed, Tony pulled his legs up so that he was sitting cross-legged on the mattress
and leaned forward to get a closer look at Steve's face. "You alright?"

Steve swallowed and furrowed his brow, unable to keep his anxiety off of his face. "I can't stop thinking about tomorrow. This is it, Tony. This is going to be it. I can't relax, I don't know how the rest of you are doing it."

Tony frowned. "You think we're not anxious, or worried, excited, scared, whatever? We all know that this is a big deal, Steve. We're all just faking 'normal' down there."

"I can't do that. This means too much to me. There's so much at stake."

"You're preaching to the choir, Steve." Tony leaned back against the headboard, his thigh brushing up against Steve's shoulder as he adjusted his seating. "I know you've got a personal stake in this, but don't think that you're the only one."

Steve tilted his head back so that he could see Tony's face. "What do you mean?"

"How do you think Bruce feels about a serum he helped to develop getting used like this? That it helped to make Schmidt what it is and is now being used to poison Shifters across the country? And Thor, Schmidt manipulated his brother into joining up with Hydra. Clint was captured and experimented on by Hydra, just like you were, and god only knows what sort of grudges Natasha is holding onto."

Steve let Tony's words soak into him for a minute. He was right. Schmidt might have done Steve the greatest wrong, but the others all had their own reasons to look forward to tomorrow to avenge their own injuries. "What about you?"

"Me?" Tony pointed at himself and Steve nodded. "I...It's more like I've got a stake in making sure we don't fail. I looked a bit more into that law Fury was talking about that those congressmen are trying to write. It's still in its draft form but," Tony paused then shrugged as Steve silently urged him on. "As it stands it would require every Shifter to register with their city and that those records be made public. By law I would have to announce my status as a Shifter and I could lose everything I and my father spent our lives creating. It's not even the money that I care about—I could liquidate all my assets and buy an island in the Mediterranean to retire to before the government caught up with me. It's the fact that everything I ever built, everything my dad built, would be suddenly worth nothing, just because I'm not human."

Steve felt something break a bit at the sound of the honest pain in his mate's voice just at the thought of losing his company. Rolling up onto his hands and knees, Steve pressed a kiss against Tony's forehead. "I'm not going to let that happen."

Tony blinked before a small grin unfurled on his lips. "I know you won't. And neither will I. That's why we spent the whole day with our heads bent over maps and plans. By the way, can we go over that part again where we bring Loki in?"

Sighing, Steve rolled off again and returned to laying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. This was already becoming an old argument. "I've gone over it six times already."

"Then one more time won't kill you."

It was nice to have switched the conversation from more serious topics but Steve really didn't want to get into it with Tony this late in the day. "You obviously don't like the plan, so what do you think is wrong with it?"

"How about all of it? I don't trust that Bird, I don't want him on the team."
"He could be a huge asset."

"Yeah, he could be. But we already know he's a huge liability."

"Thor will be with him."

Tony snorted. "Oh, great, because he's never escaped from Thor before."

Now Steve was convinced that Tony was being intentionally argumentative. Though it was true that the whole reason Thor came to the United States was to find his wayward brother who managed to escape capture at least once, though more likely several times, before they were able to bring him into custody. "He seems like he genuinely wants to help us take Hydra down."

"He's a liar; conning gullible people like you is what he does."

Steve bristled. "I'm well aware of the danger he poses, but I'm also a firm believer that everyone deserves a second chance if they ask for it. Loki seems ready to turn over a new leaf and while I don't know if I'll ever trust him, I'm not about to turn away a major advantage. Besides, he's Thor's mate. That basically makes him part of the pack."

Tony jerked up and away from the headboard so that he was leaning well into Steve's personal space. He was lucky that they were mates otherwise there'd be no way he would be able to get away with it. "What? No, I refuse to be in the same 'pack' as him. We never voted on that."

Steve rolled his eyes. "You don't vote in a pack."

"What do you do then?"

Oh. Tony might not be going for sarcasm. He might actually not know how Wolf packs operate. "You do what the alpha says."

The Cat narrowed his eyes. "And what if I don't like what the alpha says?"

"Then you challenge him and if you win in a fight you become the new alpha and the old one has to leave."

Tony scanned Steve's face before a smug smile spread across his own. "I'm pretty sure I could give you a run for your money if I tried."

Steve tilted his head. He was certain he had more fighting experience but Tony... from the few times Steve had seen him shift, he seemed pretty deadly in his animal form. He might be able to hold his own against Steve if he were desperate enough. Steve didn't want to think about that scenario ever coming to fruition and shook the image away, trying instead for a teasing grin. "But then I'd have to leave."

A moment, an unsettlingly long moment passed between them in silence as Tony hesitated. Steve swallowed as Tony just watched him. But then whatever unnamed thing it was lingering in Tony's eyes dispersed and he grinned. "True. I guess I'm stuck with you and your bad decisions."

Steve tried to smile and released a long breath as he pushed himself up onto his elbows. He didn't feel like sleeping so much anymore. Tony frowned then flipped himself over so that he was straddling Steve's lap. Steve blinked at the sudden turn-around as Tony leered down at him. "Hey... I know a good way to relieve some pressure."

It didn't take a mind-reader to know what Tony was talking about. The way he was resting right on
Steve's crotch made him hard to remember why he was unsettled just a minute ago. But the mission was still on his mind. It wasn't really putting him in the mood for messing around. "I don't know if I can—"

"Then just let me handle things. Lay back down."

"Tony—"

"Lie down." Tony accompanied the command with a gentle push on Steve's chest. "You look like you're about to run out of the room."

"There's a lot to do."

"It can wait. You, on the other hand, need some sleep now. So let me help you out."

O~O

Tony smirked as Steve let out a long-suffering sigh then obeyed and practically flopped back down onto the mattress. The Wolf looked awfully annoyed for someone who was about to get a blow job. But Tony could fix that. He had been too absorbed in the steady flow of information during the day that he honestly hadn't paid that much attention to Steve, but once night fell and they finally took a break he was able to sense the exhaustion rolling off of his mate. And it wasn't just physical exhaustion; Steve was worn out mentally and emotionally. Tony might be emotionally stunted but he had always been alright at reading other people when he actually paid attention and even a blind man could tell that the Wolf was wrung out.

He had hoped that Steve would come down and relax with the rest of them but now it was obvious that he was too high-strung to just sit in front of a television set. Tony hadn't hunted Steve down for sex but as far as he was concerned there were few better ways to get an amped-up alpha to calm down. He had had some first-hand experience with it after all. Besides, finding out that Steve had chosen to hide out in his bed had made something dangerously warm flutter in his stomach.

But now Tony had him in an even better place; namely, right underneath him. And he was definitely going to take advantage of it. Pulling back slowly, Tony slid down Steve's body until he was lying across the Wolf's legs, his face in line with Steve's waist. Steve bit his lip as Tony leaned back down and his hips rolled up on their own accord. It looked like his body already knew what was coming even if Steve's brain was still playing catch-up.

"What—Are you going to…?"

Smiling slyly up at Steve, Tony took an extra moment to unlatch Steve's belt. "Whatever your question is, the answer is probably 'yes'."

A loud gust of air burst from Steve's lips and his hands gripped at the sheets. Tony's grin widened and he glanced up through his lashes at the Wolf. He liked making Steve squirm. But he wasn't going to draw this out too long today. Maybe some other time but not right now. Steve really did seem like he was about to jump out of his own skin. It unnerved Tony, seeing Steve like this. The Wolf was keeping his shit together but he was clearly shaken.

So for the next couple minutes Tony wanted to give Steve's mind a break. "If you can still think about anything other than me after this, I'm not doing my job right."

"Tony, you don't have to—"

A flash of irritation shot through Tony but he shook it off with a roll of his shoulders as he
unzipped the fly on the Wolf's khakis. "I don't do anything I don't want to do."

Steve opened his mouth then closed it, opting instead to reach down and run his fingers through Tony's hair. Tony let his eyes fall shut at the contact before dipping his head down. Maybe Steve wasn't the only one in need of comfort.

O~O~O~O

The next day arrived too quickly and, twelve hours after he had taken refuge in Tony's room, found Steve deep in the backwoods of upstate New York in a place he never wanted to see again. The forest that had changed his life what seemed to be an eternity ago was now stretched out before him again. But this time his team had changed.

The mission had changed.

He had changed.

And he hoped to God that the outcome would change.

Steve took a look at the compound through his binoculars before passing them off to Natasha. Clint, crouching down next to them, didn't need it, his sharp eyes catching glimpses of things going on that were just a blur to Steve even with the binoculars.

The Factory was truly built into the side of craggy outcrop that broke up the more natural rise and fall of the forest floor around it. Just like Fury's intel had revealed, there was only one obvious entrance, a large gate encased in a fortified concrete wall. The windows they would gain access through were few and far between. But they knew that this wasn't going to be easy.

Pushing himself up, Steve looked down at where Tony, Thor, Loki, and Bruce were sitting on the ground. Steve, Natasha, and Clint had climbed up onto the roof of the car to get a slightly better view while the others had declined. Tony and Bruce were instead talking shop about the technical equipment they wanted to use and Thor was sitting a ways away with Loki speaking in hushed tones.

Loki had appeared out of thin air that morning at the outskirts of the forest just as Coulson, who had driven them there from Tony's mansion, had been about to send them off. Up until that point everyone else, Thor included, had thought the Raven had ditched them after all. Steve had desperately been holding out hope but was just about to give up when they had rounded a corner in the car and had found Loki standing just outside the tree line, waiting for them in the center of the road.

Sensing his eyes on them, Tony and Bruce both looked up at Steve and Bruce gave a light wave. "Steve, before we head out I want to talk to you about something really quick."

"Sure."

Steve slid off the roof of the car, jumping down to the grass and following after Bruce as he walked a couple steps away from the others. Steve raised a brow but didn't say anything, just waited until his beta seemed to judge them to be far enough away from the others before speaking. "What's this about?"

Bruce cast Steve a level look. "Are you sure it's a good idea for you and Tony to be paired up?"

Steve blinked, taken off guard by Bruce's question. "What do you mean?" Bruce was talking about the plan he had developed. But Steve didn't see how he and Tony working together would be a
"If something happens…"

Ah. There is was. Bruce was worried that his and Tony's relationship would be a danger to the mission. Steve didn't take offense. It was a valid concern. Wolves would do anything to protect their mates. All the same, "If something happens, I'd rather have him next to me."

Bruce hesitated then gave a small shrug of his shoulders. "You two can fight a lot."

They did. More than they should, in Steve's opinion. But Tony wasn't stupid and neither was he. They wouldn't start anything that would put them or the others in danger. "Not when it matters."

"And if you get too distracted with trying to keep him safe?"

Back to that. And again, Steve couldn't blame his beta even though he was starting to get annoyed. He reminded himself that Bruce was just doing his job as a pack member. But Steve wasn't going to be misunderstood. "Then whatever happens will be worth it."

Bruce rocked back on his feet and fell silent, knowing that the conversation had been ended. His eyes darted back to the others and let out a heavy sigh, running his fingers through his hair as he switched to a new topic. It seemed that he wasn't only worried about Steve and Tony. "Do you think Thor will be alright?"

Steve looked over at the Lion and he immediately knew what Bruce meant. He was asking if Thor was going to be alright being paired up with his brother during their mission as they had planned it out. Bruce wasn't as vocal about it but Steve knew that he was just as hesitant as Tony was to let the Raven in. "Yes. I think he will be." With the way Thor and Loki were sitting together know, Steve was sure of it. He didn't have any real facts to base his faith on, but his gut told him that something however slight had changed between the two foreign Shifters and that—at least for now—Loki wasn't aiming to purposefully hurt Thor. Shaking his head, Steve turned his attention back to Bruce. "You just look after Natasha, Clint, and yourself. That's more than enough for anyone."

"We won't be the ones going after Schmidt."

"But you never know what any of us will run into. Keep your eyes open and tell me immediately if something doesn't feel right. We can always change the plan if it means keeping someone safe. Remember that."

Bruce gazed at him then sent him an uncertain smile even as Steve could smell that the beta's anxiety was just as thick as it was at the start of their conversation. "Yeah."

Before Steve could figure out how to comfort him they were interrupted as Tony stood up and walked over to them as he slid his phone into his pocket. He must have just been checking it. "How about you two dogs get back over here? It's time to get this show started."

Bruce rolled his eyes at the 'dog' comment but let Tony sling an arm around his shoulders. Steve let himself smile even as a small streak of anxiety flared in his own chest at Tony's announcement. They were out of time and there was no turning back now. One way or another, everything was going to change today.

Rousing the fire that had been burning in his stomach since the moment this mission was announced, Steve marched back over to the car, Tony and Bruce trailing behind. "Alright, let's get going. Clint, Natasha, Bruce, you two head around to the far side. Tony, we'll wait until Thor and Loki are in position before moving out. And Thor and Loki, you two know what to do."
Clint gave him a lazy salute before hopping down from the roof of the car, Natasha on his heels. After one last glance at Tony and Steve, Bruce joined them and followed them into the woods to circle around the back. Thor gave Steve a confident smile as he and Loki rose to their feet. "Indeed, we know our roles quite well. We shall see you soon, my friend."

"Let's hope so." Steve elbowed Tony in his side as the Cat muttered under his breath.

"See you then."

They watched together as the Lion bounded off, Loki offering them a small bow before smoothly turning and chasing his brother away from the car and down to the path that would lead them directly to the front entrance of the Factory. Once they were out of sight, Steve ducked down behind the car to ensure that he would be less noticeable to any potential sentries.

Tony hissed and ducked back down to crouch next to Steve. "They're not going to buy it."

Steve frowned as the Cat voiced his own fears but shook it off. "They will. You said yourself, Loki is a good con-man. He'll make them believe it."

O-O

"You up there!"

The guard posted on the front gate of the Factory startled as a dark-haired Shifter seemed to materialize from the surrounding woods. The thin male sauntered up to the front gate but more surprising than his boldness was the fact that he had a much larger male Shifter, an alpha by the looks of him, in tow. The large Shifter's arms were wrapped up in restraints and a thick metal chain was lashed around it, the chain also acting as a leash that the smaller, darker Shifter had a firm hold on.

The smaller Shifter brought the larger to heel, yanking on the chain hard and causing the blond to stumble and almost trip over his own feet. "Go alert someone of standing that I, Loki of Asgard, have returned and have brought a very particular gift for Master Schmidt."

The guard's grip tightened on the handle of his rifle and inadvertently betrayed his uncertainty. There was no way that they had a preplanned protocol for this situation. "Wait there!"

A low growl rolled up in Thor's throat as Loki nodded and tugged hard at the chains around his wrist again as the guard disappeared from view to climb down the stairs to the gate. Loki was smaller than him, to be sure, but his lithe muscles did contain a surprising amount of strength. Not nearly enough to match his, but certainly enough to throw him off balance when he was already incapacitated.

Loki rolled his eyes as Thor shuffled his feet to try and regain his footing and muttered at him as they heard the guard's footsteps travel down a hidden flight of stairs down from the top of the wall. "Stop your fidgeting."

Thor glared at the cuffs Loki had clapped on him just a moment ago when they were still hidden from the Factory behind the trees. "You fastened these cuffs rather tightly."

"It needs to look authentic."

"Yes, but it did not also need to be authentic."

Loki shrugged but Thor could tell he was going to offer no apology. He could hear the guard
coming to the gate but Thor didn't think Loki would have apologized for the slight even if they had been alone. His mate was nothing if not temperamental.

But he did play his role well. As the guard, a beta Wolf Shifter, emerged from the gates Loki drew himself up, looking every bit the prince he had been raised to be. The Wolf hesitated at the sight, his grip tightening again on his gun as he approached them. "I'm going to need to check you before we go inside."

He hadn't asked for identification or explanation so that was a good sign. It meant that he had at least heard of Loki. The sense of victory Thor felt faded a bit as he realized that meant his brother-mate had been more embroiled with Hydra than he would have liked to believe.

Thor was jerked out of his thoughts as Loki smacked away the guard's hand as it came out to pat him down. Rage surged up in Thor at the sight of someone treating his mate roughly but settled himself as Loki narrowed his eyes and glared back at the guard. "Remove your hands, Wolf, or I shall remove them for you."

"Sir—"

"Do not dare to presume that I will not kill you on the spot if I feel you are not showing me the respect I deserve! You do not know the trials I have been through to arrive at your door, having dragged this brute along with me the entire way." Thor snarled in surprise as Loki gave another sudden, sharp tug on the chain in his hand. The unexpected momentum pulled Thor to his knees, his keen sense of balance the only thing that kept him from falling forward onto his face. Loki carried on, entirely undeterred. "Show me to your master immediately or I will be only too happy to vent my frustrations upon you in the most painful way I can imagine."

The guard's hand jumped away and Thor was glad for it. He did not want that Wolf's hands on his brother any more than Loki did. Moreover, if he did pat Loki down he would undoubtedly locate the many technical devices given to him by Tony that they had hidden in the interior of Loki's long coat.

The guard eyed Loki again, cast a long, appraising look at Thor, then gave a stilted nod and pressed a button on a radio he had attached to his shoulder. "Two at the gate to see Schmidt. One identified as Loki Odinson, the other a prisoner. Permission to enter?"

Thor held absolutely still as he waited for a reply and nearly smiled as one finally crackled back through over the headset. "Granted. Bring them in."

A heavy frown was on the guard's face but the Wolf turned back to the gate and waved for them to follow. Thor was careful to maintain a bit of slack on the chain as Loki strolled forward to avoid being tripped again and followed the Wolf inside the wall. The armed Shifter barely paused as he swiped a key card through a locking mechanism on the main door which ground open with a dull shriek of metal on metal that hurt Thor's ears.

Inside, 'the Factory' looked just as Thor had pictured it in his mind's eye. It was Spartan, no decoration to be seen save for Hydra's logo painted upon the concrete wall of the main corridor. There were many people, Shifter and human, bustling around but all of them stopped their tasks to watch as Loki and Thor were led through, Loki's head held high and his eyes locked straight ahead with an air of confidence Thor knew in his heart his brother rarely truly possessed.

They were brought to an elevator and ushered inside by the guard, the Wolf smacking Thor with the butt of his gun as if to prod him inside. Thor bit his lip to keep in a warning growl at the mistreatment but his anger was overtaken by confusion as the guard did not step into the elevator to
join them. Loki must have noticed as well and raised his voice. "You are not joining us?"

The Wolf frowned at them. "This elevator will take you directly to Schmidt and I have to return to my post."

Without further ado, he pressed a button on the outside of the elevator and the door slid shut, leaving Thor and Loki alone. The elevator lurched under their feet and Thor glanced out of the corner of his eye at his mate as it slowly climbed upwards. "You do intend to release me, don't you?"

Loki raised an imperious brow. "You do not trust me?"

Thor snorted and shook his arms causing the chain to clank together. "I trust that you will follow your best interests. I am simply unsure whether I fall amongst them or not."

He felt more than saw Loki smile. "This realism is unlike you, brother."

"I have learned a little since we have parted ways."

"From your new 'pack'?"

The way Loki emphasized "pack" told Thor how little the Raven thought of his choice in companions. But it was not for him to decide. "Yes."

Loki tisked and turned slightly away from him. "Father may not be pleased to hear you have made such a strong alliance with strangers."

"They are no longer strangers to me." He had not known Steve and the others for long but the bonds that had formed between them were undeniable. They were all good people and fine warriors. He was proud to be associated with them, even if they did not always agree on matters. "And if he is upset, I have no doubt that Father will forgive me in time."

A dark cloud seemed to settle over Loki as his shoulders pulled tight and he seemed to bite out his neck words. "It must be such a comforting to be the chosen son."

"You are wrong." Thor swallowed and his voice grew softer. He didn't know the right words to say but he knew he had to say something before they came face to face with the man their 'pack' was sent to kill. If everything went wrong, Thor wanted this one thing to be righted. "I have felt little comfort since you left my side."

The tension across Loki's shoulders increased before he snuck a look back at Thor. Heartened, Thor leaned in, his heart pulling tight in his chest as drew close to his brother. He could barely get his voice to sound louder than a whisper now and he hated how weak he felt in that moment. It felt terrible, all the worse with the knowledge that their mission had just begun and this feeling might sit in his gut throughout the entire thing. But Loki had always made him feel this way and he was no stranger to it. "Tell me you are back to stay. But if you intend to run again, say so, and do not lie to me for I fear if my hopes are dashed I could not bear such heartbreak a second time."

Loki met his gaze and peered into Thor's eyes as the Lion silently urged him to understand the truth in his words. After a long moment the Raven sighed and turned to face him fully. "I have no intentions of returning to our Father." Thor felt something in him beginning to fracture. "But I do find myself desiring your company. And after all that has occurred—I will promise nothing, but for the near future you can expect me to haunt your footsteps as I used to."

And as quickly as he felt his heart crack it was again mended. A beaming smile spread unbidden
across Thor's face but he could not force it away. He was too happy, too relieved. His brother, his mate was his again. "I would prefer that you walk beside me instead."

"We shall see. First we must survive the day."

"Agreed. But never fear, I shall keep you from all harm or die trying."

"I know it."

Smiling again, Thor pushed forward for a kiss but Loki held him at bay with a hand pressed against his chest. A rumbling rose up in his throat to voice his displeasure but Loki only offered him a soft, enigmatic smile meant only for him. "After. It would not do to distract you now."

O~O

Steve gripped the side of the rock face, digging his fingers into the earth as best he could as he and Tony climbed up towards a small set of windows embedded into the wall of the Factory. Tony was up in front of him, the billionaire surprisingly agile on the cliff face. Of course, he was a Panther so Steve didn't know why he didn't expect it of him.

