

my home is your body, how can i stay away?

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by [elizabear](#)

Summary

"Anyway, I think if we team up, we can convince Steve that we're best friends now. Then he'll get jealous and remember how much more important we are to him than Natalia."

Sam considers this carefully. He's never been pressed so close to Bucky before, their faces only inches away from one another. From this distance Sam can see how long and thick Bucky's eyelashes are. He can smell the pleasant scents of Bucky's clean sweat and spicy aftershave.

He wants to press his thumb into the cleft in Bucky's chin.

"Yeah, that sounds like a great idea," Sam hears himself say.

"Great!"

Notes

Thank you so much to napricot and endofadream, who were gracious enough to beta read this for me when I didn't know what the hell I was doing.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

After they save the world, after Steve leaves and returns again with a smiling Natasha tucked tenderly underneath his arm, after all the happy and tearful reunions, after Tony Stark's funeral, Sam Wilson takes a minute to sit his ass underneath a tree and freak the fuck out about the fact that he's just been dead for the last five years.

He's listening to a robot tell him for the fifth time that his mother's number is "no longer in service," his hand shaking as he presses redial on Steve's borrowed cell phone. He wants to call his sister, wants to find out what happened to his *niece*, but he can't remember his sister's number and the only thing he can think of to do is just to keep calling his mom over and over again. He's starting to really settle into the panic attack, gulping for air as his heart pounds wildly in his chest, when Bucky Barnes squats down beside him, perfectly balanced on those lean and powerful thighs.

"You OK?" Bucky asks quietly. Sam shakes his head silently, too overwhelmed to even begin to answer that question.

Like people are just OK after waking up five years in the future. Like people are just OK after turning to ash and then reforming into a human being. What is he even made of right now? Is he made of the same atoms and cells he was made of before he turned to dust? Is he even the same person? Did Sam Wilson die? Is he just a new Sam Wilson that Bruce Banner created out of thin air, a brand new body with the same memories as the first Sam Wilson? God, what is this Ship of Theseus nonsense, everything about this is so fucked up—

"OK, I need you to breathe," Bucky says gently, interrupting Sam's spiral into actual fucking madness. Bucky grabs Sam's hand and pulls it to his chest. "Can you feel my chest moving? Feel me breathing in and out? Stop thinking, close your eyes, and match your breaths to mine."

Sam squeezes his eyes shut and focuses on the feel of Bucky's chest rising and falling underneath his hand. Bucky's sternum is flat and bony underneath Sam's palm, but he can feel the gentle rise of Bucky's strong pectoral muscles underneath his fingers. Bucky's skin is warm through his shirt, and Sam focuses on the solid feel of him as he follows Bucky's slow and deep breathing. Bucky's thumb presses firmly against the inside of Sam's wrist. There's an anxious tingling all over Sam's skin, washing over him from head to toe, making Sam afraid that he's going to buzz right out of his skin.

But Bucky is breathing deep and slow, and Sam lets himself relax into it, feels himself fall in sync with this not-quite-stranger, his best friend's best friend, who is very considerably trying to keep Sam from falling apart.

"You're doing great, Sam," Bucky praises gently. "Just keep breathing, you're doing great."

"I hate this," Sam mutters.

Bucky strokes his thumb over the sensitive skin of Sam's wrist and leans closer, hesitating briefly before resting his forehead against Sam's.

"Just breathe, Sam. You're doing so good," he murmurs softly.

Sam feels a warmth uncurling deep in his belly, reacting to Bucky's closeness and his quiet praise. Is Bucky the most instinctually effective peer counselor in the world or is he actually seducing Sam right out of a panic attack? Sam absolutely cannot think about this now, he needs to focus on the original source of his practical and existential terror.

"I hate every part of this," Sam admits, frustrated. "I hate that I can't get in touch with my mom. I hate that I don't know if my niece is OK. Bucky, *who has been taking care of my niece?*"

"Hey, it's OK, Sam." Bucky says, his tone gentle and reassuring. "We'll find your niece. If she survived the Snap, Steve and Natalia would have kept track of her. They wouldn't have just let her disappear into the system. You have friends."

"Right," Sam says, feeling that glacier sitting atop his chest begin to recede a little. "OK. Friends. Steve and Natasha will know how to find Michelle. I just need to ask Steve and Natasha how to find Sarah and Michelle."

"Great! See, you have a plan now and everything," Bucky says encouragingly. "Everything is going to be fine. You're going to be fine, Sam." Bucky leans back onto his heels, and Sam breathes a little deeper as the world comes into sharper focus.

Sam nods. This is all going to be fine. He's alive, he's breathing, and he has his hand on Bucky Barnes's warm, firm chest. Bucky's eyes are kind, and Sam can almost understand, maybe for the first time, why Steve cared so much about bringing Bucky home. Maybe Bucky isn't so bad. Maybe everything is going to be fine. Sam can just about manage, now, to stuff all this panic inside his chest where it can't hurt him. If he just stuffs it in there forever, he will never have to deal with it.

Sam takes a moment to congratulate himself on his healthy coping strategies.

"You're not too bad at this, man," Sam says. "Where did you learn to handle a panic attack like that?"

"Well, I mean, I had a lot of them after realizing that I was responsible for literally dozens of grisly murders," Bucky replies dryly. "But also I spent like fifteen years obsessing over the state of Steve Rogers's lungs and trying to keep him from dying of asthma so he could grow up and be Captain America."

Right. Captain America. That's the other thing he's panicking about.

"Hey, what just happened?" Bucky asks gently. Bucky strokes his thumb over Sam's wrist. "Your blood pressure just shot way up again."

“Tell me you’re not some kind of human sphygmomanometer,” Sam says. “I don’t have the patience for that level of weird right now. Stop monitoring my blood pressure. That’s creepy.”

“OK,” Bucky says slowly. “Sorry. What’s going on?”

“Steve asked me to be Captain America. Says he’s not retiring, but he’s needed off-world for a while, and he thinks I should be the one to carry the shield.”

Suddenly, just like that, the strange, tentative peace between them shatters. Bucky’s face turns white, then flushes a deep red.

“Steve asked you to be Captain America,” Bucky repeats coldly. All traces of warmth are gone from Bucky’s face, and Bucky’s mouth settles into a grim line. “Excuse me a moment.”

Sam sighs as Bucky stalks off in Steve’s general direction.

Bucky returns a few moments later, Steve in tow, the two of them having some kind of whisper fight that Sam can’t really hear.

“Can’t believe you would do this—”

“—you know he’s a good choice—”

“—supposed to be your best friend—”

“—c’mon, Buck, you know I wouldn’t—”

Bucky yanks on Steve’s wrist as they approach Sam.

“OK, first of all, Steve, where the fuck is Sam’s family?” Bucky demands.

Steve pales, then looks genuinely contrite. “Oh, God, Sam, I’m sorry. I should have told you right away. Sarah and Michelle, they survived. They both survived the Snap. They’re living in your mom’s apartment in New York.” Steve hesitates for a moment, then adds, “Your mom was one of the ones who disappeared. She was at home watching Michelle when it happened. She should be safe. We’ll get a phone to her right away.”

Sam feels his stomach plunge at the knowledge that Michelle is five years older. He already missed two years of her life on the run with Steve after the Accords. Would she even remember him?

“Nat has your old phone stashed away. It should still have all your contacts in it. Natasha—she paid the bill. Every month you were gone. She never gave up hope we’d get you back,” Steve says, looking proud and a little teary-eyed.

While Sam works on processing the fact that his six-year-old niece is now his eleven-year-old niece, Steve rambles on about Natasha, and how brave she was, and what a rock she was, and how she kept everyone together, and how she *sacrificed her life* to save everyone, for kind of a while. Sam’s honestly kind of surprised. Steve and Natasha have always been close, but

Sam's never seen Steve as openly effusive about anyone other than James Buchanan Barnes Before The War, Steve's most favorite person ever.

"OK, that's great, Steve," Bucky interrupts in a frosty tone. "But what's this about Sam being the new Captain America?"

"Oh! Carol wants Natasha and me to go with her to a couple of planets that are struggling to organize after their populations suddenly doubled. Actually, I thought maybe you could come with us, Buck?" Steve offers. "I know how much you love space and—"

"No, *Steve*, I think I'll stay here with Sam," Bucky says stonily, glaring at Steve. Sam is a little stunned.

"What? Why?" Steve asks. He looks a bit like a confused golden retriever. "I thought you'd jump at this opportunity, Bucky, you really—"

"I really think I should stay here. Since I'm Captain America's *right hand man* and all. And since *Sam* is Captain America now."

Sam doesn't really know what to do with all of this, because it seems like there's really a lot going on here between Steve and Bucky that he doesn't want to get involved with. And honestly, he's not one hundred percent sold on the idea of working with Bucky at all, since they hardly even know each other. Today is the first time they've really interacted in a way that isn't hostile or at the very least kind of pissy, and to be honest the uncomfortable sexual tension Sam felt earlier wasn't exactly welcome.

But then a thought occurs to him, and Sam is instantly filled with delight. "So wait. What you're saying is that you're going to be my sidekick!"

"What, no, I'm not going to be your *sidekick*, I'm going to be your *partner*," Bucky argues.

"Nuh uh, nope. It's right there in the comics. Bucky Barnes was Captain America's *sidekick*," Sam says with a smirk. "Are you gonna wear the outfit?"

"What outfit?" asks Bucky, narrowing his eyes.

"Oh! The outfit with the little booty shorts?" Steve asks.

"I'm not wearing an outfit with little booty shorts," Bucky says scornfully. "I'll wear my regular outfit."

"Leather bondage gear it is, then!" Sam replies. He feels more cheerful already.

"So what else did we miss?" Sam asks later, when they're all settled in at one of the cabins on Tony's property.

Steve and Natasha are tangled up together on the sofa, Natasha's legs slung over Steve's lap and her head resting against his chest. Steve and Nat have been trading inside jokes and

finishing each other's sentences all night, and it kind of seems like Sam and Bucky must have really missed a lot, because Sam doesn't remember Steve and Nat being so telepathically linked before he got dusted.

Bucky is sitting alone, tense and uncomfortable-looking, in a chair near the fire. He must still be pretty pissed at Steve for choosing Sam over him as the next Captain America, because he keeps shooting murder glares at Steve through narrowed eyes. When Steve's not gazing adoringly at Natasha, he's busy having a silent argument with Bucky through a complicated series of expressions that include rolled eyes, pleading looks, clenched jaws, and prissy, pursed lips. Sam is honestly feeling pretty left out right now, because there's a lot of unspoken communication going on here between basically everyone but him.

Steve heaves a frustrated sigh, tears his gaze away from Bucky, and responds, "Well, they built a giant wall between the United States and Mexico. It was a pretty big deal, lots of people were really unhappy."

"Seriously? Half of the entire United States population disappears, and Americans are still freaking out about immigration from Mexico?" Sam asks incredulously.

"Oh, no, *we* didn't build the wall. *Mexico* actually built the wall," Natasha says. The wicked look in her eye suggests that this is going to be a good story.

"Wait, what? That stupid promise actually came true?" Bucky asks.

"Well, kind of?" Natasha says, giving a little so-so motion with her hand. "Mexico didn't actually build the wall because of illegal immigration, though. They built it after a bunch of riots and border skirmishes in late 2020."

"So, what? Gang violence? Drug cartels?" Sam asks.

"Nope. It was the season finale of a television show on the CW called *Supernatural*," Steve explains, as if this doesn't make the whole thing somehow even more confusing.

"You're telling me that we were gone for five years and now CW shows are a source of tension between the United States and Mexico and *they built an entire wall about it*," Sam says, raising his eyebrows.

Sam is dubious as hell about this new foolishness—he's starting to feel a lot more sympathetic towards Steve's frustration with all the impenetrable pop culture references people expected him to grasp—but Bucky visibly perks up at the mention of *Supernatural*. "Oh, how did that go? Is Destiel canon yet?" Bucky asks.

"No," Steve responds at the same time that Natasha replies, "*Si*." Then they both cackle wildly, as if this is some seriously comedic shit, and honestly, Sam's getting a little annoyed with all their inside jokes. He sneaks a look over at Bucky to see how he's responding to all this, and Sam is relieved to feel slightly less like an asshole when he sees that Bucky doesn't look any more charmed by Steve and Natasha's Abbott and Costello routine than Sam feels.

“OK,” Sam says slowly, really drawing the word out. “So I guess if I want to understand *all of that*”—here, Sam gestures broadly at Steve and Natasha, attempting to convey his incredulity at their unnecessary dramatics—“that you just did, and apparently *also* current U.S. foreign policy, I’m going to have to watch a TV show on the CW.”

“It’s fifteen seasons, it makes for great depression watching,” says Natasha, shrugging. Bucky nods in agreement. “And Steve was pretty genuinely moved by the relationship between the two brothers.”

Steve confirms this with a solemn nod. “They were brothers, but they were also *best friends*.”

“Anyway it was better than a lot of the junk we watched while you were gone,” Natasha continues. “Half the time Steve and I spent in bed together we were just binge watching trash tv and getting overly invested in the love lives of twenty-five year olds pretending to be teenagers pretending to be detectives.”

Bucky shoots Sam a significant glance at this, somehow communicating *half the time they spent in bed together?* with the tense raising of his eyebrows alone, and says, “Sam and I will watch *Supernatural* together. I’ll get him caught up.”

And yeah, maybe *fifteen seasons* sounds like an awful lot of time to commit to spite-watching a television show with Bucky just to handle how weird he feels about Steve and Natasha’s whole new bed sharing *thing* together, but then Bucky stretches his arms over his head and reveals a pale sliver of belly, little trail of hair drawing Sam’s eyes pleasingly downward.

“Yeah, all right,” Sam says. After all, this *Supernatural* show *does* sound pretty important to this sketchy new future Sam didn’t ask to find himself in.

Bucky turns to Steve. “So when do you and Natalia have to head out?”

“Probably in a week or two. We want to make sure everything’s settled here before we head out.”

“A week or two, Steve, really? You think Sam’s going to be ready to be Captain America in a week or two,” Bucky says flatly.

Sam thinks Bucky sort of has a point, but out of loyalty to Steve and his own sense of competence he keeps his mouth shut.

Steve’s shoulders hunch defensively. “It’s going to be fine, you’re going to do a great job supporting Sam.”

“I shouldn’t *have* to support Sam, Steve—”

“Bucky, c’mon, you know I wouldn’t have—”

“Not even a supersoldier, Steve—”

“Sam doesn’t *have* to be—”

Natasha is listening to this argument with a fond look on her face, like she actually missed this shit while they were gone.

“OK, listen,” Sam interrupts before Steve and Bucky get too distracted by their bullshit. “The Captain America thing is huge, yeah. But I feel like maybe we also need to be concerned about the world’s population suddenly doubling instantaneously? That’s kind of a big deal.”

“Oh!” Steve lights up. “Natasha’s had a plan set up for that since like a week after you guys disappeared. She’s spent the last five years preparing for every contingency, basically every scientific or magical possibility that might bring you guys back. In fact, phase one has already started, getting lines of communication open to reconnect families and arranging emergency housing.”

Steve beams down at Natasha, and then—Sam can’t even fucking believe this—Natasha actually *blushes* in response. Steve and Natasha are, respectively, the most repressed and tightly controlled people Sam knows, and now they’re acting like emotionally healthy people who express their feelings in front of other people? Sam is suspicious as hell, and when he looks over at Bucky, Bucky is bug-eyed, looking frantically and significantly at Sam with that unmistakable *are you seeing this too, what the fuck* expression on his face. Sam hates the fact that things are so weird now that he’s bonding with Bucky over this.

“Pepper Potts is coordinating everything through the Avengers Foundation,” Natasha says. “She needs something to do right now, and she’s basically the most frighteningly efficient person I know, so. Your only job right now is figuring out how to work together without killing each other.”

Natasha eyes them both a bit skeptically, and Sam is instantly offended at this implied slight to his professionalism.

“Bucky and I are going to do great,” Sam says. “We are definitely going to be absolutely fine at working together.” He shoots Bucky a hard look, daring him to disagree.

“Absolutely fine,” Bucky repeats dutifully, then hesitates. “You’re sure, though, right, Sam? You really want to do the Captain America thing?”

“Definitely,” Sam confirms. Bucky searches his eyes for a moment, then nods, apparently satisfied with whatever he finds.

“Great!” Natasha says with a pleased smile, and shares a satisfied look with Steve.

“Anyway,” Sam says, changing the subject, before they can figure out Sam has no fucking clue how to be Captain America and definitely doesn’t feel certain about working with Bucky Barnes. “What else did we miss while we were gone? How did Brexit go?”

“Oh, God,” Steve says.

The next morning, Sam walks down to the cabin’s kitchen for breakfast and finds a disaster.

“Is this a *murder board*?” he asks, aghast.

The wall next to the kitchen table is absolutely covered in papers that have been hastily pinned up, and there are at least eleven different colors of string stretched together in a complicated web over top of them, forming a bizarre rainbow of crazy. Where did Bucky even find that many different colors of string in the middle of the night? Did he break into a Joann Fabrics?

The kitchen table is littered with papers as well, and Sam counts six different green tea bags sitting on a napkin next to Bucky’s mug. “Have you been up all night?”

“No! And yes!” Bucky answers, his eyes red rimmed and wild, looking simultaneously exhausted and absolutely frantic with energy. He cards his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Do you know how much money Stark was spending on the Avengers Initiative after you guys blew up SHIELD? The litigation team! The insurance premiums! The property damage settlements! Weapons and technology! Research and development! Sam, the cost was astronomical!”

“Wait, this is all financial stuff? I thought this was more of, like, a traditional murder board situation here.” Sam pauses, then struck with sudden uncertainty, he asks, “Is financial stuff part of Captain America stuff?”

“Well, I mean, *kind of*, yeah,” Bucky responds. He stands up and restlessly paces the tiny kitchen. “You didn’t think you were going to just run off with the shield and, like, live off the kindness of strangers or something, did you?”

“Obviously, no,” Sam says, offended. Actually, though—not that Sam is going to admit it—Sam hasn’t had a real job in so long that he sort of forgot that this was going to be an issue. “Wait, did you get all this stuff by hacking Stark Industries?”

“Well, yeah,” says Bucky, defensive now. “I didn’t want to be rude and ask Ms. Potts in the middle of the night. Also I killed her daughter’s grandparents.”

Sam considers this for a moment, then shrugs. “Yeah, that’s fair,” he says. “So what about the funding we had before? Is that gone?”

“It’s not gone, but there’s no way the money in Steve’s and my bank account will be enough.”

“Wait, you and Steve *share a bank account*?” Sam asks, raising his eyebrows.

Bucky’s forehead wrinkles in confusion. “Well, yeah, of course. Why would Steve and I need separate bank accounts?” he asks, looking puzzled.

“Why would you...” Sam repeats faintly. “OK. Moving on from that codependent nonsense, you and Steve were the ones funding us while we were on the run? Steve never said.”

“Well, I mean, I did steal a bunch of money from HYDRA, and Steve had some backpay saved up. But there’s no way Steve and I have *Captain America* money. *Stark* barely had

Captain America money. Sam, he was spending down his *entire fortune* on the Avengers Initiative. Did you guys know he was doing that?”

