That Is Not A Cow

by mandarou

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Bucky looked down at the portal remote Steve still held, then narrowed his eyes when he met Steve’s. “You let some yahoo experiment on you again, didn’t you? Some mad scientist said,
‘hold my beer,’ and you pushed the button, right?"

**Do not read this without reading the first story, you will be so lost holy shit.**

Notes

I must reiterate that you **should not read this unless you’ve read Dishonor On Your Cow**. This is a direct companion piece to that, it will make fuck all sense. Enough people wanted to visit the AlternaVengers from that story that I decided it'd be worth it, and let's be real here, I got way too much time on my hands. So these characters are essentially the MCU canon characters, except we circumvented Civil War because the CowVerse Avengers helped Steve find Bucky early.

I am a history major who never actually used my degree for its intended purpose (…..or any purpose), so I wanted to put a note here for anyone interested. But I wound up rambling like whoa, so I'll put it in the end notes so you can alleviate any guilt you may feel over skipping it. Fuck that, I've moved it to a far more fitting place.

[edit] There's a crossover fic with my multiverse hopping guys in it! **Whip Crack, by Quarra**. I'm honored to have loaned them out!

See the end of the work for more **notes**.
“Are you sure about this thing, Stark?” Steve asked as he eyed the machine nervously.

“As sure as I am of anything involving ripping the time-space continuum apart, sure,” Tony replied flippantly. He glanced up at Steve as he fiddled with the machine and seemed to calm for a moment when he saw the real apprehension in Steve’s expression. He stood up so fast that his spine was probably the straightest thing in the room and he met Steve’s eyes. “It’ll either take you to him, or it won’t do anything at all. No harm done.”

Steve nodded, taking a deep breath and crouching down on the metal plate Tony insisted would send him anywhere in the world. He didn’t know where Bucky was, or even how Bucky was, and he didn’t know what he’d be appearing in the middle of. It was best to be ready for a fight. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

“Okay. Mind on the prize, Cap. Here we go.”

Steve squeezed his eyes closed and thought about Bucky, thought about his smile, the way his eyes danced when he was singing around a campfire, the look of utter focus on his face when he stared down the scope of a rifle. That blue coat. He nodded without opening his eyes.

And the world around him screamed.

When silence settled over him once more, he glanced up, eyes darting around. The machine had done something, because the furniture in the Tower was in disarray and it seemed that the whole team had ducked for cover. Tony had even called his Iron Man suit. Some of it, anyway. Yeah, the machine had done something, alright, it looked like it had blown up while covering Steve in enough glitter for a week’s supply at that strip joint Tony had taken Steve to last year.

Steve grunted and stood, his shoulders slumping. There was more sparkly whatever it was on his chest and he brushed it away. “Dammit, Tony!” he snarled, glancing at Tony and gritting his teeth. “I’m still in the Tower, I told you this wouldn’t work.”

Tony popped the Iron Man faceplate up and blinked at Steve. “Uh.”

His goatee looked different. And his shirt? Steve scowled and pointed at him. “Did you change?”

Tony huffed indignantly. “Did you?”

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Steve could now call himself a universal traveler, for what that was worth. He could tell the Steve of this universe wasn’t entirely pleased with his presence, but it wasn’t like Steve could just pack his bags and go on home. The machine had been a one-way trip, because they’d assumed Steve would get home by, you know, an airplane or something. But no, Delta couldn’t take his experimental ass home, so Other Steve was just grinning and bearing it right along with Steve.

And Bucky . . .

Steve had taken to calling this universe’s Bucky just ‘Buck’, because it was easier than letting this
man become conflated with Original Recipe Bucky in his head. It would have been far too easy, to think of them as one and the same. And Steve’s feelings did not deserve that much torture.

Because Not His Bucky was sweet, and kind, and he showed the same protectiveness and care for Steve that Steve had grown up alongside and Steve missed his friend so damn much. This alternate world had been . . . well, it had been a bit of a Godsend. The Bucky of this world was what Steve imagined his old friend could have been, if Fate hadn’t had other plans. The Bucky of this world was something Steve prayed his own Bucky could become, if Steve could find him. Just the fact that he’d managed to avoid all of the Avengers’ efforts to find him told Steve that Bucky was absolutely sound of mind. It was just a matter of tracking his evasive ass down.

He couldn’t do that until they figured out how to send him home, though, so Steve’s eyes followed this world’s Bucky whether he meant for them to or not. Over the course of his visit, Steve found the words, “Do you remember?” on his tongue so many times as he stared at the man’s eyes.

But Buck didn’t remember, couldn’t, because he’d never been there. And Steve’s heart ached for home.

As the days drew on with no way home, though, Buck’s arm thrown around Steve’s shoulders to squeeze him as they laughed, and the pure understanding and empathy in the man’s familiar eyes began to have a placebo effect. The ache that had settled in Steve’s heart the moment he’d watched Bucky fall into a snow-filled abyss began to fade.

Something grew in its place, something it took Steve a few days to realize was hope.

When the time finally came for Steve to head back to his universe, Steve thanked both Buck and Other Steve for that; for giving him hope again. He would find his Bucky, and he would tell him that he loved him, no matter what. He had that promise to keep.

He also had the image of Bucky on his back with his legs wrapped around Other Steve’s hips to take home, so there was that.

He said his goodbyes, Polaroids of his time there in his utility belt more precious than gold as he rubbed his fingers on the button Other Stark had told him to press when he was ready.

But all he could see was the endless void of deep space, *fucking thanks for that Other Tony fucking Stark*. Steve was close to panicking as his mind focused on deep space and nothing but deep space. He knew exactly what it looked like; he had seen Johann Schmidt get sucked into it, after all.

He couldn’t even see Bucky’s beautiful eyes or his brilliant smile in his mind, panic swirling and sabotaging him.

Buck stalked up to him with a determined scowl, like he was about to lay Steve out for being stupid. It was frighteningly similar to the look Bucky had given Steve when he’d told him about the Vita-Rays and Erskine’s serum. Steve had honestly thought Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th was going to knock his superhuman head right off his superhuman block that night.

“Steve,” Buck said, waiting until Steve’s panicked thoughts faded enough to meet those gorgeous Arctic-blue eyes. Then Buck took his face in both hands and kissed him.

Their first kiss had been nothing but Steve’s mind swirling in a diatribe of Not Right Not Right Not Yours, and Steve being terrified that the Other Steve and possibly Buck too would slug him for letting it happen. This kiss, though, was something warm and sweet as honey, and Steve sank into it like a single mom with a bubble bath, a glass of wine, and a locked door.
Buck kept kissing him until the others were wolf-whistling at them, until Steve couldn’t think of anything but the way Buck felt in his arms, the way he tasted on Steve’s tongue. And good God, the man could kiss. Then Buck yanked away from him with a gasp, taking his hands off Steve’s face and meeting his eyes determinedly. Steve inhaled shakily as he stared, and Buck mimicked it, tongue darting over his lower lip like he was relishing the taste of that kiss.

Steve tried to speak, but nothing came. There was nothing he could say.

Buck gave him a soft, sad smile. It was the same smile Steve’s Bucky would give him, back when he was holding vigil over Steve’s death bed, or when they were heading out on a mission they both knew could be their last. It was a smile that had always said goodbye.

Buck’s voice was gruff when he said, “Push the button, asshole.”

Steve stared at him, frozen in this instant in time, praying that this wouldn’t be the last time he’d be able to feel this. His Bucky was out there. And he was going to find him. He raised the remote. “Thank you, Buck,” he whispered, and pressed the button.

The world screamed around him again.

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Steve opened his eyes and looked around, halfway expecting to still be in the Tower and having accomplished nothing but knocking Buck’s fine ass to the ground again.

He was in an apartment that didn’t look much different from the old tenement buildings in his youth. There was a table shoved crookedly against the wall, a mattress on the floor, and not much else. Oh God, if he was time-traveling now Steve might just have to eat a bullet.

Oh, but there was something more important than furniture in the apartment. Bucky had been knocked clear across the room by the portal, and he was sitting with his legs splayed, back against the wall. Much like the alternate version had been when Steve first saw him, except this one had a knife held out in front of him instead of a spoon still dripping milk.

“Bucky?” Steve whispered.

Bucky rested his head against the wall, still breathing hard. He had a Sig Sauer in one hand and that Gerber Mark II in the other. Steve’s belly flipped with nostalgic joy when he saw the knife. He also had to give Bucky credit for having the wherewithal to arm himself while being flung across a room by a magically appearing hole in space that apparently offended the ears in much the same way as someone trying to suck popcorn out from between their teeth. Props.

“Jesus,” Bucky grunted. “My hallucinations never used to fight back.”

“I’m real.”

“Sounds like something a hallucination would say,” Bucky argued, but his voice was merely wry and gruff, not suspicious.

Steve opened his mouth, then snapped it back shut, squinting. “What would a hallucination not say? Pretend I said that instead.”

Bucky looked closer at him, the knife still holding him at bay. “You’re real?”

“I’m real,” Steve assured him in a broken whisper. He looked Bucky over like a starving man
watching a steak on a grill. God, he looked so good! And he was really here, in front of Steve. “You’re real.”

Bucky rolled his eyes heavenward. “The fuck did you get yourself into now, asshole?”

Steve laughed and hung his head. “You have no idea.”

“What is that thing? And why is it so violent?” Bucky grumbled, scrunching up his nose. “And why does it make that sound?”

Steve raised his head, peering at Bucky with nothing but hope in his grin. “I’ve been looking for you.”

Bucky raised his hand to poke at his ear and then the back of his head, his fingers coming away with a dab of blood. “Well congratulations. You fucking found me. Jesus Christ.”

Steve lurched to his feet and took an impulsive step forward when he saw the blood. The Sig Sauer was trained on his forehead before he could blink. He raised both hands. “I’m not here to hurt you, Bucky. I’m here to bring you home. I’m here to help.”

Bucky’s tongue darted out over his bottom lip, something Steve knew he only did when he was nervous.

Steve crouched down again, slowly, so he was on the same level as Bucky. “You remember me?” he asked desperately.

Bucky looked down at the portal remote Steve still held, then narrowed his eyes when he met Steve’s. “You let some yahoo experiment on you again, didn’t you? Some mad scientist said, ‘hold my beer,’ and you pushed the button, right?”

Steve opened his mouth to protest. He was pretty sure Tony hadn’t been drinking that day.

“Can’t leave you alone for a second.”

Steve began to grin. “I missed you,” he whispered. “God, Bucky. I missed you.”

Bucky stared at him, expressionless, for long seconds. Then a smile flicked at the corner of his mouth. “I missed you too, Stevie,” he murmured. Then he pointed the blade of the knife at Steve, waving it at Steve’s face and then somewhere over his shoulder. “As soon as I stop seeing two of you, I might even be glad to see one of you.”

Steve began to laugh, ducking his head in relief.

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Bucky was so much better than Steve could have ever hoped. He’d been prepared for the worst, for the vacant expression he’d fought on the streets of DC, for the anger from the helicarrier, for the insistence that Steve was a mission and nothing more. He certainly hadn’t dared to hope that Bucky had spent the last year remembering himself, including the wry part of himself that Steve had loved so dearly. That was exactly what he found, though.

Steve had to keep asking questions, sharing stories from their youth, listening to Bucky bitch at him for not taking better care of himself. It was the only way to be sure Steve was back in his home universe. That’s what he told himself, anyway. It wasn’t because the sound of Bucky’s voice was like music. But if Bucky complained one more time about his perfectly set up apartment that had
been ready for literally every kind of attack that Steve had blown all to hell with the one thing Bucky hadn’t been prepared for, Steve might have to hurt him.

“I have to call my team. I’ve been gone for too long, they’ll think the worst.”

“Sounds like they know you pretty well,” Bucky drawled as he drove a junker car through the streets of Bucharest.

Steve had intended to drive, but Bucky also apparently remembered that Steve had learned to drive in Nazi Germany and had absolutely refused to get in the car until he had the keys in his metal hand.

“Do you have a phone?” Steve asked him.

“Do I look stupid to you?”

Steve squinted at him. “This is a trick question, isn’t it?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Who the fuck do you think I’m calling? Psychic hotline?”

“Oh,” Steve said thoughtfully, frowning at the dashboard. “Psychic hotline probably would have been easier than machine that rips into reality.”

“Jesus, Steve.”

“We need to find a phone.”

“Seventy-one years later, and Captain America is still high maintenance,” Bucky grumbled under his breath. “Who made that doohickey you flash around with?”

“Tony Stark. He’s Iron Man. Howard’s son.”

“I know who Tony Stark is,” Bucky assured him. “Trust me. You do not want to show up at his door with me in tow, Steve.”

“Why not? He’s been helping me to find you, my whole team –”

“Steve,” Bucky said through gritted teeth. He was staring at the road and gripping the steering wheel. “Howard and his wife were killed by Hydra.”

Steve cleared his throat, ducking his head. “I know.”

“Do you?” Bucky asked pointedly.

Steve sighed. “I couldn’t be sure it was you.”

“Don’t lie to me, Stevie, you got too many tells.”

Steve peered at him, taking in his profile like a man dying of thirst.

“Does Stark know?” Bucky asked.

“No,” Steve whispered.

Bucky nodded, his jaw tightening. “Then I’ll give you a phone. And that’s the first thing you’re telling him.”

“Oh, so now you have a phone?”
“Don’t you sass me, Rogers,” Bucky growled as he pulled to the side of the road and started digging in his pack.

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The call didn’t go particularly well. But it could have been a lot worse. While Steve had been missing, the Avengers had been scouring the globe for both him and Bucky. Their working theory, after believing Steve had been poofed into stardust or something because apparently the machine spat that weird disappearing glitter from both ends, was that Steve had found Bucky and Bucky had either killed him or they’d run off together.

Steve didn’t even blame them for any of the three theories. But while Tony had been searching, he’d also found a lot of the files regarding the Winter Soldier, and he claimed to have spent several sleepless nights avoiding nightmares because of them.

So yeah, Tony wasn’t thrilled that the man who’d murdered his parents was winging his way to the Tower on one of his private jets, but he also knew that the man who’d killed his parents hadn’t been Bucky Barnes.

Steve couldn’t help thinking back to that other universe, where Bucky and Tony had gleefully played with things that exploded in the workshop well into the night. He was pretty sure that wouldn’t be happening in his world.

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Steve had been wrong. He’d been so wrong. After a week or so of icy silences and Bucky slinking out of a room just seconds before Tony entered it, the Avengers were awoken in the middle of the night by an explosion that rocked the upper levels of Avengers Tower.

Steve was still in his boxers when he pushed through the debris of the workshop with the shield on his arm. The rest of the team wasn’t much more prepared for battle, if that was what this was. It was the first time he’d ever seen Natasha’s hair look out of control, and that included alien attacks and riding shotgun when the Hulk hopped onto the floating island of Sokovia.

“Tony?” Steve called into the destroyed workshop.

He received a groan in response. A metal sheet shifted in the middle of the room and Bucky pushed onto his hands and knees, the sheet sliding aside with his movements.

“Jesus!” Steve cried, and he began picking his way through the destruction. “Buck, what the hell?”

“That one’s on me,” a pile of trash muttered from under Bucky.

As Steve got closer, he saw that the pile of trash was Tony, which seemed a little too appropriate, maybe? Bucky had actually been on top of Tony, apparently shielding him from the blast with his body, and with the metal sheet protecting them both from flying shrapnel.

“Told you not to poke it,” Bucky groaned to Tony.

Tony nodded, closing his eyes. “But I poked it anyway, yeah. Thanks, dad.”

“You’re going to bed without dessert,” Bucky moaned as he rolled off Tony and flopped to his back, blinking at the ceiling.

To Steve’s shock, Tony began to chuckle as the two of them sprawled, side by side.
“What the hell happened?” Natasha demanded from the safety of the hallway, which had been saved by the wall of ballistic glass around the workshop.

“We poked it,” Tony and Bucky answered in unison. Bucky added something muttered in Russian. Steve was pretty sure it was Russian. Bucky spoke at least eight languages that he’d told them about, though, so it could have been anything.

Tony sat up, his T-shirt steaming a little and his hair sticking straight up. “Barnes had a theory about Steve’s portal. We were tweaking it.”

Steve glanced around the destroyed workshop. “This was tweaking?”

“Minor tweaking,” Bucky answered.

Tony groaned and listed sideways, his head winding up resting on Bucky’s stomach. Bucky, the man who shied away even from Steve’s hand, didn’t even flinch.

Steve gaped at them. He glanced back at the rest of the team, but most of them had already performed Olympic-level eye rolls and left. Sam still stood there, arms crossed, shaking his head like a disappointed father.

Sam would have made a great father; he was disappointed all the time.

Steve gingerly helped Tony to his feet, then offered his hand down to Bucky. Tony was picking his way toward the door, and Bucky shook his head when he got to his feet, blinking hard as he held to Steve’s shoulder. Steve couldn’t help it, his belly fluttered with butterflies when Bucky’s hands touched his bare skin. His mind flashed back to a memory of Buck on his back, holding Other Steve to him, and he remembered the way those lips had felt on his. He was suddenly very aware of his boxers.

“Okay?” Steve asked as a distraction until he could settle the fuck down.

“Bet that fucked up my hair, huh?” Bucky asked with a little smirk.

Steve ran his fingers through the worst of it. It was sort of beyond help. “Uh. Yes.”

Bucky grunted and started making his way to the door, Steve right behind him. Bucky patted Tony on the shoulder before staggering toward the elevator.

“Same time tomorrow night, Pinky?” Tony asked with a grin.

Bucky barked a laugh, like he got the reference Steve knew he himself was missing. “Yeah.”

In the elevator, Bucky rolled his head from side to side, wincing as his neck cracked.

Steve stared at him.

“What?” Bucky asked, voice gruff. He ran both hands through his hair, but it didn’t do anything to fix the fact that he looked like he’d just been blown up.

“When did you and Tony Stark become buddies?” Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. “I overheard him muttering to himself about the portal math. I . . . spoke before I could stop myself. Next thing I knew it was three hours later and we were down here fiddling.”

“That’s just how you and Howard became friends,” Steve murmured.
Bucky gave him a tight smile. “Apparently, science bridges a lot of gaps.”

“Oh, God,” Sam muttered from behind them.

Steve found himself grinning, though. Bucky eyed him suspiciously. Steve just continued beaming at him, and Bucky rolled his eyes.

“One of the books they wrote about the Commandos had a section on you,” Steve told him. “It talked about your ability as a sniper. About the shots you made, the math you had to’ve done in your head before each one. The strategic placement of your hides. After it came out, it kind of became a popular theory that you were probably the brains of the operation.”

“I was the brains of the operation,” Bucky muttered grumpily.

“That explains so much,” Sam whispered. He had to know they could both hear him. He never cared.

Steve was still grinning. “I know. I’m just glad other people know it, too.”

Bucky very carefully did not look at Steve as the elevator came to a stop. “Have you seen the comics?” Bucky asked, no inflection in his voice.

Steve glanced at him sideways, very careful to bite down on his smile. Sam made a strangled noise behind them. Steve had to be careful when he spoke, so his voice didn’t shake, “From the 40’s?”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed dangerously. Sam was smart enough to stay silent.

“With the . . .” Steve cleared his throat.

“You’re the one who wore tights and I end up goddamn jailbait,” Bucky grumbled, stepping out of the elevator as Steve stifled a snicker. “And a fucking twink on top of that!”

“Wait,” Steve called after him. “What’s a twink?”

Bucky didn’t even turn around. “Jesus, Steve.”

Sam patted Steve on the shoulder. “Don’t Google it, man.”

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Steve had thought that one of his fondest wishes was for Bucky and his Avengers teammates to get along. He’d been wrong. He’d been so wrong. It had only been two weeks.

First of all; Bucky Barnes and Clint Barton should never have been introduced to each other in any universe, for God’s sake. Steve . . . didn’t want to talk about it. And secondly! Bucky and Natasha should never be allowed in the same universe. They were a holy Russian terror. Thirdly? Steve was beginning to fear that Bucky and Tony not only getting along, but actually collaborating, was a very bad thing. A Very Bad Thing.

You see, Bucky Barnes had never been a stupid man. Far from it. History had not treated his legacy well, in Steve’s opinion, first casting him as the plucky teen sidekick who often gave the story of Captain America its sentimental twist – and in Steve’s personal opinion maybe a hint of pedophilia? – and then seeing him through several renditions of tragic hero, tragic villain, tragic sidekick, and then back to tragic hero. Basically, history remembered Bucky as tragic, which . . . but it didn’t particularly remember him as being smart.
But Bucky had graduated top of his class. He’d dragged Steve to every goddamn science expo in God’s creation right up until the day he’d shipped out, and then spent almost as much time with Howard Stark creating new and frightening ways to kill Nazis as Howard had. How he’d been cast as the everyman soldier on the ground Steve would honestly never know, even though he had been an excellent sergeant.

Now Steve’s metaphorical headache was repeating itself, except Bucky had seventy-plus years of Hydra scientist rambling he’d absorbed like a sponge, and he had Tony fucking Stark. Steve sort of missed the other world’s Bucky, who had just been a magnet for trouble, rather than the goddamn source.

“Why the long face?” Sam asked as he sat down opposite where Steve had been moping at the kitchen table.

Steve glared at him. Sam held up both hands, laughing silently as he called a truce.

“I was just . . . thinking.”

“Well, that explains why you look like you’re in pain,” Sam muttered as he slapped a file down on the table.

Steve made a face that was childish enough he hoped Sam didn’t see it. “Ha.”

“You and Barnes have it out or something?” Sam asked, all careless like he was just tossing the comment out there. Sam never worked that way though, he chose his observations carefully and used them like Bucky’s Mark II.

“No. Why?”

“He’s been in Stark’s mad science lair a lot lately,” Sam said with a shrug. “Thought maybe it was a thing.”

“It’s not a thing.”

Sam cocked an eyebrow at him.

“It’s not a thing,” Steve insisted.

“Alright.”

There was a muffled boom from a few floors up and Steve sighed. Sam narrowed his eyes at him. “Okay, it might be a thing,” Steve groaned as he pushed to his feet.

Sam followed him to the elevator and they made their way to the workshop. Tony and Bucky were on the other side of the glass, scowling at something on a table.

Steve knocked on the glass and they both looked up. “Is it safe to come in?” Steve called.

Tony waved them in, and FRIDAY opened the doors for them.

Steve stepped warily into the space, Sam holding back suspiciously like the intelligent, normal person he was. It smelled like . . . Sulphur maybe? Something burning. “What was the sound?” Steve asked.

“We may have fixed the portal thing,” Tony said excitedly.
“Or developed time-travel,” Bucky added as he stared at the thing on the table. “We’re not sure.”

“The only way to be sure is to test it!” Tony said heatedly, as if it had been an ongoing argument.

“I ain’t pressing that button, Stark,” Bucky growled.

“You’re enhanced! It probably won’t kill you!”

“I have been very well-trained to avoid things that probably won’t kill me.”

Steve could feel a headache encroaching, which he knew was all stress, because he didn’t get headaches otherwise.

“Look, poking into alternate universes is dangerous enough, but messing around with time,” Bucky started, shaking his head.

“Then we develop a . . .” Tony pointed at Steve, eyes widening with the light of an idea. “A shield! Something to make sure you’re not seen and can’t interfere, just observe.”

“You want to send me through time in a stealth bubble.”

“This is how literally every apocalyptic movie I’ve ever seen starts,” Sam offered from behind Steve.

Bucky was staring down at the thing on the table, which Steve realized was just a piece of wood.

“Come on!” Tony cried, waving his hands at all of them indiscriminately. “Don’t you want to see events from the past happening right in front of you?”

“No,” Steve and Bucky both answered. Bucky cast Steve a stray glance and grinned at him. Then he winked.

Steve’s stomach decidedly did not tumble end over end.

“What’s the . . . thing?” Sam asked with a jut of his chin at the piece of wood.

“It’s a stick,” Bucky answered, staring at Sam like he was an idiot.

To Sam’s credit, he barely rolled his eyes. Steve half expected him to pick the stick up and try to convince Bucky to go fetch it.

“I reached through the portal and grabbed it,” Tony told them, eyes gleaming.

“From where?” Steve asked hesitantly.

“We don’t know!” Tony answered gleefully.

Bucky gave a long-suffering sigh. “Some guy probably used this stick to save himself from a dinosaur and now all of history is fucked.”

Tony whirled on him like he was about to argue, so Steve stepped forward and held up both hands.

“Can we not fuck up the time-space continuum again this year? Please?”

“I second that,” Bucky said, pointing at Steve. “He’s lucky he was sent to a universe where the people there helped him, where they could help him –”

“Exactly! They solved the problem of being able to return by making the device mobile!” Tony
cried.

“Where they helped him,” Bucky said again through gritted teeth, and all three of them took a tiny step away from his angry expression. “And didn’t just kill him. That luck won’t hold, Tony. You can’t play with this shit. And you can’t fuck around with time!”

“If you could go back and change what happened to you, wouldn’t you?” Tony asked him quietly.

Bucky licked his bottom lip furtively, frowning down at the stick. He stared at it for a long, tense moment that Steve could feel digging icy fingers into his heart. “No,” he finally said after his silence. “No, I wouldn’t.”

Tony’s shoulders slumped and he rested both elbows on the table.

“You’re familiar with the theory of Ephochal time, right?” Bucky said to Tony gently. “Existing reality grows out of the past?”

“Yes,” Tony said dejectedly.

“You change one thing, and either time will correct itself accordingly, like a stream flowing around a pebble. Or it will cascade, and everything we know now will change,” Bucky murmured to him. Steve stared at him in shock. How the fuck? “Either way, Stark, going back and saving your parents? It won’t work.”

Tony lowered his head as Steve blinked at them both. That was quite the leap in their conversation, but Bucky obviously knew Tony just as well, if not better, than Steve ever had to so swiftly decipher what Tony’s goal here really was. Steve had still been stuck on how Bucky thought the fucking stick could kill a dinosaur.

When Steve turned his attention fully on Bucky, Bucky was grimacing at him. They both shrugged as if they’d been having a telepathic conversation on what they could say to make it better and both come up with squat. Sam grunted at them in disgust. He hated it when Steve and Bucky had silent conversations, and Steve wasn’t all too sure why.

“Christ, okay,” Tony grunted finally. “You’re right, for all we fucking know, if we go back and save your dumb ass, the Nazis win or some bullshit.”

Bucky kept quiet, watching Tony carefully. Steve finally decided for a nice ‘there, there’ pat on Tony’s shoulder, which Tony didn’t even seem to notice.

“Okay, let’s get this cleaned up,” Tony muttered to Bucky.

Sam grabbed at Steve’s belt, giving him a gentle tug to tell him to leave with him and let Tony and Bucky have a moment, but Steve wasn’t sure this was a situation he wanted to leave without a responsible adult . . . Sam couldn’t leave, he was the only one they knew.

Tony and Bucky both reached for the tabletop to tidy the bits away, and then all Steve could see was a flash of blinding white, and he heard the now familiar sound of the universe screaming around him.

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Tony’s feet hit the ground hard, and his knees buckled. He fell to all fours, coughing and gagging. Fingers were digging into his shoulder, gripping him, shaking him.

“Jesus!” Sam cried from somewhere to his right. He coughed and sputtered, wheezing just like Tony
“The fuck did you do?”

“Oh, God,” Steve muttered. “Not this shit again.”

Tony glanced up, squinting through the dust that was settling. Bucky was on his hands and knees in front of him, the tips of their fingers still touching. And Steve was standing next to Tony, glancing around, his fingers still gripping Tony’s shoulder like a goddamn eagle’s talons. Fucking patriotic asshole.

“What the fuck?” Tony managed to ask.

“We went through the portal,” Steve growled. “Who pressed the button!”

“We didn’t,” Bucky groaned, his head hanging. “We didn’t touch anything but the fucking table.”

“I’m gonna be sick,” Sam wheezed. Tony didn’t glance over, but Sam was definitely gagging.

“What the fuck,” Tony said again, still gasping for air. “Is that what it’s supposed to feel like? Jesus, that was the exact opposite of fun.”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Steve answered.

“Are we in another universe?” Sam asked in a high-pitched panic. “Did I just throw up in another universe?”

Tony glanced around them, and Bucky and Steve were both eyeing the area. They were in Tony’s workshop.

“FRIDAY?” Tony asked hopefully.

“Welcome back, Boss,” FRIDAY answered. “All your life signs are reading normal.”

“Well, at least there’s that,” Bucky muttered.

“What do you mean, back?” Tony asked.

“You’ve been gone for five minutes,” FRIDAY informed them, delivered way too calmly to be telling four humans they just dissolved into nothingness for 300 whole seconds.

“What,” Bucky grunted.

“Where did we go?” Steve asked, sounding more appropriately panicked.

“Are we in the right world?” Sam shouted at FRIDAY.

“Yes, sir. You are home.”

Tony glanced around, suddenly realizing that they might be there, but the table was gone. He blinked at the floor where it had been bolted down. “Huh. Wait, did Sam just yark in my workshop?”

“It would appear so, Boss.”

“Did we just send a table into another universe?” Bucky asked softly.

Tony grimaced. “At least we still have the stick?”

“That doesn’t feel like a fair trade.”
Steve had both hands on top of his head. He was the only one who’d made it to his feet yet. “Well,” he said, glancing around at all the dust around them. “At least a table would be easier to kill a dinosaur with.”

“What?” Sam shouted at Steve.

Bucky ran one finger through the dust around them, bringing it close to his face to peer at it. “Oh shit,” he muttered. He glanced up at Tony. “It’s silver.”

Tony barely sideswiped a comment about Bucky’s metal fingers and mimicked him instead, squinting at the silver dust on the tip of his finger. “Oh, my God. Is this the table? FRIDAY analyze?”

“It does appear to mostly consist of aluminum, sir.”

“We . . . what, dissolved a table?” Bucky asked.

“Not the appropriate terminology,” Tony answered distractedly.

“Fuck your terminology.”

Tony was scanning all the dust, eyes darting. “FRIDAY, what happened?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, sir.”

“What do you know?” Steve demanded.

“You all appear to be in good health.”

Steve peered up at the ceiling, eyes narrowing.

Tony cocked his head at him. “You know, you do that since you came back from that other place. Look up when you talk to her.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” Steve muttered. “What just happened?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

Bucky was still on his knees, peering around at the dust around him. “All the components we had out are gone.”

Tony waved at the dust. “I’m sure they’re still here in some form,” he said wryly.

“You know what?” Sam shouted. “Fuck this! Fuck that stuff. Fuck all y’all! I’m going to go throw up in my room!”

They all watched him stomp out, then Steve turned to peer down at them both. “Do I even have to say this?”

“You’re going to tell us both to go get some sleep and that we have to have adult supervision from now on?” Bucky guessed.

Steve made a face at him, then nodded.

Bucky lowered his head, looking around at the dust critically.
Tony nodded, peering up at Steve. “That’s fair.”

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Steve was listlessly poking at his breakfast when Bucky slid into the seat two chairs away. Steve glanced up, and Bucky was looking at him carefully. “Morning,” Steve offered.

“Morning. You okay?” Bucky asked.

Steve shrugged, offering a tense smile.

Bucky sighed, crossing his arms on the table in front of him and lowering his head. “Now a good time to talk?”

Steve winced. Bucky never used to be careful around him like this. “Sure.”

“You seem like you’re pining,” Bucky said without preamble.

Steve stared at him, his stomach suddenly churning the toast he’d just eaten. “What?”

“Ever since we’ve gotten here. You seem like you’re . . . sad. Missing something. Someone, maybe?” Bucky winced at him. “I was designated against my will as the one who had to bring it up, since everyone seemed to think you’d get better after I came in.”

“The team thinks I’m sad?” Steve asked, aghast.

“The theory is that there was someone in that other universe you went to. Someone you’re missing.” Bucky chewed on his bottom lip, his eyes on Steve’s plate instead of Steve. He glanced up at Steve quickly, then away again. When he continued, his words were fast and shaky, like he was trying to get it out as quickly as possible. “We don’t want to lose you. I don’t. But Tony and I thought maybe, if we could stabilize the portal, make it so you can go back safely and easily, you could . . . you could go be with them sometimes and be happy but still be here.”

Steve’s mouth dropped open and he didn’t even try to prevent it. “That’s why you’ve been messing with that thing?”

Bucky shrugged and winced again, looking toward the elevators like he wanted to bolt. He stayed, though, lowering his head again. He was chewing on his lip again. “Only thing I ever wanted was for you to be happy, Steve. Were we right?” he asked without looking back at Steve.

Steve caught his breath, leaning forward to get a better look at his face. Were they right? Was Steve pining? “Yeah,” he answered breathlessly. “Yeah, you were.”

Bucky swallowed hard, nodding his head jerkily. “Was it the other me?” Steve blinked at him, and when he didn’t answer, Bucky glanced at him, narrowing his eyes. “I see the way you look at me sometimes. Like you’re missing someone who’s not actually me.”

Steve was already shaking his head as Bucky spoke, and he lurched out of his chair to scramble into the one next to Bucky. Bucky leaned away from the table and from him, watching him warily.

“I am. I guess. The other you was an incredible guy, I really liked him. But you’re right, he wasn’t you.”

Bucky frowned at him, obviously confused.

Steve huffed and looked down just to give himself a moment. “I made him a promise, before I left.
He made me promise I’d tell you how I felt about you when I found you,” he admitted, voice choked. “He always said when, never if. He had so much faith in me; he was just like you, Bucky, God! But the moment I got back, I . . .

“Wait, what?” Bucky grunted.


Bucky blinked at him, lips parting in shock.

Steve gritted his teeth and looked away, taking a deep breath. “I’ve loved you forever.” He made himself look back at Bucky’s shocked face. “And I’m not talking the kind of love that gets a manly slap on the shoulder before we go on a mission.”

Bucky scowled. “I don’t do that.”

“You always do that.”

“Well, so do you!”

“I do it because you do it!”

“I only ever did it because you did it!” Bucky closed his eyes and held up a hand almost before his last word was out. “Wait. Get back on track, Rogers.”

Steve cleared his throat. “I’m just . . . I told him I’d tell you. And now I’m telling you.”

“Why was it so important to him?” Bucky whispered.

“In that other place, the other us? They were together. Their whole world knew it, too. And they were so fucking happy. And he knew from one look at me when he asked about you that I felt the same way about you. He cared. He wanted me to be . . .”

Bucky was still staring at him, scowling. “How long have you felt this way?”

“Since as long as I can remember.”

That seemed to make Bucky scowl harder. “Not just after the serum?”

Steve shook his head, and Bucky looked back down at the table, staring hard at his hand still propped there. Steve watched him and waited, his heart hammering harder and harder as more time passed.

Bucky finally ran his tongue over his lower lip, which he’d always done when he was about to make a leap. Or walk into a hail of bullets. “I was always too much of a coward to tell you this. But since you’re being brave and all. I spent a lot of my time with men, back before the War. I was afraid of what you’d think, so I kept it quiet. And I always thought of you as a brother,” he admitted, and Steve’s heart absolutely sank just as fast as his hopeful expression.

Bucky took another glance at him and seemed to read from Steve’s face how poorly Steve’s internal gears were reacting to this news. He reached out, but stopped himself from touching Steve. His hand flopped onto his knee since he was still leaning away from Steve.

“I had never let myself look at you any other way, Steve, I didn’t want to risk our friendship,” Bucky explained quickly. “But then you showed up in that factory and pulled me off that table. I started looking at you different without even realizing it, until it was too late. I always wondered if it was
just the new version of you, or if it was the serum they put in me. And no matter which reason I settled on, it would have been so unfair to you to tell you.”

Steve let out a puff of air like he’d been jabbed in the stomach. “Bucky, what . . .”

“For a year and a half during the War, I kept trying to convince myself it was just . . . I don’t know.” He stared at Steve, frowning worriedly. “You were still the Steve I’d known. But it was more. The way I felt about you, it was more. The way I wanted to rip things apart when I saw you looking at Carter. But I didn’t want to test how indebted you might have felt to our friendship by telling you.”

Steve couldn’t even manage to swallow, his mouth was so dry. “Do you still feel that way?”

“Maybe,” Bucky whispered.

Steve couldn’t help the relieved smile that he gave Bucky, and Bucky offered a rather timid one in return.

“I know one thing for sure; thinking you were all tore up over someone else was playing hell on me. But . . . can you give me some time to ruminate?” Bucky requested. He waved at his head. “I got a lot that’s still . . . swimming.”

“We got all the time in the world, Buck,” Steve answered, feeling lighter than he had in . . . hell, in years. “I’d like to say all that swimming you’re doing is one reason I was keeping quiet, but I know it’s just that I was scared.”

Bucky shook his head, smiling at Steve softly. “You’re braver than I was ever gonna be.”

Steve reached out slowly, so Bucky would know it was coming, and he placed his hand on Bucky’s bicep. It was the metal one, and Steve didn’t care. Bucky looked down at Steve’s hand, probably to hide behind that hair. Steve was pretty sure Bucky hadn’t cut it for that exact purpose. Bucky raised his hand, brushing his fingertips over Steve’s knuckles.

“So,” he said, taking a deep breath and shaking his shoulders out like he was trying to leech off tension. Steve removed his hand. Bucky would tolerate all kinds of touching, but Steve knew it made him antsy. “Does that mean we don’t need to fix the portal? It wasn’t this alternate world you were pining for after all?”

Steve smiled gently, realizing that the idea of the portal never being stable made him rather melancholy. “I’d still like to be able to go back, at least once more. I also promised them I’d try to let them know how things worked out. They knew I was looking for you. They . . . well, they were worried about you just like I was.”

Bucky nodded. “Okay then.”

Steve bit his lip, watching Bucky carefully.

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “What?”

Steve scrunched up his nose, trying to decide how much more he needed to disclose. Bucky looked suspicious as fuck now, and Steve knew he’d have to give Bucky at least one answer.

But then Bucky rolled his eyes, sighing heavily. “Did you bone one of them?”

Steve nearly clutched his imaginary pearls, eyes widening. “No!”
“But you wanted to.”

Steve hummed dubiously. “No?”

“Oh, my God, Steve, please tell me it was alternate me and not alternate you.”


Bucky raised both eyebrows expectantly.

Steve realized his face was heating in a blush, and he looked around the room for something to focus on that wasn’t the memory of barging in on Other Steve fucking Buck in the foyer. He pursed his lips. “I kind of . . . saw some things that might have been interesting,” he finally hedged. “And I got one purely accidental kiss.”

“Twin dilemma,” Bucky said with an understanding nod.

Steve barked a laugh. “Yeah. And when I was coming home, I was sort of panicked about the possibility of winding up being portaled off to deep space, so Buck – the other you, I mean – he kissed me.”

“He kissed you to keep you from panicking?” Bucky asked, tone dry as Death Valley.

“It worked,” Steve told him defensively. “Got me right to you.”

Bucky pursed his lips, nodding as he stared at Steve thoughtfully. “He a good kisser?”

Steve was now blushing furiously, and none of the common room furniture was going to be able to help him focus on anything but that memory. “Yeah.”

Bucky’s answering grin was possibly one of the most terrifying things Steve had ever witnessed, and Steve had seen some Shit, okay. “Better hope I don’t meet this guy, then,” Bucky decided, patting Steve on the cheek as he stood. “Good talk.”

“Wait, what?” Steve blurted as he stared after Bucky’s retreat.

“I’m supposed to meet Clint for a workout in five minutes,” Bucky said over his shoulder.

“Bucky, please don’t go through the portal and kill yourself, okay?” Steve called after him.

“Sure, Stevie.”

“Buck!”

Bucky snickered, giving Steve a careless wave without turning around, heading for the elevator. Steve rolled his eyes and deflated, leaning hard on the back of his chair as he began to process the whole conversation. He’d just told Bucky how he felt about him, after all this. And not only had Bucky admitted that he was queer after all, but it was also possible Bucky had once and might still feel the same about Steve.

“Oh, my God,” he whispered to himself. He pressed his hand to his heart. “Yeah, okay. Still going.”

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Steve was jarred from a dream he couldn’t remember by a knock on his door in the middle of the night. He woke fully alert and rolled out of bed into a semi-crouch, but as soon as he realized there
was no threat, his brain went back to sleep, leaving him standing in his boxers with slumped shoulders and rubbing at his eyes. He trudged to the door and swung it open to see Tony shuffling guiltily in the hallway.

“Tony? Are you okay?”

“I need your help,” Tony said, sounding almost apologetic.

Steve squinted at him muzzily. He couldn’t remember the last time Tony had sounded apologetic about anything, especially not before anything was even on fire or trying to destroy the planet. “Am I going to regret this?” Steve asked.

Tony merely nodded, lips pressed into a thin line.

“I’ll put on some clothes.”

“Grab some shoes too,” Tony called into Steve’s apartment. “And . . . maybe the shield? Yeah, definitely the shield. Shield before shoes.”

Steve groaned as he headed back to his bedroom.

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“I’ve been working on the portal,” Tony was saying as they rode up to the floor below the penthouse where his workshop was. He was speaking almost as much with his hands as he was with his mouth and Steve was valiantly restraining his urge to flinch away from every flail. “The reports say that when you faced the Red Skull on the Valkyrie before you took your little nap, you saw him handle the Tesseract, and then it dropped through the hull of the plane.”

Steve nodded, still trying to get his brain to go back on high alert rather than sleep mode, because this sounded like a high alert conversation. “It opened up something, I saw . . . deep space,” Steve muttered with a shiver. “Schmidt just dissolved into the stars. Then . . .”

Tony was nodding, staring at Steve with wide eyes. “I think whatever he activated in the Tesseract to make it do that, hit you as well,” Tony said with a point of one finger into Steve’s chest.

“No, I wasn’t hit. I never came in contact with the cube.”

“Not physically, no. I’m talking molecular level, here, a burst.”

“What like . . . the cube hit me with its WiFi?”

“Yes, Steve, exactly like WiFi,” Tony deadpanned, but he was apparently too caught up in his excitement to poke more fun at Steve or realize that Steve was being sarcastic to start with. He just kept plowing forward in his mildly alarming interpretive dance. “We can’t get the portal to do anything but open a window big enough to stick a hand through for a few seconds. I lost two remote gauntlets to the damn thing in the last week.”

“Wait, you’re leaving severed robot hands all over the multiverse?” Steve squeaked.

Tony waved him away with a scoff. “There’s no tech in these, it’s fine. I’ve been trying to figure out how the portal worked for you, but not for us.”

“Okay?”

“I think you’re the factor we’re missing.”
Steve shook his head.

“You got it to work twice. And the thing with the table the other night, I’ve been reviewing the video. You were touching me. And Wilson was touching you. And Barnes and I accidentally brushed fingers like eighth graders on a date. All four of us were connected by touch in the very moment we disappeared. Whatever that was, I think you powered it.”

“How?” Steve asked, both bewildered and kind of concerned that he may have been the one who dissolved that table with the wrong terminology.

“My working theory is that the Tesseract left what is essentially radiation on or in you that’s still there, somehow. Steve, I think you are the battery that’s powering the portal.”

Steve scowled at their reflections in the elevator doors. When they dinged and slid open, he was staring at a very different scowl. Bucky stood with his arms crossed, the most impressive frown on his face that Steve had ever witnessed, and Steve still had very clear recall of the man trying to gut him like a fish on the street.

“Buck?” Steve said as Tony made a groaning sound in the back of his throat.

“You’re not doing this,” Bucky growled at Tony.

“I’m not sending him anywhere, I just want to test the theory! Open a portal and compare its stability!”

Bucky gritted his teeth.

“Buck,” Steve said again. “I want to see if he’s right.”

Bucky looked at Steve almost pitifully, his shoulders slumping as the intimidating scowl morphed into the persuasive pout that had given Mary Margaret O’Reilly’s virginity the wrong directions to Chastityville in 1937. “Please don’t do this, Stevie. We have no idea what kind of effect this has on you.”

“Just one time,” Steve bargained.

“The Tesseract,” Bucky said, his voice hoarse and breaking so much he couldn’t even finish what he’d been saying. Steve knew how much time Bucky had spent held captive after the Battle of Azzano, assembling Hydra’s Tesseract-powered weapons.

“I know,” Steve whispered, he stepped forward and grabbed Bucky’s shoulder, squeezing him.

Bucky scowled down at his hand, then looked at Steve from under his fully returned ‘I’ll gut you’ eyebrows. “Did you just give me a manly slap on the shoulder before a mission?” he asked flatly.

Steve winced. “Wow, I guess that was me who started that, huh?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. He jerked his head toward the workshop and stepped aside, letting them exit the elevator. “We do this, I’ve got my hand on you the entire time. You get yanked through, I’m coming with you.”

Steve gave a curt nod. “Always.”

“Leave the shield on,” Bucky ordered.

Steve nodded, reaching over his shoulder to tap the shield. “You know I can take care of myself
even unarmed, right?"

Bucky frowned at him like Steve hadn’t understood. “The table, it got reduced to its base elements. You understand? When Hydra was creating those weapons, they had a conductor for the power of the cube. They contained the power, channeled it. You understand what I’m saying?”

Steve nodded again even though he wasn’t quite sure he did.

“Tony and I think the shield acts as a conductor. Without it,” Bucky winced, not finishing his warning.

Steve blanched and blinked at him. “Oh. Right. Yeah.”

“Leave the shield on.”

When the universe started screaming at him a few minutes later, Steve wasn’t sure why he hadn’t just let Bucky herd them both back to bed.

Maybe Steve needed adult supervision, too.

Chapter End Notes

Desperate Historian's Note:

The 107th Infantry, the division Bucky was attached to, was indeed a regiment from WWI but didn’t exist in that form in WWII. By that time, it had become the 7th Infantry Regiment, which was in reality deployed to the Pacific, not the European Theater. One interesting tidbit is their regiment sleeve insignia, which is a black hourglass on a red background. The Black Widow spider was their mascot . . . Light, Silent, and Deadly was their motto. I don’t even know what to do with that except use the fuck out of it in fanfiction, but I figured I’d share.

Anyway, for the portions of this story that have to do with WWII, I’ll try to stick close to the real history of WWII, but it is damn hard while also sticking to MCU history, JFC.

The S.S.R., being a top-secret Allied spy division, wouldn’t have been attached to any specific battalion, which kind of works for fanfiction authors fudging their details, right? Right. But the Howling Commandos were all recruited from different units. In MCU canon, according to the First Avenger tie-in comic Captain America: First Vengeance, Volume 7, Jacques Dernier was French Resistance, Monty Falsworth was from the British 3rd Independent Parachute Brigade, Gabe Jones was part of the 92nd Infantry Division (a segregated unit that did see action in Italy but neither of their units was active until June and September of 1944, respectively), Dum Dum Dugan was a member of the 69th Infantry Regiment, which is also known as the 165th or Fighting Irish....you'll see my historian frustration in a second.

Jim Morita wasn't in the same cage as the others, so the comic doesn't say fuck all about him. The canon S.S.R. files, however, have him listed as originally serving in the US Army's Nisei Squadron as a Ranger. Translated to reality, that would have been the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and let me tell you these guys were some Bad Ass
Motherfuckers. They were all of Japanese descent, a lot of them probably having been forced to enlist in order to avoid an internment camp at home. The regiment, whose motto was 'Go For Broke', wound up with over 9k Purple Hearts and 21 Medals of Honor. (Thanks Wikipedia.) They did fight in the European Theater, beginning in June of 1944. And if you want to feel like a pussy, you should read up on their time in WWII. If I keep talking I will start ranting about internment camps and this is supposed to be a happy place. So.

Had he been a real boy, Bucky Barnes would have been enlisted into the 165th Infantry, also known as the goddamn 69th Infantry, you might have heard from a frustrated caffeine-infused historian that they were called the Fighting Irish, recruited solely from NYC. Canon-wise it makes sense that Bucky and Dugan were from the same unit, even though canon thinks they weren't? The real world indecisively-named 165th/69th, too, were sent into the Pacific Theater in WWII, making landfall in November of 1943. On November 3rd of 1943 in the MCU, the soon to be Commandos were giving Captain America's retreating backside the hairy eyeball, and Bucky was kind of being turned into a SuperBucky in the factory in Kreischberg.

Hell, if the Battle of Azzano happened on a goddamn Earth map at the real Azzano in the Province of Udine, the march from the factory back to the Allied base camp would have been well over 120 kilometers as the crow flies. Those prisoners were metal af. Honestly, I would have killed for a Band of Brothers type mini-series tie-in of the time between the Battle of Azzano, in roughly October '43, to March 4, 1945, when Steve goes down in the Valkyrie. I might have to write it?

My point after twenty wasted minutes of researching both real history and MCU canon and boring 5/8ths of my readers, is that I had fuck all to go on finding a real WWII regiment to shadow for the pre-Azzano or post-Azzano timelines, other than Sergeant Bucky's fine ass being in Italy. So I'm making it all the fuck up. Enjoy.

There. I used my degree. My daddy would be so proud.
“Why does it make that sound?” Bucky shouted as he waved his hands at his ears in utter frustration.

Steve was on his hands and knees, head hanging. He gagged, but thankfully nothing came up on him. “Because it’s fucking you every time it opens,” he gasped out.

“So gross,” Bucky hissed under his breath, glancing around at their surroundings, apparently paying Steve no attention.

Tony was curled in the damn fetal position on Steve’s left, covering his head and groaning miserably. “Language,” he said to Steve, despite the fact that Steve knew Tony had to be as miserable as he was internally right now.

Steve didn’t want to look up. He didn’t want to know where they were this time. “Buck,” he said, shocked by how hoarse his voice was.

The cool metal of Bucky’s hand came to rest on Steve’s shoulder. “You okay there, pal?”

Steve gritted his teeth. “Do I look okay to you?”

“Don’t be a pussy, Steve, come on. Walk it off,” Bucky answered sharply, and Steve felt his spine straightening almost against its will. Bucky had trained him well throughout their youth, apparently.

He glanced up. “Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky admitted. He was hovering over them both, sharp eyes scanning their surroundings, like a guard dog ready to tear into the jugular of the first thing that moved.

Steve finally made himself look around. There was nothing but sand in every direction. “I thought we were just opening it,” he said to Tony.

“How did you come through with us?” Bucky asked Tony. He took a step and reached down, sliding his hand past Tony’s arm and apparently checking Tony’s pulse at his neck.

“I saw you being pulled toward it and grabbed for you,” Tony answered shakily. Bucky’s contact with his skin must have been helping to soothe him, because he was slowly unfurling. “I couldn’t pull you back so I just held on. I had the remote, you’d have been stuck here without it.”

Steve reached over and placed a hand on Tony’s head. “Thank you, Tony.”

“What were you thinking of, Steve?” Bucky asked, and although his tone was merely curious, Steve still bristled at the implication that this was somehow his fault. Twenty minutes ago he’d been asleep!

He gritted his teeth and glared up at Bucky, who was frowning off at the horizon and not even looking at him. “Fuck you, Buck,” he grunted.

Bucky’s head whipped around and he stared at Steve with wide, almost hurt eyes. Steve felt instantly guilty for lashing out. The guilt didn’t last overly long, though.

“Hey,” Bucky said softly. “I’m not saying this is on you, pal. I’m asking; what were you thinking of
when the portal opened? You said it took you to what you were focusing on.”

Steve blinked up at him. Okay yeah, now he felt guilty for lashing out. His cheeks heated as he met Bucky’s eyes, and he ducked his head. “Sorry.”

Bucky pivoted and placed himself between both of them to crouch, putting a hand on the tops of both their heads. “We’re okay,” he said in a calm, soothing voice.

Steve had certainly heard that tone before, both in his youth and in foxholes across Europe. He’d kind of figured he’d never hear it again from the version of his best friend that the world had taught its many horrors to, though. Steve closed his eyes, shocked by the sudden tightening of his throat.

“We can’t stay here, though,” Bucky continued. “I can’t see anything in any direction, and I know deserts. If dehydration doesn’t get us, exposure will. We have to get back. Now.”

Tony groaned plaintively, closing his eyes and resting his cheek in the blistering hot sand. He kind of looked like he was trying to bury his head in the sand, literally. “Please, no.”

Bucky ignored him in favor of meeting Steve’s eyes. “Stevie,” he whispered. “Think of home, okay? Pick something from the Tower you can see real good in your head.”

Steve nodded, swallowing hard. How the fuck was Bucky okay right now? Steve’s insides felt like they’d been put into one of those McFlurry machines and then sucked out through a twisty straw.

Bucky took Tony’s hand and manipulated it until Tony was loosely grasping Steve’s ankle, wedged under Steve’s ass. Then he gripped them both hard around their forearms.

“At least now I can say I copped a feel of Captain America’s ass,” Tony mumbled.

Steve was still almost panting for breath, but he stared into Bucky’s calm eyes and nodded. He plucked the remote from Tony’s other hand and stared at the button.

“What are you focusing on?” Bucky asked.

Steve closed his eyes, head hanging. “The... uh...”

“Steve,” Bucky said, voice still calm and kind but with a layer of something under it that was just about as unyielding as Bucky’s ab muscles. “You left your bed unmade, didn’t you?”

Steve made a face and looked up. “The fuck?”

“When you left your apartment, you didn’t make up your bed,” Bucky continued. “Quilt tossed aside. Sheets all fucked up ’cause you sleep like a Hungarian mud wrestler?”

Steve was about to tell Bucky to fuck right off, but then he realized what the man was doing. He nodded vaguely, eyes going unfocused.

“Can you see your bed? The way you left it?”

Steve nodded again.

“Okay. Focus on it. Take us there.”

Steve closed his eyes, thinking of the warm sheets he’d rolled out of when Tony’s knock had jarred him awake. He could still see the folds, the one pillow he often used as a snuggle buddy laying crooked and peeking out from the quilt. He nodded again, and pressed the button.
The universe needed to calm its shit and quit screaming in Steve’s ears.

When the hideous squelching noise faded, Steve opened his eyes. The sparkles in the air were just now dissipating into nothing, and Steve was kneeling on his pillow. Tony was curled up next to him, with Bucky still in his crouch, holding them together.

Steve glanced around the room, shoulders sagging in relief. The return to the right place always seemed to be a kinder journey, like the universe was glad that Steve had crawled out of its ass and gone back to where he belonged.

“We’re good,” Steve announced.

As soon as the words were out, Bucky folded over and groaned, holding his arms around his torso. He rolled right off the edge of the bed and staggered, dropping to his knees. “Fuck,” he groaned.

“Buck?” Steve said, scrambling toward him.

Bucky waved a hand at him, squeezing his eyes shut. “Just let me feel shitty in peace for a minute okay.”

Steve blinked at him, realizing that Bucky hadn’t been fine after all, he’d just been saving his misery until they were in a secure place.

“I’m not moving,” Tony muttered. “You can either sleep with me or carry me to my own bed.”

Steve patted him on the head, nodding. “Yeah, okay.”

Bucky groaned again and fell sideways, laying out on the floor and curling up. “Same.”

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When Bucky slit his eyes open, Clint and Sam were both in his field of vision, staring down at him like those cartoon seagulls in the fish movie Steve had made him sit through.

“Shit,” Bucky muttered.

“Dude,” Clint said to him.

“I didn’t even clock you coming in,” Bucky told them unhappily.

“Smooth like Jiffy, baby,” Sam said with a big grin. Bucky pointed a finger gun at him and shot him in the face. Sam just laughed at him, which was probably the least satisfying result of shooting someone in the face ever.

Bucky tried to sit up and failed masterfully. Clint offered him a hand and Bucky gripped his forearm, letting Clint pull him to his feet. They almost didn’t manage it. Bucky wavered and then grabbed Clint’s shoulder to keep the room from spinning. “What?”

“You three have been MIA for almost twenty hours. We finally had to have FRIDAY give us your location,” Clint explained.

“Imagine the astonishment when she said you were all three in Steve’s bed,” Sam added with a smirk.

Bucky squinted one eye at him. “Technically, I was on the floor.”
Sam rolled his eyes and muttered something even Bucky couldn’t hear.

“It’s in my contract that I’m supposed to be invited to any and all orgies occurring amongst teammates,” Clint told Bucky with a disapproving wag of his finger.

“You have a contract?” Bucky asked.

Clint huffed a laugh.

Bucky turned to peer at the bed. Steve and Tony were curled up like a pile of snoring, annoying puppies in a laundry basket full of clothes you’d just fucking washed. Bucky had the almost irrepressible urge to kick one or, preferably, both of them. He kicked the bed instead, jostling both men and making Steve startle awake. He woke sort of like a squid trying to fight a fisherman, all four limbs flailing.

Hm. Noted.

“What?” Steve cried, sitting up in the bed and looking around, a little bit wild around the eyes.

Tony groaned and tried to burrow his face under Steve’s ass.

“We’re saved,” Bucky told Steve in a voice so dry he probably stole it from that desert. He waved a hand at Clint and Sam. Clint waggled his fingers in greeting, and Sam gave Steve another of those shit-eating grins that Bucky liked to imagine on his punching bags.

“Oh, my God, Buck, eat my ass,” Steve grunted, then flopped back down to his mattress.

“That seems uncalled for,” Bucky grumbled as he turned and slid his arm around Clint’s shoulders. “Help an old man to his bed, would ya?”

Clint was laughing hard enough that his shoulders were shaking under Bucky’s arm.

“Where the hell have you all been?” Sam asked Steve as Bucky and Clint staggered away.

“Dune,” Steve mumbled.

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They all stood around the dining table off the common room kitchen, frowning at the universal remote Steve had brought with him from the other world.

“Do you think it’s broken?” Natasha asked.

“It brought us back here okay,” Steve answered with a shrug. He kind of wanted to smash the thing, after the incident yesterday. But it was his only connection to the people who’d helped him, and he didn’t want to give up the chance to see them again.

“Maybe it’s a question of mass,” Bucky suggested, looking at Tony instead of the rest of them. “Steve said going through the portal the first two times didn’t hurt him at all. But yesterday it sure as fuck felt like sticking your face in a blender.”

“That’s graphic,” Wanda murmured with a wince.

Bucky tapped his temple. “Try it out.”

“Once was enough for me, thank you,” Wanda answered, smirking as she winked at Bucky.
To Steve’s everlasting annoyance, Bucky winked back. Steve wondered if the man could feel Vision trying to burn a hole in his forehead with that gem thing.

“He’s right, though,” Steve offered unhappily. “Yesterday felt nothing like the first two times.”

“A question of mass,” Tony murmured. He nodded. “If Steve is powering the portals, then it does stand to reason moving more mass would drain the battery faster.”

“So, you’re saying I can only bring myself through the portal safely?” Steve asked.

“Safely isn’t really the word. I mean, it didn’t do any of us damage, right?” Tony asked as he eyed Steve and then Bucky. They both shrugged. “It just sucked.”

Bucky and Steve both grunted in unenthusiastic agreement.

“So maybe, efficiently is the more appropriate term,” Tony concluded. “But yeah. Same concept, whatever.”

“This is good, though,” Steve said with a point at the remote. “It means the tech can’t be used to, say, open portals in the sky over New York and stream an army through.”

Tony winced, nodding.

“Don’t need an army to do damage,” Bucky muttered, his head bowed and a frown marring his features.

“No one’s trying to do damage here,” Natasha said, her voice oddly gentle as she knocked her shoulder into Bucky’s. “We just need it to get Steve back to the other place so he can tell them he found James, right?”

Steve and Tony both nodded as they frowned at her. Steve still didn’t know why she insisted on only calling him either Barnes or James. Sometimes she even affectionately called him Soldier. Never Bucky. He was too chickenshit to ask, that was for sure.

“If Steve’s mind is the GPS for this thing, this might take a while,” Bucky said wryly. “Apparently it’s a barren wasteland up there.”

“So, what am I supposed to do, just keep trying until I stumble on the right universe again?” Steve asked, feeling a little waspish all of a sudden.

Bucky rolled his eyes, blowing out a breath. “Jesus, don’t be dramatic when I’m still fucking hungover, okay Steve, think about it. Think about him. It’ll take you right to him, you just need to clear your mind of all the junk you carry up there.”

“That’s apparently easier for you than it is for me, okay,” Steve shouted at him.

Bucky cocked his head in the universal sign for ‘I am going to fuck your shit right up, son’ and stared at Steve for an uncomfortably long time. “I guess I’ve had a lot of practice at having it cleared,” he finally said pointedly.

Steve absolutely blanched when he realized what he’d said. He stared owlishly at Bucky as the rest of them shuffled around uncomfortably. “I’m sorry, that was out of line,” Steve finally managed to say. “Sorry.”

Bucky merely stared at him, neither acknowledging nor accepting the apology. “Let’s try it one more
time,” he finally said, face still expressionless, voice still calm. Steve knew, though, Bucky was anything but calm just now, and the fact that he couldn’t see the anger was far more frightening than the anger itself would have been. “We’ll get to your guys in that other universe, and then we can lock it away. Never have to use it again.

Steve winced and glanced at the remote nervously. “I’m not sure I can do that again so soon. I still feel like hammered shit.”

“Same,” Tony grunted.

Bucky merely sighed and turned away from the table. Steve ducked his head, refusing to watch him leave. Disappointing Bucky had always been the worst feeling in Steve’s vast repertoire of shitty feelings. He supposed it was comforting that some things never changed.

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Bucky ghosted them. The last Steve had seen of him was when he’d left the team meeting about the remote, and Steve had been looking quite intently for him ever since. He hated leaving things between them tense like that, he always had. Back during the war when they’d had disagreements, Bucky had handled them much the same way; putting forth his opinion in clear, concise words as Steve got angrier and angrier, and then Bucky would walk away from him to let Steve calm down before they carried on.

He’d never up and disappeared on Steve, though. This was a first. Well . . . it was a first that didn’t include an international manhunt.

Three days later, Steve stepped into the gym only to stutter to a stop as he caught sight of Bucky absolutely handing a pair of fight training dummies their asses. Steve stood and watched him for a while, admiring the flawless, brutal, graceful technique. Bucky’s style was an odd mixture of street brawler and ballerina with knives. It was hard to watch, harder to defend, and hardest to be on the wrong end of.

Steve still had nightmares about their brawl on the street, and the one in the helicarrier. One wrong move, one millisecond late with a reaction, and Steve would have been dead. It was a terrifying, beautiful thing.

“Hey,” Steve called over.

Bucky didn’t slow down. He’d obviously been at it for a while; his gray shirt soaked through with sweat, his hair as damp as if he’d just taken a shower. When Steve got closer, he could smell Bucky’s laundry detergent and his cologne, made stronger by the wet clothes. It caused something in Steve’s belly to cramp.

“Buck,” Steve said loudly as he moved closer.

“Heard you the first time, Rogers,” Bucky gritted out, swiping with his left and then ducking what would have been the parry. He lunged into a forward flip, adding a kickspin that hit both dummies and knocked them both on their fake asses as Bucky landed in a ready crouch between them. His fingers were grazing the mat, his head bowed as Steve stood and gazed at him. Longingly. Steve was gazing longingly. Fuck.

“Where you been?” Steve asked as casually as he could.

“Been around,” Bucky grunted, pulling back to his full height and meeting Steve’s eyes blankly as he shook out his shoulders and squared them.
Steve deflated as they stared at each other. He had seen Bucky like this a few times, mostly during the war, but also before when he was getting serious about a girl and something went wrong. Steve had never seen it directed at him, though. Steve flapped his hands uselessly. “You wanna talk?”

“No,” Bucky answered with such a casual air that Steve could have been offering him a Tic Tac or something.

“Can we anyway?”

Bucky narrowed his eyes.

“Where have you been?” Steve asked him again, more firmly this time. It was less the tone of a friend and more one of a superior officer.

Bucky started to jerk the wrappings off his knuckles, his movements swift and concise and so painfully obvious that he was trying to keep a lid on his anger. “I told you. I’ve been around.”

Steve cocked his head. “You been avoiding me?”

Bucky gave a curt nod. “Yeah, Steve.”

Steve blinked at him. He actually had not expected a blunt response, and it kind of stung. “Oh.”

“You ready to get your head out of your ass and take care of that remote?” Bucky asked, going for broke with the skyrocketing levels of bluntness.

“Why are you in such a hurry to close that door?” Steve asked curiously rather than letting Bucky pull him into a chess match of anger Steve knew he would lose.

“Why aren’t you?” Bucky countered. “You’re stalling because you don’t want that door closed. You want to be able to go back.”

“Bucky, I –”

“But the longer that thing is hanging around here, the more Tony is going to poke at it, Steve!” Bucky shouted. “Do you know how close he is to rejigging that thing so it can hop through time instead of the multiverse? Do you know what he’s going to do when that happens?”

Steve swallowed and nodded.

“He’s going to try to save Howard,” Bucky snarled. “And that means he’ll run up against me. I’ve already got the father’s blood on my hands, I don’t need the son’s or the holy ghost’s either.”

Steve blinked at him, mouth dropping open. “You’re worried he’ll go back in time and you’ll kill him?”

“Yes! I worked my fucking ass off to get to this point,” Bucky snarled, jabbing himself in the temple hard enough that Steve winced. “I don’t deserve more bullshit on top of the seventy years of it I’ve already got!”

“Okay,” Steve gasped, putting both hands up and praying Bucky wouldn’t keep yelling. God, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard Bucky actually yelling. Bucky wasn’t the type who lost his temper, even before the war. “I . . . okay, let’s go do it.”

Bucky snorted hard, adding a little sneer to it in case Steve didn’t catch that he was pissed.
“We’ll go do it right now,” Steve said again. “Come on.”

Bucky looked away, balling his wrap up and tossing it at the face of one of the dummies. “Fine. Let me shower first.”

Steve swallowed on the tight knot in his throat, watching Bucky stalk away. He was beginning to wonder where that happy ending was that the alternate Avengers had told him about. From where he stood, it didn’t look like Bucky was offering one.

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“Alright,” Tony said with a clap of his hands. “So, you think happy thoughts and press the button. And I stay here, behind my ballistics glass.” He jerked both his thumbs at the ballistics screen he and the others were standing behind.

Bucky and Steve stared at him incredulously.

Tony merely continued grinning, giving them two thumbs up.

Steve gave Bucky a sideways glance and Bucky raised an eyebrow at him. “Okay,” Steve said to himself with a sigh. “Focus on Buck, that’ll get us there. Then on the way back, I’m focusing on Sam.”

“Okay,” Bucky said, and he placed his flesh hand on Steve’s shoulder, standing facing him so Steve could use his face to calm himself if it was required. “Let’s do this.”

Steve closed his eyes, trying to conjure up that easy smile and the sound of that laugh and the way his shoulders had looked in that damn tac gear, good lord.

He pressed the button and the portal squelched open like someone deep throating a raw oyster, and Steve and Bucky stepped into it together.

They exited on the other side, blinking in shock when they found themselves on a roof, decidedly not throwing up. Bucky still had his hand on Steve’s shoulder, and they were both scanning the area before they could even really register doing it.

Bucky pointed at a man not six feet in front of them, his back to them, standing on the ledge of the roof. Steve would recognize that silhouette anywhere. Also, that giant fucking sniper rifle. Bucky shoved Steve down just as the report of the shot echoed, and the bullet cracked into the roof between their feet. Steve blinked down at the divot even as Bucky lunged forward.

For the briefest of moments, Steve actually thought he was watching Bucky shove Other Bucky off the edge of a high-rise building. But Bucky had jammed his hands under the straps of Buck’s tac gear and thrown his whole body backward, yanking Buck’s sagging weight off the ledge and ending up sprawled beside him. Steve remembered how heavy Buck was when he was a dead weight. He was shocked they hadn’t both gone over when he’d tilted forward.

Steve rushed over, taking in the wound with practiced eyes. He knelt next to Buck, putting a hand over the entry wound. “Buck?”

“Steve,” Buck gasped almost soundlessly, his eyes fluttering closed.

“He’s got minutes, Steve,” Bucky told him in a harsh whisper. His eyes were darting around their surroundings, probably trying to spot the shooter. They could hear people clambering up the stairs inside the building, and the sounds of battle were clear enough on the street below.
Steve glanced at the spot where they’d poofed into existence. “The Tower,” he gasped, looking back down at Buck’s ashen face.

They each grabbed a shoulder strap and dragged Buck, leaving an alarming amount of blood in their wake.

“Push the button!” Bucky growled.

Steve squeezed his eyes shut, thinking of the MedBay bed he’d last spent the night in, the crack on the ceiling his eyes had followed.

The portal whirled open, quieter than ever before, and Bucky and Steve dragged Buck into it. It snapped closed with barely a sound, and suddenly they were in the MedBay at the Tower.

“FRIDAY!” Steve called.

“Yes, Captain Rogers.”

“Call a full alarm, we’ve got a man down! GSW, high-caliber through and through!”

FRIDAY started up the announcement to the MedBay staff, and soon the room was filled with swarming nurses and doctors. Steve knelt next to Buck’s lifeless body for as long as they permitted.

“We’ve got you, Buck,” Steve said to him, placing a hand on his cheek and leaving a bloody handprint behind like those goddamn battle orcs in Lord of the Rings. “You’ll be fine.”

Buck’s eyes fluttered but he never regained consciousness in front of Steve. Bucky had to pull him back and shove him against the wall, his hand on Steve’s chest to keep him there and allow the medical staff to move. They rushed Buck out, heading for an OR, and Steve and Bucky were left alone.

“Oh, God,” Steve whispered. “Oh, God.”

“He’s gonna be fine,” Bucky assured him, patting him on the chest with one bloody palm. There was so much blood on them both that it wasn’t drying.

Steve nodded. Yeah. They’d gotten him to medical care as fast as humanly possible. Even if the amount of blood was terrifyingly similar to men on the battlefield he’d seen bleed out in just minutes ...

“Steve!” Bucky shouted in his face, and Steve blinked at him.

“You don’t have to yell,” Steve mumbled. He distantly realized that he might be in shock.

“I said your name five times, Stevie,” Bucky told him gently. He was still pressing Steve against the wall, only now Steve suspected Bucky might be holding him upright.

“You got to him in time,” Bucky was telling Steve, voice so gentle he sounded like he was trying to coax a beaten dog out from under a rotting deck. “He’ll be okay. But I have to go, Steve. I have to go. Steve,” Bucky kept saying. He patted Steve’s cheek and then squeezed Steve’s wrist hard. “Stevie, you have to let me go, sweetheart. I have to go give him blood.”

Steve looked down, blinking stupidly when he realized that he’d been holding Bucky’s shirt so tightly in both fists, the material had torn when Bucky had tried to move away.

“Stevie. Steve? Shit! FRIDAY, call Sam down here!”
“Right away, Sergeant Barnes.”

“Steve,” Bucky tried again, and Steve stared at his beautiful eyes as Bucky patted his cheek harder. He’d almost watched this man die, again, inches from his fingertips. God, would the world ever stop taking Bucky away from him? “Fuck, I’m sorry,” Bucky finally breathed, and he backhanded Steve hard enough to make them both stagger sideways.

Steve shook his head, blinking back from the shocked, muffled state he’d been swimming through, and he released Bucky’s shirt like he’d been burned.

“I’m sorry!” Bucky said again, voice full of anguish as he ran his hand over Steve’s forehead and through his hair. Then he bolted from the room, taking the corner into the hall hard enough to make his shoes skid on the expensive wood-grain tile floor.

Steve blinked at the doorway as he slid to the floor, his back against the wall. Bucky had run through the pool of blood, his footprints leaving a trail out the door. Steve finally clued in on the speakers, FRIDAY paging Bucky to the OR so they could get blood from him during the surgery.

God, how many minutes had he lost them by being in shock and clinging to Bucky like a dead weight? He didn’t know how long he sat there before he heard running feet out in the hall. He looked up, not sure who to hope it was coming for him.

Sam ducked his head around the door, looking askance at the blood on the floor and then at Steve. “Jesus, Cap,” he blurted. “What happened? FRIDAY said Barnes is in surgery with a gunshot to his chest!”

Steve shook his head. “Not our Bucky,” he said distantly. “It’s Other Bucky. We got there just in time to see him get shot.”

“Holy shit,” Sam whispered as he picked his way carefully around the blood to get to Steve. “Bucky saved him from falling off a building. And my first thought when he ran at him, Sam? My first thought was that he was going to push him off.”

Sam knelt beside him, eyes sympathetic and worried. “Okay,” he said evenly. “I’m in love with him. And my first thought was, ‘he’s pushing my friend off a roof’.”

Sam winced. “Well. He did push me off a helicarrier. So you weren’t exactly unjustified.”

Steve gasped and squeezed his eyes closed. “He was so pale, Sam. He lost so much blood on that roof.” He raised his bloody hands, still sticky as the copious amounts of blood dried slowly. “Just as much on that roof as there is in here.”

Sam glanced around at the floor. He didn’t appear to have anything to say to that.

“Captain Rogers, Master Sergeant Wilson,” FRIDAY said hesitantly, like the AI knew it was a bad time to interrupt.

“Yes, FRIDAY?” Sam answered as Steve foandered.

“Sergeant Barnes is requesting someone bring him Gatorade or the electrolyte equivalent.”

Sam gaped at nothing for a moment. “Man, fuck that guy!”

“They called him into the OR,” Steve murmured. “He’s giving blood as they operate.”
Sam’s shoulders slumped. “Oh.”

Bucky startled awake when his head lolled to the side, and his whole body jerked. It tugged at the catheter in his vein, and he grimaced as he tried to rearrange himself. They’d put the catheter in and hooked him directly up to the kid as they operated on him, keeping blood pumping into him as he did his level best to pump it right back out of that wound.

Bucky knew, just from the first glances he’d gotten, that if he and Steve hadn’t appeared right when and where they had, that this kid would have died alone on that roof.

Bucky was working very hard not to look at the kid’s face. Because it was him. Right down to the smile lines around his eyes.

They’d had one hell of a time getting the tac gear off him, and Bucky had wound up yanking a Gerber Yari from the small of the kid’s back and slicing the tac gear right off him. He had to give his alternate self some props, the kid was well-armed. Like, really well-armed. Like, could probably invade Latvia by himself well-armed. The tac gear looked a lot like the set-up Bucky had designed in the final decades of being under Hydra’s control, too. He’d had just enough input in his own uniform to make it something that wasn’t likely to let him die easy.

It was weird, how similar his own preferred gear was to that of Steve’s alternate version. Except for the mask. Bucky knew how handy that damn thing came in during a battle, but he’d be fucking dead before someone made him wear that thing again.

Bucky really needed something to call the kid, but all the names he could think of were his, fuck you, so he was just going to call him kid.

They’d finally stopped all the bleeds, but Bucky had to take their word for it since he’d passed the fuck out from loss of blood himself about five minutes after trying to get some electrolytes into himself. No one had brought him a damn Gatorade in time.

So, Bucky was laid out in this hospital recliner that could double for a goddamn Medieval torture device as uncomfortable as it was, and since he was still technically attached to the kid at the veins, he couldn’t go too far.

He let his head roll to the side until he was able to see the bed where the kid was now lying, pale and motionless and fragile-seeming in that bed. Bucky shivered. It was rather like walking over your own grave, he suspected. He should go to Arlington some day and stand on his, see if it actually felt like that.

Bucky’s blurry vision cleared enough to identify Steve’s goddamn miserable face on the other side of the bed.

“Bucky?” Steve’s goddamn miserable face said to him.

“M’okay,” Bucky answered sluggishly.

“Dr. Cho said you gave too much blood too fast,” Steve whispered as he got up and came to crouch next to Bucky’s torture device. Steve held up a fucking juice box and turned the straw toward Bucky’s face. “You need to be still. Rest.”

“Did you just offer me a juice box?” Bucky asked, his voice creaky and hoarse.
Steve peered at the juice and then up at Bucky. “You need it.”

“I will not,” Bucky said, turning his head away as Steve tried to shove the straw between his lips.

“Buck, you need it.”

“I refuse.”

“Bucky, come on!”

“I plead the 5th.”

“That’s . . . not . . .”

“Damn straight,” Bucky murmured, his eyes falling shut against his will.

Steve’s fingers sliding over his forehead and into his hair felt like heaven. Bucky’s eyelashes fluttered like they were trying to sing Steve toward the jagged rocks. “Buck?” Steve whispered, like he was afraid Bucky had fallen asleep or passed out again.

“Really?” Bucky said to Steve, jerking his head like it could make his eyes flap open again. It didn’t work. “Stevie? What’s the difference between a coma and a nap, aren’t they pretty much the same thing?”

He heard Steve sigh, and somehow he knew just from the sound that Steve was smiling fondly at him. His fingers continued to smooth through Bucky’s hair.

Bucky forced his eyes open, because this was important. Steve’s eyes were important. He gazed up at them, squinting as he tried to remember what was important. He took in a short breath. “I’m sorry I slapped you like I was wearing a fur coat on a street corner.”

Steve snorted. “It’s okay. I needed it.”

Bucky reached up clumsily and pressed his hand over Steve’s heart. “Steve. Stevie. I figured out the portal.”

“Yeah?” Steve hummed gently, like he was trying to put Bucky’s whiny ass to sleep now.