They weren't even that high up yet and the wind was still whipping against Steve's clothes and threatening to pull him off of the wall. Even so, he couldn't keep his mind from turning to the others. Were they okay? Was everything going right? He hadn't heard from Thor but that didn't necessarily mean something had gone wrong. And Natasha, Bruce, and Clint were probably still getting into position.

He stretched out his senses to try and locate any of his pack but the wind and the strain of the climb made it impossible to track any of them except for Tony. Tony who was currently looking back down at him with a dry smirk on his face.

"You okay down there?"

Steve grimaced as his mate's words just barely reached his ears over the rush of the wind. "I'm fine."

Tony snorted and made sure that his next hand hold was secure before hoisting himself up another three feet. "You're a terrible climber."

"I'm doing alright..." Steve grit his teeth as the rock he had stepped on fell away underneath his boot. His scramble to regain his footing earned him another snort and he glared up at Tony. "It's not a Wolf's strong suit!" Unlike Panthers, they weren't built to climb things. They were much more designed for running and maneuvering on the ground. But this had been his idea so he wasn't going to complain too much.

Steve was soothed by the fact that underneath the amusement Tony felt at his expense, Steve could smell a lingering undercurrent of genuine concern that trailed behind the Cat as he continued upwards. "Good news for you then that we're almost there."

O~O

Bruce looked up to stare at what was supposed to be their team's entry point. It looked a lot higher up in person than it had in the photographs SHIELD had sent them. But at least he wasn't expected to free-climb it like Steve and Tony had decided to do. They had said that it would take less equipment and be stealthier that way. Alphas. There was only so much you could do.
Beside him, Clint slid off the length of rope he had coiled over his shoulder and Natasha looked up at the large window that was supposed to open into a lab room that would lead them eventually back down to the main barracks, which is ultimately where they wanted to go. Well, where they needed to go. Bruce didn't want to go anywhere inside the compound but the others, his pack, were depending on him. And he could do this. Probably.

Swallowing down his fears, Bruce turned as Clint glanced over at Natasha. "Be careful, Tasha. And remember, don't kill all the guards." They needed some of the guards to be alive still, just the ones who wouldn't see them. That way if someone called to check in they would be able to answer and keep the rest of the compound ignorant of what was happening.

A dark smile played on her lips and she shrugged her shoulders. "I'll do what I can, but I won't make any promises."

Clint shrugged back. "Fair enough."

Bruce turned his head away to give her some amount of privacy as Natasha took a breath then shifted, her clothes falling away as her form twisted and shrunk until all that was left was a pile of fabric and leather with a small form moving underneath it. Clint lifted the edge of her clothes and a large spider immediately darted out and dashed straight for the wall.

Bruce and Clint watched together as Natasha expertly navigated her way up to the windows, her legs sticking to the rock as if they were coated in glue. In less than a minute she had reached the glass and, in a show of remarkable strength considering her animal form, she wiggled the window open just enough to slip through.

There was a long moment of silence after that. Bruce focused hard on the slightly opened window to listen for any sound, any clue of what was happening inside. Clint seems to sense what he's doing and turns to him with a tight smile. "It'll take a couple of minutes, but don't bother listening for anything this far away. She's pretty quiet when she works."

Bruce shook his head. "How long will it take after she bites them for the guards to go down?"

Clint's eyes flickered back up to the window and he shrugged, readjusting the grip on his arrow quiver as he did so. "If they're human, they'll be unconscious within five minutes and dead in ten. If they're Shifters, they'll take a lot longer to actually die, but they'll still be unconscious within eight minutes."

"And how much poison does she have in her? How many doses can she administer in one sitting?" The scientist in Bruce was coming out and he tried to keep it reigned in. This wasn't exactly a good time to start a new biological study, but he had never gotten the chance to work directly with Spider Shifters before and there was a lot he still had to learn.

Clint shrugged again and Bruce could tell that he was starting to get bored with the conversation. "I dunno, but I've never seen her run out. At least a dozen, maybe. I don't keep track."

"If you two are done chatting, how about you refocus on the mission."

Bruce's head snapped up and he caught sight of Natasha leaning out of the now open window, her short red hair just barely hiding the curve of her bare shoulders. Clint grinned up at her and slipped the rope off of his shoulder. On one end there was a sort of grappling hook and the Hawk swung it up to Natasha with expert aim. She disappeared from the window again for a few seconds, then peered back out. "The line's secure. Make it fast, the next rotation of guards will be coming through in the next ten minutes. And don't forget my clothes."
Kneeling down, Bruce dutifully collected up Natasha's abandoned outfit and bundled it up enough so that he would be able to put it over his shoulder and keep both hands free for climbing. Clint was already a quarter of the way up the rope, each of his movements fast, practiced, and efficient. Bruce didn't quite have the same amount of grace but after a few aborted attempts he managed to figure out a decent technique to make his way up to where Natasha and Clint were both waiting for him. He was going to have to visit gym once or twice after this was all over though because he was obviously spending too much time in the lab.

Once he got close enough, Clint and Natasha each grabbed one of his wrists and hauled him inside. Bruce tumbled in through the window and didn't even have a chance to orient himself before Natasha snatched the clothes off of his shoulder and began to dress herself.

As soon as she and Bruce were both ready they set out. Natasha had her gun, Clint had his arrows, and Bruce had reluctantly agreed to arm himself with a small firearm, just so that he wouldn't be completely useless in a fight while in his human form. Luckily as they made their way down the hall all of the guards they came across were already slumped up against the wall. Natasha had already gotten to them.

Bruce knelt down beside one of them and pressed his fingers against the alpha Wolf's neck. His pulse was slow, too slow. The pallor of his skin was off—almost a hint of bluish purple—and there was a small amount of foam coming from his mouth. Every once and a while the guard's fingers would shake with tiny spasms and a little more foam would bubble up from between his lips. Bruce pulled his own hand away and let out a long breath. It was a terrible way to die. Part of his mind was screaming at him to do something to help the poor Wolf, at least end his suffering. But they didn't have the time. They had a job to do.

The maps they had been able to pull up yesterday had given a vague indication of where the barracks were supposed to be but it hadn't detailed out what was between their access point and said room. As it turned out, it was just offices and was looked to be small laboratory spaces. Bruce kept close to the other two as they snuck their way through.

As they got further into the building there were more people milling around but most of them looked like civilians, both human and Shifter, rather than armed guards. They certainly weren't as perceptive which allowed them to be able to rush around corners and hide behind desks and shelves as they slipped through. The Shifters among the Hydra employees weren't even able to pick out their scents through the odor all the harsh chemicals floating stagnant in the air. Bruce, for one, was thankful. Taking guards out was one thing; they had weapons and would have used them on him, Natasha, and Clint if they had been giving the opportunity without any hesitation. But the scientists and assistants walking around and with their heads bent over their desks in concentration, they were different. Who knows why they were working here or how big of a part they played? They certainly weren't armed and most of them wouldn't stand a chance against Natasha or Clint if they got in their way. And maybe Bruce could identify with them more than he should have. After all, once upon a time he had worked for Hydra too.

The three of them were working off of a map they all had memorized yesterday and so even Bruce was surprised when he and Natasha turned another corner only to look back and realize that Clint had ducked down another corridor. It was quiet, essentially deserted. But it was still off-course and Bruce smelled a sharp burst of irritation from Natasha as she turned to see what was holding him up.

"Jesus…” Clint was staring at something just out of sight. He shook his head and waved at the both of them to join him. "Tasha, Doc, check this out."
Natasha was quick to snap back. "Don't deviate from the plan."

"I think we might have to make an exception."

The sheer awe in the jaded Shifter's voice was enough to lure Bruce over, and apparently Natasha too because she turned around a moment later and they both walked over to the side hallway he had turned down. Bruce could practically hear the clock ticking away in his head but as he rounded the corner, his eyes caught what had captured Clint's attention and every thought in his mind was dampened to white noise.

There was a window opening up onto what looked to be some sort of laboratory, similar to how SHIELD had their own lab set up. But instead of sleek metal walls and long empty tables, this room was filled with beds. There must've been over fifty of them and each of them was occupied by a body, the individuals stripped down to their undergarments and plugged in to a complex monitoring system that seemed to be recording each of their vitals and pumping some sort of fluid into them intravenously. There were males and females ranging in age from thirty-somethings all the way down to neonatal, about ten cribs off to one side of the room holding infants hooked up to the same sort of machine. They were Shifters, he could sense that much, but they seemed… twisted.

The doctor in Bruce itched to step inside but the wolf in him was beginning to squirm, even buried down as deep as it was. Something was wrong here, very wrong. And he wasn't the only one who could sense it.

Natasha lifted her hand and almost pressed her fingertips against the glass before hesitating and pulling back. "What did they do to them?"

Bruce could only shake his head. To get any better understanding he would have to break in, but that would be putting the entire mission at risk. "I don't know. Nothing good."

After one more long moment of staring, Bruce shook himself off and reached up to touch his earpiece. "Steve? We found something."

There were a few seconds were the signal hissed and crackled before he got a reply. "What's happening?" Steve's voice rang over the line, clear and concerned, the alpha still worried for the safety of others who weren't even part of his pack.

"There's about forty to sixty Shifters in a lab on the second floor hooked up to monitoring devices. They're unconscious but I can't make out anything more about their condition."

"They sound like Hydra's victims. Make sure you keep any possible threats away from that lab as you move ahead with the plan."

"Understood."

If their conditions were stable enough, they would be able to try to get all of them out after they were done. Either way, Bruce was going to have to call SHIELD in and bring a much larger team to transfer all of those people out to another medical facility. Right now, they had to stay focused on the plan.

Having heard Steve's message, Natasha was already going back on course and Bruce and Clint hurried to keep up with her. It didn't take them long after that to reach their goal.

Natasha and Clint tucked themselves up inside a small alcove and Natasha motioned down to a door near the end of the corridor that stood about fifty yards away. "There are the barracks."
"Good." Part One of their plan had actually worked. Pressing his hand against his earpiece again, Bruce kept his voice low and quiet as he spoke. "Steve, we're in position."

"Copy that. Thor, do you have eyes on Schmidt?"

The Lion's voice echoed out and Bruce let out a small sigh of relief that everyone was, for the moment, still alright. "We are heading there now. We are being brought to meet him in his office, just as Loki had said we would. We shall speak with him and gain access to his weapons, then leave him there where you will find him. There is an elevator and his office is on the fifth level. He will be there."

"Good. Bruce, if everything looks normal, proceed with the plan."

Proceed with the plan. Bruce swallowed and nodded even though Steve wouldn't have been able to see it. He really, really wasn't looking forward to this part. Natasha crouched down next to him and rested a hand on his shoulder as she met his eyes. "You ready for this?"

Bruce managed a shaky smile. No, he really wasn't ready. But he knew it had to be done. He was their ace in the hole, their atom bomb, the one sure-fire way to take all of the guards out as quickly as possible without unnecessary risk of life on their part. And it made his skin crawl just thinking about it. "As I'll ever be."

Clint tilted his head. "The Wolf listened to us last time. It'll work. Probably."

Except this time Steve wasn't here to bring him back down after he Shifted. Shaking his head, Bruce ran his fingers through his hair. He was just going to have to make this work. Resigned, he grabbed the hem of his shirt and tugged it up over his head and offered Natasha and Clint a wry smile. "You should stand back."

O~O

Thor looked up as the elevator came to a stop and the doors swung open to reveal a small hall leading to a single double-door, which in turn opened to a spacious room. At the far end there was a platform with a wide bank of windows behind it looking out onto the forest. More importantly, on the platform was a large desk and sitting behind that desk was a Shifter Thor had never seen before but was instantly able to identify. Johann Schmidt. Steve was right. He smelled wrong.

He struggled to keep himself in a believably submissive stance as Loki adopted a haughty attitude and led him out of the elevator and into the office. He needed Schmidt to believe that he was there against his will and that Loki had managed to best him. They did not smell like mates; it had been too long since they had last lain together. There should be no reason for Schmidt to suspect that he had come willingly. It was a hard thing for his pride to accept, especially to appear weak in front of this alpha male he already despised, but he knew it was necessary.

Schmidt rose as they stepped into the room and slowly walked around his desk, stepped down off of the platform and made his way to meet them near the center of the room. Thor's head jerked around as he heard a small sound coming from the side of the room and his eyes narrowed as they fell upon another figure. Standing against the wall was a small human male Thor hadn't even noticed before but was instantly able to identify. Johann Schmidt. Steve was right. He smelled wrong.

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Loki glanced over to assess the other occupant of the room too before sliding calmly back to Schmidt as the Wolf began to talk. "Loki! What a surprise." There was a slight undertone of something in Schmidt's voice that Thor picked up on but couldn't interpret. It wasn't quite
condescension or mockery, but it was close. "How did you manage to escape SHIELD's clutches?"

Thor was certain his brother picked up on it as well, but none of his emotions showed on his face or in his words as Loki responded. "I can be resourceful. Particularly when there are fools about."

"Fools such as this?" Schmidt waved back at Thor and he couldn't stop the small growl that rolled up his throat.

Loki gave a sharp tug on his chain and his growl stopped short in his throat. "Precisely. My adopted brother." Schmidt raised a questioning brow and Loki continued. "He was sent by his father to come and kill me when news reached him of my activities. When he came for me then. It was enough to make him hesitate and give me the upper hand. SHIELD kept their distance in fear that I would dispose of my hostage but they allowed me to get too far away and lost me. I have kept this Cat alive in case of leverage, but now that I have safely arrived upon your doorstep I am anxious to have this burden removed." Loki spoke with such certainty that for a moment Thor almost believed him too. That Loki had really just tricked them all to see himself free.

Schmidt smiled darkly and lifted his hand to motion towards the human man near the wall. "I shall see to it immediately."

"I wish to end his life myself."

Loki's quick response seemed to catch Schmidt by surprise before his smile spread further. "And you are certain you can take your brother's life?"

Loki's lips twisted down into a frown. "He had every intention of taking mine. And you cannot fathom the depths of my dislike for this arrogant creature. He has plagued me since we were both in diapers and I can assure you that it will give me a great deal of satisfaction to finally exact my revenge." A pang of hurt flashed through Thor's heart at his mate's words even though he knew them to be lies. He let this hurt show on his face, knowing that it could only add to the credibility of their ploy. His brother was a very good liar.

"Then I will not deny you of it."

Loki nodded his thanks. "I desire to have some fun first. I have been away for a while, but I assume you still have a selection of new tools to use?"

"I do. Dr. Zola?" He motioned again to the human and this time the man stepped forward, his eyes wide behind his thick glasses. He reminded Thor very much of a rabbit or a rat, some small creature caught in the clutches of a predator. "Show my guest to the armory."

"Yes, sir."

Loki turned as the man waved for them to follow. There was a genuine frown of dislike on his face now and Thor knew the cause. His brother had faked his previous conversations but he truly felt little love for humanity. He had always objected to keeping company with humans and this Dr. Zola was certainly not the best example of the species.

Nevertheless, Loki followed, and so Thor did too. Dr. Zola led them out of the room, back into the elevator, and then one floor down. The man seemed nervous but that was understandable with Loki pointedly ignoring him. Thor himself cared a great deal for humans and general but he was unwilling to offer this particular one any measure of comfort.
Once the elevator stopped they were brought down a long, narrow hall. Unlike the other floors Thor had seen there were few people here and those that were kept their eyes averted and focused on their work. Thor sensed Loki beginning to tense and stared at the back of his mate's head, willing himself to understand what was wrong. This certainly wasn't a tranquil situation but Loki was usually more adept at hiding his unease.

After a while Zola turned to a door that had no markings and unlocked it with a key he slipped from his pocket. It was dark inside but Loki and Thor followed him in. Thor's eyes hurried to adjust to the low lights and when he was finally able to see into the shadows his own agitation grew stronger. He did not know what Hydra's armory would look like, but this is not what he would have imagined. There were shelves, but they were fully of boxes, not weapons. Unless the weapons were in the boxes.

Thor looked sharply over at Loki and the Raven narrowed his eyes. "Zola, you have not led us to the armory, have you?"

"I'm afraid not." Dr. Zola's voice sounded from behind them, the man having slipped back around to stand between them and the door while they had been inspecting the room. In his hands was a long gun the sort of which Thor had never laid eyes on before. When Loki's eyes landed upon it Thor felt a sharp sting of surprise and fear as strongly as if it were his own. Loki knew what it was; it had to be another sort of weapon Hydra created. And it was sure to a great amount of damage to Shifters if they gave Zola the chance to use it.

Thor snapped off his restraints as feathers rippled up on Loki's arms and talons cut through his shoes. "You have made a very bad mistake, human."

Zola brought the gun up to his shoulder and put his finger on the trigger. "No, you have."

O~O

Steve hunkered down next to Tony as they crammed themselves into as they watched the elevator doors. They had no trouble finding it as the elevator shaft had actually been one of the few things that SHEILD was able to map out and now they were just waiting. Steve watched the different numbers light up and tracked in his head as it held at five then traveled down to four. Thor had said that Schmidt was located on the fifth floor, so that had probably been him and Loki in the elevator coming down from his office and going to the armory. Hopefully.

There was no time to second-guess things though. The only had a small amount of time before Bruce let his Wolf out and attacked the barracks so Steve had to act now. Looking around to make sure than no one would spot them, Steve darted to the elevator and punched in the call button. Tony was right at his side, the Cat dragging him down into a crouch as they waited for the elevator to arrive.

It seemed to take forever and when the doors finally slid open they practically tumbled inside, Steve reaching an arm up to hit the button for floor five. Once the doors shut again, Steve rose to his feet and pulled out a gun Coulson had handed him before the SHEILD agent separated from them. It was a special caliber given only to field agents heading off into hostile territories: a gun designed to kill Shifters with the same efficiency a regular gun could kill humans. Normal guns could wound Shifters but Shifter's strength combined with their advanced healing abilities made them difficult to actually kill. This new type of gun evened the odds. Steve never wanted to kill anyone before, but he needed Schmidt to die and if he was the one who was burdened with the task, all the better.

Tony eyed the gun but didn't say anything. He simply stood next to him in silence but just his
presence soothed Steve more than anyone else's words ever could.

When the doors swung open to a small atrium in front of a door that could only lead to Schmidt's office they both stepped out. Tony hung back though, tension running through his body like a live-wire. "I'll keep watch. Go get him."

Steve glanced up at him as he made sure his ammunition was properly loaded into his gun. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Just yell if you need me."

Steve nodded then leaned in to steal one last quick kiss from his mate. Tony kissed back, his hand coming up to grip the back of Steve's head to hold him close before he pulled Steve away with a quick tug of his hair. "Go."

Steve nodded again and swallowed as he turned away from Tony. Then, with his gun up, he went to the door and shoved it open.

Schmidt was there, standing in the middle of a large room. Like he was waiting for him. A large set of windows behind him was causing sunlight to stream in and Steve had to shield his eyes with his free hand to make out the other Wolf's face. But even without being able to see, there was no mistaking his scent. "Hello, Schmidt."

"Agent Rogers. Today is just full of surprise visitors." Schmidt took a few steps to the side as Steve walked in, the two of them beginning to circle each other. Steve kept his eyes locked tight on the other Wolf and never let the aim of his gun falter. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Steve saw red at Schmidt's mocking tone and forced his logic through the instinct to tear the other Wolf apart just enough to be able to speak. "Less than a year ago you killed my pack. Before that and since then you've committed crimes against both Shifters and humanity and I've been sent by SHIELD to take care of this."

"So, what is it that you want from me?"

"There's only one thing I want." Steve's finger twitched on the trigger of his gun. But no, that was his last resort. Now, looking at Schmidt, the last thing he wanted to do was shoot him. Instead, he wanted to dig his claws into that smug face and feel his teeth tear through his skin. The Wolf in Steve was starting to take over. A bullet seemed too good for the other alpha.

"You're here to bring me in for those pigs at SHIELD then?"

"No. I'm here to kill you."

"How unexpected of you, Agent Rogers. You must truly hate me. Yes, there it is;" Schmidt stepped closer and the muscles in Steve's arms tightened up, his finger almost closing on the trigger accidentally, "the rage, the anger. It feels good, doesn't it?"

Steve's jaw tightened. "No, it doesn't. But once you're dead I can finally put my pack's memory to rest. I'm doing this for them."

"Oh yes, your old pack." Schmidt seemed entirely unaffected by having a gun pointed at his head. The calm he was giving off just set Steve on edge. It was just another embodiment of his madness. "The 'Howling Commandos'. I wonder how much angrier you would be if I told you that when you abandoned them in the woods they weren't all dead. That when we came back around, half of them were still breathing so we brought them back here to use them as test subjects."
Steve's heart stuttered in his chest. "No—!"

"I still remember how your beta screamed and begged for us to just kill him. Despite the damage to his back, he was still the most whole so he was the one we operated on the longest."

"You're lying!"

"Am I?"

Steve knew Schmidt was trying to throw him off guard. But just the idea of—No. No, he couldn't even think about it. The small chance that it might be true, that it was possible felt like Schmidt had given driven a spike right into his chest. "SHIELD found their bodies!"

Schmidt's eyes flashed. He was enjoying this! "How many days later, and in what condition? Did you see their bodies, Steve? Did you see how they looked when they finally died? Because I did."

"Steve!"

Steve's eyes darted away from Schmidt's face for the first time as Tony burst through the door, the Cat's eyes burning with anger. "Tony!"

The Panther snarled at Schmidt as the other Wolf turned himself so that he was facing them both. "Don't listen to him. He's just trying to get into your head!"

"Ah, I see now." Schmidt had turned his eyes onto Tony and his smile spread. "I smelled you all over Rogers the last time we met, I just didn't know what to connect the scent to."