Sam closes his eyes, shaking off the waves of guilt and grief he felt at the mention of Tony’s generosity. “No, I didn’t,” he says quietly.

“Yeah,” Bucky says grimly. “It’s bad. Like, really, really bad. You aren’t an international fugitive anymore. If you want to be Captain America, you won’t be able to just save people, destroy a few buildings, then dash off to the next country before the police catch up to you. You have to actually deal with the fallout afterward. And, most importantly, and I cannot stress this enough, you need actual income. Was Stark seriously the only one of you with a real job?”

“I mean, yeah?”

“Of course he was,” Bucky says, deflating and leaning back against the counter with a thud. “God, you’re all idiots. I went off to war in the 1940s and I left *one Steve* back at home. Then I fell off a train, woke up seventy years later, and found out that Steve managed to find an entire *team* full of Steves, and each one of you is just as beautiful and heroic and stupid and *utterly impractical* as he is.” Bucky raises his metal hand to massage his temples, apparently fighting a headache so powerful that even his serum-enhanced regular arm isn’t strong enough to deal with it.

Sam carefully ignores Bucky’s insinuation that he finds Sam beautiful and heroic. Instead he pours Bucky a glass of water and slides it over to him. “OK, so what do we do?”

“Well, you’re not going to like it.”

“I’m not, huh? Just tell me.”

“We have to rebuild SHIELD,” Bucky states firmly. “We have to get in touch with Nick Fury.”

“Absolutely not,” Sam says.

“Sam, it’s the only reasonable choice. We can’t afford to privately fund your career as a superhero, OK? I mean, the insurance? The legal team? I’ve drafted fifteen different budgets and there’s no way we can get this off the ground. But if we rebuild SHIELD, there’ll be funding and qualified immunity. You won’t even have to work directly for SHIELD. You could be an independent contractor.”

“I don’t like this.”

“I know. But it’s the only way.”

“Is Fury even going to listen to us, though?” Sam asks skeptically. “Like, will he even hire you? You shot him, like, five times.”

Bucky grimaces. “Yeah, that wasn’t great. But listen, the man’s probably been waiting for this moment for years. If he can get Steve and Natalia’s public support behind SHIELD 2.0?

He'll seize the chance."

"Shit," Sam says.

When Steve and Natasha come downstairs, sleepy and happy looking, casually emerging from the same bedroom that Sam *knows* only has one queen size bed, like bed sharing is just a regular part of their regular lives now, Bucky introduces them to the financial murder board.

"So if you really want to do this, if you want *Sam* to be Captain America, we need to rebuild SHIELD," Bucky concludes.

"SHIELD?" Natasha perks up. "We're getting the old gang back together?"

"Natasha, like, 40% of the old gang were secret Nazis," Steve says reproachfully. "And more importantly, Nick Fury *didn't notice they were secret Nazis*."

"He definitely started to suspect something was wrong near the end there, though," says Natasha.

"Well, he's our best shot at getting government funding, so unless you want to ask *Tony Stark's grieving widow* for money, I think this is the best we can do." Bucky turns to Natasha. "Natalia, you know how to get in touch with him, right?" he asks.

"I do. Pepper sent out working satellite phones via courier last night. They should have arrived by this morning. I'll give him a call," Natasha says. "He's going to *love this*."

"Your mom should have gotten a phone too, Sam," Steve says. "I'll text you her number so you can give her a call."

"Thanks, man," Sam says, relieved. While Steve works on sending Sam his mom's contact info—does Steve's phone have a holographic display? Does Old Man Steve know how to work a phone with a holographic display?—Sam asks Bucky, "How did you even pull all these records together, by the way? Are you like a secret accountant?"

"Bucky worked as an actuary before the war," Steve responds absently, thumbing at some buttons on his phone screen. "He was getting his degree in mathematics before he dropped out to enlist."

"An actuary?" Natasha asks thoughtfully. "I can see that. That actually makes a lot of sense."

"It paid the bills," Bucky allows.

When Sam receives Steve's text with his mom's contact info, he steps outside for a bit of privacy. Sam watches Steve and Natasha leaning together through the sliding glass window as he waits for his mom to answer the phone. Sam feels a pit growing deep in his belly, a black hole that's been sucking in everything Sam could have lived and built and experienced in the past five years, leaving him empty and lonely and lost, missing parts of himself that he

should have been gaining. Inside, Bucky is standing alone in front of murder board, his shoulders tense, while Steve and Natasha talk and smile and touch each other's forearms.

"Sam? Sam, baby, are you OK?"

"Mom!" Sam exclaims. "Mom, I'm OK. I'm OK."

"Thank God," she says in relief. "We're OK too. Sarah and Michelle, they've been living in my apartment. Michelle's eleven years old now, Sam. We missed five years of her life. How did this happen?"

And Sam tells her how it happened. He tells her about the battle, and then the second battle, and then realizing that he had died and was resurrected by magical stones. He tells her about Bucky Barnes, standing there in disgruntled disbelief when Steve and Natasha explained that they'd woken up five years into the future, his only reaction to state flatly, "I was told that this wouldn't happen to me again."

When he tells her that Steve's asked him to be the new Captain America, Sam's mom gasps in surprise. "Captain America? Sam, are you sure?"

"Yeah, Mom. I am sure. I think I could really do some good," Sam says softly.

"Do you have good people around you? Do you have people who will take care of you?"

Sam thinks of Steve and Natasha leaving for space in a few weeks, moving on to bigger and more complicated catastrophes, superheroes who've grown so powerful and competent and amazing that they're needed elsewhere, on worlds larger than their own. And then he thinks of Bucky Barnes staying up all night to do superhero math so Sam can be Captain America, even though Bucky is apparently pissed that Steve chose Sam for the honor instead of him.

"Yeah," Sam says. "I have people who will take care of me."

That evening, Sam and Bucky sit at the table and watch Steve and Natasha put together the most disgusting struggle dinner Sam has ever seen. Steve is piling gross stacks of bologna onto bread and seems to think condiments are optional, while Natasha has dumped a bag of iceberg lettuce into a bowl and poured an entire bottle of ranch dressing on top of it. This, she insists, is a "salad." Steve and Natasha move expertly around each other in the kitchen like they're performing a choreographed dance, casually touching each other's shoulders and hips as they slide past each other. Obviously they've created this sort of repulsive dinner situation more than once. What have these two been eating for the last five years? Sam can't resist glancing up at Bucky to catch a look of horror on Bucky's face, his nose scrunched up in disgust.

When Steve sets their plates of dry bologna sandwiches and the soggy bowl of lettuce onto the table onto the table, Bucky suddenly announces that he's vegan.

"You are?" Steve asks suspiciously. "Since when?"

Sensing an opportunity, Sam rushes to support Bucky's desperate ploy to avoid this dinner. "Bucky and I are both vegan, actually. It's new."

"Really," Natasha says. "You and Bucky do stuff together now. Stuff like going vegan."

"Uh huh," Sam says staunchly.

The best way to handle Natasha is just to brazen it out. She'll suspect that you're lying, but she won't actually say anything until she has proof. Unfortunately, she'll stoop to any and all means—however invasive or conniving—to catch you out. Sam guesses he and Bucky are both vegan forever now.

"Go ahead and eat your dinner," Bucky says. "I'll just make Sam and me something while you guys eat."

While Steve and Natasha eat and trade inside jokes and talk about a bunch of political events Sam does not understand—did Michigan actually successfully secede from the Union?—Sam watches in astonishment as Bucky prepares the most incredible looking burrito bowls Sam's ever seen in his life. In like twenty minutes, the dude whips up some chipotle lime black beans, diced tomatoes, corn, fajita veggies, and quinoa, then proceeds to make pineapple mango salsa *from scratch* using a mortar and pestle. Where did Bucky even get these ingredients? The last time Sam checked, the fridge was almost empty.

Bucky looks relaxed and capable, and Sam watches the muscles in Bucky's back shift and move as he chops and grinds and sautés. Bucky's got a kitchen towel slung casually over his shoulder, and a few strands of hair at his temples curl a bit in the steam coming off the stove top.

"So what else did y'all get up to in the last five years?" Sam asks.

"Oh! Should we tell them about the—" Natasha begins, her eyes lighting up.

"You mean the dude with the—"

"With the *plastic fangs*!" Natasha finishes, wheezing with laughter. "What was that guy's name? Oh, God—"

"—Baron Blood!" they exclaim in unison, cackling.

Sam can't help but feel a little annoyed by how easily Steve and Natasha finish each other's sentences. Sam knows, intellectually, that Steve and Natasha lived each one of the five years that went by in seconds for him and Bucky. He knows that Steve and Natasha have always been close and that it makes sense for them to, like, trauma bond after everything they've gone through together. But he's never felt so left out by his own best friends before. He looks over at Bucky, relieved when he sees his own feelings of frustration and isolation mirrored on Bucky's face.

"Wait, you fought the Bloody Baron from Harry Potter?" Bucky asks.

"No, it was *Baron Blood*, not the Bloody Baron."

“Was the guy an actual baron, or were his parents just rich and tacky? Was his first name Baron?” Sam asks, fascinated despite himself.

“I think it was, like, a self-appointed title?” Natasha says. “I don’t think he was a real baron. Anyway, Steve decapitated him with his shield.”

“He was a Nazi vampire,” Steve explains.

“Like an actual vampire? Are we fighting actual vampires now?” Sam asks.

“I think so,” Natasha says doubtfully. “Steve had to soak his shield in holy water blessed by the pope first. It was a whole thing.”

“Wait, are you guys talking about *Todd*?” Bucky asks. “Brown hair, red eyes, ranted a lot about what an important superpower echolocation was?”

“Yes! Did you know this guy?” Steve asks.

“Eh, we weren’t close or anything. But there were some weird ass HYDRA experiments in the eighties and nineties. Most people these days think the Satanic Panic was a myth, but actually HYDRA really did have agents trying to indoctrinate daycare kids into supernatural cults. Todd was one of the evil brainwashed HYDRA daycare kids, volunteered to get some really hinky stuff done to him to try to create a master race of genetically pure vampires. Oh, and he was super obsessed with you, Steve.”

“Oh, God, *was he ever*,” Natasha says. “Let me tell you what he did when he got Steve tied up in his gross dungeon—”

While Natasha says goodbye to Bucky, squeezing Bucky and muttering something in Russian in Bucky’s ear, Sam is startled to feel Steve grab him tightly and pull him into an aggressive hug. Sam takes a minute to breathe in Steve’s familiar, comforting smell—still wearing Bay Rum even after all this time—and rests his chin on Steve’s strong shoulder.

“We love you,” Steve says, then hands him off to Natasha.

Natasha gives him a sweet kiss on the mouth. “We’ll miss you,” she says.

When Steve and Natasha disappear into the distance, Sam looks over at Bucky. “We, we, we,” Bucky says wryly.

Six weeks later, Sam and Bucky have formed a pretty solid partnership. They’re still living in one of the cabins on Tony Stark’s property in upstate New York for now, but they’re scheduled to report for duty at the new SHIELD headquarters in New York City on Monday.

Steve and Natasha are coming back to Earth this evening, scheduled for security briefings and press events promoting the resurrection of SHIELD, promising the public that Sam is

going to make a great Captain America and that there definitely aren't any more secret Nazis in the upper echelons of power at SHIELD.

As far as Sam can tell, Bucky's still pretty pissed at Steve for asking Sam to be Captain America instead of him, but fortunately that grudge doesn't seem to be carrying over to Sam. Instead, Bucky is perfectly pleasant and helpful as hell, which is pretty terrific considering the fact that Sam could use all the help he can get right now. Learning how to use the shield—especially while flying—is complicated as fuck and Sam probably would have lost patience pretty quickly without Bucky reassuring him that Steve was shit at math and definitely was not doing trigonometric calculations in his head while he fought.

“Does Steve seem like the kind of guy who's doing a lot of thinking while he's fighting? No, this is all practice and muscle memory,” says Bucky, clapping Sam's shoulder. “C'mon, Steve and Natalia are scheduled to get here in like an hour. Let's take showers and get ready to meet them for dinner.”

It's humid as fuck outside and Bucky's shirt is drenched in sweat, clinging so tightly to his skin that Sam can count each one of his abdominal muscles individually. Bucky raises a water bottle to his mouth and takes a long pull. Sam watches a drip of sweat slide down Bucky's throat.

“Yeah, good plan,” Sam says. A cool shower sounds really refreshing right now.

When they meet Steve and Natasha for dinner, Sam nearly forgets that he and Bucky are pretending to be vegan until Bucky orders a wheatberry salad and then kicks Sam underneath the table. Sam grimaces and reaches down to rub his shin, looking regretfully at the shiny picture of the giant burger and fries that Steve ordered on his menu.

“I'll have the wheatberry salad too,” Sam says, trying not to sound too sad about it.

Steve and Natasha are bursting with stories about space. They're happy and full of excitement, and if anything, they're somehow even closer than when they left. They have very strong feelings about Kree politics, and they tell a lot of stories about famous people from space that Sam does not know. They touch each other constantly.

The wheatberry salad is amazing.

“So what else happened while we were gone?” Bucky asks, mercifully changing the subject from the boring Kree legislative process. “How did the last season of *Game of Thrones* go?”

“Oh, it was incredible,” Natasha raves, her eyes lighting up. “David Benioff and D. B. Weiss were taken in the Snap, so they had to hire this fantasy author named Brandon Sanderson to write it. Everyone was really skeptical about how it would go—especially with half of the cast gone—but he did an amazing job. It's now considered one of the strongest finales of any show in history.”

“You know, I never could get into Game of Thrones,” Sam remarks. “All those big-budget fantasy dynastic political dramas are just so unrealistic.”

“See, that’s what Shuri said when I told her I was watching it to research living in a monarchy after I moved to Wakanda,” Bucky says. “But then her secret illegitimate cousin traveled from across the sea to claim her brother’s throne in a trial by combat. And *then* her supposedly slain brother *dramatically returned from the dead* with the help of a magical herb in order to defeat the usurper in battle, so.” Bucky lifts his shoulders and raises his hands in a sort of smug, *so who turned out to be right there?* kind of shrug.

“Yeah, OK,” Sam concedes, tipping his head to acknowledge the point.

“It’s crazy that we’ll never know how much better it could have been with Benioff and Weiss at the helm, though,” Steve says, and Sam’s stomach drops a bit as he’s hit by another wave of wrongness, that same ears-ringing, tunnel-vision-forming wrongness he’s been feeling since *he* dramatically returned from the dead. Because what’s the deal with *Steve* being so literate in pop culture that he not only *watches* hit prestige dramas but actually knows the names of the writers? To Sam, it was just a few weeks ago that Steve declared *Star Trek: The Next Generation* “a bit too flashy” for his taste.

“Hey, did George R. R. Martin ever finish the books?” Bucky asks hopefully.

“No, he died,” Steve says.

Later that night, after Steve and Natasha have conspicuously gone to bed together, Bucky grabs Sam’s hand, puts a finger to his lips, quirks an eyebrow, and leads Sam silently into a small closet on the first floor of the house. The closet is full of thick winter coats that push Sam and Bucky right up against a wall, their bodies pressed tightly together. Bucky turns on the flashlight app from his phone to give them some light.

“What are we doing in here?” Sam whispers.

“It’s the only place in the house where Steve won’t be able to hear us. Just keep your voice down,” Bucky explains.

“Oh, shit. We’re not plotting to overthrow SHIELD again, are we?”

“No!” Bucky says. “It’s been like six weeks. HYDRA won’t have a secret majority interest in SHIELD for another twenty years at least. Look, have you noticed how Steve and Natalia are, like, obsessed with each other now?”

“Yes! What is with that? I thought *I* was Steve’s best friend!” Sam hisses.

“Well, you and Steve are definitely *close* friends,” Bucky says skeptically. “But best friendship is an exclusive relationship. It’s the closest and most intimate connection you can have with someone. And you can only have one of them. Your best friend is someone you would kill for, someone that you would *die* for, someone you would come back from seventy

years of brainwashing for. Someone you would drop the very symbol of everything you believe in for. So, I think we can all agree that I was Steve's best friend."

Bucky looks pretty self-satisfied after that whole speech.

"I don't think we can *all* agree that you were Steve's best friend," Sam says, tilting his head skeptically.

"Well, I was, but the point is that I don't think I *am* anymore. I think *Natalia* might be Steve's best friend now," Bucky whispers, irritated.

"I know! I hate it," Sam confesses. "Steve and Nat and I used to all be best friends. Now they have all these inside jokes and I feel left out all the time."

"Again, Sam, you can't have two best friends," Bucky corrects. "Anyway, I know we haven't always gotten along in the past, and maybe some of us have made mistakes like kicking people off helicopters or wrecking their cars, but I think if we want Steve back, we might be able to work together on this."

"I'm listening," Sam says.

"OK, so I think we need to try to make them jealous."

"I don't think Nat gets jealous. Does Steve get jealous?" Sam says doubtfully.

"Oh, Steve gets jealous," Bucky confirms. "Did you know that like five seconds after I admitted that I remembered growing up with Steve, he immediately started getting passive aggressive about some redhead named Dot that I spent three dollars on back in 1937? It was like the very first thing he brought up."

"Oh, God, was Dot short for Dolores?" Sam asks. "Steve complained about her *all the time* while we were out searching for you."

"That was her!" Bucky says. "Steve was *so* jealous of Dolores. Anyway, I think if we team up, we can convince Steve that *we're* best friends now. Then he'll get jealous and remember how much more important we are to him than Natalia."

Sam considers this carefully. He's never been pressed so close to Bucky before, their faces only inches away from one another. From this distance Sam can see how long and thick Bucky's eyelashes are. He can smell the pleasant scents of Bucky's clean sweat and spicy aftershave.

He wants to press his thumb into the cleft in Bucky's chin.

"Yeah, that sounds like a great idea," Sam hears himself say.

"Great!"

The next day, while Steve and Natasha are busy in meetings with Rhodey and Fury, Sam moves into his new apartment in Brooklyn. It's not actually so much his *new* apartment so much as it is Steve's *old* apartment, but apparently Steve doesn't need it anymore since he's spending so much time out in space with Natasha and he "can always just stay with Nat while I'm in town, it's no trouble, Sam, Natasha and I are used to bunking together."

Sam actually has a lot of questions about how used to bunking together Steve and Natasha are.

Sam's unpacking his clothes when he hears the doorbell ring. His spine stiffens and his fingers twitch for a weapon. Steve and Natasha are both scheduled to be out for hours still, and Steve's a pretty private guy. Sam doubts many people know about his apartment.

He grabs a gun from his safe, loads it, and walks silently toward the front door.

"Sam, I know you're in there."

The muffled voice on the other side of the door is thankfully familiar. Sam feels the tension in his chest release and he lowers his gun. It's just Bucky.

Unfortunately, all that tension in Sam's chest immediately returns when Sam opens the door to discover that Bucky is, for some reason, *carrying a duffel bag and surrounded by cardboard boxes*. Sam's stomach sinks.

"What the fuck, Sam?" Bucky complains, shoving past him into the entryway and setting down his bag. "You didn't even look through the peephole to make sure no one was holding me at gunpoint? If we're going to live together you're going to have to be a lot more careful about security. I have a lot of enemies."

"I'm sorry, *if we're going to live together?*" Sam repeats, horrified. He puts the safety back on his gun and sets it down onto the counter.