It worked. Bucky’s eyes closed against his will. He patted Steve’s chest. “I’ll tell you later.”

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The next time Bucky woke, he felt far more like himself. He sat up in his tastefully upholstered Pear of Anguish and glanced hesitantly at the bed.

The kid was still asleep, but the machines were already showing promising vitals.

“Bucky?” Steve whispered.

“I’m out of my coma,” Bucky announced wryly.

Steve leaned over the kid’s bed and placed a hand on the kid’s hip. Bucky decided not to linger over that. Steve quirked a smile. “Do you remember telling me you figured out the portal?”

“What?”
“You tried to tell me, but you fell asleep. Or . . . went into a two-hour coma, whichever floats your boat.”

Bucky scowled, thinking hard. “Man, I hope I was just rambling. ’Cause I can’t remember shit of the last few hours. If I figured it out and then lost it again, Imma be pissed.”

Steve was watching him fondly over the hospital bed. “Thank you, Buck,” he finally said softly.

Bucky blinked at him, wondering at the soft expression on Steve’s exhausted face. “For what?”

“You saved him. You saved him before I even realized what was going on.”

Bucky shrugged uncomfortably. “I recognized the report of that gun. How’s he doing?”

“He’ll be okay. We got him here in time. Cho said he’s got more of your blood in him than you do now. You saved him.”

Bucky snuffed over that and looked down to examine the catheter. They had to be careful with anything in his veins, needles in his skin. The skin would start healing around it and hurt like a motherfucker when it came out.

“I’ve been . . . sort of turning it every hour,” Steve mumbled as he noticed where Bucky’s attention had gone. “They had to use the port to get saline into you. They almost had to give you a blood transfusion of your own, but you filled yourself back up fast enough to avoid it.”

“Yay, knock-off Nazi serum,” Bucky mumbled, glancing around the recovery room.

On the bed between them, the kid moaned. Steve lurched forward and took hold of the kid’s flesh hand, and Bucky pushed out of his badly padded Judas Cradle and leaned over to look at his own face, ashen and still covered with dried streaks of blood where the quick swipes of the nurses hadn’t removed it all.

Steve started looking around for a fucking tissue or something as Bucky peered down at their mumbling patient.

“Steve,” the kid finally managed to articulate. His eyelashes fluttered but he didn’t wake yet. Jesus, were Bucky’s eyelashes that long? That didn’t seem right.

Steve pressed a goddamn Wet Wipe to the kid’s forehead, and it must have been cool because the kid sighed shakily, calming. He moaned, shifting his shoulders.


The kid furrowed his brow, and Bucky knew that stubborn expression rather well. “You might as well go get the doc, Stevie, he’s gonna wake up now just to spite you.”

Steve rolled his eyes, frowning down at the kid.

“I’ll stay. Hurry,” Bucky urged.

Steve nodded and pushed to his feet, jogging out the door to track down Cho.

When Bucky looked down again, the kid had his eyes open. Bucky leaned over him, cocking his head. “You fucking dumbass,” Bucky drawled.

The kid scowled at him. “You look familiar.”
Bucky raised an eyebrow at him. “No shit?”

The kid raised his metal arm, which moved fluidly since there was no muscle or sinew to be fatigued. Bucky leaned away from it warily. He knew what that arm could do, even if the rest of the body was strapped down or slowly dying.

But the kid just poked him in the chest. “You need a fucking haircut, goddamn dumpster fire.”

His hand dropped like a stone and Bucky picked it up by the wrist, laying it on the bed again. He got his first good look at the metal arm. It wasn’t exactly like his own. He could recognize Stark tech easily enough, even if it was from a different universe. Huh, interesting.

He glanced back up to see that the kid was still staring at the ceiling. “Am I dying?”

“Why don’t you shut your fucking face and get some rest, kid,” Bucky said gruffly.

“There’s no flowers,” the kid mumbled unhappily. “Dying is stressful.”

Bucky scowled at him, watching him drift back off to sleep.

He backed off the bed when Steve and Dr. Cho came into the room, easing himself back into his Iron Maiden and trying to get comfortable.
Steve didn’t know how Bucky could sleep in that chair. He’d apparently decided to stop fighting with his recliner and lean into the pain instead. He was sprawled in the damn thing, sound asleep enough that he didn’t even seem bothered by his back to the door. His feet were almost brushing the wall at the head of the hospital bed and his arm was stretched out toward the bed with the catheter still in place. They’d had to place him like that because both men only had one flesh arm to use. Awkward.

They’d dragged a second recliner into the room for Steve, and his ass had not appreciated it. He’d basically levitated off the thing as soon as he’d made contact with it. He sat on the end of the bed instead, hand resting on Buck’s shin, staring down at the floor without really seeing it.

“Steve?”

Steve lurched to his feet, spinning so he was leaning over Buck. He slipped his hand into his metal one, squeezing so Buck would know he was real. Every time he’d woken, he’d completely ignored Bucky because he didn’t think the man was real. Bucky was . . . not amused, considering they were still hooked together by that catheter and Bucky was still giving him a bit of blood every few hours like they were topping off a gas tank. There’d been one last bleed that had gone unnoticed until that morning, but now Buck seemed to be doing much better.

Steve rested his palm over Buck’s forehead, running his thumb across the bridge of his nose to make him close his eyes again. “Go back to sleep, Buck.”

“What happened?” Buck asked, closing his eyes and frowning.

“You were shot,” Steve whispered.

“No,” Bucky said without opening his eyes. “You put yourself against the horizon, is what happened. You got your own dumb ass shot.”

“Bucky,” Steve groaned.

“Wait, can you hear him too?” Buck asked, cracking one eye open.

Steve couldn’t help but smile as he looked down at him, running his fingers through Buck’s hair. Buck blinked rapidly and then finally settled his eyes on Steve. He narrowed them. “Cap?” he whispered.

Steve grinned wider. “Hey, Buck.”

“What are you doing back here?”

Steve hummed. “Technically, I’m not there. You’re here.”

Buck glanced at the IV and scowled harder. “No flowers.”

“Yeah,” Steve murmured.

“The fuck does he keep talking about flowers?” Bucky grumbled. “Go get him some fucking carnations or something, Rogers.”

“He’s not my conscience, is he?”
Steve smiled wider. “No. And you should definitely not listen to him.”

Buck turned his head to peer at Bucky. “You found him?” he asked Steve softly, a smile pulling at his lips. “Good job, Cap. You failed to mention he’s an asshole.”

Steve squeezed his hand harder.

“Excuse you,” Bucky grumbled.

“You saved me?” Buck asked, still staring at Bucky in his chair. Bucky’s eyes were closed, but Steve got the feeling he knew attention was still on him.

“That was all him,” Steve answered, nodding his head toward Bucky.

“And I’m in your world now?” Buck asked, turning to peer back up at Steve. Steve had known he missed the man, but he hadn’t realized quite how much. He nodded, unable to answer just then. Buck ran his tongue over his bottom lip and his eyes darted around the hospital room before settling back on Steve. “They think I’m dead, don’t they?”

Steve opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again and lowered his head. “Probably,” he said with a sigh. “All we left behind was most of the blood in your body. It happened too fast to leave any sign that it was us.”

Buck swallowed hard and nodded, his jaw jumping as he closed his eyes. “Can you get me back there?”

“Uh.”

Buck blew out some air and winced.

“Definitely not until you’re healed a little, anyway,” Steve hedged. How the fuck was he supposed to tell Buck that the portal was as iffy a mode of transport as Steve’s handle on his emotions? How was he supposed to admit that he’d snatched Buck out of his world without knowing if he could get him back?

“I got some ideas about that,” Bucky murmured. He still hadn’t opened his eyes.

Steve scowled at him. He was either being an asshole, or Bucky didn’t like looking at his mirror self. Steve knew kind of how he felt, but he couldn’t imagine having to see his own double laid out in a hospital bed like this. It was a very real glimpse at his own mortality, such as it was.

“You want to share them?” Steve asked after he realized Bucky wasn’t going to continue.

“Nope,” Bucky grunted. He finally opened his eyes and looked down at the catheter in his arm. “You think we can spring me from this thing soon?”

Steve glanced at Buck, who was still frowning up at him. He tried to offer a smile that probably failed, if the offended expression on Buck’s face was anything to go by.

“His color is better,” Steve murmured. “I’ll go grab the Doc, see what we can do.”

Steve pushed away from the bed and headed for the door. As he was leaving he heard Buck say, “Hey, Scary Me, you think you can raise this bed for me?”

Steve bit his lip against a smile and went about tracking down Dr. Cho in her office.
Cho went to check on her patients after Steve talked with her, and Steve went in search of a quick cup of coffee. That was where Sam found him.

“How is he?” Sam asked when he walked into the break room.

Steve nodded, swallowing his mouthful of scalding liquid a little too fast. “He’s talking. Seems sharp, he recognized as me as Not His Steve pretty quick just now.”

“Huh.”

“Cho’s unhooking them. Bucky thinks he has an idea about the portal, he’s being cagey about it until he’s let off his leash.”

“Barnes is always cagey,” Sam grumbled. He gave Steve a careful inspection and didn’t even try to mask it. “Steve, have you slept in the last seventy-two hours?”

Steve shrugged, ducking his head.

Sam sighed. “If we get you a bed in his room, will you try to sleep?”

Steve glanced up at him, his cheeks heating. “Probably.”

Sam rolled his eyes heavenward, then turned. He stopped before he got to the door, turning to peer at Steve carefully. “You in love with this guy, Cap?”

Steve blinked owlishly at him. “No,” he said quickly. “I just . . . he didn’t ask for anything, when I showed up in his world. He just . . . cared. He’s my friend.”

Sam studied him for a few more seconds, then nodded like he was satisfied. “A nice Bucky Barnes,” he muttered as he left the room. “I gotta see this for myself.”

Steve huffed, shaking his head. He finished his coffee, then headed back to Buck’s room. He was just in time for the nurses to clear out after they’d gotten Buck settled. Sam moved in ahead of him, watching Buck warily.

Their Bucky had made tracks as soon as he was set free like a raccoon being released back into the wild, so Buck had apparently been intending to go back to sleep while he was alone. He heard Sam’s shoes squeak on the tile, though, and cracked an eye open. The change that came over his face when he smiled was almost angelic.

“Sam!” he cried, pushing himself almost to a sitting position like he was going to reach out and grab Sam for a hug.

Sam stopped and held out both hands. “Whoa, now,” he said. “Are you armed?”

“What?”

“Do you have anything sharp?” Sam asked as he took another step, pointing at Buck. “Or dull but pointy enough it can be shoved through a human with that arm? Or a blunt object?”

“You just listed basically anything I could grab.”

“I’ve learned to be thorough with my inspections.”

“What?” Buck asked again, his eyes straying to Steve over Sam’s shoulder.
“I recognize that look,” Sam explained. “That’s the look of a cat trying to get close enough to eviscerate someone.”

Buck looked at Steve, offended as fuck all of a sudden. “Did you tell them about the cat thing?”

Steve scowled. “What cat thing?”

Buck narrowed his eyes between them.

“Sam, where he’s from you two are best friends,” Steve explained. “You were roommates when Other Steve met you.”

“What now?” Sam grunted as he turned to look at Steve.

Steve shrugged.

“We’re not friends here?” Buck asked, sounding a little panicked.

Sam winced, looking a little guilty, and he turned back to Buck’s bed. “I know it ain’t you, man, but that face tossed me off a building.”

“It what?” Buck asked, voice pitched higher.

“Ripped my steering wheel out of a car I’d just made the last payment on. Tried to shoot me. Tried to shoot me again. Yanked my wings off!”

Buck’s mouth had dropped open as he stared at them.

“He’s better now,” Steve assured him with a wan smile. Sam hummed dubiously.

“So, no hug, huh?” Buck muttered, sinking back into his pillows.

Sam took a few more careful steps forward. “That was you going for a hug? Not a knife?”

“Oh, my God, Other Me is an asshole,” Buck whispered, closing his eyes.

Sam got close enough to set his hand on Buck’s shoulder and pat him. He was still as far away as he could possibly be and still make contact, and Buck was staring up at him with the same scowl their Bucky watched small children move around with. Steve had to cover his mouth so neither of them would see him smile.

“There, there,” Sam offered, patting his shoulder again.

==

“Stark?” Bucky called out when he poked his head into the workshop.

A screwdriver waved through the air from under a table.

Bucky made his way to it and crouched down to frown at Tony. “What are you doing?”

“This table is perfectly crafted, and yet, it still wobbles.”

“How long have you been under here?” Bucky asked as he peered into the dark corners of the underside of the desk.

“What time is it?”
“Fuck if I know.”

Tony shrugged negligently and held his hand out to Bucky. Bucky grabbed him and slid him out from under the desk, Tony winding up sprawled at his feet. “How’s your doppelganger? Is it weird? I bet it’s weird.”

“It’s weird. And he’s fine. I need your help.”

“I’m not going to help you kill yourself, even if it’s another yourself.”

Bucky sighed. “Why the fuck does everyone think I want him dead?”

“You don’t have a lot of love for yourself, friend,” Tony observed. He climbed to his feet and then pulled Bucky up so they were both off the floor.

Bucky just grunted at him. “I had an idea about the portal.”

“Oh?”

“When we hit that other world, it barely made a sound. And when we got back, nothing. We just popped into the MedBay, easy as you please.”

Tony frowned as Bucky spoke. “Huh,” was all he offered.

“Steve was focused on getting the kid to medical care. It got me thinking, and I’ll admit I was a little delirious at the time. But when we wound up in the place with all the sand?”

“Oh huh?” Tony said, still scowling.

“Steve’s never been lost in the sand,” Bucky said gently. He pointed at the scar on Tony’s chest. “You have.”

Tony frowned at him for a few moments, looking like he wanted to be offended. Then his face cleared as he realized what Bucky was getting at. “And I had the remote. Steve didn’t take us there, I did.”

Bucky nodded, wincing again because he knew damn well he deserved at least a swing for bringing that up with Tony. Thank God the man was easily distracted by science.

“That would mean Steve’s not actually powering it,” Tony mumbled, pacing away from Bucky.

“I have a theory,” Bucky told him. “I want to try it without Steve here, see if we can actually take him out of the equation.”

Tony turned and peered at him. “And if you turn to dust like my work table did? Steve will not be happy with me.”

Bucky shrugged. “Good thing he’s got a ready replacement downstairs.”

Tony’s expression didn’t change, but Bucky could tell he had to fight to maintain it. He finally nodded. “Okay. Let’s try it.”

He led Bucky to the alcove he’d put the remote in, using his thumbprint to unlock it and pull the device out. He handed it to Bucky. “Cap know you’re doing this?”

“No.”
Tony nodded. “Okay, then.”

They headed out onto the Iron Man landing platform. At least out here, nothing important could be blown up or disintegrate, except Bucky. He paced away from Tony until they both felt they had a safe radius around him, and then Bucky blew out a breath.

“Be careful, huh?” Tony murmured.

Bucky gave him a small, fond smile. “If I don’t come back, tell Steve I threatened you. He’ll believe it.”

Tony’s answering nod was a melancholy one.

Bucky closed his eyes, held up the remote, and pushed the button.

When Bucky opened his eyes again, he was in a deserted alley. He glanced around, orienting himself. There was trash at his feet, meaning the portal hadn’t even disturbed it. “Proof of concept, Stark,” he muttered with a grin.

He pulled his hat lower over his eyes and made his way to the end of the alley, peering out at the busy sidewalk. He waited until there was a lull in foot traffic and then melted into it, walking with the flow, hands in his pockets and head down. When he came to the intersection he stood near the light pole, looking around.

He was definitely in New York City. Whether it was his New York was an entirely different question. He blinked when he realized he was near the base of Avengers Tower, and he was looking directly at Steve, sitting at a café table across the street.

He was talking with someone who was hunched into an oversized hoodie, and his face looked grim and determined. Yep. That was the face of a Steve Rogers who was looking for his MIA boyfriend, Bucky was sure of it.

Rogers lowered his head and Hoodie Guy stood, melting away into the crowds. Bucky was suitably impressed with the guy’s disappearing act. When Rogers looked up, he didn’t seem surprised to be alone. Only now, he had nothing across the table to focus on, and his eyes landed right on Bucky.

Bucky tensed, cocking his head and lowering his chin so the hat shadowed his face. He had his thumb on the button, ready to disappear. Rogers didn’t bolt into action to chase him down, though. He merely smiled sadly and lowered his head again.

It hit Bucky kind of hard. The guy thought his Bucky was dead. He thought he was imagining things, seeing familiar faces on people. Bucky knew that feeling intimately. He closed his eyes, took a breath, and pushed the button.

When he opened them again, Tony was standing in front of him, blinking rapidly and twitching like he’d been thinking about calling his suit.

“Jesus!” Tony blurted.

“Proof of concept,” Bucky grunted, waving the remote in his metal hand.

“What the fuck?” Tony asked.

“I think it’s the metal,” Bucky told him. “With Steve’s shield alone, the portal is messy. Not enough contact with the metal when it’s on his back. When I had my hand on you, the arm and the shield
worked together, made our return easier. It’s not molecular Tesseract leftovers, it’s the vibranium.”

Tony blinked at Bucky’s arm, then back at his face. “Fucking brilliant, kid,” he finally whispered, beginning to grin.

Bucky nodded, chewing on his lip as he looked down at the remote.

“Where’d you go?”

“To the same place. It landed me within a block of the other Steve. I was able to come back in the middle of a crowded sidewalk.”

“So, vibranium conduction and making sure your mind has a clear picture, that’s all you need?”

Bucky shrugged. “I guess.”

“You want to take this to Cap?” Tony asked carefully.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah. He’s fretting over not being able to get the kid back home. May as well ease both their minds.”

“You think the kid can go through the portal with a gut shot?”

“No,” Bucky answered as they both headed for the elevators. “If he heals like I do, he should need a week from the injury. But at least now we can send word to his people, let them know he’s okay.”

==

Steve was sitting on the edge of the bed again, smiling down at Buck as the man babbled at him and Sam and occasionally crooned to the IV.

“This guy’s hilarious,” Sam said to Steve, looking offended over the fact. “Is our Barnes funny when I’m not around?”

“Yeah,” Steve said with a grin.

There was a knock at the doorway, and Steve turned to look. Bucky and Tony stood there, both of them looking a little guilty.

“What?” Steve groaned. “I didn’t hear an explosion.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes, and Tony huffed. “We’re not that bad,” Tony protested, coming into the room and peering at the bed curiously.

Buck pointed at him. “Same goatee!” he said happily.

Tony ran fingers over his goatee, scowling. He’d literally just changed his style last week.

Steve patted Buck’s shin under the blankets.

Bucky held up the remote. “We figured it out.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “You stabilized it?”

“Pretty much,” Bucky muttered. “Turns out it was mostly . . . user error?”

Steve grunted.
“By the way, your mind is not a barren wasteland,” Tony told Steve, coming up and patting him on the shoulder. “Apparently, that was me.”

“Well, that’s both comforting and terrifying,” Steve muttered.

“Long story short, I can go to his world, let his people know he’s alive and we’ll bring him back once he’s stable enough” Bucky offered.

Steve’s eyes widened and he stood. “You’d do that?”

Bucky nodded, his eyes straying to the bed. “Hey kid, you lucid?”

“Are you?” Buck challenged.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Can I get a few minutes alone with him?”

Steve nodded, glancing back at Buck. “We’ll be right back, okay?”

Buck just nodded, squinting at Bucky like he was trying to make out a reflection through a fogged mirror.

As Steve was closing the door behind him, he heard Buck say, “I know that tone of voice. I use that tone of voice to scare people.”

“Tell me about the shooter,” Bucky requested without commenting. Steve hesitated, letting the door swing closed slowly on its own so he could eavesdrop.

“How long you got?” Buck asked.

Bucky huffed. “Pretend I’m a superior officer and use small words.”

Steve left them to it, following Sam and Tony down the hall to the break room.

“How’d you figure it out?” he asked Tony as soon as they were all seated.

Tony winced. “Who knows how that guy’s mind works. It’s fascinating.”

Steve grimaced. Yeah, that was one way to put it.

==

Twenty minutes after they’d cleared out, Bucky came into the break room, his jaw set, his eyes blazing.

Steve lurched to his feet. “What?”

“I’m going to his world, let them know he’s alive.”

Steve nodded, looking at Bucky carefully. “What’d he tell you?”

Bucky stared at him, obviously trying to regain control of his temper. “I’m going to wipe them out.”

“Who?”

“His Hydra,” Bucky snarled. “They’re after him, want to do to him what they did to me.”

Steve blanched and sat back down, blinking away the horror and looking back up at Bucky
critically. “You want help?”

“No,” Bucky snarled viciously, his attention on something none of the rest of them could see.

Steve nodded. “Okay.”

“Um,” Tony offered carefully. “Is that wise? I mean, you were the one who was lecturing me about messing with other universes and –”

Bucky turned to look at him and Tony’s words trailed off.

“Yeah,” Tony said with a falsely chipper grin. “Sure, why not. Have at it, friend.”

Bucky nodded and turned, stalking out of the room.

“Are you going now?” Steve asked, scrambling out of his chair to jog after him.

“I’m going to gear up first.”

“Bucky,” Steve said, then grabbed at Bucky’s elbow. Bucky halted and turned to face him. “Be careful, okay?”

Bucky cocked his head, frowning.

Steve groaned and rolled his eyes. “You know I hate this, right? You going alone?”

“I’ll be fine, Steve.”

“You better be,” Steve growled.

Bucky gave him another odd look, and Steve’s internal soundtrack flipped over to a repeat of ‘fuck it’. He grabbed Bucky’s shirt front and yanked him closer, kissing him almost violently.

Bucky damn near flailed at first, but then his hands grabbed at Steve’s arms, holding him close as Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s neck and held on, still kissing him.

When they both finally ran out of air, they parted with twin gasps and stared at each other, both of them stunned by it.

“Jesus, Steve,” Bucky finally panted.

“Sorry,” Steve muttered, grinning because that was a damn lie and he was about to do it again. He got a handful of Bucky’s hair and pulled him closer, and Bucky leaned into him and kissed him again, leading this kiss where he’d just been trying to keep up last time.

Steve wound up pressed against the wall, breathing hard when Bucky pushed away from him.

“Just for the record, apparently all Buckys kiss like that,” Steve gasped.

Bucky put his metal hand on Steve’s face and shoved him to the side, grunting, “Douchebag.”

==

“Anything you want me to tell them?” Bucky asked the kid as he stood beside the portal to hell that the medical staff thought was a recliner.

“Just... hello, I guess?” the kid answered. He was finally sitting up, but his voice still had that
scratchy quality that came with too many opiates and that oxygen cannula up his nose for too long.

Bucky had to fight not to sigh. “Anything more specific?”

The kid scrunches up his face, obviously trying to think.

“Jesus, okay. Don’t hurt yourself,” Bucky grumbled. “I’ll be back. Anything I should know about security in your Tower?”

“JARVIS runs it,” the kid answered, frowning at nothing. His eyes slid over Bucky’s long hair to his tac gear. “He’ll know you aren’t me.”

“I’m not trying to be you, kiddo, I’m just trying to reach them without getting shot at.”

“Where’s your mask?” the kid asked.

Bucky bared his teeth. He grabbed the kid’s mask off the table beside his bed and tossed it in his lap.

The kid picked it up and blinked at it. “Jesus.”

“Hope you have a spare for when you go back.”

The kid turned the mangled mask over in his hands, poking it. “Did . . . Jesus.”

“Did that before Steve told me you liked it,” Bucky offered, feeling a tad guilty. He hated the damn thing, but he never would have fucked up another man’s gear just for the hell of it. “Sorry.”

The kid peered up at him carefully, his eyes darting over the tac gear again. “They made you wear it, huh?”

Bucky nodded curtly.

“I’m sorry,” the kid whispered.

Bucky cleared his throat. “I’m going to make sure this,” he waved a hand at his head, “never happens to you.”

The kid stared at him, his eyes big and gray and full of something that wasn’t quite sympathy. “Thank you.”

“Thank me when I’m done.” Bucky held up the remote.

“Hey, uh,” the kid said quickly. “My Steve is kind of a hugger. You don’t . . . you don’t look like you like that, so. Fair warning.”

“Noted,” Bucky said, then he closed his eyes and hit the button.

==

Buck was sitting up in the hospital bed when Steve poked his head in. He looked up from something in his lap when Steve knocked. “Hey.”

“How you doing?”

Buck shrugged and winced. “Still hurts like a bitch. You should ask Thor about his flowers. And let Bruce poke some sludge.”
Steve scowled as he moved into the room. “Our Bruce is, uh . . . away,” he told Buck carefully. “And Thor hasn’t been back for a while.”

“Oh.” Buck looked back down at the thing in his hands.

Steve realized with a lurch that it was his mask. Steve pulled up a regular chair that didn’t try to turn his ass cheeks into piñatas and sat, leaning his elbows on his knees.

“What did they do to him?” Buck asked softly.

Steve licked his lips. “I . . . I can show you the files, if you really want to know.”

Bucky held up the crushed mask and spun it on his fingertips. “I don’t want to know, do I?”

Steve shook his head, feeling like he was betraying his own Bucky merely by admitting it. “He’s the strongest person I’ve ever known,” he whispered. “Anyone else would have been dead so many times over.”

Buck swallowed hard and nodded. “This was ballistics grade Kevlar and titanium alloy,” he muttered. “His arm must be made of different stuff than mine.”

Steve shifted and winced.

“What?”

“He uh . . . he did that with his right hand,” Steve told him, pointing at the mask.

Buck blinked at him, then looked down at the mask again. “Jesus Christ.”

Steve couldn’t help but laugh.

==

Bucky popped into existence in a control room that he recognized as the security hub of the Tower.

“I beg your pardon,” Vision’s voice said from somewhere, sounding affronted.

Bucky glanced over his shoulder, expecting to see Vision even though he knew this world didn’t have one. He hit the EMP in his arm and every screen and hologram in the place went dark. “Sorry, JARVIS,” he offered. Then he hit the button again and suddenly he was in an upscale hallway.

He was standing outside the main conference room. He could hear voices on the other side. He shoved the remote in his tac gear and grinned. This thing was easy as pie if you had seventy years of practice at focusing on one goal.

He knocked politely on the door.

Steve’s voice answered in a growl. “Come back later.”

“Rude, Rogers,” Bucky murmured. He knocked again more forcefully.

He could hear muttering on the other side, then he heard Tony address the AI. So, they knew there was a problem. Good. Bucky kind of liked causing problems.

He knocked again, making it a little tune that Rogers would recognize from his youth, if this version had actually grown up with Bucky. Shave and a haircut, Bucky hummed under his breath. Then he
pounded his metal fist against the side of the door with the hinges. Two. Then he took a step back and kicked the hinges, adding, “Bits,” under his breath because leaving it unfinished was just disturbing.

The Avengers of this other world were all blinking at him stupidly, Rogers in a near-crouch near the door Bucky had just kicked in.

Bucky cocked his head at them and took a step into the room. “I did knock.”

==

Steve stayed with Buck, unable to do anything else while Bucky was off world and doing God knew what.

The rest of the team drifted through, all of them curious to meet Buck and seeming genuinely concerned about his condition. It warmed Steve’s heart a little.

Sam had finally given Buck a hug, after thoroughly searching his scrubs for anything sharp. Buck had looked even more offended by that than he had about whatever the cat thing was.

Tony was fascinated by the arm. “This is Stark tech,” he said as he fondled Buck’s hand.

“Yeah, and I can feel everything you’re doing, so how about keeping it PG-13, huh pal?” Buck muttered.

Tony dropped his hand in alarm. “Sorry! Our Bucky won’t let me near his.”

“His is different,” Buck observed. Steve handed him a glass of water when he heard the croak in his voice. Buck nodded at him gratefully.

“Bucky’s arm is Hydra tech,” Steve murmured with a wince at Buck.

“Oh.”

“It has properties even I don’t understand,” Tony grumbled.

“Well, I’m here for a while,” Buck groaned. “Feel free to poke all you want.”

Tony immediately picked up his hand again and did indeed start poking.

Steve was smiling softly when he met Buck’s eyes again.

“So, how’s things?” Buck asked him with a wry smile.

“Things are good,” Steve whispered. “Looking up lately.”

“You just need to pick up your balls with the rest of your baggage and do it, Cap,” Buck advised, closing his eyes as Tony snorted and fiddled with his thumb for some reason. “Don’t push that button unless you want your goatee seared off.”

Tony glanced up, eyebrows raised. Rather than wary, he looked intrigued. Steve wondered if he needed to put a stop to this before it had repercussions.

A knock on the door settled his problem for him. “Can I come in?” Natasha asked with a smirk.

“Please,” Steve said gratefully.
She prowled closer, peering at Buck with interest. “Hello, James,” she offered from the end of the bed.

Buck snorted. “James,” he repeated incredulously. “Am I in trouble?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Should you be?”

Bucky squinted at her. “I want you to know, your ass is just as fantastic as my Nat’s. You should probably know that.”

Natasha merely laughed, glancing at Steve. “Well, he is delightful.”

Steve snorted and took Buck’s hand, holding it in both of his. Natasha’s keen eyes didn’t miss the movement, apparently.

There was a rush of air from the corner of the room, and suddenly Bucky was there, knelt on one knee, head bowed, a knife in one hand and the remote in the other. He was positively covered in blood.

“Bucky, Jesus!” Steve cried, lurching to his feet. Natasha took a step toward him, then stopped.

Bucky raised his head, eyes darting briefly before he gave them a feral grin.

The words died on Steve’s lips, and he stared at Bucky, wondering why he wasn’t more disturbed and less turned on right now.

“Are you hurt?” Natasha asked calmly.

“If I am, I don’t care,” Bucky answered happily. He stood, shaking out his shoulders and still grinning as blood slid down the front of his tac gear.

“Oh, my God,” Buck groaned from the bed. Steve glanced at him worriedly, but Buck was just shaking his head, his eyes closed. “I understand so much more about the way people look at me now.”

Steve patted his shoulder.

Buck looked up at him incredulously. “You have fun falling on that sword, Cap.”
“Time to go home, sport,” Bucky said to the kid as he helped him out of the hospital bed. He grimaced as he stood, and Bucky could tell he was in pain when he let Bucky take a lot of his weight. He knew Steve and the kid both were in a hurry to get him home to his own world, but Bucky wasn’t sure what the portal would do to anyone riding shotgun who wasn’t in full working order.

It wasn’t his call, though.

“Hey,” the kid said, arm slung around Bucky’s shoulder, fingers digging into Bucky’s flesh hip, and patting Bucky’s chest with his other hand. He frowned, apparently getting distracted from whatever he’d been about to say, and instead muttering, “Jesus, dude, you are stacked.”

Bucky frowned at him curiously. As far as he could tell, they were literally the same size. The kid poked one of Bucky’s pec muscles, grumbling to himself.

“Knock it off,” Bucky grumbled, trying not to laugh.

The kid looked up at him, and standing like this, they were very close. Bucky craned his head as far back as it would go so he could meet the kid’s eyes without going cross-eyed. “Cap is head over heels in love with you, man,” the kid said seriously.

Bucky blinked at him. “Yeah, he mentioned.”

“So what are you waiting for?”

Bucky cocked his head. “I...” He frowned harder and looked into the kid’s eyes. It was like peering into the mirror, before Bucky’s entire life had been about pain. He realized suddenly that there was absolutely no reason to keep anything from the guy. What would be the point? “I don’t want to hurt him.”

“So don’t,” the kid grunted. “Make him happy instead.”

Bucky nodded wordlessly, swallowing hard.

There was a whump sound from the hallway, and Steve rounded the corner a moment later. He gave them both a small, tense smile.

“Okay?” Bucky asked him with a frown as Steve handed him the remote.

Steve nodded. “You were right, the portal is much kinder if you’re in solid contact with the vibranium.”

Bucky shrugged, basically shooting Steve a non-verbal well, yeah. Steve snorted at him and turned his attention to the kid.

“Buck,” he said with another of those tight smiles.

“Cap,” the kid gasped. He stood up straighter, his hand still clutching Bucky’s arm. Steve moved forward and pulled him into a gentle hug. “Thank you.”

Steve rested his chin on the kid’s shoulder. “Hey. It’s nothing you haven’t done for me, right?”
The kid snorted against Steve’s ear and Bucky saw Steve shiver. He kind of felt like he needed to leave and give them this moment alone, but the kid had fucking talons or something for fingers, because he wasn’t letting Bucky go.

They ended the lingering hug and Steve stepped back.

“Stay in touch, huh?” the kid said shakily.

“You know we will.”

The kid grinned and turned slightly, jabbing Bucky in the ribs. “You too.”

Bucky grunted and glared at him. “Don’t push your luck, you little shit.”

Steve chuckled and swiped his hand over his eyes. “You better get going. I told your Steve ten minutes.” He turned his eyes on Bucky and narrowed them. “And I promised him you’d be nice.”

Bucky frowned in confusion. “Why?”

Steve rolled his eyes almost fondly and took another step back. He gave the kid a soft smile. “Tell everyone I said hello, huh?”

The kid nodded. “See you around, Steve.”

“Bye, Buck.”

Bucky waited a beat to see if they were going to cry, then he raised the remote, pulling the kid tighter to him and making sure he had his metal arm touching as much of the kid as possible. “Close your eyes and think of England,” he told the kid before pushing the button.

==

Steve was still sitting in the hospital room, head bowed, when he felt the near-silent rush of air that signified Bucky returning. He raised his head to find Bucky standing there, looking at him expressionlessly.

“Hey,” Steve whispered.

“You okay?”

Steve nodded, attempting a smile.

Bucky raised the remote in his hand, looking down at it critically. “Part of me thinks we need to smash this,” he said carelessly. Then he looked back up at Steve, giving him a sympathetic, almost sad smile. “But I can see why you don’t want to. You have a link to a part of me I’ve . . . I haven’t been that in a long time. I wouldn’t want to lose that, either, if I was you.”

Steve shoved to his feet and advanced on Bucky, apparently looking either determined enough or angry enough that Bucky inclined his head warily, watching Steve with tension in his shoulders that said he was ready to defend himself if need be.

Steve grabbed him by both arms and shook him. “I haven’t lost anything, Buck. I have you. I have all of you, right now, right here. And that’s all I’ve ever needed.”

Bucky was scowling at him. Steve waited, but Bucky merely continued to scowl. Steve huffed when Bucky persisted in saying nothing.
Bucky’s expression became hesitant, his eyes darting over Steve’s face. “You expect me to say something right now, don’t you?”

Steve blinked at him. “Sort of?”

Bucky’s shoulders slumped and he patted Steve’s cheek, giving him a wry smile. “Listen, Stevie, I am very good at the whole physical part of this kind of thing. The rest of it? I’d rather drink strychnine than try to talk about my feelings. Okay? You can talk at me all you want and I swear to you I’m listening, and I care deeply about what you’re saying. But if I try to talk back, it’s going to be a shitshow, and we both know it.”

Steve stared at him for a few seconds. Then he started to laugh. Bucky sighed in exasperation and Steve laughed harder. He pressed his forehead to Bucky’s shoulder, sliding his arms around Bucky’s waist so the man couldn’t shove him away or leave, and he laughed until he couldn’t breathe.

Bucky started patting his back like he was trying to console him, and that just made Steve laugh harder.

“Jesus, Steve, pull it together,” Bucky finally groaned.

Steve raised his head, trying to choke back the laughs as he gazed adoringly into Bucky’s eyes. Bucky was smiling crookedly, those lovely blue eyes narrowed in a teasing expression that Steve hadn’t seen in oh so very long. Steve placed a hand on either side of his face, barely resting against Bucky’s skin. “This okay?” he asked, still chuckling softly.

Bucky’s smile went softer. “Yeah,” he said, nice and gentle like the sound Steve remembered from his fever dreams when Bucky would talk him through an illness.

Steve edged closer and kissed him. He was careful at first, but when Bucky responded by tilting his head and deepening the kiss, Steve groaned softly and went for it.

Bucky was a damn fine kisser, that was for sure.

Steve finally forced himself to pull away, pressing his forehead and nose to Bucky’s and closing his eyes. “I love you.”

Bucky ran a hand through Steve’s hair, humming. “I love you, too, Steve. Always have, always will.”

Steve finally put some distance between them, squinting dubiously at Bucky as he let his hands slide down to his shoulders. “Very good at the physical part, huh?” he drawled.

Bucky shrugged. “I’ve had no complaints lodged against me.”

Steve hummed and bit his bottom lip. “Is this a thing we’re trying now?”

Bucky was silent, but he brought his thumb up to slide it across the lip Steve had been biting. He nodded, eyes following its progress. “Yeah. Yeah, I think it is.”

Steve grinned and bit his thumb.

“Ow! Jesus!” Bucky shook his hand out and gave Steve a wary look. “Okay, we’ll work on that before we go below the belt.”

Steve grunted in outrage, and before he could say anything Bucky had grabbed the front of his belt,
pulling it hard and then releasing it so it would snap against Steve’s skin. He turned and ran as Steve swiped out for him.

“I’ll remember that, Barnes!” Steve called after him.

Bucky’s voice was receding as he called out, “Counting on it, Rogers!”

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Bucky didn’t slow until he got to the stairs and was certain Steve hadn’t given chase. Then he headed up.

“FRIDAY, is Tony in his workshop right now?”

“He is not, Sergeant. Would you like me to call him?”

“Uh, no. I need to put the doohickey back in its safe. And I need to do it without him. I also need you to put some extra security measures on it. Think you can help me out?”

FRIDAY didn’t reply for a long time, and Bucky winced as he continued up the stairs. He’d gone three flights before she responded. “I’ve deduced that the added security on the device is to protect the Boss. Am I correct?”

“Yes,” Bucky answered immediately, with a little more feeling than he’d intended.

“What would you like me to do, Sergeant?”

“I want to add a thumbprint to the scanner to accompany the one he programmed in. Make it so you have to have two people to access the device. Can we do that?”

“Of course, Sergeant.”

She even opened the workshop doors for him when he got to the floor. Bucky sent up a silent thanks that he had a damn good relationship with the AI, and he headed for the alcove Tony had kept the remote in. The clear security door was sitting open, since there was nothing in it. Which was good, that meant Bucky didn’t have to try to bypass Tony’s print to put the thing back without him present. He set the remote inside, then closed and locked the safe. The scanner beeped green to signify that it was secured.

“Place your thumb on the screen, please, Sergeant. And I will program your print alongside the Boss’s.”

Bucky nodded. “See if you can read enough variation in this one to make it a unique signature, okay?” he asked, putting his metal thumb on the screen.

FRIDAY scanned it, and then waited several moments before saying, “It is sufficiently unique.”

“You can’t fake it with a lead pipe or something?” Bucky asked wryly.

“No, Sergeant. The metal of your arm is unique, as are the minuscule variations of your thumb print caused by wear and tear.”

Bucky’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Thank you, FRIDAY.”

“No. Thank you, Sergeant,” she said, sounding much more like a grateful person than any AI should, in Bucky’s opinion.
Bucky glanced around the workshop. “He’s been working on it, hasn’t he?”

FRIDAY was silent. It was a full thirty seconds before she responded. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you what the Boss does when he’s alone.”

Bucky smiled sadly and nodded. So, Tony had been coming here alone to mess with the portal, before Bucky had confiscated the remote to go on his murder spree. Hopefully he hadn’t gotten anywhere with it. If he managed to alter it so it went through both space and time, Bucky didn’t want to see the results. He was more grateful than ever that FRIDAY had allowed him to add this check and balance.

“Understood.”

Steve was going through reports in the common area when Tony blew through the elevator doors almost before they’d opened completely.

“Where is he?” Tony shouted into the common room.

“Who you lookin’ for, man?” Sam called as he fried something that smelled like Steve would be stealing it later.

“Barnes,” Tony snarled out. “Where is he?”

Steve lowered his report and scowled in confusion.

Sam shrugged negligently. “Haven’t seen him. Have you checked the range? Usually when he’s not lurking somewhere, he’s shooting things.”

“What’s going on, Tony?” Steve called.

Tony whirled on him and pointed at the general location of Steve’s nose, or thereabouts. “Your Russian assassin has bypassed my workshop security!”

Steve stared at him.

Tony jabbed his finger through the air harder. “And! He did it with a print I can’t lift! I dusted every surface in his apartment and not one of them would unlock his damn scan! What the fuck did he use, his tongue?!”

Steve shrugged helplessly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I feel the need to warn you that if he knows you’ve been in his apartment, it’s not his tongue you’re going to be digging out of your ass.”

Tony pointed again in utter frustration and made a growling sound. “That is not the part you were supposed to address!”

Steve shrugged, completely unapologetic, and went back to his report.

Tony stood seething for a few seconds as Steve and Sam proceeded to ignore him. He finally waved his hands and shouted at the top of his lungs, “Barnes!”

“Yes, Tony?” Bucky responded in a soft voice.

Steve lowered his report again, only to see Bucky standing directly behind Tony and Tony whirling
around to face him. Now he sort of wished he’d been paying more attention so he could have seen which part of the woodwork Bucky had materialized out of. He was convinced that FRIDAY was helping Bucky move through secret passages or something, just for the shits and giggles of watching the jumpier members of the team scream when he appeared out of seemingly nowhere.

Tony gritted his teeth and pointed a finger at Bucky’s face. Bucky snapped his teeth at it and Tony looked like he wanted to smack him.

“What did you use to put the second print on the screen?”

Bucky cocked his head dangerously. “Playing with fire, were you?”

Tony huffed. “It’s my fire, I can play with it if I want.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Would Wanda agree with that?”

Tony huffed, and Steve set his report aside. Sam had turned the stove off and was leaning his elbows against the kitchen island, shoulders tense. This was no longer very amusing to watch.

“How did you bypass FRIDAY’s security to do it?” Tony asked through gritted teeth.

“I asked her nicely,” Bucky said, voice still deadly calm. “And because her first priority is your safety, she deduced that the request was one she could comply with.”

Tony blinked at him. “FRIDAY?” he shouted to the side.

“He is correct, Boss,” FRIDAY’s sad voice filtered out to them.

Tony stood stock still for a few seconds, him and Bucky staring at each other. Then Tony’s shoulders slumped and he bowed his head, covering his mouth with his hand.

Bucky watched him for a few more seconds, then he stepped closer and placed a careful hand on Tony’s shoulder. “I didn’t do it because I don’t trust you,” he said softly. “I just know how tempting it is to try to go back and fix something that hurts that much.”

Steve glanced over at Sam and saw that he had his head lowered, carefully not watching the moment. Steve wished there was a way they could both leave without drawing attention to themselves. He’d be forever befuddled by the friendship Tony and Bucky had forged, so it was still disconcerting to see the two of them like this.

Tony finally nodded and raised his head to look at Bucky. “I realized that even if I could tweak it to head back in time, there’s no way to know if it was even the right timeline. I could go to a thousand different universes and try to change things, and still never actually change it in ours.”

Bucky nodded, his hand still on Tony’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, well,” Tony shrugged, looking away. “I guess it’s good even I can’t bypass the security now. Means no one can break in and take it.”

Bucky smirked. He held up his metal thumb. “They can sure as fuck try to get to it.”

Tony huffed. “You used the metal one?”

Bucky laughed in his face. “Come on. How many versions of my thumbprint did you lift from my apartment this morning?”
“At least a dozen! Wait.”

“Yeah, I was there.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Where?”

“Right behind you, most of the time,” Bucky purred to him dangerously.

His voice made both Tony and Steve shiver, but probably for entirely different reasons. Oh no, Steve.

“Shouldn’t we just smash this thing?” Sam called as he came around the island. “Stark’s right, someone’s going to get wind of it, they always do. And they’ll come for it.”

Bucky glanced at Steve, wincing. “We can keep it safe,” he argued.

Steve knew why he was advocating for keeping it around when he’d been the one who first suggested they destroy it. He was looking out for Steve’s heart, just like he always had. Steve sighed and stood, crossing his arms protectively. “No,” he said softly. “Sam’s right. You were right, Bucky. We shouldn’t keep it around. It’s got too much potential for disaster, even if you are the only one who can work it well right now.”

They all three gave him sympathetic looks and Steve wanted to slink out of the room and go eat a pint of ice cream or something. He smiled wanly at them.

“Steve, are you sure?” Bucky asked softly.

Steve cleared his throat of the tightness forming. “They would understand.”

“I can take you to say goodbye.”

Steve shook his head. “We already said everything we can. Best to just . . . you know.”

Bucky stared at him, frowning sadly. He finally gave Steve that heartbreaking smile, the one that felt like goodbye. It was the same one Buck had given him when Steve had left the other world. Steve nodded again, more certain of his decision.

Tony pursed his lips and glanced between Steve and Bucky. “Dammit. Fine, you’re right. There’s no reason to keep the tech, no good can really come from it. Hell, Barnes has probably already dismantled the fabric of that other reality anyway, so fuck it.”

Steve scowled. Well, now he wanted to go check and make sure Buck’s world was still fabricated.

“Let’s go smash the damn thing,” Tony said as he stomped toward the elevator.

Clint dropped from one of the decorative beams in the ceiling, landing right in front of Tony and making him scream.

“What are we smashing?” Clint asked with a grin.

“How did I build a world-class building and then fill it with fucking assassins?” Tony shouted at all of them.

“You put a lot of decorative hiding spots in this place,” Bucky answered wryly.

Clint blinked, looking shocked and appalled. “Fucking assassins?” he echoed. He narrowed his eyes
at Bucky. “Are you getting laid in this joint? I’m not getting laid in this joint.”

Bucky gave him a noncommittal shrug.

“Dammit, Tasha,” Clint muttered morosely.

Tony shoved past him and got in the elevator. He stood there fuming and then waved his hands at them. “Well? Are we smashing this thing or not?”

They all piled into the elevator with him. No one wanted to miss a good smashing, after all.

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Steve’s sense for trouble was finely honed. It had needed to be, for him to live through the Depression as a sickly, combative little shit and then to get through the War with a literal target on both his front and back. His time with the Avengers should have made his Fuck Naw Sense one of the best in the world, really.

But it wasn’t tingling, and so when the shit hit the fan while the fan was on its highest speed, he wasn’t surprised, just disappointed in himself for not having seen it coming.

They’d laid the remote on the concrete floor of the workshop, so Bucky didn’t destroy yet another of Tony’s work tables. They all stood around it, ready to stomp any components that survived the initial blow. And Bucky crouched next to it, his arm whirring as he contracted the plates and made the arm stronger than a diamond plated drill. Steve realized suddenly that the whirring sound was kind of hot when he wasn’t the target of it.

Bucky glanced around at them all. “Goodbye vintage RCA remote,” he mumbled, then brought his hand over his head and slammed his fist down on the remote with all his strength.

It wasn’t pieces of plastic and electronics that flew all over the workshop, though. It was a beam of whirling light, expanding like the initial blast of an atom bomb and pulsing outward. Steve shielded his eyes, crying out as the light lanced right through his chest. He felt it on the rebound, hitting him in the back and dragging him forward like a lasso, picking him right up off his feet and launching him toward where Bucky had been kneeling.

When he hit the ground it knocked the air right out of him. He laid there motionless for a long time, trying to get his breath back. When he finally pushed himself up, he was shaky and woozy. He looked up to make sure everyone else was in one piece, and his heart dropped into his stomach. He wasn’t in the workshop anymore. He was in cold dirt and flattened grass. And the flashing, flickering light he’d thought was the broken lighting of the workshop was actually the work of tracers flying over his head, explosions in the distance, and the telltale bursts of gunfire from the wooded ridgeline straight ahead of him.

“Oh, shit,” he breathed, pushing up.

A metal hand came to shove his head back into the dirt. “Do not,” Bucky snarled. “Raise your head.”

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Tony groaned as the pounding ache in his head and the swirling nausea in his gut finally forced him back toward consciousness. Wow, that had sucked so much.

He blinked his eyes open and found that he was staring at a cloaked sky full of twinkling stars. The
cloud cover was thick and unusually low, and it took Tony a moment to realize it wasn’t a cloud at all, but a thick layer of smoke floating on the gentle breeze.

“Are we –”

A hand slapped over his mouth and Tony gave a muffled curse. Then lips were at his ear, whispering into it.

“Don’t speak. Don’t move. Play dead.”

Tony nodded minutely. He was pretty sure that gruff whisper belonged to Bucky. He hoped it did, anyway. If he was going to be transported to another world without his goddamn armor, a morally handicapped super soldier with seventy years of training and repressed rage would absolutely have been his first choice to guide him through it.

Tony laid motionless, blinking up at the sky and straining his ears. It was unusually quiet. No birds singing, no calling voices. He desperately wanted to look around, to find out where they were, but he trusted Bucky when he’d said to play dead, and that’s what he was doing. He’d heard at least two other people breathing, so he and Bucky weren’t the only ones who’d been struck by the remote’s blast. Tony didn’t know if that was good or bad. On the one hand, having more of the team here would help keep them alive. On the other, they knew the portal strained under more mass, so the return home would probably be just as painful as this trip had been.

The sky was turning pink and the stars were fading when a hand finally came to rest on Tony’s shoulder.

“Tony?” Steve whispered.

“I’m okay.”

Steve squeezed him and then removed his hand. “Clint? Sam?”

“Yeah,” Sam groaned.

“Here,” Clint whispered.

“It brought all five of us?” Tony asked, still staring at the fading stars.

“Looks like,” Steve whispered.

“Is it safe to move?”

No one answered him for a few seconds, then he heard rustling.

“Looks clear,” Bucky murmured. “We need to get to that treeline.”

“How can we be sure those are Allied forces?” Steve countered.

Tony scowled and rolled to his belly so he’d be able to see. Steve and Bucky were sprawled side-by-side on a slight incline, peering through high grass toward a ridgeline in the distance. Clint and Sam were both laying further away, both of them roughly where they’d been in relation to Tony when they’d all been standing in a circle around the remote. They were all in a depression in the ground, though it looked like an old one instead of having been newly formed by the blast they’d been caught in.

“Did you say Allied?” Tony hissed.
Both men turned to peer back at him, looking grim.

“Can’t we just zap out of here?” Clint asked, peering up at them from his back.

Bucky held up the remote in answer. It wasn’t as busted as it should have been, after going toe to toe with Bucky’s metal fist. But it was obviously handling things about as well as Tony was. Which was to say, not well at all.

“When I hit the ground, I think I landed on it,” Bucky explained, sounding apologetic like he could possibly have controlled where he’d landed. “We need to find a safe place to try it, if it doesn’t work but it gives us away while we’re exposed, we’ll be beyond fucked.”

“We’ve got to get out of these clothes if we’re going to be wandering around,” Steve murmured. “We can’t be taken for resistance around here.”

Bucky merely nodded, still looking grim.

“Do we even know where we are?” Sam asked.

“I’d say France,” Bucky whispered. “But it could also be Northern Italy, Southern Germany, or even Belgium. Hard to say.”

“You coulda just said, ‘No’,” Sam grumbled.

“We’re definitely near the front line,” Steve added. “If last night’s battle was anything to go by.”

“Did we go through time?” Tony asked, his voice and body both tense.

“There’s no way to know,” Steve answered. “It could be an alternate universe that’s just behind us, right?”

Tony nodded. “If we want to be safe, we have to assume this is our timeline until we see proof of otherwise. We can’t effect anything,” he warned. “You can’t save anyone. You can’t kill anyone. Even taking supplies from somewhere that might be needed down the line could fuck up our time. We have to be ghosts.”

“Like the dinosaur-killing stick,” Steve muttered to himself.

Tony scowled. “Yeah. Sure, like that.”

Everyone else nodded. Tony could tell they knew exactly what the stakes were right now. Good, that meant he didn’t have to continue to be the voice of reason.

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Steve glanced sideways at Bucky, watching the man’s eyes dart here and there. If they’d been in uniform, Steve could have tricked his mind into thinking this was a memory. He was terrified of what had happened and he knew how dire their situation was right now. But part of him, the part he often considered shameful and selfish, was elated to be lying in the mud with Bucky by his side again.

Bucky felt the attention on him and turned to meet Steve’s eyes. “I can get us uniforms, weapons,” he whispered.

Steve nodded. “Do it. And find us a way to that ridgeline.”
Bucky gave a curt nod, much as he always had when Steve gave an order during the War, and he began to pull himself through the trampled grass on his belly. Bucky had always acted as their scout, and he’d always been damn good at it. Steve had no doubt he still was.

“Where’s he going?” Clint asked. “Are we following?”


They waited in a horribly tense silence for almost thirty minutes. Steve was feeling his lack of a gun or the shield rather acutely by the time the twenty-five minute mark hit. When he heard movement several yards off, he reached for the gun on his hip that wasn’t there.

A low whistle reached his ears; high then low like a ding-dong. Steve returned it.

Moments later Bucky parted the grass to Steve’s right and rolled back into the furrow they’d been using as cover. Steve was almost positive it was an old tank barrage or maybe an errant bomb dropped from a fly over.

Bucky had a knife in his teeth, and he’d hooked a pack to his belt loop, dragging it behind him. He pulled it into the depression and the others all crawled closer as Bucky started pulling supplies out of it. When he emptied it, he pulled another pack from the grass that he’d had attached to the first.

He’d managed to get them all uniforms of varying description, identifying them as American troops. He’d even managed to almost get the right sizes. Steve also noticed a lot of weaponry he’d obviously salvaged off the bodies of soldiers who probably hadn’t been wearing the right sizes so he’d merely picked them clean and moved on.

“This is great, Buck,” Steve whispered as he struggled to pull the gear on over his jeans and T-shirt. They all shoved their shoes into one of the packs. Neither Tony nor Sam had even been wearing shoes.

“These are dead men’s clothes, aren’t they?” Sam asked grimly.

“They won’t need them, we will,” Bucky grunted.

“So, someone’s going to come across five naked soldiers at some point?” Tony asked, eyebrows high.

“I tried to pull bits from different bodies, so it wouldn’t be suspicious,” Bucky answered seriously. “If a patrol came across bodies stripped completely they’d put out an alert for imposters, make our lives even harder.”

Tony stared at him. “Huh.”

Bucky’s shoulders hunched as he pulled on a pair of boots. “What?”

“Nothing, it’s just . . . smart,” Tony offered with a small smile.

Bucky nodded uncomfortably. He and Steve helped the other three to get the uniforms on the right way, and Bucky handed Tony a shaving kit with an apologetic shrug. He handed Steve the sharpest knife he’d found and indicated his long hair. It took them almost an hour to be ready to move again, but when they did, Tony looked remarkably like Howard with that mustache, and Bucky . . . Bucky looked like Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th.

Steve had to swallow hard a couple times before he could speak again. “Did you get eyes on the
“ridgeline?” he asked Bucky.

Bucky grimaced. “German troops. We’ve got to go the other way.”

Steve risked raising his head high enough to see what the other way was. It was . . . a long way.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “We’re basically crawling through No Man’s Land.”

Bucky nodded curtly. “I can try to find a way, come back for you.”

Steve shook his head as he stared at the Allied lines, over a mile of open ground away. “No. We stick together on this one.”

“What were they doing trying to cross this last night?” Clint asked as he too peered over the expanse.

Steve shook his head. He knew he couldn’t possibly know about every skirmish that had taken place during the War, but none of this terrain or the massacre they’d witnessed last night was striking anywhere close to home.

“You’d be surprised how many damn fool things men have to do because their Ninety-Day Wonder was too proud to admit he didn’t know what the fuck he was doing,” Bucky grumbled.

“Did you find anything to point to where we are?” Steve asked.

Bucky shook his head. “Only thing I found was a sketch of a woman. The date was May 1944. So, we know we’re at least past that. Unless that was her name or something.”

“Shit,” Steve hissed. “This might be Overlord.”

Bucky nodded grimly. If that was the case . . . well, at least they could claim their unusual appearance in the midst of battle was from the confusion of the D-Day operation and not that they were deserting. Or from the future.

“Are we doing this, or not?” Sam asked with a wave of his hand toward the Allied lines.


They all nodded, and Bucky slithered up the opposite embankment and into the high grass.

==

Natasha and Wanda stood side by side, their hands on their hips as they took in the utter destruction of Tony’s workshop. Vision was inspecting the burn mark on the ground.

“It would appear the others have gone on an adventure,” he finally said as he stood, looking at Natasha and Wanda gravely.

“Well, fuck,” Natasha grunted.
Lucky Strike

They halted once they were within spitting distance of the Allied line. There were cooking fires and men sitting around them listlessly. There were soldiers milling. Bucky’s eyes scanned the camp, narrowing as he swiped his hand through the mud and dragged it across each side of his face.

Steve made his way to the front of the line to come to rest at Bucky’s elbow. “What do you think?”

Bucky hummed. “It’s small. If this is the D-Day invasion, it’s early days. Troops are still scattered. They’re not dug in. Using animal carcasses for the perimeter. But it’s big enough, and busy enough, for one man to slip in. I risk being grabbed by a superior officer and . . . I don’t know about you, Steve, but I don’t want to fight World War Two again.”

“Yeah, no,” Steve grunted. He peered at the encampment with sharp eyes, and Bucky waited. Steve’s tactical mind was one of the best in the history of warfare. Anyone who had seen him try to put on pants before coffee would never believe it, though. “Okay,” he finally whispered. “You go in, see if you can find any information to tell us where or when we are.”

“If you need to move, do it,” Bucky whispered. “I’ll find you.”

Steve nodded. “Keep away from officers if you can. If you’re given an order, follow it, and then get out. Keep an ear out for anything that might indicate this isn’t our universe.”

Bucky responded with a sharp nod and began to make his way through the grass toward one of the larger trees on the perimeter.

Other soldiers had always been appalled at the Invaders’ chain of command. Mainly because they hadn’t really had one. Steve had been the Captain, their leader, but they’d mostly run it like a democracy. And when Steve had given Bucky an order, Bucky had never replied with, ‘Yes, sir’ or ‘Yes, Captain.’ He’d always just nodded. It helped to remind them both that they had once been more than merely soldiers, and they would be again. The notion made Bucky want to laugh now, looking back on what they’d both become.

He waited with his head down as a patrol passed by, then crawled up to the bloated carcasses being used in place of sandbags and rolled over them, slithering up to the trunk of a tree that was large enough to offer him cover. When he reached it, he climbed to his feet and pressed against it, peering around it. If anyone saw him, he was just a soldier taking an ill-advised piss too close to the perimeter.

He picked a moment when eyes would simply slide off him, and he casually walked into the camp.

==

“Jesus,” Clint whispered at Steve’s right.

“Guy’s got balls, that’s for sure,” Sam added.

“I wish you’d all known him,” Steve murmured. “I wish you all knew how much of him is still just Bucky and not the Winter Soldier.”

When his words were met with silence, Steve risked a glance at his companions. Sam was looking at him with a sad, sympathetic light in his eyes. Tony had his head bowed.
Steve looked back at the camp, trying to find Bucky again. Clint patted his arm and pointed for him. Steve nodded, eyes following Bucky as he strolled through the camp. He walked up to a campfire and sat between two of the men, easy as you please, and Steve huffed a laugh.

He watched until he saw Bucky bum a cigarette and had one of the soldiers light it for him. He wouldn’t be moving again soon, so Steve edged around until he was closer to Tony. “I know you were trying to save him, too,” he whispered, and Tony looked up at him. “I wanted you to know . . . thank you. For giving a shit.”

Tony nodded sedately. “He’s a good kid.”

Steve smiled tightly and nodded.

“How’d we get here, do you think?” Clint asked after a few more minutes.

“Best theory is it was Barnes that brought us here, since he was the only one in contact with the device,” Tony muttered. “But with the blast pulling us all in like that, I guess it could have been any of us.”

“Had to be me or Buck,” Steve said with a wince.

“Were you thinking of your glory days?” Sam asked wryly.

“I don’t think so,” Steve answered tentatively.

“What I can’t figure is, if neither of you recognize this, how did either of you bring us here?” Tony said with a scowl. “If it was a stray thought, a memory at the wrong time, you’d have to have lived it.”

Steve nodded, still frowning along with the others. “I don’t know. There had to be something here, something nearby. When Buck comes back, maybe we’ll have some answers.”

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“Bucky?” a voice said behind Bucky as he took a drag off his bummed cigarette. Bucky’s shoulders tensed as the other soldiers glanced up and then all straightened. One of the younger ones actually stood and saluted the man who’d come up behind Bucky.

Bucky peered at all their faces, saw the awe in their expressions that he remembered all too well from the War. “Shit,” he said under his breath, sticking the cigarette in his mouth and turning to peer up at the man being silhouetted against the morning sun.

Steve Rogers was scowling at him, looking incredulous. He wore his vintage Captain America uniform, dirty and covered in all manner of grime and blood. “What the hell, Sergeant?”

Bucky cleared his throat and stood, straightening his shoulders as he faced Rogers. Rogers looked him up and down critically. “Where’d you get the Ike Jacket?” he asked as he eyed Bucky’s stolen M-44 style jacket. “And what the hell are you doing out of the aid truck? I just put you in there!”

Bucky opened his mouth to answer and he realized there was literally nothing he could say if Rogers had just left his other self behind in the surgical truck Bucky had seen set up at the rear of the camp, with its tent set up around it looking like the wings of a dragon. Bucky had always hated the surgical trucks the most. “I . . .”

“Jesus,” Rogers breathed, grabbing Bucky and staring at the blood on the uniform from the man who
had died in it. He snatched Bucky’s cigarette from his lips and threw it aside with a vicious growl.

“I wasn’t done with that,” Bucky muttered as he watched the tip of the Lucky Strike sputter. God, he hadn’t had a Lucky Strike is seventy years asshole.

“Fuck the cigarette, Buck!”

“You know what, I probably would! It’s sacrilege to waste a Lucky Strike, Steven.”

Rogers growled wordlessly and started pawing at Bucky to check him over.

“I’m okay,” Bucky insisted, trying to push Rogers’s hands away from him. If Rogers still had his Sergeant James Barnes, he would be more than mildly confused about all the extra muscle Bucky was carrying, not to mention the goddamn metal arm. Bucky could make it look like a flesh arm, but he couldn’t do anything about the way it felt.

Rogers grabbed the front of his jacket and yanked him away from the campfire, pulling him toward the trees.

“Rogers,” Bucky stuttered out, barely remembering that he’d tried not to address him as Steve in front of other soldiers during the war.

Rogers didn’t listen to any of his protests, continuing to pull him until they were out of earshot and behind another large tree. Rogers shoved him against the trunk and stepped close enough to hiss at him. “I told you to keep your ass in that aid station for another hour,” he snarled in Bucky’s face. “If anyone sees you up and moving after the hit you took last night, they’ll know. And they’ll have you in a lab in Los Alamos so fast even Colonel Phillips won’t be able to save you.”

Bucky blinked at him. What the fuck was he talking about?

“Bucky,” Steve growled. He shook Bucky like he thought maybe Bucky was zoning out on him. Was this a world where Steve knew what had been done to him? Was this a world where Bucky hadn’t kept the changes he’d noticed to himself, where he had shared them? Or Steve had figured it out. God . . . was this a world where he wouldn’t be left to languish at the bottom of a ravine because it had been a height too far to fall for a normal man?

“I’m taking you back,” Rogers mumbled as he put a hand on Bucky’s dirty cheek.

“Fuck, Steve,” Bucky grunted as inspiration hit. “The fuck you think I’m doing in this get up, huh? I needed to get out of there and no one knows me if I’m in regs. Not until someone comes up and yells my name everywhere, anyway.” He shoved at Rogers’s chest, scowling.

Rogers blinked at him. “Oh.”

“Go on, get outta here. I’ll go back to the fucking aid station.”

Rogers nodded, frowning harder.

“Find me later,” Bucky murmured more gently.

Rogers’s expression softened and he glanced behind the tree like he was making sure they hadn’t been noticed. Then he stepped closer and grabbed Bucky’s neck, forcing him into a brutal kiss. Bucky kissed back almost in self-defense, gasping in surprise and then damn near whimpering as Rogers shoved him against the tree.
“Sorry,” Rogers whispered against his lips, his hand trailing down Bucky’s torso like he was being careful of a wound. Thank God that would explain the frankly embarrassing sound that Bucky had just made. Rogers nudged him with his nose. “I just . . . I thought I lost you last night. Don’t do that to me again.”

Bucky nodded, his mouth dry and his lips still wet. Rogers stared at him a moment longer, then kissed him again, dragging Bucky’s bottom lip between his teeth as he pulled away.

“Now get your ass back to your cot, Sergeant,” he growled, his nose still pressed against Bucky’s cheek, his lips moving against Bucky’s. Good Lord . . .

Bucky blew out a breath, then gave a sharp nod.

Rogers kissed his parted lips one last time, then eyed him carefully. He shoved away from him and walked off without looking back. Bucky blinked at the woods in front of him, his knees a little shaky. “Holy shit,” he whispered.

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Steve was squinting at the movement in the camp when he heard the whistle. He hurried to return it, and in mere seconds Bucky barrel-rolled over their little hill and slid in beside him, breathing hard.

“Okay?” Steve asked, patting at Bucky’s chest like he might have been hit somewhere.

“We are definitely not in our universe,” Bucky answered, still panting.

“Report,” Steve ordered as the others crawled closer.

“I ran into you,” Bucky mumbled, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth. “He knew about the serum from Zola, and he dragged me behind a tree and kissed me in a way that was definitely not the first time.”

“He kissed you,” Steve repeated, casting an offended eye at the camp again.

“Focus, Cap,” Tony said with a teasing grin.

“We’re embedded with R-Force,” Bucky continued. “Just outside of Calais.”

“What?” Steve grunted. He stared at the ground, frowning harder and harder. R-Force had been part of the deception operations coinciding with the D-Day Normandy invasions. Their actions had caused Hitler to send the bulk of his force to Calais, anticipating the Allied invasion to land there from Dover. But all of the physical deception in the plan had stayed in England, where they’d faked troops building up across the Channel and allowed false radio intercepts and reports from double agents to lend plausibility to the coming attack. It had been vital to the success of Operation Overlord. They’d never actually physically landed anyone in Calais, though, it would have been suicide to do so with all the German forces amassing there. What the fuck were they doing here?

“Apparently in this world, they actually crossed,” Bucky said, obviously thinking along the same lines as Steve had been. “They put Captain America at the head of it to bulk up the distraction. There are . . . this is a skeleton crew – most of those kids haven’t even seen combat before, they’re all paper pushers – facing at least fifteen German divisions. I never got a date, but if it’s still June then it would be more. It’s no fucking wonder last night was a massacre.”

“Shit,” Sam hissed, glancing around them.
Bucky nodded in agreement. “We gotta get the fuck out of here. Everyone in that camp is going to die bloody.”

Steve rubbed both hands over his face, groaning. If this wasn’t their world, all the knowledge both he and Bucky had of the War from experience and their knowledge of it from their future lives was meaningless.

“Let me see the remote,” Tony said, and held his hand out for it. Bucky grimaced and dug around for it, pulling it out and handing it over. Tony turned it over and peered at it, mumbling to himself.

Steve put a hand on Bucky’s chest. “You okay?”

Bucky nodded. “I just . . . I kept thinking, if he knows, then maybe . . .”

“We could have found you,” Steve whispered, digging his fingers into Bucky’s jacket. His heart was going double-time, possibilities swirling through his mind. Bucky was right, of course, if Steve’d had even an inkling that Bucky had been given the serum, that he might have survived the fall from the train, he would never have stopped looking. He would have still been looking on the day the Valkyrie launched, and the world would never have been the same.

Bucky’s haunted eyes staring at him told Steve that Bucky was thinking the same thing. He was breathing harder. “Is this a world where Hydra wins?” he whispered to Steve, horrified.

“I . . .” Steve shook his head. He couldn’t possibly answer.

He knew one thing, though, he suddenly wanted to jump up and run into that camp and shake this world’s version of himself, tell him to get on that plane no matter what he had to leave behind to do it.

“If what you’re saying is true,” Sam whispered. “Then you two never even get far enough for Barnes to fall. You both die here.”

Bucky nodded, closing his eyes. Steve knew what he was thinking. The urge to go in there and get their counterparts out was . . . it was almost too strong to fight.

“If I have the right components,” Tony finally said, yanking Steve from his spiraling thoughts. “I can get this working. I think.”

“And what components do you need?” Sam asked.

Tony shook his head. “We won’t find them in World War Two era France.”

“So, we’re stuck here?” Clint asked, sounding way too calm.

“How did this happen?” Bucky asked almost desperately. “Was this me?”

Tony winced. “Probably?”

Bucky laid his head back against the ground and sighed up at the sky. He squeezed his eyes closed, gripping the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

“Whatever the other Stark put in this thing to power it, it must generate a forcefield of some sort, almost like one of the stones that powered Loki’s staff or the Tesseract,” Tony was saying, mumbling like he was talking to himself. “When the metal of your hand connected with it at such force, it activated it. We basically forced it to defend itself.”
Bucky still had his eyes closed, and he was shaking his head. “We should have just pulled it apart piece by piece. Dismantled it. Fucking stupid.”

“No point in crying about it now,” Sam finally said. “Question is, what the fuck do we do?”

“Well. One option is to just smack it around and think of home,” Clint offered.

Tony peered at him, considering that suggestion for way too long in Steve’s opinion.

“You’re sure we can’t find what you need?” Steve asked a little desperately.

Tony sighed, his expression grim. He pulled the battery cover off the remote and turned it so they could see the faintly glowing blue cylinder inside. It kind of looked like a AAA battery to Steve. Except for the flickering glow. And the blue.

Steve pointed and grunted. “Wait, I know what that is.”

Tony nodded. “It’s a bullet, right?”

“Yes,” Steve answered, staring at Tony with a growing smile. “I found a clip of them in the factory in Kreichsberg. Other Steve must have as well, and his Tony wound up with them from Howard.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I did too. Got nine of them back home, ready to use. Too bad we’re not there.”

“But we know where to get another one,” Steve said excitedly.

“That factory is a pile of rubble right now, Steve,” Sam pointed out.

“All we have to do is bag a Hydra soldier,” Clint said with a shrug. “Steal a clip. Then we’re good, right?”

Tony nodded, then he made an ‘ehh’ sound and shrugged. “It would solve the power problem. But it won’t fix the rest of the components.”

“Can you fix them?”

“I mean . . . maybe. It would be a very, very rough patch.”

“But it would still be a patch,” Steve said hopefully.

Tony sighed like a teenager over a crush. “Way I see it, Cap, our best option is to just press the button and see what happens.”

Steve closed his eyes and heaved an almost equally impressive sigh, resting his head against the ground beside Bucky’s.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky offered to them all. “This is all on me.”

“It is absolutely not,” Tony snapped.

Before anyone could argue further, a call arose from the Allied camp. Steve turned to look, scowling as he watched men jump up. He caught sight of the Captain America uniform sprinting across the camp, rallying men into action.

Bucky twisted and craned his neck, looking from where he still lay on his back. “Shit,” he
whispered. “He went back to the aid tent faster than I figured he would. They must have realized I wasn’t his Bucky.”

“Oh, this can’t be good,” Clint murmured.

“Push the button,” Steve ordered, scrambling to grab at Tony and pull him closer. The others huddled close, all of them certain to touch each other. Bucky’s arm was all the vibranium they had on them, but they would just have to deal with the consequences. It was that, or getting chased down in No Man’s Land, a pincer between the German and Allied forces who would both be very interested in why Steve had Captain America’s face.

“Everyone needs to focus on the same thing,” Tony said hurriedly.

Steve closed his eyes, frowning.

“The landing pad on the tower,” Sam suggested.

Steve nodded and held his breath.


Steve braced himself, focusing as hard as he could on the landing pad. There was a whoosh and a pop, but Steve had to wait to open his eyes so he could offer up a little prayer to anyone listening.

When he did risk opening one eye, his heart sank. They were still exactly where they’d been.

“Not enough power,” Tony mumbled. “We need a new battery.”

“Okay, Plan B,” Clint hissed, peering over Steve’s shoulder.

“Run?” Tony suggested.

“Fuck,” Steve growled.

“If you can all stay low, I can get us out,” Bucky mumbled. He still had his eyes closed, like he was blaming himself and himself alone.


Bucky gave a sharp nod and rolled to his belly, heading to the left this time.

Steve waited until the other three had passed him, and then he fell in, taking up the rear guard once more. He trusted Bucky implicitly in situations like this. It was how they’d lived through every battle of the War that hadn’t involved a train.

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The problem inherent in having Bucky Barnes lead them out was that the man leading their pursuers . . . was Bucky Barnes.

Tony realized it at almost the same time as Bucky must have, because he called a halt and flattened himself to the ground. The rest of them did the same, and Tony peered over the heads of the others, trying to figure out what the hell Bucky was doing up there. He looked like he’d just faceplanted into the dirt and given up. Which . . . Tony felt his pain, but now was not the time.

Steve crawled past Tony and Clint, coming up beside Sam just in time for Bucky to reverse and face
them. He’d covered his face in dirt. He pointed at his chin, then jabbed a finger at Steve. Steve nodded, and he pulled himself closer to let Bucky cover his face. Bucky was very deliberate about it, running heavy cakes of mud along Steve’s jawline, his cheekbones, and around his hairline. He finished his masterpiece by running his muddy hands through Steve’s hair, darkening the blond to a nice Pantone Blood and Guts Brown or some shit. Steve stared at him in obvious confusion as Bucky frowned through his work.

Tony was probably frowning like that too.

Then Bucky locked eyes with Clint, and Clint nodded like he understood what Bucky was trying to get across. Tony was all kinds of lost. He clutched the remote to his chest to make himself feel more useful. Steve looked just as lost, which made Tony feel even better about himself. Steve knew warfare. Spycraft was obviously not his thing.

Bucky pulled closer, whispering to all of them as low as he possibly could as men searched the trees not twenty yards away. “They’ve outflanked us. Most of the soldiers went North and East like they logically should have. But a small patrol broke and pulled South. They’re going to find us, there’s nowhere for us to go.”

“Why’d they pull South, that makes no sense?” Clint asked with a wave of his fingers.

“That’s why. It’s what I would have done,” Bucky told them grimly. “Seems like Sergeant Barnes is out of the aid tent.”

Steve nodded silently, his jaw jumping.

“They think they’re only after one man,” Bucky continued. Tony could barely hear him. “You four lay low, be silent. If you have to kill, do it quiet, anyone who comes near you. Save the guns. If I’m not back in half an hour, you raise holy hell. I’ll rendezvous with you.”

“Buck, no,” Steve growled.

“You got another plan, Steve? They’ll shoot us for spies if they find us all together.”

“He’s right, Steve,” Sam offered quietly.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Rogers,” Bucky said, offering Steve a smirk that made even Tony’s belly flutter, Jesus, this kid was something else when he was in his element. “But this’ll be easier on me if I’m alone.”

Steve huffed and nodded angrily. Tony had never seen such an incensed agreement.

Bucky turned and crawled through the grass, making much faster time than he’d been when he’d been leading them.

Steve lowered himself to his belly and sighed, swiping a finger through the mud caked on his face. Tony edged closer so they were all together and could speak safely.

“Why’d he do that to just you?” Tony asked. “Should we copy?”

Clint was shaking his head. “It won’t hurt to dirty us all up so they don’t look out of place. But he’s trying to change Steve’s bone structure,” he explained. “In case we’re taken. He did it to himself too, but . . .” Clint shrugged. “He’s already been made. And frankly, mud can’t hide Steve’s shoulder to waist ratio.”
“How the hell is he going to talk his way out of this?” Sam asked Steve.

Steve shook his head. “He’s not. He’s going to fight his way out of it. He’ll take out the smaller patrol to give us a head start.”

“Oh, man, that don’t sit right,” Sam mumbled.

Steve’s expression remained grim and angry. “I know, Sam.”

They were all silent, letting that sink in. Then Tony saw hands pop up above the tall grass about a hundred yards in front of them. “Don’t shoot!” Bucky shouted. In a . . . Southern accent? “I’m American!”

Tony grunted. “I got an idea.”

“Tony, no,” Steve hissed.

“Tony, yes,” Tony whispered as he started crawling toward where Bucky’s hands were held high.

Men converged on Bucky from the trees almost as soon as he’d finished his last words. He stayed motionless, on his knees, hands held high. Letting them come. He’d intended to incapacitate them and then move into the camp to give the others time for a clean break, but when the patrol got closer he cursed under his breath, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

The only faces in any universe he couldn’t make himself raise a violent hand to, and they were all pointing M1 Garands at him and shouting for him to shut his fucking mouth before they fed him a bullet. Bucky did as they said, putting his hands behind his head, watching them approach.

Dugan. Falsworth. Morita. Jones. Dernier. They were all there. Men he hadn’t seen in seventy years. Men he’d known he’d never get to say goodbye to. Men he’d loved as brothers. They were here, in the flesh.

And Bucky was suddenly helpless. He wouldn’t fight them. He couldn’t. He let them pull him to his feet. Let them take every single weapon he’d scavenged off the battlefield.