Steve growled and moved to try and block Tony from the other Wolf. "Stay back, this is my fight."

A sharp hiss burst out behind him and Tony stepped up to stand beside him. "Which makes it my fight too."

Schmidt just laughed, a dark, threatening sound that made the hair on the back of Steve's neck stand up. "And this is your mate. A Cat, and an alpha no less! I think your old beta would've made for a more natural choice."

Tony threw out his hands as his body slipped into an aggressive stance. "Hey! Enough talk; let's see what you're really made of."

"Such arrogance! Do you think you can challenge me when your mate and his entire pack didn't stand a chance against me?"

Tony sneered back, his hands shaking as he clenched them into fists. "You're just a dumb mutt who poisoned himself with some radioactive steroids. It'll take a hell of a lot more than that to impress me."

For the first time Schmidt looked angry. The Wolf growled, the rumble falling away into a dangerous snarl. "Very well. Let me impress you then."
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Quick warning for extra violence in this chapter! Because, you know, battle and all that. Thanks for keeping on with this story! I look forward to any comments you might have. :)

Steve's eyes widened in shock and he heard Tony suck in a sharp breath as Schmidt began to shift into his Wolf form. When Shifters transformed they morphed smoothly from one form to another but Schmidt—he was different. And it was terrifying to watch.

His Wolf seemed to be exploding out of his human form but his skin was refusing to change. Schmidt's claws ripped through his fingertips and he brought them up to tear at his face, slashing through the flesh as if it were made of paper and his muzzle came bursting out with a snarl and flash of teeth. Steve took a shaky step back and turned to check on Tony only to find the Panther's gaze blank, his mouth drawn into a thin line, but Steve could see the underlying horror in his features.

The wrongness of Schmidt's whole transformation shook Steve to his core but it didn't stop him from taking action. Setting his gun down he pulled off his shirt and quickly shifted forms himself, not wanting to be caught in his human skin when Schmidt was a Wolf. And the change had come just in the nick of time because as soon as Steve had finished there was a flash of red and Schmidt leapt at him with a snarl. The gun went skidding across the floor as Steve rolled, biting and kicking at Schmidt to throw the Wolf off.

There was a flurry of motion in his periphery and a second later Tony was right there with them in his Cat form. The three of them crashed together, Steve and Tony barely avoiding clawing each other as they both attacked. Tony's movements weren't quite as coordinated as Steve's but it was obviously only from lack of practice because the blows he did land on Schmidt were precise and lethal. But Schmidt was holding his own even against the both of them. And that frightened Steve just a little bit more.

Schmidt suddenly kicked out and shoved Tony away. Seeing that the Wolf had turned his back to him, Steve took his chance and snapped his jaw down onto Schmidt's flank, his teeth biting down through his thick red fur down to tear at his skin. Blood flooded Steve's mouth as Schmidt let out a gravelled yelp. His back paws came up and Steve was forced to let go or let Schmidt gouge his chest.

Tony was back on him in an instant and his long, curved claws dug into Schmidt's back. This time the Wolf was prepared for the attack and threw himself into a roll. Tony growled and hissed as Schmidt fell on top of him and he was pushed onto his back. Steve moved in to help when Schmidt's teeth caught on the Panther's forearm but Tony retracted his claws and rolled them over again to free himself.

Steve spared Tony a gentle nudge as the Cat bounded over to his side and then they were both back on the attack. As Schmidt righted himself both of their ears fell back, a growl rolling up in Steve's chest as Tony let out a hiss with his tail flicking angrily at the air behind him. Schmidt looked up and when he saw them standing there his lips drew back in a grisly kind of sneer and then he was
shifting back into his human form.

Steve's ears flickered in confusion but stood his ground. He didn't understand why Schmidt was shifting when he was as strong as he was in his Wolf form. There had to be a reason though; the other Wolf may be insane but he wasn't stupid. Steve just had to figure out what the other Wolf was after. But if Steve thought watching him transform into a Wolf was bad, having to watch him shift back into a human was so much worse. His human skin hadn't come off before but now it refused to form back and the top layer hung off in tattered patches like it had been a cheap vinyl mask. There was cartilage missing too in his nose and ears and Steve tried not to look too closely, not wanting to see what was exposed underneath.

Fur rippled up along Steve's spine and Tony let out another warning hiss as Schmidt rose up onto his feet. Steve wanted to look away from the Shifter's mangled face but he couldn't let himself, hunkering further down instead as Schmidt stepped forward. He didn't seem to be in pain or even bothered by the state of his skin, and just smirked down at them instead with his half-formed lips. "Impressed yet?"

Tony shifted back to his human form to respond, his mate's chest heaving as he glared at Schmidt. "What the hell did you do to yourself?"

Steve shifted back on instinct at seeing Tony change. He was breathing hard too and could feel a few lines of blood trailing down his sides from where Schmidt had gotten a little too close. The other Wolf's eyes were resting on Tony for now, his smirk growing and looking absolutely grotesque on his torn face. "I embraced power. This," he waved a dismissive hand towards his head where the damage to his human skin was the most obvious. "What is this compared to what I can have now?"

"You've gone completely off the deep end."

"Have I?"

Steve pressed a hand against his side to try and stem some of the bleeding. The wounds weren't too deep but he was going to take advantage of the momentary respite. He knew it couldn't last long. His eyes had never left Schmidt and the other Wolf met his gaze as he spoke. "You need medical care. I have a doctor in my pack, Dr. Banner. He might be able to help you." Steve hated Schmidt and had been sent there to kill him but seeing him like this, Steve was willing to give the Wolf one last chance at salvation.

But Schmidt just threw it back in his face. "Dr. Banner? He already has helped me, Agent Rogers. He was part of the team who created this serum!"

Steve's fingers tightened on his side. Fine. Schmidt had made his choice. And now Steve had a job to do.

Now that they had gone through the first round, he knew that he and Tony might be able to win in a fight against Schmidt but Steve wasn't ready to bet his or Tony's life on it. Steve broke his gaze from Schmidt and scanned the room for the gun he had foolishly let get away from him.

There! There it was. The gun had slid across the tile floor to the other side of the room, a glint of sunlight sparking off of it from the floor-to-ceiling windows behind the desk. But he was going to have to get passed Schmidt to grab it. He wasn't sure if the other Wolf had seen where the gun had gone or if he realized how dangerous the weapon really was but he was going to have to move fast if he wanted to regain his advantage.
With one quick look at Tony, Steve took in a deep breath and dove for the gun but Schmidt was right there beside him. He slammed into him hard and the impact sent Steve tumbling away at an angle, a grunt knocked out of him as his side hit the platform Schmidt's desk sat on. He grit his teeth as he scrambled to his feet and saw Schmidt coming for him again. Seeing that he was in trouble, Tony jerked forward and swung a punch aimed for the Wolf's head but Schmidt caught his wrist before he could land the blow. Tony's eyes widened in surprise and before he could even get a curse out Schmidt growled and lashed out, his other hand balling into a fist and smashing it into Tony's stomach. The Cat gasped, stumbled back, then doubled over. All thoughts of the gun vanished from Steve's mind and he was about to run to his mate when Tony's hand came up in a quick wave, the assurance only slightly ruined by his low, pained groan. But it was enough to tell Steve that Tony would be alright. Especially now that Schmidt's attention had turned back to him.

O~O

Two floors down and tucked around the corner from the door leading to the barracks, Bruce took one more breath to steady himself as Natasha and Clint took a few precautionary steps back.

Then, for the first time in his life, Bruce let go.

He let go of all of his control over his Wolf and let himself feel the anger and frustration that was constantly rolling through his body. There was a tell-tale twitch in his muscles as the Wolf threatened to come out and for once Bruce didn't fight it.

His mind was instantly drowned out by a loud roar and the last thing he remembered was fur sprouting up through his skin before everything went black.

O~O

Clint and Natasha stumbled back from where Bruce was sitting as his Wolf finally emerged, lifting its head to release an earth-shaking howl as the transformation ended. The two assassins shared a nervous glance and Natasha's grip tightened on the gun in her hand as she tried to address it. She didn't want to engage but they didn't have any time to waste. The guards were sure to have heard that howl and if for whatever reason they didn't, the distorted scent surrounding Bruce's Wolf was enough to draw their attention all by itself. "Bruce!"

Natasha swallowed down her fear as the Wolf's large head swung around to size her up, its lip curling up in a small snarl. It felt wrong to call this thing 'Bruce'; there was nothing of the scientist left in its gaze. "The guards are through that door." She motioned with her gun towards the doors to the barracks. "Go get them!"

The Wolf let out a loud snort and its eyes narrowed. Natasha felt her mouth go dry and brought her gun back up into position and she saw Clint's fingers tighten on his bow-string. She had been afraid of this. If the Wolf didn't listen to them they might be forced to take him down and she really didn't want to do that to Bruce. But if—

Natasha's mental worries were cut short as the door to the barracks slammed open and three Shifter guards appeared in the doorway, armed to the teeth, with at least a dozen more behind them prepping themselves for combat.

Before she had a chance to assess the situation, Bruce's Wolf let out a second vicious howl and charged towards them. The Wolf was too big to fit through the door but, instead of stopping him, the doorframe splintered and tore away from the wall as the Wolf hammered through it, ramming the Shifters that had been standing there hard enough to send them flying back into the room. In the same moment an alarm rent the air, blaring out of intercom speakers mounted through the halls and
They were officially out of time.

Motioning for Clint to follow, Natasha chased after the Wolf, cleanly slicing a guard's neck as he tried to run past them. Clint shot down another as the man tried to stop them from coming in, an arrow to his throat taking him down instantly. By this time Bruce's Wolf had worked his way into the center of the room.

The room looked like it had been filled with bunks and tables but Bruce had already caused enough destruction to make it hard to tell what the original layout was supposed to be. Hydra guards had him surrounded on all sides and were open firing on him but the gigantic Wolf just got angrier as it pawed at the bullets. The lead projectiles just seemed to bother him, his skin so tough that they didn't even stick, just bounced off and clattered to the floor.

There were two doors leading in and out of the room and Natasha and Clint each took up a post at one to make sure that no one got out. The guards hardly noticed them as they picked them off one at a time, all of their attention on Bruce's Wolf as it went on the offensive. It tipped its head back in another angry howl then leapt forward, swiping at a row of guards and slicing right through their Kevlar.

Some of the guards shifted into their Wolf forms but even the alphas among them didn't last long. Red began to splash everywhere and Natasha shook her head and refocused from the carnage back to taking out as many of the guards with her gun as she could, for their own sake.

O-O

Steve, Tony, and Schmidt all jumped when a loud alarm rang out through the room. Steve's fingers tightened into fists as he desperately hoped that meant that their plan was going forward rather than array. A quick look at Schmidt's face told Steve that the other Wolf was surprised to hear it too, which was a good sign. Although it did seem to make him angrier.

Steve's eyes darted back to the gun but it was still a good twenty feet away and Tony was just starting to shake himself off. He was momentarily on his own. Needing to put some space between himself and Schmidt, Steve rolled behind the desk for cover. But he should have known better than to think he was safe anywhere in Schmidt's den.

Schmidt had been right behind him and Steve ducked down behind the desk. But Schmidt hadn't intended to strike out at him. Instead, the Wolf put his hands on his desk and with an angry scream flipped it over and sent it crashing down on top of Steve. Steve wasn't worried until it actually fell on him, a cry bursting from his lips at the weight of it as it slammed down hard on the lower half of his body. He had expected wood based on the paneling on the top but it felt like the desk had been made of solid metal instead.

Schmidt's hands closed back down on the desk, the muscles in his arms flexing as he pushed the desk, and Steve trapped beneath it, back across the tiled floor. Steve tried to stop, to try and grab onto something, to try and get free, but there was nowhere to gain traction and how was Schmidt able to push this thing when he couldn't even—?

Steve grunted as his back slammed into something hard and glass shattered down around him. Steve heard Tony scream his name over the sharp sound of breaking glass and his breath caught in his throat as Schmidt gave the desk one more shove, what was left of the enormous window pane behind him crumbling away as the desk slammed Steve back. A cold wind swept in from behind him, chilling his bones and almost muting the sound of Tony calling for him. There was only a thin
steel rod digging into Steve's spine keeping him and the desk from tumbling through the empty window frame and over one hundred feet down the side of a cliff face. The broken shards of glass around him dug painfully into his back and hands and the desk ground down onto the tops of his thighs, the rest of his legs trapped beneath it.

Burying his panic, Steve dug his fingers into the top of the desk to try and pull himself out from underneath it but only managed to move a few inches before a shock of pain went through his legs. The pressure from the desk was weighing down on bone and muscle to the point he felt like they were about to break. The few inches he had given himself was just barely enough to allow him to see over the edge of the desk and he felt his heart skip a beat as he saw Schmidt stalking back toward Tony.

His eyes met the Cat's and Tony's shoulders sagged in relief before the Panther's eyes snapped to Schmidt. The rage in his gaze was unmistakable and Steve saw a wave of black ripple over his skin as his Cat form threatened to burst out. "You're lucky Steve's still alive."

"I am. That way he gets to watch as I do this!"

Whatever remark Tony had was torn from his lungs in a sharp gasp as Schmidt rushed him and threw him to the ground.

"Tony!" Across the room, the color rushed from Steve's face as he watched the Wolf straddle his mate and began to claw at the desk trapping him, leaving deep gouges in the wooden surface. His mind had gone blank white at the surge of desperation and fear searing through his veins.

When Tony was thrown down it seemed like the air had been knocked out of him and now he was lying on his back dazedly staring up at Schmidt. "…What the hell—?"

Schmidt cut off Tony's hoarse question by putting a hand on the Panther's throat and squeezing. A deep, angry growl rolled through Steve's entire body and he couldn't even care as his voice came out just as raspy and frantic as he felt. "No! Don't touch him!"

His shout seemed to snap Tony out of his daze and his hands flew up to grasp at the arm Schmidt was using to strangle him. The Cat's muscles strained and with a sudden burst of energy he twisted his grip enough to cause Schmidt's own grip to loosen then swung one fist up to slam right into Schmidt's jaw. The Wolf reeled back, more in surprise than pain, but Tony didn't even have enough time to wiggle out before Schmidt was on him again.

Rage burned hot in Steve's chest as Schmidt used his superior strength to hold Tony down and delivered his own punch right to Tony's face, the Cat letting out a grunt of pain at the blow. The smell of Tony's blood began to permeate the room and Steve pushed against the desk even harder, this time ignoring the way the movement ground the heavy material down onto his leg to the point where he was sure that the bones were going to snap under the pressure. But he had to get to Tony. He had to.

His eyes refocused sharply back across the room as he heard Schmidt throw another punch, the Wolf laughing as Tony clawed at his arm again. Tony's jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed in anger and he had to spit blood from his mouth before he was able to speak. "I'm going to make you regret that, you fucking dog."

"Are you now?" Schmidt sneered down at him and Tony let out a hiss as the Wolf grabbed him under his chin and hauled him up so that his back was up off the ground. Now Steve could clearly see the blood beginning to leak from Tony's nose, his black eye, the trickle of red coming from his mouth, the way he struggled to get a full breath as Schmidt tightened his fingers. Tony was
fighting back but most of his body was still pinned beneath Schmidt and the way he was still clawing at the Wolf's arms just seemed to amuse him. Steve continued to push, gritting his teeth as he felt hairline fractures threatening to give way in his knee and ankle.

Schmidt's voice rang clear throughout the room but it took Steve a moment to realize that the other Wolf was talking to him.

"Can you feel it? His pain? Can you feel this?" Steve watched helplessly as Tony bit back a cry as Schmidt reached up out with his free hand and twisted one of Tony's arms back almost to the point where it was about to break. "If you were truly mates, you'd be able to."

No. Steve couldn't feel it. But he could see it. He could smell it. He could hear it. And his body reacted in the same way.

A surge of adrenaline surged through Steve's body as every instinct inside of him screamed at him to protect his mate. It was a flood of panic-rage-desperation-vengeance, the rush of emotions so strong that every other thought in his brain became white noise. Gritting his teeth, Steve dug his fingers into the desk, his nails cutting into the wooden panel on the top, and pushed. His legs cried out in protest but Steve ignored them, blind to every sensation but the need to free himself to get to Tony. Every muscle in his body strained at the effort and a metallic groan filled the air. Then with one more shove Steve finally found the leverage he needed and flipped the desk up and off of him, the heavy piece of furniture crashing to the ground a few feet away with enough force to send tremors through the tile floor.

The next thing Steve knew he was on his feet with sharp pain zipping up his legs. The remnants of his adrenaline rush had gotten him up but they couldn't keep him there, his body not quite ready to hold his weight yet. Steve collapsed back to the ground with a snarl of pain as his knees gave out underneath him. Nothing felt broken but a sprain or fracture or two was a definitely possibility. But he would heal later, right now he still needed to fight.

Throughout the whole thing, Schmidt's eyes had been turned on him. When Steve had pushed the desk over the other Wolf had let go of his hold on Tony's arm, letting his body fall to the ground, and had cautiously retreated another step when Steve had stood. But Schmidt was still too close to Tony. And Tony wasn't moving. Steve didn't know how hurt he already was; who knew what one more blow could do?

Risking aggravating his injuries further for the ability to walk, Steve sucked in a sharp breath and shifted back into his Wolf form, wincing as his bones seemed to grate against each other before finally morphing. His back legs still hurt but with two others to rely upon now he was able to move again.

Steve growled low in his throat to warn Schmidt to keep his distance then ran over to Tony, his claws desperately trying to find traction on the tile floor as he skidded over to his mate. Tony had fallen face down onto the tile, one arm underneath him and the other draped limply over his back. Whimpers slipped out of Steve's throat as he got close enough to see the small puddle of blood beginning to pool under Tony's nose and mouth. Steve took the last final steps to reach his mate then moved so that he was standing over him, protecting him, as Schmidt began to pace in a circle around them.

His eyes never left Schmidt as he bent down and sniffed at Tony's cheek, nuzzling at his neck gently with his muzzle. Tony smelled alright but then why was he acting so…?

Steve woofed quietly as he saw Tony's eye flicker open in his peripheral vision. Risking a quick glance, he looked down just long enough to see Tony wink at him before closing his eye again. It
felt like a vice was taken off of his heart and Steve was able to take in a full breath again.

Tony was just pretending to be knocked unconscious. It was a ploy to catch Schmidt off his guard, one that Steve wouldn't have thought of. It was going to be up to him to give Tony the opportunity to take advantage of it though.

After licking a short stripe across Tony's jaw Steve forced himself to step off and away from his mate. By now Schmidt was fully back on his feet and Steve growled deep in his chest as he circled back around to the other side of the room. The movement was meant to be seen as an aggressive one as he stalked back around toward Schmidt but the other Wolf would be sure to notice that it left Tony wide open to any attack.

The other Wolf sneered at Steve's apparent mistake and stepped closer to Tony just as Steve thought he would. "And we find ourselves in a familiar place!" Schmidt looked pointedly down at Tony and changed his stance to rest his foot on Tony's back. To Tony's credit he didn't so much as twitch but Steve did. Something burned hot in his chest at seeing Schmidt lay claim to Tony's body and released a loud growl. "Your plans have gone array and your friends are broken and bleeding around you. Should I end his misery and kill him or let him die slowly listening to the sound of you losing your fight? I will allow you the honor to choose."

Schmidt was cut off as Tony suddenly shifted and reared up, slashing his newly-formed claws across the backside of Schmidt's legs, instantly bringing him to his knees. But before his knees even hit the tile Schmidt was shifting back into his Wolf form. Tony didn't wait for the transformation to finish and lashed out again, this time at Schmidt's soft underbelly that he had unknowingly left exposed. The Wolf howled but Tony, now fully in his Panther form, rolled out from underneath him, his teeth bared as he let out a fierce snarl.

Blood dripped from Schmidt's stomach as he lunged at Tony but before he could make it over Steve jumped at him from behind. The two rolled over each other, growling, biting, and scratching. Steve felt Schmidt dig long gouges into his skin and he returned them with equal force.

Schmidt was weakening from the wound to his stomach and they would have been on equal footing had Steve not been injured himself.

Breaking away for a second to suck in a couple quick breaths, Steve ears flattened against his head and his hackles rose in another low growl. This had gone on for long enough. He needed to figure out a way to bring this fight to a close, now.

O~O

Thor grit his teeth, his mind working in overdrive to try and think of how to disarm Dr. Zola without giving the human a chance to make use of the weapon in his hands. He could sense Loki's anger but the only thing that kept him from immediately leaping forward was the piercing fear that he could feel burning in Loki's chest beneath all the resentment he felt towards Zola. Loki knew what his weapon was. Having seen what Hydra's other technology could do to Shifters he had no intention of learning what great harm the rifle-like weapon Zola was carrying could inflict upon him.

The decision was made for him when all three of them started as an alarm suddenly blasted through a small speaker in the hall. Zola looked up towards the noise and Thor saw his chance. Bounding forward, he put one hand on the barrel of the rifle and pushed it up and away and used his other hand to grab Zola's shoulder. The human let out a cry and as he started to turn back Thor slammed his head against the human's in a brutal headbutt. His glasses snapped, there was a dull crack, and Zola's eyes rolled back, his grip going lax on the gun and blood slipping from his
nose as he slumped to the ground.

Thor grinned triumphantly and turned to his mate but Loki only scowled as he prodded at Zola with his boot. "You oaf, what did you do that for!"

The smile melted from Thor's face. "I believed I just saved your life. I had been anticipating a bit more gratitude."

"We needed information from him first!" Loki hissed down at Zola as if angry at the man for remaining unconscious, then looked up at Thor with an imperious frown. "It may have escaped your attention, but we are not actually in the armory which is where we must be if we wish to uphold our part of this mission. We needed this cretin to tell us where it is."