Bucky rolls his eyes. "Um, yes? Remember our whole fake-best-friends plan? You literally just agreed to it last night. Here, help me with these boxes."

Bucky goes back into the hallway, where he bends over to lift a box labeled "pots and pans," his skinny jeans stretching obscenely over his ass and thighs.

"Yeah, OK," Sam says, and follows him out into the hallway.

"OK, so, explain this to me again: why does being fake best friends mean that we have to be *actual* roommates?" Sam asks later, passing Bucky a beer.

They're sitting on Sam's couch now, surrounded by fifteen boxes labeled, variously: "favorite grenade launchers," "crossbows," "guns (1 of 10)," "scopes and silencers," "marijuana," and "warm sweaters."

“Is this beer vegan?” Bucky asks, checking the label. “Hold on, I’m gonna need to look this up.”

“Wait, are you *actually* vegan?” Sam asks, watching in astonishment as Bucky pulls up an app on his phone, types in the name of the beer Steve left in the fridge, frowns, and then gets up to put the beer back into the fridge. “I thought we were just pretending to be vegan to avoid Steve’s bologna sandwiches and that gross salad.”

“We were! But then I looked it up afterward to make sure I could pull this off in front of Natalia and I actually read a lot of really harrowing and kind of horrifying stuff about animal agriculture,” Bucky says, grimacing. “Anyway, if we want Steve and Natalia to believe that we’re best friends, we’re going to have to live together. Steve and I always lived together, and Steve moved in with *you* like five seconds after he met you.”

“To be fair to Steve, he did make it two very sad years living alone in the most depressing apartment I have ever seen, and he didn’t move in with me until you shot a man through his walls,” Sam says.

“That was just an excuse,” Bucky says, waving his hand airily. “Steve and I spent the entire winter of 1937 living in an uninsulated attic apartment with a broken window. If Steve didn’t *want* to live with you, he would have just slapped some duct tape over those bullet holes and gotten an extra blanket.”

Sam considers this and then reluctantly concedes the point. He’s seen Steve look unnervingly comfortable in some pretty horrific living situations over the past couple of years.

“All right, fine. But do we really need every gun ever made in our living room? I feel like surrounding yourself with this amount of weaponry has got to be an unhealthy coping strategy.”

Sam feels pretty confident about this—he’d been like three-quarters of the way through his Master’s coursework to become a licensed professional counselor when Steve Rogers bulldozed his way into his life.

“And what are we going to do if we need to take down SHIELD again, Sam?” Bucky demands. “How much do we really trust Nick Fury? Anyway, we aren’t storing these in the living room, Sam, that would be tacky.”

“Uh huh,” Sam says, his stomach sinking. “And where are we storing them?” He has a bad feeling about this.

“In the spare bedroom, of course.”

“*What* spare bedroom.”

“The spare bedroom-slash-armory! We only really need one bedroom, Sam. *Steve* and I always shared a bedroom.”

“*Did* you,” Sam says. “And I suppose you shared a bed too.”

“Of course we did. Why would Steve and I need separate beds? We were *best friends*.”

Bucky gives Sam an odd look, like he thinks Sam is the one being strange about this. As if indefinitely sharing a bed is just normal best friend stuff. Sam wants to believe that this is some kind of Depression era, growing-up-in-poverty sort of thing, but honestly Steve and Bucky are just so intensely weird about each other that Sam is pretty sure that it's actually a Steve-and-Bucky thing.

Sam thinks about sharing a bed with Bucky every night. He wonders if Bucky wears a shirt to bed, or if Bucky slides into bed bare-chested, wearing only a pair of shorts or maybe even just some tightly fitted boxer briefs.

“All right,” Sam says, sighing.

Later that night, when they're lying in bed catching up on *Supernatural*—he has got to know how this show somehow became relevant to international geopolitics—Bucky leans over to pull a huge bag of weed out of the nightstand. Then he slowly, carefully rolls the fattest joint Sam has ever seen. It's somehow absolutely massive but still structurally sound and perfectly balanced. Sam puts the show on pause because he has a lot of questions about this.

“Where did you learn how to do that? Does marijuana even work on you?” Sam asks. “Did you learn how to do this as part of that whole Eat Pray Love thing you did while Steve and I were looking for you?”

“What? No. Steve taught me how to do this back in the thirties.”

“Excuse me, Steve *Rogers* taught you how to roll a joint in the thirties? Steve ‘*Captain America*’ Rogers knows how to roll a joint?” Sam asks, scandalized.

“Yes? I didn't have any other friends named Steve—actually, Steve was always my only friend,” Bucky says offhandedly. “Anyway, Stevie started rolling his own asthma cigarettes when he was like twelve, had those perfect long-fingered artist hands even when he was little. Then when he started art school he started bringing home marijuana after class. He'd roll us a joint and we'd sit out on the fire escape and smoke before bed every night.”

“Steve Rogers,” Sam says, wonderingly. “What a little punk.”

“Right? I'm always saying that but no one ever believes me. Here,” Bucky says, passing the joint over to Sam. Sam hesitates for a moment—he hasn't smoked pot since before he joined the Air Force—but then he gives a mental shrug, figuring that SHIELD probably isn't going to drug test him. Yeah, Nick Fury is kind of a dick, but Sam doubts that he'd give a shit about a little recreational marijuana use.

Sam feels a little thrill when he raises Bucky's joint to his lips, the paper still slightly damp from Bucky's saliva. He seals his mouth around the end of the joint and sucks in deeply, sharing this wet vicarious kiss with Bucky, who watches Sam's mouth with interest. Sam

feels the sharp burn in his lungs as he holds in the smoke, then coughs violently when he exhales, passing the joint back to Bucky.

“Damn,” he says. “This stuff still works for you?”

“Yep,” Bucky says. “HYDRA wanted to make sure they’d still be able to drug the shit out of me when they were experimenting with their own version of the serum, so unlike some reckless assholes who actually volunteered to get the bona fide serum, I can still get stoned. Which is I guess some small consolation for spending seventy years on some pretty intense amphetamines and weird psychosis-inducing experimental drug cocktails.”

“Yikes. Well, that makes sense, I guess,” Sam says. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Bucky pauses. “Well, it’s not *fine* fine. But *I’m* fine. Now.”

“I’m glad,” Sam says, and he realizes he means it.

The first time Sam fucks up as Captain America, he finds out the answer to a great personal mystery: why Steve Rogers was considered “the greatest tactician in American military history.”

It’s not because Steve is *actually* a great tactician—in fact, Steve is an instinctive fighter, brash and brave and most of all impulsive.

Apparently, the real reason Steve was considered the greatest tactician in American military history is because *Peggy Carter* was the greatest tactician in American military history, and Bucky Barnes was the greatest *bullshitter* in American military history.

When Maria Hill orders them to Fury’s office for debriefing after that disastrous mission, Bucky grabs Sam’s arm and digs his nails into the tender skin on the underside of Sam’s forearm.

“Whatever you do, *do not say anything*,” Bucky hisses. “Just shut the fuck up, and let me handle this. *I mean it*.”

“I need to take responsibility for this, Bucky. Steve would take responsibility for this.”

“Steve would absolutely not take responsibility for this,” Bucky states firmly. “Trust me, I’ve been bailing that little punk out of trouble for *one hundred years*. Do not say anything.”

When they get to Fury’s office, Sam witnesses an actual miracle. Fury begins by asking them a series of terse questions in a clipped tone that slowly grows more and more agreeable as Bucky’s answers—calm, thoughtful, and pleasant—make Sam’s actions sound both necessary and entirely reasonable. The tone shifts from an interrogation to a more customary debrief, and by the end Fury’s countenance is less thunderous and more just his sort of standard expression of grim disapproval.

The truly bewildering part is that Bucky's explanations for Sam's behavior are so convincing that Sam himself is now questioning whether he even fucked up at all. Nothing Bucky says is a lie, and Sam's not even sure he would characterize anything as misleading, but nevertheless Sam slowly moves from the distinct impression that both he and Fury considered the mission a failure, to the cautious notion that maybe he'd actually made the best of a bad job after all.

When Fury dismisses them, he offers them a gruff, "Excellent work, gentlemen," and then he actually *claps Sam on the shoulder* as Sam walks out the door.

What the fuck.

"Excuse me, *are you some kind of hypnotist or sorcerer?*" Sam hisses when they return to their office. "What the fuck was all that?"

"Should we get Thai food for lunch? I'm thinking pad see ew," Bucky muses, scrolling through the menu on his phone. "What about you?"

"Get me the tofu pad thai," Sam says. It turns out Bucky wasn't wrong about the environmental impact of animal agriculture—that's actually some deeply sobering shit, and Sam feels like he should probably try to be a good role model now that he's Captain America. "Seriously, though, I did fuck up that mission, right? I wasn't imagining that?"

Bucky sighs. "Sam, you made the right call. Maybe Fury wouldn't have agreed immediately, but I didn't spend my entire life justifying Steve's aggressive self-sacrificing bullshit to people in positions of authority for no reason. Steve knew when to step up and do what was right, sure, but he also knew when to shut up and let me do the talking afterward."

Everything about Steve's career in the Army makes so much more sense now.

"Thanks, man," Sam says, awkwardly. He hesitates a moment, then asks, "You really think Steve would have made the same decision today?"

Bucky gives Sam a long, considering look. His gaze is solemn and sympathetic, and his lips press together in a sad smile. "Sam, you've got to stop comparing yourself to Steve."

Sam misses a lot about Steve, but he very specifically does not miss running with Steve. That's because Steve is an asshole, and while Sam may enjoy the view from behind when Steve laps him for the fiftieth time, he definitely does *not* feel like Steve deserves to act as smug about it as he does when Steve is quite famously the recipient of performance enhancing drugs.

Sam and Bucky are running their usual route in Prospect Park, feet pounding together in rhythm as they listen to the dope ass Carly Rae Jepsen playlist Bucky made for them on their headphones. It turns out that Sam's been putting up with a lot of shit from Steve that wasn't actually necessary, because despite being a full year older than Steve—or is it four years

younger, now, after the Snap?—Bucky has managed to develop some pretty cool taste in music. More importantly, Bucky seems mercifully content to run at a speed that is completely normal for unenhanced people who are still in fantastic shape and also have great legs.

Speaking of great legs, Sam's having kind of a hard time handling the length of Bucky's running shorts today. Bucky's legs are long and strong, lightly muscled and flexing attractively as his steady stride eats up the pavement, and his *thighs*—

“So how come Steve won't run like a regular person?” Sam asks, reluctantly dragging his gaze away from those lean, golden thighs.

“Did he try to give you some shit about how he has to run that fast to stay in shape as a supersoldier?” scoffs Bucky. “No, Steve runs that fast because Steve has anger issues and a high sex drive. Otherwise he'd be starting fights and jerking off four times a day.”

Sam's breath catches a bit in his chest and he tries very hard not to stumble at that. “Oh?” Sam asks, trying to sound casual. “And you? You're not jerking off four times a day?”

“Living with you, sweetheart?” Bucky says with a wink. “Of course I am.”

This isn't actually Sam's first time living with a Russian assassin, because he spent two years on the run with Natasha, so he's used to a lot of weird ass habits. But one thing that confounds the shit out of him is why Bucky insists on navigating Brooklyn solely through a maze of gross alleyways that smell absolutely foul.

Steve and Natasha are finally home from their peacekeeping or worldbuilding or diplomatic journey through the stars—whatever the hell they've been doing for the past few months—and Sam and Bucky are on their way to meet them at a café for lunch.

“Man, are you sure we're not going in circles? I could swear we've passed that blue dumpster at least twice already. Is this some kind of spy thing where we're doubling back to lose a tail or something?” Sam asks.

“No. And *this* blue dumpster is the blue dumpster behind the hipster café with the oat milk latte that you hate, the one with too much cinnamon,” Bucky explains patiently. “The other two blue dumpsters are behind the artisanal pickle shop and the thrift store where the secondhand clothes actually cost more than they do when you buy them new.”

“Right,” Sam says with a heavy sigh. Then he perks up when he sees their favorite stray cat. “Oh, hey, it's Steve the cat!”

“Aw! Hi, Steve!” Bucky coos. He reaches into his pocket to toss a few treats toward the skinny, ill-tempered cat, who eyes them suspiciously before hissing viciously, his scraggly hackles raising. Steve the cat ignores their treats, presumably offended by their insulting attempts at charity, and Sam and Bucky positively melt at this pointless and self-destructive display of spitefulness.

“He’s so cute!” Bucky says.

“I love him so much,” Sam agrees. “C’mon, let’s leave the treats here and keep going. Maybe he’ll eat them after we leave.”

“We should stop at the pet store on the way home and pick up a different brand. Maybe Steve has allergies,” Bucky suggests.

“Good idea,” Sam says, nodding.

As they head toward their lunch with Steve and Natasha, Sam’s surprised to realize that he feels pretty relaxed and confident about their whole fake-best-friends plan. Usually he’d be having some kind of heart palpitations at the thought of trying to pull one over on Natasha, an actual spy who actually lied to the actual God of Lies and actually *succeeded* at it, but instead Sam thinks that he and Bucky might really get away with this whole fake-best-friends thing. It helps that Bucky looks so cool and self-assured walking beside him, hips loose and easy and confident as those long legs lead them toward their whole best friends debut.

Eventually they weave their way out of Bucky’s trash labyrinth and make it to the café, where Steve and Natasha are waiting at a table along the sidewalk. Steve and Nat look happy, laughing and chatting animatedly, their body language intimate and relaxed. Sam feels a brief moment of apprehension, but Steve smiles broadly when he sees Sam and Bucky approach, and Steve and Nat both stand to offer hugs and kisses in greeting.

“We’re so glad to be home,” Natasha says, sitting back down with a sigh. “Do you know that after spending the past few months trying to navigate alien bureaucracy, I’ve actually missed filling out post-mission paperwork at SHIELD? Do not repeat that to Fury.”

“Fury’s already trying to convince Natasha to train as his replacement when he retires,” Steve brags, putting his arm around Natasha’s shoulders. The flash of envy Sam feels at Steve’s obvious pride in Natasha is swiftly overwhelmed by Sam’s genuine happiness for her. He can’t think of anyone he’d trust more than Natasha to be the next Director of SHIELD. Probably she wouldn’t let in any secret Nazis or mad scientist artificial intelligences at all.

“That’s great, Natalia,” Bucky says warmly. “How soon can you start? I already hate working for Fury.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure Fury has like three decoy replacements lined up and at least another decade of weird mind games in him before he’ll seriously consider retirement,” Natasha says, nodding her head approvingly. “And to be fair to Fury, he’s probably still pretty pissed about that time you nearly killed him.”

“Actually, Fury really likes Bucky,” says Sam defensively. “Just last week Fury even *thanked* him for giving him the chance to fake his own death—said he’d been looking for just the right opportunity for years.”

Bucky smirks and nudges his knee against Sam’s underneath the table. Sam deliberately doesn’t move his leg away, warmth spreading through him from the point of contact.

“I feel like I should be surprised that Bucky won Fury over that quickly, but honestly it makes sense. The nuns *loved* Bucky,” Steve says, rolling his eyes.

“Fury does have kind of a weird nun energy, doesn’t he,” Natasha says thoughtfully. “I’ve never really thought about it before but now I’m kind of obsessed with the idea.”

When they’ve finished ordering—bacon cheeseburgers for Steve and Natasha, falafel salads for Sam and Bucky—Natasha asks them how they’re enjoying their new vegan lifestyle.

“Have you been eating a lot of aquafaba?” Natasha asks, too innocent by half.

A surge of triumph wells up in Sam’s chest. He knows that Natasha is testing them, and he knows that they’re going to pass this test.

“Aquafaba’s actually more of a baking thing, sort of an egg white replacement,” Sam explains, biting his lip to resist shooting Bucky a smug grin. “And Bucky doesn’t eat anything with added sugar, so we don’t do a whole lot of baking.”

“And since when is Bucky such a healthy eater?” Steve asks incredulously.

“Some of us got hasty Nazi knockoff serums, Steve,” Bucky replies. “I’m like a hundred years old. How do *I* know if I can just eat whatever I want and still have perfect blood pressure and cholesterol like you? Also, do you know how much we’ve learned about nutrition since you and I were in school? When was the last time you even got a physical, Steve? Natalia ought to be making sure you take better care of yourself. I make sure *Sam* exercises and eats a sensible diet.”

“I stay fit,” Sam agrees.

Bucky smirks and lets his eyes travel along Sam’s biceps and shoulders. “Yeah, you do, sweetheart.”

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to get a physical, OK? But my primary care physician was taken in the Snap,” Steve says defensively. “I didn’t have time to find a new one. I’ve been very busy.”

“I’m actually finding this all very interesting,” Natasha says, her chin propped on her hand and her voice low and amused. “Has Bucky always been this fussy and meddlesome?”

“Only when it comes to my *best friend*,” Bucky explains with great apparent sincerity.

Steve chokes on his soda, coughing and sputtering violently, and Sam looks up from his salad to grin and catch Bucky’s eye. Natasha gives Steve a few strong thumps on the back.

When Steve recovers from his coughing fit, he narrows his eyes in disbelief. “I’m sorry, *your best friend*? Is Sam your best friend? Because I thought Sam was more like your best friend’s best friend.”

“We’ve gotten really close since we moved in together,” Sam says earnestly, slinging a friendly arm around Bucky’s shoulders.

It's not even a lie, really. They've got a pretty great routine going, and Bucky's an easy roommate. They wake up every morning and drag themselves out of their shared bed, sleepy and warm, and head out for an early run, letting Bucky's bomb ass running playlist and the exertion of their run build up the physical and emotional energy they need for the day. They take Bucky's weird secret assassin route through the alleys to and from the subway every day, and when they come home in the evenings they catch up on all the movies and music and weird political news they've missed in the past five years. They smoke a joint together in bed every night before they go to sleep, and they laugh and swap stories and usually make fun of Steve. It's all very comfortable and cozy. It's actually, Sam is startled to realize, the closest thing to *home* he's felt in the past two-slash-seven years.

"So you *moved in together*," Steve says, his voice awkward and high pitched. "That's—so great!"

"Speaking of moving in together," Bucky says innocently. "Have you guys decided where you're going to live? We can move the weapons out of the spare room at our place if you want to move in with us."

"I'm sorry, the *spare room*? It's only a two bedroom apartment, Bucky!"

Sam is happy to be back in the field with Steve and Natasha, but he can't shake the slight uneasiness that comes from thinking he'll be able to predict their actions, that he'll be able follow the rhythm of their fight together, only for the two of them to do something totally different than what he expects at the worst possible moment. It turns out that five years was just long enough for Steve and Natasha to fall perfectly in sync with one another and out of sync with Sam.

It's Sam and Bucky's first official SHIELD mission with Steve and Natasha, and everything is going mostly fine except for the fact that instead of turning into nice, clean piles of dust like in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, these gross ass vampires are exploding like giant bags of blood every time you slay them. It's super nasty and definitely unhygienic.

The vampires are feral, mostly mindless leech-like creatures that don't seem to have a lot going on in their probably decaying brains. So on top of dying in a rather revolting sort of fashion, they're not even sexy or sophisticated or even European the way pop culture has promised him. The whole experience is a real letdown, and it isn't even really dangerous so much as it is messy and tedious.