Jones and Morita held their rifles on him as Dugan walked a few paces away. Falsworth yanked a handkerchief out of his jacket and roughly wiped the mud from Bucky’s face, then stepped back, staring at him with wide eyes.

“Hey, Cap!” Dugan called out shakily. “We got us something interesting here!”

Bucky gritted his teeth as two more men came out of the forest. He knew Vintage Steve from the tell-tale silhouette of the armor he wore. Those shoulders couldn’t belong to anyone else. The man beside him, though. Bucky’s blood ran cold as the man sauntered into the sunlight.

He remembered that blue peacoat. He’d loved that coat. He also remembered suddenly being able to slip through the shadows like a wraith, to stalk through trees and underbrush without making a sound. He just never realized he’d looked quite like that when he’d done it. No wonder soldiers had always cleared out when the Invaders had strolled into camps.

Vintage Steve and Vintage Bucky approached, Barnes hanging a step behind, rifle cradled in his arms. It was obvious he hadn’t quite fully recovered from whatever grievous wound he’d suffered the night before by the careful way he held himself. Fucker had felt good enough to chase Bucky’s
ass down in the grass, though.

Rogers stalked right up to Bucky and pulled his sidearm, pointing it at Bucky’s forehead. “You have ten words to explain why you have my sergeant’s face,” he snarled.

Bucky pressed his lips into a thin line, narrowing his eyes. Before he could speak, though, to his absolute horror, he heard someone else’s mouth begin to run instead.

“Oh, good! You found him for me!” Tony called as he stomped through the tall grass like a rhinoceros trying to kill a spider.

Half the guns swung toward him, and Bucky turned his head just enough to be able to gape at the man. He had his hands spread wide, that showman’s grin on his face.

Rogers’s gun wavered. “Howard?” he called uncertainly, peering against the sun.


Rogers lowered his weapon, but Bucky was very aware that none of the others did.

“I see you found James,” Tony continued, pointing at Bucky. He was grinning the same way he did when he was showing off a new bit of tech to the team. “He’s very convincing, huh?”

The men all glanced at each other, communicating silently just the way Bucky remembered. Barnes, though, didn’t take his eyes or his gun off Bucky. He was staring at Bucky like he knew every single little dark secret Bucky had ever kept. Bucky stared back at him, letting himself smile slowly, because he knew it was utterly terrifying to be on the receiving end of that.

“What exactly is he supposed to be convincing us of?” Rogers finally demanded of Tony.

“He’s supposed to convince you he’s Bucky Barnes. Seems it worked,” Tony said, shoving his hands in the pockets of his uniform jacket and rocking back on his heels.

Rogers stared at Tony for a second, then looked back at Bucky with growing horror. He was apparently just processing the fact that he’d kissed the wrong man earlier, and what the consequences would be if anyone found out. It wasn’t just a blue ticket home for Captain America. It would be much more public than that. He raised his gun again, aiming it right between Bucky’s eyes. Yeah. That’s probably what Bucky would have done, too.

“Jesus, please don’t shoot him,” Tony said in exasperation. “You know how much money went into making him look like that?”

Bucky grunted. Excuse you, he’d grown this face himself, thank you.

Rogers hesitated, glancing at Barnes. Barnes shrugged negligently and slipped a cigarette into his mouth. “So, you’re supposed to be my double,” he said to Bucky. “They running another pointless deception on Hitler, get more men killed?”

Bucky shrugged, wincing as he tried to drag up that Southern accent again. “I don’t know. I just do what I’m told.”

Barnes gave him a wry, humorless smile. “Don’t we all.”

“Hitler is not our objective,” Tony said as he moved closer. They all still had guns on him, but they
were allowing him to approach. He likely looked and spoke enough like Howard that he had them convinced. “We’re after Hydra.”

The Invaders all shared frowns, and Rogers and Barnes lingered over the scowls they shot each other.

“What the hell is a Hydra?” Rogers finally asked Tony.

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Steve stared at the group of men through the camouflage of the grass, flanked by Sam and Clint. Clint had a rifle, keeping it aimed on whichever man he thought would cause the biggest distraction when he went down. Steve winced. Probably the guy with the star on his heart.

Steve was still trying to process the inconceivable words he’d just heard his doppelganger utter when a distant whistle caught his ears. Steve put a hand on each of his companion’s heads and shoved them down, trying to cover them.

Bucky heard it at the same time, and he lunged forward. “Incoming!” he cried at the top of his lungs.

Steve knew he was trying to save them. But the men with the guns didn’t know that, and they opened fire as soon as Bucky hunched his shoulders and ducked his head.

The first bullet came from Captain America’s gun, hitting Bucky from merely six feet away and throwing him to his back.

The mortar barrage Steve and Bucky had heard coming hit before Steve could do more than scream Bucky’s name.
Tell Me A Story, Mr. Barnstaple

Bucky actually saw the first mortar round streaking over the sky toward the encampment in the treeline because he was flat on his back and groaning at the time. He looked down at his chest, fully expecting to see blood since he couldn’t breathe.

There was a hole in the front of the jacket, smoking gently in the breeze. Bucky poked his finger through and hit something metallic. The mortar round hit and the ground shook beneath his spine. Wow, Bucky had not missed the feeling of those things on his eardrums at all.

When he pulled the jacket away from his chest and slipped his fingers into the inner pocket, he found a matte black Zippo lighter, along with the flattened bullet Captain Asshole had just shot him with.

Another mortar round hit, accompanied by men screaming and the sound of a tree cracking to pieces and hitting the ground.

Bucky plucked the bullet out of his pocket and blinked at it before tossing it away. “Jesus.”

A man dove to his knees beside Bucky, hands on his chest and scrabbling over his uniform. “You hit?” Vintage Barnes asked him breathlessly.

“No?” Bucky answered in confusion. He held the badly dinted Zippo up as if to explain.

Barnes grinned around the cigarette in his mouth. Bucky flicked the cap off the Zippo and offered him the flame, and Barnes lit his cigarette as more mortar rounds made the ground shake around them. “Thanks,” he said around the cigarette in his mouth, then he pulled Bucky off the ground and began dragging him in a zig-zag scurry toward the trees.

“Barnes!” Rogers shouted over the explosions from the cover of the trees. “What are you doing!”

Bucky and Barnes slid behind a rise in the forest floor and covered their heads as another round hit not ten feet away from them.

“Their aerial range is impressive,” Bucky shouted.

Barnes huffed and hunkered down further. “Tell me about it! Up to a mile and a half, they say.”

Bucky turned and draped his left arm over both their heads, squeezing his eyes shut as tree bursts rained down on them like confetti at a woodchuck’s birthday party.

The barrage lasted another five minutes. Once it stopped, both men in the improvised foxhole stayed motionless, knowing better than to pop their heads up first after something like that.

“I know you ain’t a double, pal,” Barnes said solemnly, his voice muffled by Bucky’s arm still draped over his face like Bucky’s favorite teddy bear.

Bucky narrowed his eyes at the dirt under his nose. “Yeah?”

Barnes grunted. “Can’t fake the kind of shit those eyes have seen. And you heard that mortar before even Steve did. You got vitamin juice in you, too, don’t ya?”

“Yeah,” Bucky grunted. He turned his head so his cheek was in the dirt instead of his mouth, and he removed his arm from Barnes’s face. “Fair enough deductions, I guess. Would you believe me if I told you I’m you from an alternate universe?”
Barnes was as silent as the forest around them, staring up at the sky. Then he sighed, long and loud, and put his cigarette back into his mouth. How he'd kept it intact, Bucky didn't know. “Yeah, sure. Why not. I read *Men Like Gods* when I was a kid.” He shifted his shoulders and craned his head to peer over the edge of the foxhole.

Bucky scowled, trying to remember the book. He couldn’t, but if it was helping Barnes get his mind around it, then whatever. “Okay.”

“Buck?” Steve’s voice called through the ensuing silence. “Barnes!”

“Stay where you are, you goddamn disaster!” Barnes called back. Then he muttered, “Jesus Christ.”

“Tony?” Bucky asked as he risked a peek around the forest floor.

“He made it to the trees,” Barnes answered with a careless shrug. “He really Howard’s cousin?”

“His son, actually,” Bucky answered blithely.

Barnes was silent, smoking the magic cigarette. He took a deep drag, then blew it out. “So, alternate universe *and* the future?”

“It’s a long story,” Bucky mumbled.

Barnes waved elegant fingers toward the ruined trees around them. “We got some time.”

Bucky shook his head, rolling fully to his belly and pushing up on his elbows. “I don’t. We had more people with us.”

“Yeah, three in the grass,” Barnes said with a nod.

Bucky looked down at him sharply.

Barnes raised an eyebrow and took another drag off his cigarette.

“Did they run for cover?”

Barnes nodded. “Got to admit, that’s when I realized you ain’t really my double. They can fake his face all they like. They can’t fake those shoulders.”

Bucky snorted. “Did they get to cover?”

Barnes shrugged carelessly. “Far as I know.”

“Thanks for coming back for me.”

Barnes made a clicking sound with his tongue. “Can’t answer questions if you’re smoldering.”

Bucky made to push up so he could go find the others, but Barnes jabbed the barrel of a Colt 1911 into his ribs and made another clicking sound, narrowing his eyes. “Tell me a story, Mr. Barnstaple.”

Bucky’s brow furrowed in confusion for a moment, but then smoothed out as he placed the name.

“Oh, yeah! I do remember that book!”

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Tony had been dragged to the treeline by two of the alternate Howling Commandos and then been
sat on so he wouldn’t try to run back and go after Bucky. They’d left him out there in the open, and Tony knew even a direct shot like that wouldn’t kill him immediately. He needed help.

The men wouldn’t let him run out into the mortar barrage, though, and Tony supposed that was nice of them and all.

It was the loudest thing he’d ever heard, which was a real feat considering all the stupid shit Tony had done over the years. When it was over, he tried to raise his head, but the man with the bowler hat grunted at him and pushed him back down. “Damn eggheads, got no sense,” the man muttered.

The other man in their foxhole, Morita, just huffed a laugh.

“Is he alive?” Tony gasped as Dum Dum Dugan wiped splinters of wood off his shoulders and hunched down in the hollow they’d dived into.

“Hell if I know!” Dugan answered happily. “Sarge went after him. Damn fool.”

Tony realized he was trembling slightly, and he tried to shake out his shoulders and take a few deep breaths to calm himself. He heard yelling through the trees, but his ears were still ringing enough and he was still stunned enough that he didn’t catch the words.

Finally, he heard Rogers call out, “Invaders!”

Dugan grunted and made to get up. Tony stared at him. “What’s an Invader?”

Dugan scowled at him. “I am. Howard sent you to us but you don’t know what we are?”

Tony blinked up at him. “You’re the Howling Commandos,” he muttered. “Everybody knows that.”

Dugan barked a deep laugh. “The who now?”

“Guy’s out of his damn head,” Morita grumbled as he walked away.

Tony shook his head, staring off into the ruined trees as Dugan climbed out of their hole. A few seconds later, hands grabbed roughly at his arms and lifted him bodily out of the hole, setting him on his feet.

Rogers tightened his grip on Tony’s bicep and shook him, the barrel of that damn Colt 1911 pressed under Tony’s chin. “Come on,” he growled dangerously, tugging Tony to start walking.

“Jesus, Rogers,” Barnes drawled from somewhere amongst the smoke filtering between the trees. His silhouette broke through the smoke a moment later, and Tony had to suppress a shiver. “Let the man go.”

Rogers’s grip only tightened on Tony’s arm, but he did lower the gun, at least. “You okay?” Rogers called.

Barnes pulled the stub of a cigarette out of his mouth and tossed it to the ground, nodding in answer. A moment later Bucky strolled out of the smoke behind him.

Rogers pointed the 1911 at him, pulling Tony closer to him like a hostage. Tony couldn’t help but be relieved, though. Bucky looked okay, considering Tony had been expecting a sucking chest wound.

“When was the last time you field-stripped that thing, huh?” Bucky asked Rogers wryly. “Probably got mud caked on the firing pin.”
Rogers looked at the gun in his hand, then glanced at Tony.

“Steve,” Barnes said again, more harsh. “Let him go. They’re okay.”

Rogers seemed dubious, but the iron grip on Tony’s arm did ease off. Rogers finally shoved him away a step and Tony grunted at him, biting his tongue to keep quiet.

“You okay, Tony?” Bucky asked softly as he came closer.

Tony nodded, still a little stunned.

Bucky checked him over, hand on his face as Bucky peered into his eyes. “Just breathe,” he advised, patting Tony’s cheek gently. “It’ll fade.”

“Right,” Tony croaked.

The sound of running feet on the forest floor had them all turning, weapons raised. The man Tony knew to be Jacques Dernier sent a low whistle that Rogers returned before he came into sight, breathing hard. Then he started speaking rapidly in French.

“He’s saying the camp has been destroyed,” Bucky murmured to Tony. “The mortars were concentrated over there, that’s why we had it easy.”

“That was easy?” Tony said distantly, blinking at the mangled trunk of a tree nearby.

Bucky merely hummed.

“Any survivors?” Rogers asked Dernier.

Dernier shook his head. “Non. Rien.”

Bucky cursed and turned his head to whisper to Stark. “No survivors.”

“Yeah, I understand non,” Tony grunted.

“Smartass.”

“That means . . . we just saved the lives of the Howling Commandos in this universe,” Tony whispered.

Bucky just hummed again, glancing around the forest.

Rogers rounded on them, that gun still dangerously close to pointed at them. “We’d have been in that camp if you hadn’t shown up,” he snarled at Bucky.

Bucky jutted his chin out, squaring his shoulders. “You’re welcome, asshole,” he said, leaving the fake Southern accent on the wayside.

Rogers blinked at him, then glanced at Barnes, who was smirking and had his head lowered like he was trying to hide it. He looked up when Rogers turned to him, then shrugged. “H.G. Wells here has a story for you,” he drawled to Rogers.

Tony turned to Bucky, eyes wide. “You told him the truth?” he blurted.

Bucky gave him an almost identical shrug to the insolent one Barnes had just given Rogers. “Sometimes it works!”
“Oh, my God,” Tony mumbled, then literally facepalmed as he stood in a bombed out forest in World War Two France.

“We have to find our other men,” Bucky said to Barnes, and Barnes nodded agreeably, apparently deciding to cut Rogers out of the chain of command altogether.

“Hold on, now,” Rogers said, putting a hand on Barnes’s chest as he stepped forward. “What the hell is going on?”

Barnes gave Bucky a narrow-eyed grin. “That might be easier to explain once we dig up his buddy.”

==

Steve was hunched over with his back against a log, head hanging. Clint and Sam were still curled up against the log, covering their heads, but Steve was as certain as he could be that the barrage was over. They’d been further away from it, thank God, because there hadn’t been cover anywhere near them. One stray mortar had landed about fifty feet away, but that was it.

His alternate self had just shot Bucky. Steve couldn’t quite get his mind around it. It . . .

There was a distant whistle, the same ding dong tune they’d used during the war. Steve narrowed his eyes, wondering if this universe’s Steve and Bucky used those whistles as well. It came again, but Steve remained where he was, shaking his head.

“Steve?” Bucky’s voice came through the forest. Steve jerked, looking up.

Clint and Sam both stirred, unfurling carefully and glancing around.

“Stevie?” Bucky called again. “Come on, pal, I always hated hide and seek!” He muttered something else that sounded like, “Fucking tiny asshole could hide anywhere.”

Steve peered over the log. There was no way to know which Bucky that was, or which Steve he was searching for.

“Jesus, okay. Clint?” Bucky called through the lingering smoke.

Clint glanced at Steve, wide-eyed. “That one’s ours.”

“Sam?” Bucky tried.

“Come on, Cap!” Tony added. “Where the fuck are they?”

“You’re going to bring the entire German army down on our asses if you keep yelling,” another voice hissed.

“Buck?” Steve called to them carefully. He poked his head over the log only to see five or six figures stalking carefully through the forest, weapons raised.

One of the men broke away from the line, heading toward their hiding spot. “Steve?” Bucky said carefully. He whistled again, for good measure, and Steve returned it. Bucky sped up, making his way over the terrain easily. When he came into view, it was indeed their Bucky, with the stolen Ike Jacket and holding an M1 cradled in his elbow. When he finally caught sight of Steve’s head, his shoulders slumped. “Oh, thank God.”

“How are you okay?” Steve blurted as he scrambled over the log and rushed toward Bucky.
Bucky dug in his pocket and pulled out a mangled Zippo. “Lucky Strike, or what?”

“Sweet Jesus,” Steve gasped. He grabbed Bucky and hugged him fiercely.

Bucky patted his back ineffectually, murmuring in his ear. It was the sweetest sound Steve had ever heard.

“Clint and Sam?” Bucky asked.

“We’re here,” Sam said from behind the log.

“Come on out. We’ve . . . come to an understanding with the Invaders.”

“What’s an Invader?” Clint muttered as he and Sam helped each other over the fallen log.

Bucky turned and gestured toward the seven men who’d come to watch their reunion curiously. Tony was with them, arms crossed over his chest and looking kind of grumpy, considering he was still somehow alive.

“They’re the Invaders,” Bucky answered. “And we told them everything.”

Steve did a double-take, gaping at him.

“Jesus,” Rogers breathed as he stepped closer, looking Steve up and down. “How is this possible?”

“This would be a conversation better had elsewhere,” Falsworth said softly. “Perhaps not directly ahead of an advancing German battalion?”

Steve jarred at his voice. He hadn’t heard it in so long, and he looked past Rogers to stare at the other men. He glanced at Bucky. “What’s the date?”

Bucky shrugged and looked to Barnes, eyebrows raised.

“June 4th,” Barnes offered, smirking. “1944.”

“Oh, my God,” Bucky grunted.

“What are you doing in Calais?” Steve demanded of Rogers. “Being here right now is suicide.”

“We go where we’re ordered,” Rogers ground out. He sounded like he agreed, though. "The deception wasn’t working, they needed an added push to keep the troops here."

The others moved closer, gathering around. “If I’ve ever seen time for a tactical field retreat, this is it, Cap,” Dugan offered.

“I have to agree,” Falsworth said. “We knew this was folly when we crossed the Channel.”

Rogers sighed and looked over Steve’s team with narrowed eyes. He waved his hand at Steve’s face. “How the hell are we supposed to explain this to Phillips?”

Steve shrugged helplessly. “Maybe don’t tell him?”

Rogers stared at him, then he looked over his shoulder at Barnes, who was lighting a cigarette. He flipped his Zippo closed and took a drag before blowing the smoke upward and grinning. “Told you he was you.”
Instead of making tracks away from the approaching German troops, Rogers forced them to circle back and do one more canvass of the camp. The first look Bucky got at it, though, he knew anyone who’d been here hadn’t lived through the shelling. The camp had been hilariously under-fortified, with no foxholes dug and no cover ready-made. The commanding officer had probably never been in combat, and whatever NCOs they’d had hadn’t been much better. They hadn’t even set up camp out of range of the German mortars.

Barnes came to stand beside Bucky. “We tried to tell them,” he said, obviously knowing exactly what Bucky had been thinking. “They were never supposed to see combat, this unit. They were part of the press corps. Supposed to stay in England, film movies. Make fake recordings, send false radio signals.” He shook his head and tossed his cigarette away in disgust.

Bucky stared at him, then glanced at several of the dead bodies sprawled in the dirt. “Their telegrams will say they died heroes.”

Barnes hummed. Then he began to sing under his breath as he moved away. “So, goodbye dear, I’ll be back in a year. ’Cause I’m in the Army now . . .”

Bucky nodded as he watched him walk away. He’d been pretty goddamn disillusioned by this point in the War, too. He didn’t think he’d been this . . . obvious about it, though. He wondered what the team had been used for, if they weren’t being pointed at Hydra.

“Don’t I look handsome, dressed up like this,” Barnes was still singing as he picked weapons and ammunition off the dead bodies he checked.

Yeah. Bucky had never been this obvious about being sort of crazy already, he was pretty sure.

They gathered all the supplies they could from what was left, then fell into a loose formation and started making their way toward the coast.

Barnes fell in beside Bucky in the rear guard. The man always looked sort of amused. It was disconcerting to see on his own face. “What year are you from?”

Bucky cleared his throat. “Two-thousand fifteen. But it doesn’t really matter, none of this ever happened to us.”

“So, you can’t tell us our future, huh?” Barnes said carelessly. Bucky honestly couldn’t tell if the man believed him or was simply humoring him until they got to SSR headquarters and could lock them up. It’s . . . probably what he would have done, to be honest.

Bucky swallowed hard at the thought of what he had been facing ahead of him in June of 1944, though. He shook his head. “No, I can’t.”

Barnes glanced at him, and he began to slow his pace until they’d fallen back a little more. “Your friend mentioned Hydra,” he said under his breath.

“Yeah?”

“They did exist,” Barnes whispered, eyes darting toward the shield on Rogers’s wide shoulders. “They were a special Nazi division.”

“Science division,” Bucky offered.
Barnes nodded grimly. “The SSR supposedly wiped them out in ’40.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes, glancing up at the others and slowing even more. “If Hydra was gone by ’40, then how exactly did you get your vitamin juice?”

Barnes cleared his throat, lowering his head.

Bucky stopped and grabbed his arm, halting him. They stood in the middle of the muddy road, completely open to enemy fire, the rest of the men continuing on, unaware that they’d stopped. “Were you a POW?”

Barnes narrowed his eyes dangerously. “Yeah.”

“I’m guessing you left some things out of your report when you got to London.”

Barnes darted his tongue over his bottom lip, glancing at the receding backsides of the others. “Do you know what the Ahnenerbe Organization is?”

Bucky scowled. “No.”

Barnes jerked his head, indicating that they should keep walking. They did, keeping pace with the others but still hanging back.

“They were involved with Hydra, when it was active. Mostly digging up shit from the past, trying to prove Germans are superior. Reports are saying they’re part of the SS now.”

“Archeologists,” Bucky said flatly.

“At first, yes. Hydra married them with scientists, doctors. People who –”

“Yeah, I know that much,” Bucky grunted.

“Okay. They dug up all kinds of weird shit, sent it to a lab to see what could be done with it. Hydra fell apart when Agent Peggy Carter killed Johann Schmidt, but the rest –”

Bucky stuttered to a stop, grabbing at Barnes’s blue coat. “What?”

Barnes glanced at the others. Sam and Gabe had both turned to look at them, and the others were slowly realizing they’d lost their rear guard and coming to a confused stop.

Barnes narrowed his eyes at Bucky to warn him to be quiet, and they caught up with the others.

“Okay?” Sam asked Bucky.

Bucky nodded curtly, glancing at Barnes again.

Peggy Carter had killed Schmidt in 1940. Jesus Christ. Bucky was going to kiss her so hard when he saw her. Without Schmidt’s fanaticism and flair for the dramatic, Bucky could very well see how Hydra would have kept to the shadows during the War, though. That didn’t mean they didn’t exist.

So, Hydra was probably still out there. But if Schmidt had been dead for that long . . . that also meant the Tesseract was probably still sleeping in Norway, and they’d never be able to get that battery Tony needed to power the remote.

“Shit,” Bucky hissed.
Barnes glanced at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Have you ever seen special weapons?” Bucky asked him carefully. “Weapons that glow blue when they’re fired?”

Barnes looked down at the ground, watching his feet as he walked. After a few moments of thought, he said, “No. I’ve heard the Russian tracers are green instead of red,” he offered with a shrug. “Never heard of blue, though.”

“Oh, God,” Bucky groaned.

“Alright there, pal?” Barnes asked wryly.

“We’re so f**ked.”

Barnes started laughing softly. “Welcome to Europe.”

==

Dernier managed to use his Resistance contacts to secure them a small boat, and they all huddled down in the dark as they made their agonizingly slow way across the Channel from Calais to Dover.

The sky in the distance was on fire, anti-aircraft guns were blasting all along the coast, the bursts revealing the outlines of hundreds of Allied planes heading toward the coast of Normandy. If they were closer, they’d probably be able to see the parachutes.

“Wow,” Tony breathed as he watched. Clint and Sam were staring, too, entranced.

Steve couldn’t make himself look, though. He sat near the bow with his head down, eyes closed.

A warm shoulder pressed to his, and he looked up, expecting Bucky. It was Bucky. Just not his.

“So,” Barnes said with a wry smile. “A different universe, huh? Is every Steve as dumb as a brick, then?”

Steve grunted at him.

“Did you do the same damn fool thing my Steve did to get this size?”

Steve wanted to shift away, but Barnes was warm and familiar against him. God, Steve had missed that blue coat more than he’d ever realized. The one in the Smithsonian was a replica. It had never smelled right.

“Project Rebirth?” he asked, voice gruff.

Barnes nodded wearily and slumped against the hull.

“Then yeah, I guess so.”

Barnes huddled up in his coat, getting comfortable and probably using Steve for warmth. “James seems to think your situation is pretty dire.”

Steve stared at him. “James?”

“That’s what Stark called him.”
“He goes by Bucky.”

Barnes snorted. “Not in my house, he don’t.”

Steve was surprised by the soft whuff of laughter he gave to that. “That’s fair, I guess.” He stared into the darkness, trying to make Bucky out of the other huddled shapes in the boat.

“He thinks you can’t get home.”

Steve sighed. “We’ll figure it out.”

Barnes merely hummed dubiously. “If you say so, chief.” He kept on humming, turning it into a tune that pricked a memory somewhere in Steve.

Barnes stared up at the fireworks display that was taking so many Allied lives above them, and to Steve’s shock, he began to sing softly. Bucky had always been a singer, and he’d been good, good enough the SSR had recorded him one night when they’d been planning a mission and Bucky had inexplicably broken into song in a far corner of the room as he was moving things around on a map by himself.

But it had been so long since Steve had heard him do it, Steve had almost forgotten how that lovely baritone could make chills run up and down his spine. His voice was no louder than the slapping of the waves against the hull, but Steve placed the song almost immediately. It was a melancholy tune without the accompanying lively orchestra, and Barnes’s rich voice made it even more dark somehow.

“She may thrill you to the skies, with the moonlight in her eyes,” Barnes sang, his own eyes lit up with the reflection of the anti-aircraft barrage. “But moonlight fades away when night is done.”

Steve stared at him. To the utter joy of the goosebumps on his arms, and the utter horror of everything else on the boat, Bucky joined in for the next round, their voices matched exquisitely and making the normally upbeat song sound languorous and foreboding.

“You may kiss her if you can, but be careful little man. Just remember that’s the moon, my son.”

“Barnes, Jesus,” Dugan grumbled. “Can’t you sing something happy for once? Only you can make the damn Andrews Sisters sound like a funeral march.”

Barnes answering grin was visible only because of the light show in the sky and his white teeth being bared.

==

“Are we going to be fucked we don’t have . . . like, papers or something?” Clint asked nervously as they disembarked in the dead of the night just west of Dover.

Rogers grunted, peering at them all in the darkness. “We’ll vouch for you if we’re stopped.”

“But we don’t get stopped,” Barnes added with a smirk that made Tony want to take a step back.

In fact, yeah, Tony did take a step back, huddling up closer to their Bucky who was not, in fact, as scary as Tony had always believed. At least their Bucky was straightforward in being a demented matryoshka murder doll. This Bucky was all shadowy edges and amused smirking drawls that, Tony couldn’t quite explain why, but were terrifying.
He turned to whisper into Sam’s ear. “Is it just me?”

“No,” Sam answered quickly, shaking his head.

It took them longer to get to London than if they’d been back home in the middle of rush hour, but Tony wasn’t complaining. It could be worse; they could be in Normandy right now.

When they reached London in the early morning hours before the sun had risen, Tony couldn’t help but stare wide-eyed at everything. This was London post-Blitz, and it was kind of astonishing. Tony could have spent days and days here and never gotten bored of the things he was seeing.

He’d half expected to be marched into the SSR headquarters and remanded, but Rogers ordered the men to make themselves scarce until noon the next day, and they dispersed talking about which tavern they should spend their time in.

Rogers and Barnes stayed behind, both looking grim. “Come with us,” Rogers ordered, and they meandered through the streets, past bits of rubble and windows covered with blackout curtains, until they reached a boarding house. They all filed in, and Barnes went to secure them rooms.

Steve and Bucky were both staring at the place, Steve looking a bit misty-eyed. “I remember coming here,” he whispered.

Rogers cocked his head, eyes darting between the two of them. “So, you two,” he pointed at them and flapped a hand uselessly.

Steve raised both eyebrows at him and Bucky actually had to stifle a chuckle. “Fondue?” Bucky asked teasingly.

Both Rogers and Steve coughed, blushing as they refused to meet anything with eyes. Yeah, Tony had heard that story from Howard enough to need a moment so he wouldn’t laugh, too.

“No,” Bucky answered, still trying to fight back laughter.

Rogers frowned in confusion. “Then why did you come here?”

“Has the best pipes in the city,” Steve answered. “Hot water.”

“WACs,” Bucky answered with a shrug.

Steve and Rogers both rolled their eyes at him, looking away with almost identically clenched teeth. Fascinating.

“I’m guessing we aren’t here for a midnight assignation,” Tony said pointedly to get them back on track.

Rogers shook his head in answer as Barnes came back with three room keys. He handed one to Rogers, one to Bucky, and one to Tony.

“Are we, uh, going to have to smuggle Sam here upstairs?” Tony asked them with a wince.

“Fucking great,” Sam grunted.

“No,” Barnes answered with a quizzical look at Tony. “Why?”

Tony faltered and waved his hand at Sam’s face. Sam was glaring at him.
Barnes and Rogers shared an even more confused glance, then looked back at Tony like he was insane.

“Because I’m black, is what the asshole is trying to say,” Sam provided.

“Oh,” Rogers blurted. “Uh, no. He’s fine.”

He and Barnes turned almost as one and headed for the stairs.

When they all looked to Steve for an explanation, Steve just shrugged. “The English were a hell of a lot better to our black soldiers than we ever were.”

Sam scratched his chin. “Huh.”

They had to scramble to follow the other two up the steps to their rooms. They bypassed the two extra ones and all piled into one room together.

“Okay, I need a better explanation for how and why you’re here than, ‘it’s a long story’,” Rogers demanded as soon as the door had been locked behind Clint.

Tony pulled out the remote and set it on the end of the bed. “This brought us here.”

Rogers and Barnes both edged closer to peer down at it. “The hell is that?” Barnes grunted.

“In the future, that will change the stations on a television,” Bucky answered. He sat on the side of the bed and his shoulders slumped.

Tony hummed. “And, add a little bit of alien tech to it, and it’ll flip you through the multiverse.”

“Aliens? No. You know what?” Rogers muttered, glaring at the remote. “Forget the how and focus on the why.”

“We don’t know,” Steve answered. “We were trying to destroy it, because it’s dangerous. But when we did, it brought us here instead.”

“Dangerous how?” Rogers demanded.

“Well for one, you were probably supposed to die this morning in that mortar attack,” Clint told him wryly. “So who knows what we’ve already changed in your world.”

“I, for one, think change is good,” Barnes said with a wry smile.

Rogers grunted at him, obviously unamused. “So, all you’re trying to do here is get back to your universe. Right?” he asked, staring at Steve pointedly.

“That’s all,” Steve assured him.

Rogers and Barnes shared a glance, and Barnes nodded after a few seconds.

“Okay,” Rogers finally said with a determined nod. “What do you need?”

“A power source,” Tony answered immediately. “The thing that powers that has been drained bringing us here. We either need to replace it, or find a way to recharge it. There are also several pieces that I need to replace. If I can have access to Howard’s lab, I can do it in five minutes.”

That made Rogers shift uneasily. He stared down at the remote for a long time, then nodded. “You
need the lab, or things in the lab?"

“I can make a list.”

Rogers gave that a curt, unhappy nod. “Do it.”

“What about the power source?” Barnes asked, sounding casual but also like he might have been teasing one of them. Tony wasn’t sure which one it might be, though.

Bucky was still sitting on the bed with his head hanging. Tony glanced worriedly at him, wondering if he was hurt or if he was just drowning himself in undeserved guilt again. Clint sat beside him, patting him on the knee. Even Sam was watching him with a frown.

“The power source,” Tony repeated distractedly. “Well. I know there’s one in Norway.”

Rogers made a strangled sound as Barnes laughed heartily. “You want us to invade Norway?” Barnes crooned. “Oh, my God, Steve, if they don’t go home can we conscript them?”

Rogers looked up at the cracked ceiling of the room like he was begging a higher power for patience.

“Actually,” Steve murmured, frowning. “I think we could get into Norway.”

“Steve, no,” Bucky groaned, hiding his face in his hands.

Barnes was suddenly scowling at them both, his brow furrowed in thought. He took the list of components from Tony to read over it, looking up with a quirk of his eyebrow. Tony nodded. Barnes patted Rogers on the shoulder. “You boys hang tight here. James and I have somewhere we need to be,” he said, and moved toward the bed, tapping Bucky on the head and then beckoning with a curl of his fingers.

Bucky peered up at him, frowning in confusion. Barnes jerked his chin, indicating for Bucky to follow, then headed for the door.

“Wait, what?” Steve blurted. “No, we can’t split up.”

Bucky stood though, still frowning at Barnes, almost suspicious but mostly just like a raccoon confused by a locked trash lid. “It’s okay, Steve,” he said. “We’ll be fine.”

Rogers gave a long-suffering groan. “Just don’t let anyone see you both, huh? If the SSR thinks it has two Barneses to deal with, they might just forfeit the war out of despair.”

“Ha,” Barnes said flatly, and yanked the door open.

Bucky turned and made a calming gesture with his hand at all of them, then followed the other him out of the room.

==

Bucky waited until they were out of the boarding house before he spoke. “Wow,” he said as they walked side by side. “You must be hiding something big.”

“You know how Steve tends to rampage first and then ask questions of the rubble after?” Barnes mused.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered dejectedly.
Barnes nodded, covering his lighter with a cupped palm as he lit a cigarette. “Yeah.”

“Where are we going?”

Barnes blew a stream of smoke into the air and handed Bucky the cigarette. “Whitehall.”

Bucky frowned and took a drag, handing it back. “SSR Headquarters?”

Barnes nodded. “I’m pretty sure I got a solution to your power problem.”

Bucky waved a hand. “I’m all ears.”

“Best to just show you.”

They were quiet the rest of the way there. Walking through the deserted streets after curfew wasn’t the brightest of ideas, but being an SSR agent offered a lot of pull. Bucky wasn’t exactly worried about being stopped.

Getting into headquarters wasn’t as easy, but Barnes was able to get them through almost every checkpoint unseen, and distract the few people who did see them from looking too closely at his new friend, allowing them to make it to the underground bunker without issue. Bucky was suitably impressed with his counterpart at this point.

They skirted past the War Room, where several people were inside, discussing the absolute failure of the ruse at Calais and how Captain America and the Invaders were all currently MIA.

Barnes glanced back at Bucky, grinning. “Oops,” he whispered when they passed by that conversation.

Bucky barely restrained a snort of amusement. They made it to Howard Stark’s lab, and Bucky slowed once they got inside, peering around. He hadn’t been here in so long, and hadn’t ever expected to see it again. He found himself grinning.

Barnes was on the other side of the massive space already, and Bucky jogged over to him. He’d just finished putting in a combination to an antique safe and was pulling the heavy door open. He cracked it just enough to slip inside. Bucky made to follow, but Barnes put a hand on his chest.

“Stay there,” he said. “This thing tends to close on its own, and I don’t think I need to tell you how bad that would be tonight.”

“Right,” Bucky grunted, putting his foot between the safe door and the edge of the vault. He could still see Barnes clearly, so it wasn’t like he needed to suspect him of anything.

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Barnes was peering up at boxes set on shelves, reading the labels quickly and then bypassing them. Finally, he grunted and pulled one down, carrying it closer to Bucky and placing it on the floor so they could both peer into it. He lifted the top off, and Bucky had to blink a couple times before he could process what he was seeing.

The clip glowed a gentle blue, full of Hydra bullets made from the Tesseract.

Bucky knelt with a grunt and stared at it.

Barnes was watching him carefully. “I’m sorry I lied about the blue weapons,” he offered. “I wasn’t sure why you were asking, at the time. Not until I saw that remote.”

“It’s okay,” Bucky whispered. “Do . . . does Hydra have these?”
“No,” Bucky answered. “I swiped this when I was being held by them. You know Zola?”

Bucky growled deep in his throat before he could stop himself.

“That’s a yes,” Barnes said with a dark laugh. “He became head of Hydra after Schmidt was killed. He tried to defend the factory when Steve stormed in. The prisoners were able to take control of it, and once we were all out, we blew it up. Zola and all his toys with it. Everyone there knew what weapons like those could mean for the world. That was essentially the end of Hydra in every form. Even Steve didn’t know about them, he thought he’d just blown up a Nazi science lab.”

“And the cube?”

Barnes shook his head. “I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s . . . it’s what this blue power came from. It’s best left missing, if you catch my drift.”

“I do indeed. Well, unless someone goes digging through the rubble we left behind, it’s safe for now.”

Bucky looked up and met the other man’s eyes, breathing harder. “I honestly don’t know if I should tell you to go find it and hide it better, or to leave it where it is.”

Barnes nodded. “Understood,” he said solemnly. He picked up the clip and held it out to Bucky. “I had this on me when we escaped. I had forgotten about it until later. I hid it. Last thing I need Howard Stark getting his hands on is these things.”

“You’re not wrong,” Bucky murmured, taking the clip.

“I put it in the old files so it’d be safe. They’re meant to be incinerated in a year’s time. In case I, uh . . . didn’t make it,” he said with a tight smile. “It’s best for everyone if you and your friends take it off our hands, don’t you think?”

Bucky stared at him, both impressed and saddened that the man had gone to such lengths to hide something he obviously didn’t even know the true power of. “You did good,” he finally whispered.

Barnes gave him another strained smile and stood. He looked over Bucky’s head and cursed quietly. Bucky stood and spun, the safe door sliding closed beside him as he found himself staring at Peggy Carter.

“Sergeant?” she barked. “How the hell . . . how are you alive?” Peggy cried as she rushed toward him and pulled him into a tight hug.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded as she stepped back and took his face in both hands. “We thought you all lost!”

Behind his back, Bucky slid the clip into the crack left in the safe door and felt Barnes take it off him. “We, um. We were hit by a mortar barrage. We lost everyone.”

The color drained from Peggy’s face. “Steve?”

“No,” Bucky said quickly, taking her hand and squeezing it. “No, the team is all okay. The others, though.” He shook his head. He couldn’t fucking remember what unit they were supposed to have
been with! Shit.

“Where are they?”

“We had a rough road back. Rogers sent them to rest before we reported in.”

Peggy sighed heavily and closed her eyes, both her hands on his chest. She rested her forehead against him for a minute. “Thank God,” she whispered.

Bucky patted her back carefully. He heard the safe door groaning as it slid inexorably shut, but he had to hope Barnes would keep it from closing entirely because Bucky didn’t have a clue what the combination was if the man got trapped in there.

“Uh. I should probably get back, I said I wouldn’t be gone long,” he tried, taking Peggy by the shoulders and gently removing himself from her grasp.

She smacked him in the chest and he winced as the Zippo lighter pressed into the giant fucking bruise that 1911 had made when Rogers had shot him.

She apparently just then noticed the bullet hole. “Have you been shot?” she cried, pulling at the jacket.

“No! I lost my jacket. Had to . . . borrow one. For the Channel crossing. It’s fine. We’re fine. I really should –”

“Yes, fine, fine. Go on. But you are going to be explaining some things in the morning, Sergeant!” Peggy growled, pointing a flawless fingernail in his face.

Bucky stared at her, beginning to grin almost uncontrollably.

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “What?”

“I’d just forgotten how beautiful you were, Peg,” Bucky answered sincerely. He took her face in his hands and pressed a chaste kiss to her lips. "Damn, it's good to see you."

She rolled her eyes, groaning as she shoved him away. He had to tense up so he didn’t slam against the safe door and close it.

“Honestly,” she huffed as she turned on her heel and stomped away.

Bucky waited until he heard the door slam behind her, then he turned to pull the heavy door open and peer inside.

“Jesus,” Barnes groaned. “I’m gonna get it from both ends for that shit.”

Bucky laughed. “Better you than me, pal.”
A note that I wanted to put on the last chapter, but I didn’t want spoilers ahead of it and I know links within a story can be frustrating on mobile devices, so I’m putting it here instead. A few things.

This is an Ike Jacket, or Eisenhower Jacket. It’s technically called the M44. President Dwight D Eisenhower, who was at the time commanding general Dwight D Eisenhower, began wearing this style after seeing British paratroopers and how functional the short waist was, so he told his tailor, ‘I want that but, like, more swag.’ And it was considered swaggy by the troops. By November of 1944 the Ike Jacket had become standard issue to be worn as cold-weather layers under the longer M-41 and M-43 field jackets that most people think of when they see Band of Brothers replaying on Spike for Memorial Day. But in June of ’44, when Steve finds our Bucky at the campfire in Chapter 5, Bucky wearing an Ike Jacket would definitely have made Steve give a confused puppy headtilt for more reasons than it not being Bucky’s jacket.

The aid station Steve is all hot about Bucky escaping from, in this instance, was a surgical truck. Most aid stations were in tents of varying sizes, and they were usually pretty far back from the front lines. I took a guess, basically, that a unit like the one in the story would have been sort of on its own, though, and went with the surgical truck instead.

The first song Vintage Bucky sings in Chapter 6, when he’s inspecting the bodies, is Goodbye Dear, I’ll be Back In A Year, which came out in ’41 or ’42, depending on how long you can focus to Google for its information idk. It had a couple of releases. The better version, if you want to listen to it, is from the Dick Robertson Orchestra.

The second, the one both Buckys sing while watching the beginning of the D-Day invasion from the water, is Steppin’ Out Tonight sung by the Andrews Sisters. And God, their voices just sound like the 40s to me. That’s the version Vintage Bucky would have known (it’s from a movie called Private Buckaroo and you cannot tell me Bucky didn’t get called that at least once by everyone he ran into before they learned). But it’s got such a melancholy undertone, I was curious if anyone had redone it to sound like I imagine Vintage Bucky’s thousand yard staring ass would have sung it. I found this version if you’re interested. It’s still not quite as ominous as I imagined it being in that boat, though.

Ah, Jesus this is getting long and I haven’t even talked about guns yet. This is why writing that WW2 story is going to be such a heinously stupid idea, folks.

Originally I had Barnes tell Bucky ‘Liverpool Street’ to indicate SSR Headquarters. I chose that because in the movie, there’s a bus that drives by with Liverpool Street as the destination before they show you the war rooms, and since there was (I thought) no other indication where it was, I figured fuck it. But it bothered me while I was writing this note, so I looked again and noticed that it’s goddamn Big Ben in the background, which would put the SSR directly in the Cabinet War Rooms. Which….makes the SSR headquarters one fuck of a lot easier to find, dude. I changed it accordingly in the story.

I’ve taken what I would have said here about the guns (both in the story and in canon
because I started talking about Bucky's weapons and I could not stop.) and put it as a second chapter to my stupid timeline, if you're interested in having visuals for the story and/or watching me slowly unravel and reveal that I sit at home alone and clean my guns . . . go for it.

I think that's it . . . I'm sorry . . .

Rogers beat Steve to the door once they heard the creak of footsteps from outside, but only barely. He yanked it open and then grabbed the front of Barnes’s blue coat, dragging him into the room. “Where the hell have you been?” he snarled, just inches from Barnes’s face.

Barnes merely quirked an eyebrow at him and shoved him away with a hand planted firmly on his face. “Back up.”

Rogers grunted and made a sound close to a growl, but he did back up and let them into the room. Bucky closed the door firmly behind him and gave Steve an inscrutable look. There were so many questions running through his mind he almost couldn’t grasp a single one of them, but Steve kept his mouth shut. For now.

Barnes was still giving Rogers a warning look when he laid an Army issue duffel bag on the bed and gestured toward Tony. “Got everything on your list.”

Tony clapped his hands together and moved toward the bed, beginning to drag things out and lay them out on the quilt. Clint and Sam hovered, watching but not touching.

“We’ll leave you to it. In the morning we’ll figure out the power problem, hm?” Barnes said, giving Bucky a significant look that Steve didn’t understand and Rogers apparently didn’t see.

Bucky returned it with a small, almost sad smile and a nod.

Barnes patted Steve on the shoulder, then knocked his knuckles against Bucky’s left arm. “I never thanked you for covering my head with that during the shelling. Must come in handy,” he drawled.

Bucky gave him the most dead-eyed glare Steve had ever seen. “I’ve got a metal arm and he’s got jokes.”

“You have a metal arm?” Rogers blurted in horror.

Bucky pulled his glove off and waggled fingers that looked real. He’d never used the cloaking mechanism in front of Steve before, and Steve had sort of forgotten that he’d done it. Bucky reached under his coat and shirt and touched something, and the skin blinked away to reveal his real metal arm.

Rogers’s jaw dropped. Instead of asking what had happened, he turned blazing blue eyes on Steve. Steve’s eyes widened and he straightened his spine immediately. “You’re supposed to watch his back!” Rogers shouted at Steve. “You’re supposed to take care of him!”

“Whoa, now,” Barnes murmured, stepping between them and patting Rogers’s chest.

Bucky moved almost counter to him, coming to stand beside Steve so he could either help or prevent Steve from launching himself into a fight with his own goddamn self.
“That’s enough,” Barnes said softly, speaking almost into Rogers’s ear. “They ain’t had it easy either, Steve. Leave it alone.”

Rogers’s jaw worked back and forth and then he nodded, lowering his head. “I’m sorry,” he said to Steve.

Steve merely nodded, not sure if he could actually verbally respond. The man was right, he was supposed to take care of Bucky, and he hadn’t. He’d let him fall. He’d let him be taken. He’d let him suffer through seventy years without him.

Steve swallowed down the tightness threatening, grabbing Bucky and pulling him closer by his hip without even realizing he’d done it.

Rogers and Barnes made their way toward the door, but Barnes stopped before he got to the hallway, turning and reaching up to unbutton his coat. “Almost forgot,” he said softly. He gestured at Bucky’s chest. “Switch with me, Cary Grant.”

Bucky immediately pulled the bloody Ike Jacket off and handed it over, taking the blue coat hesitantly. “You sure?” he asked, glancing from the coat to Barnes, who was smirking.

“Can’t very well walk in tomorrow wearing a coat I already told them I lost, can I?” Bucky snorted. “Sorry about that.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” Bucky agreed, grinning.

“I’ll get another one,” Barnes drawled as he turned away.

“Yeah, but you’re gonna pay for it,” Bucky shot back. Steve had to admit his belly did a little flutter when Bucky pulled the blue coat on.

“Don’t I know it,” Barnes grunted, following Rogers’s angry shoulders down the hall.

“What’s he talking about?” Rogers asked, turning to frown over his shoulder.

“Our boy planted one on Carter and told her she was beautiful.”

“Oh, my God,” Rogers groaned as he opened a door down the hall and they both disappeared inside.

Steve bit his tongue until the door was closed and locked. “You saw Peggy?” he asked the first chance he got.

Bucky gave him a melancholy smile. “She walked in on us, I was the one she saw so Vintage Bucky hid.”

“And you thought kissing her would get rid of her?” Steve asked wryly.

Bucky smiled serenely. “No.”

Steve snorted, shaking his head. “Where the hell did he take you, anyway?” he demanded, barely keeping his voice to an agitated whisper.

“Whitehall,” Bucky answered with a smirk. “That kid’s got more secrets than I ever kept from you.”
Steve grunted and gave Bucky a hard glare. “Considering I never realized you were healing at a rate of one gunshot per battle, that’s hard for me to believe.”

Bucky shrugged carelessly and reached into the inner pocket of the blue jacket he’d just been given. When he pulled an object from the inner folds, it glowed a familiar, faint blue. Steve gaped at it.

Tony darted forward. “Where the hell did you get that?”

“Barnes stole it from a Hydra factory before they wiped it off the face of the earth,” Bucky said, handing the clip to Tony. “He kept it hidden, knew it was bad news so he didn’t tell anyone. Not even Rogers. That’s why he didn’t tell Rogers where we were going. And . . . that’s why we can’t tell them goodbye when we leave tonight.”

“Shit,” Steve murmured as Clint and Sam shared uncomfortable glances. They had kept quiet so far, and they apparently intended to keep doing so. Steve sort of wished one of them would ask some damn questions so he wasn’t the only one doing it.

“No one can know he had those, or what they are,” Bucky continued. “They’ll go dig up the Tesseract and we all know it’s better left buried.”

Steve nodded, chewing on his lip. He didn’t want to leave without telling the other men goodbye, or good luck. He was struggling with the fact that he wanted to see Barnes one last time, too, even though the man was very different from the sergeant Steve had known.

“We have ten of those now,” Bucky said, apparently ignoring the fact that they wouldn’t be able to see the others again. “If we can’t get home with that, we’re well and truly fucked.”

“We’re not fucked, I got this,” Tony assured him, taking the clip back to the bed and beginning to fiddle. He spread everything out and then muttered, turning back to Bucky. “Where’s my screwdriver?”

Bucky patted his chest and then grunted. “Wrong coat.” He had just turned to the door when there was a knock.

Bucky opened it, and Barnes stood there, smirking just like Bucky used to during the War. Steve stared at him, unable to blink the overlay of memory away. Barnes held up the screwdriver and handed it to Bucky, who huffed a laugh and took it, turning to hand it to Tony.

Once Bucky had moved, Steve lurched forward and threw his arms around Barnes, hugging him tightly as Barnes tensed against him.

Barnes gave his back a pat. Then another one. “Okay,” he said gently. “Alright, we’re apparently having some feelings.”

“Thank you,” Steve muttered, refusing to let the man go even though he was obviously uncomfortable and tense.

“If we hadn’t been chasing you boys down in the woods, our guys would have died in that shelling,” Barnes said as he finally returned the hug. “You saved my boys, so . . . thank you.”

Steve cleared his throat and backed away, lowering his head.

Barnes was watching him knowingly. “I guess I’m in for some real shit, huh?”

Steve shook his head. “No. This place is very different from our world. You’ll be fine.”
Barnes snorted and glanced over Steve’s shoulder at Bucky, who was very carefully not watching them. “A version of me from another universe shows up with a metal arm, and you’re still a shitty liar in every version of you. Amazing.”

Steve grunted.

Then Barnes hit his left forearm and popped something out of his left hand, tossing it to Steve.

Steve almost fumbled it, but he held on to it, frowning down at it for a second before realizing what it was. He looked from the little jar of Vaseline up to Barnes, blinking stupidly and beginning to blush like a goddamn virgin bride on her wedding night.

Barnes winked at him, smirking as he turned away. “Sleep well, fellas.”

Steve was still blushing furiously as he closed and locked the door.

“I’m going to need a couple hours,” Tony told them. “But then we should be good.”

“We should probably take a few hours to sleep, too,” Sam said as he stood and stretched his back. “I don’t know about everyone else, but two days of slogging through Nazi-occupied France on three hours sleep is not something I’m handling well.”

“Same,” Clint grunted.

Tony had already transferred all his newly acquired materials to the desk near the window and was working by the light of a small oil lamp. “Yeah, sure, sleep,” he said, waving the screwdriver over his shoulder. “Go for it.”

The four of them shared shrugs, then Sam gave Steve a little grin. “Here, Cap,” he said, handing Steve the key Tony had been given. “You and Barnes take the third room. We’ll crash here.”

Steve took the key and frowned at Sam. “You sure?”

Sam looked down at the little jar of Vaseline Steve was still clutching. “Yeah, man.”

“We’re sure,” Clint added with a decisive nod.

Steve immediately shoved the jar into his pocket and cast a furtive glance at Bucky. He was standing over Tony’s shoulder, watching with interest. “I hate you both,” Steve muttered to his so-called friends.

Steve had to say Bucky’s name twice to rip his attention away from what Tony was doing. Bucky looked back at him with wide, innocent eyes. “Huh?”

“Come on,” Steve said softly, nodding his head at the door. “Let’s go grab a few hours.”

Bucky nodded, turning to pat Tony on the shoulder before joining Steve at the door. Steve dutifully ignored the grins Sam and Clint were shooting him, and he closed the door firmly behind them.

“You okay?” Bucky asked as they headed for the third room.

Steve nodded jerkily, his hand still in his pocket fiddling with the little glass jar. It wasn’t military issue, because military issue Vaseline had come in the same 1-pound tin cans that the beans did. That meant this was Barnes’s . . . personal supply. God, that made it even worse, didn’t it?

“Steve?” Bucky said softly, standing at their door and waiting for Steve to unlock it.
Steve grunted and moved to do so, unable to really meet Bucky’s eyes. He got the door unlocked and shoved it open, but Bucky caught his arm before he could go inside and hide somewhere.


Steve finally forced himself to meet Bucky’s eyes, and once he did he couldn’t look away. Bucky was peering at him in confused concern. Steve jerked his head, putting a hand on Bucky’s hip and urging him to go into the room. “Come on.”

Bucky went silently, and he started to strip out of the top layer of his dirty, bloody clothes as soon as Steve had the door shut. “You’re being weird,” Bucky mumbled as he laid the blue coat over the back of the chair at the little writing desk.

Steve whistled to get Bucky’s attention, and the little ding-dong tune they used on the battlefield had Bucky snapping to attention and looking at him out of long-ingrained habit. Steve was blushing again, goddammit, but he still managed a mischievous smirk when he tossed Bucky the jar.

Bucky caught it a lot more gracefully than Steve originally had, and he blinked at it for a second before jerking his head back up to stare at Steve. “Where’d this come from?”

“Barnes.”

Bucky snorted. “What an asshole,” he said fondly, then tossed the jar onto the bed. “You planning on using that tonight, Rogers?”

Steve hummed, nerves fluttering through him. He waved a hand at the room. “This is where we should have done that, the first time. If I’d been braver.”

Bucky cocked his head and smiled gently. “Probably so.”

Steve found himself moving before he even registered it, and stepped right into Bucky’s space and slid a hand around the back of Bucky’s neck. Bucky’s breath caught, and Steve took a moment to relish it before he pressed their lips together.

Bucky parted his lips almost immediately, and he tugged Steve closer by his hips. “You’re serious,” he said as they kissed again and again.

“Yeah, I think I am.”

Bucky hummed. “Let’s see if this place still has that hot water, then, huh?”

Steve grinned and nodded, then stole one last kiss before moving toward the tiny bathroom. They’d been given the damn bridal suite. Steve wasn’t sure who to thank, but he was pretty sure it’d be a higher power by the end of the night.

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It had been possibly the quickest bath Bucky had ever taken, both he and Steve dipping into the half-filled bathtub for just long enough to get everything clean.

Steve was skittish again by the time Bucky rejoined him in the bedroom, and Bucky realized that it was his turn to be brave. Steve had taken enough leaps for him in the last few weeks.

He walked up to Steve and tugged at the towel Steve had been using as a security blanket, tossing it toward the bathroom door. Steve cleared his throat, staring at Bucky with eyes that couldn’t hide the
“Hey, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured, gentle like he was trying to soothe a wounded animal.

“Bucky,” Steve whispered, sounding like he was in pain. He ran his fingers down Bucky’s cheek, watching them as they trailed down to his jaw. Then he dragged his fingers along Bucky’s neck and grabbed on tight. It was like he’d found a button that connected directly to the pit of Bucky’s stomach, and Bucky made the same whimpering sound he’d made when he’d been shoved against that tree.

“You done this before?” Bucky asked breathlessly.

Steve smiled almost sweetly and tilted his head, leaning in to press their lips together. “Not like this,” he said, lips moving against Bucky’s.

Bucky hummed and pressed forward, taking Steve’s bottom lip between his teeth. Steve groaned for him and pulled him closer, pressing their bodies together. Bucky was still a little damp, and Steve was radiating heat like he always did. Bucky was pretty sure if they separated right now there’d be steam developing, but frankly he didn’t want to find out. He started pulling Steve toward the bed, hands on his hips, teeth still trapping Steve’s lip just in case Steve tried to stall him.

Steve was apparently fully on board, though. When Bucky’s thighs hit the mattress, Steve gathered him even closer, strong fingers digging into Bucky’s ass possessively.

“Oh, Bucky,” Bucky panted, doing a quick box step like they were on the dance floor and then shoving Steve onto the bed. The mattress was hard and the frame was noisy, but Bucky did not care. He shoved Steve’s chest to make him lay flat and then climbed right into his lap.

Steve stared up at him like he was a painting hanging in the Met, his hands hovering but not touching, a flush high on his cheekbones. He was probably the most beautiful thing Bucky had ever seen.

“We can do this the easy way, or the hard way,” Bucky teased as he leaned over and planted both hands on either side of Steve’s head.

“I think no matter which way we do this, it’s going to end up the hard way,” Steve said, his voice somehow still wry even as breathless as he was.

Bucky grinned slowly.

“Have you done this?” Steve asked quietly.

Bucky hummed. “Not like this,” he said as he leaned closer and brushed the tip of his nose against Steve’s. He pressed a gentle kiss to his lips, then sat back up, showing Steve the jar of Vaseline he’d managed to reach while Steve was distracted.

Steve swallowed hard. “What’s the easy way?” he asked.

Bucky bit his bottom lip and let it slide slowly free. “I’ll show you.”

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Tony poked and prodded and cursed the fact that Barnes hadn’t been able to steal a soldering kit for about an hour before he finally raised his head and glanced around the room. Clint and Sam were curled together like they were huddling for warmth, which gave Tony pause for a moment as he
stared at them. Then he realized that Steve and Bucky were gone. He hadn’t really registered them leaving.

“Either of you got a lighter?” Tony asked the sleeping puppy impersonators.

“Don’t smoke,” Sam grunted without opening his eyes.

“No,” Clint offered, his face muffled where he had shoved it under Sam’s arm.

“Bucky had a lighter, I wonder if it still worked after taking a bullet,” Tony mumbled to himself, pushing to his feet.

“Don’t go knock on that door, man,” Sam warned, cracking one eye open.

Tony frowned at him.

“They’re busy,” Clint added.

It took Tony longer than he would ever admit to realize what they meant. His eyebrows shot up almost against his will when he did finally get it, though. “Oh. I’ll just . . . yeah, a match will probably work,” he said as he turned back to the desk.

Sam grunted. “Good call, man.”

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Steve was on his back, right where Bucky had tossed him, and he was staring up into Bucky’s face, mesmerized and overwhelmed by the way Bucky’s lips parted, the way his long eyelashes fluttered when he tilted his head back. The sinuous way he could move his hips as he straddled Steve. The way Steve moved inside him.

Steve’s eyes fell closed as another nearly overwhelming wave of pleasure swept through him. He gripped Bucky’s hips hard, slowing his movements. “Buck,” he gasped.

Bucky planted a hand in the middle of Steve’s chest, bending over him as he fought against Steve’s hold. His ragged gasp was close enough to Steve’s face that Steve felt it brush against his lips. Steve shoved up and managed to steal a messy kiss before Bucky pushed him back flat, following with another kiss and a roll of his hips that made Steve’s breath hitch.

“Jesus, you feel good,” Steve whispered, shoving up into him without realizing he was doing it.

Bucky groaned and moved with him like they’d been doing this all their lives. He whimpered Steve’s name, and it was probably the most beautiful sound Steve had ever heard. “It’s good,” he managed between panting breaths.

He kissed Steve again, then shoved himself back up, arching back in a way that moved Steve’s cock inside him and squeezed down. Bucky groaned and Steve shoved up again, trying to get deeper, trying to fill him full. Steve had been trying to keep Bucky’s movements nice and slow, trying to make it last. And so far Bucky had complied with those sinful, decadent rolls of his hips.

But the heat coiling in Steve’s belly had been at a simmer for too long, soaking in the sight of Bucky’s muscular body on top of him, legs spread wide and cock hard and heavy against Steve’s belly. Steve needed more.

“Buck,” he growled, shoving up harder as he pulled down on Bucky’s hips.
“Oh, God,” Bucky whispered, throwing his head back to expose the long line of his neck. “Fuck, I’m close.”

Steve grabbed at his shoulder, pulling him down harder, cock buried inside him as deep as he could get. He took hold of the side of Bucky’s neck and held on tight. “I need more,” he pleaded as Bucky continued that slow, sinuous rocking.

Bucky bit his bottom lip, and damn him he had to know what that did to Steve, he had to. He was smiling too, his eyes closed. “Then take what you need, doll,” he drawled, voice low and seductive.

Steve’s self-control snapped at the sound of that voice. He held to Bucky harder and shoved off the mattress, rolling them over and slamming Bucky’s back against the complaining bed. Bucky gave a pleased groan, stretching under him like a cat in the sun and spreading his legs wider as Steve shoved in closer.

“Yeah,” Bucky whispered as he wrapped his arms under Steve’s and dug his fingers into Steve’s back.

Steve had his eyes on Bucky’s and nothing else, but he felt Bucky’s thighs pressing against his hips, felt Bucky lock his ankles at the small of his back. His cock gave an appreciative twitch and he shoved it into Bucky’s tight ass as hard as he could. It rocked Bucky against the mattress and drew a whimpering squeak that Steve couldn’t be sure had come from Bucky and not the bed frame.

He intended to find out, though. Enough repetition should get him an answer.

He pulled back slowly, gritting his teeth as Bucky squirmed around his cock. Then he shoved back in again, fighting past Bucky’s tensed muscles. Yep, that squeak had definitely been Bucky and not the bed frame. Good to know.

Steve lowered himself just enough that his belly and chest pressed against Bucky’s overheated skin. “You’re so fucking tight, Buck,” he murmured as he pressed his lips to Bucky’s chin.

Bucky was still shifting restlessly under him, and it was driving Steve damn near insane. He bucked his hips and tightened his legs around Steve, moaning softly as Steve’s cock obviously hit the spot he’d been trying for. “Steve,” he said desperately. “Come on, fuck me.”

Steve growled against his chin. “Hm mm, you’re not giving the orders right now,” he crooned in his most evil voice, which unfortunately was not as evil as he was feeling right now, then he dragged his teeth against Bucky’s neck and sucked on his collarbone, rolling his hips the whole time.

The next time he pulled out and then slammed back in, Bucky gave a loud whimper and gasp. Steve smacked his palm over Bucky’s mouth, holding tight as he picked up a more brutal rhythm. He’d said he needed more, and he was taking it now.

Bucky’s eyes were wide and a crystalline blue as he watched Steve over the hand Steve still had over his mouth.

“Can’t trust you to be quiet through this part,” Steve growled to him, and he reached back with his other hand, pulling at the back of Bucky’s thigh and opening Bucky up even wider. He worked his hips in closer, as close as he could get, his aching cock pushing in deeper and deeper as he fucked Bucky like he’d always done in his dirtiest fantasies.

Bucky gave a muffled groan against his hand, beginning to squirm and writhe again, and God help him, the pretense of a struggle under him just made Steve hotter and harder, hips moving in faster, more brutal thrusts. Bucky arched his back under him, and Steve felt him tighten up everywhere, his
muscles pulsing around the shaft of Steve’s dick as it spread Bucky wide open. Warmth hit Steve’s belly and Steve groaned.

He leaned down just enough to be able to move his lips against Bucky’s cheekbone. “You coming for me, sweetheart?” he whispered almost cruelly. Bucky moaned again, eyes squeezed tightly shut. Steve grunted as he fought down the swirling warmth he recognized all too well. “Well, I’m not done with you just yet.”

Bucky’s fingers gripped his hair and Bucky arched his back again, squeezing Steve hard enough that his next thrust deep inside took even more effort than the last ones. Steve stayed there, seated nice and deep, and rolled his hips. Bucky cried out against his palm, fingers digging into Steve’s back.

“Fuck,” Steve gasped, and then he was no longer in control of his own body. He fucked Bucky hard and fast and brutal, burying his face in Bucky’s neck and coiling his whole body against the strength of Bucky’s movements. He felt so fucking good, tight and wet and warm, his body hard under Steve's but yielding to him, wrapped around him. He made sure every thrust of his hips took him almost all the way out just so he could feel the swollen head pushing past those muscles each time, feel Bucky's tight ass taking the full length of him with every whimper. He managed to gasp Bucky’s name one last time before he was coming deep inside him, hips rocking against Bucky's thighs, cock spurting until he knew Bucky had to be overflowing with his cum, moaning and gasping into Bucky’s skin to try to muffle the sounds.

He managed to hold his weight for a few seconds after he’d emptied into Bucky, but then he collapsed against him, and either Bucky or the bed frame gave another of those kind of adorable squeaks. Steve laughed breathlessly and took his hand away from Bucky’s mouth.

Bucky sucked in a breath. Then another. His hand flattened against the back of Steve’s head, his fingers curled in Steve’s hair. “Jesus,” he gasped out.

Steve could only groan in response, pressing his face into Bucky’s neck. He took a few minutes, until Bucky started squirming again and Steve was afraid he’d feel the need to fuck him all over again, so he pushed himself up to his elbows, head hanging. Bucky moved under him, guiding Steve’s hips with his knees and slowly forcing Steve out of him. Then he gave Steve a shove to the side, both of them winding up splayed on the bed and still trying to catch their breath.

“You always were a quick study,” Bucky finally mumbled, his eyes closed.

Steve laughed softly and slung an arm and a leg over Bucky’s sweaty body. “So how do I rate?” he teased.

Bucky smiled serenely, his eyes still closed as he placed his hand on Steve’s thigh and squeezed. “I don’t know. That was a first for me too.”

Steve blinked at him, cocking his head so he could see Bucky’s face better. “Wait, what?”

Bucky was still smiling, and he didn’t even crack an eye open. “You were giving me a first. Only fair for me to do the same.”

Steve stared at him for a second, then nudged himself closer and rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky slithered his arm under Steve and wrapped it around Steve’s shoulders, pulling him in tight.

“If I’d known that I would have gone easier on you,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky barked a laugh. “That’s a damn lie.”
Steve had to turn his face into Bucky to hide his smile. “I love you,” he mumbled into Bucky’s skin. Bucky turned his head and shoved his nose into Steve’s hair. He didn’t say anything, but Steve could feel him smiling, and that was enough. They fell asleep like that, holding onto each other and smiling softly.

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Bucky wasn’t sure how long they’d slept when he was jarred awake by the softest of knocks at their door. He tried to disentangle himself from Steve to go answer it, but when he moved Steve tightened his grasp and made like an octopus, going so far as to sink his teeth into Bucky’s collarbone in his goddamn sleep, Jesus Christ.

Bucky shoved at him and hissed. “Wake up, you goddamn barnacle,” he muttered, shaking Steve until Steve blinked muzzily at him. “Let me up.”

Steve scowled hard enough to make a whole nation of Americans feel guilty about setting their alarm clocks, but he let Bucky up.

Bucky grabbed the towel he’d tossed away hours ago, wrapping it around his hips as he went to the door. He cracked it open, peering out until he saw that it was Sam.

“Hey, man,” Sam whispered.

“We ready?” Bucky asked hopefully.

Sam nodded, his eyes very firmly set on Bucky’s face and not the rest of him. “Stark’s ready for a test run.”

Bucky nodded and tried to push down the nervous shudder that went through him. “We’ll be there in five.”

Sam just grinned at him and turned to head back to the other room. Asshole.

Bucky closed the door and turned to peer through the pre-morning gloom at Steve, who was apparently struggling to figure out how gravity worked at the edge of the bed. “Time to go home,” Bucky said softly, and headed for the bathroom to clean up and get his clothes back on.

They all discarded their stolen Allied uniforms and stood around the room in the clothes they’d arrived in. Bucky was taking the blue coat home with him, though, and they were at least all wearing shoes this time. Fuck the multiverse rules, they were the ones making them, after all.

Tony stood rubbing his forehead, staring down at the remote in his hand.

“You okay to do this, Tony?” Steve asked him. “You can sleep first. We have the time.”

Tony shook his head. “I slept as much as I always do.”

“Well, that’s terrifying,” Clint mumbled under his breath.

“Let’s do this, then,” Bucky said with a decisive nod.

“Who’s got the clearest head?” Tony asked, holding the remote up.

They all looked at Bucky, which made sense, Bucky supposed, since he’d kind of mastered the damn thing before disaster had struck. He shook his head, though, pursing his lips. His mind was still
on Steve’s hand covering his pleasure-soaked cries, and there was no way they needed this fucking remote trying to translate that into a portal home. Nope.

“I guess . . . I guess I can give it a go,” Sam offered after a few seconds.

No one had any objections. They arranged themselves in as tight a knot as possible, hoping to minimize the work the portal would have to do to get them all through, and Bucky wrapped his metal arm over Sam’s shoulders.

Sam eyed his hand askance, glaring at Bucky for a second. “Great. Portal hopping with the evil cyborg as my sidekick.”

“Hey,” Bucky grunted. “I’m not evil, I’m just misunderstood.”

Clint barely managed to convert his snort into a cough. Steve rolled his eyes and sighed.

Tony ignored them and pointed at the remote. “Pull the lever, Kronk!” he whispered dramatically.

“Oh, my God,” Sam said, squeezing his eyes shut. He blew out a deep breath, then pushed the button.

The remote did that thing again where it shot a sphere of light around them all, lassoing them in like unruly cattle and pulling them into the center. Bucky knew almost as soon as the light lanced through him that they wouldn’t be going home this time.

His knees buckled as soon as he felt solid ground beneath him again. He fell forward, catching himself with both hands and just barely keeping himself from retching.

Somewhere close, one of his traveling companions had not been so lucky.

“Wrong lever,” Bucky groaned as he shoved up, eyes darting around as he let his training take over completely. They were in a hallway of some sort, emergency lights flashing red above them, but no alarm to accompany them. They were scattered all throughout the hall, nowhere near in the formation they’d been in when Sam had hit the button. The others were all still laid out. Bucky wasn’t even sure if they were all conscious. Tony was the one gagging several yards away.

Bucky heard running steps coming down the darkened hallway and he lurched to his feet, fighting past the wavering sickness and the desire to curl into a ball and cry like a baby hedgehog.

A man appeared through the flashing lights and the lingering smoke that Bucky had belatedly placed as the remnants of a flashbang grenade.

Bucky recognized the silhouette of the man in the black tac gear, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“Jesus, kid,” the guy said, leaping over Clint’s prone body and darting toward Bucky. “Thank fuck, I thought they had you for sure.”

Bucky blinked at Brock Rumlow, his mouth parting on a question that couldn’t quite form in his brain.

Rumlow grabbed Bucky’s metal wrist and tugged. Rumlow had literally never touched the metal arm, all the STRIKE teams who’d ever acted as his backup had stayed well away from contact with it. “Come on, kiddo, we gotta get out of here,” Rumlow urged, dragging Bucky with him. “You okay? Are you hit?”
“What?” Bucky managed as he dragged his heels.

“Hydra hit Shield,” Rumlow said breathlessly. “Captain fucking America is Hydra. He called out all the sleeper agents in the goddamn building. They took out the STRIKE teams. They killed anyone who fought back. It’s just you and me left, kid.”

Bucky blinked at him.

Rumlow took a step closer, putting a hand on Bucky’s cheek. Bucky shied away from it. “You okay? You hit?”

“No,” Bucky grunted, shaking his head. What the hell was this? What the fuck?

“Then move your ass, Soldier!” Rumlow hissed. He gave Bucky another tug and something deep inside Bucky, something he hadn’t been able to eradicate just yet, was forced to follow that order from that voice.
Okey dokey, here's a first for this series. This is a darker chapter than any of the others. It has Evil Steve, for one, and Evil Steve is . . . kind of really evil. A couple warnings follow, so skip this note if you're willing to risk it and don't want spoilers. In this chapter, a character mentions intentionally trying to take his own life in order to kill another person along with him. A character threatens to harm himself as a bargaining chip against a bad guy. A character implies he is abusing his partner, and threatens another character with the same abuse (never on page and never comes to fruition, respectively).

What else . . . all the characters have feelings and they Do Not Want. And oh yeah, a bad guy gets the fuck murdered out of himself.

What I've done with this chapter is kept it self-contained. If you can't handle the above topics, don't read this chapter. I've made sure that no new plot is introduced that you won't get a Cliff's Notes version of in the next chapter. That's why this chapter is 3 times as long as all the others.

Steve groaned softly as he came to. His face was smooshed against industrial grade carpeting, which was a good indication that they’d at least left World War Two behind. The smell was a familiar mixture of cleaning chemicals, the smoke of a flashbang grenade, and cordite. Steve turned his head minutely, squinting against the garish red blinking emergency lights.

It was so quiet.

Bodies littered the hallway he was sprawled in, and Steve’s heart began to thump faster in his chest. He pushed up slowly, aware that they’d obviously jumped into the middle – or the end, anyway – of a firefight.

“Cap?” Tony whispered from somewhere nearby.

Steve peered over his shoulder and found Tony kneeling over one of the bodies.

“Where are we?” Steve asked, keeping his voice as low as he could and still allow Tony to hear him.

“Looks like the Triskelion,” Tony answered, jerking his chin toward one of the doors. There was a label on it, and Tony was right; this was the Triskelion.

Steve got to his hands and knees and crawled closer to Tony. It was Clint on the ground, blinking up at the ceiling and obviously disoriented. Steve scanned the other bodies and saw Sam several feet away. He was waking, groaning as his fingers clenched and unclenched against the carpet, drool puddling under his lips against the floor. Steve’s eyes darted from body to body, looking for Bucky.

“He’s not here,” Tony murmured, obviously able to see the growing panic on Steve’s face when he didn’t find who he was looking for.

“What happened?” Steve asked Tony.
“Right after we touched down, a guy came running through. He thought our Barnes was his and he dragged him away. I don’t know . . . I don’t know why Bucky went with him. I was too fucking sick to move and stop him.”

“Shit,” Steve hissed, his stomach lurching with a completely different kind of nausea. “He was probably just as disoriented as we were. Who was it that took him?”

Tony grimaced and looked back down at Clint. “Brock Rumlow.”

“Oh, God,” Steve breathed. “Oh, God, no.”

“I don’t think this world is like ours, Steve,” Tony said carefully. “Rumlow told Bucky that . . . that Captain America was Hydra. He led this attack. Rumlow said he and Barnes were the, ‘only ones left.’ His exact words.”

They both looked around at the massacred SHIELD agents around them. A ball of cold steel began to form in the pit of Steve’s belly. Rumlow had to have been lying. Bucky’d told Steve enough about his time as Hydra’s Asset that he knew the STRIKE teams had worked with him, they’d pretended to be the good guys, made Bucky believe he was doing what he’d done for good and not evil. It was easy to assume this world’s Rumlow would be doing the same.

They had apparently fallen into the middle of the Battle of the Triskelion, and Rumlow was trying to use the Winter Soldier to keep him alive.

“We have to find him,” Steve snarled as he met Tony’s eyes. “The remote?”

Tony held it up. He’d apparently taken it off Sam and been examining it while he’d been waiting for them all to recover. “The battery is dead all over again. I don’t understand it, but . . . best guess is taking all five of us through the portal is all the battery can handle.”

“We’ve still got nine left, right?”

Tony nodded unhappily.

“Why didn’t it work? Why did it bring us here?”

Tony was staring at the remote, shaking his head in frustration. “I don’t know, Cap. I just . . . I don’t know. Maybe it was the patch, it was too crude. I can find the right material here, though, if we can get down to R&D.”

Sam groaned as he sat up, holding his head. “Holy shit.”

“Did it work?” Clint asked miserably.

“Sort of,” Tony offered.

“How does jumping through universes sort of work?” Sam croaked.

“Well . . . we did jump.”

“Just not to the right world, I’m guessing,” Clint mumbled.

“Bucky’s been taken,” Steve told both men. “We have to find him. Our objective is getting Tony to a lab. Then we’ll hunt Bucky down and get the fuck out of here.”

Clint grabbed Tony’s hand and let himself be pulled up to a sitting slump. He hung his head. “Taken
by who?"

“Rumlow,” Tony and Steve both answered grimly.

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Bucky’s back hit the wall of the closet Rumlow had just shoved him into, and when the man closed the door behind them, it was pitch black.

“Jesus,” Rumlow said shakily. “Can’t fucking believe this. Captain America is Hydra. I knew he was an evil bastard, but . . . Jesus.”

“I don’t . . . no,” Bucky murmured.

“You been trying to tell the world for two years, kid,” Rumlow said sadly, putting a hand on the join of Bucky’s shoulder and neck. It was weird and overly intimate and Bucky tensed even further.

“None of this is on you, you hear me?”

Bucky took a few seconds to breathe and try to calm his mind and body. It wasn’t working so well.

“I have to go back,” he told Rumlow. “My friends, I need to –”

“Barnes,” Rumlow gritted. “All our friends are dead.”

“No, you don’t understand, I’m not who you think I am!” Bucky snarled, keeping his voice low but only barely.

“You don’t have to try to convince me no more, kid. I believe you, okay? I’ve believed you for over a year. Is your head okay? What happened?”

“It’s fine.”

Rumlow growled in frustration. “Everything you ever said . . . goddammit! I should have listened to you. We all should’ve listened to you. I should’ve got you out of there sooner!” He jabbed his fist against the wall behind him.