Ah. His brother had a point. But no matter. Zola was showing no signs of waking up any time soon. "We shall find another way then."

Loki rolled his eyes, pushed passed Thor, and stepped over Zola's body to the door leading back out of the room. "You are lucky that there are others about."

Thor scoffed under his breath. "I am lucky…?" This was why they had not gotten along as children.

He nevertheless followed Loki out and he picked up his pace as he saw that Loki was heading for one of the offices that had been occupied by scientists on their way in. The halls were nearly deserted now but over the sound of the alarm they could hear panicked, whispered voices coming from behind the doors. Loki seemed to have a single-minded purpose and stalked towards one of the doors where some voices were seeping through.

"Wait brother, they may not be—"

Loki ignored Thor entirely and kicked in the door. It had been locked but it wasn't as secure as other doors and the mechanical latch snapped under Loki's boot like it had been made of cheap plastic. There were three scientists inside and two of them screamed as the door burst open.

With five swift steps Loki had crossed the room to where the humans were cowering against their desks. Reaching out, he grabbed the first man he came to and with one hand on his throat lifted him into the air then thrust him back against the wall. Loki leaned in close and Thor could see and smell the terror coming from the human as Loki narrowed his eyes and hissed, "Where is the armory?"

The man was shaking and sweat beaded up on his face as he tried to look down at his companions for help but they had none to offer, none of them willing to risk coming to his aid. Loki tisked and gave the scientist a violent shake. "Speak quickly or I shall force the words from you!"

"I, I can't! Please!"

Thor knit his forehead and stepped forward. He kept his voice soft, not wanting Loki to react and hurt the man because of anything he said. It was true that the scientist was working for the enemy but he was clearly more civilian than soldier and it would not be right to injure him in battle. "This is not the way to get information."

Loki sneered back at him. "You have become soft, Thor, and no more intelligent. We have a job and I will do what I must to see it done."

Despite his words, Loki lowered the man just enough so that his toes could touch the ground when
he stretched them. "As for you," the human shuddered as Loki turned his attention back to him. His brother was no longer yelling but was instead speaking with a calm so deadly that it seemed to frighten him even more. "You have used up all of my patience. Believe me, whatever Schmidt has threatened you with to have you keep your silence is a thousand times more preferable to what I will do to you if you do not answer my question. Now, I shall ask only once more; where is the armory?"

The man bit his lip, his knuckles turning white as they gripped the hand Loki had around his throat. But the fool wasn't talking. Thor readied himself to intervene but before Loki could try anything one of the other scientists burst forward. "For the love of God, just tell him!"

It seemed to be the only impetus the man needed and his resolve broke like a dam, words flooding out of his mouth so fast that Thor could hardly make sense of them. "Go down three floors. There's a long hallway and the second last door on the left is the armory. It's locked though and takes a special key; we can't even get inside it!"

Loki raised a brow and after studying the man for a long minute he came to the conclusion that the scientist was telling the truth. "You were wise to have listened to your friend." Releasing the human, Loki turned back to Thor with that haughty look back on his face. "Come, Thor. There is still work to be done."

Checking over his shoulder to make sure that the man would live without any lasting injuries, Thor chased after Loki as he left the room. Again, his brother seemed to have a precise destination in mind but he wasn't heading towards the elevator. "Where are we going?"

"He said we need a key. And I know where we can find one."

As soon as he walked back into the room Zola had led them to Thor understood. He helped Loki turn over Zola's limp body and riffle through the man's pockets. Schmidt had clearly trusted him enough to have him deal with the both of them so he would surely have access to even the most secure of spaces.

Between the two of them it took them only a few seconds to locate a slim key card tucked into the small man's back pocket in his pants and attached to his belt with a retractable lead. Grabbing it, Thor snapped the synthetic fibers with a quick flick of his wrist and passed it over to Loki. "There you are."

Loki accepted the key with a small grin, pleased with him for what felt like the first time in years. "We should be swift."

This time Thor led and took them back to the elevator. From there he mentally reviewed the human scientists' directions and followed them to the letter and yet was somehow still surprised when they ended up standing in front of a door. The hall had been long, concrete-lined and utterly deserted. There was no label on the door itself proclaiming it to be the armory but there was a larger lock on it than any door he had yet seen and he could smell the acidic scent of metal and Hydra's serum leaking from inside the room. It seemed that fear of death made humans honest.

"This is it!"

"Finally. Here, move aside." Stretching out a hand, Loki reached by him and swiped Zola's card through the lock. A green light flashed and over the sound of the alarm still screeching around them Thor heard a click as the bolt came undone.

Thor pushed the door open his eyes widened as he stepped into the room. Automatic lights came
on, first by the door then flickered on one-by-one revealing the extent of the room. It went on for hundreds of meters, dug deep into the raw mountainside. The walls were lined with shelves and each was fully stocked with box after box of Hydra's deadly creations. There were enough weapons in that space to arm innumerous humans and kill thousands of Shifters, more than enough to create the war Schmidt had so desired.

The sight made Thor's blood run cold and even Loki seemed slightly humbled by the sheer volume of it, though his awe did not last long. Shaking off any sense of amazement, Loki flipped back his jacket and reached into an interior pocket to pull out the small explosive device Tony had given him earlier, the same variety they had used on an earlier mission. "You deal with these. I have not the patience for Stark's 'ingenuity'."

Thor grinned as Loki handed him the bomb. "Would you believe, brother, that I actually know how to use these?"

Loki tilted his head in disbelief and Thor took great pride as his mate's eyes widened as he quickly set the device and programmed it to give them a full minute to clear the room. For once he was able to experience the pleasure of knowing something his brother did not. Feeling that he was being watched, Loki's eyes jumped from the bomb to Thor's face and his disbelief melted into a small smile. "Well, it seems as if miracles do exist after all."

Thor's grin spread as they jumped up and headed for the door. "Are you so shocked that I have learned something new?"

The gentle look that had snuck onto Loki's face melted away with a teasing glint. "No, I am shocked that you are now apparently trainable."

Thor shouldered the door open, grabbed Loki's hand, and pulled him down around a corner. Finding it to be suitably reinforced, he tugged Loki down so that he was crouched down against the wall and tucked himself around the Raven to shield him from any wayward debris. Loki allowed it and almost subconsciously curled up so that his cheek was pressed against Thor's chest and Thor felt his heart soften at the motion. It had been common for Loki to do so when they had shared a bed but it had been well over a year since his mate had sought out comfort from him in such a manner.

Pressing a little closer, Thor nestled his nose against Loki's hair even as his muscles tightened, his body bracing itself for impact. "One compliment, is that so much to wish for?"

He felt a puff of warmth and Loki let out a short laugh against his skin. "Far too much."

O~O

Steve yelped, his paws slipping on the bloodied tiles under his feet as a wave of pressure rolled through the air with a hollow boom and the ground trembled. For a moment he wasn't quite sure what had happened. Then Tony let out a triumphant huff and shifted back into his human form to speak. "Steve, they did it! The bomb."

Right, Thor, Loki. If Steve had been human he would have broken out into a wide smile. But at the word "bomb" Schmidt's face twisted up into a murderous snarl. But that was the boost Steve needed to regain his strength. They could do this. He could do this.

Before Schmidt had the chance to initiate an attack, Steve jumped back on top of him and tore at Schmidt with everything he had left. Schmidt's anger gave him strength as well but Steve's was longer lasting. Schmidt was soon tiring again and even as pain continued to pulse through him,
Steve kept at it. Every bite, every scratch, every blow he got in against Schmidt became a victory as did every one of Schmidt's increasingly present missteps.

After what seemed like an eternity Steve gained the definite upperhand and managed to pin the Wolf underneath him. Steve gasped for breath, desperately pulling air down into his lungs as he stared down at Schmidt. The Wolf was bleeding, bruised, and broken, but he was still fighting like a person possessed. Steve's claws dug into the Schmidt's flank as he considered his options. He had to end this.

But now that he was faced with the reality of what he was about to do, Steve just couldn't imagine himself sinking his teeth into another Wolf and ripping out his throat like his animalistic side burned to do. He hated Schmidt. He hated him like he had never hated any other person in his life. But to kill someone like that intentionally; it was just too violent a death. Steve couldn't bring himself to do it.

But he couldn't leave Schmidt alive.

"Steve!"

Steve's head jerked over to where Tony was standing. He was still in his human form and had one hand wrapped around his chest to grip at a long series of scratches carved into his side and the other clutching the gun Coulson had sent with Steve. When their eyes met Tony nodded then tossed the gun over.

As soon as he had seen Tony's nod Steve had started to shift back, his fingers forming the instant the gun reached him. He snatched it out of the air and heaved another breath as he flipped it over and pressed the barrel against the side of Schmidt's head. The Wolf's eye flickered over to him, angry and writhing within his mind even now that his body had given up and Steve knew that it would only be cruel to drag this out any further.

He tried to think of something to say. What could he say? Nothing would fix all the damage Schmidt had done. There was nothing Steve could say to the Wolf that would make himself feel better. He could offer a prayer, a soft word, to this person who was taking their last breath on this Earth. But just as Steve couldn't say anything cruel, everything kind died on his lips. This Wolf was a depraved lunatic who was about to push the world into a war that threatened to destroy entire species. This Wolf had killed his first pack. Forgiveness would come later.

Steve placed the barrel of the gun in the dead center of Schmidt's forehead and pulled the trigger.

The recoil was nothing compared to the jolt Schmidt's body gave underneath him but it was all just a mechanical reaction. He was gone in an instant.

It was over.

Schmidt was dead.

Steve's breaths were still coming loud and stilted as he stared down at the other Wolf a moment longer. Then he tucked the gun away and climbed up off of Schmidt. When Steve stumbled to his feet Tony was immediately at his side, tucking an arm around him as both of them leaned against each other as they staggered towards the main door.

Steve had never been so thankful that Tony was an alpha. Right now he needed a strong shoulder to keep him standing and, after everything, having his mate to be the one to hold him up soothed him in ways he didn't think were possible.
"…Tony…"

Tony responded with a hoarse grunt and his arm tightened where he had it wrapped around Steve's back. There were so many things Steve wanted to say but again he couldn't find the words for any of them. They reached the elevator and Steve sighed and leaned back against the wall, thankful for the pause as they waited for the doors to slide open.

Tony fell against him and pressed his forehead against Steve's collarbone, both of them just breathing in each other's scents. Swallowing, Steve tried to talk again. Again it seemed like he should say something. This time something to mark the victory they had just achieved.

"…Tony…I…"

Tony shook his head and lifted his face so that he was looking up at Steve. His expression was tired but there was a small grin on his lips all the same. "…Please don't say something sentimental. How about we save that for home?"

Swallowing, Steve managed a smile back as the elevator arrived with a light ping. "Home sounds good…But let's find everyone else first."

Tony nodded reluctantly and shuffled into the elevator as the doors slid open. As Steve stepped in beside him, Tony leaned his weight up against the inside wall before jamming his finger into the button for one of the lower floors, the one the barracks were on. Steve let out a grunt of approval and Tony just gave a light nod and ran a hand over his face to try and wipe away some of the blood that was already drying on his cheek.

The first thing Steve wanted to do was check on Bruce, Natasha, and Clint. He knew that Thor and Loki had been able to hold up their end because he had heard the blast but he couldn't say the same about the other three. Plus, he wanted to make sure that Bruce was alright. His beta hadn't had the chance—or desire—to test whether he'd be able to change back to his human form and Steve had to admit he was a little worried about what he might find.

When the elevator reached their destination, Tony motioned for Steve to exit. Steve raised a questioning brow and Tony shrugged then pulled his phone out of his pocket and waved it around. "I'm going to step out to call our ride. I can't get an outside signal in here."

Steve knew that Tony meant SHIELD. Stepping out of the elevator, Steve held the door open long enough to get a warning in. "Be careful. There could still be Hydra guards walking around."

"Right back at you."

Steve waited in front of the elevator shaft as the doors slid back closed again and watched as the number on the top indicating what floor it was on flickered from one digit to another until it stopped on the main level. Silently wishing him good luck, Steve sighed and turned back to the issue at hand. Had Bruce been able to shift? Were he, Natasha, and Clint alright? Were they able to take out enough guards so that Tony would be safe outside and so that SHIELD would have minimal trouble when they got here?

Luckily Steve wasn't left wondering for very long. He had only gone halfway down the hall when Natasha hurried around a corner, her gun out and clearly intent on getting to the elevator. They spotted each other at the same moment but Steve was the first one to speak. "Natasha! Where are Bruce and Clint?"

The redhead nodded and spun around on her heels. "In the barracks. Come on."
Steve had to jog to catch back up with her. "Is everything alright?"

"Seventeen guards are dead."

Right. He should have specified. "On our end? Bruce?"

Natasha holstered her gun and brushed her hair back out of her face. "He pulled it off. He got himself back into his human form. Between you and me, Bruce had grabbed onto Clint and I think his begging is part of what brought Bruce back."

A new wave of relief washed through Steve. They were all okay. "Take me to him."

They went down a series of halls until they rounded another corner and Steve caught sight of what used to be a doorway. It looked like a bulldozer had driven straight through it except for the fact that the deep gouges in the fractured concrete and drywall were in the shape of claw marks. Inside the destruction was far more gruesome, the room was awash in blood and bullet holes with bodies strewn about everywhere. And in the middle of it all was Bruce, sitting hunched over on the floor with Clint crouched down next to him.

As he stepped into the room and over the wreckage, Steve's nose twitched at the heavy scent of Bruce's Wolf that still lingered thick in the room. It even overpowered the smell of all the blood from the Shifters around them and the scent memory of the Wolf was enough to hammer home just how lucky they were that Bruce had been able to gain some measure of control over it.

"Bruce!"

The beta's head bobbed up as Steve called his name. He seemed happy to see him but still flinched as Steve made it over to him and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Steve…"

"Are you okay?"

Bruce swallowed then gave a shaky nod. "I…I, I'm alright."

Good. Bruce didn't seem "alright" yet but if there was something wrong the doctor would have said so. Steve looked up at Clint and offered a small smile. "And what about you?"

Clint tried to grin back but it came out as more of a wince. Giving up, he rubbed his arm with a self-deprecating shrug. "I'll live."

A breathy laugh slipped from Bruce and he shook his head. "…Sorry about that, by the way."

"No, it's fine." This time the Hawk really did grin, although the expression was strained. "Considering how easily you killed all those guys, I'm gonna say the Wolf was just giving me a really tight hug when you tried to pull my arm out of its socket."

Bruce shook his head again before looking up at Steve. "Is Schmidt…?"

Steve voice dipped low and his fingers tightened on Bruce's shoulder. "Taken care of."

"Good…good…" Bruce trailed off then looked up again and seemed to realize that Steve had walked in alone. "Tony?"

Steve was quick to soothe him. "He's calling SHIELD in."

Bruce's nodded then straightened up, his eyes wide as he looked back at Steve. "I need, need to talk to them…They need to send a medical team in."
"Tony's taking care of it." At least Steve assumed so. But Tony was smart, to put it mildly. He had heard everything Steve had and was sure to be giving SHIELD a quick report of it.

Bruce nodded again but his thoughts seemed to be drifting. "I should get back down to them."

Seeing that he was trying to stand, Steve helped him up to his feet. "Who?"

"Those Shifters in that lab...they need immediate attention, now that it's over."

Steve tilted his head, observing his beta as he staggered out of the room. "I don't know if you should be administering medical care right now."

Clint snorted as he trailed after, Natasha joining him a few steps behind Steve and Bruce. "I don't know if he should be walking right now."

"Well someone has to check on them. God only knows how long they've been like that..." Reaching the broken entrance to the barracks, Bruce's hand fumbled on the damaged concrete as he leaned on it for support. Then he turned his eyes on Steve, his gaze exhausted, open, and beseeching. "Please, Steve."

Steve couldn't say "no," especially not when he was so concerned about the Shifters in Hydra's lab too. "Okay. Clint, can you help him down there?"

Clint sighed but nodded. "As long as he doesn't try to crush my ribs again."

Despite his protests Clint seemed like he would still be able to cover Bruce's back if they ran into any bad company. Steve would have gone himself—would have preferred to go himself to check on the sick Shifters first-hand—but the building still had to be secured. Not to mention that part of his team was still missing. Decided, Steve waved at Natasha. "Natasha, let's go find Thor and Loki and between all of us we can lock this place down until SHIELD gets here."

"Lead the way."

O~O~O

Half an hour later and Steve and Natasha had managed to find Thor and Loki and only had to incapacitate two wayward Hydra guards in the process. They had found the two inspecting the wreckage left over from explosion they had set off and breaking anything that had managed to survive the blast. Steve and Natasha gave them a hand—there wasn't much left over—and before long they had destroyed every single piece of weaponry Schmidt had stored in the Factory's armory.

A quick check with Tony over the headset let Steve know that SHIELD was on their way and that Tony was dealing with the guards that had been posted out on the front gate. Apparently he had it handled though so Steve led the others in a search of the rest of the building.

There were at least two dozen guards left and twice as many human researchers but all of them surrendered without much argument when faced with the news that Schmidt was dead. A lot of them actually seemed relieved. Natasha and Loki confiscated their weapons while Steve and Thor rounded the guards and scientists up and put them all in one room so that they could be controlled. A few of the guards, particularly the alpha Shifters among them, still had a bit of fight left in them but Steve felt comfortable leaving Thor and Loki to guard them while Natasha did one more loop and Steve went back to see how Bruce was doing.

It took Steve a few minutes to find his way to Hydra's lab but it got a lot easier when he just
followed Bruce's scent. The smell of his Wolf was still strong on him and it lit up the air like a neon sign. He saw Clint first. The Hawk was leaning outside the room against the large glass wall, refusing to step inside. As soon as he went in himself, Steve knew why.

It was the first good look that Steve got at the Shifters held hostage by Hydra and it was almost enough to make him sick to his stomach. Bruce had been right when he had first described it—there were at least fifty, probably more, Shifters, all unconscious and strapped to hard medical tables with wires plugging them into machines. Fluids were being pumped into and out of their bodies. The worst part was that there were children. There were children, toddlers, and babies.

Steve stared down at one of the small beds, some sick mockery of a crib, and watched as the child, a tiny Wolf pup by the smell of them, slept. At least, Steve hoped they were just sleeping. Its chest was rising and falling gently and if Steve was reading it right, one of the wires connected to the baby was measuring its heartbeat which was still weakly pumping. How could they do this? How could Schmidt have wanted this and how could any of the "researchers" willingly participate in this? It was true that some of them might have been here against their will but that certainly wasn't true for all of them.

Bruce had been further back in the room tending to an adult female. When he spotted Steve, the beta wavered on his feet then leaned against the wall to stabilize himself as he made his way over. His pallor was ashen, his eyelids heavy, and he looked ready for a week-long nap. But he seemed more lucid than he had before and Steve was glad that he had allowed him to come back here.

Steve tore his eyes from the child and set a hand on Bruce's arm but was careful not to actually push against him too heavily in fear that he would topple the beta over. "How is it going? How are they?"

Bruce adjusted a lab coat he had found to cover up his shirt and torn pants then ran his hand over his face. "It's going as well as it can...There are just, so many of them and some of them need serious medical attention. Others are stable but, even with SHIELD minutes away I think we're going to lose a few."

Steve felt his heart sink a little and looked over at the Shifters lying still in their beds. None of them looked healthy to him, none of them at all responsive to the sound of their voices. The thought of so many innocent people stolen away from their lives and families dying in here, like that, it just didn't seem fair. The victory seemed dull now and Steve had to remind himself that hundreds—maybe even thousands—of other Shifters could have been put at risk if they hadn't stopped Schmidt. "Is there anything I can do?"

Bruce's lips turned up in a sad little smile. "There's nothing anyone can really do until we get them to an actual hospital. Keep them as comfortable as they can be, I guess."

Shaking his head, Steve scanned the room again. He felt so useless.

His dark thoughts were broken up somewhat as a comforting scent reached his nose through the chemical haze of the lab and a moment later Tony half-jogged, half-limped into the room. Panting as he came to a stop, he leaned heavily on Steve's shoulder as Steve wrapped a hand around his mate. "Hey, SHIELD just got here. Coulson's out front and probably wants to talk to you. Bruce," the beta looked up from one of the screens showing a Shifter's vital signs, "Natasha is leading in a small army of EMTs as we speak so get ready for that clusterfuck."

At the news, Bruce broke away from the machine and hurried back across the room. "Thank God for that." Steve gasped in surprise as Bruce started to detach cords and tubes from some of the patients and the beta glanced over his shoulder to explain. "We need to get them ready for
transport! The faster we can start moving some of these guys out of here, the faster we can take them back to the city."

Turning back to Tony, Steve bumped their foreheads together which made the Cat blink up at him in surprise. Right, that was a Wolf sign of affection. Reaching up, Steve rested a hand on the side of Tony's face instead, taking care to avoid his injuries. "Can you stay in here with Bruce and Clint to help get these people out while I go speak with Phil?"

Tony nodded and looked a little relieved at the prospect of not having to run all the way back outside again. "Sure. I'll keep you posted if anything big happens on this end, and you better do the same on yours."

"Of course."

Steve lingered in the room for just a second longer and watched as Tony turned and went to Bruce's side. Then he finally got his legs to move again. Nodding at Clint as he stepped out of the room, Steve made his way back towards the main entrance to the Factory. On his way out he ran into Natasha followed closely by Agent Hill and, just as Tony had said, a small army of SHIELD medical technicians carrying stretcher after stretcher into the facility. It still wasn't going to be enough to evacuate all of Hydra's patients but it would be a good start.