"Last one!" Bucky calls out, firing his crossbow straight into the heart of a vampire standing in front of Steve. The vampire explodes in a disgusting spray of borrowed blood, drenching Steve from head to toe in its recycled bodily fluids. Sam stifles a laugh.

"God damn it, Bucky," Steve complains, his face twisting in distaste. "Just for that I'm taking first shower on the Quinjet."

Sam gives Bucky a discreet fist bump when they climb aboard, whispering, "Nice shot, man." Bucky snickers.

Steve is always so funny when he gets all prim and fussy, like some kind of stuffy Victorian schoolmarm. It's kind of adorable.

In order to fit a full decontamination chamber and shower into the Quinjet, there's only one of them, so they have to take turns showering. Sam and Bucky have a sort of medium amount of blood on them, while Natasha has somehow managed to escape the whole gory ordeal without a single drop of blood—or even sweat? Literally how is she so pristine?—anywhere on her. Since they're only in New Jersey, not too far from home, Natasha decides she can wait until they get back to SHIELD headquarters to shower.

“So what's the deal with all the vampires?” Sam asks. “I thought you and Steve killed that Bloody Baron guy.”

“We did,” Natasha replies, frowning. “It must have been a nest he left behind. Usually new vampires are too stupid or underdeveloped to feed themselves—they're sort of like human babies that way—but I guess after their vampire dad guy died they must have gotten hungry enough to try to find something to eat on their own. I would have thought that they'd have all starved to death by now, though.”

When Steve finally exits the shower a thousand years later, he shoots them a smug smile. “Good luck fighting over who goes next, guys,” Steve taunts, in an irritating, self-satisfied sort of way. “There's probably not enough hot water left for both of you.”

“Oh, that's fine,” Bucky says casually. “Sam and I always shower together anyway. We can share. C'mon, Sam.”

Bucky grabs Sam's wrist and tugs him along toward the shower, and Sam uses every ounce of energy he has left in his body to keep his facial muscles firmly under control, refusing to offer any kind of reaction whatsoever to that frankly shocking claim. *What the fuck, Bucky?* On the plus side, though, Sam has the pleasure of watching Steve's eyes widen and his stupid smirk fade as horror slowly sets in.

Natasha's face, of course, lights up in surprise and then sheer fucking delight at this unexpected turn of events, because Natasha loves drama.

“What,” Steve says weakly.

“Yeah, it's no big,” Sam says, nonchalant as hell. “We'll be out in a few minutes.”

Steve and Natasha whisper furiously at each other as Bucky pulls him out of the room.

When Bucky shuts the door to the decontamination chamber behind them, Sam falls back against it, running an open hand down his face and groaning. “Bucky, man, what are you doing?”

“What?” Bucky asks, eyes wide and guileless. He's unbuckling the chest fasteners on his uniform, and Sam decides to take a moment to indulge his purely intellectual curiosity about how exactly Bucky straps himself into all that tactical fetish gear.

“Steve and I always used to take baths together,” Bucky says. “Do you know how long it took to heat up buckets full of water *on the stove* just to take one bath? And by the time one person was finished, the bath water would be dirty and cold! And Stevie was so little, it was just easier to bathe together so we’d both stay warm, especially in the winter—”

While Bucky prattles on about Depression-era plumbing, filthy shared tenement showers, cold water apartments, the potential dangers of cold baths for people with weak lungs, and how extremely normal it is for best friends to shower together, Sam watches Bucky methodically strip down to bare, sweaty skin.

“Do you need help, sweetheart?” Bucky asks, amusement in his voice.

“What,” Sam says absently. His eyes are intently following the path of a bead of sweat that’s sliding slowly down the hills and valleys of Bucky’s well-defined abs.

“You’re still dressed.”

“Oh! Right. Yes. I mean no! I don’t need *help*.”

As Bucky turns on the water and adjusts the temperature, Sam undresses hurriedly, tossing his bloody uniform into the laundry container marked “BIOHAZARD” and stepping into the shower with Bucky.

“Now, Sam, I just want to say: it’s OK if you get hard,” Bucky says sincerely, clearly trying but then utterly failing to hold back a grin. He looks directly into Sam’s eyes and claps him on the shoulder. “You know, Steve and I always—”

“Don’t say it,” Sam interrupts. “Do not say it or I will kill you, I swear to God.” Literally the last thing Sam needs, as he desperately tries to redirect the flow of blood running to his cock, is to think about Steve and Bucky showering together *with erections*. Jesus Christ. Sam is not made of fucking stone.

“I’m just saying, it’s perfectly normal—”

“I will kill you, Barnes,” Sam warns.

“It’s the beauty of nature!” Bucky proclaims with a shit-eating grin, then easily dodges Sam’s half-hearted blow to the face. “And if it makes you feel better, I will be making literally no effort to avoid ogling you, so.”

Sam rolls his eyes and suppresses a smile. “Whatever, man. Help me wash my back.”

After they shower together on the Quinjet, Bucky apparently decides that there’s no reason for them to stop showering together now that they’ve started. So every morning when they finish their run, Bucky follows Sam into the bathroom, stripping off his sweaty clothes and just stepping right into the shower, waiting for Sam to join him. And at this point it feels like maybe it would be weird if Sam said something, like maybe he should have said something *the first time* Bucky decided they were the kind of friends who took showers together, but

quite frankly the first time Sam was so distracted by the shift and pull of Bucky's muscles as he tugged off his shirt that Sam didn't think to protest.

So now they shower together every morning, and they share the same body wash and shampoo too, because Bucky says that they already smell just like each other from spending so much time together that it doesn't really make sense for them to use different products. Plus, Bucky explains, with two full grown men in the shower at the same time, there's just not enough room to clutter up the space with a bunch of different bottles.

Sam is pretty sure that Bucky just likes it that Sam smells like him, though. Bucky's weirdly possessive that way, and it turns out that maybe Steve is too, because every time Sam gets up close in Steve's space during training, Steve's nostrils flare, the briefest look of jealousy crossing his face.

So, on the plus side, their plan is definitely working.

On the down side, however, Sam has exactly zero opportunities to jerk off now, and he's about to spontaneously fucking combust out of what is probably fatal sexual tension. Because every morning, Sam wakes up to a soft, sleepy Bucky pressed against his back, hips grinding gently against Sam's ass. And every morning, Sam watches Bucky get sweaty and breathless on their run, thin t-shirt growing slowly more transparent, clinging to those perfectly sculpted pectoral muscles. And then, after all that, Sam has to actually get naked and shower with the guy, who is not at all shy about the way his erection springs up out of his running shorts as he pulls them down his hips.

And all of this—this whole fucking blue balls-inducing, brain-melting, sexually frustrating journey into madness—happens before Sam can even get a goddamn cup of coffee. It is eight in the fucking morning and Sam is about to die from his boner.

"Hey, Sam?" Bucky asks, giving himself a critical look in the bathroom mirror. "Can you cut my hair?"

"Do I look like a barber," Sam replies flatly.

"No, but I feel like if we're going to your mom's today, I should probably look sharp, right? And I just don't feel like the long hair goes with a suit." Bucky frowns. "There are probably plenty of videos about hair cutting on Youtube, right? I'll bet you could figure it out."

Sam does not remember inviting Bucky to his mom's house with him today, and he has no idea why Bucky is planning on wearing a suit, but he does remember how Bucky Barnes had looked in those old photos, with that classic haircut highlighting his sharp cheekbones and that perfect fucking jawline. He'd looked like an old movie actor, like Cary Grant or Gregory Peck, and Sam has always had a weakness for handsome men who look like they could take you to church and then take you straight to bed so you'll have something to confess about next week.

"Yeah, all right," Sam agrees.

It turns out there are actually a bunch of tutorials on how to cut hair on Youtube—apparently there was a whole thing that happened in 2020 where everyone had to cut their own hair for a while?—and after two or three videos Sam feels reasonably prepared for this potential disaster.

He sits Bucky down on a chair in the kitchen, because Bucky's hair is thick and long, and Sam wants to make sure he can sweep everything up nice and easy when they're done. When Sam runs his fingers through Bucky's hair to start trimming the length, Bucky groans softly, his eyelids fluttering closed.

"Forgot how much I like having my hair touched," Bucky murmurs.

"Oh, yeah?" Sam says, biting his lip. He wonders if Bucky also likes to have his hair pulled, and for a moment he regrets ever letting Bucky talk him into this hair cut, because he thinks he'd like to see Bucky's long hair twisted around his fist as he guides Bucky's mouth down onto his cock.

"I never had a professional haircut before the Army," Bucky confesses. "My mom always cut it for me when I was a kid, and then when I moved in with Steve we'd do it for each other. We always needed money back then, couldn't afford a barber."

"Hold still for a moment," Sam says, touching Bucky's jaw and gently guiding his head into the right position. He runs the clippers over the back of Bucky's neck, fingers pressing lightly against Bucky's temples to move him where he needs him. Heat blooms deep in Sam's belly at the way Bucky shivers under his touch. When Sam finishes trimming the sides and back of Bucky's head, he leans down to softly blow the excess hair off the nape of Bucky's neck. Bucky moans quietly, biting his lip and arching his back almost imperceptibly. Pretty little goosebumps rise on the back of his neck.

"Take a look," Sam says quietly, handing Bucky a mirror.

Bucky turns his head left and right, preening a bit as he admires the tidy cut Sam gave him. He looks gorgeous, hair neatly trimmed in a way that draws focus to that devastating bone structure.

"Not too bad for your first try, sweetheart," Bucky says, grinning. "Think your mom will like it?"

"Oh, I think she will."

When Sam's mom opens her door to see that Sam has brought a friend to visit, she looks delighted at this unexpected turn of events.

"Sam, baby! It's so good to see you! Come in, come in!" she exclaims, pulling Sam in for a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek before leading them into the living room. "And who is *this* handsome young man?"

“This is Bucky,” Sam replies, shooting his mom a warning glare. *Do not embarrass me*, he communicates silently. She widens her eyes in response, giving Sam an overly innocent look and covering her heart a touch dramatically with her hands. *Moi?* her body language says. Sam is not fooled. “Bucky is my co-worker. And my roommate. And my friend.”

“Hello, Mrs. Wilson,” Bucky says, smiling like a goddamn choir boy. “It’s so nice to meet you. I hope you don’t mind that Sam invited me along today.”

Sam most definitely did not invite Bucky along today, but he feels like it would be rude to point that out in front of his mom, who looks very impressed by Bucky’s whole general existence. She looks even more impressed when Bucky presents her with the vase of lilacs he insisted upon buying along the way.

“These are lovely, Bucky! I’m always happy to meet one of Sam’s co-workers slash roommates slash friends,” she says teasingly. “And don’t you look nice! Sam, doesn’t he look nice?”

“You didn’t have to wear a suit to meet my mom,” Sam says with a sigh, rolling his eyes.

They already had this whole argument before they left, but Bucky was adamant about wearing the suit, and honestly Sam didn’t work *that* hard to try to talk him out of it. Sam didn’t even know that Bucky owned a suit, let alone one that was so perfectly tailored to those shoulders and those slim hips and those long legs. Once Bucky actually put on the suit, Sam suddenly felt like all of his objections were a bit trivial and unnecessary. So now, like an idiot, Sam is also dressed up, wearing a button-down shirt and a navy blue blazer to visit his own mother.

“It’s a Sunday, Sam,” Bucky says reprovably, in a tone that suggests that the day of the week is somehow relevant to his sartorial choices. Sam’s mom nods approvingly at this, so maybe it’s some kind of weird older generation thing that Sam is too young to understand.

Sam feels a bit ill at the unwelcome realization that Bucky is technically older than Sam’s mother.

Sam’s mom serves them tea and cookies while they catch up, and Bucky is unfailingly polite, charming in a sincere sort of way that Sam should have expected from all of Steve’s stories about growing up together in the neighborhood. It occurs to Sam that Bucky probably developed this skill as a self-defense mechanism against the inevitable havoc that Steve wreaked in their lives, using it to keep the two of them out of trouble with mothers and teachers and, eventually, commanding officers.

When the subject of Captain America comes up, Sam’s mother frowns disapprovingly and says, “I just don’t know why *that boy* asked you to take on this kind of burden. Is he even retired? Why couldn’t *he* be Captain America?”

Sam’s mother always refers to Steve as *that boy*.

“That’s what I said!” Bucky exclaims. “I was furious when Steve said he wanted to pass the shield on to Sam. Why did Sam need to be *Captain America*? Sam was *already* a superhero. I

mean, he was the Falcon! He could actually *fly*. How cool is that? *Steve* could never fly—Steve just *fell*, usually without a parachute. Being Captain America just meant doing the same thing Sam was *already* doing, but with an unfamiliar weapon and a lot more attention from bad guys. It seemed so risky and unnecessary.”

Sam is a little stunned at this revelation. He thought the reason Bucky was mad at Steve about the whole Captain America thing was because Steve hadn’t chosen *him* to be Captain America, not because Bucky was worried about *Sam*.

Sam’s heart thumps a bit in his chest, warmth flowing through his veins to thaw out a part of him that he hadn’t even realized had been just a tiny bit frozen, an icy chunk he’s been carrying around inside of him ever since he’d accepted Steve’s offer to be the new Captain America. Bucky looks soft and sincere, and Sam didn’t know how much he needed to hear that someone believed in him just as he was—that there was someone who didn’t just think that he’d make a good Captain America but that he was already a pretty great superhero all on his own.

Sam’s mom nods enthusiastically. “Exactly,” she says, then turns to Sam. “I like this one, Sam. He seems so much more sensible than *that other boy*. *That one* was always getting you into trouble.”

Bucky chuckles. “Oh, Steve is good at getting people into trouble. But the thing about Steve is that Steve attracts people who are just like him, people who are good and brave and ready to stand up for what’s right no matter what the cost. Sam was fighting for what he believed in long before Steve ever came along. You raised a good man, Mrs. Wilson,” Bucky says, smiling softly at Sam.

And Sam’s heart breaks a little in his chest at this, because he doesn’t think that Bucky realizes that *Bucky* is the very first person Steve attracted who shared his innate goodness and integrity, because Bucky doesn’t think he’s a hero like Steve and Sam.

Sam’s mom is clearly pleased by Bucky’s compliment, and she looks proudly over at Sam. “Sam is the best man I know,” she says, her voice strong, full of conviction. “I’m glad he has a partner who understands that his heart is just as valuable as his training.”

“Sam’s heart is exactly why Steve chose him as Captain America,” Bucky says. And then he tells her stories about Sam’s new job, stories that are carefully edited to minimize the danger they had faced and to maximize Sam’s capability and competence in dispatching various minor villains. He tells her about all of the countries they’ve traveled to, all the little boys and girls who’ve looked at Sam with stars in their eyes. Bucky makes sure to include Steve in these stories too, subtly but effectively touting Steve’s unflagging loyalty and care and dependability.

Sam remembers Steve telling him that Bucky was the first to shout “Let’s hear it for Captain America!” when they returned from Kreischberg, successfully distracting Colonel Phillips from any disciplinary action he might have been contemplating against Steve for going MIA. It’s hard to throw the book at someone who’s actively being celebrated by hundreds of grateful, cheering soldiers.

Bucky, Sam is beginning to realize, is the greatest hype man Sam has ever seen.

“Thank you so much for a lovely afternoon, Mrs. Wilson,” Bucky says with a kind smile. “It was really nice to meet you.”

“Come back next weekend!” Sam’s mom replies enthusiastically, giving Bucky a warm hug. “You can meet Sam’s sister Sarah and his niece Michelle. They’ll be sorry they missed you this week. Sam, dear, come give your mother a hug.”

When Sam pulls his mother in for a hug, she whispers, “I’m so proud of you” in his ear. Sam flushes a bit, feeling awkward and self-conscious.

“Thanks, Mom,” he says.

That night when they’re lying in bed, passing a joint back and forth, Sam makes a long overdue confession.

“I was mad at you, you know,” Sam says apologetically. “When you ran away. And when you didn’t come back after Peggy died. I thought you weren’t being a good friend to Steve. I don’t think—I don’t think I was being very fair to you. And I’m sorry.”

The thing is, Steve had told Sam a lot of stories about Bucky, about how charming and funny Bucky was, what a good friend he was, what a good sergeant he was. In Steve’s stories, Bucky was a giant, a larger-than-life sort of figure, a man who never gave up and never let anyone down.

And maybe Sam bought into all of that mythologizing, because when Bucky didn’t come back to Steve, Sam felt betrayed on Steve’s behalf. And he realizes now, with a sharp pang of regret, that this reaction was deeply unfair to Bucky, based on the legend of Bucky Barnes rather than the man. Because Bucky was *supposed* to be the loyal Howling Commando from Steve’s stories, Captain America’s Sergeant and Steve Rogers’s Best Friend, the hero who always rescued Steve when he needed it, even when Steve didn’t think he needed rescuing.

And Steve had so desperately, desperately needed rescuing, especially after Peggy’s death. Sam would never forget the sight of Steve Rogers, Captain America, tired and small and so very fragile, dipping under the weight of Peggy’s coffin as he carried her down the aisle.

When Bucky turns to face Sam, there are lines of grief in the corners of his eyes. “I was sorry about Peggy,” Bucky says quietly. “She was my friend too.”

Sam reaches out to brush his thumb along Bucky’s cheekbone, cupping Bucky’s face in his hand. Bucky raises his hand to cover Sam’s, cool metal against Sam’s skin, and Bucky shivers a little under his touch.

“You’re a good friend, Bucky. I’m sorry I thought you weren’t.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Bucky says with a tired smile.

When Steve knocks on their open office door, he looks with surprise at the sign on the doorway. “*Sam Wilson and James Barnes?*” Steve reads aloud, looking concerned. “Sam, they didn’t give you your own office? I feel like *Captain America* should get his own office. Do you want me to talk to Fury? Because you shouldn’t have to share with Bucky.”

“Nah, it’s cool,” Sam says casually. “Fury gave us two offices, but we just figured it was easier to share since we’re always together anyway. Bucky’s office is our murder board room.”

Steve looks disconcerted by this. “OK,” he says, frowning. “Well, I just came by to let you know that Nat picked up another HYDRA facility on her radar, right near where we found those vampires in New Jersey. She sent you an e-mail with the details.”

Sam doesn’t know why Steve needs to stop by to tell him something that Natasha already sent him in an e-mail, but whatever. There’s something a little bit hesitant in Steve’s expression, a little bit lonely, and maybe Steve just came by because he wanted an excuse to see them.

“Thanks,” Sam says, with a warm smile. “C’mon, let’s go over to the spare office to tell Bucky to put it on our murder board. Make sure you tell him how great it looks, by the way. We spent like thirty minutes at Joann Fabrics picking out just the right shades of yarn to tie everything together. He actually has a whole color-coded system for it, with a key in an Excel spreadsheet and everything.”

While they walk down to go see the murder board, Steve tells Sam all about Bucky’s job as an actuary before the war. Apparently all those years doing informal risk assessment calculations to try to keep Steve from killing himself while they were growing up led to an actual career. “He was actually in college for mathematics when he dropped out to enlist.”

“I wonder if he put that on his resume when he applied for the job,” Sam says. “Actually now that I’m thinking about it I wonder how Bucky fit like 80 years of experience as an actuary, a commando, a brainwashed assassin, an international fugitive, and then a goat farmer on a one-page resume.”