Bucky scowled. None of this made any sense. “Okay,” he said with a deep inhalation, tensing himself to prepare for the fight Rumlow would probably put up once Bucky told him the truth. His eyes were adjusting in the meager light filtering under the closet door. He’d have the advantage, if it went bad. “I need you to listen to me. Very carefully.”

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Steve had never wanted his shield more than he did right now. Every turn they took down a new hallway and every door they went through, every stairwell they climbed, was littered with the dead.

Someone or something had torn through SHIELD’s people like tissue paper.

Steve couldn’t help looking at every face to see if they were people he knew, or if one of them was the one face he wouldn’t live through seeing like this, broken and twisted in the agony of death throes.

The only good thing about their slow, careful march was all the weapons they were able to lift as they went.

Steve carefully pushed the stairwell blast door of the R&D level floors open and peered out, Sam right behind him with his weapon raised.
“Clear,” he whispered, and led his team into the open. Clint and Sam cleared the surrounding areas, and then they snuck down the hallway to the open communal area that served all the labs.

Steve stuttered to a halt when he turned a corner and saw the man who was kneeling over a body in the middle of the room.

He was in his black tac gear, weapons bristling everywhere. He had his hair pulled up into a knot at the crown of his head, the rest of it shaved close to the scalp. His head was bowed, the head of the dead or wounded man resting tenderly in his lap.

Steve must have made a sound, because Bucky’s eyes met his from under his eyelashes, the rest of him staying motionless, his expression grim and dangerous.

“Bucky,” Steve breathed.

Bucky stared at him, raising his head just a little. He didn’t flinch, didn’t try to go for a weapon. He just held the dead man’s head in his hands and stared at Steve like he didn’t recognize him. Shit.

“Guess you finally beat me, Stevie,” Bucky finally said, his voice painfully rough and low. He lowered his head again and gently brushed the hair off the dead man’s forehead, then covered the man’s eyes with his metal palm. “So, go ahead. Take your shot. I got nothin’ left to fight for.”

Steve took a careful step forward, motioning for the others to stay out of sight for now. “Bucky,” he said again, careful and slow. “It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

To his absolute horror, Bucky began to laugh. It was a hoarse and mirthless chuckle, full of desperation and sadness. It broke Steve’s heart and Steve had to fight not to sink to his knees.

“Not going to hurt me,” Bucky echoed, still laughing. Then he horrified Steve further by raising his Sig Sauer and pressing the tip of the barrel to his temple. He closed his eyes and cocked the gun. “I ain’t letting you take me, Steve. So how about for old time’s sake you turn around like you ain’t gonna enjoy this, huh?”

Steve gaped at him. What the hell was wrong with this world’s Bucky Barnes. Jesus Christ.

When he didn’t move or answer, Bucky finally opened his eyes and looked up to meet Steve’s, his finger on the trigger. He blinked at Steve, some kind of realization beginning to dawn in his expression. He stared for several seconds before he jerked and pointed the gun at Steve instead.

Steve raised both hands slowly, trying to keep him calm. Bucky let the dead man’s head rest on the ground, his movements exceptionally gentle even as he held the gun on Steve, and he stood and stepped in front of the body. His hand was trembling as he aimed.

“Bucky, it’s okay. It’s okay,” Steve whispered.

“What are you?” Bucky gritted out. “You’re not him!”

“No, I’m not,” Steve agreed. “I’m not your Steve. But I am Steve. I’m . . . I’m from a different world. A different universe. The multi . . . there was a portal?”

Bucky was breathing so hard that Steve thought he might start to hyperventilate. His finger was terrifyingly close to pulling the trigger.

“I have three friends with me,” Steve gasped desperately. “You might know them. I can show you. I can prove we’re telling the truth.”
Bucky didn’t move or react, so Steve very slowly beckoned the others with his fingers. “They’re armed. But we don’t want trouble, okay?”

Bucky’s eyes darted to the corner of the hallway, then he nodded minutely.

Sam stepped out first, hands raised to show his gun. Then Tony, who was displaying the remote and moving carefully, staying behind Sam. Then Clint came out, and the blood drained from Bucky’s face as he stared.

“Jesus,” he gasped, his gun hand trembling harder as he jerked it to point at Clint and then back at Steve.

“We can explain everything,” Steve told Bucky. “We’ll all put away the guns, and talk. Somewhere safe. Okay? Buck?”

Bucky swallowed audibly, still staring at Clint. Steve wasn’t sure why it was Clint having the effect on Bucky, and he watched him with aggressively alarmed confusion. Bucky finally lowered the gun, his shoulders slumping and lips parting, still looking shell-shocked as he stared at Clint. Then he took a step to the side, and looked down at the man he’d obviously been comforting as he died moments before Steve had walked up on him.

Steve finally made himself look at the dead man’s face instead of Bucky’s, and he heard Sam and Tony both gasp.

Clint made a sound that died in the back of his throat like a bird hitting the grill of a semi truck.

This opposite world’s Bucky had been cradling Clint Barton’s head in his lap, comforting him as he died.

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Tony was gathering the things he needed from the lab that Opposite World Bucky had led them to. He was trying to focus but still listen as OW Bucky gave them a sitrep. OW Bucky had told them he went by James, but Tony couldn’t stop calling him Ow Bucky in his head because it was just too goddamn appropriate for the horrors he’d already seen in this universe.

“How did you know he wasn’t the right Steve?” Sam asked.

“His eyes,” James murmured, his head bowed. He was sitting on a table, his feet in a chair and hands hanging limp between his knees. His entire body read as defeated just as surely as if he’d woken up with a hangover and a dick drawn in Sharpie on his forehead. “Steve’s eyes haven’t had those emotions in them for a long time.”

“Can you give us a rundown of the past, oh, eighty years to catch us up?” Clint asked wryly. He was still pale, crouching on the floor and refusing to meet anyone’s eyes. Tony supposed he understood, after seeing the bloody, brutal way Ow Clint had died. It wasn’t something even Clint Barton could handle particularly well.

James swallowed hard and nodded. “This other world you come from,” he said to Steve. “Are you Captain America there?”

“Yes.”

“And Project Rebirth? The serum?”
Steve nodded, swallowing so hard even Tony could see it.

James’s jaw tightened, and his voice was hard and full of betrayed melancholy. “And it didn’t . . . it didn’t make you different?”

They all shared confused glances. Steve waved at himself uncomfortably. “It made me into this.”

James growled in frustration and tapped his temple. “Up here. It didn’t change you?”

Steve was frowning even harder, and he shook his head. “No. I’m still who I always was. I’m still me, B—uh, James.”

James lowered his head, wringing his hands together so aggressively that Tony was afraid the metal hand would break his flesh fingers. “Erskine thought Red Skull was a failure because he wasn’t a good man,” James told them, his voice rough as gravel and painful to listen to. He sounded like Tony felt every time the portal fucked him in his ear hole. James’s tone somehow grew more and more bitter as he spoke. “So, they took my Stevie, because he was the best man anyone could have known. And they pumped him full of that serum. And the serum burned everything that made him good right out of him.”

It took a moment for it to hit, but when it did, Steve sat down hard on the chair behind him. Tony abandoned any pretense of working on the remote and moved closer, standing beside Clint, who was still crouching and hanging his head.

James glanced up at them, his eyes shining, his jaw tight. “I knew it as soon as he pulled us out of that factory during the War. He was different. Cruel and . . .” he shook his head, staring off into his memories. “Eventually everyone else realized it, too. It wasn’t just in battle that he was hurting people. He became a liability not only for the War, but for the country. They couldn’t let a sadist wear the symbol of America on his chest. Colonel Phillips ordered us to get rid of him, make it seem like he died in battle since the American public couldn’t know their national hero was a . . . was a monster,” James gasped. He squeezed his eyes tight and tears were forced out to run down his face unabated. “But I couldn’t do it. He was my best friend,” he told them, his voice cracking desperately and his inhalations shaky and uncertain.

Steve leaned forward like he was going to offer comfort, but James flinched when he saw the movement. He looked like a beaten dog every time he met Steve’s eyes. “Sorry,” Steve whispered, curling his hands into fists. He sounded like he was about to cry. Tony wanted to cry. Hell, Tony thought they should all be crying right now.

“He finally got so bad, I couldn’t . . . I couldn’t tell the difference between the monster we were fighting against, and the monster I was fighting with,” James told them. His tone of voice had gone just as dead and cold as the bodies they’d been passing left and right. “We had a mission on a train. It went past this ravine in the Alps, and . . . I grabbed him. And I threw us both over the edge.”

“You couldn’t kill him, so you figured you’d go with him,” Sam said softly, his voice full of sympathy that Tony had never heard Sam use with their Bucky.

James merely nodded. He gasped out a wet laugh that ended on a sob. “He caught us both,” he admitted, covering his face with both hands, not even trying to keep the tears off his face or out of his words. “He thought I’d fallen and he saved me. I was trying to kill my best friend and he saved me.”

Tony ran a hand over his mouth, keeping it there as he stared at the broken creature that should have been Bucky Barnes. Tears were running freely and he either still didn’t care or hadn’t noticed them yet. He had his shoulders slumped as far as that metal arm would allow, and he was still holding his
face with both hands, rocking slightly now.

“When we got on the Valkyrie, Steve fought the Red Skull for the Tesseract, and I . . . I destroyed the flight controls,” James continued, taking a shuddering breath. “I made sure the only way it could end was with the Valkyrie going in the drink, and both of us with it. Then I sat back as they fought, and I thought . . . Steve is saving the world from the Red Skull. And I’m saving the world from Steve.” He began to laugh again, low and broken and almost hysterical as he both laughed and cried and looked around at each of them incredulously. “And then they fucking woke us up.”

Tony glanced at the others. There was literally nothing any of them could say to this man. Tony had never thought he could feel more pity for a version of Bucky Barnes than he did for what their own Bucky had gone through. But this guy . . . this poor fucking guy . . .

“It was never in any reports, what he’d become,” James was saying as Tony’s mind reeled. “He was gone and so they protected his legacy for the people. When they found us, everyone who knew what he really became was dead. They defrosted him first since he was the hero and I was just a sidekick with a busted up arm from the wreck. They say Peggy Carter went into hysterics when they told her Steve was alive. She kept screaming that they had to leave him frozen, that they needed to kill him, that he was a monster. But she was old, she had dementia; no one paid her any mind.”

“Oh, my God,” Steve said, sounding like he didn’t even know he’d spoken.

James sniffed miserably. “He went to see her, when he got out,” he told Steve in the most distant tone of voice Tony had ever heard. He dropped it to even softer, flatter whisper. “She died as he sat with her. When he came back he had . . . scratches on his wrists.” He held up his own flesh hand to show them where. “They were so deep they took days to heal. I think he suffocated her with her own pillow.”

They all gasped as one like they were on some goddamn scripted soap opera and trying to win an award for Most Traumatized. Tony fumbled around beside him and found another rolling chair, pulling it closer before his own knees buckled. Sam was pacing now, and Clint had gone listless, letting himself collapse back on his ass. Steve was holding his belly, like he was trying to keep everything in it from being violently ejected.

James cleared his throat and tried to go on. He couldn’t make himself speak, so he bowed his head and wiped the tears off his cheeks. More joined them as he stared at the ground and cried silently. He licked his lips and finally found his voice. “When I woke up and found out he was still alive,” he said, blinking slowly like he was in shock or something. “I tried to kill him. I went after him with one good arm and an ice pick.”

He stared at the floor as they all stared at him.

Then he began that discomfiting sobbing, hysterical chuckle, looking up at them and smiling a truly hopeless kind of smile that Tony had never seen outside of his own nightmares. “I tried to kill Captain America in the middle of a SHIELD facility. Of course they locked me up. Steve told them about all the atrocities he’d committed during the War and said that it had all been me. I went from fallen war hero to the most hated man in America overnight. SHIELD threw me in a cell and left me there to rot for a year.”

“God,” Sam muttered, turning away from them and wiping his hand over his face.

“A year in, they sent . . . well, you,” James said, waving his hand at Tony. “They told me Captain America wanted to try to rehabilitate his best friend, that it wasn’t my fault Hydra had warped my mind as a POW. Stark made the metal arm. And then he made the Chair at Steve’s request.”

James nodded and wiped at his cheek again, mixing and spreading the blood and grime with his tears like he was applying war paint. “They used it on me once. I broke through the programming after a month or so, and then.” He waved his hand at the door, staring past the glass at the body Sam had covered with a jacket. “Everyone I fought today was avoiding kill shots. I think Steve intends to try it again, once they run me to ground. I’m the only one left, no one else is answering their comms anymore. There’s no one to stop him.”

“Jesus,” Sam hissed. “How the hell did we end up here?”

Steve shrugged helplessly and Tony bowed his head. He had no idea why the remote was doing what it was doing to them.

“Wish I could help,” James rasped. “This is not a world any of you want to be stuck in. Tony Stark died of a supposed heroin overdose right after the Chair was complete. Funny how his heroin left defensive wounds on him, though. And Clint . . .” James trailed off and stared through the glass at the other Clint’s body. Then his eyes trailed to Sam. “You’re still alive,” he said blithely to Sam.


“No,” James answered sadly, his eyes going distant and still shining with unshed tears, reflecting the red flashing lights and dancing like sparklers on the 4th of July. “Steve came to visit me in my cell every day. He’d have them turn off the recordings, but Brock got wise and managed to record a few of them.” He glanced around. “Jocasta, you still with me?”

“Yes, Sergeant Barnes,” a woman’s voice responded, sounding sad and sympathetic.

James nodded and swallowed hard. “It’s just you and me now, babydoll. Roll Security Feed Five, please.”

“As you wish,” the AI responded, much like JARVIS or FRIDAY would have.

A screen blipped on in mid-air, showing a holding cell from above, a powered screen between James and this world’s Captain America. James was sitting on a mattress with his back against the wall, elbows propped on his knees, head cocked as he stared listlessly at the Captain. The Captain was lounging in a backwards plastic chair, legs straddling the back of it, arms folded over. He was grinning.

“You know I used to think sex would never be fun again once they locked you up in here, Buck,” the man said, full of wry amusement. “But Sam’s no slouch in the sack, let me tell you. All I have to do is snap my fingers and he’ll drop to his knees, just like I trained him to.”

James bowed his head, refusing to watch the video or meet any of their eyes. On the video, the James in the cell was staring lasers through the Captain’s head.

“I mean, he doesn’t get quite as . . . passionate as you used to,” the Captain mused gleefully. “And he sure don’t take a punch like you can, Buck. But he might just have you beat on the dick sucking department by the time I’m done with him.”

The James in the cell didn’t move, didn’t respond. Just continued to stare. The Captain practically beamed at him. “You’re right, that isn’t what I’m here to talk about. You see, Buck, I finally got some dirt on one of your guards. The next time he’s on duty, you’re gonna get a nice dose of that paralytic gas they like to use. I hear you like that stuff.”
He paused to see if James would react in any way. When James didn’t, the Captain apparently grew agitated, and he lurched to his feet, tossing the chair aside and taking an aggressive step closer to the faintly glowing screen, like a gorilla trying to defend its territory. Tony was surprised the guy didn’t thump his chest with his fists.

He did bare his teeth at James, though. “Oh, you’ll be awake. And you’re gonna feel everything I do to you, Sergeant Barnes. It’s gonna be just like old times.”

“So, it’s gonna be five minutes of me trying to remember if I left a stove on somewhere and then you’re gonna fall asleep so I can read in peace?” James drawled, sounding completely unmoved by the threats.

The Captain grunted, obviously gritting his teeth even on the tiny video display. Then he huffed a forced laugh. “You’re right. At least Sam still has that gag reflex I like so much. You lost yours in the barracks.” He turned away before the verbal volley could continue, leaving James alone on the video. After a few seconds, James turned his head to stare at the camera. Then he raised his hand and gave the camera a sign.

It was three fingers up, facing the camera, and his ring and middle fingers folded to his palm. Tony knew it meant, ‘I love you.’ He looked from the screen to the James who was sitting a few feet away, head bowed and eyes closed.

“I’m sorry,” James said to Sam. “I think your counterpart will be getting the worst of this deal.”

“Okay, Jesus, we can’t let that psychopath find Sam or Bucky,” Clint blurted, pointing at the screen even as the screen disappeared.

Steve stood slowly, staring like he didn’t actually see anything in front of him. He walked calmly over to one of the sinks on the far wall, and then he was gagging, heaving up whatever had been left in his stomach. His fingers turned white as he gripped the edge of the sink, and he continued to gag long after there was nothing left to come up.

Tony kind of wanted to do the same thing.

James glanced around at them all, expression unreadable. “You should all leave as soon as you can,” he said, the life drained entirely from both his words and his beautiful steel-gray eyes. “This ain’t no place for good people anymore.”

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head. “We still have to find our Barnes. Is Rumlow one of yours?”

James perked up and nodded jerkily. “He was part of the STRIKE team that was overseeing the Chair. He . . . he saved me. Made sure he was always on duty so I was safe. Broke me out before they could put me in the Chair again. He was the only one who ever believed me about any of it, the only one who saw Steve for what he was, at first. By the time everyone else saw it, it was too late, Steve had too much power.”

“He’s still alive,” Steve told James, still hanging his head over the sink. His voice sounded wrecked, and it seemed like he was working hard to hide the distaste he obviously felt when thinking of Brock Rumlow. He ran the water, drinking some of it and splashing his face before rejoining them with halting, uncertain steps. “At least, he was, when we landed here. He took our Bucky with him. He thought he was you.”

James blinked and nodded, his breaths quickening. “If Brock’s alive, I can find him and your man.”

“Okay,” Steve grunted. “Will he hurt our Bucky if Buck tries to tell him the truth?”
James shook his head, looking certain. “Brock’s a good man. And he knows me too well to be fooled for long. Once they’re safe, if your Barnes tries to explain, Brock will listen.”

“Are you . . . are you and Rumlow, um, together?” Tony asked carefully.

James slid his eyes from Steve to Tony, cocking his head curiously. “Yes. He’s the only reason I didn’t just put a bullet in my head a long time ago. If he’s still alive . . . well, there’s a little bit of fight in me left, I guess.”

Tony glanced at the others, one eyebrow raising in disbelief. That certainly brought up some interesting questions to ask their Bucky when this shitshow was over.

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“You’re really not him,” Brock said in a dejected, tremulous whisper.

Bucky had gone through the whole story as they stood chest to chest in the tiny supply closet, and then Brock had given him a rundown of this world in return.

Needless to say, they were both traumatized as fuck right now.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky whispered.

Brock bowed his head. “He’s either dead or Rogers got him in that Chair. Either way, I’ve lost him.”

“That’s not true,” Bucky murmured. “Okay? We’ll find him. Then we’ll find my guys. And we’ll help you both fix this.”

Brock huffed miserably. “There’s no fixing this now. Rogers has obliterated SHIELD. He’s been using Hydra resources, and as soon as he’s taken power, he’ll turn on Hydra too.”

“Can’t say I’m going to cry over that one,” Bucky mumbled.

“No. But it’s just one more force that will be out of his way.”

“What’s he after?” Bucky asked with a scowl. “Why do any of this?”

“He’s a psychopath,” Brock answered, grunting with the force of the word. “A fucking monster. He wants the world to burn, and he wants to be seen holding the match when it does.”

“That’s both poetic and horrible.”

“Yeah,” Brock said almost fondly. “James is the one who said that, in his debriefing with SHIELD. Rogers got hold of the audio, forced Stark to manipulate it so it sounded like James wasn’t talking about Rogers. Once the quote got out to the public, Rogers had everyone believing James had been talking about himself.”

“Jesus.”

Brock nodded at the interruption, but kept on talking like all his rage was bubbling out in the form of words. “That he was deranged and destructive and proud of every time he’d made someone scream. The whole world thinks James is a goddamn monster, that Captain America tried to save us all from his childhood best friend by sacrificing himself to go down in the Valkyrie. If we’d just listened to the kid when he tried to tell us what Rogers was . . .” He shook his head, eyes going unfocused and falling inexorably sadder.
Bucky scowled at the man. “You’re in love with him,” he blurted as soon as he realized what he was seeing so plainly in a man he’d only ever known to be stoic and grim.

Brock nodded slowly, giving Bucky a melancholy smile. “We were breaking him out. We were going to get out and set up shop as a resistance force, try to fight all this from somewhere that James would be safe from him. I don’t know if Rogers knew or if this was just the shittiest timing in the world.”

“What do you mean safe from him? Why is your James still alive if all of what you’ve said is true?” Bucky asked. “If St – Captain America is this far gone, why didn’t he just snuff Barnes out and remove the risk of someone eventually believing what the guy was saying? That’s what I would have done.”

“Me too. But Rogers? He likes to play,” Brock answered, his tone going dark with anger and something a little too close to fear for Bucky’s peace of mind.

“Play,” Bucky echoed incredulously.

Brock hummed angrily. “He needed an adversary in the public eye, and James fit that bill so he kept him alive with just enough lax security that if James had actually tried, he could have escaped, and Rogers could have taken him out while the world watched.”

Bucky realized he’d start chewing on his lip and he shook himself, almost snapping to attention. He’d always done that, worried his lower lip, darted his tongue over his lips, when he had too much nervous energy. The Rumlow that Bucky had known had hated it, always scolding the Winter Soldier for his nervous tics and tells. Bucky always suspected there had been something more to Rumlow’s irritation.

Now he could see that he’d been right about the something, but he never would have guessed what the something was if he’d never been standing in a dim utility closet, letting his bottom lip slide from between his teeth as Brock Rumlow watched raptly and unconsciously leaned closer like he was being pushed by the rolling waves of the sea toward a land of salvation.

He reached up to Bucky’s face, his strong, callused fingers almost painfully gentle as they grazed along Bucky’s jawline and the pad of his thumb touched Bucky’s lips so tentatively it was like the brush of a breeze and nothing more.

Brock stared for a second, then he jerked his hand away and shook himself, leaning away from Bucky with a murmured, “Sorry. I just . . . James does that, too.” He grunted self-consciously. “Usually right before we kiss. You even smell like him, this close.”

“It’s okay,” Bucky managed to say, even though being in such proximity to a face and a voice that had always meant he was soon going to get blood on his hands was still unnerving. And as it turned out, the source of Brock’s frustration over watching the Winter Soldier’s teeth sinking into his lip might very well have been because it turned him on. And Bucky sure as fuck didn’t want to ruminate over that one.

None of the STRIKE teams ever messed with the Winter Soldier like that, though. You don’t stick your willy into the barrel of a loaded gun, after all.

“It’s not okay, and I’m sorry,” Brock argued. “I know James is shifty about being touched without permission, I shouldn’t have touched you either.”

“Trust me, I’ve been through that portal enough to know how weird it is to see the face of someone
you love but it ain’t actually them.” He stared at Brock for a second, then carefully telegraphed his intentions and patted Brock’s cheek. “You’re a good man, aren’t you?”

Brock cocked his head and frowned, either confused by Bucky’s words or trying to nuzzle into his hand without seeming like he was. “I’ve always tried to be.”

Bucky smiled sadly, and Brock noticed. “I’m not a good man where you’re from. Am I?” he said dejectedly.

“No. No, I’m afraid you’re not.”

“Do I . . . does he hurt you?” Brock whispered, sounding absolutely shattered.

Bucky’s belly lurched uncomfortably. What good would it do to tell this guy that some alternate reality version of himself had been one of the men who’d led the alternate version of his lover to the Chair? How was he supposed to tell this guy that the doppelgänger of the man he loved had just the previous night ridden Captain America like a bicycle without a seat cushion? How did he tell this poor fucking guy that the other versions of himself in the multiverse were giant, crusty pricks, essentially.

“Not anymore,” Bucky decided on saying.

Brock pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded, bowing his head on a heavy sigh.

“Who is ‘we’?” Bucky asked after a few seconds to let Brock process.

“Hm?”

“You said we were breaking James out. Who else was involved with this resistance force you were putting together?”

“Barton. Romanov. Stark, before he was murdered. Most of the STRIKE teams came on board not long ago,” Brock answered, sounding exhausted. “They all worked with Rogers on missions, saw some of what James had been claiming all along. Barton and Romanov started coming down to talk with James, trying to get the real story. It took a couple months – we had to move slow and careful – but eventually we had a plan. We were going to get James out, get somewhere safe and start building up a resistance force.” He nodded, staring at the wall to the side of Bucky’s head. “It was a good plan.”

“Well. I know my Barton, and my Romanov. And I know myself. They’re not easy to kill, and if I’m pissed enough I’d drag my ass out of my own grave to slap a bitch, so how about we stop hiding in the closet and go out there and take care of shit.”

Brock stared at him for a second, then he broke into a wide, charming grin. He laughed softly.

“Yeah, you’re definitely him, kid.”

Bucky snorted. “Come on. Did you have a rendezvous?”

“Yeah,” Brock said almost soundlessly, nodding and straightening his shoulders. “Let’s go.”

Steve was still reeling as James led them to the rendezvous his team was supposed to have retreated to.
Steve supposed he’d still been holding out hope that the Steve Rogers of this world wasn’t a monster, that it was all something that had been inserted into James’s head by Hydra or . . . but that video James had shown them, seeing himself sneering and taunting and threatening James that way, talking about Sam that way . . .

It was his worst nightmare, sprung to life from the bowels of some eldritch monstrosity that godforsaken remote had dragged from a portal.

Steve rammed his shoulder into a protruding door as he walked, unseeing and not paying any attention to his very dire surroundings.

Clint grabbed the door from behind Steve before it could slam, giving Steve a worried frown.

“Sorry,” Steve whispered.

“Come on, Cap. We can do this,” Clint said, squeezing Steve’s shoulder. “One foot in front of the other.”

Steve nodded and gritted his teeth determinedly, pushing on as James led the way.

James held up his fist when he reached the corner of the hallway intersection, and they all pressed tight to the wall. James took a mirror and held it low near his hip, checking that the area was clear.

“Okay,” he whispered to them. “Stay here. If Brock sees Cap’s face behind me without being forewarned, he’ll shoot him. Let me make sure he’s read in before you follow.”

Steve nodded miserably as the others all gave silent acknowledgments.

James slipped around the corner and moved soundlessly toward the door that was apparently their target.

The speaker system let out a loud whine of feedback and everyone winced, covering their ears.

“Buck?” Steve’s voice came over the speakers.

Steve’s head shot up, glaring at the speakers in the ceiling.

“Bucky,” the Captain crooned, obviously taunting. “Last man standing, Buckaroo. What should we do about this, hm?”

There was a moment of silence, like the Captain was actually waiting for James to respond.

“Tell you what, boyo. I know I’ve killed off most of your other friends. But you’ve still got your Stevie, right? Come on up here to Stevie, Buck, we can work this out. One minute in the Chair and you’ll love me again. You remember that, right? ’Til the end of the line, pal,” the Captain snarled. His next words were honey-sweet again, though. “You and me, just like old times. It’s not so bad a deal.”

“Jesus, this guy’s like if the Joker and Hitler had a baby and named it Nancy so it’d get beat up in school,” Clint mumbled.

Tony snorted softly before he could muffle it.

There was whisper of movement, and Steve tensed as James poked his head back around the corner.

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Come on, it’s clear.”
Steve and the others followed.

They wound up going into what looked like an auxiliary armory, which required a hand and optical scan to enter. James gave it his handprint, then let the thing scan his eyes. “Stark programmed Jocasta to only answer to Natasha before he was killed. He knew enough about Steve to know when that Chair was done, he was too. We couldn’t save him. But he tried to save us. Natasha and Clint spent the last few months taking over parts of the Triskelion that only we can access. Like . . . mini-safe houses in the building, in case something like this happened.”

Steve realized belatedly that he was talking so the security installed in the door could analyze his voice. The door opened with a whisper and a click, and James pushed inside, ushering them all in.

Steve froze when he saw the two men already there, then he darted forward and pulled Bucky into his arms. “God, Buck,” he whispered as he buried his face in Bucky’s neck. “This place is so fucked. Thank Christ you’re okay.”

“I know,” Bucky murmured, holding Steve just as tightly.

When Steve pulled away from him, he glanced at the others, only to jerk in shock when he saw James and Brock Rumlow doing almost the same thing Steve and Bucky had, clinging to each other and murmuring. Steve had the almost overwhelming urge to yank James out of the man’s grasp and punch him in his traitorous face. Then punch Brock in his traitorous face. He had to look away when James pulled out of the embrace just enough for Brock to kiss him tenderly, fingers resting on his jaw. Even Steve had his limits to what he could bleach out of his eyeballs.

He met Bucky’s eyes and found Bucky smirking at him. He pulled Steve closer to hug him again. “Don’t worry, that definitely never happened to me,” he whispered into Steve’s ear.

Steve huffed a relieved laugh.

James finally pulled away from his reunion with Brock, and he turned to peer at Bucky and Steve. He took a step closer, and Steve backed away a step, letting Bucky have his hands free as the two men studied each other.

“This is bizarre,” James finally mumbled.

Bucky inclined his head, jutting his chin out as he looked James over. “I like the haircut,” he offered.

James snorted and offered his hand. “I like the coat.”

“Well, it’s vintage,” Bucky said as he shook James’s hand.

Once the greetings were over, they all took seats at a small table in the corner of the room. James hadn’t been kidding about the mini-safe house thing. The room was stocked with weapons, ammo, food, water, four mattresses, and had a small bathroom attached. Steve thought maybe it had been a dormitory originally, or an overnight suite for agents or protected witnesses, before Natasha and Clint had confiscated it and turned it into this.

Steve’s heart ached over the fact that they’d needed to go to such lengths, all because Captain America was an evil bastard.

“Only thing we can do now is run,” James was saying when Steve finally shook himself out of his funk.

“Where?” Brock asked dejectedly. “Rogers has the keys to SHIELD. He’ll keep Hydra around just
long enough to launch Insight, and then . . . there won’t be anywhere to hide, or anyone left to fight back.”

James nodded, staring at the table. “I traded the entire world’s future for a best friend who was already dead,” he whispered.

Brock put a hand on the back of his neck, squeezing hard. “You ain’t your brother’s keeper, kid,” he said gently. Steve hadn’t known Brock Rumlow could be gentle or comforting. It was utterly uncanny to witness.

“So, Evil Steve’s goal is to be in charge?” Clint asked with a frown.

“No,” James answered, sighing as he leaned back into Brock’s hand. “He wants the world to be as miserable inside as he is. He’s . . . chaos, wrapped in blood and fire. That’s all he wants. Blood and fire; chaos.”

Clint stared at the man, eyes wide, mouth agape. Seeing Clint speechless was just as weird as seeing Brock being nice. Steve shivered.

“He still needs allies, though,” Sam said quietly. “He’s not in control yet. He’ll have to explain what happened here today. He’ll need a scapegoat so other government agencies, other world powers, don’t come after him until his chessboard is set up. Right?”

Brock and James both nodded. “He’s got his scapegoats already,” James told them, sounding exhausted.

“The building’s on lockdown, no one in or out, but the news is all over it. Jocasta?” Brock said, wincing.

“As you wish, Agent Rumlow,” the AI replied, pulling up a screen against a nearby wall that was showing CNN. A reporter stood on the other side of the bridge entrance to the Triskelion, breathlessly reporting about the notorious war criminal James “Bucky” Barnes and his attempted coup of SHIELD.

They all dejectedly watched the information ticker scroll across the bottom of the feed. It named everyone James and Brock had told them had been part of their intended resistance as the perpetrators of the largest single-day massacre in modern times. They were estimating at least a thousand dead inside the building.

Steve kind of thought their numbers were low.

“We’re the most wanted men in the country,” James said dazedly.

“The world,” Brock corrected, his eyes darting over the screen as he read.

James’s eyes were glistening again as he nodded. “And Steve Rogers will be the hero who was forced to kill his childhood best friend for the good of the world.”

Tony grunted and sat forward, pointing at James. “But what if James Barnes becomes the hero who’d been fighting for years to make someone see the truth? What if James Barnes is the hero who had to kill his childhood best friend for the good of the world?”

James cocked his head at Tony and sighed. “I’d forgotten how little sense you make when you have an idea,” he said wryly, managing a melancholy smile.
Tony grinned. “That’s our solution,” he said as he glanced around the table at each of them. “We let the world see and hear what Captain America really is, behind closed doors. And we let the world watch as James Barnes takes him down and saves us all.”

They all stared at him blankly.

“Great,” Bucky finally said, tone flat and burnt to a crisp just like the pancakes Steve always failed at making. “Is that all we have to do?”

Tony grunted and pointed at the news feed. “Steve is obviously – hold on, can we figure out something to call Evil Steve so we don’t get confused here?” he asked as he pointed at Steve.

James and Brock both continued to stare at him, scowling. “Evil Steve seems pretty appropriate,” James finally answered.

Tony shrugged and pointed at the news again. “Evil Steve is obviously controlling any and all news coming out of the Triskelion. Which means he has the communications array under lock and key. But what if Team Opposite Day here had a ringer?” he posed, swirling his finger through the air.

“You think you can get into the system?” Steve asked him. “Get some video or audio out?”

“Really, anyone who heard the way Evil Steve was talking on the open comm back there would be able to smell the crazy on the guy,” Sam said, nodding. “Not to mention his bragging about poor Other Sam’s gag reflex, I mean damn.”

Tony was grinning excitedly. “If Jocasta is based on the same program as mine back home, I can use her to get into it, no problem. We can broadcast any data we have access to, and we can broadcast live so there’s never any question that it was altered like the recording Evil Steve leaked of James.”

“That’s all well and good,” James drawled. “But we’re essentially going to be broadcasting our deaths live around the world.”

“That’s quitter talk,” Clint teased.

James fixed him with an inscrutable, wearied look. “Yeah. It is,” he said pointedly.

“All we have to do is make sure you and Evil Steve square off in front of a streaming camera. Get him talking, let the world meet the man behind the plan,” Tony said, his words coming faster and faster as his tongue tried to keep pace with his brilliant mind.

Steve scowled at him. “You mean, me?”

Tony turned to look at him, eyes wide. “I didn’t, actually, but that would work just as well without the threat of dying bloody!”

“I don’t . . . I don’t think I’m that good of an actor, Tony,” Steve said shakily.

“No one would mistake him for Evil Steve,” Brock told them, shaking his head and staring at the tabletop. “You don’t understand. You won’t, unless you see him in person.”

James had his head bowed, his eyes closed. Brock still had his hand resting on the back of James’s neck, like they were both drawing comfort from the contact. It was kind of sweet.

But it was also still so weird.

“I can’t beat him,” James finally told them, voice soft and shaky. “I’m no match for him. No one is.
All we’d be doing is showing the world exactly what they want to see; Captain America killing a dangerous criminal.”

Everyone was silent, the wind knocked out of their sails.

The feedback suddenly bursting through the speakers made everyone jump, and Steve winced as he plugged his ears with his fingers.

“Woo,” Evil Steve crooned gleefully, laughing too close to the mic. “Sorry about that feedback, I know how much that hurts on those sensitive prison ears. You know me, though, poor ol’ Cap, can’t work all this newfangled technology and such.”

“What a toolbag,” Clint grunted.

“Come on, Bucky poo, come to daddy one last time, huh?” Evil Steve crooned.

James bared his teeth like a cornered animal.

“I can see all the life signs of your little escape crew,” Evil Steve continued. “Or should I say the absence of life signs? Seeing as how each and every one of them is soaking the Triskelion with their blood right now.”

Steve risked a glance at Bucky. He would admit he was concerned about how Bucky was handling listening to Steve’s voice saying these things. Bucky was scowling at the table top, but he glanced up when Steve moved. They stared at each other for several seconds, then Steve nodded at him. Bucky had a plan, he could tell.

“Why does he think Brock’s dead?” Clint whispered.

Brock held up an arm, showing them a stab wound on his forearm. “We all removed the chips so they couldn’t find us. When they’re out of the body, they read as dead.”

Clint frowned and nodded.

“Tell you what, babydoll. I’ll give you thirty minutes to get to the roof and meet me,” Evil Steve drawled. Steve wasn’t sure he could even make his voice sound this sinister. “Take your time, find your friends and cry on their bodies like you always have. I need thirty of my own minutes, you see. Did you know that Sam will drop to his knees whenever and wherever I tell him to?”

Beside Steve, Sam lowered his head, shivering. Steve’s first instinct was to reach out to him and try to comfort him, but he doubted anyone in this room wanted Steve to touch them just now. Not with that voice filtering through the air like lightning. Steve didn’t even want to be touching himself right now.

“Mmhmm, right in the middle of a firefight, even,” Steve cooed like he was talking to someone else besides James right now. Steve had little doubt that Ow Sam was right there with him, being forced to do God knew what. “Do you want to listen, Buck? You always said you loved the sounds I make.”

“Somebody loves the sounds he’s making,” Bucky grumbled. He eyed Steve critically. “Do me a favor and never turn evil, okay? You’d be impossible to shut up.”

Steve tried not to laugh, he really, honestly tried. He managed to make it a pretty believable cough, in the end. The situation was simply too dark and dire for Steve not to start laughing hysterically, just like James had been shortly after they’d found him. If Steve started laughing now, he’d never stop.
“And if you’re not up there when thirty is up?” Evil Steve said with relish. “My handsome, adoring, loyal boyfriend, who I just retroactively proposed to last night, is going to take a flight without one of his wings. Seeing as how you ripped one off. Won’t that be a damn tragic story? Captain America’s fiancé killed by his psychopath ex-boyfriend during an attack on the good guys.” He laughed almost maniacally. “They might even be able to peg you as racist on top of it all! I’ll be untouchable after all this shameful, senseless loss.”

The static cut out and Evil Steve was gone.

James sighed heavily. “Jocasta, please mark a countdown for twenty-nine minutes.”

“As you wish, Sergeant Barnes,” the AI replied, and a countdown clock projected onto the wall.

Then James merely closed his eyes, lifting his head until he would have been staring up at the ceiling. The stunned, solemn silence stretched on.

Bucky finally sat forward, humming softly as he watched the time tick down. “This is a good plan,” he announced casually. He met Steve’s eyes briefly before looking at James and Brock. “In fact, this is a great plan.”

James finally opened his eyes. “It is,” he agreed miserably. He looked at Tony and clucked his tongue. “Can you get us broadcasting live in less than thirty minutes?”

Tony grinned. “I can do it in three.”

“Get started,” James ordered, voice going hoarse and cracking. He kept pushing through it all, though. “We’ll get as much of it out as possible. Make the world see what he is. It might save them. There are three A/V drones in here, we can rig them to show the roof, stream the fight and catch anything he says during. He can’t help himself, he chatters and taunts.”

“James,” Brock whispered, turning his body toward James like a flower to the sun. “We both know you’ll last minutes against him. He’s too strong. And he’s spent the last two years training in new ways to kill while you’ve been in that cell.”

“I know,” James said, the words nearly coming out silent for how defeated he sounded. “But the only way I’ll ever go down in the collective memory as a good man is if I do this. I don’t want to die as hated as I am now, Brock. I couldn’t kill him when I had to. I got to make amends somehow.”

Steve bowed his head, unable to keep tears from welling. This wasn’t even his universe, these weren’t his men. It didn’t help to tell himself that, though.

“You’re not going to fight him on the roof,” Bucky said, voice strong and determined and in complete contrast to James’s. “I am.”

Steve’s head shot up, and he stared at Bucky just like the rest of them were. “Buck,” Steve started, but Bucky held his hand up in a graceful flick of his wrist.

“I’ll fight him. I’ll get him to talk. And I’ll kill him if I have to.”

No one dared to argue with the tone of Bucky’s voice.

“You don’t have any idea what you’re going up against,” James finally warned. “I was given a version of the serum. I’m strong. I’m fast. I have a goddamn metal arm. He’s still better.”

Bucky stood and pulled his blue coat off, pushing the sleeve of his Henley up and showing James his
Clint grinned and bounced a little in his seat, tapping the table to draw James and Brock’s attention. “If Evil Steve is expecting his sergeant from World War Two, with an arm made of titanium alloy or whatever that thing is,” Clint told them, nearly gleeful as he pointed at Bucky’s arm, which was whirring as he flexed the plates. “Then when he meets the goddamn Winter Soldier and his vibranium murder arm, we’re going to want his face recorded for posterity.”

James and Brock were both staring at Bucky, like he was the only one in the room with a metal arm, come on.

Steve couldn’t help the swell of pride and, God help him, lust as he watched Bucky’s body go from easy and relaxed to poised and battle-ready with no effort at all.

“I’ll need the tac suit,” Bucky practically purred to James. Then he turned that smirk on Steve. “And another haircut.”

Televisions around the country turned to static and flickered, and when the picture came back, no one was watching whatever TV show, news reel, or baseball game they’d been watching before. Instead, a shot of a rooftop high above the DC skyline in the distance filled the screen. A man stood in the center of the shot, dressed all in black, waiting.

He wore a menacing black muzzle to hide his face, and his eyes were lined in black camo paint to help with the glare coming off the shiny towers of the Triskelion. His metal arm was on full display, the plates shifting and whirring, loud enough that the super-sensitive mics on the three drones could pick the sound up and gift it to the viewers in their homes, like the mysterious vibrating box under the Christmas tree from the requisite family lush.

Despite how stunning the picture they’d painted with the drone’s cameras was, Steve felt sick as he watched the screen from the safety of one of the high-level offices on the top floor. They hadn’t been able to place anyone on the roof to act as backup since there had been very little cover where the helicopter pad was situated. Plus, they couldn’t risk those drones getting a shot of any faces that were supposed to be either dead or more evil than Satan’s asshole after a can of beans.

They were bivouacked in this office, as close as they could be without tipping Evil Steve off. And they were positioned perfectly to prevent backup from arriving to give Evil Steve aid, even though both Brock and Jocasta had assured them that Evil Steve had by now killed even the Hydra sleeper agents who’d helped him take the Triskelion. Steve wasn’t taking any chances when playing dead for the tracking system was the simple matter of slicing a chip out of a forearm, though.

So he’d set them up here. It was a decent trade-off, on paper.

Steve had always hated the black and white simplicity of a plan on paper.

The door to the roof groaned and screeched in the sensitive audio of the drones they’d positioned all over the roof. Tony had a station set up, not unlike a live newsroom, where he could switch from camera to camera as the fight moved. The rest of them were crowded around the television hung on the wall of the office.

Captain America strutted out onto the roof, wearing a version of his uniform that had a lot more black in it than it did blue. Steve stared at the man prowling out onto the roof. Brock had been right; there was no way anyone would mistake Steve for this sack of cats crazy motherfucker. He looked
wild and dangerous as he moved, feigning a carelessness that hid a deadly force of nature.

He stopped about twenty feet in front of the figure wrapped in black. “Nice haircut,” the Captain said, making even a compliment sound sadistically teasing somehow.

The man standing opposite the Captain was not Bucky Barnes. He was not Sergeant James Barnes, either. The Captain, with those taunts and cocky jut of his hip, had no idea who he was facing down.

The Winter Soldier cocked his head slowly, staring at the Captain without a word. The lower half of his face was completely obscured by the mask he wore, and his eyes gave away nothing.

“Nice muzzle, too,” the Captain cooed, stalking closer. “You really want to fight me, Buck? I’m not sure that’s going to end well for you.”

“At least it will end,” the Soldier said, voice clear as a bell in the silence.

The Captain ducked his head and looked closer at his opponent. “Wow,” he said incredulously, chuckling. “Prison wasn’t kind to you, was it, pal? You got a very Prince of Darkness thing going here. Is that what Rumlow likes about sneaking into that cell and letting you give it to his ass even when he knows I’m watching you?”

“How many people did you murder today, Steve?” the Soldier asked, devoid of inflection. Steve was amazed at how calm his voice was.

The Captain grinned almost ferally. “Never enough,” he snarled.

Beside Steve, Brock almost slumped over in relief. “God, he’s talking. Thank Christ.”

“And how many more have to die before you’ll be happy?” the Soldier asked. “How many more lives do you need to take?”

The Captain shrugged negligently. “It ebbs and flows. You know how it goes.” His terrifying grin widened and he dropped his voice to an intimate, seductive purr. “But if you really need a number, sweetheart, I’d say I just need one more.” He raised his pointer finger in the air, then jabbed it at the Soldier. “Yours will do.”

The Soldier slowly pulled the mask from his face and tossed it aside, eyes remaining locked on his opponent. Steve could imagine what this first glimpse of that angel’s face attached to that living weapon must be doing to the millions of people watching Tony’s streaming broadcast. He’d chosen the perfect moment to reveal himself.

The Captain was chuckling again, shaking his head in elated disbelief. “God, you’re still so damn beautiful, you know that?” he said with a sigh. “I don’t understand how you fought down the fire from that serum, Buck, I really don’t. All you had to do was give in to it. We could have been a team. It could be you here by my side instead of the broken husk Sam Wilson has become.”

“Only broken husk around here is you, pal,” the Soldier said, cocking his head the other way and frowning sadly.

“I lost anything I could’ve ever given a shit about!” the Captain shouted, his mood shifting as fast as the plates on the Soldier’s arm. The Soldier was motionless, expressionless, silent as the Captain railed at him. “Even you abandoned me in the end! There is no end of the line with you, pal. I see you, Bucky Barnes. I’ve seen you and you couldn’t even stand being second best. Suddenly I was better than you at every little thing you did, and you turned your back on me once you couldn’t use your scrawny little friend as a crutch for your ego. Everything I’ve become, that’s on you!”
The Soldier was silent and still for so long that Steve had to watch the Captain instead just to make sure the feed hadn’t frozen.

Finally, the Soldier shook his head sadly. “You’re never gonna stop. Are you? You’re going to keep lighting match after match, until the whole world’s on fire around you.”

“Well,” the Captain responded, slowly like he was really giving it thought. He seemed almost wistful when he answered. “Yeah. That’s what they built me for. The perfect soldier.”

“And what of the good man?” the Soldier asked, his voice merely a phantom of the strength of his former words.

“The good man?” the Captain echoed, beginning to laugh as he stared at the Soldier incredulously. “The good man is the first to die. The good man turns to ash while the stronger ones slog on. You should know that better than anyone, Sergeant Barnes. You’ve been turned to ash, and yet, here I am.”

He spread his long arms out, gesturing around them like he was surveying his kingdom. The Soldier shrugged his shoulders, making a fist with his metal hand. The cameras picked up the whirring sound of the arm contracting into battle mode.

The Captain was biting his lip in anticipation, the enthusiasm in his blue eyes sickening to watch flood in. “What’s a perfect soldier worth without a war to fight?”

“You want a war,” the Soldier said, voice dropping and turning to ice. He held out his left hand, palm up, and beckoned to Steve with his fingers. “Then bring it to me, sunshine. Light that last match.”

The Captain lowered his head, glaring at the Soldier and beginning to grin. Then he pulled the shield off his back and flung it at the Soldier, charging after it in the same standard attack Steve used when he was going for shock and awe.

The Soldier reached out and caught the shield, the clang of the impact echoing over the roof and through the television speakers of millions of homes and businesses across the country. James and Brock both audibly gasped when they saw it, and Steve was certain they weren’t the only ones watching the streaming feed who reacted that way.

The Captain’s steps stuttered in shock when the Soldier kept the shield and dropped into a defensive crouch, but then he charged on, enraged and shouting as he attacked.

And then the fight was a blur. Brock and James had been right, the Captain was fast and strong, and his fighting style showed that he’d spent all his time out of the ice learning new and better ways to fight. Learning how to be more lethal.

The thing was, he would have obliterated the James Barnes who’d gone right from World War Two into a twelve by twelve foot holding cell. The fight would be over by now and the Captain would be standing over a body and gloating.

The thing was, the Captain had never sparred with James, and so he was confident that James couldn’t anticipate his moves, confident in the knowledge he had of his opponent; that he was stronger and faster than James, better trained and more experienced.

The thing was, no one in this world had spent seventy years being honed in the very depths of hell on earth, molded into a living, breathing weapon. Captain America certainly hadn’t lived through that. Not like the man in black had.
The thing was . . . the Captain had no idea what kind of weapon had been waiting for him on that roof.

The Captain used his superior strength in a fight, relying on it far more than Steve ever had. He punched hard and kicked harder, using elbows and knees and headbutts and anything he could as a blunt instrument, trying to pound his opponent into submission, trying to knock them into a pulp that would never move again.

But the Soldier moved with the grace and ease of a dancer. He slashed with knives as he spun around and away and over. He picked his spots with precision and was gone again before the Captain could react. He blocked with a metal arm that was harder than the Captain could ever have suspected, and he handled the shield in a way no one in this world should probably know how, since the Captain had apparently never allowed another soul to touch it.

After just three minutes of brutal, heinously beautiful fighting, the Soldier was dancing away from the Captain’s grasping hands, light on his feet, shield on his arm and knife in his hand as the Captain crouched, breathing hard, bloody cuts and gouges all over his uniform and exposed skin.

“You're not Bucky. What are you?” the Captain snarled at the Soldier as the Soldier strolled up to stand over him, just out of reach.

“I’m the nightmare they made me,” the Soldier answered softly.

The Captain lunged for his knees with a shout, and the Soldier jumped, flipping over in the air and landing behind the Captain as the man was still grabbing out for him. The Soldier’s feet hit the ground and then he dropped to his knees all in one fluid motion, wrapping the metal arm around the Captain’s neck from behind, pulling back and yanking the Captain’s head so he was on his knees with his back arched, hands grasping and pawing at the vibranium vice around his neck.

The expression on the Soldier’s face, clear for all the world to see through the high definition cameras of the drones, was heartbreaking. He was killing his best friend in the whole world, and his eyes told the masses watching that he knew part of his soul was dying on this roof today, too. Both of these kids from Brooklyn being sacrificed to the gods of War.

The Soldier bowed his head as tears began to slide through the black camo paint. He squeezed the Captain’s neck tighter.

“You’re never going to hurt anyone ever again,” the Soldier said to the Captain through gritted teeth. “I tried to take you out with me. I tried to protect the world from you. Every vile thing you’ve done since then is on me.”

The Captain tried to respond, his mouth opening and closing as he struggled for breath. His fingers grasped desperately behind him, finally finding purchase in the Soldier’s hair and holding fast.

Tears were streaming down the Soldier’s face as the Captain’s struggles slowed and his sounds became more desperate, more terrified.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t save you,” the Soldier whispered. The sound carried, though, reaching the closest drone’s mic. “We lost Steve Rogers in 1943. Whoever you are, whatever you are . . . you’re not the man I loved.”

Steve knew that Bucky was no longer talking to Evil Steve. He was no longer even playing by the script for the cameras and the millions of people watching on in horror. He was trying to tell himself to kill the man. He was trying to convince himself it was the only way.
He was trying to absolve himself of the sin before he’d committed it.

“Come on, kid,” Brock whispered desperately to the TV. “You can do it.”

James sat down hard and covered his head with his hands, beginning to rock back and forth, unable to watch any longer. He was crying just as hard as Bucky was on the video feed.

“Buck,” the Captain gasped, tapping the metal arm like he was trying to tap out of the fight. “Please! Please . . . you were the only thing I’ve ever loved. You are . . .”

The Soldier gave a broken sob and pulled the gun from his thigh holster. He jammed the barrel under the Captain’s chin, squeezed his eyes shut, and turned his head away. Then with a primal shout of anguish, he pulled the trigger.

Steve cried out in shock as he watched, and the others all made strangled sounds as they all stared at the screen, horrified and entranced in equal measures.

The Soldier collapsed to his side with the dead weight of the man he’d just killed. He pulled the Captain’s body into his lap and hugged him close to his chest, cradling the Captain’s head and shoulders against him, pressing his face to the Captain’s battered cheek and sobbing loud enough that the cameras of all three drones picked it up.

Steve lurched to his feet and was heading for the door before Sam managed to grab him and block his path. “You can’t be seen on those cameras, Steve,” Sam said quickly as Steve struggled with him. “Stop!”

Steve stopped trying to pull and push him away, and he slumped against the wall beside the door with a ragged gasp, sliding down to his ass and staring at the tragic tableau on the television.

A man was carefully walking up to the Soldier as he held the body of his best friend in his arms, nose pressed to the Captain’s cheek, still rocking and crying uncontrollably, begging the dead to forgive him.

“Barnes?” the other Sam said softly, his shaky voice filtering through the speakers. “Jesus. You did it.”

The Soldier shuddered violently and looked up at him, looking lost and heartbroken. His eyes were red and his face was streaked with tears and camo paint and blood spatter.

OW Sam held out a hand to him. “Come on, man,” he urged. “Come on. It’ll be okay. I was here, I saw everything he did today, okay? I won’t let you take the hit for this. I ain’t gonna let anybody put you back in that cell.”

The Soldier looked back down at the Captain’s face, his entire body trembling as Sam helped him arrange the body in the center of the helicopter landing pad, right where the Soldier had caught his body falling. Then Sam pulled the Soldier to his feet and used his sleeve to wipe the blood away from the Soldier’s cheek. He was saying something that none of the audio could pick up, but the Soldier was still nearly inconsolable, his eyes on the Captain’s body and nothing else.

Finally, Sam forced him to turn his back on the body and pulled him into a forceful hug. The Soldier clutched at him like he would be ripped right over the edge of the roof and fall straight into Hell if this complete stranger didn’t hold on to him.

Someone in the room with Steve let out a choked sob. Steve thought it might have been his Sam.
“Brock,” James said, his voice a hoarse wreck, but somehow still calm. “Go get him. Please.”

Brock nodded and darted for the door, casting a sympathetic glance Steve’s way as he went.

Steve stared at the television, watching as OW Sam was joined by Brock seconds later, and both men led the Soldier toward the roof access as he fell apart. They left Captain America, bloody and broken, lying on the ground behind them.

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With the threat now neutralized, Tony had retreated to the R&D lab to continue work on the remote. He’d gotten through the door and managed to convince Jocasta that he was indeed Tony Stark and that it was okay to acquiesce to his requests. She had darkened the glass walls of the lab for him, and then he’d pressed his back to the door and slid to the ground.

The first sob that ripped out of his throat shocked him, and then the tears really started coming. He sat there alone, sobbing uncontrollably, feeling like his heart would absolutely shatter into pieces if he didn’t cry every ounce of the emotion out of him right here and right now.

He didn’t know how long he sat there like that before there was a gentle tap on the door above his head.

Tony wiped viciously at his face and scrambled to his feet, unlocking the door and pulling it open. Clint stood there, hands shoved deep in his pockets, head bowed.

“Barton,” Tony greeted shakily.

Clint glanced up, his face flushed and his eyes just as red as Tony’s probably were. “Kind of rough, huh?” Clint croaked as he stepped into the lab.

“You could say that,” Tony answered, trying for a smile and failing so hard he could probably get a job driving the StruggleBus around town.

“The rest of them are coming down soon,” Clint said, listless and morose. Seeing Clint Barton without a joke or a grin just wasn’t right. Nothing about this world was right.

“I haven’t even . . .” Tony glanced around the lab, taking the remote and the clip of bullets from his pocket. “I haven’t even started.”

Clint nodded in understanding. “We have time. Rumlow is holding off the authorities by claiming the Triskelion’s security measures have been bypassed and it’s not safe for anyone to cross the bridge until we can get them back under our control.”

Tony nodded, swallowing back the tight, gritty feeling in his throat from all the crying. “Any survivors yet?”

“There’s a couple critical cases,” Clint answered, looking at the darkened glass like he could see the body of his other self out there under that jacket. “They’re not going to make it without immediate medical care, though.”

Tony wanted to ask him if he was okay, but he knew it was the dumbest question any of them could ask each other at this point. Instead, he asked a wry, “Is anyone okay right now?”

“Can’t imagine they are,” Clint answered with a wan smile. “Buck is . . . I think he’s in shock. Our
Sam took him to the infirmary to check him over.”

“He did a hell of a thing,” Tony said quietly, looking at the remote in his hand again. “I know it wasn’t him. But he still looked like Steve. Sounded like Steve. It was still Steve up there. I’m not sure I could have done it even knowing how rotten his insides had become.”

“Yeah,” Clint whispered, gazing at the glass without really looking like he was seeing anything. “Yeah, I don’t know if I could have either.”

They stood in silence for several minutes, both lost in their own thoughts but also both taking comfort in a familiar presence beside them. When the elevator dinged on the other side of the door, Tony shook himself out of his funk and headed for the table where he’d begun assembling bits and bobs earlier.

He kept the glass tinted, so Clint wouldn’t be able to see the body on the other side. A few seconds after he’d gotten his work station set up, the lab door opened again. Tony turned to find all of the others filtering in, and something scared and grateful inside him warmed. None of them needed to be alone right now.

The other Sam was with them. Tony had missed the explanation they’d given the man for why and how they were all there, but he seemed to be taking it about as well as a man could after a day like this.

“Tony,” Steve greeted gently. At the sound of his voice, both James and Ow Sam flinched before they could stop themselves. Steve hunched his shoulders a little and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He softened his voice even further as he drew closer to Tony’s workspace. “How’s it going?”

Tony winced guiltily. “To be honest, Cap, I’m just getting to this. I sat on the floor and cried first.”

Steve didn’t make a joke or scold him for wasting time. He just set a careful hand on Tony’s shoulder and squeezed. “Me too,” he whispered, head bowed.

Tony grunted and threw caution out the window, turning to pull Steve’s massive body into a hug. Steve clung to him for several seconds, then backed away with a small, genuine smile. “Thanks,” he whispered.

Tony hummed and turned to look at the others. A few of them were watching him and Steve, so Tony spread his arms wide. “Anyone else want one? I give great hug.”

To Tony’s utter shock, Bucky shifted around in the chair he was curled into, and he raised his hand pitifully. Tony would not have turned down that request even if Bucky Barnes was dying of a contagious flesh eating bacteria right now, so he stalked right over to him and pulled him out of the chair, tugging the man to him and hugging him tight.

Bucky accepted the transfer without complaint, wrapping his arms around Steve’s neck and digging
his fingers into Steve’s shoulderblades, hiding his face in Steve’s neck.

Everyone else in the room requested a Tony Stark patented hug after that, so Tony did his due diligence before he went back to his workbench and got to work.

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Brock came up to Bucky as Bucky was staring listlessly at the floor. He knelt in front of Bucky and peered up him, face set in a sympathetic frown. “Hey, kid,” he said to Bucky, raising his hand slowly so that Bucky could stop him if he didn’t want to be touched. He patted Bucky’s knee, squeezing it a little. Then he stood and held out his hand. “Come over here with us.”

Bucky let him pull him out of his chair, and he followed to the little break lounge area right off the lab where everyone else was huddling together, exhausted and traumatized as fuck. When they walked up, James stood and came to them.

He swallowed with difficulty and seemed to force himself to meet Bucky’s eyes. Bucky held his gaze for a moment, but then had to drop it, bowing his head as tears threatened yet again. Bucky was beginning to think he was allergic to this world’s air or something, because he was fine and he was not crying because he was all up in his feelings, he was not.

“Thank you,” James said, placing his hand on Bucky’s metal arm, right over the red star. “Steve was . . . our Steve, I mean. He died the day they put him in that machine. You didn’t kill Steve Rogers, you understand?”

Bucky licked his lips and glanced up, trying to breathe through the vice around his chest. “I’m sorry you lost him,” he finally managed to dredge up. “I’m sorry.”

James offered him a purely miserable smile and a nod. Then he turned away, drawn to Brock like a moth to a weirdly non-lethal flame. Brock took him around the shoulders and pulled him in, kissing James’s temple.

Bucky found himself smiling as he watched them. It wasn’t a happy ending at all. There were too many good people dead. But Bucky was finding comfort in the fact that even in a world where Steve Rogers wasn’t actually Steve Rogers, Evil Steve’s version of Bucky Barnes could still find a place for himself. He really hoped those two were happy for the rest of their lives, even though he’d still gladly punch his world’s Brock Rumlow in the nutsack with an anvil.

He pulled his attention away to give them a moment of privacy, and he found Sam approaching him carefully. It wasn’t his Sam, he could tell by the tense line of the man’s shoulders. Bucky dredged up a genuine smile from somewhere, and Sam made an effort to try and return it.

“How are you?” Bucky asked him.

Sam shrugged. “I’ll be okay.”

“But you’re not right now.”

Sam snorted and shook his head. “No. No, I’m not right now.”

Bucky nodded, not sure what else to say. He had no idea what Evil Steve had put this man through, but he knew for sure that any version of Sam Wilson in any world did not deserve one second of abuse from anyone, even if his own Sam kind of hated him.

Ow Sam peered over Bucky’s shoulder. “So. The Multiverse theory, huh?”
Bucky nodded and shrugged. “You know of it?”

“I read a little,” Sam said with a small smirk. “Well. I gotta say, if you and your team hadn’t been lost in space when you were, I’d be dead. Or maybe worse. We’d all be dead or worse by now. So . . . as much as I know you guys got to hate what you’re going through, I can’t say I’m sorry it’s happening to you.”

Bucky frowned thoughtfully, cocking his head. “Huh,” he said, soft and almost to himself instead of adding to the conversation. They’d dropped into Vintageland in time to coax the Invaders into the safety of the forest, and now they’d dropped into a world where Bucky was the only person around who had the tools to take Evil Steve down while also clearing the name of his own counterpart. Ow Sam was right; the remote was taking them into places where their counterparts were in mortal danger. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Sam patted Bucky on the metal arm, which Bucky was still not used to people doing. The only people who ever voluntarily touched his arm were Tony, Steve, and Clint. No one else would go near it. Some people wouldn’t even look at it, like they were afraid the damn thing would become sentient and detach itself and beat the hell out of anyone who gave it the hairy eyeball.

Ridiculous.

“Are you all going to be okay?” Steve asked Brock and James, and Bucky turned his attention back to the others, moving closer to sit gingerly on the edge of the little sofa beside Steve.

Brock and James shared a loaded glance, then looked back at Steve with almost identical shrugs. “No matter what happens, we’ve only got one direction we can go in,” Brock said, pointing a finger toward the ceiling.

“We sure as hell can’t get any further down,” James agreed, and he was actually able to offer Steve a small smile. He cleared his throat and gave Brock an unreadable look. Brock nodded, and James’s shoulders seemed to relax a little. He stepped closer to the couch, meeting Steve’s eyes hesitantly. “Can I have a minute with you?”

Steve was peering up at him with a confused frown. “Of course,” he said, pushing to his feet. He placed a warm hand on the back of Bucky’s neck, which still felt weird where they’d shaved the sides off it to make it look as much like James’s as possible. “You gonna be okay for a bit?”

“Sure am. Go.”

Steve nodded and followed James out of the lab and into the lobby area, where the darkened glass gave them a little bit of privacy. Before the door closed behind them, Bucky caught sight of James turning and pulling Steve into a hug. He was pressing his forehead to Steve’s shoulder and Steve had a hand on the back of his head, speaking to him in soothing undertones, as the door finally snicked closed.

Bucky’s version of Sam came over and sat in Steve’s vacated spot, his shoulder just barely brushing Bucky’s. Bucky looked over at him in surprise, wondering when the last time was that Sam had voluntarily gotten close enough to Bucky to touch him. And he was on Bucky’s left, something Sam had never allowed.

“I uh . . .” Sam shook his head as he stared straight ahead rather than meeting Bucky’s eyes. “Shit, man, I don’t even know what to say.”

Bucky nodded, working his jaw back and forth because it had been tense for hours and was starting
to ache. “You don’t have to say anything, you know.”

“I know,” Sam whispered. He finally risked a glance at Bucky, then he leaned close and gave Bucky’s metal arm a gentle jab with his elbow. “I’m sorry for all the times I’ve ever frisked you. Or had someone else frisk you. Or made fun of all the weapons you can hide up your ass.”

Bucky snorted quietly, a smile playing over his lips as he looked down at Sam’s clasped hands. His was squeezing them tight, sliding his palms together and then threading his fingers and clutching into a fist again.

Bucky watched the motions, mesmerized. “You don’t have to apologize,” Bucky told him, voice stronger and more certain. “I don’t take offense by any of it.”

Sam grunted unhappily. “I’ve never trusted you like I should be able to trust a teammate,” he started, words measured like he was running through a thousand different things to string together and choosing the best one to run with. “I didn’t know the you that Steve knew. And you aren’t exactly an easy man to get to know. But I’ve never tried to meet you halfway.”

Bucky was frowning at Sam again, searching his stoic expression for a little more understanding of where this was coming from and where it might be going.

“See, when I look at you, Barnes, all I can see is the Winter Soldier. That’s the scary ass motherfucker I know.”

Barnes gulped down against the tightness threatening his lungs and throat, and he curled his shoulders in protectively, bowing his head.

“But . . . that thing you did up there?” Sam continued, finally turning his whole body toward Bucky. He put a hand on Bucky’s tense back. “I think I finally got a glimpse past the Winter Soldier, you feel me? Watching you in that fight, and what you did after. I finally saw the Bucky Barnes that Steve’s been telling fictions about all these years.”

Bucky was shocked when he raised his head to find that his swimming vision had finally cleared up, and now tears were making tracks down both his cheeks. Yeah, it was definitely allergies.

They stared at each other for several stunned seconds. Then Sam scooted even closer, wrapped his arm over the back of Bucky’s shoulders, and tugged. Bucky went willingly, and Sam enveloped him in a surprisingly strong hug.

“I’m gonna do better,” Sam promised him.

Bucky shook his head. He wanted to tell Sam that he didn’t have to do better. He wanted to tell him that keeping a distance was the smartest thing any of the Avengers could do; they had every right in the world to keep themselves safe, and this wasn’t kindergarten, they didn’t have to make sure every teammate was included and felt special and loved. They didn’t owe Bucky that, Sam most of all.

But Sam gave hugs that were just as amazing as Tony’s, and Bucky clung to him, leaning into him so hard and for so long, that by the time he realized his head was pillowed on Sam’s thigh and Sam was still holding him protectively, Bucky was too exhausted to even apologize, much less get up and move away.

When Sam shook him awake an indeterminate amount of time later, Bucky was still groggy and exhausted. He sat up, jamming the heels of his palms into his eyes and rubbing until he saw spots.

“Tony’s got the remote ready,” Sam told him as he stood.
Bucky peered up at him, blinking sleepily. “Right,” he said, forcing his sore body to move.

He followed Sam out into the R&D lab, where the others had all gathered. They’d obviously all already said their own goodbyes to Brock, James, and Ow Sam, so Bucky went up to the three of them, shuffling stiffly and wincing at the bright lights of the lab. At least the red emergency strobes had stopped.

He kept his head down, unable to look at any of them. “I’m sorry for all your losses,” he offered, feeling wretched both inside and out.

Brock stepped forward and pulled Bucky into a tight hug. “You did good, kid,” he said softly. “Don’t you carry this with you when you leave, you hear me? You saved a lot of lives here. Remember that.”

Bucky nodded obediently and Brock released him.

James offered Bucky a small, genuine smile, then he offered his hand. “Good luck,” James said, shaking his hand. “I wish there was something more eloquent I could say, but I got nothin’.”


James released his hand and stepped away, then Bucky cast a furtive glance at Ow Sam. “Thank you for pulling me back up there,” Bucky said to him.

Ow Sam nodded, pressing his lips tight together. “Thank you for risking your life to save a bunch of strangers. I hope third time’s a charm with this thing so you can get home.”

“Thank you,” Bucky mumbled, glancing at all three of them one last time. “Good luck. All of you. Take care of each other.”

“You got it, kid,” Brock said with a determined nod.

“You three better clear out,” Tony called over to them. “This thing tends to throw tantrums and suck anything it feels like into it’s vision quests and shit.”

The three OW men laughed and said their last goodbyes, trailing out of the lab and stopping on the other side of the glass to watch.

Bucky joined his teammates, taking a deep breath, holding it for a ten count, and then expelling it like he was releasing every bad thing he’d been holding inside him the last twenty-four hours. He’d be leaving the guilt in this world with that breath.

“Who wants to drive this time?” Tony asked, holding up the newly rejigged device.

“Dude, naw,” Sam grunted.

Bucky shook his head furtively.

Clint had his eyes closed, face toward the ceiling. “Think happy thoughts, think happy thoughts,” he muttered over and over.

“Okay fine, I’ll do it,” Tony mumbled, and they all curled into the portal knot formation that probably would have made them all legally wed in some states at this point.

Steve had Captain America’s shield now, so he held it in the center of the knot, and each man put a hand on it. Bucky wrapped his arm around Tony, holding him tight in preparation for Tony to press
“Happy thoughts, happy thoughts, no monsters where we want to go,” Clint was still murmuring.

“Okay,” Tony grunted. “Everyone focus on the landing pad at the Tower.”

They all gave sounds of acknowledgement, enough grunting to make Bucky feel like they were rooting pigs after the same truffle. He squeezed his eyes closed, and thought of the Tower’s landing pad, trying desperately not to let the image overlay with a bloody helo pad.

“Here we go,” Tony said tightly, and he pushed the button.
Chapter Notes

I finally forced myself to read over the last chapter again and fixed as many mistakes and typos as I could. That shit was rough, dude. And I'm sorry this chapter is later than most, this past weekend was my birthday so I took a little break to spend it with friends. But I'm back, and on to happier clusterfucks we go!

Further notes on this chapter are at the end, so if you appreciate warnings rather than possibly uncomfortable surprises, read that first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky kept his eyes squeezed closed once the swirling of the portal had stopped. Call it being traumatized, call it cowardice, Bucky didn’t care. But he was going to let one of the others react first, before he had to do it this time.

He heard Steve groan plaintively, with answering moans and grunts from the other three. At least they were all five conscious this time, that had to be an improvement.

“What . . . the $#@%?” Tony finally muttered. “Wait, what?”

Bucky cracked one eye open with an expectant wince.

Of all the things he’d expected to see, a life-size, hand-drawn comic of Captain America kneeling in front of him hadn’t been one of them.

Bucky opened the other eye and frowned in confusion at what had to be a cardboard cutout of Steve in his uniform.

Then the drawing moved and looked at him, wide eyes a stunning cerulean blue.

Bucky threw himself away, scuttling like a crab until his back hit something solid. “Jesus!”

A pure white oblong circle popped into existence above the drawing’s head, smaller white circles trailing down, with a hastily-rendered black question mark in it and nothing else. Bucky reacted on instinct and tossed one of his knives at the thing, dashing it into smoke.

He glanced around wildly, but all he saw were more drawings, each an incredibly accurate likeness of his friends, if his friends had been goddamned cartoons.

More white bubbles popped in and out of existence above their heads as they all looked around, all of them panicking and confused just like Bucky was, the white screens above their heads a jumbled mess too fast and muddled to read. When Bucky realized a bubble had appeared above his own head, he pulled another knife from his boot and jabbed it. It popped with the sound of a helium balloon deflating, and the white thing did a few loop-the-loops around the room before disappearing.

“What the hell?” Tony said, looking down at his own hands. “Oh, my God.”

“What the $#@% just happened?” Sam cried, then he looked at the air, offended. “Did I just get
“We’re in a comic,” Clint muttered as he stared at his own cartoon hands. He seemed to be handling it far better than Bucky was. “We are comics.”

Bucky risked a glance down at himself, and sure enough, his entire body looked just like all the others. He was drawn. Lovingly, it seemed, but still drawn. His metal arm was rendered beautifully, down to the last line in the plating. He reached a hand to his face and found he was wearing a domino mask over his eyes. He tried to pull it off, but his fingers couldn’t even slip beneath the edges . . . it was drawn on him. The thought of never being able to get that mask off hit him so suddenly and so hard that his breathing went instantly ragged, and he brought both hands up to try and yank the damn thing off again.

“Bucky,” Steve’s voice said from the cardboard cutout in front of Bucky, calm and soothing just like Steve’s voice would have been when Bucky was in the middle of a nightmare. “Calm down, Buck, we’re okay. You’re okay, doll.”

Bucky snapped his gaze up to Steve’s impossibly blue eyes, blinking at him. How the hell had Steve known he was panicking? Was his fucking comic book form easier to read than he was in real life?

Steve winced and pointed one of his weirdly two-dimensional fingers at the space above Bucky’s head. Bucky looked up, only to find another of those white bubbles, his stream of panicked thoughts trailing across it like it was a screen with a line hooked directly to his mind. He lunged and stabbed the damn thing again, popping it with the blade of his cartoon knife. It burst into multi-colored confetti and showered him with the debris.

Bucky sat slumped in the resulting pile of glitter, staring at Steve’s shame-faced, hand-drawn avatar with a scowl.

Beside him, Clint poked his own thought-bubble with the tip of an arrow and it made a sound effect like a squeaky dog toy as it deflated in place and then lay like a flattened tire in the air above him before disappearing.

“How the $#@% did we get here?” Tony demanded. He gritted his teeth and looked up, narrowing his eyes. “Quit bleeping me out! Cursing is not satisfying unless everyone hears it!”

Bucky was trying hard to keep his mind calm and blank. If any of his teammates could read his mind all the time, they’d either be even more terrified of him, or – the worse scenario in Bucky’s mind – they’d pity him even more than they already did. Bucky couldn’t bear the thought of either one.

Steve crawled closer and laid a hand carefully on Bucky’s shin. It was bizarre, being able to feel the contact like it was real while looking at what was essentially a comic book panel of Steve touching him. When Bucky glanced up to meet’s Steve eyes again, Steve was scowling hard enough for ink wrinkles to mar his forehead.

“What are you leaning against?” Steve asked him, staring at the space over Bucky’s shoulder.

Bucky scowled and turned to look at the wall he’d backed himself into. Or, well, he’d thought it was a wall. There was nothing there, though, even if he was still leaning against something solid. He put his hand against it, pushing it. It was solid, they just couldn’t see it.

“I don’t know,” he finally mumbled, slumping against the invisible wall again.

The others had all crawled closer to them, huddling in a circle around Bucky’s splayed legs.
“Okay,” Sam said, trying mightily to sound calm and reassuring. He put a hand up and closed his eyes. “We’re obviously in a universe that is drawn like a comic book.”

They all stared at him, waiting for him to get to the part where he started comforting them, since that always seemed to be Sam’s role. He merely stared with unfocused eyes, though, dropping his hand.

When he glanced around to find them all watching him expectantly, Sam shrugged. “That’s all I got.”

“What shape is the remote in?” Steve asked Tony as he settled on his ass and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Tony held the remote up. The blue of the battery was faded and gray, drawn to look dead. “We used up another bullet getting here. I hate to say this, I mean, it pains me on a physical level to admit, but I have no idea how this thing actually works. Every theory I’ve had has been useless.”

Clint patted Tony on the shoulder as Tony placed the remote on the floor in the middle of their circle.

Bucky finally took a moment to calm and examine each of his companions. Steve was in the Captain America suit, the shield on his back in its harness. Sam was wearing a red and white suit, a pair of goggles with red tinted glass on his face and goddamn honest to God red wings behind him. Tony didn’t look all that different, maybe younger, but . . . Jesus Christ, Tony was huge. He was almost as big as Steve, and so was, for that matter, Clint. At five foot ten inches tall, Sam Wilson was now the smallest man in the room. Clint didn’t look much different either, except for the band-aid now across the bridge of his nose, and his black tac suit had a purple protective patch over his chest.

Bucky kind of didn’t want to know what he himself looked like. He knew his hair was long again, for one. Longer than it had been before they’d been pulled into the first portal.

“Why did we all change?” Sam asked as he fingered the goggles on his face. He either chose to leave them there, or he couldn’t get his off either. “None of the other worlds changed us.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Tony mumbled, shaking his head and glaring down at his hands. “It feels weird. I feel out of proportion.”

“Me too,” Clint admitted.

“Can we just fix the $#@%ing thing and jump again?” Bucky asked Tony softly.

Tony glanced at him and immediately looked away, biting his lip against what Bucky belatedly realized was a laugh. Bucky glared up at the screen that was yet again hovering over his head. The only thing in it was a tiny frowning emoticon.

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Bucky left it there with a sigh.

“I’ll, uh,” Tony said, his voice shaking with repressed laughter. “I’ll start working on it.”

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Steve knew it was a breach of privacy, not to mention an abuse of a situation that none of them could control, but he could not force himself to stop staring at the little white shape above Bucky’s head. Clint had deemed the screens ‘thought bubbles’, saying they were fairly common in comic books, which made Steve’s fascination with the damn things even worse in his opinion. No matter how
guilty he felt, though, he was still stealing glances at the damn thing.

It had been so long since Steve could tell what Bucky was thinking. At one point in their lives, they’d had no secrets – well, except for the one they both kept about wanting to bone, apparently – but other than the one tiny secret they’d had between them, they’d been open books for each other. Steve had been able to read Bucky’s face and body language, hear between the words of what he was saying to the meaning underneath. During the war, that ability had been priceless. Steve had known that much, but he’d never realized how comforting it had been until Bucky was gone. He’d felt nearly deaf, been utterly lost, in a world full of people he had to take at face value.