He squeezed by them and made his way through the main entrance to find Coulson waiting just outside. Behind him and behind the walls surrounding the front of the Factory Steve could see three helicopters and about six vans emblazoned with the SHIELD logo.

As Coulson caught sight of him, the agent slipped off the sunglasses he was wearing and nodded to Steve with a small, tight smile on his face. "Steve! Well done."

Steve nodded back, accepting the man's hand as Phil reached out to shake his. "Thank you, sir."

"I know it couldn't have been easy, any of it, but from what Stark's told us, and from what I can see, you did everything we could have asked for. What you've done today is going to save a lot of people, humans and Shifters."

"We did our best." Steve turned back to look at the compound. "I saw the medical team going in and obviously the safety of those Shifters that Hydra used for testing need to be our first priority. But Thor and Loki are currently watching over a room full of Hydra employees that need to be taken into custody."

Phil nodded. "Like you said, the injured Shifters are our first priority. Once we get all of them out, we'll deal with the others."

"What's going to happen to them?" Steve had to think long and hard about whether he cared or not. But in the end the answer was always "yes."

"They'll be put into holding cells until we can set up trials for them." Steve turned back to look at Coulson in surprise and the agent's tight-lipped smile returned. "There's no saying right now how much each of these individuals were personally involved with what happened here but we'll take each case as its comes and make sure that each of them gets the chance to defend themselves in a court of law before we start doling out punishments."

"Schmidt will never get that opportunity."

Phil's eyes hardened before he set a comforting hand on Steve's shoulder. "He decided his own end with the choices he made a long time ago."
Steve nodded his agreement. Schmidt had set himself on a path that only had one outcome. Steve regretted that someone had to die but not the fact that Schmidt was dead. After everything Schmidt had done and had tried to do, having him not on the world was the only way to save it. And the Wolf is Steve could finally rest knowing that the person responsible for the death of his pack had paid for it.

The next few hours were a blur for Steve. It took them that long to bring out all of the sick Shifters then to round up all of the Hydra employees that were still alive. After that, Coulson ordered that teams go in to collect all of the bodies and Steve and the others lingered to watch as the agent ordered the Factory to be destroyed after it had been entirely cleared. He said it was to prevent any of Hydra's research from ever falling into the wrong hands but Steve was certain that he, Agent Hill, or another senior agent had managed to secret away some of the information Hydra had gathered before they razed the building. They let explosives do the heavy lifting and the mountain the Factory was built into shuddered as the blast sent a sound wave billowing out into the surrounding forest.

Steve watched from a hilltop half a mile away with his pack and Agent Coulson as the dust and debris slowly began to settle and rock slides knocked loose from the mountain by the explosion buried the destruction under a pile of earth. Once everything had fallen back to silence Steve knew that it was time for them to head back home. Agent Coulson nodded his goodbye with a promise that he would remain on site to confirm everything was finished. Steve offered Loki a ride but the Raven declined. With a quick, "I will see you at home, brother," Loki disappeared in a flash of black feathers.

Thor had looked saddened by the Raven's sudden departure but kept a small smile on his face as they loaded up into the car to head back towards civilization. Steve and Tony each opted out of driving, instead crashing in the middle seat as Natasha took the wheel. Clint said he would have offered but his arm was still hurting him. The pout he sent over to Bruce went completely unnoticed by the beta who, still dressed in the white lab coat he had stolen from Hydra's lab, was slumped over against the window in the back seat, dead asleep.

The drive lasted for a couple of hours and Steve nodded off a couple of times himself. When they finally turned onto the road that led up to Tony's mansion, Steve didn't think he had ever seen anything as welcoming in his life as the tree-lined drive. A few minutes later and Natasha pulled the car up to the garage and they all nearly fell out of the car. Steve had to lean over into the back seat and shake Bruce awake and Tony leant the beta his arm as they hobbled towards the front door.

It took Tony a moment to fish his keys out of his pocket and after a few seconds of searching he grew too frustrated and shouted at the door instead, "JARVIS! Unlock this for me, will you?"

Steve smiled as the electronic butler answered back immediately."Yes, sir." There was a click and the double doors slowly opened to reveal the foyer of Tony's house. "By the way, sir, you have a visitor."

Steve straightened up as Tony's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "A visitor? What visitor?"

"That would be me."

"Loki!" Thor pushed his way to the front of their small group, a huge smile on his face, as his brother sauntered out into the entryway from one of the side rooms.

Tony put his hand out to stop the Lion from running inside, the muscles in his shoulders drawn tight as he glared at the intruder. "How did you get in here? This place is wired tighter than Fort
Tony interrupted himself with a hiss as Thor shoved his arm aside and stepped over the threshold. He caught his brother in a tight hug before his hands slid up to cup Loki's face, entirely oblivious to the rest of them standing there watching. "Why are you here? I had thought you said-?"

The Raven tilted his head with a small smile. "I said I would meet you at home. And if I am not mistaken, this is what you have come to consider as 'home'."

"You are not wrong." Thor's eyes grew soft and even Steve could see it coming as he leaned in and pressed his lips against Loki's.

Beside Steve, Tony practically bristled and threw both of his arms into the air as if he were a referee calling a foul. "No! No kissing in public spaces."

Bruce grinned wearily and brushed past the Panther to step inside. "Are you sure you want to make that rule?"

Tony quickly reconsidered. "No incest kisses in public spaces!"

Steve flushed and shook his head, by-passing Tony to go into his home as Clint began to laugh behind him. Steve thought he saw a blush creep onto Loki's pale cheeks but Thor didn't seem to have heard a word any of them said and parted Loki's lips to deepen the kiss.

"Hey! No! This is my house, my rules. If you want to do nasty things with psychopaths, you do them in a hotel, got it?"

Hearing Tony continue to rant, Steve looped back around Thor and Loki and grabbed the Panther's hand. Tony snarled at him but let Steve pull him further into the house. "You could have supported me a little bit more, or at all. Am I the only one who remembers that Loki tried to kill us not too long ago? How are you okay with this?"

Steve just shook his head and kept pulling Tony along as he reached the stairs. He hadn't forgotten Loki's past actions, but he did remember the Raven's recent ones too. "Let's just get some sleep."

"Excuse me? Sleep? How am I going to sleep with a killer in my house?"

"I'll help. Come on, Tony."

Tony growled but stayed silent and momentarily giving up the battle. Steve had a feeling it out crop back up again but for now he knew Tony was as tired as he was, proven by the fact that he didn't continue on with the argument. Instead he let Steve take him to his room without any further complaint and closed the door behind them as they stepped inside, cutting off the sounds of the rest of their team preparing themselves for bed.

They silently went through the motions of their nightly routines before falling gratefully onto Tony's mattress. They were both exhausted but neither one of them seemed to be ready for sleep. They were lying on their sides facing each other so close that there were less than six inches separating them. Seeing Tony safe and finally able to let his guard down soothed something in Steve's chest even as the patched cuts and bruises reminded him of the fact that he had failed to keep Tony out of harm's way.

Biting his lip, Steve reached over and cupped the back of Tony's head, gently rubbing small circles down to the nape of his neck. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you…"
Steve had kept his voice soft, barely above a whisper, and Tony responded in kind as a mirthless smile flickered onto his lips. "Likewise. When Schmidt pushed that desk over on you I wanted to claw out his heart and eat it."

The frankness of Tony's confession startled a laugh from Steve's throat but he could relate. Shuffling forward, Steve pressed his nose against the Cat's. "God, you can't imagine what I was thinking when he was on top of you." Steve's eyes fell closed at the memory. "The ways I wanted to hurt him…"

He heard Tony hum then a burst of air hit his face as he chuckled. "You and me, we have strange pillow talk."

"Maybe."

One of Tony's eyebrows shot up and he gave Steve an incredulous look. "Maybe?"

Steve's denial instantly crumbled. "Okay, yes. But what are we supposed to be saying instead?" What else were they supposed to talk about? Those things before were true, and they meant something. Admittedly they weren't the most romantic, but…if they were strange, what was "normal"?

Tony smiled and moved closer, his legs brushing up against Steve's under the covers. "Stupid things like 'oh, sweetie, I was so afraid I was going to lose you.'"

The other had meant it as a joke but it hit hard in Steve's chest and his expression sobered. "That's true. I was, for a few minutes…" He saw Tony's smile falter and tried to lighten the mood again by nuzzling Tony's jaw with his nose. "…What should we say next?"

Tony's voice had softened. "Probably some fluff-filled emotional breakdown where we both devolve into teary messes and talk about feelings. I'll let you make up the dialogue for that part though; it's obviously more your thing."

That brought a grin to Steve's face. He was beginning to see what Tony meant. Neither of them were very good at expressing deeper emotions—although the Cat seemed particularly bad about it—and other mated pairs probably had a lot less difficulty with it. Probably because they both weren't alphas. It was thought that an alpha needed a beta or an omega to soften them up enough to be a proper mate. But Steve wanted to prove them wrong; he already knew that another alpha could bring out an alpha's softer side. Tony had done it to him innumerable times.

Steve took a deep breath, savoring the smell of his mate, before letting it out slowly. Tony fidgeted under his touch but froze when Steve's gaze came back up and looked straight into his eyes. "How about… I couldn't have done it without you. That there were a few times that I thought I was going to lose but that I saw your strength and it gave me the strength I needed to keep fighting. That I love you and I want you by my side forever so I don't ever lose that. That I can't even imagine a future without you in it…How am I doing?"

Tony's mouth had fell open and when Steve finished it snapped back shut. It took the Cat a moment to find his words again, and when he did they came out as a rasp. "Pretty good…"

Steve smiled then laughed as Tony growled and jumped on top of him. He must have done very good.

O-O

Tony growled and nipped at Steve's throat before tucking his face against the Wolf's neck to hide
the blush that threatened to bleed onto his face. Not that Steve would probably be able to see it with all the bruising but, for sh*t's sake, he didn't need to be blushing over some flowery words like a school girl.

They both seemed to have gained some energy back as Steve rolled them back over so that he was lying on top of Tony. Tony's arousal flared as Steve's hips began to grind down onto his but threw the Wolf off with a quick twist of his body. "Nuh-uh, I don't think so."

Steve looked slightly stunned and blinked over at him from where he had landed on the bed. "What?"

Tony grinned and crawled on top of the Wolf. "You got to top last time, it's my turn."

A thoughtful frown appeared on Steve's face, like he didn't dislike the idea but wanted something else. But Tony wasn't going to let up on this one. It wasn't as if he hated bottoming for Steve but he didn't want anyone to get the impression that that was how the relationship was always going to go. And after everything that had happened, after getting his ass handed to him by Schmidt and having to watch Steve get thrashed around, he wanted control over something tonight.

Tony's thoughts derailed as Steve tilted his head to the side. His blue eyes were wide and open, and so fucking sincere that it almost hurt to look at them. "Please? I just…" Tony twitched as Steve reached up and gently rested his hand on Tony's back, sliding it down to his waist as he spoke. "I want to take care of you tonight."

To take care of him. Tony wanted to scoff but the sarcastic noise caught in his throat. Alpha Wolves…they took care of their mates. But did alphas let other people take care of them? No one had offered to take care of him since…He could barely remember. Tony swallowed and shook his head. "…You really want to take care of me?"

Steve's answer was immediate. "Yes."

Tony eyed Steve for a moment longer before raising his eyebrows and pulling off of the Wolf. Then he scooted over to sit on the edge of the bed and pointed to the ground. "Then get down on your knees." If Steve wanted to play it like that, then they were going to do it Tony's way.

Steve tilted his head before understanding lit in his eyes and he blushed. "But I—"

"After." Tony was only going to hand off control once he was done with it.

Satisfied with the promise, Steve slipped off of the bed and moved to kneel between Tony's legs. A spark of pleasure shot up Tony's spine at the sight of his mate, one of the strongest alphas he had ever seen, in such a submissive position in front of him and immediately considered them even for whatever Steve wanted to do with him afterwards. He lifted his hips to let Steve pull down his boxers then waited for Steve to move. He didn't have to wait for long.

Tony bit the inside of his cheek as Steve's lips wrapped around the head of his arousal before swallowing him down as far as he could go without gagging. His fingers came up to grip what he couldn't take in his mouth and he gently applied pressure in time to his head as he carefully began to bob up and down. Steve definitely lacked technique but Tony was pretty sure that all his fumbling only added to it for him. It was the knowledge that Tony was the only person Steve had ever done this for, had ever gotten onto his knees for. Just seeing Steve down there, looking up at him through his ridiculous eyelashes with his lips stretched around him, almost made Tony come on the spot.
Sucking in a hiss as he felt his orgasm threatening to rush over him, Tony reached down and tugged on Steve's hair. "Steve..."

Steve understood, Tony knew he did, but the Wolf continued on. Tony's fingers tightened their grip and he grit his teeth. "Steve, if you want me to come while you're in me, you better stop."

Those were apparently the magic words. Tony moaned as Steve's lips and hand suddenly disappeared, but the moan was cut off by a shout as Steve surged up and tackled him back to the bed. Suddenly he had a lap full of desperate, aroused, alpha Wolf and Steve's mouth was everywhere, biting and licking at his neck, his jaw, his ear, his shoulder. Just barely managing to remember to breathe through the onslaught, Tony reached down and pushed Steve's underwear off of him so that there was nothing but skin between them.

Steve whined low in this throat as their arousals brushed together and the sound of it was enough to almost make Tony come again. Swearing, he pushed Steve away just enough to let him roll over and up onto his hands and knees. Blinking in surprise, Steve's body seemed to move before his brain kicked back in and he scrambled up to lean over Tony's back. A part of Tony's brain was screaming at him for putting his ass in the air and being mounted like some omega but the rest of him was alright with it. Because it was Steve. And because next time, when they both had fewer issues to deal with, he would make sure that he was the one topping.

The muscles in Tony's back twitched as the Wolf licked a wide stripe up his spine and nuzzled his shoulder blades. Tony's fingers dug into his sheets and he swore his claws came out for half a second as he almost lost control of his Panther form. "Oh fuck... Steve, if you don't fuck me in three seconds I swear I'm go—Ngh, shit!"

Tony got what he wanted in a big way. And it was just what he needed, to just fall into something so entirely that it was the only thing he could think about. Every fear and every worry he had carried with him all day melted away under Steve's hands. Neither of them lasted long, both too tired and sensitive, and once they were done they collapsed in a heap of limbs and sweat. Tony didn't even try to adjust his position, just wrapped his arms around Steve as he fell on top of him and closed his eyes, letting himself drift into unconsciousness surrounded by the scent of his mate.

He couldn't have gotten more than two hours of sleep when Tony was woken up again with a small shuffling noise near his door.

His brow furrowed and he pushed his face into his pillow as he heard the door to his room creak open. What was Steve doing, walking around? Then he felt something stir behind him and realized that Steve was lying behind him with his arms wrapped around his stomach.

Which meant that he couldn't be at the door.

Tony's eyes snapped open and he scented the air. He identified the smell before he caught sight of a figure slip in through the cracked door. "Bruce?"

Steve had woken up when Tony had tensed in his arms and immediately caught on to what was going on. He groggily let Tony go and pushed himself up onto his elbows. "What's wrong?"

Bruce shuffled closer, worrying the hem of his night shirt in his hands. There were dark bags under his eyes which stood out in painful contrast to his pale face. He looked more sheepish than Tony had ever seen him but Steve didn't look all that surprised. The beta swallowed and tried to look anywhere but at Steve and Tony. "I, I can't sleep again."

Tony frowned then gaped at Steve as he automatically waved Bruce closer. "Come here."
Falling back against the sheets, Tony let out a moan. "What the hell are you doing…?" The question was for Bruce and Steve. It was too early in the morning for this shit. He didn't understand what was happening or why Steve was inviting Bruce into the bed when they were both naked and covered in sweat and dried come.

Steve barely glanced at him and fished both of their underwear off of the ground without leaving the comfort of the bed. "Bruce needs to be grounded. It's Wolf stuff."

Tony heaved a sigh but tugged on his boxers as Steve threw them at him. Bruce gave a timid grin as he drew closer. "It's pack stuff."

Tony eyed the beta and snorted as Bruce moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "Well, you're about to lay in 'stuff' so if you insist on cuddling, you might want to switch out the blanket first." When Steve said that Bruce needed to be "grounded" Tony assumed that meant that Bruce was on the border of losing his shit and shifting into that Wolf monster. Which was the only reason he was letting this happen.

Bruce immediately hopped back up, all nervousness gone and replaced with disgust. "What? Tony, that's gross."

"What are you, five? You're the one busting into my bedroom at one in the morning." Bruce could come in if he had to he should have known better than to expect anything different.

"Ugh…" Bruce wiped off the back of his pajama pants as Steve gave him an apologetic look. "Where are the spare blankets?"

Tony rolled over and pulled the blankets over his head. "Bottom drawer of the wardrobe."

Bruce followed his direction and Tony tried to go back to sleep as Steve moved around to help the beta lay down a new blanket next to him. Then Tony felt the mattress dip and then blinked his eyes open in shock as Bruce crawled up next to him instead of Steve. "What-?"

The beta shook his head as his nerves seemed to return. "I, just, need to be near an alpha right now. You, you're my alpha too. I'm sorry, this is really awkward, but I couldn't sleep even though I'm so damn tired and every time I did I was worried that the Wolf would come back…"

Tony pulled the blanket down to his shoulders so he could look at Bruce. "You're right, this is beyond awkward. Now stop talking so we can all get some sleep."

Steve propped himself up so that he was looking at Bruce over Tony's shoulder. "He means 'You're welcome to stay here as long as you need.'"

"That is not what I said…" Tony grumbled to himself as he pulled his sheets back over his head. Luckily no one responded. Steve settled back down and Bruce had been telling the truth because almost as soon as things had gone quiet the beta's breathing evened out. He must have really been exhausted.

Tony really didn't like having other people in his space. Steve had become an exception and Bruce…Tony closed his eyes and sighed. Bruce was…okay. He was the closest thing Tony had to a friend beside Pepper and Happy. So Bruce could stay. As long as this wasn't an everyday thing he wasn't going to complain. Too much.

Steve sought his hand out underneath the covers and Tony relaxed. He was just about to drift off himself when there was another noise at his door. This time a knock.
Steve jolted up into a sitting position and Bruce started so badly that he nearly rolled off of the bed. Tony just groaned and burrowed further under the covers as the door creaked open again.

"Hey…"

Steve answered back, his voice groggy. "Clint? Natasha?"

"I saw Bruce come in." Tony could hear the smile on Clint's face as he spoke from the door. "Can we join?"

Growling, Tony threw the blankets off and sat up next to Steve to glare at the newcomers. Clint was standing there with a small smirk on his face, Natasha standing behind him with a quirked eyebrow. "What the fuck…? Wolves I can understand, but Birds and Spiders do not nest together." Bruce there was a reason for. Bruce he could understand. This was ridiculous.

"What do you know? Move over." Before Tony could offer more protest, Clint literally jumped onto the bed, bouncing on it like a kid in a hotel room.

Tony hissed at him then snarled at Natasha as the redhead wandered over to sit down at the foot of the bed. "How are you a part of this?" She just shrugged and Tony turned his glare on Bruce. "This is because of you. Look what you started."

Moaning, Bruce shook his head as he pulled his pillow over his head. "Not on purpose…"

"No one informed me that we were participating in a bonding experience this night!"

Everyone in the room looked over at the doorway as a voice much too loud for the early hour boomed from the hallway.

Tony gave up trying to scare Clint and Natasha off and fell back against the mattress. He closed his eyes, hoping that Thor was just a sleep-deprived hallucination. "Oh my god, why…?" Clint sniggered as the Lion strolled into the room in nothing but his underwear, dragging a reluctant-looking Loki behind him. But Tony was way over the limit of how much he would put up with. "Get the hell out of my room."

Steve rolled over and wrapped his arms back around him. "Tony…"

Scowling, Tony narrowed his eyes at him. Steve met the gaze with a beseeching one of his own. "Don't give me that look. Wait," a horrific realization came over Tony and he jabbed Steve in the chest, "you want this, you sick bastard. You want this to happen."

Steve tugged him closer and Tony could feel the way the Wolf was smiling against his forehead. "Just go with it."

"This is my room!"

Bruce was only slightly repentant as he wiggled a bit closer to Tony so that Clint would be able to fit next to him, freeing up more space at the foot of the bed for Thor and Loki. All at once Tony hated the fact that he had gotten such an expensive, large mattress. The next mattress he bought was going to be a twin size. "You're the one that decided to mate. This is the alpha's room now."

"It was always the 'alpha's' room! It was mine!"

Steve had the balls to laugh at him before he curled around Tony's body. "Shh…"
"Don't 'shush' me you—"

Steve wrapped a hand around the back of Tony's neck and pulled him into a kiss. Which turned out to be a pretty effective way to shut him up. Tony bit hard at Steve's bottom lip to show that he wasn't happy with the situation. Steve let out a satisfying yelp at the nip but his hand tightened on Tony's hip beneath the covers. Feeling something almost like regret, Tony soothed the bite with a quick lick. He was still angry though and wanted Steve to know it. "This is ridiculous. This is the last time…"

Steve tucked his arms around Tony's back as the others started to lie down around them. Clint had snuck in next to Bruce and Natasha had curled herself around Clint's legs, using his stomach as a pillow. Thor was sprawled out across Bruce, Tony, and Steve's feet and had pulled Loki on so that the Raven was half on top of him. Steve's eyes passed over all of them before smiling and murmuring into Tony's ear. "This is what being part of pack is all about."

"Last time."
"We'll see."
"Steve."
"Fine."