“Wait, Fury actually made you two submit *resumes*?” Steve raises his eyebrows.

“Nah, just Bucky,” Sam replies, grinning. “I think Fury just wanted to give him a bit of a hard time after he shot him. Bucky actually wrote one up for him too. Wouldn’t let me see it, but if Natasha just so happens to find it anywhere on SHIELD’s servers at some point...”

“I’ll let you know,” Steve says, chuckling.

When they get to the spare office and see Bucky tacking up some new papers on the vampire murder board, Steve’s laughter catches abruptly in his throat. Bucky’s newly short hair is styled today in an appealing combination of his old, neatly parted look and a more modern fashion.

“Bucky?” Steve says breathlessly, his voice thick with emotion.

“Oh, hey, Steve,” Bucky replies awkwardly, raising his hand to his newly cut hair a bit self-consciously. “How does it look?”

“Great!” Steve says fervently, eyes shining. “You look—God, you look so great, Bucky.”

“Thanks,” Bucky says, biting his lip shyly. “Sam cut it for me. Had to look respectable if I was going to meet his mom.”

Steve looks unexpectedly stricken for a moment, but then recovers quickly. “Well, it looks great,” he says. “And you met Sam’s mom! That’s—great. That’s also great.”

“She loved him, of course,” Sam says, rolling his eyes. “He wore a *suit*. And he brought her *flowers*.”

“Bucky always did bring my mom a flower when he came to visit, even if he had to steal it from someone else,” Steve says wistfully. “That’s—that’s so great that he still does that.” Steve looks dreadfully, deeply jealous right now, although Sam honestly can’t tell if Steve is jealous of him, jealous of Bucky, or jealous of Sam’s mom. Probably a weird combination of all three.

“Well, it turns out Bucky is great with moms. Even put in a good word for *your* sorry ass while he was there,” Sam says cheerfully.

“Wow! Good! That’s—that’s so good,” Steve says, his voice a little weak now. “Wait, does your mom not like me? Actually never mind. We can talk about it later. I’ll just—I’ll just be going now. I can see that you two have a lot of work to do, so I’ll just—go.”

When Steve leaves, Bucky raises an eyebrow at Sam. “You think maybe the whole make-Steve-jealous plan is actually working?” Bucky says wryly, the corner of his mouth tugging up in a crooked smile.

Sam stifles a laugh. “Yeah, just a bit.”

Sam and Bucky are just getting out of the shower after their run on Saturday when they hear an unexpected knock on the front door.

“I’ll get it,” Sam says, pulling on a t-shirt and a hoodie. Bucky’s still standing in front of the closet, clad only in a gratifyingly small towel as he takes his time deciding what to wear today.

When Sam gets to the door and opens it, he’s surprised to find Steve and Natasha standing in front of him. Steve looks a bit sheepish, but Natasha appears utterly relaxed, at ease in the way that she always is no matter what’s going on or how weird Steve is.

“Surprise!” Steve says awkwardly. He raises his hands briefly like he might be attempting some sort of jazz hands or something, then clearly thinks better of it and sticks his hands in

his pockets where they can't get him into trouble. "We're here to take you guys out!"

"Sam, sweetheart, where's our blue sweater?" Bucky calls out from the bedroom.

"*Sweetheart?*" Steve repeats thinly.

"*Our* blue sweater?" Natasha repeats gleefully.

Bucky emerges from the bedroom, hands smoothing out a few wrinkles in the aforementioned sweater as he tugs it into place. "Never mind, I found it," Bucky announces. "Hey, guys."

"Well, hello, Bucky. So you two *share clothes now*," Natasha observes, the corner of her mouth curving blithely upward. "Isn't that *interesting?*"

What's particularly interesting, Sam thinks, is that he is ninety-nine percent certain that he saw Steve wearing that same white t-shirt Natasha has tied neatly at her waist just the other day.

"Of course we share clothes. Why would Sam and I need separate clothes? We wear basically the same size, even if Sam's shoulders *are* a bit nicer than mine," Bucky says, winking at Sam.

"Your waist is trimmer, though. You've got that nice lean look going on, it's really working for you."

"OK!" Steve interrupts, sounding a bit frantic. He and Natasha trade a few weird, indecipherable looks back and forth and Natasha rolls her eyes. "So we were thinking we would take you guys out this morning, have some *best friend time*." Steve says this last part with particular emphasis.

"Great, where are we going?" Bucky asks.

"Actually," Steve says, "we were thinking about splitting up. Sam, how do you feel about going to a ball game with me?"

"Sure," Sam says, raising his eyebrows in surprise. "What are Natasha and Bucky going to do?"

Natasha and Bucky have a brief conversation in Russian, gesturing back and forth a bit before Natasha flatly states, "Bucky and I are gonna go to yoga and then get mani pedis."

"OK," Sam says, raising an eyebrow in skepticism. Honestly he probably doesn't want to know whatever it is they're really planning to do, if only for the sake of plausible deniability. Sam wonders if he and Bucky should think about getting married at some point so they don't ever have to testify against each other. He should bring it up later, probably not in front of Steve.

Steve and Sam are sitting in the sun, relaxing at a Mets game, and Sam has missed this so much. It's spring, still a bit chilly, but the sun is out and the day's warming up quickly. Steve looks happy and relaxed, golden hair shining in the sunlight and a little bit of pink on his cheeks and forehead that will fade away before they're even home from the game tonight.

"So you and Bucky are getting along well," Steve says, glancing at Sam out of the corner of his eyes.

Sam hums noncommittally, taking a sip of his water. He'd checked the app on his phone to see if any of the beers they had on tap were vegan, but unfortunately none of them were. Which is fine, really, because Bucky's been nagging him to drink more water lately. In fact Bucky'll probably ask Sam about it when he gets home, so now Sam will be able to tell Bucky yes, he had a bottle of water today, he's *staying hydrated*.

"You don't think Bucky's a bit—much?" Steve asks uncertainly. "Some people used to think he was a bit overbearing."

"Nah, he's cool," Sam says mildly, then hesitates. "But, well, he doesn't have much use for privacy, does he? I mean, he's always so—around. And so attractive! And sometimes a man needs some time to himself, for personal, intimate things. You know what I'm saying?"

"You're dying of sexual frustration, aren't you?" Steve smirks, with a knowing little glint in his eye.

"God, yes."

"Old Bucky Barnacle. So that's still his move, huh?" Steve says, his voice wry. "Well, good luck with that. If history repeats itself, I'm sure the situation will eventually come to a head one way or another."

Sam doesn't know what to do with that ominous remark, but since it's such a nice day he decides to let it slide.

"Bucky did say something to me once, kind of struck me as odd. He said that you were his only friend growing up. Which—that's not true, right? I mean, he's so handsome and charming and—surprisingly sweet. I feel like a guy like that would have a lot of friends."

Steve laughs ruefully. "You'd think so, right? But Bucky never really seemed to want other friends, and honestly a lot of people thought there was something a bit—funny, about him. And about me."

"Funny like maybe you two were a little *too* close?"

Steve rubs the back of his neck, looking a little flustered. "Yeah, maybe," he admits. "We were always together. God, Bucky used to get so jealous when I'd make other friends. But he loved me, wanted me to be happy. I think he was happiest when we were a part of the Howling Commandos. He just wanted me to be around people who valued me and appreciated me, I think."

“He liked Peggy a lot,” Sam says mildly, carefully.

“He talked to you about Peggy?” Steve’s eyes widen slightly in surprise.

“We talk,” Sam says, careful to keep his tone guarded. Sam doesn’t know how much Steve and Bucky have really had a chance to connect after Bucky came back from Wakanda, doesn’t know how much Bucky is comfortable with Sam revealing. He gets the feeling that Steve and Bucky have been dancing around a lot of things for about eighty-five years now. “He likes Natasha too.”

“Does he,” Steve says, with a small, speculative smile.

They’re sitting on the sofa, catching up on Riverdale, and Sam can’t believe how much better the show has gotten since the Decimation forced them to write out Archie Andrews. They’ve just finished the episode where Betty Cooper reveals that the murdered Jason Blossom was actually just a clone of the real Jason Blossom—who apparently was in the witness protection program the whole time—when Bucky suddenly announces, “I think we should practice kissing.”

“Yes, absolutely, one hundred percent,” Sam agrees immediately, then pauses. “Wait, why?”

“Well, Steve and I used to practice kissing all the time, so it’s obviously a pretty normal best friend thing to do,” Bucky reasons, gazing earnestly at Sam with wide, too-innocent eyes. “I feel like it would be suspicious if Steve found out I haven’t kissed anyone in almost eighty years and my so-called *best friend* didn’t help me get back into practice.”

Then Bucky pulls his right arm across his chest, casually stretching the strong muscle in his shoulder, the thin material of his t-shirt straining over his firm bicep. And wow, Bucky really should have been a lawyer or a politician or something, because Sam always finds his arguments extremely convincing. He’s honestly the most persuasive guy Sam has ever met.

“Yeah, OK,” Sam says. “C’mere.”

Bucky leans toward him, hand coming up to touch Sam’s face gently. Bucky’s so close that Sam can feel Bucky’s soft breath against his mouth, and Sam leans forward to rest his forehead against Bucky’s.

“OK?” Bucky murmurs.

Sam hums in response, leaning forward to touch his lips softly to Bucky’s. Bucky’s hand trembles a little on Sam’s face, nerves or anticipation, but then Bucky’s grip tightens and he pulls Sam closer, opening his mouth to capture Sam’s lips between his.

The kiss starts out soft and sweet, tentative, and then slowly grows more passionate. Sam gasps when Bucky’s teeth pull gently at his bottom lip, tugging his mouth open so Bucky can slip his tongue inside. Sam moans and strokes his tongue against Bucky’s, heating burning through his veins as their tongues slide wetly against each other. Sam can feel Bucky’s heart

beating right against his own, through their shirts and their skin and their sternums, a pounding, frantic rhythm that matches the pulse of blood traveling directly to Sam's cock.

Sam tangles his fingers in Bucky's hair, gripping the short strands in his fist and tugging gently, pulling Bucky's head right where he needs him. Bucky pitches forward a bit, off-balance, bracing his hands on Sam's thighs before climbing eagerly up onto Sam's lap. Bucky is making sweet, urgent little sounds that send a shiver of want down Sam's spine, and Sam has to pull back for a moment, take a minute to breathe and let his racing heart settle in his chest.

"*Sam*," Bucky says, pupils dilated and dark. "Fuck, sweetheart."

"Yeah," Sam breathes, panting and fighting to keep his hips still, trying to keep from shifting them up against Bucky's. "That was—."

"Good?" Bucky asks, lips curving into a crooked, cocky grin.

"It was all right," Sam replies casually, feigning nonchalance. "I think you still need more practice. C'mere."

They practice kissing a lot after that, which is great, and also lucky, because when Bucky hisses "kiss me" to Sam in the middle of a HYDRA raid, Sam doesn't even hesitate.

They're sneaking into that New Jersey HYDRA facility Natasha found near the gross vampire lair, and Steve and Nat are breaking into one end of the facility while Sam and Bucky creep through the other. They're trying to be quiet, don't want to be caught before Steve and Natasha have a chance to get the data off HYDRA's servers, so when a HYDRA goon stumbles into the hallway with them, Bucky hauls Sam right up against him and kisses him fiercely.

The HYDRA goon makes a noise of surprise and confusion, clearly baffled by the two heavily armed men making out in the middle of a research facility, but Sam's having a hard time paying attention to him over the feel of Bucky's lips, which are spit-slick and firm and insistent against Sam's. When Bucky starts grinding his hips against him—wow, Bucky is really *selling* this—Sam lets out a low moan that Steve and Natasha will almost certainly hear over the comms.

"What's going on here? You're not supposed to be here!" the goon says.

Bucky releases Sam's lower lip from between his teeth with a loud pop. "Huh? Oh, sorry, guess we got carried away," Bucky says sheepishly.

"That's OK, just—hey, wait! You're the Winter Soldier!" the goon exclaims, apparently catching sight of Bucky's metal arm.

Steve and Natasha burst into the hallway at that moment, and when the goon turns back around to face them Sam pulls his shield from its harness and throws it at the man, who falls

to the floor like a sack of bricks. Sam catches the rebound.

“Oh, hey, guys,” Bucky says with a grin, casually reaching down to readjust the lines of his uniform from where Sam’s fists had wrinkled it during their makeout session. “You didn’t have to come help out. We had everything under control here.”

“*Had everything under control here,*” Steve repeats. “We saw you on the security cams necking right in front of a guard!”

“Well, sure, but the guy caught us red-handed sneaking down the corridors. Thank God Bucky’s such a quick thinker or that guard would have thought something was suspicious going on,” Sam says, shooting Bucky a grateful smile. Bucky grins back at him. “Using the old pretend-to-be-a-couple-making-out scam was a *great* call.”

“A great call?” Natasha says, raising her eyebrows. “You’re dressed as *Captain America and the Winter Soldier* and you’re *right in the middle of their facility*. In what way did you appear to be two passionate lovers out for an innocent stroll?”

“To be fair, that guard would have no idea if Captain America and the Winter Soldier had a more than professional relationship,” Bucky points out.

“And are you questioning Bucky’s professional judgment as a *master of covert operations*, Natasha?” Sam says reproachfully, shaking his head in disappointment. “Bucky was a ghost for over fifty years. I think the man knows how to keep from blowing a cover.”

Steve sighs heavily, rubbing his temples in frustration. “Look, let’s just do a quick sweep through the basement, OK? It’s the only place left that we haven’t checked out.”

When they make it down to the basement, Sam is surprised to find that the whole thing has a very distinct incel-with-a-sex-dungeon vibe to it. Which is not really an aesthetic that he thought HYDRA would be embracing, but he’s learned to roll with it when it comes to the weird shit that HYDRA gets up to. The room looks moldy and kind of wet, with a clammy cement wall that has an actual, albeit cheap-looking, coffin propped up against it, right next to some rusted metal chains that look like a serious tetanus hazard. There’s also a microwave and a pretty expensive gaming PC down here, screen turned on to one of those gryphons and gargoyles MMORPGs.

“Is someone living down here?” Bucky asks, wrinkling his nose in distaste. “Or, even worse, is someone living in *that coffin*?”

There’s only one way to find out. Steve walks over to the coffin and yanks it open, jumping back in horror when a man wearing a neck brace and plastic fangs pops out and cries, “Steve! I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist coming back for me and my vampire babies. And you’ve found my new dungeon!”

His creepy red eyes are on fire with ecstasy.

“Ew, it’s Todd,” Bucky says, making a sour face. “I thought you killed that guy.”

“Yeah, me too,” Steve says with a frown.

“My name isn’t *Todd*,” Todd says peevishly. “It’s *Baron Blood*. How would you like it if everyone called you *Bucky* instead of the Winter Soldier?”

“Everyone does call me Bucky.”

When Todd has the nerve to look judgmental at this, Sam narrows his eyes and snaps, “Bucky is a *great* nickname.”

“It’s very cute,” Natasha agrees.

“I gave it to him,” Steve says, nodding proudly.

“Did you,” Todd says, eyes widening in alarm. “I didn’t mean to imply that Bucky was a bad nickname! Not at all! In fact, I love it. I was just—pointing out that it might be a tad *unprofessional* to use someone’s regular name in this kind of *formal* confrontation between a superhero and his archnemesis. I mean, this is really more like a *work meeting*, so I think it’s best if we just stick to titles, right, Captain America?”

“You called him Steve, earlier,” Natasha says.

“Well, the relationship between a superhero and his archnemesis really is such an *intimate* connection,” Todd purrs.

“Gross,” Bucky says.

“Anyway,” Steve says loudly, “Sam is Captain America now, I’m just a regular SHIELD agent. And I’m actually kind of in between call signs right now, so you can just—just call me Steve, I guess.” Steve looks a bit queasy at this.

“Wonderful, *Steve*,” Todd says smugly, his smile sharp and unnerving underneath those plastic fangs. Then he turns to Sam, looking him critically up and down before disdainfully stating, “I certainly won’t be calling *him* Captain America, though.”

“Why not? That’s pretty rude, Todd. We’re having a work meeting.” Natasha’s tone is disapproving.

“Well, for one, I’m racist,” Todd explains. “But also there will only ever be one Captain America, and that’s Steve Rogers. This guy’s just *the Falcon*.”

He says it scornfully, and Sam honestly might have felt a little insulted, but instead he remembers what Bucky said to his mother, that the Falcon was *cool*, that he could *fly*, that Sam was a superhero before he ever met Steve Rogers. And so Sam stands tall, raises his head high, and does his fucking job because he is a hero and a professional.

“Whatever, Todd,” Sam says. “I’m going to have to arrest you now.”

Unfortunately, Todd chooses this moment to reveal that he has the ability to transform into a swarm of bats, each of them wearing a tiny neck brace and plastic fangs as they form a small

cluster and fly right out of the room and presumably away into the night.

Sam sighs in frustration. “You’re out there somewhere, Blood Baron, and I’ll find you!” he calls out after Todd.

“No, you won’t!” Todd shouts from a distance.

Sam puts his hands on his hips and narrows his eyes. “Yes, I will.”

“Nope!”

Bucky looks around the room, sighing in disgust as he takes in the mess and chaos from dozens of vampire bats flying about, leaving bat fur and guano everywhere.

“Great, now we’re all going to have to get rabies shots,” Bucky complains.

Sam and Bucky’s whole fake-best-friends plan is working phenomenally well, because ever since that Saturday Steve and Natasha had showed up unexpectedly to take them out, they’ve been regularly scheduling what Steve insists upon calling “best friend dates.” So long as they’re all in the same city, every Saturday they get together in pairs or as a foursome so that no one ever feels left out and everybody gets some quality time with each other.

When Steve and Sam hang out, they usually go to a game or to the gym—not to do any serious training, just to spar, getting sweaty and screwing around trying out new moves on each other. The best part is that for whatever reason the other SHIELD agents seem super reluctant to work out at the same time as them, so Sam and Steve always have plenty of room to wrestle and grapple around on the mats, pinning and taunting each other until someone gets frustrated enough to really slam the other one around a bit.

Sam has no idea what Bucky and Natasha do on their mysterious outings—they *claim* they’re going to drag brunches or yoga or spin class, but Sam can only guess what kind of sketchy shit a pair of formerly Russian former assassins might get up to together. Thankfully they’re always careful to mastermind their operations in Russian, presumably so that Sam will never be forced to reveal anything incriminating about them if he’s questioned. Bucky takes care of him like that.

Sam’s dates with Natasha are always super weird and fun—they usually end up going to see some kind of crazy conceptual art exhibit or avant-garde foreign film, then get coffee afterward and pretend to be fancy art critics. Or they’ll wander around old flea markets and antique stores and look for insensitive gifts for Steve and Bucky.

Sam is pretty sure that Steve spends his dates with Bucky doing something really homoerotic and intense like drawing semi-nude portraits of Bucky in 1940s military uniforms.

Actually, if they’re not already doing that, Sam should suggest it. He could probably try to pass it off as “healing” or “cathartic” or something, and maybe Steve will even show him the

drawings afterward now that Sam has so much experience critiquing art with Natasha.