He’d gotten used to it, of course, before Bucky had returned. But he hadn’t realized how dearly he had missed that connection between the two of them until he’d found Bucky again and realized that connection was still missing. Bucky had managed to sever it with decades of training that made him inscrutable – unreadable, even to Steve.

Now Steve could read him again, quite literally, and the only way to keep his eyes off Bucky’s inner thoughts was to keep his eyes closed.

And none of them felt particularly safe enough to sit around doing that right now.

They were still getting used to being drawn in two dimensions. Steve didn’t feel two-dimensional, he still felt like himself, he felt real. But his eyes were giving him contrasting information on that matter, and it was disconcerting as hell.

Clint was the only one who seemed to have already shrugged it all off and was going about business as usual, keeping an arrow trained on the only door to the room. The thought bubble that hovered over his head was nothing but a target. Steve had always wondered what went through a sniper’s head as they waited for a kill-shot. He wasn’t sure Clint Barton’s thought bubbles actually answered that question for him, but it was fascinating all the same.

Tony was futzing with the remote, muttering to himself. He seemed calm enough, but his thought bubble gave Steve a headache, swirling with mathematics and bleeped out curse words, all of it streaming so fast that it was impossible to read. Not that Steve could have made sense of any of it even if he could single out any one thing to try reading. Tony’s mind was a beautiful, terrifying cacophony, and Steve found himself both in awe of the mind it was now obvious he’d always taken for granted, and with a growing affection for the man it belonged to.

Sam had periodically been pacing, stopping to try to yank the goggles off his face, and then pacing while trying to yank the goggles off his face. His mind was a constant tickertape stream of punctuation that Steve had quickly discerned was cussing, interspersed with an occasional, “I didn’t sign up for this bullshit,” and “friends with superheroes $#@% that,” that Steve tried hard not to laugh at.

There were so many things Steve should be doing right now, and giggling manically over the thought bubbles of his friends was not one of them. They hadn’t even figured out where the hell they were yet.

Bucky sat with the frowning face floating over him and nothing else passing by the bubble, almost like the screen that displayed his thoughts had frozen on the emoticon and hadn’t been able to boot back up. His back was hunched against the invisible barrier, and he’d refused to move until they had a task for him to complete or Tony had the remote ready to go.

So, Steve had gone to sit beside him, and now their shoulders were pressed together, both of them sitting silent. Bucky was warm, despite the fact that his body was drawn in ink, and Steve had
managed to keep his glances up at Bucky’s thought bubble to one or two per minute now, rather than staring and waiting for something more to be revealed.

Bucky finally looked at him when he caught Steve glancing up, meeting his eyes with a frown. “What?”

Steve shook his head, at a loss for what to say. He settled for the truth. “It’s just . . . been a long time since you let me see what you were really thinking. I guess I can’t help but try to see it now.”

Bucky closed his eyes and let his head rest against the invisible wall. “I know. I’m sorry. I’ve just . . . just been trying to protect you, Steve.”

Steve scowled and turned more toward him, fascinated by the way all their forms could be seen like normal but still present as flat. The artist in him was screaming. “Buck,” he whispered. “You don’t have to protect me from any part of you. I love you.”

Bucky shot him a quick, worried frown, then looked at the floor between his feet again.

“You,” Steve said in a harder, more determined voice. “I love you. Hell, Buck, I goddamn adore you. Nothing that passes through that thing is going to change that. Not ever.”

Bucky was motionless and silent for several seconds, then he risked another glance at Steve. His eyes strayed upward, looking above Steve’s head briefly, before he barked a laugh and looked away. He covered his mouth and closed his eyes, like he was trying not to look at Steve at all as he attempted to stifle more laughter.

“What?” Steve asked, a little offended that this was Bucky’s response to that sincere of a confession. He swatted Bucky’s arm. “Don’t be a dick.”

“I’m sorry,” Bucky offered with a strangled laugh. “It’s just . . .” He gestured toward the bubble floating over Steve’s head, and Steve risked a glance upward.

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It was the only thing on his own screen. Steve laughed loudly in surprise, causing the others to glance over at them.

Sam snorted and Tony began to mutter louder under his breath, shaking his head at them and bending over the remote. “God, where is a camera when you need one?”

Steve didn’t even care that they were all laughing at him, as long as that small, fond smile stayed on Bucky’s lips. Bucky’s eyes were tracking Sam as Steve continued to stare at him.

“Hey,” Bucky finally said, nodding his head toward Sam. “You think you could draw on us if you had the right tools?”

Steve glanced over at Sam, humming. “I could try. Why?”

“Cause as much as I hate this stupid mask, those goggles have got to be driving Sam crazy. The vermillion tint to them. It’s not meant for indoor conditions, it’s meant to enhance the target against a background with too many colors.”

“So, what, he can’t see well?”

Bucky shrugged. “If it were me, I’d be getting nervous because there aren’t many colors in here to
filter out. Especially since nothing is in 3-D to start with. He’ll eventually see nothing but a flat wall if he wears them too long. It ain’t gonna hurt him unless we get ourselves in trouble, but it’s putting him on edge.”

“Yeah, we don’t want that,” Steve mumbled, watching Sam pace and toss up curse after bleep after curse. He also knew Bucky was trying hard not to panic again, with that domino mask attached to him. If Steve could fix Sam’s goggles, then he could fix Bucky’s mask, and Steve knew that was the main reason Bucky had brought it up even if he wouldn’t say it.

“And if you can erase things, or draw new things,” Bucky continued carefully, wincing at Steve. “Maybe you could fix that remote better than Stark can in this world.”

Steve stared at him, heart hurting over the fact that Bucky would probably list every single damn thing Steve could change or help, except for himself. It was the way Bucky had always been, putting others before himself. That character trait was the only reason Steve had lived long enough to be given the serum. It was both appalling and amazing that such a self-sacrificing bit of Bucky’s personality had survived when so many other things had been burned and frozen out of him.

Bucky was watching him with a stunned, wounded frown as Steve ruminated, and Steve realized with a sinking feeling that Bucky had probably read every single thing Steve had just thought.

Steve bowed his head dejectedly and made to stand, but Bucky grabbed his arm before he could. When Steve looked back at him, Bucky was staring at him determinedly. “I know I’m not the same as I was, Stevie,” he said softly. “God, I know that. But I’m trying. I swear to God, I’m trying. Because I adore you, too.” He pointed up, and Steve fought the flutter of guilt when he glanced at the bubble hovering over Bucky’s head.

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Steve grinned as he watched Bucky force the other emotion down again, leaving the frowning face alone once more.

“That one’s just for you to see,” Bucky explained, rubbing his thumb over Steve’s hand before releasing him.

Steve grunted and put his weight on one knee, leaning over Bucky and pulling him into a quick kiss. Bucky’s hand came up to his hair, clutching at him for the few seconds they allowed themselves. When they separated, they were both staring at each other with wide eyes.

“That felt super weird,” Steve admitted.

“Let’s save that for when we’re real people again,” Bucky told him at almost the same moment.

They both nodded and released each other, refusing to meet each other’s eyes as Steve stood.

Clint cleared his throat. “You also don’t want to ask anyone what your thought bubbles were doing just now,” he told Steve and Bucky without taking his eyes off the door.

“Gross,” Tony grunted, never pulling his attention from his work on the remote.

Sam was covering his goggles with both hands, groaning, the thought bubble above his head completely blank.

Bucky actually laughed. In fact, Steve would have called it an evil chuckle, so he felt okay with leaving Bucky alone for a while in his current state of mind.
“How’s it coming, Tony?” Steve asked when he got closer to the table Tony had turned into a work area.

“How honestly? I’m having some trouble trying to treat what is essentially the page of a coloring book as a real mechanical device.” Tony pushed the remote away and placed both hands on the table. “We might just have to put a new battery in and pray when we push the button again, hope we go to a world where I can actually fix the damn thing.”

Steve nodded, frowning down at the remote.

“How do you know what needs to be done to it?” Bucky asked.

Steve and Tony both jumped, turning toward him. He was less than a foot behind Steve, head cocked, arms crossed as he frowned at the remote.

“Jesus Christ, kid,” Tony grunted. “I’m going to put a collar with a bell on you.”

“I literally can’t make noise even when I try,” Bucky told them defensively, and he stomped both feet against the floor. He was right, he didn’t make a sound. He even made his arm recalibrate, and there was nothing.

Tony narrowed his eyes at Bucky. “Huh.”

“How do you know what it needs to be fixed?” Bucky asked him again, more pointedly. “Could you tell Steve what it needs to look like and let him draw it?”

Tony scoffed, glancing between Bucky and the remote. Before he could voice whatever derogatory words that particular combination of thought bubble displays would have produced, though, he took a moment to think, then narrowed his eyes at Steve. “You know what. That’s worth a try.”

Sam came shuffling over, grunting at them. “So, what, we need a pencil?”

“Essentially, yeah,” Steve answered with a shrug.

Clint had moved closer, but his attention was still on the door. “We don’t even know what this place is,” he told them. “Going on a quest for art supplies might be more dangerous than it’s worth if we can just push the button and jump again.”

Bucky nodded in agreement, sighing softly. “We need to figure out how the fuck it’s getting its directions before we jump again, right?”

He glanced around at all of them, gauging their reactions.

Steve couldn’t take his eyes off the white screen above Bucky’s head, though, and he watched with parted lips as the damn thing suddenly sped along with tactical assessments and math and God knew what else that Steve’s eyes just weren’t fast enough to latch onto. It was moving almost as fast as Tony’s had been.

Bucky seemed to realize that none of them were actually looking at him, but rather above him. He glanced up with a frustrated growl, then stabbed the bubble before Steve had even clocked the knife in his hand.

“Fucking things,” Bucky muttered as his bubble quivered and then imploded into a tiny, almost adorable little rainbow starburst.
Tony hadn’t installed a new battery into the remote yet, but he could do it easily and they could jump again this very moment if they chose to. Except he hadn’t been able to discern what the fuck was wrong with the damn thing.

He had no grasp of how or why it was taking them where it was, and there was nothing for him to pull up and study, no data to crunch for an answer. They only had guesses and theories, and the only way to test them was to put their bodies through the meat grinder of the portal again and again until they ran out of batteries and had to procure more, or the portal just turned their minds and bodies into mush.

Tony wasn’t keen on either outcome.

They weren’t in any immediate danger here, unless the ever-increasing angry face in Bucky’s thought bubble was going to start stabbing things, so Tony supposed they were all standing around hemming and hawing because at least this cartoon world was a known variable right now. They had no idea what they’d be dropped into if they jumped again.

They all sat around and tried desperately to think while also keeping their minds completely blank so no one could read them. It wasn’t an easy combination to try.

“We just need to figure out how to aim it better,” Steve was insisting as Tony’s mind wandered across his own thought bubble. “If we knew how to do that, we could get home even if the remote is malfunctioning.”

A lightbulb literally went off above Tony’s head and he grunted. He grabbed the remote as the others kept talking, and he popped the battery cover off, then fished around in his pockets for the clip of bullets. He replaced the dead bullet with a fresh one and closed the remote up, setting it on the table.

His movement had gained the attention of the others, and they all stared as the remote began to emit little curved black lines, pulsing outward almost like a moving wireless symbol.

“What is it doing?” Steve asked.

“It’s doing what it has been since we woke it,” Tony answered, excitement forcing him to bounce on his toes. “We just couldn’t see it. But this world has to indicate it somehow, so it’s interpreting it as a visible pulse.”

“Meaning?” Cling prodded with more patience than people usually had with Tony when he got excited.

“I’ve looked this thing inside and out more times than I care to admit,” Tony told them. “There’s nothing wrong with the insides. It’s not the inner components causing the fuck up at all. It’s the power source itself.”

“So, what, we have to reason with an inanimate object?” Bucky asked, sounding exhausted and downtrodden. “I’ve got enough experience with Steve, I should be able to give it a go.”

Tony snorted and pursed his lips as Steve shot Bucky the dirtiest look a cartoon was capable of.

“We need to figure out what’s acting as the indicator for the destination,” Tony corrected, waving his hand around in utter frustration. “Without that understanding, we’re going to remain at the mercy of a sentient RCA remote.”
“Vintage RCA remote,” Bucky murmured with a scowl, and Tony thought Bucky was just being an ornery cuss and correcting him until Bucky’s thought bubble blipped and shivered like it was trying desperately to dislodge the frowny face and show them something else.

Bucky’s eyes darted around at them all, cautious and wary like a wounded alley cat, then his gaze landed on the remote.

Tony was watching the white screen above his head in fascination, and because he had zero respect for Bucky’s privacy, he supposed he did sort of deserve the seizure-inducing flashing that happened as Bucky let go of whatever vice he’d had around his thoughts up to that point.

Steve gasped a little when Bucky closed his eyes and bowed his head, letting his thoughts literally race. Tony blinked away the flashing from his vision, and watched with his mouth gaping as Bucky’s thought bubble turned into a goddamn Pensieve from Harry Potter.

They were watching themselves, in full living, breathing color, as they circled around the remote. It was like watching a video playback through Bucky’s eyes. Was this how Bucky’s mind always worked? Jesus Christ.

The remote sat on the ground, Bucky’s metal fist curling at the edge of the bubble. “Goodbye vintage RCA remote,” Bucky rumbled, his eyes still closed. Then on the playback in the bubble, the metal fist slammed down on the remote and everything went white.


Bucky just shook his head, eyes still closed. The bubble pulled up another moment that Tony had seen through different eyes.

The metal arm slid around Sam’s shoulders, the memory showing a furtive flick toward Sam’s face, like Bucky had been gauging Sam’s reaction to being touched by that arm. It made Tony’s belly flip unpleasantly, seeing that moment of fear and hesitation through Bucky’s eyes.

“Portal hopping with the evil cyborg,” Bucky said as Sam’s lips moved silently in the thought bubble.

Sam shifted uneasily, glancing at them all with a wince. It seemed Tony wasn’t the only one realizing how cavalierly they’d treated Bucky Barnes, how thin the ice under his feet must have felt since he’d arrived at the Tower with Steve.

Bucky scrunched his face and bowed his head so none of them could see his expression. “I’m not evil, just misunderstood,” he intoned, repeating his past words in a lifeless monotone.

The thought bubble blipped again, bringing up the R&D lab in the nightmare world they’d just come from. It was focused on Clint briefly as he muttered to himself.

“Happy thoughts,” Bucky murmured.

“No monsters where we want to go,” Clint finished for him, staring at himself in the thought bubble.

Then the bubble went dark, and Tony realized Bucky had closed his eyes in the memory, but had still been focusing on what Clint had been saying.

Bucky blinked his eyes open and stared at them all, licking his lips nervously. He shifted from side to side, like offering those memories up for them all to see had somehow been wrong, or maybe even shameful. Tony couldn’t help but stare at him, though, fascinated and impressed.
“Do you have an eidetic memory?” Sam blurted. “Like Steve?”

“No,” Bucky whispered uncomfortably.

Tony was still gazing at the thought bubble, which had gone entirely blank now. He narrowed his eyes. “It’s listening to us,” he said suddenly.

Everyone peered at him in a mixture of hope and confusion.

“You saying the remote is actually sentient?” Sam asked hesitantly.

“Maybe not sentient, but it’s definitely active, rather than passive like I’ve been assuming,” Tony answered, picking the remote up and turning it over.

“So, it’s not reading our thoughts when we push the button, it’s hearing what we say before we press it and then interpreting that into a new destination?” Bucky asked slowly.

“I think so.” Tony nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah.”

Their moment of discovery was interrupted by a voice calling out on the other side of the door.

“Cap! I found the source of that power surge!”

“$#@%,” Clint hissed, scrambling over to the door and placing himself beside it, so he’d be hidden when it swung open.

The rest of them scrambled to hide, Tony just barely remembering to grab the remote as he darted toward the corner and hunkered down behind an armchair.

He had a clear view of the doorway when it was pushed open a crack.

“Bucky!” Steve’s voice shouted from somewhere out in the hall, his tone that of a strict father chastising his kid. “Don’t even think about going in there without backup.”

“Sorry, Cap,” the first voice replied. But that . . . that voice couldn’t be Bucky. It was an actual kid speaking, no closer to eighteen than Tony was right now.

The response to the kid’s words wasn’t audible, but seconds later the door pushed open more and Tony shrank further into his hiding spot.

Two people carefully entered, moving like a SWAT team around each other. One of them was a massive comic version of Captain America, and the other was a child that came up no higher than Captain Comic’s goddamn nipples.

Tony blinked and stared harder, trying to figure out what the fuck he was seeing. Both of them wore tights with knee-high boots, and nothing more than onesies over the tights that didn’t leave a goddamn thing to any imagination. Tony knew the kid came up to Captain Comic’s nipples because he could fucking see Captain Comic’s nipples through the guy’s onesie.

“Whoever’s here, you have three seconds to show yourselves,” Captain Comic announced.

The kid who Tony could only assume was the Comic world’s version of Bucky Barnes moved into the room, sweeping it with an automatic rifle that looked heavier than he did. Goddammit, Tony had grabbed the remote, but left the clip of bullets sitting there in his haste.
Captain Kid picked it up, his sketched face crumpling in confusion. He held it up. “Steve?”

“What is that?” Captain Comic asked.

Captain Kid shrugged.

Captain Comic’s eyes scanned the room. Tony had no idea where the others were hiding, but he could see Clint, still behind the open door, arrow nocked and ready.

“Huh,” Captain Comic finally said. “Give it here, we’ll have Howard look it over.”

Tony barely kept himself from making a sound.

Captain Kid tossed the clip to Captain Comic, who slid it into a pocket somewhere, then Captain Kid continued his sweep of the room half-heartedly as Captain Comic turned to leave.

There was a flash of black in the corner of Tony’s vision as he stared at Captain Comic’s back, and by the time Tony had focused on the movement, Captain Comic had turned and found himself face to face with their Bucky, who was holding the kid around the neck with his metal arm, other hand placed flat against the side of Captain Kid’s head. One twitch of Bucky’s powerful enhanced muscles, and he’d be able to snap the kid’s neck, drawing or no drawing.

The giant gun dropped from Captain Kid’s hands and he grabbed the metal arm, fingers clawing at it uselessly.

Bucky wasn’t even slightly bothered by the kid’s struggling. “I’m afraid I can’t let you leave with that,” he growled to Captain Comic.

Clint punctuated the sentiment by kicking the door closed right behind Captain Comic’s back. Clint aimed the arrow at him, and Captain Comic put both hands up.

“Let him go,” Captain Comic snarled.

Bucky shook his head. “Not ’til I get that clip back.”

Tony stood, and it earned him a flick of the eyes from Captain Comic but nothing more. Sam received the same blank face. But when Steve showed himself, he got a little bit more of a reaction.

“What is this?” Captain Comic snarled.

“Ain’t got the time or inclination to explain, pal,” Bucky drawled. “Just hand it over and we’ll be on our way.”

Captain Comic was obviously gritting his perfectly drawn teeth because his perfectly square jaw jumped as he reached into the pocket and extracted the clip. He showed it to Bucky, then tossed it toward Steve.

Bucky loosened his hold on Captain Kid, putting a hand in the center of his shoulders to shove him forward, but Captain Kid, all five feet and maybe six inches of him, whirled and grabbed Bucky’s metal arm, pulling Bucky off balance and then kicking him in the side of the kneecap to make Bucky’s legs buckle.

Bucky didn’t buckle like a normal human should have, though, not even a normal drawn human, apparently, and the shock was written clearly on Captain Kid’s face, followed swiftly by the very apparent realization that he’d just fucked up. Bucky bared his teeth and squared his shoulders. It was
a subtle thing, sure, but Tony knew from first-hand experience that it was still terrifying. Even if Bucky was a literal comic book character right now.

Captain Kid seemed to brace himself for the violence, the expression on his face heartbreakingly similar to the one Tony saw their Bucky make at least a half-dozen times a day back home. Tony felt his heart seize up, yet again reminded that despite the relative safety of the Tower, Bucky Barnes hadn’t felt truly safe there a day in his life, thanks mostly to Tony and his teammates still treating Bucky like a violent punchline instead of a traumatized war hero. Tony’s knees went weak with the horrifying epiphany.

Bucky obviously didn’t see the resemblance in the kid’s fear, though, because he gave an almost feral growl and grabbed the kid around the neck with his metal hand, lifting him without any trouble at all as everyone in the room shouted at him to stop. Bucky seemed to calm marginally as he stared into Captain Kid’s terrified young eyes, but he still tossed the kid toward the side of the room where that strange invisible barrier was.

It was probably the least violent thing he could control himself into doing just then if he was in as much pain as his thought bubble seemed to betray.

“No!” Captain Comic cried, lunging forward.

Captain Kid crashed against the invisible barrier and it shattered like it had been made of glass this whole damn time. Captain Comic cried out with such desperate fear and anguish that even Tony’s heart flipped over anxiously.

Captain Comic dove to his knees at the edge of the shattered wall, peering through the hole like he couldn’t possibly go through it. “Bucky!” he shouted.

The boy groaned and pushed to his hands and knees, shaking bits of sparkling glass from his hair. “Buck, come on, take my hand, come back!” Captain Comic cried, reaching his hand just far enough so that it didn’t pass the imagined barrier between them.

Clint’s aim with the arrow wavered, and he glanced at the others, who were all standing and watching with befuddled frowns. Even Bucky looked confused, like he didn’t understand why Captain Comic was reacting like he’s just ripped the kid’s spine out through his throat or something.

Captain Kid finally raised his head and sat back on his haunches, looking down at himself. “What am I wearing?” he muttered almost to himself. He peered up at Captain Comic, cocking his head in obvious confusion. “Steve?”

“Come on, kid, come back this way, you can’t stay in there any longer!” Captain Comic begged.

But Captain Kid continued to frown at him. “Why the hell would a superhero have a fifteen-year old for a sidekick?” he asked.

“What?” Captain Comic asked desperately. “Buck, crawl to me, come on.”

Captain Kid shook his head, then looked at the other men in the room who were all staring at him. “It’s weird, right?” he asked before looking back at Captain Comic. “It’s a little weird, Steve.”

Captain Comic damn near whimpered, then looked over his shoulder at Bucky, eyes blazing with both malice and something that seemed oddly like mourning. He didn’t make a violent move toward Bucky, though, when he pushed himself up. He visibly braced himself and then stepped through the barrier, hand out to grab Captain Kid and pull him back through.
The moment he passed the barrier, though, he fell to his knees with a gasp. He stared straight ahead, stunned, blinking as his breath quickened. “Jesus,” he breathed.

“Yeah,” Captain Kid grunted, nodding in commiseration.

Captain Comic looked down at his fifteen-year old sidekick, who was still frowning at him, head cocked. “It is weird, isn’t it?” the man gasped.

Captain Kid nodded again.

“And why do we share a bunk?” Captain Comic rasped angrily. “That’s so inappropriate!”

“Oh, my God,” Clint whispered, stepping closer to stare at them, he glanced at the others, eyes wide, then he met Bucky’s eyes and huffed; almost a laugh, but sounding too horrified for it to be a real one. “I think you just tossed them through the Fourth Wall, dude.”

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It took them a full fifteen minutes to coax Captains Comic and Kid back into the room. The two of them had become increasingly horrified by themselves, from what Steve could tell of their ramblings. And he knew enough to realize that these versions of him and Bucky were somehow the ones those horrible comics from during the War had been based on. There was a lot to be horrified by.

Steve had remarked several times to anyone who would humor him that those comics made the best soldier he’d ever had the pleasure of serving with into a teenage punchline in tights, not to mention making Steve look like a damn pedophile for the way they’d portrayed Bucky Barnes and Steve’s relationship with him.

And Captain Comic was currently sitting on the other side of what Clint had called the Fourth Wall, having a moment of self-realization where he was calling himself a pedophile as a fifteen-year old Bucky watched him dubiously and tried to cut the tights off his uniform with a Ka-Bar he’d pulled out of somewhere.

Their uniforms were just as attached to them as Bucky’s mask and Sam’s goggles, though, from what Steve could see.

Sam turned away from the hole in the wall and gave them all a helpless shrug. None of his soothing words had been able to pull the two errant drawings back into their own real world. None of Tony’s technical speak had worked before that. None of Clint’s humor. None of Steve’s pleas to their senses of duty.

Everyone was wary of stepping over the wall to grab them. And after seeing the way it had fucked with the minds of the two people who lived in this world, Steve wasn’t willing to risk sending any of his team over there.

But nothing was working and they couldn’t just leave them over there to go slowly insane with self-awareness. Though Steve wasn’t sure it was a great idea, it was time for them to pull in their ringer.

Steve looked to Bucky, who’d been watching the proceedings with a frown that matched the one in his thought bubble. Bucky glanced over when he felt Steve’s attention, then rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” Bucky grunted. “I made the mess, I have to clean it up. Fine, fine.”

He stalked over to the break in the barrier stiffly and squatted down with a wince that he hid quickly, resting his metal arm on his knee. “Hey,” he said through the hole. Neither of them paid him any
attention, both of them too busy handwringing and giving each other horrified looks as they tried to get the stupid onesies off. Bucky snorted hard through his nose and raised his voice. “Hey! #$%@%heads!”

Both men snapped their attention to him, eyes wide. “Language, Buck!” Captain Comic blurted. “You ain’t my commanding officer, so stick your #$%@%ing reprimands up your #$%@%,” Bucky grunted at the man. “Now both of you get your #$%@%ed up heads screwed on straight and drag your sorry #$%@%es back in here!”

They stared at him, stunned out of their horror momentarily. Then Captain Comic shook his head and glanced at Captain Kid. He nodded, and the kid began crawling toward the barrier, Captain Comic right behind him. Captain Comic reached a hand toward the barrier, testing it before he allowed Captain Kid to go through.

Nothing happened, but Captain Kid still grimaced in anticipation of something hurting as he put his hand through the barrier. Bucky grabbed his wrist and yanked him, pulling the kid through the barrier like he was a pillow and Bucky was going for champion of the sleepover.

Captain Comic lunged forward, shouting, “Hey, easy!”

Bucky grabbed him by the collar of his uniform when he popped his indignant face through it, dragging him through the barrier as well. As soon as his bright red boots passed over, the barrier reassembled its shattered pieces and was whole once more, no longer visible at all.

The pair lay side-by-side where they landed, splayed out and blinking at the ceiling dazedly.

Steve and his team all came up to stand over them, looking down at them with far more than the mild concern Bucky seemed to be showing.

Captain Comic blinked rapidly, his vision finally focusing on Steve’s eyes. “Am I a pedophile?” he asked shakily.

Steve opened his mouth to answer, then snapped it back shut, scowling.

Beside him, Bucky grunted. “Do you fuck him?” he asked Captain Comic, nodding at Captain Kid.

“No!” Captain Comic gasped, eyes going even wider as his face took on an expression of hastily drawn horror.

“Do you want to?” Bucky asked in the same careless tone.

“No! Jesus!”

“Then you’re not a pedophile. Walk it off.”

“Oh, my God,” Captain Comic whispered, staring at the ceiling again.

“Listen,” Tony said impatiently. “We can explain what we are and why we’re here, but we need you both to stay calm.”

“We know who you are,” Captain Kid said as he struggled to sit up. His voice was something out of Steve’s memories, and it ran down his spine, chased by a shiver, every time Captain Kid spoke. It was Bucky’s voice, the one from their childhood, the one he’d lost the same year he’d been forced to quit the choir at church because he’d aged out of it.
“How do you know who we are?” Sam asked, obviously not distracted by memories of his youth like Steve was.

“We saw the story,” Captain Comic mumbled, rubbing his face. “On the other side. We saw your story, saw everything.”

Steve glanced at the others uncomfortably. He didn’t like thinking of their own universe as just another story being told somewhere. He supposed it would have to be, in at least one of the multiverses, and that men who’d lived their entire lives as comics would see everything as just another story being told. That theory was slightly comforting, but it still didn’t mean Steve had to face the reality of any of it. “Does that mean you can tell us how to get home?” he asked carefully.

Captain Comic shook his head, but didn’t explain.

Captain Kid sighed and met Steve’s eyes. “It’s not finished yet. The story. We can’t help you.”

“You should jump now,” Captain Comic told them, and he finally accepted Steve’s offer of a hand to help him to his feet. He seemed shaky when he stood, and he shied away from touching Captain Kid when Sam helped the poor kid to his feet.

Bucky eyed Captain Comic, silently seething. His thought bubble was very pointedly displaying an emoticon that Steve was pretty sure everyone understood well enough.

“‒lbrakk(00) – ‒EHICLE

“You two gonna be okay?” Clint asked them as he absently patted Bucky’s shoulder to calm him and maybe get rid of at least one of the guns his bubble emoticon was holding.

Captain Comic swallowed hard, then nodded. “Every story I’ve ever heard of someone breaking the Fourth Wall, they forget the things they’ve seen when the page turns. Except for Deadpool, he just gets crazier every time he goes through it.”

“Understandable,” Captain Kid mumbled, his head still bowed. “We’ll likely be back to normal when all of you go through the portal, won’t remember anything we saw on the other side.”

Captain Comic shifted uneasily, glancing down at the kid and almost shying away from him with his entire body.

Bucky stepped forward and grabbed Captain Comic by his chin, dragging the massive man toward him with absolutely no effort or resistance. Steve idly wondered just how much stronger they all were than the comic versions. Bucky certainly seemed to be having very little issue with manhandling a man who was much larger than even Steve was.

“If you shut that kid out because of your pride or shame or whatever you’re thinking when you look at him right now, I will come back here,” Bucky snarled in Captain Comic’s face. He bared his gritted teeth and spoke through them. “With an eraser.”

Captain Comic’s perfectly pink-hued face turned a sickly yellow, then went pale as the ink drained from his face. He nodded, staring into Bucky’s eyes. Steve almost did a double-take when he saw that Bucky’s eyes weren’t the carelessly filled-in gray-blue they had been, but were now flat black. It was like his pupils had dilated beyond the point of an artist’s ability to add color to them.

“You do not want to meet a Bucky Barnes who’s been cast aside by Steve Rogers,” Bucky whispered to Captain Comic. “‘You understand me?’”
Captain Comic’s eyes darted up to the thought bubble above Bucky’s head. Steve wasn’t sure what would have been more terrifying; seeing a man seething like Bucky was while the horrific thoughts that would accompany such an emotion whizzed past above his head, or seeing this sort of anger on a man who was somehow still coldly capable of keeping that thought bubble blank. Captain Comic was obviously of the opinion that the latter scenario was the more intimidating, because that was what he was witnessing when he gulped and nodded again hastily.

Steve placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder, squeezing and tugging him away gently. “Come on, Buck,” he whispered. “They’re okay.”

Captain Comic wrapped his arm around Captain Kid’s shoulders as soon as they moved away enough for him to have the room, and he pulled the kid to him protectively, shielding him. Both of them kept a wary eye on Bucky.

Steve kind of didn’t blame them. Bucky had military-grade crazy eyes going on right now.

Captain Comic cleared his throat, which gave Steve pause for only a second as he pondered vocal cords and such. He decided quite firmly that he didn’t even want to start thinking about the logistics of the internal workings of drawn characters and how they functioned.

“We can keep the rest of our team off you for another thirty minutes, tops,” Captain Comic told Steve. “After that, I can’t guarantee your safety here.”

“We’ll be long gone before that,” Steve assured him. “Thank you. And Barnes is sorry for tossing the kid through a wall.”

“No, he’s not,” Bucky grumbled as he walked stiffly away to stand beside Tony and the remote.

“Bucky!” Steve barked before he could stop himself. It was too natural a reaction for him to chastise his sergeant when Bucky played bad cop to his good one.

Bucky whirled on him, the thought bubble above him flickering as his control on his temper was lost. He slashed the bubble with a wave of his knife without seeming to realize he’d done it, and then pointed the knife at Captain Kid. “Kid broke my fucking fibula, Rogers, I’m sorry if I didn’t handle it well!”

Steve blinked stupidly at him. “What?”

“What?” Captain Kid squeaked. “Shit! I’m sorry, I thought you were trying to kill us!”

Captain Comic squeezed the kid’s shoulder and stepped between him and Bucky. He held up a hand to calm any further arguing, then fished around in his utility belt. “Here,” he mumbled. “My first aid kit is fully stocked. It won’t feel great, but you can fix the break before you make the jump.”

Bucky stared at him as Captain Comic held the tiny aid kit out to him. After a few seconds, Captain Comic’s hand wavered, and he glanced at Steve worriedly before turning and handing Steve the kit instead. “You probably don’t know how to use that, do you?” he asked with slumping shoulders.

“I think we can handle a little first aid,” Sam answered with a snort. “It’s the part where we can fix a broken leg in a few minutes we’re having trouble with.” He stepped closer and took the kit, snapping it open. He stared at it in silence long enough for Steve to crane his head for a closer look.

It wasn’t a first aid kit at all. It was an artist’s kit, complete with colored pencils, charcoal, erasers of varying sizes, and a tiny ruler.
“The hell is this?” Sam blurted finally.

Captain Comic snorted. “Yeah, that’s what I figured.”

Captain Kid stepped forward, pulling the kit gently out of Sam’s hands. He gave Bucky a nervous glance, then he straightened his spine and met Bucky’s eyes. The kid had nerve, Steve would give him that. Just like Bucky always had, even way back when he’d been fifteen.

“I can fix it. If you’ll let me,” he said to Bucky, who was watching him with a frown.

Bucky darted his eyes toward Steve and Sam, then looked back at Captain Kid. “Okay, kid,” he grunted, voice gruff. The little white thought bubble began to reform itself above his head, and Bucky stopped mid-step to look up at it. He growled wordlessly, and the thought bubble shrank back into nothing. Steve knew his own thought bubble was probably displaying nothing but heart eyes right now, and he did not care.

The pair of Buckys went into a corner where Bucky slid to the ground, his leg out in front of him. Steve watched curiously as Captain Kid began to work on Bucky’s leg.

“This is going to be a bitch for a couple minutes,” Captain Kid warned.

“Language, kid,” Captain Comic offered distractedly as he peered over Tony’s shoulder at the remote.

Both of the Buckys grumbled in response. Then Bucky gasped in shock and pain as Captain Kid used the eraser, literally rubbing a spot of Bucky’s leg out of existence.

Steve stepped forward, a wounded sound in the back of his throat, his stomach turning as he watched every ounce of color drain from Bucky’s face. Sam beat Steve to him, though, and Bucky grabbed Sam’s hand and squeezed, gritting his teeth and arching his back as he tried to keep the leg still.

Steve was going to be sick if he had to watch this for long.

The kid worked quickly and efficiently, though, obviously aware of how much pain what he was doing must be causing. He erased until he reached bone, gleaming clean and white in the midst of layers of drawn muscle and flesh. Captain Kid erased the crack in the bone that he’d exposed, redrawing the lines of Bucky’s leg with the utmost care, and then he began to add layer after layer back onto Bucky’s leg as Bucky gritted his teeth, obviously so close to loosing a cry of pain that he began biting his tongue after a few seconds. Captain Kid finally covered the spot in a black that matched Bucky’s tac gear perfectly, then glanced up at Bucky worriedly.

Bucky was still tense, body coiled in agony, hand gripping Sam and eyes still squeezed shut.

“It’s going to be vulnerable for a few hours,” Captain Kid said as he blended the new colors in. “Don’t get it wet. Try not to touch it too much for at least an hour, let the new layers settle without smearing them.”

He sat back on his haunches when he was done, peering up at Bucky. “I really am sorry.”

Bucky grunted and shook his head, eyes still closed as his entire body slumped. “I got what I deserved, kid.”

“Heh.” Captain Kid responded, then he pushed himself to his feet and turned to look at Captain Comic. They gave each other a wordless nod, then Captain Kid began to pack up the first aid kit again.
Steve winced through an attempt at a smile as both men glanced around uneasily.

“We’ll hold everyone off as long as we can,” Captain Comic finally promised again, meeting Steve’s eyes. “But you shouldn’t linger. Give him a few minutes for that leg to settle. Then you should try to leave.”

They all nodded in understanding. Bucky was still sprawled against the wall with his eyes closed, clutching Sam’s hand. He didn’t bother saying goodbye.

The two comic characters backed out of the room, not taking their eyes off the intruders on their world until Clint had carefully closed the poorly rendered backdrop door behind them.

Tony clapped his hands together hard, but instead of the sound it should have made, a jagged red bubble appeared beside him, with a cheerful yellow **CLAP** written over it.

Tony glared at it as it slowly dissipated.

“We gotta get out of here before I lose my damn mind,” Bucky groaned from the floor. Everyone else grunted in agreement.

“Oh, Tony growled. “We need to tell the remote where we want to go. So, I propose that we just tell the goddamn thing to take us home. Any other suggestions?”

He glanced around at them all, but no one responded with more than shrugs.

Sam helped Bucky to stand, but he was obviously still in a lot more pain after the first aid than he’d been showing before it. Steve went over and helped Sam support his weight, and they all gathered in a circle around the remote.

Tony handed it to Bucky. “You got the metal arm, might as well give us our best chance.”

Bucky nodded morosely and took the remote, holding it in his metal hand. “Let’s just hope the remote thinks vibranium drawn in ink and watercolor is the same thing.”

Sam groaned. Steve knew how he felt.

“Oh, Bucky said, his voice lowered to a determined growl. “Remote, we want you to take us all home. Take us home.”

They all curled around each other, clutching at each other so no one could be lost in the eye of the hurricane they knew was coming.

“Take us home,” Bucky murmured desperately, then he pushed the button.

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The portal dropped them from a height of nearly three feet when they popped back into existence. No one was able to keep his feet, and Bucky actually cried out when he landed, crumpling to the ground and wrapping both hands around his leg, right below the knee.

“Motherfucker!” he hissed, holding his leg to him and curling up on his side.

Steve crawled toward him, placing a hand on his shoulder and tugging to get a look at his face. “Oh, thank God,” he breathed when he saw Bucky’s face twisted in agony. Not because Bucky was in agony, obviously, but because he was **real.**
Steve took a quick survey of the group. Everyone was there, in one piece, and most importantly, all of them real again. They were even in their own clothing again.

Bucky continued to rock, holding his knee to his chest and muttering invectives that would have been bleeped all over the place five minutes ago.

“Where are we?” Tony gasped, voice hoarse and wobbly from the portal ride. The portal was beginning to remind Steve of the Cyclone, a little bit. “Are we home?”

Steve craned his head and glanced around. “We’re definitely in the City,” he finally said with relief. “You all stay here with him, I’ll go see what I can find.”

Tony and Sam both nodded, and Clint crawled dazedly over to Bucky, pulling him until Bucky’s head rested in his lap and he was hugging Bucky’s shoulders protectively. Bucky groaned pitifully, shivering, allowing himself to be coddled. Steve gave him an alarmed once over. It wasn’t just the healing leg that had Bucky on the ground like this. He still looked awfully pale. And Steve hadn’t seen Bucky allow anyone to physically comfort him like this since he was seventeen years old and his baby sister had been taken by pneumonia.

Steve and Tony exchanged a worried glance, but Tony waved Steve away. “Go. We’ll be okay. We need to find somewhere safe to take him and let him rest.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Sam asked.

“Fuck you,” Bucky said through gritted teeth. “I can hear you all, y’know? I ain’t dead yet.”

Tony mumbled something and then patted Bucky on the head. He peered back up at Steve. “I think the portal takes the extra energy it needs from us when it needs an extra boost. We can share the shield, lessen the effects on us, but Barnes can’t separate himself from that arm. For all we know, it could’ve been draining his strength a little at a time with each jump and we didn’t even realize it.”

Steve nodded, gulping back the worry that tried to crawl up his throat. He handed Sam his stolen shield. “I’ll be fast.”

He turned and jogged to the head of the alley they’d landed in, peering out to see where they were. They were in New York City, in Manhattan, if Steve was recognizing things correctly.

He had walked two blocks when he realized why the City seemed different to him. The skyline had changed; where Avengers Tower should have been grazing the skyline and casting its shadow just blocks away from where Steve stood, there was nothing.

Steve stared in abject horror. Avengers Tower didn’t exist. It wasn’t even Stark Tower. It wasn’t even there.

“Oh, my God,” someone said to Steve’s right. Steve glanced over carefully and saw three teenage girls standing there, staring at him. One of them clapped her hands together under her chin. “Oh, my God! It’s really you!”

Steve cleared his throat, glancing behind him in the hopes that someone famous was standing there besides Captain America. He gave the girls another careful look.

“Can we take a selfie with you? Super quick!” one girl begged.

“Uh,” Steve grunted. “Who is it you think I am?”
All three girls tittered excitedly, obviously trying not to make a scene and attract more attention to him. One girl leaned closer and said in a harsh whisper, “You’re Chris Evans!”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter includes references to the 1940's era Captain America comics, which involved a teenage Bucky Barnes in battle situations, and read with a modern eye, portrays a very . . . weird relationship between Steve and Bucky. The one link I've included within the story is a link to one of the comic panels, if you're curious.

The end of this chapter, and some of the next chapter, will mention and have Real People™ in it, but never in a sexual situation, which is why I'm not labeling RPS in this story. It's still an alternate universe, so I didn't kidnap Chris Evans or Sebastian Stan and lock them in my basement. Haha I don't have a basement, what are you talking about.....
This Might Take More Duct Tape

Chapter Notes

Alternate Universe versions of Real People™ ahoy.

Steve gave selfies and autographs for lack of a better plan of escape, and his nerves were whirring by the time the trio of teens left him standing on the street corner where they’d found him.

Steve watched them disappear down the street, then gave another longing glance toward the empty air in the distance where Avengers Tower should have been. Whatever this place was, it wasn’t the home Bucky had begged the remote to take them to.

But Steve’s face was apparently just as famous in this world as it was in his own, but under a different name. He’d gathered that the man with his face was an actor of some sort, but he couldn’t exactly ask probing questions about ‘himself’ of people who were fans of the guy. Steve desperately wanted to get home, but he still had enough wits about him that he didn’t want to ruin his alternative self’s life, either. Stories of him being crazy with fans wouldn’t help the guy.

“Chris?” an incredulous voice said from behind him.

Steve’s shoulders instantly tensed, his belly giving a sickening lurch. He knew that voice. That was Bucky’s voice. He turned carefully, peering over his shoulder.

A man with Bucky’s face stood a few feet away, head cocked and frowning at him, one earbud pulled out of his ear. The way he was dressed, it looked like he’d either just finished a jog or was about to start one.

Steve blinked at him. If Steve was ‘Chris’, then this guy’s name was decidedly not Bucky in this world. They were friends, or at least acquaintances, from the way the guy was staring at him. And Steve didn’t even know his name.

“Hey,” he settled on saying, turning to face the guy.

“What the fuck, man, aren’t you still filming? What are you doing in New York?”

Steve licked his lips, trying to keep calm. Give him space aliens streaming from the sky, give him Nazis with blue laser guns, give him a homicidal double trying to kill him, and Steve could handle it.

But give him awkward social interaction? No, fuck you very much. And that look of betrayal in a stranger’s eyes the same color as Bucky’s? Steve was lost.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. He didn’t even know enough about this world to lie to the guy. “I, uh . . . I just dropped in,” he answered, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Bucky’s doppelgänger pulled the other earbud out and frowned harder. “Were you even going to let me know you were in town?” He cocked his head, damn near sneering as he waved his hand at Steve’s chest. “Or is that something else we’re not doing anymore?”

Uh oh. More than just acquaintances, then. That sounded like the contemptuous tone of a wronged
Steve winced before he could settle on a more appropriate, less guilty expression, and the guy huffed, shaking his head at Steve in disgust.

“Wow,” he said softly. “Really, Chris? The one thing you promised wouldn’t happen when this thing ended,” he muttered, waving two fingers between them, indicating that ‘this thing’ he was alluding to had been a thing between them.

Steve’s belly flipped even harder. God, was he about to ruin his other self’s relationship by being a shitty liar?

“And here you are not three weeks later, pushing me right out of your life,” the guy said, his voice going flat like he was trying to hide how upset he truly was behind a layer of sarcasm. “We’ll stay friends, my ass.”

The man who was not Bucky had obviously been waiting for Steve to reply, either to refute him or to acknowledge that he was right, Steve couldn’t even guess with so little to go on. When Steve continued to stare at the guy like a goddamn deer watching a Mack truck barrel down on it, the guy’s disgusted expression grew angrier.

He shoved an ear bud back into his ear. “You know what, I don’t have the energy to deal with this bullshit all over again. Enjoy your trip,” he muttered, then fixed the other earbud in and turned his back on Steve, stalking away.

Steve watched him go, torn between his two choices here. He could either let the guy go and make his own life so much fucking easier, while completely fucking up everything for this guy Chris, whoever the hell he was. Or he could chase after the stranger who looked like Bucky, and try to fix things. Maybe even tell him the truth and gain an ally in this world that could help Bucky.

He was moving before he could even think twice about making his own life easier. “Wait!” he called after the guy.

He either didn’t hear Steve thanks to the earbuds, or he ignored him. Steve broke into a jog to catch up with him.

He grabbed the guy’s elbow, pulling him around even as the guy yanked away from his grasp and rounded on him, scowling impressively. “What the fuck are you doing?” the guy hissed, his eyes darted around the streets around them. “Paparazzi follow me everywhere I go, or don’t you remember listing that as one of the reasons you were dumping me?”

Steve damn near whimpered in the back of his throat. Okay, so alternative him was a dick, apparently? Or just a fucking moron, if he’d been the one to end it. The look in this guy’s eyes was tearing him apart, even though he knew on every logical level that this was not Bucky, and Steve hadn’t been the one to put that look there.

“So, let’s go somewhere we can talk,” he said softly, imploring the guy with eyes that had never failed on Bucky. He took in the casual workout clothes and other cues and made a wild guess. “Your place? It’s close, right?”

The guy worked his jaw, glaring at Steve as he obviously battled internally. It was easy to see that even though he’d been hurt recently enough to still be livid, he still had feelings for this Chris person. Steve could use that until they were somewhere private and it was safe to tell the man the truth.

Steve knew it was a wild enough story that he’d need to be able to make sure the guy couldn’t run
when he started into it.

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Bucky hadn’t been making a lot of noise to start with, though Tony and the others could see that something was obviously wrong with him. He was in a lot of pain, and he was as pale as Cap’s legs when he wore shorts in the winter. But even the few small, miserable sounds he had been making after Steve had left them had stopped now, and he was frighteningly still and silent.

“We can’t stay here much longer,” Sam murmured as he placed a hand on Bucky’s forehead. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him, but I know he needs fluids. A place to rest. I wouldn’t mind getting a look at that leg to make sure whatever those damn cartoons did to it isn’t fucking him up in the real world.”

Tony nodded as he stared at Bucky’s face. He had spent a lot of his time hating the guy, and even more of his time trying to get over those feelings by getting to know Bucky on his own terms. And now, watching him suffer in some alley just feet away from help that was too dangerous to seek out, Tony could barely tolerate the thought of losing him.

He leaned closer, settling his hand on top of Bucky’s hair. “Hang in there, kiddo,” he whispered. Bucky hummed in response, frowning before Sam’s hand smoothed over his forehead again. Clint tightened his protective hold around Bucky’s upper torso, holding Bucky between his splayed legs and letting him rest against his chest.

“We’ll give Cap five more minutes. Then we move him ourselves,” Tony decided grimly.

“Someone’s running.” Bucky murmured, and all three of them jumped at the sound of his voice. Tony had honestly believed the guy had lost all awareness ten minutes ago.

Sam and Tony both turned to shield Bucky and Clint, crouching and facing the head of the alley. They all had weapons on them still, and Sam held the shield. Tony couldn’t help but wish Bucky was more lucid if a fight was coming, though.

To everyone’s relief, it was Steve who turned the corner and jogged to them, his eyes shadowed by a hat and sunglasses.

“Thank fuck,” Tony grunted as he deflated. “Are we home?”

Steve’s grim expression when he removed the sunglasses was answer enough. He came closer and knelt beside Tony, looking Bucky over. “He’s gotten worse.”

“We need to get him somewhere clean,” Sam said urgently. “Somewhere safe.”

“I’ve got a place,” Steve told them. “It’s not far, just a few blocks.”

“How?” Tony demanded.

“I met the other him,” Steve answered with a jut of his chin down at Bucky. He knelt and pulled his hat off, settling it carefully on Bucky’s head. “In this world we’re all . . . actors. People recognized me on the street and asked for autographs.”

“What?” Tony grunted.

“Our alternate selves have different names here. And there’s no such thing as the Avengers, it’s just a
movie franchise.”

“What?” Clint said before Tony could repeat it.

“In this world, we don’t exist,” Steve told them, voice filled with frustration. “We are the stories here. People here think I’m a guy named Chris Evans, he’s the actor that plays . . . Steve Rogers in a movie.”

Tony looked between Steve and Bucky, scowling. “So how did you convince Bucky’s double or actor or whatever to help us?”

Steve winced and pulled another hat from his back pocket to cover Tony’s face. “It’ll be easier to just show you. We’re all highly recognizable here, maybe even more than at home. And people aren’t afraid to come up to actors like they are us. We need to get him off the street.”

No one argued that, and they helped Steve lift Bucky to his feet. Bucky was awake, but not really aware enough to help them move him. It took both Steve and Sam taking his weight and dragging him between them to make it look even remotely like they weren’t a group of men carrying a dead guy through the streets of New York City.

Thankfully Steve hadn’t been exaggerating, and the brownstone he led them to was only blocks away. Steve pushed through the door, finally taking Bucky’s weight and hefting him to carry him bridal style into the house. The others trailed after him warily.

“Where is this guy?” Clint asked.

Steve actually blushed and nodded his head toward the side of the house, where Tony assumed there was a living room or parlor or whatever they were called in these old brownstones. Steve pointed them into the room before taking Bucky toward the stairs and presumably up to a bedroom.

Tony followed the others, coming through the doorway and stopping short when he found a man who looked just like Bucky Barnes, glaring at them all from where he sat in a dining chair in the middle of the living room.

Steve had duct taped him to the chair and gagged him with a goddamned silk tie.

“Holy shit!” Clint blurted, staring at the man.

“Steve,” Sam groaned, hiding his face behind both hands.

“He wasn’t in a listening mood at first,” Steve explained blithely as he climbed the stairs carefully with his burden.

The guy mumbled something around his makeshift gag and managed to lift one hand just enough to toss them the finger.

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Bucky knew, on some level, that he was not okay. His leg ached like a son of a bitch, but that wasn’t what had laid him out like a Gulag buffet on leftover day. No, he could feel a chill ravaging through him, and he was weaker than he ever remembered being. It was almost like coming out of the cryo tank, when he’d known putting up a fight could free him but had never been able to lift a finger until it was too late.

It was like being held prisoner by his body’s own weakness all over again.
He was aware enough to know he was in Steve’s arms, being carried somewhere. He managed to crack an eye open, looking up at Steve’s frowning face. “Steve,” he croaked, not even sure if he’d made enough of a sound to get Steve’s attention.

“I’ve got you, Buck. You’re okay,” Steve murmured, turning his body so he could maneuver Bucky through a doorway. He laid Bucky down in a bed that was far too soft, then leaned over Bucky and passed a cool palm over Bucky’s forehead. He met Bucky’s eyes, a desperate frown on his face. “I don’t know what’s wrong, Buck. I don’t know what to do.”

Bucky closed his eyes, then realized he couldn’t get them back open.

“Buck?” Steve whispered, his voice shaky. “Bucky?”

“Still here,” Bucky forced out.

“Tony thinks the portal has been sapping energy from you. When was the last time you ate anything?”

Bucky scowled, and it took almost all his energy just to do that. “France?”

“Shit,” Steve hissed, his fingers clutching at Bucky’s hair almost to the point of pain.

Bucky grunted. “Stevie?”

“Yeah, Buck,” Steve whispered, bending closer. Bucky could feel his presence, just inches above him. It was comforting, somehow, to know that even now his spatial awareness was still on his side, even if the rest of him was embroiled in a revolt.

Bucky swallowed against his dry throat, trying to get the words out. “Is my hair long again?”

Steve was silent for a few seconds, then he began to laugh softly, gusts of breath against Bucky’s lips. He leaned closer and pressed a kiss to the corner of Bucky’s mouth. “No,” he finally answered, a smile evident in his voice. “It’s like it was in the Opposite World again. It looks good.”

Bucky managed to open both eyes, the desire to see Steve leaning over him far more powerful than the desire to keep them closed and melt into the warm embrace of unconsciousness. “I like your beard.”

Steve pulled back a little and ran his fingers over his mouth and chin. “Yeah,” he said, a playful smirk twisting his lips. “It’s growing on me.”

Bucky stared at him, narrowing his eyes in the best approximation of a scowl he could manage.

Steve bit his lip, but he couldn’t hide that smile. “Couldn’t pass it up. Sorry.”

“You’re a horrible person,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair once more, then leaned down to kiss him gently. “Rest. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Bucky couldn’t really respond, so he just lay there, focusing on making sure his body was still taking care of the little things, like breathing.

He had no idea how much time passed, though knowing Steve’s ability to leave someone to suffer alone and retain their dignity, it probably wasn’t very fucking long. When Steve did return, he came back with the other three.
Bucky cracked one eye open. He forced the other to open with it when he saw that Steve was carrying another person into the room. Unlike Bucky, this one was struggling mightily as Steve carried him slung over one shoulder, like a sack of piglets being taken to bring your pets to work day at the butcher’s shop.

Steve tossed the man onto the other side of the bed, jostling Bucky enough to make him groan in protest.

“I’m not taking the gag out until you promise not to start yelling again,” Steve told the new addition.

The guy said something that was too muffled to be clear, but if the tone was any indication, this guy had just gravely insulted Steve’s mother.

“Steve,” Tony said, sounding exhausted. “This is a world without superheroes or alien invaders or magic pet rocks, okay? This guy has absolutely no frame of reference to even begin to believe what we’re telling him. All we are, are weirdos who broke into his house and tied him to a chair.”

The guy made a sound of agreement, pointing all his fingers at Tony, since his wrists were duct-taped together.

Steve sighed mightily and reached down to yank what looked like a very expensive ruined tie out of the guy’s mouth. Bucky turned his head to get a better look. He wasn’t even surprised anymore when he found himself staring at his own face. God, how weird could life get on them?

“Fuck you!” the guy shouted at Steve, lashing out with his duct taped hands. Steve caught them easily and pushed them against the guy’s chest, holding him flat against the bed.

“What else do we have to do to prove to you this is real, huh?” Steve asked desperately. “You said yourself, this Chris guy is in Atlanta with these three right here,” he waved a careless hand toward the end of the bed, where precisely none of the others were standing. “Filming a movie. I just picked you up like it was nothing and carried you up a flight of stairs without breathing hard. Can the guy you know who looks like me carry two-hundred pounds like that?”

“Two-hundred pounds, my ass,” the guy snarled, twisting his shoulders around and trying to squirm out from under Steve’s hand.

Steve growled at him, then pointed at Bucky. “Look! See for yourself!”

Bucky didn’t have the energy to do much more than continue to stare at Steve’s frustrated expression, but he could feel the guy turning to glance at him.

“Jesus,” the man whispered. “Okay, what is this? A prank? Some weird method-acting that the whole cast is trying? ’Cause I gotta tell you, shithead, you need to go back to your character sheet and study up, I don’t think Captain fucking America would approve of you duct-taping your ex-boyfriend to a chair!”

“You’d be surprised,” Bucky mumbled.

The guy jerked to stare at Bucky again. “Okay, where the fuck did you find him? He even sounds like me.”

“He is you,” Clint told the guy. “None of us is who you think we are.”

“Clearly,” the guy snarled, giving Steve another hateful glare. It was apparent that he still thought he was talking to his ex-boyfriend. Bucky didn’t blame him for the evil eye, if that was the case.
“What’s your name?” Sam asked.

That earned him an incredulous stare.

“Either tell us your name, or we’ll give you an unflattering nickname, that’s how we roll,” Tony told the guy.

“Seriously? You’re sticking with this, not going to break character? Renner?” he said, looking at Clint desperately.

“I don’t know who that is, chief,” Clint told him, sounding both amused and sympathetic in the way that only Clint could.

The guy grunted. “This is so fucked up.”

“Tell us your name, and I’ll take the tape off,” Steve offered.

Bucky closed his eyes almost against his will as the guy silently seethed beside him.

“Sebastian,” the guy finally mumbled. “Okay? Happy? I’m playing along. What, have you got cameras set up or something? Marvel’s doing some weird fourth wall extras for the DVDs? Knew I should have read my contract more carefully.”

Steve reached across the guy and patted Bucky’s shin, pulling out the knife Bucky had stashed in his boot.

Beside him, Sebastian froze, watching the knife warily as Steve cut the duct tape off his ankles, and then his wrists.

“That’s a real knife,” Sebastian muttered.

“Yeah?” Steve grunted.

“It’s not a prop knife.”

“Nope.”

When Bucky glanced over again, the guy was leaning against the headboard, staring at them all carefully. “Okay,” he finally said softly, holding up both hands. “Okay. You played your prank. You got me to play along. But I’m over it now. Please stop.”

“This isn’t a prank,” Steve insisted, his voice gentler now that it was obvious the kid was scared.

“You want me to believe you’re all from a different dimension,” Sebastian said, voice flat and exhausted. “That the characters we play in the movies are real. Somewhere. In another universe.”

“Yes,” Steve answered.

“And you’ve been hopping from world to world through a portal. Created by a remote control from the 90’s.”

“Essentially,” Tony answered, shrugging. “Yeah.”

Everyone was silent for an interminable minute. Then Sebastian glanced at Bucky again. “What’s wrong with him?”
“We don’t know,” Steve answered, his worried eyes trailing over Bucky. “But he’s why I needed your help.”

Sebastian stared at Bucky, swallowing hard before looking back up at Steve. “Seeing my own face on someone else is making it harder to think you’re crazy,” he admitted.

“Trust us, we know how weird it sounds,” Sam drawled.

Sebastian opened his mouth to respond, then jumped almost an inch off the mattress when a phone began blaring and vibrating from somewhere under him. “Shit,” he hissed, closing his eyes. “I always answer my phone when I’m not working, if I don’t whoever it is might . . . whatever, get worried.”

“Go ahead,” Steve allowed, stepping back.

Sebastian dug the phone out of the pocket of his jogging shorts, staring at the caller ID. His eyes flicked from the phone to Steve and back. “It’s you,” he said, looking even more bitter than he had when Steve had him gagged.

“No better way to prove we’re telling the truth,” Steve whispered.

Sebastian rolled his eyes and reluctantly answered the call, putting it on speaker without needing to be asked. He didn’t say anything, though, just glared at the phone. These guys must have had a hell of a blowout to end things.

“Hello?” a voice finally came through. It was Steve’s voice, but the accent was all wrong. “Seb?”

Sebastian stared at the phone, obviously stunned at hearing that voice over the phone when the apparent source was standing beside him with his arms crossed and an impressive scowl on his face. Sebastian finally cleared his throat. “What do you want, Chris?”

“Uh . . . hey,” the man he’d called Chris said. “I just . . . I’ve got the week off from filming before they start up our scenes together. I thought maybe I could come to New York.”

Sebastian grunted, gritting his teeth. “You’re a big boy, you can go wherever you want to.”

“Seb, come on. I’m saying I want to see you. I want us to talk.”

Sebastian glanced up at Steve, one eyebrow raised. Steve shook his head furtively. The last thing they needed was to have to go through the whole explanation again with another double.

“Yeah, no thanks,” Sebastian told Chris with a curl of his lip. “You did all the talking you could last time I saw you.”

Bucky turned his head so he wasn’t staring at Steve any longer, and when he did a full-body shiver ran through him. He groaned miserably before he could stop himself.

“Seb?” Chris said over the phone. “Are you okay?”

“Fine, gotta go,” Sebastian said quickly, then ended the call in the middle of an urgent protest from the other man, then he quickly turned the phone off completely.

“Sorry,” Bucky whispered, grimacing as he tried to shift his body again.

“He can go fuck himself,” Sebastian grunted. He waved a hand at Bucky. “What do we need to do for him? Should we call an ambulance or something?”
“No doctors,” Steve answered, though he sounded bitter about it. “We’d never be able to explain the metal arm.”

Bucky rolled his head back and forth. He could feel the kid staring at him, so he lifted his hand and wagged his fingers.

“Holy shit,” Sebastian breathed. “Jesus, he has a metal arm and that wasn’t your first try at convincing me it was real?”

Steve shuffled and cleared his throat, blushing a little, and Bucky had to laugh. It barely came out as a sound.

“We think the portal has been pulling the extra power it needs from us,” Tony finally told Sebastian. “We didn’t realize it, and we haven’t exactly been keeping up with stellar nutrition. If I had to guess, Barnes has been taking the brunt of it because of the arm.”

“Why?” Sebastian demanded. He was remarkably on board the whole dimension-hopping portal thing now that he’d apparently gotten enough proof.

“Something about the vibranium,” Tony answered, shrugging. “We don’t actually know how the damn thing works. We can’t even aim it.”

“So, you’re not here for a reason or anything. You’re just working with faulty GPS?” Sebastian asked wryly.

“Basically,” Clint grunted. He sat on the bed next to Bucky’s hip and leaned over him. “We all need food, water. But he needs more, I think.”

“I’ve been working out like an idiot for months to prep for when filming starts,” Sebastian said hesitantly. “I’ve got a fuckload of recovery things in the kitchen. Protein powders, power bars, electrolyte-heavy drinks. We can load him up with that stuff, see if it helps.”

“It certainly can’t hurt,” Sam said, nodding and offering his hand to the kid to help him out of bed. “Come on. I’ll look at those wrists, too.”

Sebastian glanced down at his arms, blinking at the rings of raw skin where he’d obviously fought against the tape. “Yeah, okay.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve offered as the two of them headed for the door. “For what it’s worth.”

Sebastian turned around and narrowed his eyes at Steve, then looked at Bucky, meeting his eyes. After a few tense seconds of staring, he nodded. “We’re square,” he told Steve, sounding earnest. “If you really are the Steve and Bucky from the movies we’re making, I’m probably lucky all you did was tie me up to save him.”

Steve was apparently struck speechless, because he remained quiet as Sam and Sebastian left the room. He turned to the bed again, jaw set and eyes sad as he climbed in beside Bucky. He ran his hand through Bucky’s hair, forcing Bucky’s eyes to close again.

“We’re safe here. Rest. We’re not moving again until you’re back to full strength.”

Bucky nodded. “What’s his story?” he asked, refusing to open his eyes again.

“From what I’ve gathered, he and this Chris guy were together. He got dumped about three weeks ago. I haven’t asked for more details, I figure we’re imposing on him enough as it is.”
Bucky hummed. He could tell Clint and Tony were still hovering, and the air felt heavy with whatever they were keeping themselves from saying. Heavy enough that it felt like a real weight on Bucky’s chest.

“Either spit it out or stop watching me like I’m a wall you just painted,” he mumbled.

Tony cleared his throat, and Bucky heard him shifting his weight. “Actually, could I have a few minutes alone with him?”

Bucky forced one eye open just enough to see through his eyelashes. Clint was already moving toward the door, but Steve was still leaning on his elbow, hovering over Bucky protectively.

Tony shrugged. “Just a couple minutes. Please.”

Steve looked from him to Bucky, and Bucky blinked up at him and gave him a nod. He would admit he was more curious to find out what Tony wanted than he was apprehensive. He was pretty sure they were far past the point that Tony would want to do him harm, physically or emotionally. Steve left, making sure his face was the visual representation of a grumble as he closed the door behind him.

Tony waved a hand at the edge of the bed, where Clint had been perched next to Bucky’s hip.

“Go for it,” Bucky rasped. Good God, he was thirsty, he hoped one of those idiots thought to bring him water when they were gathering all their fucking nutritional supplements.

Tony sat on the edge, his body a live wire of tension. “I realized something in that last world,” he said, apparently bulling right into whatever heart-to-heart he was planning on. He glanced down at Bucky, then away like he didn’t want to see Bucky’s expression. “We’re not very good to you.”

Bucky frowned and turned his head so he could see Tony’s face better. “What?”

“Us. The people who are supposed to be your team. Maybe even your friends, I don’t know. We’re not good to you.” Tony grunted and turned, hiking his knee up to the mattress and staring down at Bucky. “We say we’re your friends. But I’m still holding a grudge, and we both know it. I never pass up an opportunity to remind you you’re living under my roof rent-free, or to make a joke about being surprised when you say something intelligent. Sam frisks you every time you come into a room, bitches about his car or his wing all the time. Even Clint goes all gleeful at the chance to see someone being terrified of you. And it’s not fair to you.”

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Bucky opened his mouth to make Tony stop, but Tony held up his hand, closing his eyes.

“It’s not fair to you. It’s not right, none of it is. When that comic kid turned around and fought back, even though you were twice his size and at least four times as strong, he reminded me of you.”

“He was me,” Bucky mumbled.

“I know, but you get my point. He didn’t care if he was going to lose. He still turned around and fought. And I realized, even though it’s Steve who usually barrels into a fight, he does it because he thinks he can win. But you . . . you do it even when you think you’ll lose. And goddamn, but if that isn’t the bravest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Bucky had long since lost any words he could possibly respond with. He blinked up at Tony, staring.

“And then there was a split-second where that kid was scared. When he realized he’d failed and he
thought you were going to hurt him. And I saw the look on his face,” Tony murmured, then he ducked his head and closed his eyes. “And it didn’t just remind me of you. It was you. Every time someone makes a joke, or teases you, or hell, sometimes when I just look at you, I realized I’ve seen that stark fear in your eyes.”

Bucky’s heart was pounding hard enough that it felt like it was lifting him off the bed, making him lightheaded all over again. He’d never realized what Tony was saying was true, but now that it was all laid out in front of him he couldn’t even deny it. From the moment he’d regained himself, remembered who and what he was, he’d been terrified. The fear had never faded.

Tony took a deep breath and met Bucky’s eyes again. “This is me, saying I’m sorry. When we get home, I’ll do better. We’ll all do better.”

Bucky tried to wet his chapped lips with his tongue, but the inside of his mouth wasn’t much better so it did fuck all good. “You don’t owe me that.”

“You’re a human being, so yeah, I do. You’re also my teammate.” Tony hesitated for a moment, then he gave a weak smile. “And I think maybe you’re also my friend, after all this. So yeah. I do owe you that.”

Bucky realized his throat had gotten tighter, that his chest was aching with the breath he was holding. He nodded, afraid to speak for fear of tearing up.

Tony patted his chest, and it was oddly comforting, like a puppy receiving a belly rub. Then Tony stood and took a few restless steps away. “I’ll get you a glass of water.”

“Thanks,” Bucky whispered as Tony walked away.

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When Sebastian had told them he had a kitchen full of recovery supplies, he had not been exaggerating. Steve had gone down and stared at an entire cabinet full of protein powders, an entire fridge full of nutritional supplements and vegetables and chicken breasts. He was Captain goddamn America, he had a metabolism four times that of a normal man, he had to eat almost constantly and stack his foods with carbs and proteins to maintain peak performance, and even he had never seen so many nutritional supplements in his life.

“Jesus,” he muttered as Sebastian put together a meal for Bucky. He’d done this at breakfast and then again at lunch, too, and Bucky had recovered enough to move around on his own and come downstairs. Steve hoped that a few more meals and solid few nights of sleep would have them ready to try another jump.

“Perks of the job,” Sebastian said as he pulled one of the tubs down and plugged in a blender. “This is the best way I know of getting as much into him as possible without him having to eat a cow or something.”

“He’s already a hundred percent better than he was,” Steve responded, plucking at the peeling label of a beer Sebastian had dragged from the back of the fridge and handed Steve without a word.

“When you leave, I’ll pack a bag for you. If you can take this stuff with you.”

Steve just nodded distractedly, frowning as he turned to the other man. “How’re your wrists?”

“It’s fine,” Sebastian said, waving one hand for Steve to see. “The rest of you probably don’t want to eat what I’ve got in my fridge again. I can order something. Pizza?”
“That’d be great. We can’t repay you.”

Sebastian scoffed, giving Steve a crooked smile. “I think I’ll be okay. How long do you think you’ll be here?”

“I don’t know.” Steve winced, feeling his face flush. He didn’t like being in this position, having to accept help with nothing to return for it. “We’ll go as soon as we can.”

Sebastian waved a hand. “That’s not why I’m asking. I have to fly to Atlanta in six days. But you can stay. I’ll leave a card, you can supply yourselves. Just stay inside. I don’t have to tell you your face on the front of a gossip column won’t do anyone any good.”

“Thank you,” Steve whispered. “I know this is . . . weird.”

“Ha!”

Sebastian plucked up the plate and glass he’d been working on and carried it out of the kitchen, taking it to the living room where they’d left Bucky curled up on the couch with a blanket.

They’d spent the last eight or so hours watching the movies Sebastian and his fellow actors had been making. They’d gotten to the moment where Bucky fell from the train, and Steve had needed to leave.

The next movie was paused when Steve rejoined the others.

“Thanks, kid,” Bucky muttered to Sebastian when he handed Bucky his dinner.

“No problem. And stop calling me kid.”

Bucky snorted, watching Sebastian move away.

“My friends call me Seb when they’re too lazy for three syllables,” Sebastian continued, pulling out his phone. “What should I order?”

“Pizza?” Clint asked, perking up mightily.

They walked Sebastian through ordering more pizzas than he’d probably ever seen in one place at one time, but he didn’t say a word when he put the order in, just rolled with it.

Steve sat next to Bucky, placing a careful hand on his knee. “Doing okay?” he asked softly.

“Better than I was,” Bucky grunted, poking at his meal. “We were lucky we landed with this kid, Steve. How are we going to keep this up if I’m useless every few jumps? What if we’d landed in the middle of that opposite world with me like this?”

“I know,” Steve whispered, bowing his head. “I’ve been thinking about that too. I think . . . we’re safe here. There’s no Hydra, there’s no war. We should stay here until we’re sure the next jump brings us home.”

“How?” Bucky grunted. “This is a world where this stuff doesn’t even exist.”

Steve nodded, biting his lip and glancing over the others worriedly. “I don’t know.”

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They were watching the Avengers, Steve looking sort of appalled by the way he and Tony fought on
screen and Tony laughing hysterically through the whole scene, when there was a knock at the door.

“Shit!” Sebastian called from the kitchen. Bucky didn’t know what he was doing in there, but he’d been banging things around for a few minutes. “Barnes, will you answer that? Just sign a squiggle or something.”

Bucky pushed out of his seat, knowing he was the only face that could be seen in Sebastian’s house right now. He shuffled to the door and cracked it open, peering out at the pizza delivery boy.

Steve’s worried face stared back at him.

“Shit,” Bucky grunted.

“Seb,” the guy started.

“Nope,” Bucky grunted, and slammed the door in his face.

The knocking started again, more insistent. “Seb! Open up!” the guy on the front stoop shouted.

Bucky trudged into the kitchen. “It’s for you.”

Sebastian glanced up, frowning as he washed his hands clean. Bucky made a motion toward the front door, wiggling his fingers. “What was his name? Chris?”

“Oh, God,” Sebastian moaned, closing his eyes.

“Seb!” the guy called out, pounding harder on the door. “I still have a key, you know!”

“I can punch him,” Bucky offered as he pushed the sleeve of his shirt up his metal arm. “If you want me to.”

“Hold that thought,” Sebastian grunted, moving toward the front door and gesturing with his dish towel for Bucky to come with him.

Bucky hissed at Steve as he went past, and the others all made themselves scarce as Bucky planted his back against the wall next to the front door. He watched as Sebastian put a hand on the door and took a deep breath. The kid glanced sideways at him, and Bucky nodded encouragingly.

“I’ll have to see him in a week anyway,” Sebastian muttered, then flipped the lock and pulled the door open an inch to peer out.

“Seb, what the hell?” the guy shouted.

“What are you doing here?”

“No one’s heard from you since last night!” Chris shouted. “I talk to you on the phone and you sound all weird, then you drop off the face of the earth. Even Mackie couldn’t get you to return a text, we were worried.”

“I’m fine,” Sebastian said, calm and collected in the face of the other guy’s near panic.

Bucky peered through the crack in the door and saw the guy hovering, looking like he desperately wanted to push the door open and bull his way in. Bucky slid his bare foot until he had the door braced, just in case.

The guy put a hand on the door but didn’t push it. “Can I come in?” he asked, sounding like he was
trying to calm down.

Sebastian hummed, then shook his head. “No, thanks. I’ll see you next week,” he said, pushing the door.

Chris pushed back, gritting his teeth. “Something’s wrong with you, I can tell. Let me in.”

“Maybe you’re what’s wrong with me, have you thought of that?” Sebastian hissed, putting his hand up on the doorframe to block Chris from being able to see into the house.

Bucky saw the moment Chris’s eyes landed on the raw skin of Sebastian’s wrist. He sighed heavily. So, they were doing this, then.

Chris shoved at the door, “Seb, who’s in there with you? Are you hurt?”

Sebastian looked at his wrist and groaned, shoulders slumping. Bucky grabbed him by the collar of his T-shirt, yanking him out of the doorway. Chris shouted wordlessly and grabbed through the door for him, missing him and lunging forward. He shoved his shoulder into the door before Bucky could shut it, dragging the door over Bucky’s little toe.

“Fuck!” Bucky shouted, shoving Sebastian out of the way and jerking the door wide so Chris fell forward into the foyer. Bucky grabbed him by his shirt front and tossed him toward the floor at the foot of the stairs, slamming the door shut and locking it behind him. “That hurt, asshole,” he snarled.

“Bucky, no!” Steve shouted as he popped out of whatever hiding spot he’d been in, and Bucky bared his teeth but froze obediently.

Sebastian had his back pressed to the wall, and Chris was splayed out on the floor, pushing himself up and cursing.

“Who the hell are you people?” Chris growled as he turned and got to his knees. He looked ready to fight until he saw Bucky standing over him. “Seb?”

“Yeah, this might take some more duct tape,” Sebastian said to Steve.

Tony was already standing behind him, duct tape in hand. He jerked a length free and stepped forward.

It took three of them to get Chris wrapped up, and when they had him restrained Sebastian stuffed the dish towel he’d been holding into the man’s mouth. “Been wanting to do that for weeks,” he muttered as he stalked off toward the kitchen.
“Why didn’t you tell me he’s from fucking Boston?” Steve cried as he threw himself into the chair at the head of the dining table. Bucky couldn’t remember a time that Steve had looked more offended. He had tried pretty hard to remember, and nope, Steve’s face was at critical mass offended right now.

“At least he’s not from Jersey,” Bucky said with a small smile and a wink at Steve when Steve turned his offended face toward Bucky.

“I told you he’s a douchebag,” Sebastian offered.

“But still!” Steve grumbled. “Anyway. I had another talk with him. I think he’s coming around.”

“No,” Sebastian groaned. He was staring off toward the foyer, where his ex was still bundled up in yards of duct tape and letting out muffled complaints. “He just wants you to think that so you’ll let him go.”

“He’s right,” Tony agreed. “He’s still convinced it’s all plastic surgery and ransom demands.”

“Who’d want to ransom an actor?” Sebastian mumbled.

Bucky reached into his boot and pulled one of his favorite knives, a nasty little curved TDI KA-BAR, out of its sheath. “Can I have my turn now?”

They all watched him warily as he stood, but since they’d been at this for most of the evening, they were all apparently willing to let him have a go. Getting the pizza delivery past a duct tape cocoon of mumbling actor trying to signal for help had been an ordeal, that was for sure.

He walked slowly into the foyer and knelt in front of Chris, who was eyeing him with a mixture of anger and hope. Bucky helped him until he was sitting up and leaning against the wall, and then he met Chris’s eyes and gestured to Chris’s mouth. Chris nodded. Bucky carefully reached for the cloth Sebastian had stuffed into the poor guy’s mouth, half expecting his fingers to be bitten like Tony’s had been earlier.

Chris let him pull the rag out, though, taking a deep breath as he stared at Bucky. “Seb,” he whispered after a moment. Bucky quirked an eyebrow at him. The guy couldn’t even tell them apart? “This is just some fucking hardcore Stockholm Syndrome shit, okay. Just . . . cut me loose and we can get out of here.”

Bucky smirked and held up the curved KA-BAR, gazing lovingly at the matte black blade. “You know why I like the TDI for my boot?” he asked Chris.

Chris’s eyes followed the blade as Bucky turned it around.

“You put a knife in your boot, you grab for the handle, you pull it straight up. That’s all well and good, when you have the time and space to turn it over,” Bucky murmured, placing the tip of the
knife at the stretched piece of duct tape between Chris’s hands where he’d been struggling. “But in a
fight, it’s nice to have the handle angled, you see?” Bucky continued, flexing his fingers around the
angled hilt. “So it pulls nice and easy, no need to flip the blade before you can slash with it.”

Chris swallowed hard. It was the only thing that moved as he stared at Bucky. He didn’t even seem
to be breathing. Bucky held the knife up and twirled it around his fingers, gripping it again and
slashing through Chris’s taped hands in a move almost too fast for the eye to follow.