O~O~O

The next time Steve woke up the sun was up, just barely visible through the thick curtains in Tony's room. Bruce and Thor were still passed out on the bed but everyone else, including Tony, had vanished. The spot Tony had occupied next to him last night had gone cold meaning that the Cat had gotten up a while ago. Steve hoped that he wasn't too mad. He knew that Tony valued his personal space but Steve had really enjoyed last night when everyone came in. Well, he had enjoyed the part of the night before then too, when it had just been him and Tony, but there was something special about having his whole pack clamor in.

But now he should probably find Tony and check on him.

Carefully slipping out of bed to make sure that he didn't wake up Bruce or Thor, Steve pulled on some clothes and snuck out of the door. The mansion was humming with quiet energy and Steve trailed Tony's scent down to the main floor. It smelled like he had gone down to his workshop at some point but had left and retired to the kitchen which is where Steve found him. He was sitting at the counter with a mug of coffee and the newspaper spread out in front of him, though most of his attention was on the smart phone in his hand.

"Tony?"

The Cat turned, watched Steve for a moment, then turned back to his phone. "Well, look who's finally up."

At least Tony was talking to him. That was a good sign.

Moving closer, Steve wrapped his arms around Tony's shoulders from behind and kissed his cheek, nosing the side of his head. "…I'm sorry about last night, but it meant a lot to me…"

"I didn't sleep much."

Steve checked on Tony again and saw that Tony did look a little ragged. "Sorry."
"Just…don’t make it a habit. And I'm upgrading the lock on my door."

"Sure."

A moment of silence passed between them before Tony sighed and leaned back into his embrace. "We're in the papers."

Steve perked up, grateful for the change in topics. "What?"

Tony nodded, tucked his phone away, then flipped the newspaper back to the first page. "Check it out, front cover spread. And look at that face."

Steve blinked in surprise as he saw his own image staring back at him. It had been taken after he had killed Schmidt, when he had gone outside to speak with Coulson when the agent arrived on scene. He looked haggard but composed, a few lines of blood streaking across his face and over the grim set of his jaw. Above the picture was a headline that stretched across the entire top of the page: **BIOTERRORISM PLOT FOILED BY SHIELD**. Reaching around Tony, Steve picked up the paper to get a better look. "Where did the press even get that photo?"

"SHIELD, according to the caption.‖ Tony grinned at Steve's surprise and lifted his mug up for another sip of coffee. "It looks like they're finally taking hold of the press and feeding them what they want people to see. And it seems like you're the new poster-child of Shifter-human relations."

Steve unwrapped his hands from around Tony and moved to sit down on the stool next to him, still holding the newspaper. "What? But you're more famous."

Shrugging, Tony pulled his phone back out of his pocket. "I'm not out of the closet yet to the public with the whole Shifter thing. But I had the same question and my answer was," clicking to open his text messages, Tony raised his brows as he read off the screen, "and I quote, I am apparently too 'unpredictable and self-obsessed' for the position."

"Oh..."

"Oh? That's all you have to say?" Tony leaned onto the countertop to try and get a better view of Steve's face. "You have become the image for justice and Shifter rights and that's all you got for me?"

Steve swallowed. This was a lot of information to take in. "Do you really think people will start caring that much?"

Tony raised a brow and swiped his hand over the screen on his phone, causing the image to appear on the large television screen across the room. Line after line of names and phone numbers began to appear and Tony snorted. "According to the one hundred and three calls and emails JARVIS has been fielding since this morning asking to have you on news programs, talk shows, and radio stations, yeah. People care."

"Oh, wow..." The people apparently wanting to contact him continued to roll onto the screen and Steve could only stare. Shaking himself off, Steve felt himself smiling. "This could be a good thing though. If I can start to talk to people and if they are ready to listen maybe I can make some real headway in making sure that Shifters and humans can get along. But that's probably what SHIELD had in mind when they sent out that photo."

"You think?"

Tony's sarcastic response was cut short as Clint ran into the room. Judging by his outfit he had just
come from a workout but there was an excited grin on his face. "Hey, did you guys see the news?"

Steve nodded. Clint's excitement was contagious and when combined with his own, Steve could hardly sit still. "Tony showed me the paper."

"No, I mean on TV, on a *national* news program. The reporter said that they're trying to contact you but they haven't had any luck yet. Did you forget to charge your phone or something?"

They were on TV too? Wow, this was getting big! "Tony, can you have JARVIS stop blocking those calls?"

Tony eyed him cautiously. "I could. Are you sure you want that? Once those sharks smell blood in the water they'll just keep coming at you."

Steve understood why Tony was acting guarded. He knew firsthand that the billionaire had had his share of being hounded by the media. But this was different. With all these people who wanted to talk to him, and with how many people might get the chance to hear what he had to say, Steve couldn't let this opportunity pass by. "Yes, I'm sure. If there's anything I can do, I want to give it a try."

Clint cocked his head to the side. "What are you going to do?"

Steve looked from him then turned to meet Tony's eyes. The Cat looked just as curious to hear Steve's answer so the Wolf decided on the truth. "Hopefully I'm going to change the world."
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Oh my goodness! This is it, this is the last chapter! This little epilogue is my gift to all of you who stuck with this story all the way through to the bitter end!

And I guess this story isn't really over now that I've started my "Ask Me" blog: http://askavengersshifters.tumblr.com/. If you're feeling like you have some unfinished business in this universe, please direct your comments and inquiries there, either anonymously or otherwise. It really does make my day to get new questions. I get embarrassingly excited. If you just want to stalk me in general, please make it easier on yourself and turn your attention to: http://loquitorlatinae.tumblr.com/

Changing the world was easy. Managing how it changed was the hard part.

As soon as Steve opened the floodgates for the media it seemed like every reporter in the United States wanted a personal interview with him. In Steve's defense, he handled it well. He managed to sound perfectly articulate and had a thoughtful answer for every question. He smiled and was serious at the right moments, was disarmingly, naturally charming, and did his research before every appearance so he wouldn't be caught off guard.

In essence, he did everything Tony never bothered to. Tony thought they would have gotten tired of Steve because as perfect as he was, Tony figured he'd be too perfect and lack the sort of drama the media fed off of. And eventually the calls did slow down and Steve wasn't going out every other day for an interview. But something had happened that Tony hadn't counted on.

Steve had become America's sweetheart.

Even though the media was growing bored, the nation adored Steve. Humans and Shifters alike set him fan letters, a lot of them absurdly meaningful and so full of gratitude to Steve for standing up for basic civil rights. It seemed like people had been desperate for a hero, someone to look up to in these turbulent times, and Steve fit the bill.

And Tony found himself encountering a new experience of his own; he had abruptly become one half of the country's newest power couple.

It hadn't taken news stations long to connect Steve to the Shifter Tony had been spotted with on his dinner date and soon they were being invited in tandem to some of the most exclusive social and political parties from coast to coast. They usually declined the invites—Steve wasn't comfortable with the crowd and Tony was just usually feeling anti-social—but on occasion they threw on some suits and acted the parts of the new bastions of hope for human-Shifter peace. SHIELD was sickeningly supportive of it all and sometimes Agent Coulson would even call them to strongly urge them to attend such or such an event on behalf of the organization. Usually when that happened Steve would manage to convince Tony to play along.

As much as they behaved themselves and smiled for every camera, Tony wished he could say that things were going as well as they appeared on the outside.
He also wished he could say that it was the pressure and stress from all the recent attention they were getting that was causing problems. But in his heart Tony knew that wasn't true.

Steve and Tony were both alphas and even though they were mates they inevitably butted heads behind closed doors. They had always had a slightly volatile relationship but about three weeks after the incident at the Factory even the others began to notice a slow change.

It started off slowly with short fights about little things. They both instigated the arguments but again Tony knew that he was to blame for the majority of them. He had begun to get more on-edge recently, but that hadn't been entirely his fault. He just wanted a little space, some time on his own. He had spent most of his adult life living alone and now it seemed that he couldn't walk into a room without someone being there. A month after everyone moved in even the smell of Tony's home had entirely changed, going from his to the strange mix of scents that was The Pack. Tony didn't mind the smell itself but the basic principle of it, of his home becoming their home, was harder to swallow. Even when they were sent out on missions there was always someone right next to him and usually that person was Steve.

When he was at home, Tony had tried to escape down to his workshop to hide out but that hadn't panned out either. Sure, he had gotten nearly a full day in there, but then Steve had forced his way in to check on him. Like he was a kid that required supervision. Steve lingered too long and finally Tony had snapped and yelled at him to get out, which sparked another one of their fights.

Before Tony knew it, he and Steve were fighting more often than they were talking. In the beginning he didn't mind it, because the others left him alone more and the make-up sex was great, but after a while it started to get to him. More and more, Tony just wanted to leave the house. So he started going in to work more. Pepper was thrilled, until she realized that Tony's return to the office was more prompted by domestic problems than anything. But she let him do what he wanted because, in her eyes, he was at least getting some work done.

Soon though not even a daily commute gave Tony enough separation from the others so he decided that a business trip to his manufacturing facilities in Southern California was in order. Which was a perfectly legitimate reason to get out of town for a few days. Or for a week. Or a week and a half.

Tony had loved every minute of it.

But he eventually ran out of excuses to stay away. All of his important tools and files were in his workshop in New York and he knew Pepper would just tell him to come home if he asked her to forward them to Malibu. That, and after nearly two weeks he had relaxed a bit so that he didn't feel like he was going to crawl out of his own skin anymore.

So he readied his private jet and flew back.

Happy drove him from the airport to the mansion and when Tony stepped out of the car and faced the front steps everything seemed normal. A little quiet, but normal. He could already smell Steve and it was clear that the Wolf had been making frequent rounds of Tony's property. By his scent, it had been a couple of hours since Steve had been outside though so Tony headed right for the house.

Letting out a large sigh, Tony tucked his suitcase under his arm and pushed the front doors open. No point in being sneaky about this. "Honey, I'm home!"

Footsteps raced down the hall upstairs before Tony could even close his mouth and half a second later Steve appeared at the top of the staircase, his face flushed and his eyes almost wild. "Tony!"
Tony raised a brow at Steve's appearance and smirked. "Any crazy parties while I was gone? You know what they say about the cat being away."

Steve didn't seem to hear him as he hurried down the staircase and immediately pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. Wincing, Tony pushed on the Wolf's arms to try to get him to loosen his grip. "Jesus, Steve, come on. Let me breathe!"

Steve immediately pulled back but kept his hands on Tony's shoulders as Steve's eyes scanned over his face then his chest hands and arms. "Tony, are you alright?"

"Of course I'm alright. What's wrong with you?"

Admittedly Tony was a little snappish but even he was surprised when Steve's gaze morphed in a split-second from concerned to angry. Tony went tense at his mate's sudden mood change and took a step back.

Steve let him go but kept him pinned with a glare. "Upstairs. We need to talk."

Tony's mind spun, going over everything he had done and said to try and figure out what it was that had set Steve off. Sure, there were a number of things that probably made the Wolf unhappy, but this seemed to be about something specific. He drew a blank but one thing Tony was sure of was that he didn't like Steve's tone. He sneered as Steve turned around and stalked back towards the stairs, expecting Tony to follow. "What? Am I in trouble?"

"Upstairs."

He felt like he was back in high school and had been called to the principal's office. It wasn't a sensation Tony had appreciated then and it certainly didn't sit well with him now. Especially not when it was happening in his own house.

As they walked through the entryway, Bruce stuck his head out from the study. The beta's curious look melted away to surprise when his and Tony's eyes connected. "Tony?"

Tony smirked and waved. "Hey Bruce. Love to talk but I guess I need to be lectured in private. I'm hoping it's just a kinky innuendo."

Steve looked over his shoulder and gave him a dark glare. Nope. No chance of sex. Too bad; it would have made for a nice homecoming. Tony snorted then turned back to Bruce only to find a disapproving frown on the beta's face before he disappeared back into the study. Great. Bruce was mad at him too.

Tony shook off the temporary loss of an ally and raised his brows at Steve's back. This was going well so far.

As Steve marched him up to the second floor and down the hall to Tony's room they passed by the gym. Natasha and Clint were inside and they glanced up at them as Tony and Steve walked by the open door. Tony didn't linger long enough to see their expressions. Since Bruce was upset with him, the best he could hope for was that the two assassins would be ambivalent.

Now that Tony thought about it though, they were lacking one disapproving face. "Where's Thor?"

Steve's voice was tight but steady, like a battle-calm had settled over him. Which bode really well for Tony. "He left with Loki for Europe."

"What, he just took off?"
"He told me it was necessary and I let him go. He's an alpha, he doesn't always answer to me, just like you obviously don't."

Okay, so much for distracting Steve from being angry. But if Steve thought he was going to be able to intimidate Tony he really should have known better.

They reached Tony's room and Tony put off the inevitable by completely ignoring Steve once he closed the door behind them. He focused instead on slowly unpacking his suitcase. He wished he'd packed more.

"Tony."

Tony raised his eyebrows again but didn't turn around, just dumped his dirty clothes into the hamper. Sure, it was a bit immature but Tony wasn't about to respond, not when Steve was talking to him in that stern voice.

A growl rolled out of Steve and his tone grew more insistent. "Tony, look at me."

Tony's resolve to stay silent snapped. Now Steve was growling at him? "Why?" As far as he knew, eye contact was not a biological necessity for verbal communication.

Steve sighed in frustration. "I'm not going to do this with your back turned."

"And that's supposed to encourage me to turn around?"

"Tony..." Steve reached forward and grabbed a tight hold on Tony's arm to the point where it actually kind of, no, it hurt. Not that he was going to tell Steve that.

Hissing, Tony pried Steve's fingers off and finally turned around to meet his mate's eyes. "Alright, you want to talk, let's talk. What is it, Steve?"

Steve's blue eyes were dark with anger. It was an emotion the Wolf didn't often show on his face and it didn't suit him. "Where have you been?"

"Out on business."

"Business? That's it?"

"Yeah."

Steve growled again and stepped closer so that he was snarling in Tony's face. "That's all I get after you just take off for twelve days?"

Tony scowled as Steve tried to physically intimidate him and didn't move a single inch. "Yeah."

Apparently Steve was expecting more than a single syllable answer but Tony honestly didn't have anything more to give. He was out on business, that was it. He didn't know what Steve wanted to hear but he wasn't going to start making shit up to make the Wolf feel better. He shouldn't have to.

Steve's eyes widened then narrowed and a flush rose onto his cheeks. He wasn't aroused though, he was just enraged. "I was worried sick, Tony! We all were! I had to call Ms. Potts to figure out what happened to you after you didn't come home. You never told me you were going to be gone for so long!"

So that was it. Oops. "Sorry, must've slipped my mind."
Tony's flippant answer just riled Steve up more. "I thought something terrible had happened to you! You could've at least called—"

Tony cut Steve off before he could go off on another rant. He didn't want to hear it. "Look, it's not a big deal, alright? I just got caught up in things. I'll program JARVIS to keep you updated on my work schedule."

Tony tried to turn away but Steve maneuvered himself so that he was standing in front of him again. He wasn't going to let him run from this. "No! Tony, you need to understand, you can't just do that. You have to tell me first. It's not that hard."

"For fuck's sake, Steve, it was less than two weeks! Relax. I'm kind of an important guy, I have to travel."

"I'm not going to just relax, Tony!"

And Steve was shouting now. Why was he shouting? There was less than a foot between them. Tony could feel his blood pressure rising, his heart pounding loudly in his chest. To top it all off he could feel a migraine beginning to spike right between his eyes as his anxiety began to build. This was just...this was just too much again. He had just gotten back and he already wanted to be one thousand miles away. Bringing his hand up to his face, Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. "I am getting so sick of this shit..."

Tony had muttered that under his breath but Steve had caught it. He had also caught the change in Tony's mood and his voice lowered back to a reasonable volume, even though it retained a harsh edge. "Tired of what?"

"This, this," Tony waved his hand in the air back in forth between them, "this argument we have whenever I try to do anything my way!"

Something seemed to break in Steve's eyes and his shoulders drooped. Slowly he stepped back from Tony then dropped down onto the bed as the back of his knees hit the mattress and rested his face in his hands. "Do you think I like fighting with you? This isn't exactly how I expected to spend my life interacting with my mate."

Tony stared down at Steve as a swarm of different emotions rolled through him. They were both still angry but now Steve almost seemed depressed. But Tony didn't want to see it. Was Steve blaming him for this bullshit? Well, excuse him for not being a good enough mate! "If you don't like it, then leave!"

"I can't!" At his words, Steve had thrown his hands down into his lap and his head had snapped back up so that he was looking at Tony. Tony just scoffed and, seeing his disbelief, Steve swallowed and shook his head. "I can't, Tony. Wolves mate for life. This won't end for me until you or me dies!"

Tony felt the blood drain from his face. He was serious. Steve was serious. What the hell—How did something like that even evolve in Wolves? How did that make biological sense? And Steve knew this when they had mated. And the fucking idiot had still mated with him? The sensation of being trapped increased tenfold and the room didn't feel big enough. The house didn't feel big enough. He wasn't good enough for Steve. He had known that from the beginning. But he wasn't going to change. He couldn't. He had honestly tried for a while there, but he just couldn't take it anymore. "Then you're just going to have to kill me, Steve, because this is all you're going to get!"

Steve jerked back like he had been slapped. Then he was up on his feet and his eyes had gone wide
in horror. Before he could answer back though, Tony pushed on. Now that the floodgates were open he couldn't stop. "This is who I am! I was losing my fucking mind pretending otherwise! I can't stand your constant fawning and attention anymore. I need to get out and breathe."

"Tony-!

Steve moved in to embrace him but Tony viciously batted his arms away. "That's exactly what I'm talking about!"

"I can't help it! I lov—"

Before Steve could finish his sentence Tony butted in. He didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to fucking hear it. "Okay, you know what? This conversation is done."

"No," Steve chased after him as Tony spun back around to head towards the door, "I'm still talking!"

Tony shook his head. "But I'm done listening. You can keep right on talking to yourself though. Knock yourself out."

Steve growled again and caught up with Tony but didn't move to grab him. "Where are you going?"

"None of your fucking business!"

Tony slammed the door to his room hard, leaving Steve on the other side. Steve could have easily opened the door and come after him but for whatever reason he didn't and Tony was thankful. He probably would have punched Steve right in the face if he had.

He was sure that their fight had carried throughout the house because the door to the gym was shut. Tony stormed right by it and found Bruce standing hesitantly at the bottom of the stairs. When he saw Tony coming towards him the beta looked like he wanted to dart away. But he steeled himself as he saw Tony hurrying towards the front door. "You're leaving? But you just got here."

"Yeah, I'm leaving. While I'm gone talk some sense into the dog upstairs, will you?"

Bruce frowned and shook his head. "I'm not letting you put me in the middle of you two again. Besides, Steve is just worried about you, Tony. And so am I. We all are."

That stopped Tony short just as his hand fell onto the door handle. "Why are you worried about me?"

Bruce stepped forward to try and soothe him but Tony shook off his touch. Even the beta's presence was starting to grate on his nerves. The realization struck Tony more than any other. He had always gotten along with Bruce. He needed to get out of here. "You're pulling away from the pack and from Steve."

"I just," Tony paused to try and calm himself down. He didn't have the patience to deal with Steve right now but he wanted Bruce to understand. "I need a break."

"From what?"

He didn't get it. Tony could tell by the look in Bruce's eyes that he didn't get it. But why had Tony even expected him to? Bruce was a Wolf too. "From everything."
Bruce furrowed his brow but let Tony's answer go. "Well, where are you going? How long will you be gone?"

"I'm going back to work."

O-O-O

Tony leaned back on his couch, set his tablet down, and closed his eyes. A warm, humid breeze wafted in through the window he had thrown open, bringing in the warmth of the sunshine and the smell of the ocean. He had gotten back from his business meeting and returned to the penthouse hotel room he had rented out for the past three weeks just an hour ago. The meeting had gone well enough but he was ready for a mental break. The whiskey he had found in the room's mini-bar helped.

It was a relief, to be alone again. But there was an undeniable itch under his skin that was hard to ignore. Over the past two months Tony had partied his way through Europe, wining and dining his long-neglected continental investors, before moving on to India and then East Asia. He burned through at least a hundred thousand dollars but easily made fifty times that in the talks he had with business executives.

It felt good.

But at the same time…

Tony sighed as his phone began to ring. Fishing it out of his pocket, Tony flicked his eyes open and glared at the screen. Who was calling him on this line? Oh, Pepper. Closing his eyes again, Tony tucked one arm behind his head and grudgingly answered the phone. He was blocking most of his calls in order to avoid harassment by anyone in the pack, but he had programmed it so that Pepper's number could come through just in case there was an emergency at work. "Hello, you've reached the voicemail of an overworked prodigy who is on a long overdue vacation. Leave a message at the tone and he'll call back when he feels like it."

"Tony!" Pepper's voice was sharp and clearly in no mood for games. "Where are you?"

"Currently in a luxury hotel in Hong Kong. Why? Want me to pick you up a souvenir?"

"You need to come home."

Rolling his eyes, Tony sat up so that he could stare out the window at the ocean and the sprawling city that surrounded it. Pepper knew what he was up to and she should know better than to lecture him. At the very least, he was actually mixing some business with his pleasure so she should be happy. Then again she had been working her ass off back at the home office so maybe she wanted him back to take it back over. "I'll be back state side in a week or so. I can fly into LAX and set up shop in Malibu for a bit. Just transfer whatever accounts need going over to JARVIS and I'll look over them during the flight."

He heard Pepper make a small distressed sound in the back of her throat and it wasn't until that moment that he realized Pepper could still be calling because something was wrong. "No, Tony, it's not work. You need to come back and talk to Steve."