Today Sam and Natasha had planned on going to an outdoor art fair for their best friend date, because it's funny to buy Steve tacky cat art and then watch him fumble for an appropriately gracious response, but this morning dawned with the sound of thunder rumbling ominously in the distance. By noon it's pouring rain, a thick wall of icy water erupting from angry gray clouds, and Natasha is soaking wet when Sam answers the door.

"Jesus, Nat!" Sam says, ushering her into the apartment. "Let me grab you a towel for your hair. Do you want a change of clothes?"

"Sure, but don't worry about the towel," Natasha says with a careless wave of her hand. She opens the duffel bag she's brought with her to reveal a barber's cape and a pair of shears. "You're going to cut my hair!"

"Oh, I'm going to cut your hair," Sam grumbles, rolling his eyes. "Why does everyone seem to think I'm a barber?"

Sam leads Natasha into the kitchen and pulls out a chair for her before heading into the bedroom to try to find a pair of sweats that might fit. Natasha's tiny, petite even when she wears heels, and it's easy to forget that about her when she always stands so tall and confident. Sam wonders sometimes if that's how Steve looked before he got the serum, all tiny and full of courage and swagger. Sam definitely does not think about how he and Bucky might have a type, and instead he grabs a t-shirt and the smallest pair of joggers they own, the ones that pull nice and tight over Bucky's thighs and ass, before heading back into the kitchen.

Instead of waiting in the chair, Natasha's standing in the nude, unselfconscious, wringing her clothes out over the sink. Her skin is pale and damp, glistening even in the dim, stormy light of the kitchen. Sam swallows and allows his eyes to trace the path of a drop of water sliding down the side of her neck only until it hits her collarbone, then looks away.

Sam clears his throat and tosses her the bundle of clothes. "Here, put these on," he says, keeping his gaze averted while he grabs her wet clothes out of the sink. "I'll put yours in the dryer."

"Leave the bra out! If you put it in the dryer you'll ruin it!" Natasha calls after him.

Sam rolls his eyes. "I have a sister, you know!"

Sam hangs Natasha's bra up above the dryer, and damn, he can see why she doesn't want him to ruin it. It's gorgeous, black and lacy and expensive-looking—sexier than the three no-nonsense cotton bras that Natasha rotated between during those two years on the run. Sam smiles as he fingers the lace along the band, a gentle wave of happiness cresting over him at the thought of Natasha finally allowing herself to wear something beautiful.

When Sam returns to the kitchen, Natasha's dressed, cozy and comfortable in Sam's favorite t-shirt, joggers rolled up around her waist in an attempt to keep them from hanging onto the

floor. Sam tries very hard not to feel any sort of way about how Natasha looks in Sam and Bucky's clothing.

"So what am I doing here?" Sam asks. He flicks on the light and wraps the barber's cape around Natasha, snapping it carefully at the back of her neck. Natasha's hair is already damp, and Sam combs it straight, parting it just above her left eyebrow the way she likes. He's lost track of the number of times he's watched her straighten and style her hair this way over the years. "Do you want to keep any of the blonde?"

Natasha shrugs. "Nope, just lop it all off."

"You're lucky Bucky's hair was long enough that I had to watch a bunch of videos on how to cut women's hair too," Sam says. He uses the comb to pull her hair taut and then trims off the bleached ends. "Actually, you're lucky you're beautiful enough that you can pull off an at-home hair cut from a dude with exactly one professional reference."

Natasha rolls her eyes and reaches back to pinch Sam's leg in response.

"Careful!" Sam warns, jerking back to dodge her unnecessarily strong fingers. "If I slip with these scissors, you're gonna end up with the same haircut I gave Bucky. Do you want to be matching Russian murder twins? Steve and I won't even be able to tell you two apart anymore."

Natasha gives him a sly look from beneath her lashes. "Are you saying you and Steve would *mind* if Bucky and I switched places on you once in a while?"

Sam bites the inside of his cheek and ignores the massive trap Natasha has laid for him, all giant wooden spikes sticking out of a hole in the ground that Natasha's barely even bothered to camouflage with leaves.

"You and Steve are nasty," Sam says. "Don't get me and Bucky involved in your business."

"Sam," Natasha teases in a sing-song voice.

Sam ignores her and focuses on trimming her hair, watching the blonde strands drift down to the tile floor. The kitchen is silent around them, quiet enough that Sam can hear the hum of the refrigerator over the soft sounds of the rain pitter-pattering outside, finally beginning to slow.

"Sam," Natasha says.

"I'm almost done," Sam interrupts. He trims one last stray hair that's escaped from the rest. "You like it just below your shoulders here? If you part it in the middle you'll look just like you did when I met you."

"Sam—"

"Here, take a look," Sam says, handing over the mirror.

He unsnaps Natasha's cape and busies himself with cleaning up, bringing Natasha's scissors over to the sink to wash them. Sam soaps up the scissors and watches the storm move off into the distance through the kitchen window. There's a ray of sunshine peeking through the clouds off to the west, just beginning to hint at the promise of a pretty day ahead.

When he's done cleaning the scissors, he turns back to face Natasha and catches her smiling at herself in the mirror. "Sam!" she says, her eyes bright and sparkling. "I do look just like I did when you met me."

"Yeah, Nat, you do," Sam says with a fond smile, tugging on a lock of Natasha's hair. "You look just like yourself again."

The corner of Natasha's lips tugs up in a wicked grin. "You think I've still got what it takes to bring down an entire secret government agency?"

"Nat, you don't need to bring down an entire secret government agency. You're gonna run one someday."

The next Saturday Sam and Bucky are making their way through the alleys of Brooklyn on their way to lunch with Steve and Nat, and Sam can't honestly say that the smell of dumpsters is really doing a lot for his appetite. He's hopeful that they might run into Steve the cat, but otherwise it would really be nice to just go the regular way for once.

"Man, I don't think we're being followed," Sam says. "Do we really have to go through the whole trash maze today? Can't we just walk on the streets like regular people?"

Bucky looks concerned. "Wait, what do you mean *being followed*? Do you think we're being followed?" Bucky's spine stiffens and he looks alert, eyes darting back and forth to check the alley entrances for suspicious characters.

"No? But isn't that why we walk through all these alleys every time we go somewhere?"

Bucky looks shifty for a moment, then embarrassed. "No? It's really more like—OK, so the truth is—I *don't actually know my way around Brooklyn through the streets*," he mumbles.

"I'm sorry, you just said what now," Sam says flatly. "Bucky, *you grew up here*."

"I know, OK?" Bucky lifts his arm to scratch the back of his neck self-consciously. "But do you know how many fights Steve got into in these alleys? We didn't have cell phones back then, Sam! The only way to make sure Steve was safe was just to take the alleys everywhere and hope I'd run across him before he got himself killed."

"Oh my God, you really are the world's best best friend," Sam marvels. "No wonder Steve wouldn't shut up about you."

"Yeah, yeah," Bucky says, rolling his eyes and trying to hide a pleased grin. "All right, sweetheart, show me how to get there the fancy way. Lead on."

So Sam leads Bucky out of his weird little warren full of dumpsters and feral cats and into the sunny streets of Brooklyn. Their shoulders and hands bump a bit as they walk along, and Sam's heart beats a little faster when Bucky briefly tangles their pinky fingers together and gives him a little squeeze.

When they get to the restaurant they find Steve and Nat sitting close together, grinning and laughing and looking fondly at one another, and Sam is surprised to find that he doesn't feel even the slightest burn of envy at their casual display of intimacy. Instead his heart swells with affection for them, his best friends, and Sam feels thankful that whatever trauma and heartache they've suffered over the last five years, at least they've finally learned how to express all those emotions they'd been keeping locked so tightly inside of them.

Steve and Nat seem lighter, happier, quicker to offer smiles and physical affection and verbal assurances of love. It's kind of sweet really, Sam thinks.

Steve and Natasha look happy when they see Sam and Bucky arrive, standing up to give them big hugs and quick kisses on the cheek or the lips. The four of them chat for a while about what else Sam and Bucky have missed over the last five years—they're still catching up, working their way now through the four legendary albums Taylor Swift released after her boyfriend was lost in the Decimation. She dropped all four albums at the same time, received massive public and critical acclaim, then disappeared for the next four years. Sam is profoundly unsurprised by the revelation that he and Bucky share an appreciation for hot, artistic blonds.

When the subject turns to work and thus to Todd, Sam groans. "So what's the deal with that guy anyway? I thought you *literally beheaded him*."

"I did," Steve says with a grimace. "But he had that whole neck brace situation going on? So I guess he's using it to just sort of—hold everything together." Steve looks a little nauseated at the idea.

"Todd is so gross," Bucky complains.

"You soaked the shield in holy water blessed by the pope, though, right?" Sam asks, frowning. "Todd's Catholic, so it should have worked."

"We did," Natasha confirms. "Steve took a trip to Rome and went to a special mass and everything."

Steve turns to Bucky, looking displeased. "Oh! Did you know that they do the mass with the priest *facing you* now? So now he can see if you're goofing off in church. *And* they don't do it in Latin anymore, so they expect you to actually listen too."

"Remember when Father O'Connell caught us sneaking comic books into our hymnals and Ma wouldn't let me see you for a month?" Bucky says, shaking his head and letting out a low whistle. "She always did think you were a bad influence."

"I honestly thought you were going to die every single night when you snuck up that death trap of a fire escape to my bedroom in the pitch darkness."

“Well, c’mon, like I was really going to go an entire *month* without seeing my *best friend*?” Bucky says, scoffing. “Plus that was like the same month we discovered masturbation so forgive me for being willing to risk death to come see you every night.”

Natasha snorts a little at that, and Sam makes sure to look directly in front of him at Steve so that he does not catch Natasha’s eye.

“Anyway,” Natasha says loudly, clearing her throat. “I think our mistake was in getting holy water blessed by the wrong pope.”

“The wrong pope?” Bucky lifts an eyebrow. “There’s only one pope, Natalia.”

“Not anymore!” Natasha says cheerfully. “After the Snap, there was a huge schism in the Catholic Church between the ‘faithful’ and a group of people who thought that what we actually experienced was the Rapture. There was this whole conspiracy theory that the old pope and a group of cardinals—who were all taken in the Decimation—deliberately suppressed information about the Rapture because it conflicted with Catholic teachings. So the remaining ‘faithful’ cardinals elected one pope, but then another group of cardinals broke off and elected a *different* pope.”

“What,” Sam says.

“Yup!” Natasha says, eyes alight with amusement. “So the schismatics moved their Holy See back to Avignon in France, but before they did, they—get this—*collected the old pope’s ashes and put them on trial*.”

“*What*,” Sam repeats, mouth dropping open in disbelief.

“It was the most batshit insane Medieval farce of a trial I have ever seen, and I grew up in the Soviet Union.” Natasha tips her head in reluctant approval at this lunacy. “So anyway, now there are two popes, and they’ve each ex-communicated the other.”

“So if Todd is a follower of the schismatic pope, then I guess we need to go get some holy water blessed by that guy instead?” Sam says.

“Natasha and I can go,” Steve offers.

Bucky narrows his eyes at this and bumps Sam’s knee under the table. “Nah, Sam and I can go. The last time I was in Avignon, I was in the infantry and it was being bombed by the Germans,” Bucky laments. He knows how guilty Steve feels about the horrors Bucky witnessed in the war before Steve rescued him from Kreischberg. “Plus Avignon is really beautiful this time of year.”

“It will be a *healing trip*,” Sam says earnestly.

One of Bucky’s many mysterious superpowers is that no matter where they are in the world, no matter what part of any city, no matter what language everybody is speaking and whether

Bucky can speak it too, Bucky can disappear for fifteen minutes and magically return with the best weed Sam has ever smoked.

They're at their hotel in Avignon, relaxing after a pretty tense dinner with Pope Stephen X—known apparently to “regular” Catholics as the Antipope of Avignon—and his loony band of schismatics. Sam has already expended the majority of today's allotted emotional energy pretending that everything this guy did wasn't deeply weird.

“Do you think he's actually going to release a papal bull against Destiel?” Bucky asks. He sucks on the end of their joint, cheeks hollowing out attractively as he inhales, before he exhales and passes it back over to Sam.

They're on the roof of the hotel, where they're probably not technically allowed to be, but Sam used his wings to get them up here anyway and he's sure they have some sort of diplomatic immunity or something, right? Probably. They have a gorgeous view of the Rhone, painted dark purple in the setting sun, and the Palais des Papes looks Gothic and romantic as hell surrounded by Medieval ramparts.

“I don't know, man,” Sam says, shrugging. He feels warm and lazy. “I tried to tell him it'd be political or religious suicide or whatever if he did. Like 40% of the world's Catholics live in Latin America and they're all Destiel believers down there.”

They lapse into silence for a moment, and then Bucky says, “Hey, Sam? Do you ever think about submarines?”

“I mean, occasionally, I guess,” Sam says thoughtfully. “Why?”

“I dunno,” Bucky replies, leaning back and looking up at the sky. “It's just so funny thinking about all the submarines floating out there, hiding from each other. Like, what a ridiculous thing we all decided to do. We just send people out for months at a time and tell them to find other submarines but not to let other submarines find them. And like every major superpower does this, and it costs billions of dollars.”

“That's a good point, but also you're high as fuck,” Sam replies, stifling a grin. “Where did you even get this weed?”

“French Mafia,” Bucky responds blithely.

Sam shakes his head in disbelief, wondering when *that* became a thing. He pours another glass of wine from the picnic basket they brought up with them and takes a sip. “This is a nice ass spread, by the way. You really know how to make a guy feel special.”

Bucky grins in response, and oh, Sam knows that grin.

“C'mere, baby,” Sam says. “Let's make out.”

It takes a while for Natasha to track Todd to his new lair, but eventually she finds it in the Free State of Michigan. Like everything else about the world after the Snap, everything about

that situation is confusing as hell too, because when Michigan seceded from the Union, the Upper and Lower Peninsulas actually split apart from each other. It wasn't even because one peninsula wanted to leave and the other wanted to stay either—they both wanted to leave, but the Lower Peninsula refused to let the Upper Peninsula tag along with them, arguing that they didn't contribute enough to their tax base.

So now the Lower Peninsula is an independent country known as the Free State of Michigan, while the Upper Peninsula is still a part of the United States of America and is known simply as Michigan. They fought *a lot* over which peninsula got to keep the name Michigan, and the Upper Peninsula only narrowly won that battle after Ohio got its trashy ass involved.

Finally, after the Battle of Toledo and the total shit show that was the Second Michigan-Ohio War, the United States government finally agreed to let the Free State of Michigan leave so long as they got to keep the Upper Peninsula and call it Michigan. So now the Lower Peninsula is a libertarian hellhole called the Free State of Michigan and Sam has to use his passport to get there.

“Do you even need a passport?” Bucky asks. They're in the middle of fighting Todd, who's not actually that good at fighting but is very good at exploding into a group of bats every time they try to land a punch. “You're *Captain America*. I feel like this is a situation like the Queen of England, where she doesn't need a passport because all passports are issued by her.”

“I don't *think* that all American passports are issued by me,” Sam says doubtfully. He should probably check with Nick Fury or maybe the President about that, though.

Todd re-forms back into a person just to be a dick and tell Sam he'll never be the real Captain America.

“You're an asshole, Todd,” Sam informs him. Then, before Todd can become bats again, Sam slings his shield, already coated in holy water blessed by the Antipope of Avignon, directly at Todd's neck, busting through his brace and re-severing his head.

“Nice hit,” Bucky says, whistling in admiration.

Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to do the trick, because Todd just stands up, gropes blindly for his head, and once he finds it, he poofs into a swarm of bats, each one cradling its little head in its right wing, flying off into the night at a distinctly wonky angle.

“Damn it, Todd!” Sam calls after him. “What the fuck do you even believe in, man?”

They don't stay at a hotel in the Free State of Michigan because it's a dystopian nightmare where every hotel room is a smoking room and Sam is genuinely concerned about being hunted for sport, so they take the Quinjet back to New York.

They get in late, showering perfunctorily and climbing into bed nude together, too tired to bother pulling on pajamas. When Sam wakes up in the morning, he can see that it's really more like mid-afternoon, the sun streaming in through their curtains, filling the bedroom with soft, diffused light. Bucky is pressed up against his back, too hot and just a tiny bit sweaty, his hard cock nestled up against Sam's ass.

When Sam shifts a bit against him, reluctantly considering the prospect of getting up and starting the day, Bucky makes a discontented little noise and wraps his arm around Sam's chest to pull him back.

"No, come back here," Bucky mumbles, voice rough with sleep. He throws his leg over Sam's, trapping him into place, and drops a warm kiss onto the back of Sam's neck. Sam shivers at the feel of Bucky's lips against the sensitive skin at his nape, and Bucky's hand wanders down Sam's chest and along his flank as he subtly grinds his cock into Sam's ass.

Sam lets out a low chuckle. "Oh, that's what you want?" he asks with amusement.

"Yeah, sweetheart," Bucky breathes. "That's what I want."

Sam turns over to face him, capturing Bucky's lips in a slow and dirty kiss. Bucky moans softly, and his hand slides down to blatantly grope Sam's ass, fingers kneading into the hard muscle. Bucky's cock is pressed against his, and Sam can't resist grinding a bit against him.

When Sam pulls back from the kiss, he asks, "You sure about this? Sex changes things."

"Sure I'm sure," Bucky says, grinning. "I mean, it's been awhile, but Steve and I always—"

"Do *not* tell me you and Steve used to fuck back in the day." Sam groans, willing his brain not to indulge those mental images.

"Wait, did you and Steve *not*—"

"No!" Sam says defensively. "Steve and I were *best* friends, not *boyfriends*."

"Sam, first of all, it's totally normal to fuck your best friend, it's called friends with benefits. I looked it up, and it's a thing." Bucky sounds placid, relaxed, his tone entirely too reasonable, his expression even and unbothered. "And second of all, you and I are only *pretending* to be best friends, so it'll be even more fine for us."

Bucky shifts his hips against Sam again, and Sam stifles a low moan. Sam is absolutely going to go along with this nonsense. God, all of his relationships with all of his friends have gotten so deeply weird ever since Steve came into his life. Steve's boundary issues with Bucky are infecting the entire rest of the team.

"Yeah, OK," Sam agrees, then gasps as Bucky leans down to lick and then gently bite Sam's nipple. The sensation goes straight to Sam's cock and he can't resist thrusting his pelvis up against Bucky's hard abs. "Fuck, baby."

"Yeah, sweetheart," Bucky says, licking his way down Sam's chest, mouthing and sucking at the skin on Sam's lower belly and thighs, soft and gentle and careful, like maybe he doesn't

want to leave any bruises. Sam wonders if that's a leftover habit from fucking Steve, if Bucky hadn't wanted to leave marks on Steve's pale, delicate skin, still so quick to bloom purple even now that his bruises fade in a matter of hours. As Sam pictures Bucky's mouth on Steve, licking and sucking at him the same way that he's torturing Sam now, heat spreads through his entire body, his skin on fire.

Bucky spends an excruciatingly long time just teasing and kissing around Sam's cock before he finally, finally runs his tongue slowly up Sam's hard length.

"Fuck," Sam curses, fighting to keep his hips still. Bucky looks up at him from beneath those long lashes, and Sam feels a sharp tug in his lower belly at the sight of those gorgeous gray eyes. "Fuck, *please*."