Chris yanked his hands free of the tape, but Bucky grabbed one of his wrists with his metal hand,
squeezing until Chris winced. Bucky leaned closer, close enough he could feel the man’s labored
breaths. He pressed the side of the blade to Chris’s cheek, cocking his head and allowing himself a
marginally evil smirk. “Do I still look like a ‘Seb’ to you, son?”

Chris shook his head jerkily, lips pressed together tight.

Bucky let him go and Chris pressed himself into the wall, staring hard at Bucky. His eyes darted over
Bucky’s shoulder, and Bucky turned enough to be able to see Sebastian leaning in the doorway,
arms crossed.

“Jesus,” Sebastian muttered. He sounded more impressed than appalled, though.

Bucky looked back at Chris. “If I cut the rest of that off you, are you going to fight us?”

Chris shook his head, staying silent.

“Are you going to try to run?” Bucky practically cooed to the guy. He was enjoying this a little too
much, maybe. Sebastian had filled him in on how this guy had dumped him, though, not five minutes
after Sebastian had admitted he was in love with him. Bucky found it hard not to ramp up the
assassin crazy-eyes just a little. It was the next best thing from a shovel talk.

Chris shook his head again. “No.”

Bucky gave him a smile that edged toward sinister. “Okay, then.”

Sebastian moved forward, watching as Bucky cut the rest of the tape off the man. Chris was looking
up at him, eyes darting between the two of them, remaining perfectly motionless like Bucky had told
him to.

“Fuck,” he finally muttered. “You really do look alike.”

Bucky rolled his eyes as he shoved his knife back in its sheath and stood. He turned to Sebastian,
putting his back to Chris. “You can do better,” he said, patting Sebastian’s shoulder.

Sebastian merely snorted as Bucky walked away.

“Seb, what the fuck?” Chris hissed.

“How is it my fault?” Sebastian asked incredulously.

Bucky put his back to the wall, both eavesdropping and making sure Chris didn’t bolt out the front
door now that he was untied. Or, un-taped, rather.

“What the hell are you even doing here?” Sebastian demanded. It sounded like he was helping Chris
up off the floor.

“I told you. We were all worried. No one could get in touch with you. I even called some of your
friends in the City.”

“And they actually took your call?” Sebastian asked drily.

“I left messages,” Chris mumbled.

“You should go back to Atlanta.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone with those psychos!” Chris hissed. He obviously thought none of those psychos could hear him.

Sebastian grunted. “Chris, the only person in this house who’s ever hurt me is you. Go back to Atlanta.”

Bucky heard him coming, and he stayed where he was against the wall, watching as Sebastian stalked past. Sebastian turned to nod at him.

“Want me to escort him out?” Bucky asked softly.

“Don’t tempt me,” Sebastian muttered, moving back toward the dining room.

Chris was following him, looking like he wanted to continue trying to urge Sebastian to leave with him, but when he passed through the doorway and saw Bucky there he jerked away, putting his back to the wall and resting a hand over his heart. “Jesus!”

“You’re still here,” Bucky said to him.

Chris jutted his chin out and squared his shoulders. He’d never looked more like Steve. “I’m not leaving.”

“Man asked you to leave. Seems the thing to do.”

“What are you, his bodyguard?”

Bucky lowered his head, looking out at Chris through his eyelashes. “Do I need to be?”

Chris blinked at him, eyes wide and mouth gaping. “God, it’s like if he had a terrifying older brother,” he muttered as he walked away to find Sebastian.

Bucky watched him go, pursing his lips. He’d been an excellent terrifying older brother, thank you very much. He’d had three baby sisters, and the whole neighborhood had known they were all off-limits, right up until Rebecca had kicked him in the shin and demanded he stop scaring away her suitors.

Bucky rejoined the others, not at all surprised to find Sebastian sitting with his face in his hands and Chris hovering a few feet behind him, eyeing the others with a mixture of wariness and disbelief.

“What I don’t understand, is why it’s taking us to the places it has,” Tony was saying as he and Steve argued about something. “I don’t know how much clearer we can be than asking it to take us home.”

“You’re assuming it has a reason,” Sam added. “You’re giving the remote motives, but does it even have them?”

Tony groaned and ran both hands through his hair.
“You said you’ve changed something important in each world,” Sebastian said as he dropped his hands and rested his cheek on his arm. “If it’s following classic quest structure, it has a motive.”

“Quest structure?” Clint echoed.

“You’ve either changed or gained something at each stop, right?” Sebastian asked. Steve nodded carefully. “Quest structure.”

“Seb,” Chris whispered. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Shaddup,” Sebastian grunted, closing his eyes.

“So, if your theory is correct,” Tony said to Sebastian, pointing a finger that made Chris flinch. “We’ve got a job to do in every universe we hit before it will take us home? And it’s just going to take us to a different universe for as long as it needs us?”

Sebastian shrugged. He looked tired and stressed, which Bucky couldn’t blame the guy for. Especially with the way Chris was hovering. If their break-up was still new, that would be stressful enough.

“So, what could we have come here for?” Clint asked as he poked listlessly at some pizza crust on his plate. “Our other selves are all actors. They’re not in danger, right?”

“Debatable,” Chris muttered under his breath. He crossed his arms, scowling at the table top.

“Have you had any trouble?” Steve asked Sebastian. “Any . . . I don’t know, threats? Weird things going on?”

Sebastian stared at the tabletop in front of Steve for a long time, squinting finally and then lifting his head. “Not really. I mean, I’ve always had my fair share of nutbars, and it’s ramped up since the Captain America movies. Nothing I’d take special notice of.”


Steve nodded and looked at Chris expectantly. “What about you?”

Chris shifted uneasily. “My hate mail has increased. Rumors about me and him have gotten a few people worked up.”

“Well, won’t they be relieved to hear you’re single again,” Sebastian grunted.

Chris stared at Sebastian’s back almost longingly, and Bucky watched them both with a frown. He’d seen nasty break-ups before, and Chris wasn’t exactly acting like a man who was relieved to be out of a bad relationship. Suddenly he had a few pointed questions about that hate mail, but he would save them until he and Chris were alone.

“We didn’t really change anything in the comic world,” Clint said as he spun the crust around like a top.

“No, but we did learn a lot about the remote itself, we would never have known it was emitting a frequency without that world,” Tony said, drumming his fingers on the table. “So, if we’re not changing something here, we’re supposed to gain something? It was awfully convenient to land here with no danger with Barnes in the shape he was.”

Sam hummed and glanced toward the living room. “Hold up. If those movies are about us, and
they’re as accurate as the first couple we watched . . . won’t it show us things we don’t know about? From, like, villain scenes and stuff?”

Tony perked up. “Hell yeah, they will!”

“Yay movie marathon,” Clint drawled with absolutely zero enthusiasm.

Sebastian, though, was laughing under his breath. “I’ll go get the TV set up again.”

Bucky stepped forward as Sebastian stood. “Hey, kid. You smoke?”

Sebastian nodded, then winced. “I’ve cut back with filming coming up. Don’t have any in the house. There’s a bodega down the block, though. I can give you some cash. Get beer, I think we’re going to need it.”

Bucky nodded and Sebastian went to go find his wallet. He handed the thing to Bucky with a grin. “Just in case you need it.”

“Seb, Jesus,” Chris blurted.

Sebastian turned to look at him. “What’s he gonna do? Run off with it? That’s Tony Stark, Chris, he’s got more money than God, if he ever gets home to it.”

“You’re actually believing all this, aren’t you?” Chris asked, aghast.

Bucky rolled his eyes and slid the wallet into his pocket. “Anyone else want anything?”

Steve held up a hand. “I need a cigarette.”

Bucky snorted. “Just one?”

Steve gave him a wry smile. “We’ll play it by ear.”

“Just get a handful of packs,” Sebastian told Bucky as he headed for the living room. “And a lot of beer.”

“I’m going with you,” Chris declared, crossing his arms again. Sebastian stopped and turned to frown at him.

Bucky quirked an eyebrow at Chris, smirking. “Are you?”

“Everyone you come across will think you’re him. I’m going with you.”

Sebastian rubbed his face with both hands. He looked about one word away from faceplanting into the wall. “Just don’t beat up an old lady in front of a camera or anything, you’ll be fine,” he told Bucky.

“I don’t do that anymore,” Bucky said wryly, watching Chris with narrowed eyes.

“Anyway!” Sam said, holding up both hands. “So our new theory is that there’s something we need to learn from these movies? Let’s do this, then.”

Bucky turned and headed for the door. He had his own theories about the remote and why they were being dragged around the multiverse by the short hairs, but he’d let the others talk it out while he let his own thoughts percolate a while longer. He needed air. To his utter disgruntlement, Chris joined him just like he’d said he was going to, walking out the front door with his chin set stubbornly.
“Thought you wanted to make sure the psychos don’t hurt him,” Bucky said as he flicked the camouflage on his arm to make it look like flesh and started off down the block.

“You can do a hell of a lot of damage by wearing his face around town,” Chris pointed out through gritted teeth.

Bucky shrugged. The man wasn’t wrong. “So, did you dump him because of the reasons you gave him, or was it something else?" 

“That’s none of your business,” Chris mumbled.

Bucky stopped and turned to look at him, and Chris came to a grudging halt, kicking at the pavement and refusing to look at Bucky. “Did you receive any threats you didn’t tell him about?”

Chris blew out a harsh breath. “He told me he loved me and it scared the shit out of me, okay?”

Bucky cocked his head, looking over the guy and trying to find an ounce of Steve in him. He wasn’t finding much. “So, you broke his heart because you’re a coward?” he finally asked.

Chris’s head shot up, his lips parted like he was going to argue. But he snapped his teeth shut and stared at Bucky, his color going pale under the street lights. “I...”

“You did break his heart,” Bucky told the man. “You know that, right?”

Chris bit his lip and bowed his head again, his shoulders slumping. “It was just supposed to be a casual thing. We went four years like that. We’d get together when we could, we’d get with other people when we couldn’t.”

“You sure about that, hoss?” Bucky asked pointedly.

Chris narrowed his eyes at him, barely raising his head. “’Cause I’m pretty sure if you ask him how many people he’s fucked in those four years, his answer is going to be you.”

Chris looked almost sick in the artificial light. “We were never... oh, God.”

Bucky shrugged and started walking once more. He didn’t speak again, not really all that interested in making any further conversation with a guy who suspected he was some sort of con artist instead of a dimension hopping assassin.

Chris, though, he seemed jumpy, too full of energy with nowhere to aim it. “So, you actually think you’re Bucky Barnes, huh?” he finally said after half a block.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Pretty sure, yeah.”

“Is there, uh, medication that you’re supposed to be on?”

Bucky huffed a laugh. “Probably.”

They stepped into the bodega and Bucky made sure to nod and smile when he looked over at the woman behind the counter. He wasn’t used to people smiling back, not being afraid of him. “Huh.”

Chris trailed after him as Bucky grabbed two cases of beer and shoved them into Chris’s arms, then grabbed two more and ambled toward the counter.
“So, if you people are supposed to fix something in this world, what do you think it is?” he asked Bucky after a few minutes.

“You humoring me now? Because I’m good with not speaking.”

“Call it getting into character, whatever,” Chris muttered. He pulled his wallet out as Bucky got in line behind a young couple with a fussing baby. “I’m getting this.”

“Whatever you say, chief,” Bucky drawled. “Yeah I think we’re supposed to fix something. And if you want full disclosure, I’m terribly afraid that the something might be you and him.”

Chris cast a wide-eyed glance at Bucky, blinking stupidly. Bucky raised an eyebrow and let him stare.

“Do you love him?” Bucky asked, keeping his voice down.

Chris struggled through something that was either trying to make words or trying to get something unstuck from between his teeth, Bucky couldn’t quite tell. Finally, Chris hunched his shoulders and bowed his head. “Yeah, I do. But you said it yourself, I broke his heart. And apparently I’ve been cheating on him because I thought our relationship was more casual than he did, so how exactly am I supposed to ask him to take me back when I don’t fucking deserve it?”

Bucky shrugged and glanced away. “I guess that’s why we’re here, huh? To help your dumb ass,” he grumbled, watching as two men came into the bodega, all shifty bloodshot eyes and coats too heavy for the mid-summer weather. Bucky sighed. “Shit.”

“Huh?” Chris asked, turning to look at him.

Bucky paid him no attention, looking around the small shop carefully. There were two girls near the chips, a phone held up and pointed toward him and Chris as they whispered excitedly. There was an old man in the far corner, mumbling about the price of milk. The young couple with their snuffling infant. And the girl behind the counter.

One of the men who’d just come in was hovering near a rack of sunglasses at the door, trying them on and looking in the mirror on the rack, checking over his shoulder with every pair. The other guy had gone back toward the beer, out of sight from the counter.

“This is gonna be bad,” Bucky whispered to Chris.

Chris’s head jerked up and he started to look around, but Bucky grabbed his upper arm and squeezed. “Don’t. Look forward. Do what they say and don’t be a hero, okay?”

“What are you –”

Bucky shushed him with a hiss. He glanced over again to find the two girls approaching them, giggling and blushing and each of them pushing the other one to go first. “Hey,” Bucky said to them, shifting into his best imitation of Sebastian’s outgoing personality and giving them both an encouraging smile to bring them closer. He gestured them forward as Chris eyed him suspiciously.

“You want a picture? You got your phone on you?”

“Yes,” one of the girls squeaked.

She showed him her phone as Bucky glanced over the aisles to see the second man idling his way toward the counter, hand in his jacket pocket. Bucky angled his body between the man and the two girls, trying to make it look like he was stepping in for a selfie.
“We’ve been livestreaming to a friend of ours!” the girl said breathlessly. She was so nervous Bucky could feel himself getting jittery. God, he was kind of glad the people in his own world were too scared of him to come up to him like they did the other Avengers. “Can you say hi to her?”

Bucky put a hand on the girl’s shoulder, shielding her from the shifty man he was pretty sure was about to rob this convenience store. “Call the police,” he whispered to the girl, lowering his head to make it seem like he was looking at her and not the man approaching.

“What?” she asked, looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Do it,” Bucky hissed.

The man shoved between Bucky and Chris, jostling Bucky toward the girls as he drew a gun and pointing it at the lady behind the counter. The other guy near the sunglasses stepped in front of the door, pulling a 9mm out of his coat.

“All the money, now!” the guy shouted, waving the gun around like a goddamn amateur. Bucky hunched his shoulders, keeping himself between the gun and the girls.

The girls screamed anyway, the guns got waved a little more, and Bucky very slowly bent to set his cases of beer on the floor.

“Don’t you fucking move, man!” the second guy shouted at Bucky, who stood just as slowly and put both hands up. “Everybody down on the floor! Now!”

Bucky had lost sight of the old milk guy, but the girls both dropped, one of them still clutching her phone in her hand. Bucky eyed her, shaking his head. It was too late to call now, she’d just get herself killed. The couple in front of them in line were both crouching against the counter, shielding the now wailing infant. Chris was edging sideways to put his body between the men with the guns and the baby. Huh. Not too shabby, for a douchebag. Once he was certain he had the infant behind his broad shoulders, he knelt and set his beer down, putting his hands behind his head obediently.

Bucky stood there, watching the young mother try to hush her baby as the counter attendant hastily shoved dollar bills into a plastic bag. He’d intended to just keep everyone calm and safe and let these two dillholes go get themselves arrested somewhere else, but then the guy at the counter turned and waved his gun at the mother.

“Shut that kid up!” he shouted. His safety wasn’t on, and his finger was on the trigger.

The woman curled herself around her baby, sobbing and shushing the baby ineffectually.

“If you’ll stop shouting, the baby will calm down,” Bucky said to the guy through gritted teeth.

“I said on your knees, motherfucker!” the guy from the door shouted, moving forward to push that 9mm into Bucky’s face. Bucky narrowed his eyes at the guy. He was still wearing a pair of sunglasses, the tag askew against his forehead. Bucky stared at him, hoping the guy could see how fucking unimpressed Bucky was with him.

If he made a move on this guy, the other man could fire and hit any number of the civilians in this place. He’d have to get both men within arm’s reach, with both guns pointed at him before he could act.

So, he stood there, hands held at shoulder-height, trying to lure these two bozos closer to him. “I’m not getting on my knees until you stop pointing that gun at an infant.”
The guy shoved the barrel of the 9mm into his temple, pushing Bucky’s head sideways. Bucky met Chris’s terrified eyes, and Chris shook his head furtively.

“Wait a second,” the guy at the counter said, turning to point his gun at Bucky too. “I know this guy. Yeah, yeah, this is that dude from those movies! What, you think this is a movie, Mr. Hollywood? You gonna go all superhero on us?” He laughed and looked down at Chris, who was glaring up at them. “Oh shit! That’s Captain America, dude!”

“Why don’t you just take your money and get out of here, huh? Leave these people alone,” Chris growled.

“Oh, you’re a hero, huh? This ain’t no movie, bro,” the counter guy said. He was almost sing-singing the words, high as a goddamn kite, no doubt.

Bucky cleared his throat, shifting his weight to pull attention back to him. It worked like a dream, both guns being pointed at his head again.

“The Winter Soldier!” the guy at the counter crowed, stepping closer and jabbing Bucky’s chest with his gun. “That’s his name. Thinks he’s a big badass from a movie!”

Bucky grabbed for both guns, racking the slide halfway on the one at his temple so it jammed when the guy tried to pull the trigger, and flicking the safety on the other because it was the only piece he could reach without giving away the unnatural strength in his hands. Then he gripped both men by their wrists and pulled, spinning with all his strength and dragging the two would-be thieves into each other to knock their heads together. One man dropped while the other struggled to flick the safety off on his gun, so Bucky leapt and came down with his elbow on the back of the guy’s neck, dropping him like he was hot, as the kids liked to say these days.

He kicked the heel of his boot into the first guy’s face, then bent and punched the other one with his metal fist, leaving them both in an unconscious heap on the floor at his feet.

He disarmed both men, patting them down for hidden weapons as well, then he field stripped both guns and tossed the parts over the counter as the lady peeked over the edge at him.

The whole thing had lasted perhaps fifteen seconds. Not his best time, but it would do.

“Holy shit,” one of the girls breathed.

Bucky turned to look at them, narrowing his eyes. “Did you livestream all that?”

The girl blinked stupidly for a second, then looked down at her phone. “Oh, my God,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

Bucky hummed and winced. There was nothing he could do about that now. “Call the police, now,” he ordered. The girl who hadn’t already had her phone recording nodded and fumbled her phone out, dialing.

“I hit the panic button,” the counter lady told him shakily.

“Good girl,” Bucky muttered. He reached down and helped Chris to his feet, and Chris stared at him, his blue eyes wide and his lips parted. “Believe me now?” Bucky whispered.

“Yeah,” Chris breathed.

Bucky patted his cheek with his metal hand, then nodded toward the couple with their crying baby.
“Get them behind the counter, would you?”

Chris seemed to take a moment to get his brain back online, but when he did he finally moved and coaxed the girls and young parents up and around the counter where they were safer. Bucky still hadn’t seen the milk man since it had all started.

Bucky nudged one of the unconscious men with his toe, then knelt to check both their pulses. They were both still alive, so at least there was that. He hefted the four cases of beer up onto the counter.

“You got any duct tape?” he asked the lady.

She stared for a second, then nodded and went rummaging through a drawer with shaking hands. She handed Bucky the roll. Bucky took it, then he took her hand, squeezing it gently and meeting her eyes. “You’re okay,” he whispered. She clutched at his hand, nodding almost like she didn’t realize she was doing it. “Is your register still working?”

She turned to it and nodded again, still looking like she was in shock.

Bucky squeezed her hand again before letting her go, then he pushed the cases of beer toward her pointedly. “And we need four packs of those,” he added, pointing to the Marlboro’s on the back wall before he took the tape and knelt to secure each of the men with their hands behind their backs.

The lady stared at him, then turned and woodenly grabbed a handful of packs, placing them on the counter beside the beer. “Uh. It’s a hundred and twelve dollars,” she said as she rang them up with motions that seemed more like auto-pilot than conscious thought. Her hands were no longer shaking, though, so at least the distraction had worked for her.

Bucky looked to Chris, who was still staring dazedly at the men on the ground, no longer insistent on paying, apparently. Bucky grinned and pulled out Sebastian’s wallet, putting six twenties down on the counter. “Make yourself useful and get the door for me, huh?”

Chris jerked and hurried toward the door, staring at Bucky the entire way. Bucky gave the girl at the counter a nod in farewell, then stepped out onto the sidewalk. Chris turned like he was going to say something to the people watching them, but obviously nothing came to him because he just nodded and ducked out of the store, jogging to catch up with Bucky.

“Holy shit,” he finally said.

Bucky eyed him and stuffed two cases of beer into his arms, then ripped one of the cigarette packs open with his teeth. “Gonna be alright?”

“What the hell just happened? How did you . . .”

“Well, I’m either telling the truth and I’m Bucky Barnes,” Bucky said as he pulled one of the cigarettes out with his teeth. He lit it with the Zippo lighter he’d kept from the Vintage World, then stuffed the lighter back into his pocket and pulled the cigarette from his mouth. “Or I’m a hell of a lot more dangerous than you had me pegged for.”

Chris gaped at him.

He blew smoke up and away as Chris stared at him, then put the cigarette back in his mouth and picked up his beer again, cocking his head at Chris. “Which one makes you feel better?”

Chris plucked the cigarette out of his mouth and took a drag from it as they walked. “Jesus Christ.”
“My phone is blowing up,” Sebastian announced as he stared at the screen.

Steve paused the movie they’d been watching. “What’s going on?” Steve asked, a sinking feeling in his belly. It was no coincidence that they’d just sent Bucky out into the world and now this.

“Everyone I know is asking me if I’m okay,” Sebastian said, turning the phone to show dozens of text messages and more appearing by the second.

“Bucky, no,” Steve groaned, covering his head.

Clint pushed out of his seat and went for the TV remote, turning it from their paused movie to the news. There was nothing there, so at least it hadn’t been a wide-scale event. Sebastian tossed Tony an iPad, and it only took him a second to find the footage of what had happened. It was apparently all over Twitter, and the original video had been streamed live to Facebook just ten minutes ago.

“Looks like you prevented two armed men from robbing a bodega, then bought cigarettes like nothing had happened and left before the police showed up,” Tony muttered.

“Bucky, no,” Steve groaned again, covering his face.

Twitter was lighting up with Sebastian’s name. Steve was afraid to look in case they’d just ruined the man’s career.

The front door opened and closed, and they all stared as Bucky and Chris came into the room, holding two cases of beer each, Bucky seeming unfazed and Chris looking like he’d just stepped off a roller coaster. Bucky handed out beers liberally, using his metal fingers to open each one, then he threw himself onto the couch beside Steve.

“What the fuck did you do?” Sebastian asked Chris.

“I didn’t . . . I’ve never seen anyone move that fast,” Chris stuttered.

Tony turned the iPad so Steve and Sebastian could see the video. It was shaky, obviously filmed on a phone, and there wasn’t actually a lot that could be made out once the girl holding the phone had huddled on the floor. The shot of Bucky taking out both gunmen was clear as could be, though. Wasn’t that always how their luck ran?

“Oh, my God,” Sebastian muttered.

“At least it wasn’t an old lady,” Bucky offered with a shrug.

Sebastian stared at him.

“There was a baby. I had to do something,” Bucky explained, looking only vaguely apologetic.

Sebastian stood and looked around the room. “The police are going to come here, aren’t they? They’ll have questions?” He put both hands in his hair and looked at Chris with wide eyes. “How the hell do I explain being able to do that?”

Chris shrugged. “Dude.”

“Don’t you do like . . . fight training for films?” Clint asked.

“Fight training!” Sebastian shouted. “I didn’t even know guns came apart like that!”
“If they question you, just tell them you don’t remember any of it,” Bucky told them, still annoyingly calm. “Instinct took over, it’s all a haze.” He waved a hand and then pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tossed it to Sebastian. “You’ll be fine.”

Sebastian looked down at the cigarettes in his hand, staring at them until there was a knock on the door. He looked up and met Steve’s eyes, looking like he was bordering on a panic attack.

Steve winced. “We’ll hide. Bucky will talk to the police.”

Bucky pushed out of his seat and grabbed Sebastian’s hand, pulling him and shoving him toward Steve with a pat on his back. “It’s okay. I made the mess, I’ll take care of it,” he muttered, gesturing for them all to go make themselves scarce. He pointed at Chris. “You’re with me.”

Sebastian led them all up the stairs, leaving Chris with Bucky and hustling them all up toward the roof. He let Clint light his cigarette as soon as the door was closed, and he leaned against the wall and slid to the ground, cigarette dangling from his lips.

“You okay?” Steve asked, kneeling in front of him.

“That shit’s going to be on every gossip site in the world in an hour,” Sebastian said dazedly. He blinked, looking up at Steve as if just noticing him there. “Oh my God.”

Steve patted his knee, knowing it wasn’t exactly comforting. “At least you looked good doing it?”

Sebastian laughed almost hysterically. “We went four years without being spotted together outside of the press tours or filming,” he said, staring at Steve like he was yet again surprised that he wasn’t speaking to Chris when he met Steve’s eyes. “One of the reasons Chris ended it was because he didn’t want to be hounded about being bi. He didn’t want to be seen with me. And now I’m all over the internet, buying beer and cigarettes with him. And beating up armed robbers.”

Steve pursed his lips, frowning. “Which one are you more upset about?”

Sebastian ran a hand through his hair. “I honestly don’t know.”

Steve patted his head for lack of a better idea of how to comfort him.

Clint was perched near the edge of the roof, watching the door three floors below. “They’re leaving. Barnes must have been convincing enough.”

“He can be charming, when he wants to be,” Steve mumbled.

Steve could hear Sebastian’s phone going off over and over, so he reached into the guy’s pocket and pulled it out, silencing it. “You can answer them when you feel better,” he told Sebastian gently.

Sebastian just nodded, staring sightlessly and smoking his cigarette with trembling fingers.

A few minutes later, the door to the roof access pushed open and Bucky stuck his head out. “We’re all clear. They just needed a statement.” He was jostled from behind and pushed the door open wide, letting Chris through with a disgruntled curse.

The man made a beeline for Sebastian. He probably would have shoved Steve out of the way if Steve hadn’t stood and taken a step back. He went to his knees beside Sebastian as Sebastian watched him incredulously.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” Chris murmured, reaching for Sebastian’s hand. “I’m sorry.”
Sebastian pulled his hand away, though, still staring at him. “Why are you still here?”

“What?”

“Go back to Atlanta,” Sebastian said slowly, enunciating like he was on his last nerve and it wasn’t a very big one. “You told me we were done, so be done for Christ’s sake.”

Chris looked like he’d just had his heart stomped on, and Steve turned away, glancing over to where Sam and Clint were hovering awkwardly. They were all hovering awkwardly, actually, including Steve.

He walked further away, Bucky joining him where there were several lounge chairs set up. They both sat and the others soon joined them, casually trying to ignore the dramatics on the other side of the roof. Bucky handed a pack of cigarettes around, smiling crookedly when Steve took one.

He still had the dented Zippo that had saved him, and he offered a light to each of them. When he went to light Steve’s, Steve cupped his hands around Bucky’s, letting his fingers linger when they brushed the backs of Bucky’s hands. Bucky winked at him, still smiling, as he lit the cigarette.

“What are you grinning about?” Steve asked Bucky, keeping his voice low and leaning closer.

Bucky met his gesture, leaning closer to him as well, close enough that it made Steve’s heart kick into a faster rhythm. “If that remote really is sending us places where we’re needed, I think I know what we have to do here.”

Steve frowned at him, watching dazedly as Bucky took a deep drag from his cigarette. The way his cheeks hollowed was... distracting, to say the least.

“And what’s that?” Tony asked. “You think the robbery was –”

Bucky hummed. “They never would have been in that store if I hadn’t needed a smoke. I don’t think that’s why we’re here.”

“Why, then?” Steve whispered, purposely keeping his voice down so Bucky would lean closer.

Bucky nodded his head toward the other side of the rooftop, where Sebastian and Chris were arguing quietly. “Them.”

Steve glanced over, careful not to stare for too long. Chris looked like he was pleading his case, Sebastian still sitting on the ground in front of him and giving him an impressive scowl. “What about them?”

“Look at them. They’re both too fucking stupid to get their shit together,” Bucky murmured. “But they’re both in love.”

When Steve looked back at him, it seemed he was even closer. Steve licked his lips, wanting to close the distance between them and drag Bucky into a kiss. Now wasn’t the time. Even if visions of their night together in Vintage Land still swirled through Steve’s head at all hours of every day, now wasn’t the time.

“Ugh,” Tony offered loudly. He threw himself onto the lounge chair beside Bucky and laid back, tossing his arm over his eyes dramatically and his leg into Bucky’s lap. “Will you two just go bang so the rest of us can be sexually frustrated in peace?”

Bucky smirked at Steve and topped it off with another wink, placing his cigarette back between his
lips.

Sam grunted and patted Clint’s chest, both of them moving toward the door. “We’re going to watch
the rest of those movies,” he announced loudly. “I’m calling it. 0800 tomorrow, all our asses
downstairs, ready to make a plan.”

“Who put you in charge?” Tony called after him.

“I did!” Sam shot back.

Clint raised a hand. “I seconded the motion, it’s done.”

“Traitors!” Steve called after them.

Tony sat up, his leg still slung over Bucky’s thighs. “You really think we have to play cupid before
the remote will take us somewhere else?”

Bucky shrugged, resting his forearm on Tony’s thigh. “We could try to jump without meddling, see
what happens. But if it’s not their lives we’re supposed to save, I’d put good money on it being their
hearts.”

Tony hummed, watching the other two men over Steve’s shoulder. “Saving their lives would be
easier.”

“Tell me about it,” Bucky muttered.

He quietly told them both about the short conversation he’d had with Chris, and Steve wound up
holding his face in both hands and groaning. “Are we sure they’re even supposed to be together?”

Bucky shrugged. “Only they can know that. I think if we just . . . mediate?”

“Great,” Tony grunted. “I’m shit with relationships. Hell. We’re all shit with relationships. I’d rather
be fighting something.”

“Same,” Bucky and Steve both muttered. Steve narrowed his eyes. “We’ll make Sam do it.”

Bucky barked a laugh, and Tony groaned.

Tony finished his cigarette and stood, patting both Bucky and Steve on their shoulders. “See you two
crazy kids in the morning. Don’t be too loud.”

Steve smiled softly as he watched Tony say goodnight and a pointed goodbye to Sebastian and
Chris, respectively, and then head back into the house.

Bucky hummed, seeming to enjoy that cigarette more than Steve would have thought. He looked
down at the one in his own fingers, frowning. “I can’t remember you ever smoking until the war
came.”

“That’s ’cause you would have fucking died if I’d blown smoke at you,” Bucky said with a laugh.

“Meh.” Steve stuffed the cigarette back into his mouth.

“It’s been a rough week, Stevie,” Bucky murmured. “We can afford to take a break in a world where
we’re safe.”

Steve glanced up at him from under his long eyelashes. Bucky was looking at him like a cat
watching a laser light, ready to pounce. Steve was of half a mind to let him. “What’s put that look in your eyes?”

Bucky leaned closer to him, close enough to kiss him. “You’re so fucking beautiful, you know that?” he whispered to Steve.

Steve could feel a blush starting up in his cheeks. “Aren’t you lucky, then, that there’s two of me to look at.”

Bucky growled softly, his hand sliding up Steve’s thigh as he tilted his head to run his nose behind Steve’s ear. “No. It’s only you.”

Steve shivered violently, his eyes fluttering closed.

Scuffling nearby pulled Steve out of his lust-ridden thoughts, and he felt himself blushing furiously when he looked up and found the two actors with his and Bucky’s faces standing a few yards away. Bucky sat back, taking another drag from his cigarette.

“So, you two are together?” Sebastian asked, waggling his fingers at Steve and Bucky.

Steve blushed harder, like his face was trying to answer for him, and he peered at Bucky just in time to see Bucky’s mischievous smirk spreading. Bucky nodded and blew a stream of smoke straight up.

“Figures,” Sebastian muttered, bowing his head. “You can take my room. The uh, drawers are stocked.”

“We can’t put you out of your bed, kid,” Bucky argued.

Sebastian huffed and stepped forward, taking Steve’s ignored cigarette from his hand and putting it in his mouth. “It’s not like I’ll be using it any time soon.” He turned and met Chris’s eyes as he blew smoke off to the side. “Right, Chris?” he asked as he stepped past the man, heading for the edge of the roof.

Chris watched him with an expression Steve knew well enough, as often as he’d made it while longingly staring at Bucky’s back. It was the look of a man who knew the thing he loved was out of reach. Steve cleared his throat and Chris jumped, looking at them guiltily.

“So, did you have a good reason, or are you really an idiot?” Steve asked wryly.

Chris ducked his head, focusing on his hands as he wrung them. “I’d rather talk to him about it, if it’s all the same to you.”

Steve quirked an eyebrow at him, then looked over his shoulder at Sebastian, his tense shoulders silhouetted in the lights of the city. “Might want to do it soon.”

“Like, right now,” Bucky added. “Cause the next time he asks you to leave and you don’t listen, I’m gonna take it personal. You understand?”

Chris stared at Bucky, his brow furrowing and his blue eyes going harder. “I’d never hurt him,” he whispered.

Bucky plucked the cigarette from his lips and blew a stream of smoke at the man. “Ain’t the way he tells it.”

Chris blinked at him, his lips parting as the color drained from his face. He turned to stare at
Sebastian, who had his head bowed. Steve couldn’t tell if Sebastian could hear them or not; his body language was so different from Bucky’s that Steve couldn’t read him well at all.

Chris took a step toward him, then faltered, shoulders slumping. “It was never supposed to be serious,” he said to Sebastian’s back. “We both knew that, going in.”

“I know,” Sebastian answered, smoke billowing around his head with his words. “Knowing it didn’t change anything, though. Not for me.”

“Seb,” Chris said, taking another faltering step, hand reaching out then flopping to his side.

“I still fell in love, even knowing you’d end it as soon as I told you.” Sebastian lifted his face to the night sky.

“If you knew that, then why did you tell me?” Chris asked in frustration. “We had a good thing going.”

“Because I deserved to say it,” Sebastian said, turning to face Chris. “And you deserved a chance to prove me wrong.”

Steve was blatantly staring, so when Bucky patted him on the arm, Steve jumped an inch off his lounger. Bucky stood, gesturing for Steve to come with him. “Goodnight,” Bucky called softly.

Sebastian bowed his head and offered them a wave as he turned back around. Chris didn’t seem to have noticed them at all; he still stood and stared at Sebastian’s back.

Steve followed Bucky to the door, but he cursed when he got to it, putting a hand on the doorknob. He turned back to look at the other two and shook his head. “Hey,” he called, and Chris glanced at him, wincing. “Nothing’s as complicated as you’re making this seem, son. You either love him, or you don’t. Either way, he deserves to hear you say it.”

Chris blinked at him, then nodded dazedly.

Bucky patted Steve’s shoulder, squeezing and pulling Steve into the stairwell. “Come on, Cap,” he whispered.

They heard Chris say, “It’s weird when they call me ‘son’.”

“Tell me about it,” Sebastian huffed before the door closed on their conversation.

As soon as the door snicked shut behind Steve, Bucky pulled him closer, tugging on him until Steve had him caged against the wall.

Steve placed both hands on the wall beside Bucky’s head, leaning in to kiss the smirk right off Bucky’s lips. Bucky relaxed into him, fistng Steve’s shirt with both hands and arching his back so he pressed against Steve’s body.

“God, Buck,” Steve whispered. He gripped Bucky’s hips with both hands. “I can’t stop thinking about the way you looked that night.”

Bucky hummed and nipped at Steve’s bottom lip. “Yeah?”

“You looked so fucking good,” Steve whispered, pressing into another, far dirtier kiss. Steve’s thumbs slid under Bucky’s jeans, squeezing his hipbones. “How did it feel? Having me inside you?”

Bucky made a strangled sound in the back of his throat and tilted his head, pulling Steve into another
slow, seductive kiss instead of answering.

“Will you show me?” Steve murmured, and he popped the button of Bucky’s jeans. “Will you fuck me?”

Bucky took Steve’s face in his hands, trapping Steve’s lip between his teeth and then kissing him silly. “I’ll show you,” he growled.

Steve damn near whimpered as Bucky pushed him away. Bucky took his hand to lead Steve down the steps, and Steve followed like a good little duckling. As soon as they reached the master bedroom, Bucky closed and locked the door, then tugged Steve into another kiss as he began shoving Steve’s shirt up.

“What if they make up like you’re saying they have to?” Steve asked breathlessly, mumbling through the shirt as Bucky lifted it over his head. “Won’t they want their bed?”

“They should take that shit slow and not fall into bed, don’t you think?” Bucky growled, yanking the shirt off and tossing it away.

“Whatever you say, Buck,” Steve gasped.

Both of Bucky’s hands settled on Steve’s ribs, and Steve shivered at the cooled metal. He grinned when he saw the look in Bucky’s eyes, that hungry, mischievous glint that Steve would never get enough of. “Buck,” he whispered again.

Bucky pressed him against the wall next to the door, running the tip of his nose along Steve’s jaw. “We can save this for later,” he offered, his lips moving against Steve’s pulse point. He dragged his teeth over it and Steve’s breath hitched.

“I want it now,” Steve groaned, trying to turn his head enough to press his nose against Bucky’s hair and breathe him in.

Bucky pulled back, meeting Steve’s eyes. He rested both forearms against the wall, his fingers lazily twirling the tips of Steve’s hair. Steve ran his hands up under Bucky’s shirt, fingers catching on warm skin. He nodded as Bucky peered at him.

“Yeah,” Bucky whispered finally, urging Steve to move toward the bed.

Steve managed to get out of his jeans on his way, and by the time he was crawling into the very same bed Bucky had been laid up in not twenty-four hours before, he was down to just his boxers. Bucky stood at the foot of the bed, shirtless now, watching Steve as he shifted over to the middle of the bed. Steve rested back on his elbows, peering at Bucky with a smile. “I can’t do this alone.”

Bucky’s lips twitched and he pushed his jeans and boxers down slowly. “I mean, you could, if you were motivated.”

“Get naked and get up here, Sergeant Barnes,” Steve growled.

Bucky bit his lip, looking down as he kicked his jeans away. God, he was so fucking beautiful. Steve gazed at him dazedly, remembering the days when he’d been forced to look away for fear of how he would react to seeing Bucky like this.

“Lights on or off?” Bucky asked, standing naked and staring at Steve like he was trying to memorize every inch of him.
Steve rolled and flicked on the lamp by the side of the bed. Bucky picked his jeans up with his foot, then tossed them toward the light switches, making an adorable little sound of triumph when the heavy denim caught on the switch and pulled it, turning the overhead lights off.

Steve laughed as Bucky crawled onto the bed. “Did you know that was going to work?”

Bucky crawled up between his legs, settling on top of him and propping himself up on his elbows. He was grinning like the man Steve had grown up with, like he didn’t have decades of horrors behind him. It was a lovely smile.

“I could do that a thousand more times and never get it to work again,” Bucky admitted, and he let more of his weight rest against Steve. His smile softened as he looked into Steve’s eyes. “Hey there, sunshine.”

Steve ran his fingers through Bucky’s hair, jutting his chin up to demand a kiss. Bucky obliged him, sliding their mouths together, flicking his tongue into Steve’s mouth and coaxing a soft groan from Steve’s throat. He topped the kiss off with a nip to Steve’s upper lip and he hummed as he pulled back.

“I can’t tell you how many times I thought of this,” Steve admitted, and he realized suddenly that he was nervous. His belly was full of flutters, and his heart was racing.

Bucky ran his knuckles down the side of Steve’s face. “We’ve got time to take it slow,” he whispered. “That okay with you?”

Steve let out a shaky breath. “Yeah. I want this to last as long as it can.”

Bucky very obviously fought back a smirk, and he bent to kiss Steve again as he dragged his right hand down Steve’s body. He pulled at the band of Steve’s boxers and let it snap against his hip. “Get rid of these,” he whispered against Steve’s lips, then pushed off Steve and rolled to the side of the bed.

Steve shimmied out of his boxers as Bucky rummaged carefully in the drawers. Steve thought briefly that they should be fucking ashamed of themselves, taking over Sebastian’s bed, using his damned lubricant. But Steve couldn’t really have cared less about propriety right then, watching the muscles of Bucky’s back shift and bunch as he moved.

He reached over and ran his fingers down Bucky’s spine, recalling the way Bucky had arched his entire body as Steve had fucked him. He desperately wanted that again. But he wanted Bucky inside him even more. He grabbed Bucky’s hip and tugged demandingly.

“Impatient,” Bucky muttered as he closed the drawer and rolled, letting Steve pull at him. He held the bottle of lube up. “You want to do it? Or me?”

Heat pooled in Steve’s belly, hitting him so fast he actually gasped. “You,” he said, struggling to get a breath in over the sudden wave of lust. “You do it.”

Bucky rolled toward him and pushed Steve to his back, using his foot to drag the mussed quilt out of the way. They were going to destroy these sheets, they might as well try to conserve the rest of the poor guy’s bedding.

Steve spread his legs wide as Bucky pushed at his knee, climbing on top of him. He gripped Steve’s thigh hard, his fingers digging in. “Jesus,” Bucky whispered as he looked up and down Steve’s body. “I thought I’d forgotten how to be nervous.”
Steve took his face in both hands, smiling gently. “No need to be nervous,” he said even as his own chest fluttered tauntingly. “At least you’ll know no matter what, it’ll be the best I ever had.”

Bucky gave a wholly undignified snort at that, pressing his forehead to Steve’s as they both laughed. Bucky nipped at Steve’s nose before making his way down Steve’s body, pressing gentle kisses as he went.

Steve’s eyes drifted closed, and he lifted his head, giving Bucky room to do as he pleased. Bucky’s hand slid over Steve’s belly, fingers dragging down his hip and around his thigh. He hitched Steve’s leg up, wrapping his arm under Steve’s thigh as he kissed at Steve’s hip.

“Buck,” Steve whispered, blinking up at the ceiling as his whole body trembled. He forced himself to look down to see what Bucky was doing, only to gasp out every last bit of breath in his lungs when he found Bucky’s shining gray eyes looking up at him.

Whatever Bucky had been waiting for, he apparently found it in Steve’s face, because he bent to kiss the inside of Steve’s thigh. He was gentle at first, but then he dragged his teeth over the tender skin, and Steve writhed against him, his breaths coming fast and shallow.

“Please,” he whispered.

Bucky nuzzled his face against Steve’s thigh, then moved to run his lips up the underside of Steve’s cock. Steve gasped again, arching his back and trying not to thrust into Bucky’s mouth. Bucky licked the head and pressed his lips tightly together, ducking his head so that Steve’s cock forced its way into his mouth.

Steve lost the battle and pushed up, gasping as Bucky swirled his tongue and hummed. He shoved Steve’s leg higher on his arm, bracing the back of Steve’s thigh against his metal shoulder.

When a slick finger pressed inside him, Steve gasped and grabbed for Bucky’s hair, bunching a handful of it in his fist. Bucky hummed again, letting Steve’s cock slide out of his mouth. Steve could feel those eyes on him and he forced himself to look down again, mouth going dry at the sight.

“Good?” Bucky asked softly.

“Yes,” Steve gasped. He realized he was still clutching at Bucky’s hair, and he loosened his grip.

Bucky grinned up at him, shaking his head. “Don’t,” he said, pressing his finger in further. “I like your hand there.”

Steve resumed his death grip on Bucky’s wavy hair, and Bucky groaned. Steve felt the sound vibrate through his whole body, and Bucky must have liked his reaction because he took Steve’s cock back into his mouth and hummed again.

“Buck,” Steve said again, gasping. “You keep that up I won’t make it long.”

Bucky responded by ducking his head, taking Steve all the way to the back of his throat. Steve barely restrained the shout that tried to strangle him. Bucky twisted his finger, pressing carefully into Steve, and he lifted his head again. “Pretty sure you can keep up with me,” he drawled.

Steve huffed and gave his hair a yank. Bucky grunted and turned his head to bite at Steve’s thigh in retaliation.

“Jerk,” Steve grunted.
“Still good?” Bucky asked, his words muffled by Steve’s leg as his finger slid easily.

“Feels good,” Steve answered, squeezing his eyes closed. He’d never tried anything like this, not even on himself. Bucky’s finger inside him felt like an intrusion, but it also felt intimate and amazing, sliding in and out slowly, pressing at Steve’s tense muscles.

Bucky kissed up Steve’s inner thigh as he added another finger, and Steve arched his back, squirming. Part of him wanted Bucky’s mouth on his dick again, wanted to watch Bucky suck him off and them come down his throat, fast and dirty like he’d always fantasized about. The rest of him wanted Bucky inside him right now.

He tugged at Bucky’s hair. “Come on.”

Bucky laughed softly. “Trust me, Stevie, this ain’t the part you want me to rush. Besides,” he said, pausing to lick from the base of Steve’s cock to the tip. Then he growled, “I’m gonna get a taste of you first.”

Steve cried out softly when Bucky took him in all the way to the back of his throat again, tongue flicking over the head as he pulled back. He kept at it, sucking and humming as Steve writhed and pleaded breathlessly.

“Buck,” he finally warned, tugging at Bucky’s hair hard. “Buck, please!”

Bucky hummed around his cock, hunching his shoulder so Steve’s leg was forced up higher. Steve’s hips came up off the bed and he cried Bucky’s name plaintively when he came, gasping and thrusting his hips up over and over as Bucky swallowed him down.

He was lightheaded when it ended, his body boneless as Bucky kissed from his belly up to his chest. “Buck,” he rasped out. It was the only word he seemed to be able to form.

“That’s it, Stevie,” Bucky murmured, kissing his neck. He curled his fingers inside Steve and Steve jerked, gasping. He hadn’t even noticed the third finger Bucky had inside him. Bucky kept moving his fingers, twisting and sliding them, curling them, fucking Steve slowly with them as he peppered kisses up and down Steve’s torso.

Steve’s fingers were still tangled in his hair. He tugged demandingly, and Bucky followed along, stretching just enough for Steve to kiss him hungrily. He had Steve’s leg bent so far that Steve’s knee could have touched his chest, and his fingers were digging into Steve’s thigh almost to the point of pain. Steve grasped at him, dragging his fingers across Bucky’s back, moaning into the kiss they shared.

“Fuck me,” Steve ordered breathlessly. “Come on.”

Bucky twisted his fingers one last time, pulling them out slowly as he began to kiss down Steve’s neck again. He pushed up, grabbing the bottle of lube and slicking himself up liberally as his eyes took Steve in. He looked hungry, and Steve was more than willing to be a meal.

“Yeah,” Steve urged, tugging at Bucky’s shoulder. He groaned when he felt the head of Bucky’s cock pushing into him.

Bucky was looking down, taking care as he pressed into Steve. Steve tried to keep his eyes open, tried to watch the expression that came over Bucky’s face as he pushed in. Bucky looked up at him, his sinful lips parted, his tongue pressed to the back of his teeth as he rocked his hips slowly.

Steve finally groaned and closed his eyes, shifting his hips against Bucky, working him in deeper.
“Oh, God,” he groaned, dragging his nails down Bucky’s chest. “Fuck!”

“Okay?” Bucky gasped as he laid his weight on Steve, his hips pressing into Steve’s inner thighs and forcing Steve’s legs wider apart, his body warm and heavy in Steve’s arms.

“It’s good,” Steve whispered. Bucky grazed his lips over Steve’s, rocking his hips slowly. Steve wrapped around him, tightening his leg over Bucky’s arm. He writhed under Bucky’s movements, groaning again. “It’s good, Buck.”

“Stevie,” Bucky said against Steve’s chin. His grip tightened and he pulled back, thrusting back in slowly, like he was being careful. “God, you feel good, sunshine.”

Steve wrapped both legs around him, urging him to move with the heels of his feet. He grabbed a handful of hair again and held on as Bucky kissed him, his hips moving in a slow, easy rhythm. Steve was hard again, and every slide of Bucky’s body against him was just enough friction to make him want more, but not enough to give it to him.

Bucky had Steve’s hip in an iron grip, his other hand on top of Steve’s head, like he was going to keep Steve from being shoved up the mattress with every thrust. His breaths were ragged against Steve’s lips.

“More,” Steve pleaded.

“You’re gonna regret it if I go at you like I want to,” Bucky growled.

Steve shimmied under him, pushing his hips up with a gasp. Bucky groaned and bowed his head, pressing his face to Steve’s collarbone and shoving in deep. He rotated his hips and Steve cried out, clutching at him. “More!” he begged again. “Fuck, please!”

Bucky shushed him, sliding a metal finger over Steve’s bottom lip. “You keep making those sounds and I’m not gonna last long.”

Steve whimpered, his lips parting to let Bucky’s finger slide inside. Bucky followed it with a kiss, licking into Steve’s mouth. He kept moving, picking up a lazy, easy rhythm that was driving Steve’s body insane.

“Steve,” he groaned, burying himself deep and rocking there, changing his angles and searching.

Pleasure zipped through Steve’s body when Bucky found what he’d been looking for, and he writhed against it, his nails digging into Bucky’s back. “Do that again,” he gasped.

Bucky smirked wickedly and repeated the movement, holding Steve against his struggles as he fucked him, hitting Steve’s prostate every few thrusts of his hips, kissing him hungrily to muffle Steve’s sounds.

“Oh, shit,” Steve whispered, arching his back.

Bucky hummed. “I can feel you getting nice and tight, Stevie,” he murmured. “You gonna come for me again?”

“Yes,” Steve groaned, trying to fight against Bucky’s weight, trying to squirm under the hands that held him tight. “Feels good, Buck. God, you feel good!”

Bucky took Steve’s bottom lip between his teeth, licking and sucking it, fucking Steve harder and faster. Steve tightened his legs, trying to stop the tremor he could feel in his thighs, trying to hold off
the orgasm building.

Bucky growled, pushing into him and rocking, pulling Steve’s hips off the mattress. “Come on, Stevie,” he whispered. “Come for me, sweetheart.”

“You first,” Steve challenged, gritting his teeth.

Bucky hummed again, but it turned into a growl as he tugged Steve’s hips up again and thrust into him hard. “I want to feel you,” he practically snarled, fucking Steve harder, dragging his teeth over Steve’s chin. “Come on, Stevie, give it to me, sweetheart.”

Steve held tight as he let go of the last ounce of control he’d had, and Bucky kept going, fucking him through a second orgasm as Steve’s body tightened and pulsed around him.

“Fuck, Steve!” Bucky cried, his teeth and fingers leaving marks behind as he held tight.

“Come in me, Buck,” Steve whispered. “Come in me, come on.”

Bucky whimpered and buried his face in Steve’s neck, biting down on his collarbone, his hips still rocking as he emptied into Steve.

Steve held him tight, both of them still moving languidly in the afterglow. “Buck.”

Bucky turned his head and kissed Steve’s neck, breathing hard against his skin and making Steve shiver.

“I was right,” Steve said after a few minutes of trying to slow his heart and catch his breath. Bucky hummed questioningly, and Steve smirked. “Best I ever had.”

Bucky used his metal fingers to pinch Steve’s flank, and Steve gave the loudest shout of the night.

He heard a bang from outside the door and raised his head.

“Get it, Cap!” Sebastian shouted, sounding like he was walking past the door to one of the guest rooms.

Steve felt his face immediately flush hot, and Bucky laughed delightedly as he rolled off Steve and sprawled.
I can't apologize enough for the delay. First I was on vacation, then life got weird for a bit, then I got stuck hard on this chapter. Not because it's a hard chapter a la Evil Steve, but it was a hard chapter to get my head around for various reasons. I finally figured it out, and then had to split it into two. So this is on the shorter side, but it'll be faster this way and it's been long enough. And the next one is in process and going exactly where it should be, thank chris.

Tony startled awake when the couch dipped beside him, and he flailed like a starfish trying to suction itself to a glass wall.

"Sorry," Bucky said quietly, obviously trying not to laugh.

Tony peered at him through dry eyes, squinting in the dim light. He’d been wrong; it wasn’t Bucky after all.

Sebastian gave him a small smile. “You finish your marathon?” he asked, nodding at the dark television.

“I got to the last movie and watched myself blow Barnes’s arm off,” Tony grumbled. He pointed at Sebastian like it was his fault. “Which never happened, by the way.”

Sebastian raised both hands in the universal gesture for, ‘I don’t care enough to argue with you but it’s not my fault.’

Tony rubbed his face. “What time is it?”

“About six. Sun’s coming up and stuff. Don’t superheroes rise early and all that garbage?”

“No,” Tony grunted. “Do actors drink coffee?”

Sebastian plucked a mug from the coffee table and handed it to him with a raised eyebrow.

“You’re alright, kid,” Tony mumbled, breathing in the steam and humming happily. “How did, uh, your relationship drama go last night?”

Sebastian shrugged. “I left him on the roof and went to bed.”

“Huh. You feel good about it?”

“No,” Tony grunted. “Do actors drink coffee?”

Sebastian answered happily, settling back into the cushions with his own mug of coffee. “Listen, I heard what you were talking about last night. You think you have to fix us before you can go home.”

Tony sipped warily at his coffee, watching the other man.

“You don’t have to do that,” Sebastian said with a wince. “We’ll work it out, whichever way it goes.
But if I have to forgive him because I feel like you’re all stuck here if I don’t? That’s not going to end well for anyone.”

Tony nodded. “Hadin’t thought of it that way.”

Sebastian shrugged. The floors above them creaked as one of the others moved around and they both stared at the ceiling for a few seconds. “I’m not saying this so you think you need to go,” Sebastian said after a while, still watching the ceiling. “You’re welcome to stay for as long as you need. You’re safe here. But . . . there’s nothing for you to fix.”

Tony watched him for a few seconds, then nodded slowly. He had to say he agreed with the guy. It wasn’t their place to meddle just because they were on a magical mystery tour of dimensions. “I’ll pass it along.”

Sebastian nodded, taking another careful sip.

Shuffling steps came from the foyer, and a moment later Clint and Sam appeared, both looking sheepish.

Tony glared at them. “What happened to our movie marathon?”

Clint winced and rubbed a hand through his hair. “Sorry. I saw a bed and I took it.”

“Shut up, Stark,” Sam muttered, turning away.

Tony made an offended noise in the back of his throat that he would never admit to making.

“Did you finish them?” Clint asked.

Tony nodded, giving Sebastian a careful look. “Yep. Nothing to talk about.”

Sebastian took another sip of his coffee as Clint nodded and turned away, no doubt wandering off toward the smell of coffee from the kitchen. Sebastian eyed Tony. “Not going to tell them about Civil War, huh?”

“Absolutely not,” Tony grunted, getting up. “And let’s hope that’s a universe we don’t get sent to.”

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They were all standing on the roof again, to save Sebastian’s furniture.

Steve didn’t feel great about leaving, but Tony had relayed Sebastian’s feelings on the matter, and Steve was man enough to admit when his gut instincts were being led by his heart. They were leaving Sebastian and Chris to their own devices, and Steve was choosing to just believe they’d work things out. It was all they could do, without forcing Sebastian’s hand.

Bucky’s pack that he’d stolen from the Vintage World was stuffed full of recovery crap from Sebastian’s kitchen, plus a few thousand dollars Sebastian and Chris had both pooled together. They were all wearing new clothes that Sebastian and Chris had gone out and bought for them as well.

They’d gone together. And they’d come back still smiling. So that was something, at least.

“Good luck,” Sebastian called from the safe distance Tony had made them get to.

“If you, uh, need help,” Chris added. “Try to get back to us.”
Steve nodded at them. He didn’t have the heart to tell them they’d probably never see them again, since they couldn’t aim this thing worth a damn.

“You be good to each other,” Bucky called to the two actors. Then he grinned almost evilly. “Or we will be back.”

Sebastian merely laughed, but Chris nodded seriously, resting a hand on the small of Sebastian’s back. He edged closer, curling that hand around Sebastian’s hip. Sebastian smiled softly and ducked his head, watching them through his eyelashes. He gave Steve another nod, a smirk playing at his lips. Steve was more relieved than perhaps he should have been.

Tony held the remote up, glancing around warily. “Who wants to give it a go this time?”

Bucky held out his hand. “I’ll do it. At least we know I can take the hit.”

Steve snatched it out of Tony’s hand. “Not on my fucking watch,” he muttered. “If I wind up a zombie, too, at least we’ll know it wasn’t your arm that did it.”

Bucky looked briefly like he was going to argue, but then he merely nodded and rested his metal hand on Steve’s shoulder.

They all came closer together, doing the dimension-hop cuddle, and Steve closed his eyes, thinking of home. Thinking of the bed in his room that he wanted to drag Bucky back into, thinking of his teammates’ smiling faces all sitting around the kitchen table and laughing. “Take us to our home,” he said to the remote, then pressed the button.

Steve was briefly aware of Sebastian and Chris shielding their eyes and hunching down, covering their heads as the world ripped apart in front of them, and then Steve and the others were swirling down into yet another world, just like all the times before.

They dropped on hard concrete, all of them cursing and grunting and completely incapable of softening the landing. Steve groaned and pushed up, looking around as he clutched the remote to his chest protectively.

“Oh, thank God,” Tony cried, just as Steve was realizing that they were on the landing pad on the top of Avengers Tower.

“Don’t get excited yet,” Bucky warned. His hand clamped down on Steve’s shoulder and dragged him to his feet, steadying him. “Steve?”

“I’m okay,” Steve assured him. He did feel weak, but it was nothing he didn’t think he could shake off, if he had to. He met Bucky’s worried eyes and nodded. “I’m okay.”

“Guys,” Clint called. He was still on his hands and knees, but he’d apparently been able to tuck and roll when they hit the ground, because he was further away, several yards from the edge of the pad. He was stretching his body out so he could look over the edge. “I don’t think we’re in Kansas yet.”

Bucky and Steve shared a weary glance, then trudged together to peer over the edge with Clint.

The streets of New York City were practically deserted. No cars stuck in congestion and honking, no traffic lights blinking. There were people moving, which Steve found comforting, but not nearly as many as he was used to seeing from the top of the Tower.

“God,” Sam breathed as he came up to stand with them, looking out into the distance. “What is this? There’s no power anywhere.”
Tony blew out a breath and sat down hard, blinking down at the scene on the street. “This is what
the aftermath of an attack would look like, if the bomb were . . . electromagnetic or something.
Targeted electronic systems.”

“Let’s hope we’re not home, then,” Bucky murmured, squinting off into the distance. He winced.
“The air does look suspiciously clear. Like power’s been out a while.”

Tony was nodding, shielding his eyes. “Jesus, you can see Delaware. Looks like nothing’s been
emitting anything for a while.”

“Great. Yay, save the planet and shit,” Steve muttered. He raised his head and glanced off at the
horizon. Bucky and Tony were right, they could see for miles and miles up here. It was also easier to
breathe.

“We’ve either been gone a lot longer than we think, or we’re still not home,” Sam finally said, grimly
voicing what they were all no doubt thinking by now. “I’m hoping for option two, to be honest.”

Steve’s shoulders slumped. Bucky tapped his arm and handed him a foil-wrapped nutrient bar. Steve
quirked an eyebrow at him. “Are you mothering me?”

“No,” Bucky grunted, smacking Steve’s shoulder with the bar. “But if we’re about to be in the shit
it’d be nice if you don’t collapse on us.”

“I’m fine.”

Bucky turned to face him with a scowl, tearing the foil off the nutrient bar. “Eat this before I shove it
down your throat.”

Tony snorted as he got to his feet. “We don’t need you to narrate what you did last night, we all
know.”

Steve could feel his cheeks heating even as he smirked at Bucky and traded the remote for the
nutrient bar. Bucky tossed him a wink before turning away again and peering out over the city. He
moved away, and Steve lost track of him for a few seconds as he stared at the clear sky.

The nutrient bar tasted like ass, but Steve gnawed on it anyway in the silence as they all came to
terms with their newest predicament.

“What do we do?” Clint finally asked.

“How do you like the Tower,” Tony suggested. “Maybe we can find supplies, something.
I wouldn’t mind having more of these damn batteries, if we’re going to keep this up.”

There was a bang from behind them, and they all whirled to face it. Steve was still chewing his
motherfucking nutrient bar, trying to choke it down so he wouldn’t strangle on it during whatever
fight was about to come. He reached out instinctively for Bucky, but the man wasn’t with them any
longer. Steve cursed himself for losing sight of him and finally choked down the last bite he’d taken.

The door to the Tower slammed open and a figure wrapped in black from head to toe stood in the
shadow of the door, gun trained on them.

Steve and the others froze, hands out to show they weren’t a threat. The man in the doorway hadn’t
moved, was simply staring at them from the shadows, his face swathed in dark material of some sort.
When he stepped out into the light, gun lowering, Steve caught the glint of metal in the sunlight
coming from the man’s wrist.
Steve didn’t need the metal arm to tell him who this was, though. He’d recognize the way Bucky moved in any universe.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” the man whispered from behind a thick, wax-coated material that may have once been a coat, the gun in his hand beginning to tremble as he took another step closer. “Stevie?”

==

Bucky watched from behind the mangled ventilation system he’d been distracted by, narrowing his eyes as another version of himself carefully moved toward his guys. He tossed another look down at the venting, frowning at the way it had been butchered and sealed off so that it obviously wasn’t letting air in or out of the Tower. He kicked his pack under the venting, something in his gut telling him that it didn’t need to be found on him just now.

He put both hands up, preparing to move forward, but something in the way the other him moved – a rangy wariness, like a starving wolf – stopped him in his tracks. He stayed down out of sight, straining his senses.

“What,” the feral Barnes stuttered out, his eyes darting between them all. He narrowed them when he saw Clint, of all people. His gun came up again. “You’re not . . . what the hell are you?”

“We’re not . . . uh.” Tony glanced around at the others, apparently not even sure what he should be denying he was. He shrugged helplessly. “We’re not bad?”

“We’re from another dimension,” Bucky said as he stood up from behind the ducting. The feral Barnes had a second gun pointed at him before he’d finished speaking, the fastest draw Bucky had ever seen. The startling realization that the man had known he was there – that someone was there, anyway – was . . . uncomfortable.

The man’s eyes never left the bigger group, though. “What the fuck kind of hell are you from that you’d come here?” the man asked through gritted teeth. The different dimension part hadn’t even fazed him.

“We can’t control it.” Bucky blurted out, taking another step away from the ducting and raising both his hands. He had to fight not to send a very pointed glare at his companions to make them shut their yaps. And he had to fight to make himself cower. When he spoke again, his eyes were still on the feral version of himself and his voice shook with earnest frustration. Bucky was rather pleased with the deception. He should have been on Broadway. “We can’t control where it takes us, or when it takes us there. We don’t even know what’s doing it.”

The guns were still up, but the man gave Bucky a quick glance. There was a lot of appraising going on in that glance, though. Bucky didn’t know what had happened here, but he knew for sure that this guy had been fighting for his life a lot longer and a lot harder than Bucky himself ever had.

“We’ve been to World War Two,” Bucky continued pitifully. “Again. We’ve been to a world where Steve was evil and we had to . . . we’ve been cartoons. Please. Please tell us this place is at least secure.”

In the end it wasn’t Bucky’s performance, but Steve’s giant golden retriever eyes that did it. The starving wolf unfurled a little into an arguably more at ease position, lowering the guns marginally. The guy still reminded Bucky of a live wire, though, spitting out tension and death.

“It’s secure. And the air is . . . it’s safe now, we think.”
“You think?” Sam echoed, and slapped his hand over his nose and mouth.

Bucky watched him incredulously, wondering how long he could hold his breath like that and what good he thought it might do him now.

“Get inside,” the other Barnes said with a sharp jerk of his head. When they all stared at him, he barked out, “Quickly, move!”

They all hopped to, hustling into the Tower and whatever fate awaited them there.

==

As soon as the door shut on the roof, they were thrown into pitch darkness. Steve squeezed his eyes closed, willing his night vision to hurry the fuck up.

“Give it a minute,” this quickdraw version of Bucky said softly. “You don’t want to take a wrong step on the way down.”

Steve turned to peer into the inky black, seeking Bucky. “Buck, do you have –”

“The bag didn’t make it with us,” Bucky mumbled apologetically.

Steve hadn’t heard Bucky sound this subservient since . . . Steve’s memory didn’t stretch back far enough to recall a time, actually. And he knew damn well he was still trying to swallow part of one of those nutrient bars that Bucky had pulled from that bag, so Bucky was a lying liar. But he’d always had a good reason for these shows he put on, and Steve was willing to trust Bucky’s instinct above his own.

He sighed heavily, making sure the sound was loud and judgmental in the echoing stairwell. “Dammit, Buck.”

“I’m sorry, Steve,” Bucky murmured, sounding like he was cringing.

Steve cringed along with him, hating himself a little for the act. Bucky had some goddamn explaining to do once they were alone.

“What . . .” Clint hesitated, and when he continued his voice was lower. “What happened here?”

“Aliens,” Quickdraw answered, flat and morose.

“The Chitauri?” Steve asked carefully.

“No. They came here. They didn’t get far. But we weren’t ready for the next wave,” Quickdraw explained, sounding hopeless and tired. “Another race, they sent scouts. Released a biological weapon. We figured out it was bacterial, a kind of space fungus that affected humans just like those fucking tropical ant zombies Banner wouldn’t ever shut up about.”

“Bruce is here?” Tony asked eagerly.

“Not no more,” Quickdraw answered, completely void of emotion. He cleared his throat, though, betraying how much the explanation was costing him. “The infected starting turning on each other, infecting more and more, and it spread. Too fast. Enhanced people and anyone locked up in a secure place were about all that was left after a month.”

“Jesus,” Sam breathed.
Quickdraw laughed with difficulty. “Never thought I’d miss the sound of your voice, Sam.”

Steve reached out into the dark carefully and touched the tips of his fingers to the man’s shoulder. He stiffened under Steve’s touch, then leaned into it almost like he couldn’t help himself. “Are you . . . are you here alone?”

Steve was already trying to figure out how he could convince his boyfriend to adopt the guy and take him with them.

“No. There’s a couple of us left,” Quickdraw said with a bracing exhalation. “Can everyone see the stairs?”

There was a muttered chorus of “Sort of,” and “Dude, naw,” from the others. Steve squinted, shaking his head.

“Okay,” Quickdraw grunted. He unclipped something from his belt and then the distinct sound of a radio crackled to life. “Barton?”

“Yeah, boss,” Clint’s voice came back immediately.

“I need the lights on in sector four. Five minutes.”

Barton laughed over the radio. “You got some creepy crawlies in there with ya?”

The lights began to hum, taking a while to brighten. And Steve was being generous with the definition of ‘bright’ because the light barely allowed them to see each other, much less the stairs. In the back of the group, Clint and Bucky were giving each other an unreadable look. Steve squinted at them.

Quickdraw sighed. “We got . . . survivors,” he said after a beat. “Put some pants on or something.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Barton,” Quickdraw barked, a tone Steve had rarely heard in Bucky’s voice.

“I’ll get intake going,” Barton responded, sounding more professional than Clint ever sounded. Steve was officially weirded out.

Quickdraw turned to look at them, then nodded his head toward the stairs. “Step where I step. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Oh God,” Clint muttered from the back of the group. “Buck, I need to be carried.”

Bucky sighed heavily, but when Steve turned around, Bucky had turned his back to Clint and was in the process of getting Clint onto his back to piggyback him down the steps. With Clint’s track record for fucking things up, Steve approved of that particular tactical decision.

“Hey, Steve,” Sam said hopefully.

“Don’t even think about it,” Steve huffed, and he began to carefully follow the meandering way down the steps that Quickdraw led them through. The others were silent behind him, with Bucky’s steps falling heavier than normal, what with the added weight he was carrying.

As soon as they reached the top floor, where the common area was, the lights in the booby-trapped stairwell went out, and Clint Barton stood waiting for them as the stairwell door sealed shut, his bow and quiver on his back.
Steve supposed he should be thankful the guy didn’t have an arrow nocked already, that was a show of trust from any version of Clint.

The guy immediately went a few shades paler, glancing at Quickdraw with wide eyes.

“It’s not them,” Quickdraw said dejectedly as he pulled his mask down to rest around his neck. “They’re . . . uncontrollably dimension hopping, apparently.”

“Wow. Does that suck as bad as it sounds like?” Barton asked them as he took them in with a goofy grin. Steve could see how the corn-fed doofus routine could dupe people, but he’d known his own Clint for too long to be fooled. He could see the sharpness in the man’s eyes.

“Yes,” they all answered, not an ounce of prevarication in any of their tones.

“Geez,” Barton whispered when his eyes landed on Clint, who was doing his best to still cling to Bucky’s back like an urchin.

Quickdraw stepped closer, lowering his voice as he whispered into Barton’s ear for a few seconds. Even Steve couldn’t hear what was said, and they both ducked their heads closer, so lip-reading was out too. If Steve knew their strengths and weaknesses from familiarity, they knew his as well, and those of his team. It wasn’t a great feeling.

Barton finally nodded seriously, then turned a small smile on Steve and his companions. “Come with me. I’ll get you quartered. You mind doubling up?”

“No, that’s fine. Wherever you can put us,” Steve answered.

Barton nodded, and glanced at Quickdraw again questioningly. To Steve’s utter shock, Quickdraw pulled the man in and gave Barton a quick, reassuring kiss. Steve wasn’t able to snap his mouth closed fast enough. This world’s Steve and Bucky weren’t together?

Barton was left with a slightly goofy grin on his face as Quickdraw turned back to Steve, giving him a soft smile. “Jesus, it’s really you, though, huh?”

Steve had to catch his breath before he could nod, still feeling bowled over.

“Been a long time since I seen your face, Stevie,” Quickdraw murmured. He stared for a second, and his voice waivered when he asked, “Can I hug you?”

Steve swallowed hard and nodded, blinking away the realization that in this world, it wasn’t just that he wasn’t with Bucky. He obviously wasn’t here at all.

Quickdraw pulled him into a tight hug, gripping his shirt with both fists. Steve held him just as tightly, closing his eyes. The man patted him on the back, holding him close for another breath before he released him and stepped back sharply, clearing his throat. “Barton will get you set up. Then I’m sure we all have some questions to ask. Take thirty, meet back here.”

Steve nodded and Quickdraw turned away, stalking off toward what Steve knew to be the penthouse suite.

“Come on,” Barton said, and he led them toward the three penthouse guestrooms.

“We’re not putting anyone out, are we?” Sam asked worriedly.

“Me and Buck are the only ones left,” Barton answered blithely as he marched them toward the
Something in Steve’s belly sank like a stone. Jesus Christ. Now he had to convince his boyfriend to let him adopt two people . . .

Barton stopped at the first room and waved a hand at Steve and Clint. “Room one.” Then he pointed at Tony and Sam. “Room two. The water works, so use as much as you need.”

Steve frowned, but headed toward the door he’d been directed to, glancing over his shoulder.

Barton gave Bucky a gentle smile and raised his hand, letting Bucky shuffle forward carefully. “Come on, beautiful. Buck said to give you some space, let you decompress a little,” he said kindly, leading Bucky to a third room a little down the hall with his hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

Bucky stretched the fingers of his right hand out by his thigh, giving Steve a ‘hold’ signal that Steve knew well. He knew these guys were separating them like this on purpose, putting them in pairs that wouldn’t seem likely to communicate as well, singling Bucky out for whatever reason. Steve wanted to be offended that they didn’t trust them, but he had to give it to them. They were outnumbered in their own home by strangers, and the only thing Quickdraw had seen of this version of Steve and Bucky was a Steve who was sharp and impatient, and a Bucky who cowered and didn’t even grumble about carrying Clint down those stairs.

Steve nodded. He would have gotten Bucky away from the rest of them, too.

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Bucky glanced around his room carefully, then eyed Barton. He looked leaner than their Clint, like he wasn’t eating as well. If Bucky had read this wrong and left all those damn nut bars on the roof, he might have to feel guilty later.

Barton gave him a nervous smile. “I’m sorry for singling you out,” he offered, and he sounded sincere. Almost sweet. “Buck said I might need to check up on you. Said . . . said your Steve wasn’t treating you so great up there. Said . . . said your Clint wasn’t.”

Bucky blinked quickly, like he was trying not to show surprise. He ducked his head, afraid he wouldn’t be able to pull off the trick with a man who was apparently boning another version of himself. Not to mention, if Barton and Barnes were the only two left, then . . . well, they’d have plenty of time to get to know each other, wouldn’t they?

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Barton said quickly, moving like he was going to put a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. He aborted the movement, looking around the room. He took his bow and quiver off his back, setting them by the door, then he winced and stepped closer to Bucky, holding both hands out like he wasn’t a threat.

Bucky watched him through his eyelashes, his heart stuttering a little. This guy wasn’t a feral wolf like his buddy out there. He was a goddamn cupcake. He suddenly flashed to the image of Clint’s broken and battered body on the floor after Evil Steve had gotten done with him, and he gasped a harsh breath. Goddammit. Bucky took a deep breath and turned into the outstretched arms, letting Barton pull him into a hug.

The one Bucky gave him didn’t have an ounce of an act in it.

“Good Lord,” Barton whispered, his hands gripping Bucky’s back and arm. He began to chuckle. “You are stacked, kid. Christ, it’s been two years since Buck’s had this much muscle on him.”
Bucky snorted, gripping the man closer. Shit. He was going to have to convince his boyfriend to adopt another Barton . . .

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“They’re splitting us up on purpose,” Tony mumbled under his breath as soon as the door to the room was shut.

“Do you blame them?” Sam asked.

Tony shrugged. “No. It just unnerves me that they’re smart and paranoid enough to do it.”

“Oh,” Sam said distractedly as he glanced around the room. It was almost exactly like their own Tower, maybe some hints of different decorators, and definitely no bots cleaning it in a while. Sam looked back at Tony, scowling. “What the fuck did that pants-shittingly terrifying version of Barnes mean by zombie ants, do you know?”

Tony winced. “There’s this fungus –”

Sam held up a hand. “Okay, Imma stop you right there.”

“No, this is important,” Tony said through gritted teeth. He was nervous, and he wasn’t entirely sure why. But God help him, he was taking his cues from Bucky, and Bucky had definitely been giving off some vibes since the rooftop. “It’s a fungus that takes over ants. Takes over their brains. Starts controlling their actions, forces them to attack other ants and infect them too.”

“Like . . . zombies?”

“You’re not supposed to say the Z word in a story about the living dead, Wilson, don’t you know your lore?”

Sam blinked at him. “No.”

Tony sighed. “Never thought I’d regret not being roomed with Barton.”

“Same, man. Same,” Sam said as he turned around and began to pace.

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“You’re not supposed to say the Z word, Steve,” Clint told Steve as he sat on the end of the king-sized bed.

“What? Why?”

Clint sighed, his shoulders sagging. “I bet Bucky knows this.”

==


Barton quirked an eyebrow. “We call them zombies.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, why?”
Bucky squinted at him. “Oh, man,” he said after a moment, grinning widely. “That’s going to piss Stark off so much.”

==

“Stop saying zombies!” Tony hissed at Sam, fighting not to raise his voice.

“That’s what they are!” Sam said with a flop of both hands. “We aren’t in a zombie movie, Stark, we can say zombie! What’s gonna happen, you say zombie and suddenly one pops out of the ductwork? Zombie zombie zombie!”

Tony clapped his hands over his ears. “I’m not listening when you get eaten! Wait! Shit! This is Steve’s fault!”

Sam stopped his pacing. “What?”

“He said, if he gets turned into a zombie, at least we’ll know it’s not Bucky’s arm.”

“Oh, shit,” Sam muttered. He walked quickly to the door and banged on it. “Steve! Don’t say zombie! You’re gonna get eaten by the ductwork!”

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“Told you it was your fault,” Clint grunted.

Steve stopped pacing and glared at him. Then he shouted at the door. “I stopped saying the Z word, okay! Shut up, Sam!”

==

Barton clapped Bucky on the back, then stepped away and took his face between both hands. “God, it’s a little weird,” he muttered as he peered into Bucky’s eyes. “Even your eyes are the same.”

Bucky quirked an eyebrow at him.

He stiffened as he heard the others yelling at each other, but Barton didn’t appear to catch the words. He caught Bucky’s body language, though, and he moved his hands and stepped away guiltily. “Sorry,” he offered softly. “You probably don’t like being touched, huh? Neither did Buck, when he was first with us.”

Bucky found himself responding strangely to the soft look in Barton’s eyes, the gentle level of trust and sympathy he was offering Bucky, assuming it was the touch and not something off Bucky had heard. He reached up to Barton’s ear. “Your hearing aids?”

“Died. Year ago. Once we lost both Banner and Stark, there was no one to fix them anymore. Buck tried, but they were just too intricate. I can hear enough to get by.”

Bucky raised both hands and asked, ‘Does he sign?’

Barton grinned and nodded, responding in kind. ‘Not as well as you. You sign with your Clint?’