Tony scoffed and relaxed again. So this was about his relationship issues. He checked in every now and again on the gossip columns online and so far no one had gone nuts over the fact that he had taken a break from Steve. Of course, they probably didn't think anything of him globe-trotting for a month or two. After all, that had been pretty standard for Tony before he had gotten wrapped
up with Steve and his pack. He would get back home before anyone noticed anything was off. He supposed he was lucky that Steve wasn't an attention-seeking media whore like some of the other people he had slept with in the past. They had run to the magazines as soon as they felt jilted.

"Really? Are you going to play marriage counselor now?"

"Tony-!"

He cut her off, "Steve and I will talk eventually. I'm not mad at him anymore, I just need a little more 'me' time." Then he would go back to New York and make friends with Steve again. Sure, Steve might be angry but he'd get over it at some point. Steve was dependable like that.

"Tony, would you let me talk? Steve is shutting down!"

'Shutting down'? What did that even mean? "I never knew he was such a drama queen…"

"This is serious! I mean he's physically shutting down. He's having some sort of physiological response from you not being there and the last time I checked in he could barely make it out of bed! I don't know him as well as you do, but he doesn't seem like the type to act like that just to prove a point."

Tony's blood ran cold and for a second he felt his heart stop. For one frightening moment he thought he was having another heart attack and gripped at his chest. Pepper was still talking but Tony couldn't hear a word, his ears still wringing at the fact that something was wrong with Steve.

Cutting Pepper off mid-sentence, Tony gathered enough air in his lungs to speak. "I'll be there as soon as I can. Have Happy pick me up at the airport." With that he slammed his button down on the "end call" button on his phone and hung up.

Tony didn't even bother to pack anything except the essentials. He just left, caught a taxi to the airport, and basically harassed and screamed at the poor airport employees until his jet was ready to fly. His money got him off the ground in record time but it turned out no amount of wealth could make his jet fly any faster. So he spent the entire trip trying to distract himself by re-engineering the engine systems to accommodate faster speeds while maintaining comfortable conditions in the cabin. By the end of the flight Tony was pretty sure that he had just revolutionized the aerospace industry but was too focused on getting back home to care.

Happy was waiting for him on the tarmac with his car as requested when the jet landed. Tony didn't say a word except to give a quick order to take him back to the mansion. His whole body felt cold and tense like he was being crushed in ice. When they finally got there Tony didn't even wait for the car to stop before he was launching himself out of the vehicle and jogging up the front steps to the door. Tony couldn't catch Steve's scent and it made the heavy block of worry twist in his gut.

Steve. Where the hell was Steve?

Tony shouldered his front door open and ran inside. "Steve? Steve! Steve, you in here?"

He was met with a long moment of silence before he heard footsteps echoing out from the kitchen and he let out a long breath of relief. It was only then that he realized how empty the mansion felt. "Hey, where is everyo—?" Tony's words stuck on his tongue as the footsteps grew louder and then Thor, not Steve, entered the foyer. Thor? Wasn't he in Europe? Swallowing, Tony cautiously approached the other Cat. The Lion's unexpected appearance set Tony on guard. And why was he the only one in the house? "What are you doing here?"
Thor snarled at Tony. He had apparently interrupted the other alpha while he was eating because Thor was holding half of a sandwich in his hand that he seemed to have completely forgotten about. "Where have you been?"

"A lot of places. Where's Steve?" Tony didn't have time for this. He sniffed the air near the stairs but Steve hadn't used them recently.

Thor was relentless though and brandished his sandwich at Tony. "You dare have the gall to show up like this and demand to see him in such a manner?"

The reprimand ripped a snarl from Tony's own throat and he spun on Thor. All he wanted to do was get to Steve so he could figure out what was going on and fix it. "Don't test me right now, I'm not in a good mood."

"As it should be! How dare you treat your mate with such abject disregard!" Thor drew himself up and looked down at Tony with condescension written all over his face. "I knew Panthers were capricious with their affections but I had not also known them to be heartless."

Tony growled. "What the fuck did you just say? How am I 'capricious'?"

"You come and go simply as it suits you with no concern for the desires of your mate. I cannot understand it; as an alpha, how can you willingly abandon your mate?"

"I didn't abandon Steve! I took a short break! Besides, he's an alpha too, he should be able to take care of himself. Now, I'm only going to ask you one more time, where is Steve?"

The Lion looked like he was fighting off the desire to start throwing punches but at that point Tony would have welcomed it. It would give him the excuse he needed to throw punches of his own. "Two days ago Bruce brought him to the medical ward at SHIELD."

All desire to fight Thor rushed out of him. Bruce did? "What? Why?"

"Because Steve was dying."

Dying.

Steve was dying.

That didn't...

That didn't even make sense.

Tony didn't remember running back outside. He didn't remember barreling in front of Happy's car just as his chauffer was driving away, nearly getting hit. He didn't remember the ride into town.

The next thing Tony was fleetingly aware of was pushing open the doors to SHIELD's hospital. There were some junior agents on his heels, yelling at him for not having a security pass or some such bullshit but Tony didn't care. They should know who he was. And if they tried to get in front of him he was going to claw their faces off. He could smell Steve now. The scent was weak but it was there and he was going to do whatever he had to get to his mate.

There was a commotion in front of him and hands fell on his shoulders. Blind to everything else but his need to get to Steve, Tony instantly lashed out with a sharp growl of rage at being stopped.

"Tony!"
"Tony, stop!"

That voice. He knew that voice.

Realizing that he had been about to shift, Tony sucked in a shaking breath and let himself feel the hands on his shoulders. His vision cleared and he saw Bruce standing in front of him, the beta's eyes staring into his concernedly. It took Tony a moment longer to notice that he was decked out in his doctor gear, which did nothing to comfort him about Steve's condition. If Bruce thought he had to step in for the regular SHIELD doctors it wasn't good.

"Tony, are you back with me?"

Shaking his head, Tony tried figure out what Bruce was talking about. "With you?"

The Wolf sighed and dismissed the SHIELD agents behind Tony with a nod of his head. "You just busted through three SHIELD security check points in a full-on alpha rampage. You could have just called me and I would have—"

Tony grabbed Bruce's hands and pulled them off of his shoulders. "Where's Steve?"

Bruce's exasperated expression sobered at the question. "He's in the next room. But Tony, there are some things I need you to understand before I let you see him."

"What? No! Let me through!" What the hell was Bruce, a beta, trying to do by standing in his way?

But Bruce didn't budge. In fact, the bastard stretched his arms across the hall so that Tony wouldn't be able to pass by without having to physically move him. "Not until you realize exactly what you did."

Tony hissed, the noise falling to a low snarl as he narrowed his eyes. "He's my mate!"

"And he's my alpha and my patient, and right now I'm protecting him from you."

That reached him because Tony knew that he would never hurt Steve, not even at his angriest. There was no reason why Bruce would need to protect Steve from him. But…Tony bit his lip. Clearly that wasn't true. Because he had hurt Steve. Bad enough to land him in the hospital.

"Wolves die from this kind of thing, Tony!"

"Bruce—" Tony closed his eyes. He didn't want to hear Bruce confirm it. Tony's mouth opened again but he didn't have the words for everything he wanted to say. He was being choked by worry and so much fucking guilt he thought he was going to drown in it.

"The only reason Steve is still alive is because he's too damn stubborn to give into it! If he were anyone else, you'd be coming home to a funeral! Wolves can die from grief and worry. We can die from broken bonds."

"Broken bon—We didn't, I never-!" Tony grit his teeth and put a hand against the wall to hold himself upright. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I swear I didn't know."

Bruce's tone softened. "I know you didn't, but it still happened, Tony."

"What the hell am I supposed to do?"

He heard Bruce sigh then felt a hand on his shoulder again. This time Tony allowed the touch and
let Bruce pull him away from the wall. "You'll have to figure that out. You made it in time today though."

Tony only had the strength to nod but managed to regain his footing and walk without support as Bruce led him to the room. The door was closed and Bruce checked back with him once before swinging the door open. Tony was almost afraid to look inside but when Bruce frowned at his hesitation he gave into the fact that he was going to have to face this head on. Sucking in a deep breath, Tony squared his shoulders and stepped forward so that he was standing in the doorway looking in. And he was glad that he had taking such a deep breath because suddenly his lungs didn't work right.

Leaving Bruce in the hall, Tony crept into the room towards Steve, his hands shaking even as he clenched them into fists to try and get the tiny tremors to stop. He had done this. He had done this to Steve. The alpha Wolf was laying on a hospital bed, the mattress propped up so that he saw nearly sitting up at a forty-five degree angle. His skin had taken on an unnaturally pale color and there were deep, dark circles beneath his eyes, like he hadn't slept in a week. Whatever had happened had taken a toll on him physically; he looked a little smaller and a lot worn down. There were a few wires attached to him to measure his heart rate and an IV plugged into his arm feeding fluids into his body. How did it get this bad? Steve was fine when he left. He had looked fine.

Tony faltered near the foot of the bed and Bruce frowned then pushed past him. With swift efficiency he grabbed an armchair sitting in the corner of the room and placed it right next to Steve's bedside then motioned silently for Tony to sit in it. Swallowing, Tony took another deep breath to steel himself then walked across the room and dropped down into the seat. The new position gave him an up-close view of Steve's face and the shaking in Tony's hands grew worse until they were crawling up his arms to the rest of his body.

He had done this.

He had done this. He had broken Steve because he was too much of a fuck-up.

Pursing his lips to keep in all the sounds that wanted to slip out, Tony reached forward and grabbed Steve's hand. It was warm but clammy as if he was running a fever. The fingers stayed limp in his for a minute but then they twitched and closed around Tony's. Tony's mouth fell open and looked up to find Steve's eyes open and watching him. He looked confused, then surprised, then his face settled into an expression of exhausted relief that just about broke Tony's heart.

"Steve." Tony's voice was hoarse. Swallowing, Tony tried again. "Hey. You don't look so good."

The Wolf rolled onto his side so that he was facing Tony. His voice was weak but, ever an alpha, he was forcing his words out anyway. "Tony…I'm sorry…"

For fuck's sake—Tony wanted to laugh. He almost did but kept it in because if he did he would probably start to cry instead. "What are you apologizing for?"

"For whatever I did…to push you away."

"Shut up. Just, shut up." Out of the corner of his eye Tony saw Bruce leave the room. He brought Steve's hand up to his face and pressed his cheek against it, inhaling deep breaths of his scent. Steve didn't smell like him anymore. The thought ripped a choked noise from Tony's throat and he closed his eyes tight. 'I, I love you. I love you so much it scares the shit out of me. I'm not good at showing it, and I start feeling trapped, but I don't think I'd be able to handle it if you died. Jesus, Steve, please don't die."
A dull whine slipped from the Wolf and his fingers tightened on Tony's hand. Tony thought Steve was upset until he opened his eyes and found a beaming smile on Steve's face. "You can't get rid of me that easily…"

Tony could only shake his head. "Look at you. What the hell are you so happy about?"

"Tony…that's the first time you said it."

"What?"

"That you love me."

"You want to hear something really pathetic?" Steve smiled again and nodded. Leaning over Steve's cot, Tony gave over to himself and pressed their foreheads together. "You're the first and only person I've ever said that to."

Steve released a strangled growl and tilted his head up to catch Tony's lips in a kiss. Tony returned it then fell into it as he felt Steve try to deepen the kiss but was unable to even push himself up onto his elbows. Steve was so weak. Thor was right; he was a terrible alpha. He was a terrible person in general. But he was going to do whatever he needed to now to try and make things alright again.

Tony didn't leave the SHIELD facilities that night, or the next. He had them pull up a cot and didn't get a wink of sleep because it was too damn uncomfortable but he didn't complain because he was able to stay next to Steve. It was apparently against policy to have him stay over but Bruce gave him an allowance because his presence was quickly causing Steve's health to approve.

Tony stepped out once and a while to use the toilet and talk to Bruce about what had happened while he was away. According to the beta, Steve had hidden the symptoms of being separated from Tony after the fight for a long time. Not even Bruce noticed. But then he had stopped eating. When Tony asked Steve about it he had insisted that he wanted to but he just couldn't keep anything down. A Wolf could last longer without food than a human could but eventually Steve's body started to shut down, just like Pepper had told Tony over the phone. He had finally gone to Bruce about it and together they had tried to deal with the problem without worrying the rest of the pack. That had lasted about twelve hours but once Natasha got wind of something suspicious going on she forced the truth out of them. Bruce, not Steve, had ended up calling Thor back to help and to provide an alpha presence. They had gone through two weeks of constantly monitoring Steve and Steve had endured the humiliation of it all before he collapsed on the stairs and they all agreed he needed to be sent to the hospital.

Bruce had tried to call Tony and even Steve had once but his phone blocked their calls. It wasn't until things had gotten desperate that Bruce had finally called Pepper to have her get in contact with him. Speaking of Pepper, she came to the SHIELD building herself to personally check in on Steve, to yell at Tony until he was pretty sure his ears had started to bleed, and to tell him that all of his luggage had successfully been packed up in Hong Kong and shipped back to New York. Tony had thanked her but hadn't really cared. None of that stuff was irreplaceable or even all that important.

As the days passed Steve started to stay awake longer and started to want to move around. Tony helped him out of bed to walk up and down the halls, first under Bruce's supervision then alone. After one such walk Bruce popped his head in and with a broad smile announced that Steve was healthy enough now that he would be able to go home.

Steve turned to Tony with a gorgeous smile on his face as Bruce disappeared to go file the appropriate forms with the head of SHIELD medical. Tony couldn't help but smile back at his
mate. "So, looks like we can take the house back from Thor again. I'm worried he's gotten too comfortable."

Steve's smile curled into a smirk. He was sitting on the edge of his cot, his knees pressing up against Tony's as they sat face to face. "You're not still scared he's going to take over the mansion, are you?"

"At this point, I think he might just to spite me. He was pretty mad at me."

"Maybe you deserved it." Steve had been joking but it still drove a spike of guilt through Tony's heart. Steve must have seen a hint of it on Tony's face because the Wolf's brows drew up in concern a second later. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." They both knew that Tony felt bad enough already.

But Tony just shrugged and swallowed to try to get rid of the knot in his throat. "It's alright. I did deserve it."

Steve shook his head but didn't answer back. Instead, he reached out and grabbed Tony's hand in his own, tightly intertwining their fingers. They remained quiet for a minute before Steve furrowed his brow again. "Tony…I think we should talk about, about what we're going to do differently. To keep this from happening again."

He sounded so hesitant, like he was worried Tony was going to snap at him. And normally Tony might have but he knew this was a conversation that they needed to have for both their sakes. "Okay."

And even though Tony was okay with this he had no clue about where to start. Luckily Steve always seemed to know what to say. They had talked a little bit about why Tony had left before but never with this amount of seriousness. Steve met Tony's eyes with a solemn gaze of his own. "I know that you left because you were feeling overwhelmed. That I was crowding you. You know I didn't mean to," Tony nodded and Steve continued, "so I'm going to try to step back. I promise to give you more time alone. When you are home, I'm not going to follow you around and when you go down into your workshop I'm going to wait until you come out—unless it's an emergency."

Tony grinned at that last bit. "Or if I invite you." Steve's expression brightened and Tony sighed. It was his turn. He wasn't looking forward to it but if Steve could make some concessions so could he. Tony knew that he couldn't ever push Steve as far away as he did. His world couldn't be all about him anymore. "And in return I promise to let you know before I take off, and that I'll never leave for more than a week at a time." He didn't know how that sounded to Steve but hopefully he would able to tell that those things were big for Tony. He was used to being able to go off on his own whenever he wanted and for how long he wanted. He had never made himself accountable to anyone before. "And when I'm here, I'll always sleep with you. Spooning, cuddling, sex, whatever you want. I'm particularly fond of that last one, by the way."

Steve shook his head but was still smiling as he leaned forward and pressed their lips together. Nuzzling Tony, lingered for a moment before pulling away just far enough so that he was able to speak. "We can do this, Tony."

"I never thought we couldn't."

O~O~O

The next few weeks were considerably better for Steve, mentally and physically. It had made a world of difference to get back to the mansion and his strength returned in leaps and bounds. A part
of him was ashamed by how quickly his body had deteriorated after Tony had left. He had heard from other Wolves that something like that could happen, but usually only after their mates died. As far as Steve knew, a Wolf never left their mate on their own free will. Not that he blamed Tony entirely.

Tony was a Cat. They had different needs and Steve definitely understood that now. But more than that, at his heart Tony was an engineer. He built things then tested them for weak points. He expected them to fail, but he didn't just break things on purpose. To a degree it's what he did, what he was constantly doing, to their relationship. Cautiously building it up then testing them, expecting their bond to fail. Steve could see it in his eyes with every fight they had even after Tony said he would try not to start fights anymore. But over time his confidence in the strength of what they had was increasing.

It helped that they were both keeping up their ends of their bargain. Steve gave Tony more space, even though it was hard at times, and in turn Tony was considerably more agreeable. He still left for work but he always came home at night. He even called ahead once when he knew he was going to be coming home late, just to make sure that Steve wasn't going to worry about him.

He also didn't protest when Steve told him that he wanted to go out when Saturday rolled around to get some fresh air and stretch his legs with a walk around the city. Tony's only rule was that, in his words, "if they were going to go out they were going to be subtle because the paparazzi bastards were still circling like buzzards". As it turned out, "subtle" meant Tony wearing jeans, a t-shirt, sunglasses, and a ball cap while Steve stuck with his usual khakis and a button up. Steve figured as long as they stayed away from Stark Tower they'd be alright so he had suggested they go the park instead. The same park he and Bruce had first met Natasha in so many months ago. It was over a dozen blocks from Tony's office so Steve figured that it would be safe. Tony had scoffed but again agreed.

Instead of having Happy drive them and risk attracting unwanted attention, Tony drove one of his less flashy cars out and parked in a public lot. It was a short block to walk to the large city park and Steve and Tony walked side by side close enough so that their arms shoulders brushed together. Steve didn't really have a plan so when they turned into the park he just let himself wander and wordlessly followed Tony when the Cat decided to go down one particular path or another. They unconsciously followed different scent lines from Shifters who had passed through earlier, jumping from one to the next as they crisscrossed each other. They didn't talk much but they didn't need to. Tony seemed almost pensive and Steve didn't mind the quiet. It was actually comfortable, peaceful, and there was enough ambient noise to keep his mind occupied.

There were voices from humans enjoying the warm summer day and the sounds of bird chirping. A breeze was causing the leaves to rustle in the trees and the gentle hum of insects in the bushes. But then there was a different noise. Steve paused as a small sound reached his ears from further inside the park. Tony stopped walking as Steve hesitated then rolled his eyes as he realized what had caught his attention. "Really, Steve? Can't we just keep walking like normal people?"

"I just want to make sure everything is alright." By then they had both identified the noise as the distinctive sound of a young child crying. Not in pain, just in the way that kids did when they were upset.

Tony grumbled some snarky comment at him but Steve ignored it, knowing that he wasn't really bothered by his tone. It took a moment for Steve to find the child but he was guided in by the sound and soon came upon a small clearing. It was edged on one end by a copse of tall trees and right below one of them a small human boy was standing with his hands rubbing his eyes. Tears were running down his cheeks and Steve hurried right over to him.
Reigning in the part of him that wanted to reach out to physically comfort the child with a hug, Steve kneeled down next to him as Tony hung back with his hands tucked in his pockets. Steve lightened his voice to a gentle hum to try and settle the boy down. He looked like he was about six years old, certainly no more than eight, and he was obviously very upset about something. "Hey, hey. What's wrong?"

The boy pulled his hands away from his eyes and stared up at Steve, taking great heaving breaths in between his whimpers. "My, my kite got caught in the branches!"

Steve tilted his head then looked up into the tree above them to find that, sure enough, there was a red kite snagged up in some of the taller branches. Relieved that it wasn't anything more serious, Steve smiled down at the boy. "It's alright. I can get it for you."

He hiccupped then swallowed, his tears slowing right away. "Really?"

"Sure! Wait down here."

Standing up, Steve walked over to the tree's trunk and scanned the branches up. It would be a bit of a climb but it was possible, as long as the branches could support his weight.

As Steve began to make his way up the tree he could hear Tony beginning to speak to the little boy. Steve had to smile, hearing the Panther talking to the kid in exactly the same way as he spoke to adults. It was sweet and made a warmth blossom in Steve's chest. "Is that kite that fun?"

"W-what?"

"You seem pretty broken up over it. There's no way it can be worth that many tears."

"It's, it's my favorite."

"Well it obviously doesn't fly well since it's in the tree. Either that, or you're a terrible kite flyer."

The boy immediately grew irate at Tony's banter and Steve heard him stomp his foot on the grass. "It flies real good! The wind just took it and then it got caught in the tree."

"Next time try flying it in a field."

Steve was about to shout down a reprimand but then realized that Tony had successfully distracted the boy from being sad and the tears had completely dried up. Steve felt Tony's eyes on him and glanced down to find the Cat watching him. Noticing that he had been spotted, Tony just raised an eyebrow in question behind his shades. "Need help there, sport?"

There was the barest hint of a tease in Tony's voice and Steve knew that his mate was enjoying watching him struggle to climb up the tree. There was little doubt in his mind that Tony could have made it up to the kite and back by now but part of the conditions of going out today were being subtle and Steve assumed that part of that was not revealing Tony's remarkably inhuman climbing abilities to a talkative human child. "No, I've got it under control."

Now that he knew Tony's eyes were on him Steve kept careful control over his movements and quickly and efficiently made his way to the thinner branches. Pretty soon the kite was within his reach and he untangled it from its leafy prison. Once he got it free, Steve smiled and dropped down to the grass with a soft grunt. The boy ran up to him, his eyes wide with amazement and a huge grin on his face. "No way!"