"I've got you, sweetheart," Bucky says soothingly.

He presses a soft kiss to the tip of Sam's cock and then wraps his pretty lips around him and slides down, maintaining eye contact as he takes Sam deep into his mouth. Sam gasps at all that wet heat surrounding him, shocked by the fire racing down his spine as he feels Bucky swallow him down.

"Bucky," Sam says helplessly, reaching down to put his hands in Bucky's thick hair, soft and still messy from sleep.

Sam shifts restlessly, trying not to fuck Bucky's mouth as Bucky leisurely drags his mouth up and down Sam's cock, his pace maddeningly, frustratingly slow. When Bucky slides all the way down to the base of Sam's cock, taking his entire length into his mouth, Sam's hips jerk involuntarily and his fists clench in Bucky's hair.

"Fuck, baby, I need—I need—"

Bucky pulls his mouth off Sam's cock and Sam moans at the loss of that tight heat. Bucky's eyes are knowing, his lips spit-slick and pink, so pretty and swollen.

"I know what you need, sweetheart," Bucky says sympathetically, wickedly, his voice rough from Sam's cock down his throat. "You gonna let me fuck you, Sam?"

"Yeah, God, yeah," Sam says. Sam's pulse leaps at the thought, and he takes a deep breath to try to force his racing heart to calm down, to steady his shaking hands.

Bucky kisses his way back up Sam's chest, leaning over Sam to whisper in his ear, "So gorgeous, sweetheart. Gonna make you feel so good, Sam."

Bucky reaches into the top drawer of the nightstand to pull out a condom and a bottle of lube. Sam starts to turn over, to bring himself up onto all fours, when Bucky stops him and says, "No, stay there, sweetheart. I wanna see you while I fuck you."

Bucky grabs a pillow and slides it under Sam's ass, pulling Sam's knees up and spreading his legs apart so he can look at him. Sam trembles under Bucky's gaze, his skin prickling as Bucky's eyes roam greedily over Sam's body.

“Fuck, Sam,” Bucky says reverently. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Sam gasps, arching his back when he feels the slick press of Bucky’s finger at his hole.

He tries not to clench up, tries to relax his muscles as Bucky slides a finger smoothly inside him. Bucky is sweet and soothing, praising Sam as he works his finger in and out of him, telling Sam how beautiful he is, how good he feels, how much Bucky can’t wait to be inside of him. Sam’s poor, neglected cock is dripping precome onto his lower belly, and Sam reaches down to take himself in hand, giving his cock a gentle stroke.

“Jesus, sweetheart,” Bucky says, his eyes hot and admiring as they watch Sam’s fist moving over his cock.

Sam keeps at it, leisurely jerking himself off while Bucky works a second and then a third finger into him. Bucky’s eyes are dark and hungry, and Sam feels aroused and exposed and needy, desperate for more, ready for Bucky’s cock to fuck him open and fill him up. He’s panting and gasping, chanting, “Please, please, please” as Bucky’s fingers stretch and pull at his loosening rim.

“You want it?” Bucky says, ripping open the condom package, pulling out the condom and sliding it down the thick, flushed length of his cock.

“Please, yes, I need it,” Sam begs.

And Sam’s embarrassed by his eagerness, how desperate he is for it, but the humiliation only makes him more aroused, his cock hardening further under his hand. He’s always so quick to say yes to Bucky, so quick to be tempted even against his own common sense, and Jesus fuck is he grateful for that now because that is Bucky’s cock sliding into him, pushing past the tight ring of muscle at Sam’s entrance and filling him up.

Bucky grabs Sam’s legs and hitches them up around his waist, sliding another inch of his thick cock deep inside Sam, who’s gasping and panting beneath him. Sam’s knees tighten around Bucky’s sides, gripping him tight and using his leverage to pull Bucky deeper into him. Sweat begins to form at the small of Sam’s back and behind his knees, prickling at his overheated skin.

“*Sam*,” Bucky moans. “God, Sam, you feel so good, sweetheart.”

Bucky bends down to steal a wet, filthy kiss as he slides his cock deeper, pushing that last, final inch all the way into Sam. Bucky’s hips are flush against him, and Sam feels so connected to Bucky, with Bucky’s tongue sliding slickly into Sam’s mouth and Bucky’s cock thrusting deep into Sam’s ass, and Sam swears Bucky’s heart is beating in time with his, twin rhythms pounding faster and faster until Sam feels like they’ll both burst into flames.

“C’mon,” Sam urges. “I need it. Please, baby.”

“Yeah,” Bucky breathes, leaning down to give Sam one last kiss before he braces himself on his arms and starts moving, slow and deep and dirty, into Sam. Sam’s head falls back as his

back arches, and Bucky's teeth nip gently at the exposed skin of Sam's neck. Sam reaches down to grab Bucky's ass, and Bucky inhales sharply when Sam pulls him, hard, so far inside him that Sam feels like he'll choke on Bucky's cock.

"Sam—Sam, you—"

"Yeah, baby, please—"

"God, *Sam*—"

Bucky fucks him so slowly, so sweetly, that Sam feels like he's going to float off into space, lost in the feel of Bucky's cock hitting that sensitive spot before dragging back out against his tender rim. Sam moans every time Bucky hits his prostate, feeling his balls begin to tighten and draw up against his body. Bucky's pace slowly shifts from controlled and relentless to wild and irregular.

"Sam, Sam, look at me," Bucky groans. Sam opens his eyes to find Bucky looking wrecked, his lips swollen, eyes dark and dazed, looking beautiful and so utterly focused on Sam. Their eyes meet and Bucky holds the contact, biting his lip and moaning. "Sam, Sam, I'm gonna —"

"Yeah, c'mon, do it—"

Bucky comes with a choked cry, shuddering and thrusting his hips erratically against Sam. His body shakes and shivers, breath coming in heavy gasps against Sam's mouth.

Sam groans and focuses his attention back to stroking his cock, his hand moving faster and faster as Bucky pants and recovers above him. Sam's almost there, so close, when Bucky leans down to kiss him, teeth biting gently at Sam's bottom lip, and stars explode behind Sam's eyes as he spills over his fist.

Bucky is slow to pull out of Sam, kissing him lazily before removing the condom and then collapsing on top of him. Sam wraps his arms around Bucky as they breathe and let their hearts settle, pressed tightly against one another.

"God, *Sam*," Bucky says, voice muffled by Sam's neck, sounding happy and exhausted and overwhelmed.

Sam lets Bucky rest on top of him for a while until he begins to feel suffocated by the weight of an entire supersoldier resting on him. He nudges Bucky to the side a little, and Bucky rolls onto his back, pulling Sam over to rest his head on Bucky's shoulder.

Sam wonders if Bucky understands that "friends with benefits" usually don't *make love to each other* the way that Bucky just made love to him.

"Good, sweetheart?" Bucky asks, pressing a kiss to the top of Sam's head.

"Yeah." The corner of Sam's mouth turns up in a grin. "You did all right."

“You were pretty good yourself,” Bucky says appreciatively. “Thought I was going to die when I got inside you. Christ, sweetheart.”

They lapse into blissful silence for a moment, and Bucky reaches over to grab Sam’s hand and pull it onto his chest. He plays with Sam’s fingers idly, intertwining their fingers and then pulling back to stroke his thumb over Sam’s palm. Bucky seems utterly relaxed and content, and Sam hates to break the comfortable silence but he just has to ask.

“So,” Sam says casually, “is that always how you fuck? All slow and romantic and full of eye contact?”

“Well, I mean, I’ve only ever had sex with Steve, so I guess so?” Bucky says, frowning. Sam is a little stunned at this revelation, eyebrows shooting upward in shock, because Bucky is one of the most attractive men Sam has ever met and Sam now knows for a fact that Bucky knows how to seduce someone if he wants it. “I guess I’m not really sure how I’d fuck someone other than you or Steve. I mean, maybe *Natalia*—”

Sam decides to interrupt Bucky before he finishes *that* interesting thought. “Rumor has it that you were a real smooth operator back in the day, though, taking ladies out on the town and double dating with Steve and going out dancing all night. You’re saying you never seriously tried it on with anybody else?” Sam asks in disbelief.

“Well, I mean, there were girls,” Bucky says slowly. “But I sorta got the feeling that they didn’t really take me seriously? Like, they were happy to go dancing with me, and they’d give me a sweet kiss at the end of the night, but if I tried for anything more they’d just pat me on the cheek and tell me to say hi to Steve for them and I really should take out their friend Betty next week.”

Bucky shrugs, obviously baffled by this behavior, but Sam suddenly understands *exactly* why Bucky wasn’t very successful with the ladies, and Sam really should have been way less surprised by the fact that even the sheltered Catholic girls of 1940s Brooklyn could tell that Bucky and Steve were deeply weird about each other and Bucky wasn’t exactly *available*.

“Did you ever want to get married and have a family?”

“Sure, someday,” Bucky says carelessly. “But Steve and I were still young when the war hit. I thought we’d have more time together. And then we didn’t, and Steve met Peggy, and you know how everything went after that.”

“It didn’t bother you when Steve found Peggy?”

“No, of course not,” Bucky says, his eyes shining and earnest. “Peggy was a *doll*. And I’ve been in love with Steve my whole life. I knew we’d always be best friends. It never even occurred to me that I could ever really lose Steve, not in a way that mattered. After all, who can ever really come between someone and their best friend?”

And that—explains *a lot* about Bucky’s near fanatical devotion to the very concept of best friendship. Sam shakes his head at this, knowing that there’s probably no point in trying to shake Steve and Bucky out of the wacky coping mechanisms they’ve developed for 1940s

homophobia. After over a hundred years that shit has got to be *way* too deeply entrenched in their psyches.

Sam resigns himself to embracing their crazy on this particular issue. At least Bucky is hot.

Sam and Bucky are visiting Sam's mom, and Sam doesn't know *how* his mom knows, but somehow she definitely *does* know that something is different between Sam and Bucky, and boy does she look thrilled about it.

"Thank you so much for the lovely flowers, Bucky!" Sam's mom gushes. "And you thought to bring a dish for dinner! Sam *never* used to bring a dish with him to dinner." She beams at Bucky, so clearly approving of all of the changes Bucky has brought to Sam's life, then looks meaningfully over at Sarah and Michelle. "And don't they look handsome!"

Michelle simply nods obediently at this, because she's eleven and not particularly impressed by Sam's too-formal attire, but Sarah gives him a quick once over and then raises her eyebrows in mild surprise at his tailored blazer.

Sam and Sarah have a quick conversation through facial expressions, communicating "What's all *this* then, Sam?" and "Don't make a big *thing* about it, Sarah," and "Is he your *boyfriend*?" and "Shut *up*, Sarah!" through a series of suggestively waggled eyebrows and narrowed eyes and teasing smirks.

"I hope it wasn't too much trouble for you to plan a meal without meat, Mrs. Wilson," Bucky says with concern. "If it's too much or you don't want the hassle of meal planning, you're all more than welcome to come to our apartment for dinner on Sunday nights."

And the thing is, Bucky's not being smarmy or insincere about it at all. He would be genuinely happy to have Sam's family over for dinner every Sunday night, because Bucky likes cooking and he likes Sam and he likes families, and maybe Sam's starting to feel some kind of *way* about all of Bucky's effortless charm and openhanded generosity and muscular thighs.

"So you and Sam are *living together*," Sarah says with interest. Even Michelle perks up at this, finally glancing up from her phone, where she's been texting rapidly or possibly live tweeting this entire embarrassing conversation.

Bucky puts a casual arm around Sam's shoulders, and come on, Bucky *has* to know how this looks to Sam's family, right? "Yep, for probably around six months now, right, sweetheart?" Bucky says, smiling at Sam.

And suddenly Sam realizes that maybe Bucky *doesn't* know how this looks to Sam's family, because Bucky has such an extreme lack of awareness regarding normal friendship boundaries, and also because they're so far deep into this whole fake-best-friends thing that this is just the way that the two of them *act* now, all the time.

And, really, Sam has to blame Steve and Natasha for this too, because the two of them are only encouraging this madness with all the “best friends dates” and the excessive physical affection and their own overly invested relationship. Literally no one in Bucky’s life is modeling basic relationship boundaries for him, no wonder he slipped through the cracks of normal human friendship behavior.

And Sam must be crazy too, because he just smiles back at Bucky and says, “Yep, that sounds about right, baby.” Because Sam isn’t really all that concerned about normal human friendship behavior when Bucky looks at him like *that*, gray eyes all warm and soft and pleased, like Sam’s the best thing he’s ever seen.

Sam’s heart beats a little faster in his chest, warmth traveling through his veins, and oh, this is a *thing*.

“You know, when you and *Steve* were living together, he never invited us over to your place,” Sam’s mother points out. Thanks to all of Bucky’s hard work rehabbing Steve’s tarnished image in Sam’s mother’s eyes, Steve has been upgraded from *that boy* to *Steve*, always stated with a faint moue of distaste.

“Steve and I were international fugitives, Mom,” Sam replies, his tone patient. “We didn’t have a stable place to invite you to.”

“And whose fault was *that*!” Sam’s mom says triumphantly.

“Mom, I made my own choices when it came to the Accords.”

“Sam’s not a follower,” Bucky agrees, and it’s sweet that Bucky thinks so but Sam realizes now that that is a *complete lie*, because Sam has done nothing *but* follow Bucky along in this foolishness ever since he felt Bucky’s body pressed up against him in a closet. “And if anything it’s probably *my* fault how everything went down. I was the one they blamed for that bombing—Steve and Sam were just trying to help me. They really are the best friends I could ever ask for, and I’m still not sure I was worth everything they went through for it.”

And maybe it’s just a fluke of the phrasing, maybe Bucky didn’t really *mean* it, but Sam can’t help but notice that this is the first time Bucky has ever used the plural form of the term *best friend*.

“Oh, dear, that wasn’t your fault!” Sam’s mother protests. “You were framed for that bombing!”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t Steve’s fault either, Mom.”

Sam’s mother sniffs. “Well, I still think *Steve* could have made more of an effort to get to know your family.”

“I’m still friends with Steve, Mom,” Sam says, rolling his eyes. “Our friendship is not past tense, we’re not, like, broken up or something.”

“Then why isn’t *Steve* here for Sunday dinner with the rest of the family?” Sam’s mother gestures around the table at the five of them, and Sam’s heart skips a beat as he realizes that his mother is including Bucky in *the family*.

Sarah and Michelle are observing this conversation with ill-concealed glee, unabashedly enjoying Sam’s friendship-slash-relationship-slash-familial drama. Bucky’s arm is still wrapped around Sam, his thumb rubbing absent little circles on Sam’s shoulder, and Michelle is tapping away on her phone as she watches. Sam doesn’t have high hopes for this staying off the internet when he catches Michelle snapping a surreptitious photo of Sam tucked in snugly under Bucky’s arm.

It’s Bucky’s metal arm, too, so no chance of passing Bucky off as some random dude.

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, Sam thinks. He leans over and gives Bucky a soft kiss on the mouth right in front of his family.

Sam and Bucky are fooling around on the sofa after finishing season one of *The Mandalorian*—apparently Pedro Pascal’s bedroom voice really does it for both of them—and Sam is finally getting the chance to trace Bucky’s abs with his tongue the way he imagined every single time he jerked off in the shower back before Bucky started taking showers with him.

Sam shifts down to suck a bruise into the sharp jut of Bucky’s hip bone, and Bucky moans underneath him. Bruises don’t last any longer on Bucky than they do on Steve, but Sam still likes seeing Bucky’s fair skin mottled with fresh marks, likes the possessive little thrill it sends through him to see Bucky’s perfect flesh marred by Sam’s mouth and teeth.

“Sam, please, suck me, sweetheart,” Bucky begs.

“*Yeah*,” Sam agrees, pulling Bucky’s boxer-briefs down his hips and watching in satisfaction when Bucky’s hard cock springs forward, flushed and thick and perfect. Sam is impatient tonight, wants Bucky’s cock in his mouth *now*, and he leans forward to swallow Bucky down in one long, slick slide.

“Fuck, *Sam*,” Bucky moans.

Sam grabs Bucky’s hips as he bobs his head up and down, fingers digging in tight, bruising, to keep Bucky from thrusting into Sam’s mouth. Bucky is strong enough that he could easily break Sam’s hold but he doesn’t, squirming restlessly underneath Sam, frustrated and needy and desperate.

Sam pulls off Bucky’s cock long enough to take in a big gulp of air before he slides back down, taking Bucky as far back into his throat as he can, and Bucky moans brokenly when Sam tightens his mouth and lips around him. Sam sets a steady rhythm, swirling his tongue around the head of Bucky’s cock and then sucking him back down again, spit slicking up the way. Sam reaches up to roll Bucky’s balls between his fingers, squeezing and tugging gently, admiring the heft of them in his hand.

“God, Sam, Sam,” Bucky chants, hands fisting in the sheets to keep from grabbing Sam’s head and fucking his face. “Sam, sweetheart, I love you. I love you so fucking much.”

Sam moans around Bucky’s cock, and Bucky cries out, tapping Sam’s shoulder in a desperate warning before he breaks Sam’s hold on his hips and thrusts forward, flooding Sam’s mouth with come. Sam swallows him down, bitter and salty, and then leans forward to rest his head against Bucky’s pelvis and catch his breath.

“God, Sam,” Bucky says, panting. He looks flushed and beautiful, and Sam’s heart feels like it’s going to explode in his chest.

“I love you too,” Sam says helplessly.

Bucky looks awestruck for a moment, then says, “C’mere,” in a rough voice.

He pulls Sam up and gives him a quick, hard kiss, then reaches down to unbutton Sam’s jeans and slide his hand around Sam’s cock. He strokes Sam firmly, a brutal pace that drives Sam half out of his mind. Sam’s already so hard from sucking Bucky’s cock, can still taste Bucky’s come in his mouth, and he won’t need much to get there.

“Baby, please, I need—”

“I know what you need, sweetheart,” Bucky says comfortingly. He buries his head in Sam’s neck, biting down on the thick cord of muscle that leads to Sam’s shoulder, and Sam’s back arches in pleasure. Bucky strokes him just a little faster, almost enough, thumb rubbing at that sensitive spot right beneath Sam’s glans. “C’m on, sweetheart, come for me.”

And Sam does, come splattering over his lower belly, mind going blissfully blank and toes curling in pleasure. While Sam comes down from his high, Bucky reaches up to cup Sam’s face in his hand, stroking his thumb tenderly over Sam’s cheek. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

Sam leans forward to kiss him, losing himself in the warm heat of Bucky’s mouth, their lips moving in a slow, gentle slide against each other. They make out lazily for a while, hands roaming appreciatively over each other’s bodies, until Sam reluctantly pulls away to clean up.

When Sam returns to the living room, Bucky is sitting in the dim light of the television, chewing anxiously at his lower lip. Sam plops down next to him, turning on his side to face him and putting his feet in Bucky’s lap.

“Did you mean it?” Bucky asks uncertainly. “It wasn’t just, like, a heat of the moment thing?”

“I did,” Sam confirms, his voice sure and steady. “Did you mean it?”

“God, yes, Sam. I love you.”

They look at each other dopily for a while, then Bucky tugs at Sam’s legs to urge him further down the sofa, closer to Bucky. They curl up together and enjoy the comfortable silence until Bucky says, “Tell me something you’ve never told Steve.”