Bucky nodded and smiled sadly. He was going to have to ask Clint if he had a spare set of aids on him. The man typically carried four or five extras, because he broke them all the damn time.

“What happened to Banner? To Stark?”
Barton’s smile faded, eyes turning sad. “Banner peaced out once we realized we couldn’t turn the tide. He said he didn’t want to know what a zombified Hulk could do to the team, to the Tower. This is the only safe building in the City left, the only one that still has power and water, that’s easily defensible.”

“He left?”

“ Took one of the two Quinjets we had and left in the middle of the night. Stealth mode, no way to find him. And . . .” Clint winced and ducked his head. “He wasn’t wrong. Just the idea of a Hulk trying to eat me gives me nightmares, Jesus.”

Bucky shivered involuntarily. “Yeah,” he croaked.

“Stark. Well, that’s a longer story,” Clint continued with a heavy sigh. “Buck will probably want to handle that one. It’s sort of . . . personal, for him.”

Bucky merely nodded, brow creased with concern and dread pooling in his belly once more. He hated that they’d split them up, though he understood why they’d done it and had even expected it. He’d been afraid to try to communicate to Steve what he was thinking, but Clint had read him like a book in the darkness of that stairwell, climbing onto his back so Bucky could hold onto his thighs and tap Morse code as they went. And the way down had been plenty of time to get his thoughts across.

==

“You think this place is bugged?” Clint asked Steve as he eyed the ceiling.

“I doubt they’d put electricity toward that, what with the stairwells and all,” Steve mumbled. He’d given up his pacing and was sitting on the floor at the end of the bed, leaning his shoulder against Clint’s leg. When Clint Barton told you to stop fidgeting, you had to admit you had a problem.

Clint leaned his elbows on his knees, ducking his head like he was trying to get himself together. He fidgeted with his hearing aid, turning it all the way up. “Buck had some things to say,” he whispered, so low only super-soldier hearing could have picked up that he’d spoken at all.

Steve turned his head.

“He said to treat him rough, like you did in the stairwell. All of us.”

Steve swallowed hard. “He say why?” he asked under his breath.

“Said not to trust this Barnes. Said it was a gut feeling, something off about him. He wants at least one of us to be underestimated.”

Steve winced. He’d suspected that was the reason for Bucky’s behavior, but . . . he just wasn’t picking it up. “What do you think?”

Clint was silent for a moment. He finally hummed. “Think it was damn weird watching those two suck face.”

Steve huffed and laid his head against the mattress. “Super weird.”

“I didn’t pick up anything bad from this Barnes, Cap,” Clint finally murmured. “And if you aren’t either . . . I don’t know, man.”
“Yeah.”

“I don’t want these guys thinking they need to rescue our Bucky from us. That don’t sit right.”

“I know,” Steve growled, gritting his teeth. He was a little pissed that Bucky had forced that play on him, now that he’d let it percolate.

“We’ll let it play out. Hell, if anyone will understand the necessity of playing it safe, it’s a zombieland version of you and Buck.”

Tony and Sam were just in time to walk in at the end of his sentence. Tony flapped his hands at Steve's face. “Stop saying the Z word! Jesus Christ!”
They congregated in the common room, and Steve finally had a chance to actually look around this time. The windows were still unprotected, so Steve assumed they were ballistic glass, just like at home. In fact, the common area looked much the same. It was cleaner, though, more sparse. And in the kitchen there were stacks and massive stores of food, water, medical supplies, and weaponry. It actually looked like they had cleared out the armory in the basement, and the medical suites, then added it to whatever they’d already had in the residences and stacked it all up here.

The stairwell doors were not only barred, but also booby-trapped, just like the stairs up to the roof had been. Steve scowled. Something wasn’t adding up here.

Tony ambled up to him, staring at the open elevator shafts and the barred stairwell doors pointedly.

Steve nodded to him. “Yeah.”

“I get mining the way up here,” Tony murmured, glancing around to make sure Quickdraw or Barton weren’t anywhere near them. Quickdraw was still absent, and Barton was still with Bucky in that back room, which Steve wasn’t concerned about at all. Tony continued to whisper next to him. “But if there was an EMP like I thought when we got here, why put traps on the stairs up to the roof? Who’d be able to get up there without something as an assist?”

“Enhanced?” Steve whispered. “I don’t know. We’ll ask them.”

“Yeah, sure. Trust all around, right?” Tony said even more pointedly as he turned to watch Barton coaxing their Bucky down the hall toward them.

Bucky had his shoulders hunched, his eyes down. Jesus, he looked like the end result of every nightmare Steve had ever concocted of Bucky’s time with Hydra.

Steve grit his teeth and glared at Bucky as they came closer. He fucking hated that the man was putting on this show. Hated it.

When Steve looked back toward the others, he had to repress a startle when he realized Quickdraw was standing there, eyeing him and Tony with the others still in his peripheral vision. Steve hadn’t heard him come in, hadn’t felt the eyes on him. Jesus Christ, this guy was good.

“How’s a seat,” Quickdraw offered, sweeping his hand toward the sofas. He then used that hand to flip the knife he’d been holding with the blade against his forearm, lining the blade up with its holster and sliding it home.

Steve moved carefully, nodding as he offered Quickdraw a small smile. The man’s lips twitched, but that was all Steve got for his efforts.
Once they were all seated, except for Bucky, who was standing near the window, shifting restlessly as he looked out, Quickdraw leaned back into the sofa cushions and seemed to sort of melt into Barton’s side, all the tension leaving him.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked carefully.

“You’d think, with nothing to do but survive, that the days wouldn’t get longer,” Quickdraw answered, sitting back up after a few seconds of allowing himself to go boneless. Barton put a hand on the small of his back and left it there.

Steve tried not to stare, because it was weird.

“So. You two are all that’s left?” Tony asked, apparently deciding to brazen this one out. Steve was, for once, grateful to him for it.

Quickdraw nodded, ducking his head. “When the first reports started coming in, Steve and Natalia went out to check them.” He glanced at Barton, who nodded discreetly. “Twenty minutes after they landed, Natalia had turned.”

Steve felt his whole body go cold. There was no more Natasha in this world? God, he couldn’t even get his mind around it.

“Steve wasn’t infected, but . . .”

“We didn’t know that, at the time,” Barton provided when his companion faltered. “When he got back and reported what had happened.”

“We had to quarantine him, to make sure. Banner ran tests. He . . . he wasn’t infected. But he came out of holding different.”

Barton flailed a little at that, covering his mouth and then waving Steve’s way. “He was angry,” he explained to Steve. “He kept trying to tell us he wasn’t infected, that we were wasting time trying to find a cure through his blood because it didn’t have the bacteria in it. And he was right.”

“He was right,” Quickdraw murmured. “If we’d listened to him . . .”

Barton patted him carefully as he held his head in both hands, flesh and metal fingers bunching his short hair. His hair was cut similarly to Bucky’s current style, which Steve was just now taking note of. He had to shake his head to get his mind off this feral, frighteningly competent version of Bucky that he was faced with. Jesus . . .

“Anyway,” Quickdraw muttered, dropping his hands. “He came out angry. And by that time, we’d lost over half the world’s population to this thing.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sam murmured.

Quickdraw licked his lips, his eyes darted from Steve toward the windows, where Bucky still stood with his back to them and his head down. “I think Steve blamed a lot of those losses on us. Himself included. He was . . . he couldn’t find a way to forgive any of us. He stayed angry.”

Steve sat back, sighing. If anyone knew what that feeling was like, it was him. He’d been angry all his life, it felt like, at one injustice or another. He tried to put himself in the place of this world’s Steve, tried to find a level of mass destruction that would make him stay angry at Bucky. He couldn’t get his head around that, though. He also actively tried to curb his current annoyance with Bucky, telling himself the man had seventy years of honed instincts, and Steve needed to trust them.
Steve had to shake his head so he could pay attention, missing why they’d lost Bruce Banner, other than their version had also flown away on a Quinjet.

“Once Banner left, we had no hope of finding a cure, or even a way to inoculate anyone who hadn’t already been infected.”

Barton shrugged elegantly. “We all just sort of gave up, after that. It became about survival instead of saving.”

Quickdraw closed his eyes, a singularly unusual thing to do, Steve realized, because he was trusting a room full of literal strangers not to attack him. Steve wanted to get up and hug the man, but he didn’t dare make a sound while this version of Bucky with the instincts of a wild cat was trusting them not to move.

“We all gave up, except for Steve.”

“Wow, that’s so weird,” Tony said in a monotone, looking sideways at Steve. “What’s that like, I can’t imagine.”

“Shut up, Stark,” Steve muttered, feeling heat come to his cheeks.

It did invoke a small, sad smile in Quickdraw, though, so Steve would tolerate the gentle teasing.

“By a year in, we were fighting non-stop. Steve and I,” Quickdraw continued. He gazed off at the windows, looking somehow both fond and forlorn. Steve had the innate sense that the man was using the poignant moment to study his other self, though. He wondered if Bucky could feel those eyes on him. “He still wanted to save the world. The Tower was still secure, at that point. We still had power, water, weapons, food stores to last for years, and a hydroponic garden set up on several levels to grow more food. We were . . . hell. We were what he called ‘the last beacon of safety in the City.’”

“Maybe the world,” Barton muttered, wincing and running a hand through his hair.

“Steve wanted us to open the doors to survivors. But we had no way of weeding out the recently infected, no way of knowing which of those survivors we could trust. We never would have been safe. We took a vote. Sam was going to vote with Steve, we all knew it. But he pulled Stark to his side too, and we were deadlocked.”

Quickdraw halted there, his gaze going distant.

Barton cleared his throat. “Want me to get the video up?”

Quickdraw closed his eyes. “Yeah.”

Barton stood, rubbing his hands up and down his thighs nervously. “Short story? We argued over it for days. Then Rogers made a . . . an executive decision.”

“He went down to open the doors,” Quickdraw explained, sounding tired and sick. He waved at the wall. “This is how that ended.”

“Jarvis?” Barton called. “You awake, buddy?”

“At your service, Agent Barton.” Steve started at the sound of JARVIS’s icy tone. He was shocked to hear it at all in this world, but he’d also never heard one of Tony’s AIs sound . . . angry.
“Can you show our visitors the fight?”

“Of course.” A video popped up, blinking in and out. Captain America stood in the foyer of the Tower, his shoulders squared, his shield up. The Winter Soldier faced him, full mask and goggles on his face, standing in front of the ballistic glass doors as hundreds of people banged on them, shouting and pleading with them to open the doors, to help them.

“I ain’t letting you do this, Steve,” the Soldier said softly.

“You gonna stop me, Buck?”

_The Soldier rolled his shoulders, lifting his chin. “You gonna make me?”_

_The Captain didn’t speak again, didn’t waste time with chatting. He launched the shield at the Soldier, then attacked as the Soldier caught the shield and spun. The fight was quick and brutal, both enhanced men moving almost faster than the video could follow, exchanging blows and using the layout of the foyer like a battlefield._

_The Captain moved in graceful arcs of precision hits, but the Soldier fought dirty just like their Bucky did – half ballerina, half brawler – and he used anything and everything in his way as a weapon. After several minutes of wincing through the video, Steve was forced to watch the Soldier take the Captain down in an eerie mimicry of their fight on the helicarrier, straddling him and pounding him into submission until the man no longer moved._

The Soldier crawled away from him, collapsing on the marble tile and rolling to his back. His face wasn’t visible, but Steve imagined agony and betrayal running through both battered men.

In the background, the bloodied Captain raised a hand, and the Soldier scrambled closer, trying to grab whatever the man had. He wasn’t fast enough, and an explosion shook the footage. Glass and debris sprayed everywhere, and the Soldier grabbed the Captain’s shield holster, dragging him toward the stairwells. A throng of people clambered across the video, chasing after them. Some looked human, still, running for safety themselves. Others looked decidedly not human, though Steve wouldn’t have known by the way they moved so quickly. A wall of red met them, allowing the Soldier and the Captain to escape into the stairwell.

“Jesus, they’re fast,” Clint grunted from the end of the sofa.

“And strong,” Barton added, nodding. “Jarvis, that’s enough.”

The video took a few seconds to cut out.

“That explains why the stairwells are blocked,” Tony said, looking from the wall to Quickdraw. “How many floors were compromised?”

“Fifty, before we could stop them.”

“Holy shit,” Sam muttered. He was sitting with his hand over his mouth.

“We lost half our food stores. The hydro gardens. Three quarters of the weapons. And Wilson, Rogers, and Stark.”

“They were killed?” Steve asked, his voice hoarse.

“No,” Quickdraw answered, jutting out his chin. “They left.”
“Compromised the building. Then left,” Barton said quietly. “Wanda, Buck, and I were trying to shore up the stairwells, trying to save the middle floors where our backup stores were kept. Wilson, Stark, and Rogers took the last Quinjet and bolted.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve whispered. He looked at Quickdraw in dawning horror. “He left you?”

Quickdraw stared at him, refusing to answer.

“You were together,” Bucky said suddenly, still facing the windows. They all turned to look at him, shocked that he’d spoken.

“Yes,” Quickdraw gritted out finally.

Bucky nodded. “We’ve seen that in a lot of worlds. But you fought. So, he turned to Stark. Maybe . . . turned to Stark before he ended things with you?”

Quickdraw narrowed his eyes, glancing at Barton and then at Tony. “Yes,” he answered softly.

Bucky merely nodded, his arms crossed and his shoulders tense, still looking out the window. Steve realized with a suddenly renewed, burning anger that Bucky had just made these men think he’d cheated on him with Tony just like the one in this world had. He opened his mouth to speak, but Tony’s fingers dug into his thigh and he snapped his teeth together.

Barton sighed. “We tried to find them, after a few months. After Wanda . . .”

“What happened to Wanda?” Steve asked carefully.

“She was a goddamn champ, saved more floors than we ever could have without her,” Barton muttered, ducking his head. “We lost her a few months after that. We thought . . . we all thought since she was enhanced, she wouldn’t be infected. And she could fly, so she scavenged for us. Turns out we were wrong. She got bit. Got back here and turned.”

“I shot her,” Quickdraw said softly. He held his finger up to his temple. “Has to be a headshot.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve offered, feeling a little queasy.

“After we lost Wanda, we tried to get in touch with the others,” Quickdraw continued, his voice a little colder now. “But Jarvis only listens to Clint. And there’s only one satellite in range that wasn’t taken out when the EMPs hit.”

“About that,” Tony said, raising one finger.

“The douchebag aliens who attacked hit the whole world with massive electromagnet pulses,” Barton filled in. “But they apparently didn’t realize just how much damage it would do to Earth. Once the dust settled, and I mean literal dust, the fuckers left because the world wasn’t useful to them.”

“They were also apparently . . . allergic to oxygen, in the end?” Quickdraw added, shrugging his massive shoulders. “We don’t know. Stark laughed for days when he discovered that.”

“Assholes,” Barton muttered.

“ Anyway. The satellite. It flies over about . . . twice a week. We’ve been trying to connect to it when it’s in range, leave a message for anyone capable of receiving it.”

“No luck?” Tony asked carefully.
Quickdraw shrugged and held out both hands. “We do okay with most things. But neither of us is Tony Stark.”

Everyone in the room turned to peer at Tony, who was nodding. “I know a guy,” he said with a cheeky grin. “When is the next flyover?”

“We don’t know. We get about five minutes warning when it’s near.”

“I can work with that.” Tony said confidently, and Steve smiled softly, because he knew the man wasn’t merely bragging.

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Tony was biting his tongue to keep from asking all the other questions zipping through his mind. He sat through a brief interrogation about their dimension-hopping, how and why, when. They all played dumb, letting Clint do most of the talking because he rambled the best out of any of them and apparently already had a fake story all set up.

Tony had some questions for his teammates, too, but he wasn’t sure he’d get to ask them until they left here. First question: where the fuck was their remote?

Quickdraw let them go after a few more minutes of talking, letting them know that they’d have a rationed dinner in two hours, but the water was free. Great.

Both of the Z-men led them down the hall this time, escorting them back to their quarters. “I’m sorry we have to lock the doors,” Quickdraw said as they got to the first two rooms. “Please understand.”

“It’s fine,” Steve said quickly, reaching out almost like he didn’t know he was doing it. He laid a hand on the man’s arm, squeezing it. “We understand.”

“If you need anything, the intercoms work. Hell, maybe Jarvis will actually answer you if you talk to him.”

“He really won’t talk to you?” Tony found himself asking.

Quickdraw glanced up for some reason. “Jarvis?” he said, smiling wryly when he looked back at Tony in the glaring silence.

“Hey Jarvis, if Sergeant Barnes was the last man alive, would you answer him?” Barton asked.

“I would gladly power myself down and open the doors, sir,” JARVIS responded cordially.

Quickdraw pointed up. “That’s why we blew the elevator cables.”

“And barred the stairwells,” Barton added.

“What about the roof?” Tony asked, looking toward the stairwells down the hall. “Why is that all tricked out? Surely that’s safe?”

The two men glanced at each other, and Quickdraw nodded faintly. “It’s safe unless you have a Quinjet,” Barton answered grimly.

Tony felt a little sick over that answer, but Steve looked downright ready to hurl his patriotic guts all over the hallway. “You thought they’d come back and attack you?”

Quickdraw ducked his head. “As soon as they compromised the security and took our only mode of
escape, we had to assume they were hostile.” He raised his head, meeting Steve’s eyes. “We still
do.”

Steve swallowed hard, nodding faintly.

“Rest well,” Quickdraw said pointedly, nodding toward the doors.

Tony stepped into the room he’d been shown into before, waiting as Sam joined him. And then they
heard the locks engage.

“Holy shit, man,” Sam said softly.

“Yeah,” Tony answered.

“I mean holy shit, man!”

Tony glanced at him. Sam looked a little sick himself.

“You think the others would let us take them with us?” Sam asked softly.

Tony winced. “Steve will. Bucky, though.”

“Why is he still all weirded out, huh? What the hell is he seeing that we’re not?”

Tony bit his lip, staring across the room. He couldn’t say why, but he’d be on Bucky’s side with this
one. He also had a weird feeling still, no matter how dire the situation was for this world’s Barnes
and Barton.

The air vent in the ceiling above them popped loose and swung free, and Sam screamed, “I didn’t
say zombie!” as he ducked away and grabbed a lamp.

Tony blinked as Bucky landed in front of them without a sound. “Jesus Christ, Wilson, stop
screaming!” the man hissed.

“Man, fuck you!” Sam hissed back, wielding the lamp like a baseball bat. It was still plugged in.
“What the fuck, you fucking fuck! Scared the shit out of me!”

“If you want me to bite you, you’ll have to buy me dinner first,” Bucky drawled, shaking his
shoulders out and swiping dust off his chest. “Their air vents are smaller than ours,” he added,
looking at Tony. “Why is that, do you think? What in this world changed that this Tony Stark said,
‘make these fuckers just small enough to make it hard for wide shoulders to crawl through’?”

Tony shrugged helplessly, blinking at him. “Did you need something, Barnes?”

Bucky shrugged and winced. “I was trying to get to Clint and Steve, but there was a jackknife.”

Tony nodded, pursing his lips. “Of course.”

“Seriously. Two more inches, that’s all I’m asking.”

“That’s what she said,” Sam muttered as he tried to disentangle himself from the lamp’s cord.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Bucky said, suddenly achingly sincere. “I bet hearing that all the time must affect
your confidence.”

Sam blinked at him, mouth falling open and cheeks flushing. He almost spoke, then he narrowed his
eyes as both he and Tony saw Bucky beginning to smirk. “Man, shut the hell up.”

Bucky snorted, glancing at Tony and throwing him a wink.

“You realize you put a target on my back out there, right?” Tony asked casually. “Making them think Steve and I are fucking?”

Bucky nodded, not looking one bit apologetic. “Better you than,” he trailed off and waved a hand at Sam, who was hopping on one foot and cursing quietly as he pushed at the electrical cord.

“Granted,” Tony huffed with a laugh.

“Also, you’re Tony Stark,” Bucky added, waving at Tony. “They need you. They won’t hurt you.”

“You hope,” Tony grunted.

Bucky shrugged. “Calculated risk.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, but he couldn’t help the smile that was playing across his lips. “Please tell me you have the remote.”

Bucky shook his head and pointed up. Fucking great. He’d hidden the damn thing on the roof.

“If you were the last man standing in an apocalypse, and a magical remote that could take you to a new world fell into your lap, would you kill for it?” Bucky asked softly.

Tony blinked at him. “That’s why you’re going all kicked puppy for them?”

Bucky shrugged. “Part of it. Something about this world’s Barnes, though. It ain’t hitting right.”

“Is it because he’s tapping Barton?” Sam asked as he threw himself onto the end of the king-size bed.

“Oh, my God,” Tony muttered.

“Listen, I know. Part of me wants to get these two out of here just as bad as you do,” Bucky said, suddenly somber once more. “But . . . I can’t shake the feeling that that me out there is one step too far gone.”

“They’ve been the lone survivors of the end of the world for years,” Tony argued. “Of course they’d be a little gone.”

Bucky shrugged. “I know myself. I know what I’d be capable of, if I’d already lost Steve.”

Tony blinked at him, Bucky’s reasoning finally dawning on him. “That’s what tipped you, huh? This is a version of Bucky Barnes who’s lost his Steve Rogers already?”

Bucky nodded, pressing his lips tightly together. “He looked like he’d seen a ghost up on that roof. And I know what that feels like. I know what I’m capable of doing, once he’s been lost. There’s no way we can trust him not to kill all of us and put a chain around Steve to keep him here.”

“Man, that is bleak. You are bleak,” Sam said, rubbing his hand over his face.

Bucky shrugged. “So. If I come to you when they’re not around acting like a goddamned abused
dog, just assume he’s killed me and stuffed my body somewhere and he’s trying to jump world in my
place, okay?”

Tony stared at him as he turned away and reached up for the air vent. “Are you serious?”

Bucky glanced at him as he hung from the ventilation. “Yeah. Why do you think he had me isolated?
Hidden ball trick.”

“Jesus,” Tony muttered as he watched the man disappear into the ducting, then the metal arm came
back to pull the grate back into place. Tony strained his hearing for sounds of Bucky moving, but he
heard nothing. Even if the ducts were two inches smaller, Bucky seemed to be doing just fine in
them.

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Bucky gritted his teeth and wedged himself around the jackknife in the venting. Goddamn, two more
inches, that’s all he was fucking asking for. He got close enough to the vent in the other room to be
able to hear Clint and Steve talking, but he wasn’t this bendy, okay, he couldn’t reach the next
section to actually get over there.

“I’m gonna kill him,” Steve was saying, sounding like he was seething.

Clint sounded exhausted. “He’s being cautious, Cap.”

“He’s being an asshole.”

Bucky rested his forehead against the dusty bottom of the vent and sighed. It was probably for the
best that he was stuck. That didn’t sound like a conversation he needed to drop into.

He reversed and headed back to his own room, slowing down and straining his ears to make sure the
room was empty before he re-entered. He managed to get the grate back in place, then he eased onto
the end of the bed, glancing around at his room.

“Jarvis?” he whispered.

There was a pregnant pause where he would have sworn the AI was listening. He squinted into the
silence.

“You there, pal?”

“At your service, Sergeant,” JARVIS said, mimicking his soft whisper.

Bucky smiled in relief. “Nice to meet you.”

“And you, Sergeant Barnes.”

Bucky clasped his hands together, worrying the metal fingers. “You don’t speak to your Barnes.”

“No, sir. Does this upset you?”

Bucky squinted one eye, hoping he wasn’t playing intellectual chess with an AI. “Not really. Can
you tell me why, though? Why you don’t speak to him?”

JARVIS was silent, and Bucky sighed softly, thinking he’d lost him. “He’s not a good man, sir,”
JARVIS murmured after a few more seconds.
Bucky blinked at the door. “How do you quantify a thing like that, Jarvis?”

“I’m afraid I’m not able to make such a calculation for you, Sergeant.”

Bucky nodded, smiling wryly. “I know how you feel, pal.”


Bucky glanced up, scowling. “The same could be said of a lot of people, Jarvis.”

“Yes. But I have observed, in my time, that there is always a line a human being will not cross. Where that line exists, I believe is in correlation to the weight of that human’s soul.”

Bucky blinked at that wording. “Do you know what a soul is?”

“That is another query I am unable to quantify, Sergeant. But I know what a soul is not.”

“Okay?”

“Sergeant Barnes does not have a soul.”

Bucky stared at the door for so long he realized his eyes were beginning to well with tears, and he blinked them away, eyes burning. “You can tell that sort of thing, huh?”

“I believe I can, sir. Yes.”

“You think I have a soul, Jarvis?” Bucky held his breath in the silence.

“I believe your soul is weeping, sir.”

Bucky startled and reached his fingers up to his face, wiping a tear away from his cheek. “Maybe it just has a hole in it,” he mumbled, trying to huff a laugh.

“Shattered, but still present, perhaps?” JARVIS offered gently.

Bucky shook himself and stood. “What really happened to Rogers and Stark and Wilson?”

“They escaped, sir.”

“They didn’t kill them?”

Bucky bit his lip.

A video popped up on the wall next to him, and he jumped away from it, startled. His heart was still racing in his throat as he watched Stark, Rogers, and Wilson sprinting toward the roof access stairwell. The door banged closed behind them, and just steps later the Winter Soldier in his full tac gear hit the door, yanking it open and following. The video feed changed to the stairwell, showing the race up to the roof. The Soldier gained on the men by hopping over the railing and climbing straight up like some goddamned nightmare insect, making it to the top landing just as Wilson got through the roof access door and slammed it in the Soldier’s face.

The Soldier threw himself at it, bursting through the locking mechanism JARVIS apparently had tried to engage, and then the feed switched again. A Quinjet sat on the roof, ramp down, Stark running up into it. Wilson was sprinting toward it, and Rogers was planting himself between the jet and the door, ready to brawl with the Soldier again. His shield had apparently never made it out of the destroyed foyer.
“You think you’re leaving this way, Rogers?” the Soldier asked over the sound of the Quinjet’s engines, pulling a gun and aiming it at the man’s head.

“The Bucky I knew, he’d have been at those doors with me!” Rogers shouted back, pointing at the Soldier. Bucky winced, because like fuck he would have, dumbass. “You’re not him! You’ve lost whatever was in you that made you him!”

“It’s the end of the world, Steve! You can’t save everyone! You can’t save any of them, not anymore!” The Soldier lowered his gun, holding both hands out plaintively. “Please. Don’t do this!”

“You’re going to get them killed. All of them. One by one. Hell, you’ll probably do it yourself,” Rogers said. Bucky’s spine straightened at the words, a shiver going up and down it. He wanted to look away, but he didn’t dare. “Because the only thing you care about anymore is yourself! And I won’t stand by and watch it anymore!”

They stared at one another for several seconds, then Rogers turned his back on the Soldier and strode toward the Quinjet.

Bucky bit his lip, narrowing his eyes at the video. He wasn’t . . . he wasn’t certain that he didn’t agree with Quickdraw, here. It was the end of the world, after all.

Then the man on the video raised his gun and fired one shot. Rogers pitched forward onto the Quinjet’s ramp as the Soldier stood and watched, still and stoic. Wilson dragged Rogers into the jet as it began to lift off, obviously shouting for Stark to get it in gear. Rogers was limp as the ramp closed up and the Quinjet rose into the air.

The Soldier stood, head cocked, watching the jet fly away. He raised his arm and sent the jet a lazy salute, then turned and ambled back into the stairwell.

Bucky blinked at the wall as the video feed cut off. He blinked again, mouth hanging open. “He shot Steve?” he whispered to JARVIS.

“Captain Rogers was merely the last of a long line of victims the Sergeant believed to be a threat.”

“Who else?”

There was no response.

“Do you know . . . do you know if they made it somewhere safe?” Bucky asked. “Do you have contact with them?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I do not.”

Bucky placed a hand over his belly and sat down heavily. He missed the bed and sank to the floor without really taking note of it, his entire body cold and numb. This Barnes had shot his own Steve in the back . . .

The sense memory of Steve’s body going limp in his arms, along with the sound of the bullet Bucky had put into his head, rocked through him, and he began scrambling for the bathroom. He barely made it to the toilet before he was throwing up several days’ worth of nutrient bars.

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A knock on their door roused Steve out of a restless nap, and he pushed to his elbows to blink at the door.
“You okay?” Clint asked nervously, hovering at Steve’s side. “You’re real pale, Cap.”

Steve nodded, rubbing at his eyes. “I don’t know how Buck took more than one jump before we noticed he wasn’t okay,” he mumbled. “I’m so fucking tired.”

Clint patted him on the shoulder, then moved away to answer the door. Bucky stood there when Clint opened the door. No wait. It wasn’t Bucky. It was Quickdraw. Steve was starting to be able to tell them apart by the way Quickdraw’s eyes stayed hard and serious, by the tightness of his jaw.

“You hungry?” Quickdraw asked them amiably.

“Yes,” Clint answered for them both. “Thanks.”

Steve pushed himself off the bed, shocked at how weak he still felt. Thank Christ Bucky had threatened to shove that nutrient bar down his throat.

Barton had already beckoned Tony and Sam out of their room, and Quickdraw led them toward the common area. Steve glanced over his shoulder, watching Barton head for the third door, where they were keeping Bucky locked up by himself.

“You know, Buck doesn’t so do great when he’s alone,” Steve said to Quickdraw. “You think you could move him into one of our rooms?”

Quickdraw didn’t slow his steps. He didn’t even glance over at Steve. “I’ll talk to him, see what he prefers,” he said, tone even and cool.

Steve bit back a reply. Fucking Bucky, at least his little act had these two guys convinced. And what good was it doing them? Fuck all, from where Steve was sitting.

He was surprised when they were all seated at the dining table, the food already laid out. It wasn’t a lot, but it was enough. Steve felt sort of guilty for eating when he knew all of them could get a solid meal from another world with one click of their remote, but he could admit to himself that he felt far too weak for his own peace of mind.

As they ate, Clint and Sam both slipped him pieces of their meal. Steve didn’t fight them on it.

Bucky was silent through the entire meal, head bowed, eating steadily. When he was addressed by Barton, he answered with nods or shakes of his head. A few times he did it with ASL, causing Barton to grin delightedly.

Steve glared at him from across the table. As soon as they were alone, Steve was going to chew his ass out so hard. Then he was going to kiss him, because not being able to talk freely with him or touch him was making Steve’s fingers itch.

“How long do you usually have before you’re sent somewhere new?” Quickdraw asked Steve as the meal was winding down.

Steve shrugged, eyes darting to Bucky and then Clint. “It varies. Sometimes it’s a few minutes. Others, it’s been days.”

“Is there any warning?”

Steve chewed slowly, hoping one of the two men would give him a sign of how he should answer.

“No,” Clint provided before Steve had to swallow what was in his mouth. “It just . . . blips and we’re
all falling all over ourselves into somewhere new.”

“And you don’t know why?” Barton asked his double.

Clint shrugged, but Tony laid his fork down. “We think we’re supposed to help our alternate versions out of whatever trouble they’re in. We’ve saved a few sets, now. Once we do that, we’re usually sent somewhere new.”

Quickdraw peered at him thoughtfully, then bowed his head. “In that case, I’m sorry.”

“What for?” Steve asked, brow furrowing as he leaned forward.

Quickdraw shrugged nonchalantly and continued eating. “If you have to save someone to be able to leave, you’re going to be stuck here just like we are.”

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After dinner, Tony asked if he could have access to the labs. Quickdraw and Barton shared an unreadable glance, then Quickdraw nodded and stood. “I’ll take you there. It’s a bit of a . . .”

“It’s an obstacle course of zombie traps,” Barton provided when Quickdraw couldn’t seem to come up with the right words. Quickdraw pointed at him, nodding.

Tony stood, taking a deep breath. “Hey Barnes,” he said to Bucky. “Care to be my lovely assistant again?”

Bucky nodded and stood, pushing his empty plate toward the middle of the table.

Quickdraw and Barton both looked at Bucky in obvious surprise. Bucky shrugged, his cheeks reddening under the scrutiny as he offered both men a small smile. “We’ve only blown up his lab twice.”

That didn’t seem to curb the curiosity of either man, but it did ensure they didn’t ask any questions. Quickdraw led Tony and Bucky through a minefield of traps toward the labs on the floor below, and Tony catalogued each one carefully, hoping he’d be able to make the trip again if he was forced to.

The longer he stayed, the more on board he was with Bucky’s play-acting. Something just was not right here. It hit him suddenly, as he was stepping over what looked like a bouncing betty mine, that it was the lack of hope. There was no hope here. Neither of the Z-men seemed to think there was anything or anyone to save anymore – including themselves – and it bothered Tony more than he’d ever tell the press.

When they got to the doors of the lab, Tony’s heart beat a little faster. It was pristine, just like his own at home. He stepped up to the clear blast doors, almost smacking his face into them when they didn’t open.

Quickdraw cleared his throat, glancing over at Bucky. “This is the other reason we’ve had no luck with the satellite. Or any of the building’s tech. Jarvis won’t let us in.”

Bucky’s eyes were drawn to the man’s hand, and if Tony caught the glance, so did Quickdraw. Quickdraw made a fist, holding it up. “What would be the point?” he asked with an exhausted, wry smile. “Once I got past the doors, he’d just power down all the tech.”

Bucky and Tony both nodded, and Tony peered into the lab.
“I’ll leave you to it. He might be more amendable if I’m not here,” Quickdraw murmured, retreating toward the stairwell.

They both watched him go, and as soon as his steps were no longer audible, Tony opened his mouth to speak. Bucky made a sharp gesture, eyes still on the stairwell. He gave it several more seconds before he turned to Tony and nodded.

“He’s good,” Bucky whispered.

“He’s scary.”

Bucky nodded grimly. Obviously neither of them felt as good about this world’s version of Bucky’s skills as they had in the last several. The Barnes from Steve’s favorite world was a fucking cupcake who still looked like he could kick ass and save orphans and shit. The competent Barnes of the Vintage World had been someone Tony would have hidden behind in a fight. Hell, Tony’s own version of Barnes was someone he’d put his back to. This Barnes was someone Tony would hide from when blood started flowing.

Bucky stepped closer, uncomfortably close for Tony’s level of sexual frustration at this point, let’s be real, and he whispered in Tony’s ear. “Jarvis?” he said, his breath ghosting against Tony’s cheek. “You with us, pal?”

The lights in the lab flickered. Dash, dot, dash, dash. A simple, silent Y.

Tony blinked at Bucky, fighting not to whirl around and stare into the lab.

Bucky was grinning. “Can you let us in?”

The lab’s doors whooshed open, and Bucky patted Tony’s chest and gave him a shove. The doors shut securely behind them.

“Jarvis?” Tony said hesitantly.

“Welcome, sir,” JARVIS’s voice came back. Tony could have cried. “How can I help?”

“I need to know everything,” Tony said as he clapped his hands together.

“I need a drink,” Bucky muttered.

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“You okay, Steve?” Sam asked quietly.

Steve sat staring at the windows, blinking away the haze he’d allowed to cloud his brain. He blinked at Sam and Clint, offering them a weak smile. “I’m confused.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, coming to sit by Steve and stare with him like Steve was some sort of animal in a zoo. He glanced around and gestured for Clint to come closer, then once they all had their heads bowed together, Sam told them about Bucky dropping in to visit him and Tony.

Clint merely nodded. “I kind of thought it might be something like that.”

“He thinks these two guys are going to try to jump with us?” Steve asked softly.

“As us,” Clint corrected, his eyes on the exits to make sure they weren’t being overheard. “And I don’t really blame him. If I was stuck here, I’d be desperate to get away in any way possible.”
“Yeah,” Steve whispered.

“If Tony can locate the other three, maybe we can rig something up to get them all together again,” Sam murmured.

Steve winced. “I don’t . . . I can’t imagine ever cheating on Bucky. It’s just not something I can get my brain around.”

“Especially with Stark,” Sam grunted.

“I’d tap Stark,” Clint said with a thoughtful hum.

Steve and Sam both stared at him. Sam raised a hand and closed his eyes. “I am learning way too much about my teammates today.”

Clint shrugged negligently. “I’m just saying.”

“For the record, Bucky would tap you,” Sam added, before looking back at Steve, whose eyes had been going wider and wider as his companions talked.

“Wait, what?” Steve blurted.

“Purely theoretical, and . . . stuff,” Sam assured him. “So what’s the plan, Cap?”

Steve groaned and ran a hand over his face. “Holding pattern. We’ll see what magic Stark can work down there.”

“You gentlemen need anything?” Barton asked as he came in from the direction of the master suite. Obviously he and Quickdraw shared that room, and wasn’t that a horror show of mental images for Steve to deal with right now.

“We’re good,” Steve called, turning and sending Barton an OK sign with his fingers. “Just trying to stay out of your way.”

Barton waved a dismissive hand at them. “Buck’s all torqued up about the medical floor, so I’m staying out of his way.”

“What about the medical floor?” Steve asked, scowling heavier.

“We’ve been trying to figure out how to get there and scavenge some heavier equipment,” Barton explained as he moved closer, bottle of water in hand. “Last month we had a close call on a supply run. It spooked us, I guess.”

“What’s the hold up?” Sam asked, watching Barton warily as the man threw himself onto a sofa nearby.

“Well. I think the proper term is ‘horde’, right?” Barton said with an easy smile. “Just two of us, it’s not a mission we can risk.”

Steve glanced at his companions, raising an eyebrow. Neither of them responded in any way, but he nodded. “Well. There’s seven of us now. Could it be run with seven?”

Barton blinked at him, eyes going wide. “Naw, man, we can’t ask you to do that. It’s not life or death. And what if you pop to another dimension in the middle of it?”

“It, uh . . .” Steve glanced at Clint and narrowed his eyes to make the man keep his lying mouth shut.
Clint and Bucky both were on Steve’s Disappointed List right now. “It doesn’t happen unless we’re all together. So we could run it with you.”

Barton stared at them, looking at each man in turn before he met Steve’s eyes. “You’re serious?”

“Of course,” Steve said, sinking into the commanding tone of Captain America.

Barton held up a finger. “Hold that thought.” He leaned over the back of his couch and looked toward the master suite, shouting, “Hey, Buck!”

“What?” the call came back almost immediately.

“You’re gonna wanna hear this!”

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Tony didn’t realize that he was covering his mouth with his palm until Bucky gently took his wrist and pulled his hand away from his face.

They were sitting on a desk, pressed shoulder to shoulder, watching a collection of short videos provided by JARVIS. Barnes, slipping out of the bed he shared with Steve to sneak down to the range and fuck Barton in the privacy of one of the firing lanes. Barnes, leaving dinner early to go on a ‘run’ and then disappearing into Maximoff’s room for an hour. Barnes, kitting out for a sparring session with Wilson and then dragging Wilson into the showers as they both stripped. Barnes, gesturing at Steve with his metal hand like it was malfunctioning and then going down to the lab to share an atrociously passionate, fast-forwarded thirty-seven minutes with Stark on the desk . . .

Bucky and Tony both hopped away from the desk like it had burned their asses.

“Holy shit,” Tony grunted, blinking as the videos paused.

“Well,” Bucky said slowly. “That was . . .”

“Enlightening?” Tony tried.

“Horrible.”


Bucky shrugged. He’d already told Tony about the video he’d seen; Barnes shooting Rogers in the back during their escape. “I can’t tell if he’s just a horrible person, or if he’s an evil person.”

“I mean, he’s definitely a horrible person,” Tony said with a nod. He narrowed his eyes at Bucky. “Have you ever?”

Bucky did a double take when he looked at Tony, mouth falling open, looking almost as offended as Steve sometimes could. “No! Jesus!”

Tony almost laughed at the blush crawling up Bucky’s cheekbones. “Good to know, kid. Don’t do that.”

“You’re an ass,” Bucky mumbled, wincing as he glanced back at the paused end of the last video. Tony’s ass certainly did feature heavily in that picture. “Jarvis, turn it off, please.”

The video blipped out.
“Where does this leave us?” Bucky asked after a few contemplative seconds.

Tony glanced around the lab. “Well. We don’t have anything that’ll make Steve believe any version of you is a guy we don’t need to bother saving.”

Bucky nodded in agreement. “And when we do jump, I’m not going to feel great about leaving either of those guys here. Even if one of them is a lying, cheating scumbag.”

“Don’t forget boyfriend-shooting,” Tony said as he wandered over to the Iron Man arrays.

Bucky mumbled as he followed. “I was trying to block that out.”

“Okay,” Tony said on a sigh as he narrowed his eyes at the dark suits. “Say we do find the other three, and I could rig two of these suits to get the Z-men to them. Are we helping or hurting?”

Bucky shrugged. “Far as I can tell, Rogers, Wilson, and Stark made their choice, and they sure as hell had more of the story than we do. I’m not even sure we should try to find them.”

Tony was nodding absent-mindedly, stroking the beard that was finally beginning to fill in properly after he’d had to shave it off for World War II. “I think we need to take everything we’ve found to the others.”

Bucky glanced back at the blank space where the videos had been. “I’m not sure Steve needs to see all that.”

“I didn’t need to see all of that,” Tony countered. “Hell, you’re too young to see that shit.”

“I am over half a century older than you, Stark.”

“Don’t make it weird,” Tony shot back with a wave of his hand. “Why wouldn’t Z-Stark take a suit with him when he left? I mean, they’re kind of the perfect outfit for the end of the world.”

Bucky was silent beside him, peering at the suits. “Why would he cede control of his Tower to someone like Barnes?” he finally asked quietly.

“Unless . . .” Tony’s eyes widened and he turned to look at Bucky, who seemed merely curious rather than having any sort of epiphany. Tony was jolted by the fact that he had gotten used to Bucky’s mind working almost in tandem with his, and wasn’t that a weird thing to discover? “Z-Stark would have had the most access to the outside world, right? Being able to wrangle that satellite.”

Bucky shrugged and then nodded.

“And they said that Z-Rogers pulled Z-Stark to his side, somehow. What if they weren’t fucking? There was no video of Rogers and Stark banging.”

Bucky shuddered and shook his shoulders out like something had just crawled up his spine.

“What if Stark knew something he didn’t share with Barnes or Barton?”

“Like what?” Bucky prodded, but his voice sounded more sly than confused now. “You think he knew somewhere safe, don’t you?”

Tony grinned brightly. “Jarvis?” he said with a clap of his hands. “Did Mr. Stark compile information about how the disease effected the rest of the globe?”
'He did, Sir.'

''And?''

'Major cities such as New York were hit hardest. But smaller cities and towns were left untouched. Rural areas remained almost unscathed. While urban centers were quarantined and abandoned to their fate, the remainder of the world continued on, and presumably still does.'

Tony and Bucky stared at each other. ''Motherfucker,'' Bucky breathed. ''They weren’t trying to let people into the Tower.''

Tony grinned broadly. ''They were trying to evac them to safety.''

They stared at each other for a few more seconds, then Bucky moved suddenly, pushing Tony up against the wall near the Iron Man arrays and crowding in close.

''Whoa!'’ Tony cried, flailing as Bucky pressed to him from his knees to his chest. ''This is not an appropriate celebration!''

''Shut up,'' Bucky hissed, ducking his head and hiding his face in Tony’s neck.

''Bad touch,'' Tony gasped as his spine pushed against the concrete wall.

''Stark,'' Bucky snarled. ''Shut. Up.''

Tony held his breath, trying to ignore the massive super-serumed muscles practically squishing him into the corner. Then he heard the sound Bucky had heard; the whisper of mechanics as a camera was repositioned.

They were hiding in one of the only blind spots in the entire lab, Tony knew because he’d had several private panic attacks in this corner, thank you. But it wouldn’t stay completely hidden, not if someone was actively moving the cameras. The camera whirred again, sweeping back and forth like it was looking for them.

Bucky reached a hand up carefully and scrubbed his fingers through his hair, mussing it up. Tony nodded, catching on finally.

''Might as well go all in, Bucky Bear,’’ he grunted, grabbing at Bucky’s hair with both hands and fisting it between his fingers.

''I really hate that name,’’ Bucky growled, tugging at Tony’s jeans until he dislodged Tony’s belt.

''Fuzzy wuzzy was a bear,’’ Tony taunted quietly. He pressed his forehead to Bucky’s, gritting his teeth as Bucky’s metal hand clutched at the back of his shirt.

Bucky was obviously trying not to laugh, his body tense against Tony’s. ''There are so many things I can stuff in your mouth to shut you up, y’know.’’

''I refuse to kiss you even if it is to keep our cover.’’

''This is the most aggressive fake makeout I’ve ever had,’’ Bucky mumbled, squishing their noses together and then tweaking Tony’s ribs to make Tony cry out.

Tony flailed too, then gripped onto Bucky’s shoulder with a huff. ''I hate you so much.’’

Bucky’s body shook under Tony’s hands as he laughed. ''That’s hot.’’
“Shut up!”

They pawed angrily at each other in the partially hidden alcove for a few more seconds, then Bucky shoved away from Tony and the wall, wiping at his mouth like they’d just broken a messy kiss.

There was a knock on the doors of the lab, and Bucky and Tony both startled convincingly as they turned toward the glass wall.

Quickdraw stood there, his head bowed. Like he was respectfully not looking at them, so they could rearrange themselves accordingly. Like he hadn’t been watching the video feeds. Like he hadn’t known exactly what they’d been doing and had merely stumbled across a moment he hadn’t wanted to see.

Tony gritted his teeth, glaring almost playfully at Bucky as he adjusted his shirt and redid his belt. “This guy is good.”

Bucky’s jaw flexed, then he grinned at Tony wickedly. “Yeah. But he ain’t Tony Stark.”

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Barton kitted Steve and the others out with whatever they could use, and he led them three floors down, stopping at the medical floor. The door had been chained shut.

Steve took a deep breath, then immediately regretted it when the smell of unwashed bodies hit him. Barton had explained that the people weren’t dead, so much as living empty husks. Steve could only think of how much a cure to this thing could have saved, and he was beginning to understand this world’s version of himself a little better. It was frustrating, knowing that the right people had been in the right place at the right time to save the goddamn world, but they’d all given up and chosen to save themselves, instead.

Steve gritted his teeth and shook himself. They couldn’t go back in time and make this right. At least, Steve was pretty sure they couldn’t. All they could so was save those who were left.

Barton unlocked the chains, unwinding them slowly, so they wouldn’t clink. He stood at the door, hand on the knob, and looked back at Steve, Sam, and Clint. “Ready?” he whispered.

Steve got the all-clear from the other two, then nodded determinedly.

Barton turned the knob silently, then wrenched the door open. Steve bulled his way into the corridor, expecting a mob of rabid humans. But there was no one in the corridor. He could hear movement and knew they were on the floor, though.

Sam and Clint moved behind him, each of them turning to cover one end of the hallway.

Barton stepped into the doorway, cocking his head at them and frowning as Steve looked back at him questioningly.

“I’m real sorry about this,” Barton said, all Midwest aw shucks as he shrugged, then slammed the door closed behind them.
Sudden But Inevitable Betrayal

Tony moved toward the glass barrier, eyeing Quickdraw carefully. “Something wrong?” he called to the man, both of them blithely ignoring the fact that Quickdraw had just walked in on Tony and Bucky engaged in some heavy petting in the corner.

Quickdraw leaned against the glass, crossing his arms over his chest. “Maybe,” he said, sounding oddly contemplative. Tony could hear him clearly through the speakers. “I see you got Jarvis on board.”

Tony gave an elegant shrug. “Well, he knows daddy’s home.”

The smile Quickdraw gave him turned Tony’s blood to ice. He looked like a man whose plan had just come together perfectly, and every instinct of self-preservation Tony possessed, all two of them, told him that Quickdraw’s plan coming together was going to end in blood. Quickdraw was still smirking when he drawled, “That’s good.”

Tony cleared his throat, glancing behind him for Bucky, sort of shocked at himself when he realized that having Bucky close to him made him feel not only safer, but also stronger. The man was hovering, a subtle flush still high on his cheekbones, his body language communicating a weird cross between chagrined for having been caught with his hand in the metaphorical cookie jar of Tony’s pants, and protectively combative as Tony’s unease grew.

Tony couldn’t even tell if it was an act or not at this point.

“There’s been a development,” Quickdraw told them, still disturbingly nonchalant.

Tony raised both eyebrows expectantly. “Uh huh?”

“Might be quicker to show than tell,” Quickdraw drawled, jutting his chin out toward Bucky. “But I wonder, now, if speed is really something you’re wanting, coming down here just the two of you? Might not even be bothered by it, might want to carry on as you were?”

Tony felt his face heating up, but he’d had years of practice at suppressing a blush. He wasn’t about to let this sociopathic nymphomaniac make him feel guilty for getting some ass he hadn’t actually gotten.

“Ask Jarvis to give you a live feed of the medical floor,” Quickdraw instructed.

The way he was leaning against the glass made his hip jut out almost seductively, and Tony forced his eyes to drag away from the man. No matter what universe they were in, Tony was a red-blooded human being, okay, and Bucky Barnes was hot. Sue him. His competence made him somehow even more attractive, and Quickdraw shared that characteristic with Tony’s version, as well as the fact that his shoulders looked fucking incredible in a Henley. But where his Bucky was mostly reserved when it came to flaunting that sex appeal, Quickdraw seemed to count it as merely another weapon in his already fully stocked arsenal. Tony could see how this guy had convinced almost everyone on the team to fuck him. He still didn’t know why the guy had done it, but Tony didn’t really care either.

“Jarvis?” Tony said without taking his eyes off Quickdraw’s smirking expression. He forced himself to turn his back on the man behind the glass barrier when JARVIS provided a video feed for Tony and Bucky to view.

They were looking at an empty corridor – the medical floor – with a crash cart and a stretcher sitting
amidst haphazardly strewn medical debris. After a few seconds, three figures came into view, bunched together in a defensive stance, retreating.

Tony immediately recognized all three men. The video feed was of the highest quality, after all. He could even see the lines of strain on Sam’s face and the beads of sweat at Clint’s hairline. Steve grabbed the stretcher and shoved it behind them, positioning it so it blocked the hallway as they ran under the camera and out of view.

“What is this?” Tony shouted at Quickdraw.

“Rogers told us that you won’t jump world unless you’re all together,” Quickdraw answered, looking at his fingernails like he was bored. “What happens if one of you kicks it? Are you stuck, then?”

“What?” Tony growled.

Quickdraw finally looked up, narrowing his eyes. “We got no use for the other four. But you. We sure could use a Tony Stark.”

Bucky moved so fast that Tony barely registered it. He launched himself at the glass, banging on it with his human fist. “What did you do?” he shouted at his doppelgänger.

Quickdraw simply grinned that shark’s smile of his. “I didn’t do anything, Sunshine. They volunteered. Have to be honest, we almost called it off until we could get you with them, but you had us both fooled. I hope you take that as the compliment I intend it to be. Wasn’t sure if you were really on a leash or not. Barton damn near had me convinced you needed saving.” He laughed delightedly. “You banging Stark, though? That works okay for us. He’ll behave if we have you to dangle in front of him.”

Bucky snarled deep in the back of his throat and turned to watch the video, his eyes darting back and forth frantically as the feed switched to a new corridor. Steve and Sam were valiantly staving off a dozen or more angry attackers as Clint ran ahead of them and tried locked door after locked door down the hallway. They finally found a door that wasn’t locked or barred and shut themselves into an exam room just in time. The dirty, starving husks of what used to be people began banging and clawing at the door, piling against it mindlessly, trampling some of their number underfoot.

Tony stared in horror, his mouth falling open.

“We know the others landed in Malibu safely. We even know that Stevie lived long enough to get there. And not once did they think to come back. To save us. To see if we were even alive. So we’re either going to hunt those self-righteous motherfuckers down and kill every last one of them, or we’re taking the train you’ve been riding and hopping off this shithole. It’s your choice. You get our escape pods working, and you might even have time to save them before you jump,” Quickdraw cooed to Tony.

Bucky threw himself against the glass again, his teeth bared in a feral snarl. Quickdraw laughed as he took two backward steps, raising both hands like he was saying he came in peace. “Easy there, tiger,” he said, chuckling like he was taunting an animal at the zoo. “Life without Steve around to be disappointed in you ain’t so bad, once you get used to it.”

Bucky let out a purely primal sound of rage and threw himself at the glass again like he could break it down with pure, righteous spite.

Tony wrapped both arms around Bucky’s body, tugging him away from the glass. Well, he tried to
tug him. Bucky’s solid mass didn’t even budge when Tony leaned all his weight into trying to get him to move.

“Barnes, come on,” Tony said through gritted teeth. “Let him go. We can get to them, come on.”

Bucky shoved away from the glass as Quickdraw waved his metal fingers daintily at him then turned his back and strolled away toward the stairs. “Whatever you need to get two of those suits working, I’m sure Jarvis will be happy to provide.”

Tony rolled his eyes. He’d never been more grateful that their Bucky Barnes was mostly a decent human being with possible self-esteem issues, because an overly cocky psychopathic version of him was fucking insufferable.

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Steve leaned all his weight against the door, feeling the pounding and scraping against the other side like it was the tines of a fork dragging up and down his spine.

“We have to get to Tony and Bucky,” Sam panted, bending over and planting his hands on his knees, temporarily using his ass to help Steve hold the door.

Clint was adjusting his hearing aids, wincing and nodding. “They never wanted to jump world with us. They wanted to keep Stark here.”

Steve closed his eyes and sighed heavily. “Fuck,” he whispered. “And they think if we’re all dead, Tony can’t jump. Because I told them we all had to be together. Fuck!”

“They won’t hurt Tony, and Bucky is going to be goddamn feral once he finds out what they did,” Clint assured him. “We’ll get to them.”

Steve snarled wordlessly, then gulped in a deep breath to try and calm his mind. “They have no reason to keep Buck alive, though. We have to hurry.”

“If we try to fight through that, we’ll all be infected,” Sam said, gesturing wildly at the door. “They don’t have to kill us, just exchange fluids or whatever and we’re done.”

“Gross,” Clint whispered, staring up at the ceiling as he turned a slow circle.

As Steve watched him, he pulled a chair over and climbed onto it, reaching for the high ceilings and punching a vent open. He lifted himself into it, dangling from the ceiling as his biceps bulged and trembled with the effort of keeping him suspended.

“I think I can fit in here,” Clint told them after he’d lowered himself back down. “No way Cap can get through. Sam, I’m not even sure if you can. I don’t know how Buck did it.”

Steve stared at the duct. Clint was right, he would never fit. He nodded anyway. “Go find them. When you get far enough from us make noise, try to draw these guys away so we can break free. We’ll try to work our way to the elevator shafts, climb out that way.”

Clint nodded, but before he could heft himself up, Steve grabbed for his ankle. “Then get to the roof. No matter what happens, get to the roof. We have to get to the remote before they can find it.”

Clint nodded again, grim and determined, then hefted himself up into the ductwork.

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“Will those suits work?” Bucky snarled, pointing at the Iron Man arrays.

“I am afraid the suits have not been left with charge, sirs,” JARVIS answered before Tony could open his mouth. “And each was sabotaged by Mr. Stark before he fled.”


Bucky finally stopped his pacing to turn all his enraged attention on Tony.

Tony held out both hands, palms down. “We need to be smart, here. And that means I need your tactical mind, not your my-boyfriend-is-being-chased-by-zombies mind. Okay?”

Bucky was obviously gritting his teeth, and his eyes blazed as he stared Tony down. Then he blinked and lifted his head, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Okay,” he said, voice soft and sincere. “Thank you.”

“Okay.”

“Can you fix a suit like he asked?” Bucky asked, and Tony decided that his calm was even more terrifying than his rage.

“If I know how he sabotaged them, I’ll be able to fix it fast.”

“How long will one take to charge?” Bucky asked. He’d started pulling on random bits of black tactical gear that they’d found in the lab, pieces the other Stark had obviously been tinkering with. He covered anything that could easily be bitten. “Doesn’t have to be full, just enough to get you to the roof.”

“Ten minutes, tops,” Tony answered confidently.

Bucky seemed to slump a little with that, but it was merely his shoulders losing their tension, relief flooding his posture. He pulled on one fingerless glove over his metal fingers, then jammed in as many knives and guns as they’d been able to collect. One gun only had a single bullet in it, but Bucky took it anyway. “Get started on it. Medical is two floors down. I’m going to them. We’ll meet you on the roof. One of us has to get to that remote before they can.”

“And the Z-men?” Tony asked.

Bucky’s jaw shifted. “If you see one of them. Kill him. Just make sure it’s the evil version, and not me or Clint.”

“Give me a code word,” Tony demanded, because he’d seen this movie too many times.

Bucky carefully peered over his shoulder at the camera behind him, then held his hand up in front of his chest, hiding the rude gesture he made. “Code word is kiss my ass.”

Tony laughed softly as Bucky flipped him off. “Okay, then. And Clint?”

Bucky grimaced, then tugged at his ear like he was thinking. His eyes drifted sideways, indicating the gesture even as he shrugged helplessly. “We’ll just have to hope we end up with the right one.”

Tony nodded carefully. Message received; their Clint had his hearing aids in. Bucky turned on his toes, stalking toward the exit. JARVIS opened the doors for him without being asked, and they closed behind him as soon as he was out of the lab.

“Jarvis, let’s get one of those suits powered up,” Tony requested as he watched Bucky leap into the
empty elevator shaft and gracelessly clatter out of sight.

“I must apologize, sir,” JARVIS said after a pause that was too long, the AI’s voice soft and somehow filled with regret.

Tony froze, frowning at the shiny concrete floor in front of him. “For?”

“My instructions were to deceive,” JARVIS confessed. “I am afraid I’ve done my job too well.”

Tony blinked, his heart sinking. “You take your orders from Barnes,” he said grimly.

“Indeed, sir.”

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Steve and Sam rounded the corner at a dead run, sprinting for the bank of elevators as a dozen empty husks hurtled down the hallway after them. They were just yards away from the safety of the shafts when a shadow appeared and a man dropped out of one of the elevators, landing in a combat ready crouch, covered head to toe in thick tac gear that could protect him from bullets, much less bites.

Steve went left, Sam went right, and they both sought whatever shelter they could find in doorways as their new friend stood and unfurled his wide shoulders, eyes darting around.

Steve stared at him hard. “Buck?” he asked with far more hope trembling in his voice than he was proud of.

Bucky’s eyes landed on him and the relief that washed over his entire body was palpable. “Stevie,” he breathed. He waved frantically at the shaft behind him, holding a gun in one hand and a long dagger in the other. “Come on!”

Steve and Sam both darted for him.

“Yeah, hi,” Sam shouted at Bucky as they passed him. “I’m here too, still alive and all, don’t celebrate or anything.”

“Move your feet faster than your mouth, Sam,” Bucky growled as he began picking off their pursuers. The sound of the gunshots would no doubt have them inundated in seconds.

Steve leapt clear across the elevator shaft, clinging to the protruding ledges along the interior like an over-aggressive koala to keep from plummeting over sixty stories to the bottom. Sam was more careful, holding to the edge of the open doors and swinging himself inside to stand on the rungs of a maintenance ladder.

Bucky still faced the charging horde, shooting methodically, headshot after headshot as he backed toward the edge and covered their retreat.

“Buck!” Steve shouted, and Bucky finally turned and lunged for the shaft. There were no cables to grab onto, nothing but the narrow protrusions and ledges that criss-crossed the shaft. Bucky made it across, but the weapons in his hands prevented him from getting a good hold and he slid down the interior wall. Steve grabbed for him, the moment frozen in time by Steve’s absolute and utter panic as he saw another moment in time, another fall, another split-second where his fingers hadn’t been able to reach.

He caught Bucky’s wrist and Bucky clamped down on Steve’s forearm with his metal fingers, dangling as they both cried out with the pain of their strained shoulders.
“I’ve got you,” Steve whispered desperately. “I’ve got you, Buck, get your feet under you!”

Bucky’s head was bowed, no doubt staring into the pitch black abyss beneath them. Then he looked up at Steve, his eyes big and terrified for the briefest of moments before he gritted his teeth determinedly and dropped his gun to grab for a handhold.

“Jesus,” Sam was saying, over and over. “Jesus fuck! What the fuck?”

“Where’s Barton?” Bucky asked breathlessly.

“He got into the ductwork,” Steve gasped, still gripping the lifeline of Bucky’s wrist. “Went to find you and Tony.”

“Steve!” a voice called out over the noise of the hissing and snarling of the husk people.

Steve and Bucky both jerked, glancing over their shoulders at the hallway behind them. That had been Bucky’s voice calling, sounding as if it had come from one of the half dozen other elevator shafts. They shared a look as the man called for Steve again, and Bucky worked his hand out of Steve’s grasp to put a finger to his lips. Steve nodded, and Sam stayed silent, beginning to climb and free up the rungs of the ladder for Steve and Bucky to shift onto.

“Stevie!” the voice called again, sounding more desperate. Sounding utterly terrified that Steve wasn’t answering. Steve fucking ached to call back to him. He stared into Bucky’s eyes in the scant amount of light, telling himself the man was right here, they were marginally safe, and the voice calling out for him wasn’t the voice of the man he loved.

They were halfway to the next floor when they heard scuffling from below. Steve stopped his climb and looked down at the open doors, watching the shadows as the man took on the remaining infected people who hadn’t just walked off the edge of the open shaft after them. Of course he’d know which shaft they were in, Bucky had left a trail of bodies – both moving and not – leading right to it. Steve heard a quiet curse, and then a man leaned into the elevator shaft, looking down and then craning his head to peer up.

“Steve!” he shouted, sounding in turns terrified and relieved. Then he squinted into the dim, and a look of horror came over the handsome face that belonged to both Bucky and Quickdraw. “Jesus, Stevie. That’s not me you’re with!”

Steve shook his head, but he couldn’t find words to throw back. Both men were wearing almost the exact same thing, the jeans and Henley Bucky had worn when they’d eaten, along with cobbled together tac gear. God, Quickdraw must have orchestrated this, trying to switch up on them. And Steve and his teammates had played right into it, splitting up, letting Clint and Bucky both go off on their own knowing that both men could easily be mimicked by the Z-world versions. Clint was the only one who would fit in the ducting of a conveniently unlocked refuge, and Bucky would undoubtedly hare off after them as soon as he knew they were in trouble. They’d been so predictable, played right into the checkmate.

Steve cursed under his breath.

He looked from the Bucky at the shaft doors to the Bucky climbing up the ladder above him. The man on the ladder pulled another gun from the small of his back and aimed down, firing two shots that pinged off the doorway where the other Bucky’s face had just been.

Steve lunged upward and grabbed at the back of his thigh, shaking him. “No! Don’t shoot him!”

“Steve!” Bucky cried in outrage. Steve’s grab jostled him and made him damn near lose his grip on
the ladder as he dropped the gun. It was the last one Steve could see on him. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Don’t you shoot him,” Steve growled.

Bucky was looking down at him, incredulous. “We can’t save these two, Steve, they’re too far gone! All they want is to go to Malibu and kill the others for the fun of it before they sail off to another universe!”

“Shoot him and I won’t forgive you,” Steve promised, guilt and doubt churning in his belly now.

“Stevie!” the man below him called. “Please. You know me. You know me! You know that’s not the right one! Tony’s working on a suit, he’s meeting us on the roof. You know why we’re going to the roof, Steve!”

“He’s been watching us with the cameras,” Bucky countered from above Steve, sounding calm and confident. “He knows everything we’ve said and done since we got here.”

Steve grit his teeth and looked back up, past Bucky to where Sam was watching with wide eyes. “Climb,” Steve ordered.

Sam began to scuttle up the ladder again. But Bucky was now frozen, looking down at Steve in dawning horror. “Jesus,” he breathed when he met Steve’s narrowed stare. Whichever version this was, he could read the doubt in Steve’s eyes now, see the suspicion written in his expression. He knew that Steve was no longer sure of him. He sounded like his heart was breaking when he said, “Jesus, Stevie.”

“I told you to fucking climb,” Steve snarled.

Below him there was more scuffling and several grunts as more infected showed up. The man who claimed to be Steve’s Bucky swung himself into the elevator shaft to escape, clinging to the ladder. He looked up and Steve was caught by his eyes, the reflection of the light from the corridor betraying the shimmer in them. He looked just as betrayed and heartbroken as the one climbing above Steve.

And Steve . . . Steve couldn’t tell them apart. He didn’t know which one was the man he loved, and which one was a killer.

He stared down at Bucky’s face as Bucky shook his head and said his name pleadingly, then he looked up to find Bucky above him, watching him with that gut-wrenching hint of dismay in his eyes as Steve so obviously wavered in his convictions.

“Climb,” Steve ordered again, harsher.

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Tony was sitting on the hood of a classic cherry red Mustang, shoulders slumped dejectedly, eyes closed. JARVIS wouldn’t let him touch any of the suits, the AI too convinced that Tony would use it to escape rather than do as he was told. There was no way to charge them either even if he could fix them. The ruse from JARVIS had been so effective as to make Tony and Bucky think they could safely divide their forces. But there was no safety here, not for any of them. And there was no safety in the outside world. This world was dying, or already dead, and Tony was powerless to save anyone.

JARVIS had been instructed to lock him into the lab, and whatever protocols Quickdraw had created in the program since he’d been in control of it, Tony had little hope of discovering them in the short
amount of time he had, not without JARVIS himself to help.

They had been soundly outmaneuvered. This world had sapped the hope right out of Tony’s marrow, just as it had done to the Z-men.

A frantic tapping at the glass had Tony raising his head in exhaustion. He blinked at the man. “Clint?”

“Are you okay?” Clint shouted, obviously not realizing Tony could hear him perfectly well through the glass wall. “Jesus, Stark, don’t just sit there!”

Tony hopped down and trudged to the wall, cocking his head at Clint. “I’m locked in. Where are the others?”

“They couldn’t fit through the ducts,” Clint answered, moderating his voice only slightly even though he’d now heard Tony speaking. “We have to move, we have to get to the roof!”

“Bucky went down there to extract you,” Tony told Clint, his sense of helplessness bypassing unease and going right to full-blown banging his head against a glass wall. “His arm or Cap’s shield are the only things that have any hope of getting these doors open.”

“How the hell did you get in?”

“Jarvis. He tricked us. Let us in, made us think he was helping us. But he gets his marching orders from Crazy Barnes, and I can’t override them.”

JARVIS’s voice filtered down to both of them. “I do apologize, sir.”

Tony sighed heavily.

Clint turned to peer around the foyer that led to the elevators and stairwell, trying to find something that could be used for a jailbreak.

Tony narrowed his eyes as Clint’s searching revealed his ears, no hearing aids to be found. Barton. He felt his heart going faster, adrenaline rushing through him, and he fought to remain impassive when Barton turned back to him. He was wearing pretty much what Clint had been, jeans and a plain white T-shirt, a bow and quiver slung across his back.

So, this was their plan. Bucky had been absolutely, horribly right; it was the hidden ball trick. Split them up, and somehow engineer a way for both Barnes and Barton to pose as their other selves. Tony struggled to swallow down a knot of nausea when he wondered if his Clint was dead or dying somewhere, hidden where his body would never be found. If Bucky had met his end when he encountered Quickdraw, if the man who was moving to save Steve and Sam was the man who’d tried to kill them to start with.

“What about the crap they laced the stairwell with?” Clint asked, pointing at the open door.

Tony licked his lips, doing the calculations even as he tried to get a step ahead of the Z-men’s plan. If he played along, he’d at least be able to reach the roof and get to the remote.

He wondered if he could take Clint Barton hand-to-hand. He knew he couldn’t take his world’s Clint, the man had been one of SHIELD’s top agents for a goddamn reason and he’d only further excelled since being able to spar with and learn from the other Avengers. Tony had no doubt this Clint Barton was just as imposing a foe. Tony would need more than just brawn to do it.
“I’m not sure there’s enough firepower on those stairs to force these doors open,” Tony answered after a mere couple of seconds to think. “And if there was, it’d bring down the whole floor on top of us. We need Barnes. Or the shield.”

Barton cursed and let his head hang, placing both hands on the glass. “There’s nothing in here you can use?” he asked after a moment of allowing himself to be frustrated.

Tony turned and peered around the lab. All the tools that could do the trick, he knew that JARVIS wouldn’t let him operate. Not unless they needed to let Tony out. He narrowed his eyes, refusing to voice the handful of ideas he had for getting past the doors, then he looked back at Barton to shake his head dejectedly, like he’d given up. “Not with Jarvis obstructing me.”

Barton cursed, glancing at the stairwell again. Then he perked up and looked back at Tony. “If he’s taking orders from Crazy Barnes, maybe he’ll take orders from our Barnes.”

Tony inclined his head. There it was. Barton would somehow magically retrieve Steve and Sam, conveniently accompanied by the evil son of a bitch wearing Bucky’s face, and they’d miraculously rescue Tony from the lab and escape to the roof, all of them together and in such a hurry to jump world that no one would look too hard until it was too late.

Goddamn.

He licked his lips, nodding. “It’s worth a try.” He gestured vaguely toward the elevators. “Barnes went to Medical at the speed of gravity.”

Barton turned and jogged to the bank of elevators, peering over the side. He jumped and cursed and stumbled back just as Sam’s head popped into view.

“Jesus Christ,” Sam grunted as Barton grabbed his hand and helped him to crawl onto the floor. They both turned and looked over the edge.

“Oh God,” Barton whispered, the sound carrying through the speakers for Tony to be privy to. “Which . . . which one is ours?”

Sam bared his teeth and got on all fours. “We don’t know.”

Tony was staring hard at their backs as a metal hand gripped the edge of the door and Bucky’s face came into view. Tony was staring so hard that he damn near missed the man who dropped soundlessly from an air duct overhead and drew back on his bow.

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Steve’s body felt like a coiled spring, ready to burst out of a couch cushion and stab someone in the ass the moment he was next touched. He watched as Sam and Clint leaned over, trying to pull OneBuck to safety.

Clint had just clasped his hand with OneBuck’s and tensed to pull when the tip of a bolt thwipped right out of his chest. He looked down at the arrow, blood dripping from its tip, then he swayed forward. Steve and Bucky both grabbed out for him as he plummeted past them, but he was too far away, and he was dead before he ever knew he was falling.

Steve stared into the bottomless pit, shocked into numbness.

“Jesus Christ,” TwoBuck breathed out as he stared down in the same way Steve was.
Above Steve, OneBuck scrambled out of the shaft, his metal arm held out in front of Sam as he stared off into whatever he was looking at. Steve forced himself to climb.

“It’s him!” Tony was shouting frantically from the other side of the glass blast doors of his lab. “Barnes! It’s the right Clint! It’s our Clint, his hearing aids!”

Steve scrambled to his feet just in time to see Clint pull his bow string back, prepared to defend himself from OneBuck’s attack.

Tony banged on the glass again. “Kiss my ass, Barnes!” he called out. “Kiss my ass!”

Clint slung his bow over his shoulder and turned to blink at Tony, spreading his arms as if asking him what the fuck he was talking about. Sam snorted, but OneBuck dismissed Clint as a threat, now that his bow was out of play, and he moved away from the elevator shaft to face it as TwoBuck climbed out.

They found themselves in quite the quandary, all of them staring as the two damn near identical Buckys squared off.

“Oh, shit,” Tony muttered from behind the glass.

“Steve,” TwoBuck breathed out, not taking his eyes off OneBuck. “You know which one of us is the right one. Just look.”

Steve did as he was told, peering hard at first one man, and then the other. They were mirroring each other almost perfectly. Steve had convinced himself that he could tell Quickdraw from Bucky by the hardened glaze of his eyes, the tension in his sharp jawline. But in this moment they both looked like predators.

“I . . .”

OneBuck’s eyes flicked to him carefully. “Stevie, please,” he whispered.

Steve shook his head, desperate and growing more and more terrified that he’d make the wrong choice.

Clint suddenly had an arrow trained on OneBuck, and Sam had pulled a gun from his belt to keep it aimed at TwoBuck’s head. Neither man protested.

Tony was still banging on the glass, but the speakers that allowed them to hear him had apparently cut out. Steve’s ability to read lips wasn’t great, so he wasn’t sure if Tony was still shouting ‘kiss my ass’ over and over, or if Steve was just misreading him.

He looked back at the two mirror images, straining to see a difference.

“You known me all your life, Steve,” TwoBuck murmured gently to him. “This ain’t hard. No one’s dying. You’re not killing him. We’re just leaving him here in this bed he made.”

The words rang so fucking true to Steve’s mind and heart that he forced himself to take a deep breath and really look at the man. Bucky’s jawline. Bucky’s winter silver eyes. Bucky’s determined stance, ready to haul himself into any fire Steve charged into. They weren’t killing anyone . . .

Which one was the man he loved, and which one was a killer . . .

Steve turned to OneBuck, his jaw shifting and tightening. “You tried to kill him down there without
a hint of hesitation,” he accused.

OneBuck blinked at him, staring into Steve’s eyes like he could see into his very soul. The realization that Steve had made him as an imposter seemed to seep in, because the battle-ready exterior cracked under Steve’s steady glare. It wasn’t defiance or anger that was revealed under it, though. It was a bone-deep exhaustion. Devastation filled his entire body until it turned into unshed tears, making those eyes seem like liquid mercury as he shook his head.

His broad shoulders slumped, his eyes never leaving Steve’s. “Jesus, Steve,” he whispered. “Ask me anything, ask me something this world’s person could never know.”

“You said yourself, you were watching us this whole time. We don’t know what you could know.”

“And fake Barton was the first one to get to Tony,” Sam pointed out, turning until he had the gun pointed at OneBuck as well. “This one got to us first.”

Steve tried to ignore the muffled pounding of Tony’s fists on the glass. He was pointing emphatically at TwoBuck and shouting something, but the only ones who could truly read his lips were Bucky, neither of whom they could really trust right now, and Clint, who had his back turned to him and refused to take his eyes off either Winter Soldier.

Steve’s heart stuttered as he stepped up to stand beside TwoBuck, and the others flanked the imposter as Steve made his choice, weapons raised.

OneBuck stared at them, looking around at them all, fear fleeting across his handsome face as he seemingly realized his plan had failed. He appeared to shrink in on himself – his shoulders no longer tensed for battle, his powerful body no longer coiled to strike – as he finally accepted that he’d lost, that he’d die if he tried to fight them. “Wow,” he said, almost under his breath. He raised his hands slowly, surrendering.

The others tensed around him, glancing at Steve for direction. They weren’t killing anyone. They were just leaving the man here, alone now, in a world that was long past dead.

The man licked his lips, no longer able to meet Steve’s eyes. He glanced over at the glass barrier between them and Tony, and perhaps in some final act of spite, he slowly raised his metal middle finger toward Tony, flipping him the bird.

Steve snorted as Tony went absolutely ballistic, pounding on the glass, waving his arms, looking wildly around the lab. He finally darted off as Steve turned his attention back to OneBuck, who had his fingers laced behind his head now, his eyes closed.

“There’s nothing I can say to convince you you’re wrong, nothing that won’t give him more ammunition to hurt you,” OneBuck murmured. Steve wasn’t sure if he was speaking to all of them, or just Steve. “Just . . .” He opened his eyes, blinking at the ground before he forced himself to meet Steve’s eyes. “Just kill me. I’ll do it myself rather than remember this as the end.”

Clint’s arrow wavered and he cast Steve a sideways, uncertain glance.

“What you do with yourself after we’re gone isn’t going to keep me up at night,” Steve snarled.

OneBuck merely nodded, lowering his eyes once more. “Never trust him,” he whispered as a parting shot. He shook his head. “Never trust him, Stevie. He’ll kill you all.”

Steve scowled and opened his mouth to tell the man to stop talking even as doubt began to creep in again. A flash of bright red in his peripheral vision caught him, though, and he turned just in time to
see a gorgeous classic Mustang GTO barreling toward the glass barrier.

Steve shouted a warning, and everyone dove for cover as Tony slammed the car into the glass wall. It splintered all up and down, bowing against the force of the car as Tony jammed on the accelerator. The roar of the engine was almost deafening as the glass failed and allowed sound to finally penetrate the foyer.

Tony reversed and then slammed forward again, crashing through the compromised blast wall and careening into the tiny foyer to slam against the bank of elevators.

Steve scrambled to his feet, grabbing TwoBuck’s arm and hauling him up, patting him down frantically to make sure he was okay even as TwoBuck swatted at him and barked at him to stop.

Clint, Sam, and the other Bucky had all dived for the stairwell, and the car had them trapped in there, all of them staring with wide eyes as the Mustang’s front bumper tilted precariously into the wide doors of the freight elevator.

OneBuck leapt onto the hood and slammed his fist through the spiderwebbed windshield, going after Tony while he was still dazed and couldn’t fight back.

Sam had his gun up again, and this time he didn’t wait for Steve’s say so, firing three shots before the slide locked, empty.

OneBuck blocked all three shots with his metal arm as he reached into the car with his flesh hand. The glass ripped the skin up, smearing blood all up and down OneBuck’s arm. The Mustang’s back wheels lifted off the marble floor with the man’s added weight, and Steve didn’t need to be a rocket scientist to know the car was going to overbalance and plummet down the freight shaft any second now.