"Here you are, son."
Steve passed him the kite and the boy stared up at him in awe. "That was so cool! You must be a Shifter!"

For a second Steve faltered but then he took a closer look at the human and felt that the boy had was full of nothing but innocent curiosity. "That's right."

"My Mom told me about Shifters and we're learning about you in school!"

Behind Steve, Tony had to turn his back to hide a laugh. So Shifters were a study subject in grade schools now? Steve tilted his head. As long as teachers weren't being discriminatory, it was probably a good thing. "That's good. I hope you learn a lot." Thinking of teachers, the thoughts struck Steve that the boy seemed to be without any sort of adult supervision. The boy had mentioned his Mom before... "Did your Mom bring you here?"

"Yeah!"

"Does she know you're over here?"

"Um..." The boy's fingers tightened on his kite and he scuffed his shoe on the grass.

The blatant avoidance tactic made Steve laugh. Kneeling back down next to the boy again, Steve leaned down to catch his eyes so that he knew the child was listening to him. "You'd better go find her again so she doesn't worry. Maybe she can help you fix up your kite."

Steve was immediately sorry he had brought up the kite because the boy's eyes flew to the toy and noticed the small tear slicing through the synthetic fabric. "Oh no! It's broke!"

"No, it's okay. See?" Steve gently tilted the kite in the boy's hold so that he could get a good look at the tear. "All it needs is a little tape and it will be as good as new."

Steve's reassurances calmed the child back down and a grin spread back across his face. Kids were amazing. "Thanks!"

With that, he scampered off, Steve calling for him to go back to his Mom before he disappeared from view. Steve turned back around to find Tony giving him an amused look and Steve frowned.

"What?"

Tony shrugged then waved for Steve to join him so they could continue their walk. "You're cute sometimes."

"What did I say about calling me 'cute'?"

"Stop being cute and we'll talk."

O~O~O

The walk had been a week ago. It was the last chance he and Tony had to go out of the house and be alone but there were still times, like today, when he and Tony ended up with a little time to themselves even in the mansions. Bruce and Clint were watching a football game in the next room and Thor had unexpectedly challenged Natasha to a sparring session. They had gone upstairs to the gym and every once and a while Steve heard a loud thump from the ceiling. He figured that meant that Natasha was winning and had just thrown the Lion to the ground again. That left him and Tony momentarily alone in the sitting room. Steve had decided to sit and read while Tony finished up with some financial paperwork for his company before they joined Bruce and Clint in the media room. But there was something Steve wanted to do while they were still alone.
Steve stared at the window without really seeing anything beyond the window pane. He was trying to think of the right way to ask the question that had been buzzing around his mind since earlier that afternoon. It was one that he had asked himself before and had been slowly solidifying in his mind for a few months now but that had reached a peak last week. He just…didn't know how Tony would react.

Swallowing, Steve turned from the window and decided to just be direct. "...Tony?" The Cat grunted from where he was hunched over his tablet and Steve pushed ahead. "I've been thinking..."

"Have you been thinking about being more specific?"

Faced with the prospect of having to finally voice his thoughts to his mate, Steve stumbled only for a moment. "Have you ever thought about, you know, kids?"

There was a long, poignant pause between them before Tony shook his head. "About kids in general? Not since I was one."

"No, I mean, about us having one." Steve had a feeling Tony had known exactly what he meant; the Cat was just trying to deflect.

"No."

That time the answer had come so quick Steve didn't quite know what to make of it. "'No' what?"

"Just, no. No." Unable to pretend he wasn't paying attention to the conversation, Tony straightened up in his seat and switched his gaze from the tablet to Steve. From the expression on his face, Steve might as well have just told Tony to claw his own arm off. "'No' to the whole thing. No. I'll do you the favor of forgetting you ever mentioned it."

Wow. That was just...Steve furrowed his brow. "You're not even willing to discuss it?"

Tony let out a small, mirthless laugh. "Why would I be?"

"Because it's been on my mind for a while now. It's important to me." It was important that they talk about it. And if Steve had learned anything over the last month it was that he and Tony actually needed to talk about their concerns before things got out of hand.

But Tony was only shaking his head. "It's a really stupid idea, Steve."

Steve let out a sharp breath of air and spun back around to look at the window. Tony looked pretty bothered by this and maintaining eye contact with the Cat only seemed to be making him more upset. "Why? Maybe it's what we're missing."

"No, maybe it's what you're missing, but not me. Babies don't fix relationships, Steve. They just complicate them. And ours is already pretty fucking complicated."

"This isn't about 'fixing' our relationship." Except, a teeny, tiny part of it was. Steve just didn't want to admit to the side of him that was saying so. "You can't tell me that deep down inside, you don't want a kid."

"Nope. I have zero interest."

Steve turned back around, a warning finger pointed at Tony. "Now that's a lie. You've let a couple of lines slip every once in a while when we make love—"
"Lines? What? When—Oh. No!" Tony jumped up to his feet with narrowed eyes and smacked Steve's hand down. "Only when I was in heat! You can't use that against me; my body and my brain have very different ideas of what my junk is good for during that month. Besides, if you want to get technical about it, wanting to get your mate pregnant with your own kid is different than wanting to adopt a brat you're not even related to. And since we're both male alphas, not to mention different sub-species, that first option is kind of off the table."

Steve knew that. He wasn't that naïve. But just because they couldn't have a biological child together didn't mean that there weren't other options. "You don't want to be a dad?"

"Not really! Do you?"

"Yes!"

Tony fell silent and Steve took a deep breath, letting the air out in a long exhale before continuing. "Tony, I do want a kid. It doesn't have to be now, but eventually."

Tony stared at him for a long moment before he shook his head, "Wolves…"

"It's not just because I'm a Wolf," although that probably did play a major role. Wolves were very family oriented. You needed to keep the pack growing somehow. "I just, I think I could be good, as a dad. I think we both could."

"I'll agree with you that you could. But I'm just not father material."

"Tony, you'd be great."

Tony threw his arms out in explosive protest. "How can you say that? Look at my Dad! The guy abandoned me on a daily basis! He left me at daycare for two weeks once without a word! When I was five years old I had to walk twelve city blocks to and from kindergarten every day because he forgot to tell the driver to take me to school!"

Tony was growing more agitated and Steve felt a tug in his chest as the Cat's voice became tinged with something akin to desperation. "He gave his life for you, Tony. He loved you. And you're different—"

"I've already almost killed you, my mate, by taking off for two months. You think I'll treat some strange kid better than that?"

"Yes. I do." Tony seemed to deflate in front of Steve's eyes. "I think that you'd come to love them. And even if you show them love in a different way than other parents, I think you're more affectionate than you believe."

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"Because even though you did take off, you came back to me." Tony's eyes slipped closed as Steve reached up and ran his thumb across the Cat's jaw. "And because you let me hold you at night."

As Tony let out a sigh, Steve leaned down and rested their foreheads together, letting his own eyes fall closed. When they were this close, Steve could sense everything Tony was feeling, not through any psychic connection, but through smell. And he could practically taste the subtle tang of fear hanging around his mate like a fog. Keeping his voice low, Steve slid his hand from Tony's jaw, down the curve of his throat, and through his dark hair to rest at the back of his neck so he could hold him close. "…What are you afraid of?"
He felt Tony's inner struggle before he finally relented, his own voice barely above a whisper. "I'm afraid I'll fuck it up…I'm not good with kids, Steve. I know you want one, but…I'm just not the right person for the job…"

"You're the perfect person for the job, because you're mine."

He felt Tony smirk and he pressed his short nails into Steve's back through his shirt. "…Don't go all alpha on me. Your blood would stain my new suit."

"I was being serious."

"So was I."

Shaking his head, Steve cut off the argument by pressing a light kiss against Tony's forehead. "I meant I wouldn't want to do this with anybody else, Tony. We can do it together."

O~O~O

After that, Tony didn't bring it up but Steve could tell that the Cat didn't forget. Steve let him have his silence for now but it wasn't long before the rest of the pack was aware of the situation. It turned out that Clint had heard their conversation and before long Natasha knew, then Bruce knew, and Thor knew. They all seemed to know better than to bother Tony about it but when the Cat wasn't looking they would throw Steve comforting or sympathetic looks.

Bruce actually came to him for a private talk. The beta had apparently been trying to feel out how serious Steve was about wanting a child and Steve could only tell him the same thing he had told Tony. That, yes, it was something he wanted; not necessarily now, but eventually. When he had heard that Bruce had just shook his head and wished him good luck. Then they had discussed what the realities of trying to raise a child while the whole pack was constantly being sent out on multi-day missions that involved a high degree of risk. Steve had thought about that before but in his heart knew that he and Tony could make it work. He just didn't have a plan for how when Bruce pressed him. But Bruce supported Steve, surprisingly as did the rest of the pack. Well, Natasha seemed ambivalent but Clint and Thor each came to him individually and teased and praised Steve for wanting a child, respectively.

And Steve was at a loss of how to proceed.

He didn't want to force Tony into something he didn't want, especially not when it would involve bringing a child in to their home to suffer the consequences of having one parent who didn't want to deal with a kid. Steve tried to forget about it but as a mated, alpha Wolf it was nearly biologically impossible. He instinctually wanted children to raise and protect, to take over the pack when he grew old. He had thought that Tony might be the same as an alpha but either Cats were programmed differently or Tony was being very, very stubborn. Watching his mate over the next several days told Steve that it was more of the latter.

When the weekend rolled around and Tony was able to stay home from work, everybody ended up hanging out in the media room. Steve and Thor were talking over plans to build a new training facility on the property and Tony was half offering his opinion on the matter and half watching a movie Clint had decided to put on. Bruce had balked at the movie choice but now was stuck on the couch with his eyes glued to the screen and a little wince on his face at how bad the movie actually was. Natasha was sitting next to them but was ignoring the screen entirely in favor of a book she was reading that looked like it was written in Russian.

With all the tension that had been between Steve and Tony recently—and the whole pack by
extension—it was relaxing to momentarily forget about it all.

The movie had just reached an exciting point in the plot when the doorbell rang, nearly startling Clint out of his seat. Steve glanced over at Tony and the Cat motioned for him to stay put as Tony stood up. Clint paused the movie then flipped back over the couch to follow Tony out of the room with a curious look on his face. Smiling, Steve shook his head and was about to turn back to the schematics he was sketching out when he heard Tony mutter a quick, "Sorry, not interested" before slamming the front door shut. When the Cat walked back into the room, Steve met his gaze. "Who was at the door?"

Tony waved his hand. "A salesman or something, don't worry about it."

Clint's voice echoed out from the main hallway and Steve could tell that the Hawk had positioned himself somewhere up in the rafters. "It's Agent Coulson."

"Tony!" Scowling at his mate, Steve jumped to his feet and ran past Tony out into the front part of the house. There was a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye as Clint shifted and flew down from his hiding spot, the Hawk swooping through the entryway and back down towards the media room as Steve made his way to the door.

Skidding to a stop, Steve grabbed onto the handle and wrenched the door open to find Agent Coulson still standing there, a small smile on his face as if he hadn't just had the door closed in his face. "Phil! Sorry, so sorry! Tony has kind of been in a bad mood recently."

The human nodded at him with a knowing look in his eye and Steve knew that any offense was forgiven. Phil adjusted his stance and Steve noticed that the man was carrying a small case with him. "It's alright, Steve."

"Is this about another mission?"

"Not today. Agent Hill is still submitted the paperwork for your trip to Ohio last week."

"Ah, yeah." There had been a situation outside of Akron, Ohio where an omega Wolf had called for help after being harassed and stalked by an alpha Wolf. Steve and Natasha had gone out to handle it and had got the alpha under control but a house in a residential neighborhood had been damaged and a fire had started. Luckily the local first responders had put the fire out but SHIELD had to work with the fire and police departments to settle out the details. "I apologize again for that. We didn't notice he had a lighter on him, otherwise we never would have let him get so close to that gas stove."

"Understood. But, as I mentioned, I'm not here about that." Steve heard footsteps approaching from behind him and scented the air. Tony. Phil's smile grew a little as the Cat walked up to stand beside Steve in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. "A little bird told me you were thinking of adopting."

Tony scowled. "Clint or Loki?" Loki had been flying in and out since Thor had arrived, which had added to Tony's annoyances. "Either way, they're going to get a beating for sticking their beaks in someone else's business."

Phil quirked a brow. "Actually, I was being metaphorical. It was your assistant, Miss Potts." Steve perked up at that even as Tony's shoulders bunched defensively. Steve hadn't contacted Pepper at all about this, wanting to respect Tony's privacy in the matter, but if the woman knew about it that meant that Tony had willingly opened up to her about it himself. Which meant that he wasn't entirely against the subject because if he had been the Cat would have buried it.
It was the best news Steve had gotten in a long time. Tony looked like he was about ready to run though. "Oh. Someone's not getting a Christmas bonus then."

"Tony." Steve admonished his mate, but gently. He could hear Tony's heart beat speeding up and he was starting to tense up from nerves. As anxious as he was though, Steve wasn't about to let this chance go. Phil clearly had something in mind and he wanted to know exactly what it was. "We were, actually. Thinking of adopting, I mean. With both of us being male alphas..."

Phil waved off Steve's explanation and he was happy not to have to give it. Of course the SHIELD agent would understand what sort of issues they were having. Shifters were his business after all. "I thought I might bring up an option for you then."

When Steve nodded, Phil correctly took it as a cue to continue. "I'm sure you remember the Shifters who we found during the final raid on Hydra's main compound." Okay, Steve wasn't quite sure where they were going with this anymore, but he nevertheless nodded again. He remembered that whole operation like it had happened yesterday. "After they had been brought into SHIELD's care it was discovered that all those Shifters has essentially been Hydra's medical test subjects and had been injected with myriad of serums and formulas that their research division developed. Once they were brought to our hospital, some of them passed away before we could find a way to stabilize them but others pulled through. The survivors were able to recover to the point where we realized the full effect of the experimentation."

Steve tilted his head and Tony's lips had drawn into a hard line. "Bruce mentioned something about that a while back. Something about their genetic codes being scrambled up?" After they had gotten back from their mission at the Factory, Bruce had spent most of his waking hours at SHIELD's facilities in town. Steve and the rest of them had gone in on occasion to check on the survivors but hadn't been able to do much to help.

"That's right. Dr. Banner saved a good number of them by discovering that the combination of injections given to them by the Hydra doctors actually affected their DNA by splicing their Shifter genetics with other Shifter animals, apparently in an attempt to make new, more powerful hybrid Shifters." Steve felt the blood drain from his face, Tony's hand automatically coming to rest comfortingly on his forearm. "For most of them, the result has been that they are unable to shift at all anymore; whenever they try to change from their human form, their body begins to shut down because it simultaneously tries to transform into multiple shapes. At the same time, they are able to manifest many unique abilities while still in their human form, beyond just general strength or agility enhancements. Long story short, they have become outcasts even among Shifters and we're working hard to rehabilitate them and reintroduce them back into the world as productive members of society. Some of them lack the stable environment necessary for the transition though, particularly the young ones."

Now Steve saw the connection. Steve had seen the young Shifters Hydra had plugged into machines in the Factory and Bruce had confirmed that they too had been experimented on. "Are you asking if we want to adopt one of the children?"

Tony stiffened up next to him as Phil gave a firm nod. "Only if you're willing. They would need special care, even for a Shifter. But the children we have in our custody need a strong but understanding household to integrate themselves into, so they can socially develop as normally as possible given their situation. I realize that this is a big decision for you to make, and I would understand if you don't feel you have the time to devote to such a task. But if you are interested, I brought this file with me."

Setting the black attaché he was carrying down on the ground, Phil clicked it open and removed an
unlabeled manila folder. He handed over to Steve who curiously flipped it open. Inside there were about ten pieces of paper, each a bio and summary of one of the children found at the Hydra compound, a small colored photograph pasted at the top corner of every page. "I estimated the age range you might be looking for and pulled their files. Look through it and if any one of them catches your eye let me know and we can make the proper arrangements. Read carefully though, because each of them is unique and comes with their own set of challenges."

Steve let out a long breath as he stared down at the children on the pages. "Thank you. We'll get back to you either way."

Saying good-bye to Coulson in a much more polite manner, Steve gently closed the front door without removing his gaze from the profiles. He was about to walk back to the others when the thought struck him that Tony hadn't looked at the pages once. In fact, the Cat seemed to be putting in some effort to ignore them. The realization brought Steve's eyes up and he frowned softly at his mate. Tony frowned back and Steve lifted the papers towards him. "Do you want to take a look?"

"Nope." Steve's face fell and Tony bit his lip. Then he heaved a breath and tilted his head. "I'll let you give me the highlights."

A wide smile spread across Steve's face and before Tony could escape he reached out and grabbed his mate up in a tight hug. Because Tony wanted him to look through the files and wanted to know what was in there. Tony was giving his consent. Closing his eyes, Steve soothed his hands down Tony's sides and pressed a gentle kiss against his lips. "Thank you."

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The next day was one of the rare days where Tony actually invited Steve down to his workshop to hang out while billionaire tinkered with some new invention. It was another olive branch and Steve jumped at the chance to accept. Usually he would have brought down his sketch pad but today he figured it would be a great time to continue to flip through the stack of folders Coulson had given them.

Steve was sitting in the chair at Tony's computer station while Tony was elbows deep in some new sort of generator the Cat was building. He had tried to explain the complex energy systems that would keep it running but Steve had just nodded along and turned his focus back on the profiles of the children. Tony had realized that he was just talking to himself a minute later and had given up and turned on some loud rock music instead.

A few hours passed by and Steve carefully went over the paperwork. This wasn't a decision he was making lightly. He was analyzing each child to determine if they would be compatible not just with him and Tony, but with his pack as a whole. Bruce, Natasha, Clint, even Thor assured Steve that they would be fine with whatever child he and Tony decided on. The real trouble he was having was that he wanted to save them all. Each child had gone through a horrific experience and had been altered in unnatural ways and they all deserved the best the world could give them. But Steve knew that one child would be enough of a challenge for them and that bringing anymore in would be a disservice to everyone involved.

Finally Steve found one that really struck a chord within him, enough that he felt willing to call Tony over. "Hey, Tony."

"Hm?" The Cat's questioning grunt echoed strangely out of the machine he was buried in.

"Come look at this."
"Give me a minute."

Steve heard the sound of Tony tightening a few more bolts before he pulled his head out and wiped his hands off on a rag. Throwing the rag over his shoulder, Tony wandered over and rested against the back of Steve's chair. He smelled like sweat and motor oil and Steve leaned back into him on the pretense of allowing Tony a view of the papers in his lap.

"What?"

Steve passed the page he was looking at up to Tony who reluctantly accepted it. "What do you think about him?"

"JARVIS, turn down the music." As the rock fell to a murmur, Tony set his chin on the top of Steve's head and stared hard at the little boy in the photo. "He looks like all the other kids you've shown me so far."

"There's something about him…Here, read his file."

Tony sighed but his eyes jumped down to the middle of the paper and read aloud. "Caucasian male, four years old, small for his age. A Wolf Shifter who had his genetic code spliced with, with Spider DNA? Really?" Steve nodded and Tony raised his brows. Steve had been surprised too. As far as SHIELD knew there were only three Spider Shifters in the world. Where had Hydra even gotten their hands on a strain of Spider DNA? "Shit…Alright." Clearing his throat, Tony went back to reading. "One Shifter parent, one human parent who apparently died soon after his birth. He was being cared for by his human Aunt and Uncle when Hydra agents came for him. He was targeted after his Aunt brought him to the hospital for some routine check-up. Both his Aunt and Uncle, who were pretty old, were killed in the break-in trying to keep the kid from getting snatched. Unable to shift but shows clear signs of advanced abilities in human form such as enhanced strength, agility, and as of yet unexplored characteristics due to the introduction of Spider qualities into his genetic code. Personality is bright but withdrawn and has failed to make significant progress in SHIELD's rehabilitation program."

Tony had skimmed over some parts but those were the most essential. Steve looked up and waited as his mate went quiet above him. "What do you think?"

Tony hummed then dropped the paper back into Steve's lap. "He sounds like a handful."

"He sounds like he needs a little extra attention." Steve corrected Tony gently. Which was part of the reason Steve liked him. It was possible that this child wouldn't do well in another foster care situation. His abilities hadn't been completely realized yet so he would need a strong group to help him through that and help him learn to control and manage whatever he grew to be.

"I should have known you'd want to pick the runt of the litter."

"Is that a 'yes'?" Tony was wearing his poker face again and Steve had to be sure.

"You have to be the one who remembers to feed it and take it for walks."

That was a "yes". Grinning, Steve pulled Tony down into a kiss then reached forward to grab Tony's cell phone that his mate had left out on his desk. Seeing that he was going to make the call right then and there, Tony pulled away and went back to his work. But he didn't tell JARVIS turn the music back up so Steve knew that he wanted to listen in to the conversation.

Steve knew just enough about Tony's phone to be able to use it to dial Phil's number. He heard the phone pick up after just one ring and talked before Phil even had time to greet him. "Agent
"Coulson?"

"Steve! It's good to hear from you again. What can I do for you?"

"Those files you gave us yesterday…"

"About the children. Have you come to a decision already?"

"I've talked it over with Tony and there's one child in particular that caught my attention. If it's possible, it would be great to have the chance to meet with him to see if he would want to come stay with us."

"That's great news. Who caught your eye?"

"The four-year-old Wolf named Peter Parker."

"I was hoping you would choose him. He's a good kid and deserves a good home and a good family."

Steve could hear the smile on Phil's face and it made his own grow. If even Coulson thought this was a good idea there was nothing he had to worry about. "If he's willing, I'd like to try and give him both of those things."

"I can't think of anyone better."

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