Sam thinks for a moment, then groans. He covers his face with his hands, peeking embarrassedly through his fingers, and says, “OK, so I went through a phase, when I first got out of high school, where I told everybody to call me Snap Wilson.”

Bucky laughs incredulously, then claps a hand over his mouth to stifle it, mostly unsuccessfully. “I’m sorry, you told them to call you *what now?*” he asks gleefully.

“I told them to call me Snap Wilson,” Sam grits out. He is already regretting this, but Bucky looks so fucking elated that Sam can’t bring himself to care too much about the inevitable teasing he’s going to receive. And it’s Bucky, not Steve or *Natasha*, so Sam knows that the ribbing won’t be *too* savage.

Bucky is already trying to suppress his wild grin, pressing his lips together until they turn almost white. “So was this like a rough time you were going through, like trouble at home or something, or did you just think Snap Wilson sounded cool?” His voice is a mixture of genuine concern and barely concealed amusement.

“I just thought it sounded cool,” Sam confesses.

Bucky laughs in delight, and Sam gives him a sour look, poking him in the side. “Yeah, yeah, your turn now, buddy,” Sam says. “Tell me something you’ve never told Steve.”

Bucky sobers up, clears his throat and says, “I didn’t enlist in the Army.”

“What?”

“I let Steve think that I enlisted, because I didn’t want him to know that I had to drop out of college to pay for his medical bills when he got sick the winter of ’41. Got called up shortly after, told him that I enlisted.”

Sam’s heart breaks a little at that, for Bucky, because he would have done anything to take care of Steve, and for Steve, who never would have forgiven himself if Bucky had gotten drafted and sent home in a body bag on his account. To this day Steve still feels guilty about leaving Bucky behind in that ravine, even though he had no reason to believe that Bucky could have survived the fall, and anyway Steve drove a plane straight into the Arctic like a week later and couldn’t have rescued Bucky anyway.

“So wait, how *does* Steve think you paid for his medical bills?”

“I told him I got paid to pose for some dirty pictures,” Bucky says with a saucy grin. “Then he asked to see them and I had to beg one of his photographer friends to take some for me to try to sell the whole embarrassing lie. Honestly I was a little flattered that Steve had exactly zero questions about the whole thing, like of course someone would pay to see me jerking off wearing a pair of women’s stockings.”

Sam raises his eyebrows at that. “Any chance those pictures are still around somewhere?”

“I’m pretty sure Steve burned them all before he headed out on the bond circuit,” Bucky says with regret, then brightens. “But on the plus side, I think I just came up with a great idea for

the erotic portrait series Steve's been working on during all of our best friend dates."

Sam grins cheerfully at this. "*Nice.*"

A month later, they're in Eastern Washington with Steve and Natasha, fighting off a horde of formerly human white nationalist cult members who are now a group of largely mindless but probably still racist vampires.

The vampires aren't much of a threat, but there are a bunch of them and they're good at causing enough chaos that it's hard to get close to Todd, who's in a neck brace again and back on his bullshit.

Sam's done a ton of research on Catholicism since the last time they met and he's still not sure how to finally kill this guy. The holy water blessed by the Roman pope didn't work, and the holy or possibly *unholy* water blessed by the Antipope of Avignon didn't work, and Sam's pretty much run out of popes to get holy water from. Out of a commitment to preparedness Sam's brought along vials of leftover holy water from each pope, but he's honestly not sure if they'll be much help to them if neither of them even works.

Sam, Bucky, and Steve are all covered in blood from the vampires they've slain so far, but as usual Natasha still looks perfectly pristine as she lectures Todd on his many sins and hypocrisies. God, she even had the audacity to wear a white uniform to this. Sam's heart swells with affection for her.

"I thought you were supposed to be Catholic, Todd. It's not very *pro-life* of you to create all these vampires," Natasha says, shaking her head in disapproval.

"I'm just trying to make humanity great again," Todd snaps defensively through his ridiculous plastic fangs. "Society works best when there are a few strong leaders and many weak, dependent followers. HYDRA believes in *order*. The Catholic Church used to believe in order too—it *used* to understand the value of an authoritarian system of governing its followers."

And just like that, Sam understands Todd's belief system. "He's a Sedevacant!" Sam announces, pointing a finger in triumph.

"What?" Bucky asks, firing a crossbow into a vampire trying to latch its fangs into Steve's calf. The vampire explodes in a shower of red, and Steve wrinkles his nose in disgust but keeps fighting. At this point there's not very much of Steve that *isn't* covered in blood, and Sam hopes they aren't all going to have to worry about bloodborne diseases from this whole gross situation.

"Remember all those changes in the Catholic Church since you and Steve were kids? Those all came about after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Sedevacants believe that the church lost its way and fell into heresy when it embraced modernism. So according to them there *is* no valid pope—the seat of the pope is actually vacant," Sam explains, tossing his shield off to behead a vampire looming over Bucky.

“Thanks, sweetheart!” Bucky calls, blowing him a kiss.

“Great,” Natasha says, irritated. “And how are we supposed to get holy water blessed by no one? Wouldn’t that just be regular water?”

Sam frowns in dismay at this terrible, zany loophole Todd has apparently discovered.

Todd cackles triumphantly. “You can’t! You’ll never be able to kill me—there’s no holy water on earth that’s been blessed by *no one*,” Todd boasts. “I’m invincible!”

“Not so fast,” Bucky says, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “Sam, do you still have both vials of holy water?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Mix them together!” Bucky says. “Holy water blessed by the pope plus holy water blessed by the *antipope* will cancel each other out.”

Todd’s eyes widen in horror. “No, that won’t work!”

“It’s simple math, Todd,” Bucky says smugly. “Sam, do it, I’ll cover you!”

Sam’s hands are steady as he unscrews the tops of the bottles, sure in the knowledge that Bucky will have his back if any vampires try to latch onto him while he’s busy. He coats the shield in holy water from each of the vials, making sure to cover every square inch. Then, with a mighty throw, he launches the shield toward Todd, nailing him directly in the throat.

When Todd’s head is blown back off his body, he explodes into a bloody, disgusting mess.

“Gross,” Steve says.

The baby vampires stumble around, confused and lost without their leader, and it only takes about twenty minutes for Sam and the others to slay the rest of them now that Todd’s dead.

Sam makes a mental note to use all of his influence as Captain America to get Bucky an honorary doctorate in mathematics from Harvard or Yale or something after all this.

Sam and Bucky spend forty-five long minutes showering off all the blood after their showdown with Todd and his racist vampire gang, the last fifteen of which are spent with Bucky pressed up against the shower wall with Sam’s tongue in his ass.

“Fuck, sweetheart, please,” Bucky begs. He’s trembling and squirming, spreading his legs shamelessly for Sam. “Fuck me, *Sam*, please.”

Sam reaches down to squeeze the base of his cock, liquid heat pooling in his belly at the thought of sliding his cock into that tight hole he’s been eagerly, methodically loosening.

Bucky's hands are pulling at his own ass, spreading his cheeks so sweetly, so obediently for Sam's mouth. Sam traces a finger around Bucky's wet rim, poking in just a bit to test him out, and Bucky's thighs twitch and shake around Sam's face.

"You think you can take it standing up?" Sam asks, giving Bucky an assessing look.

Bucky bites his lip and sobs a bit, panting and gasping, his face pressed up against the shower wall. Bucky looks wrecked already, so pretty, and Sam decides to take pity on him.

"C'mon, baby, let's go to the bedroom," Sam says, standing up and shutting off the shower.

He wraps Bucky in a towel and leads him to the hotel bedroom, and Bucky shivers prettily in the cool air, goosebumps rising on his clean, damp skin. Sam crowds Bucky against the mattress to warm him up, leaning his head down to dip into the wet heat of Bucky's mouth, sliding his tongue against Bucky's in a dirty kiss that leaves them both moaning.

Sam grabs the lube and Bucky spreads his legs eagerly, obscenely, and the sight is so erotic that Sam feels like he's been punched in the gut, breathless with desire and desperate to plunge his cock into all that tight, willing heat. His hands shake a bit as he fumbles with the lube, and he coats his fingers until they're nice and slick, ready to slide right in with just the slightest amount of pressure.

Bucky gasps when Sam slips one long finger into him, biting his lip and arching his back. "Sam, more—I need—"

"I got you, baby," Sam says, sliding another finger in next to the first. Bucky's mouth gapes open, his throat emitting a choked off little cry, and Sam's cock is aching hard at the sound, weeping messily against Sam's belly, dripping little trails of precome. Bucky's a quivering mess underneath him, and Sam presses wet kisses between Bucky's thighs as he ruthlessly opens him up. "God, look at you, baby."

Sam gives him another finger, and Bucky takes it, keening and begging. "More—please—Sam, I want your cock."

"Oh, you think you're ready for it, baby?"

"Yes, *please*, Sam," Bucky whines, and Sam reluctantly removes his fingers, climbing up to settle his body over Bucky's, letting gravity pull him down so they're pressed tightly together. Bucky may be sweet and pliant underneath him now, but Sam knows how strong he really is, how easily he can bear Sam's weight.

When Sam starts pushing his cock inside of him, Bucky gasps, mouth opening in a small *o* of pleasure. Sam fucks Bucky shallowly until he grows impatient, needs to go deeper, grabbing Bucky's thighs to pull them up so he can bend Bucky in half underneath him. Bucky's limbs are long and flexible, moving easily as Sam moves him right where he needs him. Sam bites his own lip, hard, as Bucky's hole pulls him in, clutching greedily at Sam's throbbing cock.

When Sam slides all the way home, Bucky gasps and says, "Sam, Sam, wait—"

Sam pauses, his cock buried fully inside Bucky, panting harshly at the effort of keeping his hips still.

“Yeah, baby,” Sam says, voice straining. “What do you need?”

“Sam,” Bucky says, and he sucks in a deep breath, closing his eyes and visibly working to control himself. “Sam, I need to tell you something.”

Sam looks down at Bucky and waits, letting Bucky take the time he needs to settle. Sam’s hips are flush against Bucky’s ass, his cock seated fully inside of him, and he feels so connected to Bucky, like they’re two parts of the same whole.

Bucky pants raggedly for a few moments, squirming and restless under Sam, until he calms again, opening his eyes to look at Sam. Bucky’s lashes are long and gorgeous and damp, his pupils dark and dilated.

“Sam, I have to tell you,” Bucky says, flushing prettily, his wide eyes so earnest and sweet. “I—somewhere along the way, I want you to know, everything became real for me. You—you really are my best friend.”

Sam closes his eyes, heart so achingly full in his chest.

“You’re my best friend too,” Sam says softly, seriously, because he knows this is important to Bucky. “I love you.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.” Bucky’s eyes are wet and shining.

Sam grinds his hips against Bucky’s ass, his lips curving up in a dirty grin. “You gonna let me fuck you now?” Sam asks. Bucky gasps, hands coming up to grip Sam’s back, fingers digging in bruisingly hard.

“Yeah, Sam, yeah, fuck me,” Bucky breathes.

Sam pulls out and then slams his hips back into Bucky, who gasps in surprise, spine arching in pleasure. Sam sets a hard and deep rhythm, letting loose all of the leftover tension and stress from the fight earlier, taking all that frustrated energy out on Bucky’s willing body. When Sam nails Bucky’s prostate, Bucky’s hands scrabble over Sam’s back, clutching and pulling at him frantically. “Yes, there, there,” Bucky says, voice desperate and breathy.

Sam drives his cock into Bucky faster, pounding harder as he feels his balls tighten and heat race up his spine. He’s close, so close, and he leans down to brace himself on one elbow so he can reach down to grab Bucky’s hard cock. He can tell from the noises Bucky’s making, those sweet, high whimpers, that Bucky isn’t far behind him. When he strokes Bucky hard, his fist sliding brutally up and down Bucky’s cock, Bucky arches his back and comes, spilling all over his sweaty chest.

The sight of Bucky’s come, pearly and glistening over his taut abs, sends Sam over the edge. Sam’s hips jerk and stutter, his thrusts erratic, shuddering as he feels his balls empty into Bucky’s tight hole. He wants to collapse, wants to let go and fall onto Bucky, let Bucky catch

him and hold him, but instead he pulls out. Bucky whines quietly at the loss, and Sam can't resist reaching down to rub his fingers against Bucky's wet, puffy hole, admiring the slow trickle of Sam's come dripping out of him. Bucky shivers at the touch of Sam's fingers to his abused hole, probably raw and oversensitive, and Sam reluctantly drops his hand.

"Sorry," he says, kissing Bucky's knee in apology.

"S'ok," Bucky slurs. "Like it when you get all vulgar and possessive on me."

"Speaking of possessive," Sam says, heaving out a heavy sigh and collapsing back onto the bed next to Bucky, hooking his ankle over Bucky's. "Can we talk about the whole fake-best-friends thing? Like, where are we with that and what was our endgame there?"

"Well, I guess I was wrong about only having one best friend," Bucky admits, looking at Sam out of the corner of his eye and grinning bashfully. "And I guess the plan was just—make Steve jealous."

"And?" Sam prompts.

"And—I think that was it? I'm not really sure where I saw it all working out," Bucky confesses.

"I feel like maybe you're not all that great at planning without a murder board."

"I'm a *visual planner*," Bucky says defensively. "And it seemed kind of disrespectful to make a murder board about Steve given the fact that I did, in fact, try to murder him *several times* as the Winter Soldier."

"That's fair," Sam concedes, tipping his head to acknowledge the point. "But we're good now, right? I mean, we're best friends with each other, we're best friends with Steve and Natasha, Steve and Natasha are *also* best friends—and I'm kind of crazy in love with you."

"What I'm hearing you say here is that my crazy plan worked."

"Yeah, OK," Sam says, hiding a smile. "Maybe it did."

It's a Saturday, and Sam and Steve are on their best friend date, and Steve is kicking Sam's ass in the gym. Sam knows, intellectually, that he's in fantastic shape and that there's no shame in being beaten by a scientifically enhanced human being. That doesn't mean that it doesn't still hurt his pride—and his back, *motherfucker*—when Steve manages to take him down hard without even having the decency to break a sweat.

"I think that's about enough for today. I feel like I've done a pretty good job wearing you out," Steve says, smirking like an asshole, because he is an asshole. "Let's hit the showers."

When they get to the SHIELD locker room, it's nearly empty, the way it usually is on Saturdays. There are still a few particularly dedicated SHIELD employees roaming about, mostly new guys. For whatever reason most of the seasoned employees stay away from the

gym locker room on Saturday afternoons when Sam and Steve work out. Today, when people catch sight of Sam and Steve walking in, they blanch and immediately speed up with whatever they're doing, hustling out of the locker room like it's on fire or something. In under two minutes, Sam and Steve are the only ones left.

"It's weird how everybody always leaves when they see us coming in to shower together," Sam remarks, stripping off his sweaty shirt and tossing it in his locker.

"I wonder if they're intimidated by us," Steve muses, then takes a moment to admire Sam's bare chest. Steve's eyes are hot and appreciative as they travel lazily up and down Sam's torso.

Sam shrugs in response, then winces as he feels a muscle tighten up in his back. "Ouch," Sam hisses. "Man, I know I'm not twenty-five anymore, but damn, I really don't need the reminder, you know?"

Steve's brow furrows in concern. "Here, let me take a look at that when we get in the shower."

They finish undressing and then get into the shower together. They share a stall, because Steve read an article about water conservation that he apparently found very inspiring, and also because sometimes it's nice having a buddy with you. Sam lathers himself up, and then out of habit he reaches over to spin Steve around so he can wash Steve's back too.

"God, that feels good," Steve moans, the sound of it echoing in the strangely empty locker room. Sam spends a good few minutes really working Steve over as he scrubs Steve's back, groping and kneading at Steve's lats and traps while Steve moans and arches his back in pleasure.

When Sam finishes, he gives Steve a little pat and says, "OK, you do me." Obliging, Steve turns around to rub Sam's back, massaging the tight muscles, his hands sliding easily over Sam's skin with the slick of Sam's body wash.

"This where it hurts?" Steve murmurs, digging his fingers into Sam's lower back. "God, you're really tight here."

"*Yeah*," Sam says, groaning at the pleasure-pain of Steve working at the sore point in his lower back. He huffs a frustrated, petulant sigh. "You know, sometimes I feel like the more I lift, the tighter I get."

"Maybe you should start going to yoga with Bucky and Natasha," Steve suggests. "Actually, they're starting a class in about twenty minutes. If we hurry up in here, we could probably meet them there if you want."

"Wait, Bucky and Natasha are at *yoga* today?" Sam asks in disbelief. "You're telling me that *Bucky* and *Natasha* go to *yoga*? That's what they're doing on their best friend dates?"

Suddenly, Steve looks very anxious and very guilty.

“Wait,” Steve says slowly, apprehensively, “Bucky does *tell* you what he does on his best friend dates, right? He—I mean, you do *know*—”

“Yeah, Steve, I know,” Sam says, his tone dry. “I just thought yoga was, like, a cover for something. I didn’t think they were *actually* going to yoga.”

“Oh!” Steve brightens. “Yeah, it’s doing some really amazing things for Bucky’s flexibility. And for Natasha’s ass.”

Sam shrugs. “All right, then, let’s head over.”

Sam and Steve finish up in the shower, moving more quickly than their usual leisurely Saturday afternoon locker room shower pace. Sam’s skin is still a bit damp under his fresh gym clothes, but the air outside is warm, and he’ll be sweating again soon anyway once he starts working out in the humid yoga studio.

When Bucky and Natasha see Sam and Steve, their faces light up with big smiles.

“Hey, sweetheart!” Bucky says, coming over to give Sam a hug and a kiss while Natasha does the same to Steve. “You and Steve are done earlier than usual.”

“Yeah, he whooped my ass,” Sam admits, scratching his jaw.

Sam and Steve switch hugging partners, and Nat’s body feels small and strong in Sam’s arms when she goes up onto her tiptoes to give him a warm hug and a kiss on the lips. And when Sam sneaks a look downward, he notices that Steve was not lying about all the great things yoga’s been doing for Natasha’s ass.

Sam lets go of Natasha and turns back to Bucky. “So you and Nat really do yoga,” Sam says, shaking his head ruefully. “You know, all this time, I thought you two were doing some secret spy shit that you were trying to keep me from having to answer questions about? I was half-convinced that we should be thinking about getting married just so we wouldn’t have to testify against each other.”

Steve and Natasha raise their eyebrows in surprise, but Bucky looks pleased at that. “Well,” Bucky says, lips curving up in a crooked grin, “let’s not take that marriage idea off the table just yet.”

Natasha clearly aims for a sober expression, but the corner of her lip twitches and her eyes sparkle with mirth. “You know, I can’t say that we’ll definitely *never* get up to any secret spy shit, Sam. Maybe it’s not a bad idea to keep that in your back pocket.”

Steve raises an eyebrow and nods thoughtfully. “Plus, do we even know if Bucky’s still considered an American citizen?”

“I’m honestly not sure,” Bucky admits. “But being married to Captain American *should* grant me automatic citizenship, probably.”

Sam shrugs placidly and slings an arm around Bucky’s shoulders. “Sounds like a good plan to me.”

After all, Sam's mom always *did* say that happiness was being married to your best friend.

End Notes

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