OneBuck hauled a bruised and bloody Tony out through the windshield, then rolled them both off the hood, neatly ducking the arrow Clint fired and getting them both off the hood just as the Mustang tipped and began its inexorable slide down.

TwoBuck pulled a gun from a holster at his thigh, aiming it at his evil twin.

OneBuck pulled Tony to his feet instead of brandishing a weapon, and he must have seen the gun being aimed at him. In a motion so fast that Steve didn’t even see OneBuck grab him, Tony was in front of the man, acting as a shield. OneBuck’s metal arm came around Tony’s chest, holding him there.

Steve pulled his shield off his back, squaring his shoulders. “Let him go!” he ordered.

“Cap, this one’s ours,” Tony said breathlessly, his voice shattered from all the yelling he’d been doing that none of them had heard. He wavered and blinked dazedly, but the metal arm kept him steady. “This one’s our Bucky Bear, he knew the code bird. Code . . . word. He’s . . . my . . .”

The words sank in, and Steve’s mind turned over like the sickening lurch of a storm-tossed ocean, realizing that he hadn’t seen OneBuck grab Tony because Tony had jumped in front of the man to shield him. That OneBuck was supporting Tony’s weight as the man teetered, not restraining him to hide behind him. Supporting his weight after he’d just pulled him from a doomed vehicle . . . god . . . oh god, it really was their Bucky. Steve had chosen wrong. Steve had almost left the man he loved stranded in a dying world.

There was an almighty crash from the bottom of the freight elevator shaft.
Quickdraw pulled the trigger, the bullet pinging off a metal hand before it could hit either Bucky or Tony. But the force threw both men backwards, and when Tony’s legs gave out, his weight dragged Bucky down with him.

Steve turned and slammed his shield into Quickdraw’s arm. He heard the wet crack of bone breaking as the gun clattered to the ground. Then Steve spun and hit Quickdraw in the back of the head with the edge of the shield, sending him pitching forward to his knees. An arrow hit him center mass with a sickening wet thwip, and Quickdraw fell back, sprawled on the ruined marble with his legs still folded under him.

Steve coiled, ready for the man to get up. He didn’t move, though, and blood began to seep out of his dark hair, Bucky’s dark hair, onto the white floor beneath him.

Steve stared for seconds that seemed to stretch on, like a nightmare in which he tried but couldn’t scream, like the slow climb of a roller coaster that promised a steep fall but never reached the pinnacle. He finally tore his eyes away from the dead man who looked like his best friend, and he found Clint and Sam helping Tony and Bucky back to their feet.

“Buck,” Steve whispered, taking three steps before he faltered. Bucky wouldn’t raise his head, wouldn’t even look at Steve, much less meet his eyes.

“It’s okay,” Bucky responded, not looking at any of them as he put his cool metal hand on the back of Tony’s neck, steadying him gently. He swallowed hard and finally grimaced as he peered at Steve. “I tried to kill him. You picked me because I tried to kill him. It made sense.”

No one seemed to know what to say.

“We should stock up on food,” Sam finally suggested carefully. “Gather supplies and rest before we try to jump worlds again.”

Clint cleared his throat. “Yeah. These guys won’t be needing any of it no more.”

Tony seemed to be shaking off the unsteadiness, but he kept his arm draped over Bucky’s shoulders, allowing Bucky to take a lot of his weight. “I can get us past the booby traps,” he told them, his voice a low, angry growl. “Then we’re going to go get the remote. And we’re going to sit in a room and stare at it, and none of us will say anything that can be interpreted by that sentient son of a bitch for at least two hours before we try pressing that button.”

Steve nodded obediently, cowed by Bucky’s downcast eyes and Tony’s sharp, angry tone.

The trek up the stairwell to the penthouse was slow and arduous, with Tony and Bucky conferring while trying to reverse engineer their memory of the way down. But Steve hardly noticed as he followed at the end of the line.

He’d almost condemned the love of his life to this world, the man who’d stood beside him since they were twelve and thirteen years old, the man who’d been the brightest light to ever shine in Steve’s life.

Steve was still in a daze, riddled with shock and guilt, when Sam coaxed him into sitting on a couch. They were all somber, words being whispered rather than spoken as Clint explained that he’d been able to avoid his evil twin because he could hear Barton in the ducts when the man had been at a disadvantage. Their movements were listless and defeated, even though they’d supposedly won this
battle, as they stocked several packs with supplies.

When Sam returned from the roof with Bucky’s pack and the remote, Steve was still sitting right where he’d been planted.

And Bucky was still refusing to meet his eyes.
Chapter Notes

I have sort of....lost all sense of how long the usual chapters are for this story. I keep thinking I’m aiming for 10k, when really I started out aiming at 5k, I dunno. Still, sorry for the longer wait between updates! School is back and stuff and apparently you’re supposed to feed your kid like 3 whole times a day or some bullshit.

“Cap?” someone said on the periphery of Steve’s consciousness.

Steve closed his eyes.

“Cap,” the voice said again, softer but somehow more insistent.

Steve forced himself to struggle away from the haze he’d allowed to settle over him, and he focused his eyes to find Tony squatting in front of him, peering up at him with a worried frown. He had a bruise forming on his forehead, around the little cut he’d acquired when his head had hit the steering wheel of the Mustang. It was a miracle he wasn’t more injured after that stunt.

“Yeah,” Steve croaked out.

“I know this whole thing is shit right now,” Tony said softly. “But we can’t afford for you to leave us, Steve.”

Steve blinked a few times, the words jarring him into glancing around at his surroundings. Clint was still gathering piles of supplies and putting them into the packs they’d scavenged, and Sam and Bucky were in the kitchen. Bucky sat on the edge of the counter near the sink as Sam cleaned the bloody wounds on his right arm. His head was bowed, and Steve was too far to tell if either Bucky or Sam were speaking. They were all moving like they were under water.

“We need you, Cap,” Tony said, dragging Steve’s attention back to him. “All of us do.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve murmured, looking down at Tony and pushing himself off the sofa. “I’m here.”

Tony stood with him and patted him on the shoulder.

“You saved him,” Steve said, his voice raw and trembling. “Thank you.”

Tony squeezed his shoulder. “I wouldn’t have known which one he was either, Steve. We worked it out beforehand, that’s the only reason.”

Steve ducked his head, wringing his hands. “That was smart.”

“Don’t have to tell me. We’re both smart people,” Tony answered, his voice almost teasing. He squeezed Steve’s shoulder harder, forcing Steve to glance at him. His expression was solemn once more, which was decidedly odd to see on Tony Stark. “I lost a round of rock, paper, scissors with Sam, so he gets to play nurse while I try to offer emotional support.”

“That doesn’t seem tactically sound,” Steve muttered.
Tony flailed both hands. “That’s what I said! But here goes nothin’, Cap. You fucked up. Right? Nothing you can do to change it. But you’re not the only one who fucked up, huh? Sam and Clint were fooled too. And like I said, I’d have been flipping a coin if Buck and I hadn’t worked something out beforehand.”

Steve looked up at him sharply, frowning.

His reaction stopped Tony mid-inhalation, preventing him from continuing. “What? What’d I say? Did I make you feel better? ’Cause if I did, Sam owes me ten dollars.”

“You called him Buck,” Steve said, voice embarrassingly timid and almost dazed as his eyes veered off toward the kitchen.

“Is that . . . is that off-limits? Is that like a sex thing? Because I can never say it again if it’s a sex thing.”

“No, it’s . . . it’s fine, Tony.” Steve found himself offering Tony a fragile smile. “It’s good. You like him.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Is that a question or a statement? Never mind, doesn’t matter. Yes, okay? Yes, I like the kid. He’s smart, he’s kind, he’s brave, and he’s a fucking badass. Of course I like him, just like you fucking told me I would when I was drinking half my brain cells away and insisting on hating him, okay? Happy?”

Steve’s smile strengthened just the tiniest bit. “Yeah, actually.”

“I cheered him up!” Tony shouted across the otherwise solemn silence. Both Sam and Bucky jumped, causing Bucky to hiss as Sam’s hands jostled the piece of glass he’d been pulling from Bucky’s mangled arm. “You owe me ten bucks!”

Sam flipped him the bird without looking away from Bucky’s arm. “I only got one buck over here, you’re outta luck.”

Bucky facepalmed into his metal hand. Hard. That had to have hurt more than it was worth.

Tony huffed, then turned back to Steve, eyeing him carefully. Then he gave Steve a little shove. “Go talk to the kid, Steve. You both need it.”

Steve gulped down the protest he’d been on the verge of making and forced himself to walk toward the kitchen, watching Bucky closely. When he got closer, Bucky raised his head and finally looked at Steve, causing Steve to stop in his tracks.

“You okay?” Bucky asked him, his voice gentle like he was trying to coax a stray in from the rain.

“I . . .” Steve shook his head when he realized no more words were going to form for him.

Bucky glanced down at his arm, which was now cleaned of all the blood and free of glass but still covered in cuts, then up at Sam. “Thanks, Sam. They’ll heal faster than you can bandage them.”

Sam nodded, glancing at Steve almost sympathetically before patting Bucky’s knee and pointedly moving far enough away that he was out of earshot.

“Come here,” Bucky murmured to Steve, holding out his metal hand.

Steve drifted toward it like a man drowning. He gripped Bucky’s fingers hard, hard enough to hurt
anyone who didn’t have metal digits probably, and let Bucky give him a tug. “I’m sorry,” Steve gasped, his throat too tight to make it louder, to make it more sincere, to make Bucky believe it.

“Hey,” Bucky said gently, far more careful than Steve felt he deserved, pulling Steve until he stood between Bucky’s knees. He raised his hand and flicked his fingers through Steve’s hair. “It’s okay, Steve.”

“It’s not,” Steve gasped, and he crumpled into him, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s torso and shoving his miserable face into Bucky’s neck. Bucky’s arms came around his shoulders, one hand on the back of Steve’s head as Steve let out a muffled sob. “I should have known you.”

“We were both me, Stevie. You hear me? It was an impossible situation,” Bucky whispered into Steve’s hair. “And I didn’t make it better, I know that. My mind blanked on any single thing I could tell you that he wouldn’t know. I’m sorry, Stevie.”

Steve shook his head, clutching Bucky tighter. “Don’t,” he gritted out. “Don’t apologize to me. I would have left you here.”

“But you didn’t. It worked out. We’re still here.”

Steve shook his head again, and he felt Bucky’s body tensing like Bucky was trying to separate them. He stubbornly held tighter as Bucky tried to get him to lift his face, shaking his head furtively when Bucky tugged at his hair.

“Alright, okay,” Bucky murmured, over and over as he petted Steve and hummed at him. “We’re still here.”

He finally coaxed Steve into loosening his death grip, and he pulled back to frame Steve’s face in his hands, ducking his head to force Steve to look at him. Steve blinked at him miserably.

Bucky huffed a soft laugh, almost jarring Steve out of his self-recriminations. “Jesus, never mind, you look miserable,” Bucky said, his voice fond as he forced Steve’s face back into hiding against his neck. “There, that’s a better view.”

Steve was almost horrified to find himself responding with a wet laugh. He held to Bucky tighter. “I’m so sorry.”

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered, speaking into Steve’s hair. “I told you. It’s as much on me as it is on you. I can’t freeze and expect you to keep plowing on with your head screwed on tight, that wouldn’t be fair.”

“Life’s not fair,” Steve mumbled.

Bucky turned his head and managed to press a kiss to Steve’s temple. “No. It isn’t. But we been kicking its ass so far. Just stick with me to the end, Sunshine.”

Steve finally pushed away, letting his hands drag regretfully over Bucky’s sides. Bucky’s hands landed on his face and he was being forced to look up again.

Bucky was smiling softly at him. “You’re harder on yourself than anyone else is ever gonna be, Rogers.” He gestured at the others with his chin, and Steve glanced over his shoulders at the other three men, who were sitting together, watching Steve and Bucky worriedly.

“Tony saved you,” Steve muttered, ducking his head. “From me.”
Bucky grunted. “That’s what teams are for, Steve. We’re not in this alone. Remember? You’re not in it alone. Today could have ended real ugly, but it didn’t. And it made me realize, I’m not in it alone, either.”

Steve breathed out a harsh breath. Bucky was just now realizing that? How could he have ever thought Steve wasn’t right by his side every step of the way through their future? Guilt curled in on him, and he felt his body curling with it.

Bucky forced him to stop, holding his face a little harder. “Stevie,” he whispered sadly. “That ain’t on you. That’s on me. You hear me?”

Steve closed his eyes, resting his forehead against Bucky’s because it was the only place Bucky would allow him to hide.

“Babydoll,” Bucky murmured, and the endearment from his lips in a situation where neither of them was naked or trying to get that way shocked Steve into opening his eyes and pulling back to meet Bucky’s. Bucky huffed at him, a smirk playing across his lips. “Listen to the words coming out of my mouth. And not the words clanging around in your head. Got it?”

Steve nodded obediently, licking his lips. The action drew Bucky’s eyes down, and he stared at Steve’s mouth for a second or two before leaning in to press their mouths together in a sweet, chaste kiss.

“Jesus, I love you,” Bucky whispered, like he was confessing his darkest secrets to Steve and Steve alone. “Stevie. The issues I’ve got hanging onto me aren’t your fault.”

“But –”

“Hey,” Bucky snapped, somehow keeping his voice gentle while still making sure his tone meant he wasn’t having any of Steve’s nonsense. “Did I fucking tell you to think, yet? No. I’m talking, you’re listening.”

Steve bit his lip, fairly certain he wasn’t supposed to smile as Bucky went full Sergeant Barnes on him. He nodded, successfully chastised.

“I’ve known all my life that you’re right there with me. Even when my mind wasn’t my own, you were in there; I can’t prove it, but I know it’s true.”

“Buck,” Steve whispered, affection and longing and anger all swirling through him. He held Bucky tighter, like he’d be ripped away if Steve didn’t anchor him.

Bucky ran his hand down the side of Steve’s face, then framed his face once more. “It ain’t just you and me anymore, pal. It’s like during the War, when we had a whole team around us we trusted. I haven’t had that in such a long time, I couldn’t recognize it when it came along again. But today I realized we have it, with these guys. We have it. And the fact that it took what happened today for me to see that? That ain’t on you.”

Bucky ducked his head to make damn sure Steve couldn’t tear his undivided attention away from Bucky’s beautiful arctic ice eyes. Steve felt his body swaying forward, drawn into Bucky’s orbit.

Bucky grunted for emphasis, shaking Steve’s face back and forth. “The things wrong with me aren’t on you, Steve. Just like the issues you got hanging around ain’t on me. Do you blame me for the things that make you unhappy? For the things that wake you at night?”

“No,” Steve answered breathlessly, horrified at the mere thought of putting all that weight on
Bucky’s shoulders.

“Then why do you do that to yourself?”

Steve blinked at him. “I . . .”

Bucky brushed his thumb over Steve’s bottom lip. He looked like he desperately wanted to follow his thumb’s path with his tongue, but he gritted his teeth determinedly and met Steve’s eyes instead. “You’re beating yourself up for choosing the wrong me. But you didn’t choose him over me, Stevie. He was damn good at what he was doing; he told you exactly what he knew you wanted to hear. And I sure as shit couldn’t think right to help you.”

“I hurt you,” Steve protested, sounding whiny even to his own ears, but he didn’t care.

Bucky winced. “Yeah, I’ll give you that. It did hurt. But it wasn’t on purpose. We’re gonna hurt each other, Steve. You can’t love someone like I love you without getting hurt. That’s why we have to forgive each other just as easy.”

“This wasn’t just . . . Bucky, I . . .”

“I know, Steve. I know. And it hurt like all hell, I won’t lie. You chose me because I tried to shoot him. Because I was a killer and you didn’t think the man you loved was a killer.”

Steve squeezed his eyes closed, refusing to let Bucky see how right he was.

“I love that you see me as noble, Stevie, I always have,” Bucky murmured painfully, his voice cracking. “But I’ve always been a killer, when it came to you.”

Steve frowned hard and risked a glance up into Bucky’s eyes. They were shining now, impossibly beautiful and familiar.

“In all our lives, there’s never a moment I would have hesitated to kill if it meant keeping you alive, Steve.”

“Bucky. You don’t understand. I condemned you because you tried to kill him. And then turned right around and bashed his head in as soon as –”

Bucky shook him again. “Stevie! You did for me exactly what I was willing to do for you. So fucking stop turning that over and over and wallowing in it. Nothing in this world, or . . . fuck, any of these worlds, is black and white. We weigh the lives of others against what we mean to each other, and since we were kids, that scale has been rigged. I’m a killer. You’re a killer. And we have to believe we’re both still worth it.”

Steve looked up and stared at Bucky, blinking as Bucky stared right back. His expression was calm, almost placid, and completely unhindered by anything like guilt or regret. Steve knew the man better than to think nothing was going on under the surface that he couldn’t see, but he knew Bucky was showing him exactly what he needed.

He swallowed hard and gripped Bucky’s hips harder. “You’re worth it. I love you,” he said almost dazedly.

Bucky patted his cheek. “And I love you. With everything that entails. I’d kill for you, Stevie. I’d die for you. And I’ll forgive you for anything. In any world.”

Steve lurched forward to kiss him, and it wasn’t exactly the most elegant thing Steve had ever done,
but Bucky’s surprised flail and the pleased hum that followed as Bucky’s knees squeezed at Steve’s hips was well worth the clumsy effort.

Steve forced himself to end the kiss, dragging Bucky’s lip between his teeth as he pulled away, then pressing their foreheads together as he rubbed his nose along Bucky’s.

“That’s more like it, sport,” Bucky whispered against his lips, grinning.

Steve nodded and breathed out as he pushed away. “Okay. I’m okay.”

Bucky patted his cheek and gave him a little shove, backing Steve up so he could slide off the counter. He pulled Steve with him, leading him back into the sitting area to join the others.

No one said anything for several agonizing moments, until Clint cleared his throat and waved his hands toward Bucky.

“No, I don’t think we can wait,” Bucky responded with a grimace. “We need to get out of this place, it’s still not safe.”

Tony and Sam both groaned, looking at the remote, which was sitting innocuously on the coffee table between the sofas.

Bucky grunted at them, direly unimpressed. “You were giving the remote the silent treatment, weren’t you?”

“We thought it was worth a try,” Sam mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Barnes is right, though,” Tony said on a sigh. “With Jarvis still off-sides, we can’t expect this place to stay secure long enough to let the remote have quiet time. No telling how many of those booby traps he has the ability to set off or disengage, how many access points he can blow, if he seeks revenge.”

“I assure you,” JARVIS’s melodious voice floated down. “Sir. I am not here to harm you.”

“Yeah, thanks, Hal!” Clint shouted viciously at the ceiling. “Okay, so let’s do this.”

“No, absolutely not,” Steve sputtered, waving everyone’s hands away from the remote even if none of them had been thinking about reaching for it. He glared at Clint. “I haven’t seen A Space Odyssey, but I know enough to know we don’t want to live it.”

Clint winced and smacked his palm over his mouth. Bucky gave him a pat on the shoulder in commiseration.

Steve stared at Bucky’s metal hand on Clint’s toned, bare, well-muscled bicep. “You know, I know this is going to be horribly hypocritical right now, but could you two. . . . maybe not touch? For a couple worlds?”

“I gotta second that,” Sam grumbled, raising his hand.

Bucky and Clint stared at them with identical wide, confused blue-gray eyes for a moment before they both looked at Bucky’s hand on Clint’s arm. Bucky retrieved his hand like he’d just stuck it in a bear trap and Clint hastily scooted away from him. “Sorry,” they mumbled in unison.

“I’ll get over it,” Steve assured them. “Just. . . . later. A lot later.”
Tony groaned loudly and dragged his fingers down his face, the pads of his fingers pulling at his lips when he got to them. “What do we do? We have six batteries left. We can’t do this indefinitely and just hope each time.”

Steve shook his head, at a loss. They all stared morosely at the remote.

“Sirs,” JARVIS’s voice chimed timidly.

Bucky muttered under his breath and lowered his head, dragging his hands through his hair.

“What, traitor?” Tony barked.

“I feel I should warn you,” JARVIS said carefully. “There has been a breach on the roof.”

“Wait, what?” Tony stuttered, standing and turning in a circle when he realized he had nowhere to go and nothing to call to him to address the issue like he would normally.

“The Quinjet has just landed,” the AI answered. “Within are three heavily armed heat signatures. I fear the others have returned.”

“Oh, shit,” Sam gasped. “They’ll never listen to us if we try to explain this. They’ll kill Buck and Clint on sight.”

“Or they’ll kill us for killing their Buck and Clint,” Clint added, standing and grabbing his bow.

“It’ll be a fucking shootout at high noon before we can get a word out either way!” Tony snarled, staring at the stairwell doors. Then he turned to graze his eyes over the rest of them, looking pained. “I’m not sure I can shoot myself. But I don’t . . . I know I can’t kill people who look like you. Any of you. I’ll freeze.”

Steve was oddly touched by the obvious anguish in Tony’s eyes. It seemed the others were, as well.

Then they all heard the roof door bang open.

Steve nodded and grabbed the remote. “Time to go!”

Everyone grabbed the packs they’d prepared, hustling to and fro and then converging near the biggest open space, next to the windows. From the stairwell they could hear shouting, Steve’s voice roaring for Barnes to come out and face him.

“Let me,” Bucky whispered, gesturing at the remote with his fingers.

Steve almost whimpered at him. “Buck.”

“You took the last hit, Steve. Let me take this one.”

Steve squared his shoulders and nodded, handing the remote over. It made sense, tactically. Bucky was thinking tactically, not emotionally, and Steve needed to as well.

They all hunkered down as they heard steps and shouts and the occasional thump of one of those booby traps being sprung all ringing in the stairwell.

Bucky closed his eyes, his metal hand tightening over Tony’s shoulder as he pulled the man closer into the circle. “Take us somewhere safe,” he snarled to the remote, then pressed the button.

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When Bucky landed – and goddamn were they being dropped from higher and higher with these fucking jumps?? – his flailing body hit the hard-packed ground and kicked up so much dust that he couldn’t even make out the other men at first.

There was a moment of pure panic as they each scrambled for each other, all of them trying to count four companions at the same time.

“We’re all here,” Steve whispered somewhere to Bucky’s right.

There were three other vaguely positive acknowledgments along with Bucky’s mumbled answer that quelled Bucky’s panic instantly. They weren’t going to lose anyone. Bucky wasn’t going to lose any of these motherfuckers he called his friends. Not to a goddamn universal remote.

“I’m afraid to open my eyes,” Clint admitted. “Someone be brave and see where we are.”

Sam grunted and coughed. “I can’t see shit, man.”

“I can . . . smell shit?” Tony added hesitantly.

Bucky sniffed, and above the almost overpowering scent of dry dirt and grass and water nearby, there was indeed the distinct aroma of shit in the air. “Wow,” he found himself saying before he could stop himself. “We’re literally landing in shit now.”

“That’s not funny,” Steve moaned.

Bucky wrinkled his nose and pushed himself to his feet. “Did I fucking say it was?”

“No.”

Bucky gave Steve a curt nod. “No. Shittiest vacation ever,” he added, grinning when he saw Steve bite his lip against a laugh. He looked around, forced to shield his eyes from the glaring sun overhead. It seemed like there were miles and miles of rolling hills around them, cut by streams and scaring gorges that broke up the land with sparse trees clinging to their edges. A stream that might actually have been classified as a river ran maybe a hundred feet away. At the base of the little hillock they’d landed on was a thick copse of trees, leading up into a hillier forested area as the river wound away from it.

“And, what the fuck,” Bucky said on a sigh as the others all stood and brushed themselves off to join him.

“Where are we?” Sam asked finally.

Bucky shrugged.


“Yeah, a little,” Clint admitted, pressing a hand to his chest. “Thought it was just dimension-hop buttfucking, though.”

Bucky took a deep breath, acknowledging with a little nod that even he couldn’t seem to pull a full lungful. “So we’re, what, on high plains? Somewhere?”

“I’m gonna say Colorado,” Tony said decisively. “Because fuck, we might be on Mars for all we know.”
“Colorado it is,” Steve mumbled. He came up to stand beside Bucky, resting gentle fingers on the inside of Bucky’s elbow. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Bucky answered after a moment to take stock. “Yeah, I am. That jump didn’t take much out of me, feels like.”

He met Steve’s eyes, and Steve obviously struggled to hold his gaze as he gave Bucky a small smile.

Bucky reached for him, squeezing his arm. “You?”

“I’m fine,” Steve practically whispered, finally losing the battle for eye contact and ducking his head.

Bucky sighed. So that was still lingering, despite their little heart to heart. He brushed his knuckles down Steve’s dirty cheek, smiling fondly when he saw the gentle blush spreading over Steve’s face.

“What is a big pile of shitty dirt doing in the middle of maybe Colorado?” Sam asked, flapping his hands around and looking at the ground where they’d landed. He scowled hard and stopped flapping, bending to look at the dirt closer.

“What is it?” Tony asked, staying well away from the dirtier dirt with the expensive shoes he’d bogarted from the Zombie World.

“Hooves? Maybe. I think this was a cattle crossing,” Sam finally said as he stood and put his hands on his hips. He was still frowning when he looked up and glanced around at the rest of them. Then his eyes went wide and his mouth dropped. “Aw, hell naw! We are not in some weird Old West bullshit, I refuse to do pre-emancipation world with you assholes!”

Steve and Bucky both blinked at him, then at each other.

“I mean,” Bucky mumbled. “It could be post-emancipation world.”

Sam stomped his foot. “Shut up, white boy!”

“Well. If it’s a cattle trail,” Steve said slowly. “We can follow it.”

“Yeah. Or,” Sam said, holding his hand up and pointing one finger. “We can not and just put a new battery in that thing and hop on out of here.”

Bucky shrugged as the others squinted at Sam like they were considering it.

“I’m good with it,” Clint muttered, flopping his hands against his thighs.

The crack of a gunshot had them all hitting the dirt. Bucky covered his head with his metal hand as more shots rang out, but his other fingers in the dirt could feel the earth beginning to vibrate. He glanced up as another gunshot rent the strange white-noise silence of the open air around them. He could see pebbles trembling in front of his face. “Uh.”

“Stampede!” Sam hissed as he shot to his feet and whirled around.

Bucky pushed up to join him, startled to find not a stampede of cattle like he’d sort of expected, but rather a group of maybe a dozen horses, most of them unsaddled and merely being led by their reins by four riders urging them into full-out gallops. They were heading directly for the sparse treeline to the left of where Bucky and Sam stood. There were three riders giving chase, gunfire now being exchanged between the two parties.

As they watched, one of the stragglers of the fleeing group was hit in the back and pitched forward,
toppling off his horse. The horse raced on, the man’s boot caught in the stirrup, his body dragging along behind. None of his companions slowed to help him.

“Hold your damn fire!” a voice bellowed over the distance from the group giving chase.

Fuck holding your fire; Bucky knew when those men hit the trees for cover, those woods would become a blood bath for anyone caught in the open. And this didn’t exactly look like a situation where someone would pause to ask them what they were doing in the middle of nowhere during a moderate-speed chase.

“Incoming!” Bucky shouted, grabbing Sam and shoving him to run. “Run for the water!”

They all grabbed up their packs and raced for the water. Steve and Bucky quickly outpaced the others, and they seemed to realize it at the same time, pulling up on their speed until they were both acting as the rear guard for their retreat.

Sam hit the bank of the river first, throwing himself off the ten foot drop and hitting the water with a splash that barely made a sound above the rushing of the current. Yeah, it was definitely a river and not a stream. Bucky cursed as Tony and Clint both flung themselves in after Sam, hoping the current wasn’t as strong as it looked from this close. He pressed his metal hand between Steve’s shoulderblades and shoved him, sending Steve into a graceless, cussing freefall that ended in a near belly flop into the water.

Bucky slid feet first toward the edge of the riverbank like he was sliding into second base to duck a tag, and he rolled as he slid, ending up laid out flat on his belly, his toes hanging over the edge of the bank and his eyes on the riders as he breathed hard into the fragrant earth.

The fleeing group had indeed headed for the treeline, just as Bucky had suspected they would. They were just now hitting it, dispersing into the trees and urging their mounts and the animals they were leading to push through the undergrowth. Bucky winced. He had no doubt there were a couple tree branches to the face happening over there, for man and beast.

The pursuing riders fanned out, shooting half-heartedly into the trees but not giving chase.

“We’re gonna lose ’em if they get to those gullies!” one of the riders shouted. Bucky caught the glint of something shiny on the wide lapel of the man’s leather duster, a piece of metal he could only assume was a badge. The voice echoed over the hills, distorting it, but it still sounded . . . familiar.

“Shit!” another badge shouted. And that was definitely Sam’s frustrated cursing voice.

The last badge to gallop toward the group raised a rifle, pointing it almost directly at Bucky’s hiding spot. “I saw one go for the river!”

Bucky startled. He recognized that voice too. Shit.

He shimmied closer to the river’s edge, looking back over his shoulder. The others were . . . not there. “Fuck!” he breathed out, crawling closer to the edge. When he peered over, he could see four heads bobbing in the rushing water, all of them looking up at him as they clung to roots and dead limbs that were hung up in the mud of the steep riverbank. All of them looking as wrathful as a litter of kittens in a bathtub.

Bucky breathed out a sigh of relief, slumping against the ground. “I think the posse is . . . us,” he said to them, hoping they could hear him above the sound of the river. He waved down at them ineffectually. “Or, some of us, anyway.”
“Buck, get down here!” Steve called, his voice harsh as he tried to both shout and keep his volume low.

“No one going to make a posse joke?” Tony asked, just before his words were literally drowned out with a mouthful of river water. He bobbed higher, spitting water and gulping in a deep breath. “Just me? Okay. No, you’re right, completely inappropriate right now.”

Bucky looked over his shoulder at the renewed sound of thundering hooves. They’d apparently spotted him even through the cover of the long grass he’d hoped would hide him and were now driving their tired horses hard toward him.

“Shit.” He waved his hand at his guys, keeping the motion behind the cover of the river’s bank. “Downstream, go!”

“Barnes!” the lead rider bellowed, and when Bucky looked back at them the man was pulling his gun from the holster at his hip. “Don’t you do it!”

Bucky squinted at him, his eyes widening when he realized the man in the leather duster and the fine fur Montana crease hat was Steve.

Bucky stared for a little bit longer - because hot damn was that a good look on Steve - only registering the Colt in the man’s hand when it was raised and pointed steady at him, despite the horse still in full gallop jostling him from underneath.

“Nah,” Bucky gasped, scrambling to make certain his pack was secure.

The beardy and badged Steve on the horse fired a shot that missed Bucky by a country mile. “Don’t you do it, you damn crazy bastard!”

“Rude, Rogers,” Bucky muttered, and rolled off the edge of the riverbank into the rushing water below.
First of all, if you’ve read the comic 1872, this is not based on it. I’ve never read it, so any similarities are purely coincidence, unfortunately. Second! The history of the Confederate sharpshooters is fascinating, and I’ve had to really curtail my desire to go into it in these next chapters. They were . . . really very good at what they did. There were actually several Confederate sharpshooters who were called the Angel of Death, most notably during the Battle of Gettysburg in the Devil's Den. Their names have mostly been lost.

Steve was able to push away from the bank of the river, away from the grasping claws of the debris, but he almost immediately lost track of the other men as the rushing water swept him away. A body slammed into him and he grabbed onto it with all his strength and then shoved the man toward the water’s surface, gasping for breath long enough to see that he was holding Sam’s head above the water. Before he bobbed back under, he saw a dark head of hair not far away and a flailing arm that he thought might be Tony.

The river swirled and eddied and Steve briefly lost sight of the ridge where they’d gone over before he and Sam were spun back around like they were in one of those damn teacups at Disney World. Sam sputtered, cursing and spitting river water, slapping the water with an open palm as he tried to swim without Steve’s aid. Steve didn’t let him go.

When he swirled around again, Steve was able to see Bucky hit the water as horses stomped on the riverbank overhead. Clint was still caught up in the roots they’d been clinging to; the bow on his back appeared to be hooked on a limb. He’d obviously made the conscious choice not to cut it loose and had been left behind to the mercy of their pursuers. Steve started cursing right along with Sam as they were pulled further and further away from the others.

The last look they got of their companions before the river took them around a bend and into the wooded darkness, Bucky was swimming hard against the current, back toward Clint, with a knife clenched in his teeth. Steve would never be able to get to them, even if he wasn’t struggling already to keep himself and Sam from being swept away. They had to trust that Bucky could get Clint free and that the two of them would be able to follow.

Sam began struggling in Steve’s arms as soon as the bend in the river slowed the current. Steve fumbled, his head dipping under water, his throat burning as the cold river water went up his nose. He held to Sam’s hips and his belt as Sam ducked his head under water like a goddamn seagull going after a fish. When he popped his head back up, he had Tony’s jacket front in both hands, and Tony was grasping for them both, coughing up water and gasping for breaths that never quite seemed to get clear of the water lapping at all their faces.

Steve did his best to grab both men and just hold on, keeping them marginally afloat and together with all the strength in his fingers as the river had its way with them.

“Got to get to cover!” Sam hollered, pointing toward the trees as they rushed past. Steve was shocked by how hard it was to hear him. The river’s current was much stronger than they’d thought when they’d run for it, and Steve was pretty sure his ears were full of water.
Steve didn’t know how long they stayed in the river – it felt interminable as they all struggled just to breathe and avoid more debris or rocks – but he knew was probably no more than a few minutes. The first stretch of bank he caught sight of that was actually level with the water, Steve started trying to make his way toward it. He was a strong swimmer, and so were both Sam and Tony, but trying to keep together by clinging to each other and flail for dry ground turned them into a litter of clumsy puppies trying to get to the food bowl first.

Steve managed to toss his hangers on toward the shore where they could save themselves, then he took a few powerful strokes after them, swimming for his life until his fingers dug into mud. He scrabbled up onto the bank, fighting against the shallow pull of the river at his legs, shockingly exhausted once he was certain they were all on relatively dry land. Sam and Tony both sprawled beside him once they cleared the water. Steve summoned all the remaining dignity in himself and fought to keep from kissing the mud beneath his face.

“Barton,” Steve gasped out. “Barnes. Either of you see them?”

Tony winced and shook his head without opening his eyes, while Sam merely gasped for deeper breaths and waved a noncommittal hand through the air, sending water droplets flying.

A stick cracked, loud and intentional over the sound of the river, and Steve rolled to his belly, eyes on the forest. He came face to toes with a pair of scuffed, dirty boots.

“Hidy, Marshal,” the man the boots belonged to drawled as he knelt so Steve could meet his eyes as he pushed up to his elbows. Bucky’s blue eyes stared back at him from underneath the wide brim of a brown gambler hat with silver and turquoise conchos around the band. A long feather was stuck in the band as well, trailing along the crown. Sweet baby Jesus, that hat looked good on the man. Still . . . Steve stared at the jaunty feather for a long time, scowling in confusion.

Bucky peered at each of them, beginning a slow smirk before he looked back down at Steve. For the first time, Steve noticed men behind him, guns pointed at them. Bucky’s brow furrowed, an expression of concern taking over the smirk. “You lose your horse?”

“Buck,” Steve breathed.

Bucky hummed, narrowing his eyes as he used the long barrel of a Remington Model 1858 to shove the brim of his hat up. He tutted at Steve, cocky and taunting. “You shot at us.”

Steve opened his mouth to respond, but nothing save for a coughing croak came out.

“I think we shot at them first, Sarge,” Barton’s voice said from the group of men holding weapons on them.

Bucky stood, the teasing frown still on his face, the gun still in his hand. “That right?” he asked Steve.

“Uh,” Steve managed.

“Yes,” Tony answered immediately, nodding as he continued to look down at the mud beneath him. It was as if he thought if he made eye contact, they’d kill him. He might not have been wrong.

“Huh,” Bucky’s alternate responded, humming thoughtfully. He turned to peer at the men behind him. “Who fired that first shot?”

A man that Steve belatedly recognized as a very bearded Brock Rumlow blew out a breath, like he was exasperated. “Rollins fired it.”
“Oh,” Bucky responded, a dainty hand placed to his chest as he turned to face Steve, his whole body now in on the taunting, innocent act he was performing. He narrowed his eyes at Steve. “Then that’s taken care of, huh Rogers? Jack didn’t make it.”

Steve remembered the man they’d seen shot and dragged by his horse. That must have been Jack Rollins. He nodded numbly.

“That’s right,” Bucky crooned. He took a few steps closer, cocking his head down at Steve. “All’s fair in love and war, after all. Right, Stevie?”

Steve looked up at him just in time to see the heel of a boot aimed at his face. He tried to dodge it, but the mud had sucked his heavy weight down too far, and he could do nothing but take the powerful kick right in the temple.

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“Don’t cut it!” Clint cried as Bucky went after his bow string with his Mark II.

“You’re killing me, Barton!” Bucky shouted as the water buffeted them both. He shoved his knife back into its sheath.

Pebbles and clumps of earth fell into his face as he clung to the downed tree roots, pulling at Barton’s composite bow. He didn’t dare look up. He knew the riders were up there, knew he and Clint were just seconds from being shot at from above.

Clint pushed at him. “Go!” he hissed.

Bucky just grabbed a fistful of his jacket and pulled their faces closer. “I am not leaving you, you fucking asshole!”

“Well, ain’t that sweet,” a voice called from above. It was Tony’s voice.

Clint peered up, shielding his eyes against the sun outlining the men standing on the riverbank and looking down at them. Bucky ignored them, tugging at the thick tree branch that had caught Clint’s bow.

“Barnes!” Lawman Steve shouted at them. Bucky heard the click of a gun cocking. “Stay right there!”

“How!” Bucky grunted, almost laughing at the man. Stay there, his sweet ass. He switched hands, gripping the root with his camouflaged metal hand and pulverizing it with one squeeze. He and Clint both fell free of the deadfall and plunged into the rushing current. They clung to each other, both of them under water and fighting for the surface even as they each fought to hold the other.

Bucky really thought they’d be able to catch the current and slip away. They probably would have, if the goddamn cowboy bastard version of Sam Wilson hadn’t tossed an honest to God real life lasso into the water and looped the rope around Bucky’s foot.

As soon as he realized he was caught up again, he released Clint’s jacket, hoping the man would be able to reach the others, if nothing else. But Clint, goddamn him, held onto him, refusing to be separated from him. He grabbed Bucky’s knife from its holster and tried to pull himself along Bucky’s body against the current as Bucky did his best to keep his mouth and nose above water. But before Clint could slice the rope clear, another rope looped around his arm. He lost the knife, and soon both of them were being pulled toward the banks of the river like catfish dragged from beneath a log.
Bucky wound up dangling above the water by his foot, holding his arms tight around his torso to keep all his weapons from being shaken free like a ragdoll covered in leaves. He didn’t even try to help them lift his weight. He knew he was heavy, what with half his spine being made of metal and all, and he knew even three men would have trouble deadlifting him up that ten-foot bank.

He hadn’t accounted for the horses.

They dragged both Bucky and Clint clear of the edge, sliding them at least twenty feet across the high grass — that was surprisingly sharp, Jesus — before they halted the struggling horses and circled back around to stare down at Clint and Bucky, neither of whom were even complaining anymore.

Bucky blinked up at their silhouettes. “Nice hat,” he said to Steve.

Steve sighed loudly. It almost made Bucky feel at home. “James Barnes, Clint Barton. You’re both under arrest.”

“On what charges?” Clint demanded petulantly as he inspected the string of his bow. It was still intact. Bucky idly wondered what the fuck it was made out of.

“You just broke out of the jail in that town back there,” Tony told Clint, sounding just as exasperated as Steve.

“That doesn’t sound like us,” Clint insisted.

Bucky shook his head in agreement. “That definitely sounds fake.”

Steve and Sam shared a glance and another set of twin sighs. “Yeah, Rogers,” Sam said wryly. “He’s a real fuckin’ peach, just like you said.”

“Good damn thing I don’t bruise like one,” Bucky muttered to Clint, who snorted as he tried to unwrap the thick, heavy rope from his wrist.

Bucky didn’t bother. He didn’t even know what kind of fucking knot that thing was tied in, who the hell could lasso a flailing target in a river anyway? Jesus.

Neither Clint nor Bucky put up a fight as they were pulled to their feet and all the sharp things they had on them were stripped off. It took a long time. Nor did either of them struggle when ropes were wrapped around their wrists and tied off, the ropes attached to the pommels on two of the lawmen’s saddles. They didn’t want to hurt these men, and they didn’t want to be shot trying to run back for the river. The others were all still out there, and they’d no doubt come for them. Remaining calm was their priority, and Bucky was glad to have Clint with him, knowing the man could stay calm and silent under pressure.

Bucky probably would have fought a little bit, though, if he’d known these bastards were going to make him and Clint walk behind the damn horses all the way back into town.

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Tony shimmied his shoulders, trying to loosen the ropes enough to be able to slip them. Their captors weren’t paying a lot of attention to them, having tied them all to a tree and left them to set up camp.

He finally got low enough that the tight ropes hit his shoulders, and he had just enough leeway to start sliding down. If he got out of the ropes, the others could as well. He began to slump, catching Sam’s eyes around the side of the tree. Sam nodded furtively.
A bullet thumped into the tree just above Tony’s head, and Tony froze, blinking wide eyes at the man who was definitely not Bucky Barnes. He had already holstered his pistol after taking the shot, and he was smirking at Tony from beneath the brim of his hat.

“Holy shit,” Tony gasped.

“Fuck, man,” Sam muttered at his side.

Tony blinked as Barnes saluted him, then went back to arranging the campfire he’d been working on. Okay, so they were sneakier than he’d given them credit for. Okay.

Tony glanced at Sam again. “What are you calling him in your head?”

Sam ducked his head and cleared his throat. “You mean besides asshole?”

“Come on. You’re calling him Buckaroo in your head, aren’t you?” Tony needled.


Tony chuckled softly. “Yeah, me too.”

Steve groaned from somewhere behind them. Tony tried to crane his head, but Steve must have been further around the side of the trunk than Sam was, because he wasn’t in Tony’s line of sight.

Barnes obviously heard the sound as well, because he lifted his head, the firelight playing off his shadowed features beneath that damn hat. God, Cowboy Bucky was kind of hot. Tony groaned right along with Steve.

Barton joined Barnes as they sauntered over to their prisoners. Tony noticed that Barton had the remains of what looked like old handcuffs still around his wrist, the chain dangling as if it’d been cut.

“He’s bigger than he looks from out front,” Barton commented as Steve groaned softly again.

Barnes smirked and cocked his head. “Well. Everything looks smaller from so far away. Ain’t that right, Rogers?”

Steve sighed. “I’m sure if I’d been chasing you, that comment would probably rankle.”

Barton cocked one eyebrow. “You saying you keep shooting at us for the hell of it? You ain’t chasin’ us?”

“I’m saying we aren’t who you think we are.”

“Right,” Barnes answered. He rested his hand on the butt of his pistol and glanced over his shoulder at the other men moving about. Tony couldn’t be sure, because no matter how well he thought he might know their Bucky, this man wasn’t him and his body language couldn’t be trusted. But Tony thought the guy looked shifty all of a sudden.

Barnes and Barton shared a glance and Barnes nodded before turning away.

“We aren’t who you think we are!” Steve called after him.

“Neither are we,” Barnes said softly, merely waving over his shoulder as he strolled away. Barton came closer, though, squatting in front of Tony and resting his forearm on his knee.

Tony raised an eyebrow at him.
“They say you’re good with gadgets,” Barton said, grinning.

Tony jutted his chin out. “I do okay.”

Barton flicked his fingers and produced a long, thin sliver of metal. It looked like it had been shaved from a horseshoe or something. Maybe even the cuff around the guy’s wrist. “Think you can gadget with that?”

Tony frowned at the metal, then up at Barton warily.

“It’s a trick,” Sam murmured, glaring at Barton. “If we get loose they’ll shoot us.”

“If we was gonna shoot you, we’d a done that before we dried you off,” Barton argued, flicking the metal at Tony’s feet. “Only thing keeping the others from killin’ you is Buck, and they’re rumbling at him. You got five minutes. Then even he can’t save you.”

He stood and sauntered away, going toward the horses. Barnes had knelt next to the fire once more, his back fully toward Tony and the others.

Tony risked a glance at Sam, who was already nodding. “Do it.”

==

The sound of the massive iron bars closing and latching echoed through the drafty little stone building that served as the town’s jail.

Bucky slid his bound hands through the slit meant for food and rested his forearms against the iron, smirking at Rogers. The man wouldn’t look at him as he locked the cell. Bucky’s eyes were drawn by the badge on his lapel. It was round, just like the shield, with a star in the center. Bucky couldn’t help but smile softly as he stared at it.

“What?” Rogers snapped at him without looking up.

“It suits you,” Bucky said to him, nodding at the star.

Rogers merely narrowed his eyes as he focused on locking the cell.

“You gonna cut us loose from these?” Bucky asked softly as he spread his fingers, tugging at the heavy rope.

“No,” Rogers answered curtly. His eyes darted up to meet Bucky’s, then back down again, hiding behind his hat.

“What?” Bucky asked, poking the man because he was kind of enjoying it. “You don’t trust me?”

“Ain’t trusted you since you lit out in the middle of the night and left to go be a Rebel,” Steve snarled at him, jamming the keys onto the nail on the opposite side of the wall where they’d hung Clint’s bow.


“Think he means the uh . . . War Between the States?” Clint said, sounding more like a question than anything. Bucky glanced at him, eyebrows raised.

Rogers was glaring at Clint like he wanted to rip through the iron and get to the man. Bucky edged closer, putting himself in front of Clint and bristling protectively. Rogers met his eyes finally, blue
“In it together, hey Buck?” Rogers snarled. “Flanked the sentinel in the middle of the damn night, though. With him.” His eyes pinned Clint over Bucky’s shoulder, and Bucky backed up a step, shielding Clint once more. “Off to go be heroes, right? Famous Rebel sharpshooters, both of you.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes.

Clint leaned closer, whispering in Bucky’s ear. “That really doesn’t sound like us at all.”

“Antietam. Chancellorsville,” Rogers was saying through gritted teeth. He slammed a hand against the bars, shouting so loudly that both Bucky and Clint flinched away from him. “Gettysburg! You know what they called you? The papers? The Union soldiers, the men you swore to fight beside?”

“Traitor?” Clint guessed in a small voice.

“They called you the Angel of Death,” Rogers informed Bucky, voice and face grim with rage. “That’s how many of our boys you killed.”

Bucky found himself lowering his head, unable to look into the anger in Rogers’s eyes. “That sounds like me,” he murmured to Clint.

Rogers slammed his hand against the iron bars again, then shoved away, stalking out of the tiny room.

Bucky and Clint were both still for several seconds, both holding their breath. Then Clint patted Bucky’s shoulder gently.

“That could have gone worse,” Clint offered cheerfully.

Bucky grunted, glancing at the cell next to the one they were locked into. Half the stone wall had crumbled, the iron bars of what once was a window left in the rubble. The wind whipped into their cell through the opening.

He and Clint moved closer to the bars separating the two cells, both of them using their bound hands to grip the iron as they peered through.

“What’s a little damage?”

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“What’s a little damage?”

Steve wasn’t sure how long he’d been unconscious, or what he’d missed while he’d been out, or how Tony got loose, but when Tony and Sam yanked the ropes from around his chest and grabbed him, telling him to run, Steve ran. He’d ask questions later.

They could hear men shouting from the camp as they ran blind through the dark woods. Steve pulled out in front, using his supersoldier eyes for some damn good as he led Tony and Sam around deadfalls and over tree roots in the ground.

The ruckus behind them soon turned into bullets being fired blindly into the trees, and the sound of horses’ hooves pounding.

The horses were gaining on them by the time they reached the edge of the woods. Steve hoped they were somewhere near the pile of shitty dirt that they’d landed in this shitty world in, but he wasn’t
sure. And he had no idea where Bucky and Clint were, or how the hell they would find them if they
even got away. He just knew as soon as they hit open ground, the horses would run them down.

He skidded to a halt at the edge of the treeline, holding Tony and Sam back when they would have
kept running. “They’re too fast on horseback,” Steve gasped out. The others were breathing so hard
they couldn’t speak.

The pounding of hooves came up behind them, and Steve turned, squaring his shoulders and
preparing himself to fight. Several horses went by, no saddles, noses flaring and eyes wild as they
ran from the gunfire. It looked like someone had let them all loose before Steve and the others had
escaped.

There were two riders following the fleeing horses, but they seemed to be out ahead of the shouting
and gunfire, both of them bent low over their horses like they were dodging the gunfire too. A low
whistle came from one of the riders. A whistle Steve recognized. A whistle that had always meant,
‘I’m coming for you, I’ve got your back,’ in the darkness.

He stared for several heartbeats, telling himself that even though they’d come across horrible versions
of themselves in other worlds, he had to trust that some of them were still good. Some of them were
still just Steve and Bucky.

He stepped into the clearing and held out his hand.

“Steve!” Tony cried.

Sam was yelling right along with him. “What are you doing?

Steve braced as the rider barreled down on him, keeping his hand extended. Strong fingers wrapped
around his forearm and yanked as the horse galloped past, pulling him easily onto its back behind the
rider. He wrapped his arms around the rider’s waist and pressed his face to the man’s back, hunching
his shoulders as more bullets flew past.

“Hold on,” Bucky’s voice said softly over the sounds of the pitched battle behind them.

“The others,” Steve shouted back to him, looking over his shoulder.

Barton was riding hard behind them, urging his horse into the open. Another horse followed closely,
the reins clutched in Barton’s hand. Sam was on that horse, and Tony was riding behind Barton,
holding to him just like Steve was to Barnes.

“What the hell just happened?” Steve called to Barnes.

Barnes just laughed as he nudged the horse into a flat-out run across the open ground. “Me and Clint.
We did what we do best.”

A bullet whizzed past Steve’s ear and he hid his face in Barnes’s back again. “What’s that? Piss
people off? Get shot at?”

Barnes shook his head. “Sounds about right!”

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“You think they got away?” Clint asked softly as he and Bucky hunched into the farthest corner of
their cell, trying to keep warm from the bracing wind by aggressively cuddling each other.
“Got to hope,” Bucky murmured. The lawmen, and the silver stars on their lapels said they were U.S. Marshals, had taken their packs, stripped Bucky of every weapon he’d had on him, all while staring at the knives as if they’d never seen the like before. They probably hadn’t. The ceramic one, in particular, had been quite a conversation stopper as Stark and Wilson had stared at it. Rogers had refused to look over any of their belongings.

Bucky huffed, wondering what they would have thought of his Skorpion. He was glad he hadn’t been carrying any of his guns, though. That wouldn’t have been easy to explain. The metal hand had been easy enough to hide, and since they hadn’t found anything sharp enough to cut their ropes, Bucky had merely snapped them with his fingers once they were left alone.

He and Clint hadn’t been able to find out what year it was, and neither of them knew a whole hell of a lot about the time period anyway. But Bucky knew guns. And the gun Stark carried was a Colt Open-Top Model Revolver, which weren’t made until 1872. It looked fairly new, so Bucky was willing to put the year in the mid 1870’s with some confidence. That meant whatever hard feelings Rogers was still harboring from the Civil War, they were going on a decade old.

That was a long time to hate someone.

“What’s our play?” Clint asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Bucky winced. Part of him wanted to stay, talk to Rogers more, try to find out if his version of Bucky really had abandoned him in the middle of a war to go fight for the other side, or if it had been something like what Bucky himself had suffered. Part of him wanted to fix this.

But the snatches of conversation the marshals were having in the room out front had made it clear that their prisoners were to be transferred in the morning, and Bucky and Clint couldn’t allow themselves to be taken further and further away from the others.

Bucky had managed to hide the remote on the trek into town when they’d passed a hollow tree, even though he wasn’t even sure if the water had ruined it or not. And Tony still had the batteries. None of them could leave without the others. None of them would leave even if they could, not without the others.

“I can bend the iron,” Bucky finally answered, peering at Clint critically. “But it won’t be quiet.”

Clint glanced at the doorway, where the firelight danced off the stone walls and teased them both with the hint of warmth. “Well. From the glares he was giving me, it already seems like maybe Barnes and Barton in this world are just as close as the ones in the last. We can work with that.”

Bucky groaned, lowering his head. “Before this is over I’m gonna fake make-out with the whole team, ain’t I?”

“Aww, I’ll be gentle for your first,” Clint said, patting him on the shoulder as he pushed to his feet.

Bucky huffed a laugh and let Clint pull him up. “Hate to tell you. You won’t be the first.”

“Wait, what?” Clint said, drawing it out teasingly and pitching his voice higher. “You dog, you! Was it Sam? I bet it was Sam. He’s got hate-sex written all over him.”

Bucky huffed again, trying his best not to laugh. He shoved Clint against the iron bars that separated their cell from the damaged one and crowded up against him. Clint let out an oomph but wrapped his arms around Bucky’s neck.

“Okay, killer, get to it. I’ll moan wantonly if they look in here.”
“You do that,” Bucky muttered as he gripped one of the bars behind Clint’s back. He had to push against another bar with his right hand for leverage, his whole body straining against Clint’s as he felt the bar in his metal hand begin to give. He grunted as he let up on the pressure, hanging his head against Clint’s shoulder as he took a few deep breaths and braced himself for another try.

“You do that,” Bucky muttered as he gripped one of the bars behind Clint’s back. He had to push against another bar with his right hand for leverage, his whole body straining against Clint’s as he felt the bar in his metal hand begin to give. He grunted as he let up on the pressure, hanging his head against Clint’s shoulder as he took a few deep breaths and braced himself for another try.

“Jesus,” Clint grunted as Bucky pressed harder against him. “That’s kind of hot, not gonna lie.”

“Shut up, Hawk Guy,” Bucky grumbled. His second try bent the bar even further, pushing it almost against the bar beside it. He would have to bend at least three of them for either him or Clint to fit through, or maybe snap the middle one.

“The hell’s going on back there?” Wilson’s voice called out to them.

“If the cell’s a rockin’ don’t come a knockin’!” Clint called back, laughing as Bucky groaned in his ear.

“The hell does that mean?” Stark muttered under his breath. Bucky knew he didn’t mean for anyone to hear it. They had no idea what Bucky was capable of, in this world.

Bucky felt more than saw movement behind them, and he stuffed his face into Clint’s neck to make it at least look like they were enjoying themselves. Clint threw one leg over Bucky’s hip, letting Bucky’s already straining muscles take some of his weight.

“All right, that’s indecent,” Wilson groaned from the doorway. “Rogers, don’t come in here.”

Bucky held his breath against Bucky’s cheek for a few seconds, then nodded. “Clear,” he whispered.

Bucky grabbed two of the bars and put everything he had into them, pulling both away from each other. The iron bar in his left hand snapped with a ringing clang.

Bucky hit his hand against the bars and shouted like he was really into what Bucky was doing to him, making Bucky wince away from the sound.

“Fuck, that hurt,” Bucky whispered, shaking his right hand out. “Can you fit through that?”

Clint pushed back against the opening, nodding before he slipped halfway through. “What about our stuff?”

Bucky shook his head. “We’ll get clear first. Circle back after they run out after us.”

Clint merely nodded and darted through the opening. Bucky gave one last glance back, then wedged himself between the mangled bars. Clint darted out of the broken cell and grabbed his bow, though Bucky was pretty sure he didn’t have any arrows. Bucky’s shoulders and chest barely fit, even when he blew out every last bit of air in his lungs. He stumbled once he came through, and Clint caught him with little more than a scuffling of noise.

“Good?” Clint whispered, settling his bow on his back.

“Think I shaved off my nipples,” Bucky grumbled, clutching said nipples and rubbing them as they both scrambled over the stone rubble of the neighboring cell and into the frigid night.

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Tony had given up on pride about an hour ago, and apparently so had Sam, because both of them were snuggled up against Steve like he was a mama duck holding them under his wings. The bastard
was warm, okay, and Barnes and Barton refused to allow them a fire.

Steve, to his credit, was tolerating it with nothing more than a hefty sigh.

Several feet away, Barnes and Barton sat with their backs to each other, leaning against each other as free and easy as if they’d spent all their lives doing it. Barnes had his head bowed, the hat over his eyes and his arms crossed. Tony was pretty damn sure the guy was asleep.

“What are we gonna do?” Sam asked after what seemed like hours of silence.

Steve shook his head, jostling Tony’s exhausted doze. “We have to find them,” he whispered.

“Any suggestions?” Tony asked, surprising himself by yawning at the end of it.

Steve huffed. “I’m thinking.”

Barnes used one finger to shove his hat up, turning his head just enough to look over at them. Barton groaned as he was disturbed by the movement. “You keep yappin’, you’ll give away our position,” Barnes warned quietly.

“Why’d you free us?” Steve demanded in a harsh whisper.

“They were gonna kill you,” Barnes answered, his voice gruff.

“Why’d you break with your crew?” Steve persisted.

“They were gonna kill us,” Barnes answered, easy as you please, returning to his languorous hunch of a sleeping position.

Tony scowled as he peered at them in the moonlight. “Then why ride with them?”

“I needed them,” Barnes answered curtly. “You took Clint and put him behind a stone wall. Takes more’n one man to handle that many horses.”

Steve cocked his head, obviously confused. But Tony was getting a picture of it. “You used all those horses to pull the jail apart and break him out?” he blurted.

Barnes’s smirk was clearly visible beneath the brim of his hat.

Tony barked a laugh. “Horsepower.”

“Tony,” Steve grunted.

“You seem a hell of lot more amused than you were this morning, Marshal,” Barton drawled without moving.

Tony cleared his throat. He could imagine watching these guys rip the wall off a jail and haul ass out of town wouldn’t seem so funny if he was one of the lawmen who was supposed to catch them and stuff. Still . . . he wasn’t the law and it was kind of hilarious. Tony found himself chuckling and unable to stop.

Both Barnes and Barton glanced over at them, both looking quizzical. Tony waved a hand. “Sorry.”

Barton cocked his head at them. “What did you mean when you said you weren’t who we thought you were?”
“We’re not,” Steve answered, hunching his shoulders. “Look at us. We’re not the people you think we are.”

“Steve,” Tony warned softly. He had been wracking his brain trying to figure out how to explain who and why they were in a way a man from the 19th century could wrap his mind around. He’d been coming up empty.

“Your clothes do look funny,” Barton grumbled, settling harder against Barnes’s back.

“And where are your guns?” Barnes added.

“We’re from another plane of existence,” Sam said suddenly.

Barnes and Barton both stared at him, then turned to peer at each other over their shoulders.

Steve and Tony were both staring as well.

“Spiritualism was popular in the mid to late nineteenth century,” Sam murmured. “It’s a way to explain it that they might actually understand.”

“Huh,” Tony huffed.

“We’re . . . we’re the same people as the marshals who are after you. But we’re from a different plane of existence,” Sam continued. “We’re different people.”

Barnes stared at him. Barton began to laugh. “What, like ghosts?”

“Yes,” Sam said immediately. “Like ghosts.”

Barnes muttered and pulled his hat low again, settling against Barton’s back.

“Look,” Tony said as he pushed away from Steve’s warmth. He crawled closer to the two outlaws and held out his arm, pointing at the cuff of his jacket. “You ever seen one of these? It’s called a zipper. Does the same job as buttons or laces.”

Barton peered at it for a long time, and Barnes finally turned his head to see what was keeping Barton’s interest. They both looked at the zipper of Tony’s cuff, then up at him with almost matching frowns.

“Tony,” Steve said softly. “Do you have the batteries?”

Tony glanced at him over his shoulder, nodding.

“Show them.”

Tony hesitated. They hadn’t had a lot of luck with telling the truth in the past couple worlds. “Fine,” he finally grumbled, pulling the zipper on the hidden pocket inside his coat. When he pulled it out, the soft blue glow lit up all their faces.

Barton and Barnes immediately scrambled away from it, Barnes resting his hand on his gun.

“Whoa, whoa!” Tony hissed, holding it gingerly. “It’s okay. It won’t hurt you. Just . . . look. Have you ever seen anything like this? Or like the clothes we’re wearing?”

Both men watched him now like feral cats, just as likely to bolt away from him as to come closer. Barnes’s eyes darted to Steve and back to Tony. “The hell is this?” he demanded.
“We’re telling the truth,” Steve insisted softly. “We had two more men with us. We had you and Clint with us. We have to find them.”

“You’re crazy,” Barnes whispered to Steve, sounding almost wounded by the realization.

The look on Steve’s face in response damn near broke Tony’s heart.

“They’re not crazy,” a voice said from the darkness.

Barnes moved as fast as any living thing Tony had ever seen, gun in his hand, turning on his knees to face the voice. Barton stood over him, bow and arrow in hand, the two of them moving like a well-oiled machine.

“Easy,” the voice said again, moving closer. Two dark figures appeared in the glow of the blue in Tony’s hand, dry grass crunching underfoot. "Easy."

Tony almost cried when he saw Bucky and Clint emerge and step into the patch of moonlight near their little camp.

“Buck,” Steve gasped, scrambling to his feet.

“Easy!” Bucky hissed just before Steve barreled into him and they both went toppling over into the high grass.

Neither Barnes nor Barton had relaxed, but they both seemed stunned into immobility. Finally, after a few seconds, Barton lowered his bow, staring at Clint with wide eyes. “That’s . . . us.”
Bucky had spotted the blue glow from over a mile away. The air out here was... kind of amazing for a sniper. Clint had agreed as they’d jogged through the high grass toward whichever idiot was glowing in the middle of the night. Bucky had placed bets on Tony.

Clint had refused the bet.

They’d approached carefully once they’d realized the cowboy versions of themselves were with their guys. Bucky had finally chosen to speak with the full expectation that he might get shot at. Would probably get shot at. He’d still been shocked by the speed with which both men moved. They’d called the last version of himself Quickdraw, but damn he kind of wished they’d saved that moniker for this world. Still, he’d been prepared and managed to stay calm when the barrel of that gun swung his way.

He had not prepared himself for two-hundred plus pounds of solid muscle and sunshine leaping into his arms.

“Buck,” Steve said again, burying his face in Bucky’s chest as Bucky tried to force air back into his lungs.

“Jesus fuck, Rogers,” Bucky gasped. “My ribs.”

“Sorry,” Steve offered, not sounding one bit sincere as he pushed up to his hands and knees and straddled Bucky’s chest. He grabbed Bucky’s face like he was preparing to smash his head into the dirt. “What the hell happened to you? Where have you been?”

“You happened to us,” Bucky answered, jabbing at Steve’s chest. “We got arrested by your stupid face. We had to break out of jail!”

“Wait,” Barnes said as he carefully rose to his feet and took a step closer. “You broke out of that jail... again?”

Bucky nodded, peering up at the shadowed version of himself in the moonlight. All he could see was a hat and maybe a feather.

“Oh, Lord,” Cowboy Barnes groaned, holstering his gun and pushing his hat back so he could slap a hand over his forehead. “Rogers is gonna kill me. He’s not even gonna ask questions, he’s just gonna shoot me in the face outta spite.”

Barton was laughing behind him.

Barnes turned on him, pointing. “It’s not funny!”

Barton held up both hands, still chuckling. “You’re wrong, but okay.”

Barnes growled unintelligibly.

“Sorry,” Barton offered, not sounding one bit sincere. “I’m still trying to square with them being ghosts.”

Bucky scowled at them, peering up at Steve. “Ghosts?”

“It was the only way Sam could think to explain,” Steve mumbled into Bucky’s chest as he rubbed
his face all over Bucky like a cat for a few more seconds before he pushed up and helped Bucky to his feet.

“That’s fine, Cap, I didn’t want a hug anyway,” Clint teased as he came closer to the little sheltered clearing the boys had been using as a camp.

Steve slung his arm around Clint’s shoulders and pulled both him and Bucky closer. “I’m glad you’re okay.” He pulled Clint closer, getting in his face, and held his chin with one big hand. “But if you ever leave yourself behind again for that stupid fucking bow, I will strangle you with it.”

Clint’s eyes widened and he pursed his lips, nodding. “That’s fair.”

Steve released his hold on Bucky and pulled Clint into a hug. Bucky blinked at them, surprised. Clint let out a whoosh of air, eyes widening even further and edging toward panic as he peered at Bucky over Steve’s shoulder. Steve had never been a particularly cuddly person, even with Bucky. And Bucky had never seen him show physical affection for any of his Avengers teammates beyond that manly pat on the shoulder he’d perfected during the war. Apparently, neither had Clint.

The last world must have done more of a number on Steve’s mind than even Bucky had suspected.

Clint finally lifted a hand and gave Steve a gentle pat on his back. “Glad to see you safe, too, Steve,” he said, soft and gentle and serious.

Steve didn’t let him go but he did pull away, keeping one hand clasped on Clint’s shoulder as he reached out to pull Bucky back to him. He held them both under his arms, squeezing tight enough that it was either pure relief or a punishment, Bucky didn’t know which.

He gave a placating pat to Steve’s belly and Steve finally huffed a breath and released them both. “From now on, we don’t get separated,” Steve ordained as he shoved both of them toward the others.

“Like we did it on purpose,” Bucky muttered.

A snarl from Steve had Bucky shutting up pretty fast. “We stay together even if I have to kill all of you to do it,” Steve growled between clinched teeth.

Bucky laughed softly, but the others were watching Steve warily, like he might have cracked on them.

Only when they were closer did Bucky get a halfway decent look at his and Clint’s alternate versions. They were both watching keenly, expressions sliding between amusement, wonderment, and consternation.

Bucky gave them both a nod. “Thanks for not filling me full of holes,” he said to them both.

Barnes blinked at him, obviously still trying to handle the oddity of looking at and talking to himself. “Uh,” he finally managed, weak and uncertain. “Yeah. I guess if I was gonna shoot myself, I’da done it years ago.”

Bucky snorted, but Cowboy Barton smacked Barnes in the back of the head, disturbing that hat of his. Barnes grumbled and set it right.

“By the way, Sam,” Clint said as he settled onto the ground beside Sam and scooted closer for warmth. “Your other self is like a rodeo clown or something.”
“Excuse me,” Sam said, voice dry. Sam leaned into him as Clint snuggled closer.

Bucky hadn’t realized until just now how cold the unenhanced humans must have been out here. He felt awful suddenly for not working harder to keep Clint warm as they’d traipsed through the wilderness.

“He lassoed me and Buck right out of the river,” Clint explained, waving his hand in the air. “With the current and everything, ten feet in the air. It was damn impressive. Annoying. But impressive.”

Barton cleared his throat. “Yeah, he does that. Roped me right off my horse yesterday. That’s how they got me.”

“It sucked,” Bucky grumbled. He pulled Steve closer and grabbed him by his stupid face, kissing him before Steve could struggle. Steve melted into him, slipping his hands around Bucky’s waist and tugging him closer, humming with contentment as he reciprocated.

It took a long time of just losing himself in the relief of Steve being there with him and in his arms before Bucky realized they were being watched by just about everyone. Sam was rolling his eyes almost fondly, and Clint and Tony were both sporting sly grins. But Barnes and Barton were both staring at them, eyes wide, mouths agape.

Barton cleared his throat. “Is that . . . well. That’s new and different.”

Barnes winced, glancing back at him. “Not really new. Or different.”

“Oh,” Barton said, his voice as dry as dust. “Well shit, Buck. No wonder Rogers hates me. He thinks you ran off with me for a bachelor marriage.”

“I did run off with you for a bachelor marriage.”

“Only after he tossed you out on your ass,” Barton argued, suddenly frowning and serious.

They stared at each other for a few seconds, then both of them shrugged and turned away from each other, situating themselves back on the ground where they’d been before Bucky and Clint had disturbed them. They leaned against each other, settling in, watching each other’s backs. It was plain to see the decade of time they’d spent in each other’s company. Their close friendship was something even Bucky found himself a little envious of. He didn’t know if he’d ever be that easy with another person again, even Steve.

A heavy melancholy rolled over him; he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life coiled tight as a spring, always surprised when his teammates – his friends – touched him.

Bucky couldn’t help staring at his alternate self wistfully even as Steve dragged him toward the group by his metal hand.

Steve settled onto the ground, and Bucky resisted the urge to plaster himself to the man’s side, instead taking the spot between Tony and Sam so he and Steve could bracket the other men, making sure each of them had contact with one of them. He knew they were the only sources of warmth out here tonight.

Barnes gave a careless, elegant hand wave their way, peering at Steve in the light of the moon. “So. It’s hard to argue your point when I’m staring at myself.”

Bucky couldn’t stop himself from waving cheekily with his metal fingers, wishing he’d taken the hologram off for this. But that was information he’d saved if they needed some extra convincing. He
didn’t want to traumatize the outlaws, after all.

“You said the marshals arrested you,” Barnes said, meeting Bucky’s eyes unflinchingly. “Did you try to tell them you’re ghosts like these blockheads did to us?”

Bucky shook his head, pressing his lips tight together. “Marshal Rogers, uh . . . he didn’t seem overly receptive to anything I had to say. We figured trying to tell him the truth wouldn’t go over well for his blood pressure.”

Barnes didn’t move or react in any noticeable way, but he seemed to shrink into himself a little, shoulders slumping almost imperceptibly as he ducked his head. He used that hat the way Bucky used to use his long hair, hiding behind it when he’d felt too vulnerable.

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Nice hat.”

“I know,” Barnes replied without looking up.

Tony jabbed Bucky in the ribs, and Bucky leaned toward him to whisper, “Am I the only one who wants a hat?”

Tony coughed to cover his snicker.

“He was real mad at you, huh?” Barton asked, his tone no longer teasing. He shimmied his shoulders a little against Barnes’s back, like he was reminding the other man he was there for him, supporting him.

Bucky shook his analysis of the two men away and grimaced at Barton’s question. “Yeah. Yeah, he was.”

“Did he hurt you?” Barnes asked in a low, calm, dangerous voice. “Either of you?”

A chill ran through Bucky’s spine, remembering the animosity from the zombie world, the hopeless anguish from the opposite world. God, he didn’t know how many more versions of himself and Steve who hated each other he could encounter before it all got too heavy and he wouldn’t be able to shake it off anymore.

“No,” Clint answered after several tense seconds of silence. “To be fair, I think he wanted to come after me and beat me out of existence, but he didn’t hurt us.” Clint hummed for a few seconds, brow furrowing. “Unless you count rope burns and sore feet.”

Barnes merely nodded, not glancing up again. He was hard to read, hiding behind the brim of that hat.

“Why would he hurt either of you?” Steve demanded as he scooted up close to Clint, squishing the five of them together in an entirely demeaning but somewhat enjoyable display of snuggling.

“Because Steve Rogers is a stubborn bastard who’s only alive right now ’cause he’s too full of spite to die,” Barnes growled. “Been like that since we was kids.”

“You grew up together?” Sam asked, cocking his head and scowling. He was leaning into Bucky almost unconsciously, and Bucky realized the man wasn’t getting a hint of warmth since he was on Bucky’s left.

Bucky raised his arm, and Sam wedged himself against Bucky’s torso gratefully. Bucky hesitated for only a few heartbeats before he wrapped his arm around Sam’s waist, holding him close enough to
Barnes huffed, watching Bucky and Sam almost incredulously before he could school his expression back to blankness. “Yeah, we grew up together. Both our families ran from Ireland when the rebellion went sideways. Stevie and me, we met on the boat. We were four or five, maybe. Grew up in Brooklyn right beside each other. When I was sixteen and Steve was fifteen we lied about our age and joined the state militia. Our regiment was called up in ’61, part of the Irish Brigade. Three months later, we were covering the retreat after the First Battle of Manassas.”

“Buck,” Barton said gently. “They might not recall it by that name.”

Barnes looked stricken suddenly, turning to peer back at Barton before hunching his shoulders protectively. “It was, uh . . . the Federal Armies called it Bull Run.”

Bucky stared at him, torn between sympathy and anger. The man was using the Confederate names for battles he’d fought in as a Union soldier. Rogers hadn’t been lying; Barnes and Barton really had deserted.

“If you grew up together, and you fought together, why is it you and Marshal Rogers are on opposite sides of the law now?” Steve asked heatedly, apparently deciding that sleep and low blood pressure were both for the weak and all that shit.

Bucky shifted uneasily, shaking his head. He didn’t want to hear this again. He didn’t want to witness Steve absorbing this information.

Barnes caught the movement, though, and narrowed his eyes. “What was the marshal’s side of the story? Did he say anything to you?” he demanded of Bucky.

Bucky cleared his throat. “I . . . I don’t want to answer that.”

Barnes smiled like a wolf from beneath the brim of his hat. “That bad, huh?”

Bucky winced and ducked his head.

“I know that look, I worn it often enough,” Barnes said to Bucky, his voice sharp and commanding. “He hollered at you, didn’t he?”

“A lot,” Bucky conceded.

Clint groaned. “Fuck it, man. Marshal Rogers didn’t tell us shit. He thought we were you and we already knew everything he did. But from what he did say, we gathered that you and Rogers joined the Union army together,” he told Barnes blithely as Bucky tried to subtly reach him to pinch him. Clint batted at his hand like he was a buzzing bee and kept talking. “But he said you two left camp in the middle of the night, deserted your regiments to join the South. That you became sharpshooters for the Confederates. Damned good ones, if your nicknames were accurate.”

Barnes ducked his head, hiding behind that hat of his yet again as his shoulders went tighter.

“What were their nicknames?” Tony asked tentatively. Bucky glanced at him, realizing how oddly silent Tony had been up until then. He gave into the impulse and tossed his arm over Tony’s shoulders, inordinately pleased when Tony scooted closer and snuggled up under his arm. It had been a long time since he’d been the one offering comfort and shelter, rather than praying someone else would give it to him.

Clint grunted at Tony, sounding vaguely impressed but also bitchy about it. “Rogers said they called
Barnes the Angel of Death.”

“They called all the Confederate sharpshooters that,” Barton grumbled. He jutted his chin up, stubborn and proud as he stared off into the dark night. “Our boys called him the Shade. No one ever saw him coming or going; he was like a ghost on the battlefield.”

Barnes sighed, as if he wasn’t proud of the name he’d earned from his compatriots during the war. But he did indeed sound proud when he added, “And they called him Smoke. ’Cause by the time you looked for him, nothing was left but the breeze.”

Barton was silent at his back, both of them unmoving. “We tried to tell him,” Barton finally grumbled when it became obvious that no one else was willing to speak. “Rogers. We tried to tell him. After the war, after we tried to go home.”

“All we wanted to do was go home,” Barnes whispered.

“Buck tried to tell Rogers what really happened,” Barton continued more heatedly. “He refused to listen. Said if he ever saw Buck again, he’d kill him. Kill me, too, and he’d do it right then if we didn’t leave his sight.”

“He meant it, too,” Barnes murmured.

“Threw us out into the street for the soldiers, like carrion,” Barton growled. “We coulda been hanged if they’d grabbed us, but Rogers didn’t fucking care.”

Barnes sighed, like this was something they’d not-so-fondly reminisced over before, with the same results each time.

Bucky glanced at Steve carefully. His eyes were hard and glinting in the moonlight, his jaw tight. Bucky realized it was the same angry glare he’d been subjected to in that jail, and he leaned toward Tony almost unconsciously. “Steve,” he whispered.

Steve’s head whipped around to settle his glare on Bucky, but he seemed to shake himself once he saw Bucky’s wounded expression. He blinked at Bucky almost guiltily before his jaw jumped again with impotent anger and he narrowed his eyes.

“No one believed me, either, Stevie,” Bucky reminded him. “No one but you.”

Steve blinked at him again, his shoulders slumping as he peered across the mere yard or so of dirt separating them from Barnes and Barton. “So, tell us the truth,” he prompted, obviously exerting a herculean effort over controlling his temper.

Barnes was watching them from beneath the brim of his hat, his expression unreadable even to Bucky’s keen eyesight. “After the Seven Days Battles and Malvern Hill, I was approached by a Colonel. Colonel Nick Fury,” he began to explain, his voice soft and gravelly with melancholy. “He’d summoned both me and Clint; we’d only met a handful of times before that.”

“Only took a handful of times,” Barton interjected, his smile obvious in his tone. “For me, anyways. You ever fall in love with the way a man holds a rifle?”

Bucky pursed his lips, nodding like that was a legit point. Beside him, Tony was doing the same thing, and it made him smile.

Barnes paused in his storytelling and ducked his head, smiling softly as he shifted against Barton’s back, like they were communicating through their bodies alone.
After a few seconds of letting themselves take comfort in their proximity, Barnes continued grimly. “Colonel Fury was trying to gather information, get spies down south he could trust and set up a ring. He pulled me and Clint because we’d shown we could shoot.”

“Best shots in each of our regiments,” Barton added proudly. “A match made in heaven. Or hell, depending on who you’re talking to.”

Barnes chuckled softly. “One way to put it. Fury told us the South was gathering all their sharpshooters into companies and battalions of their own, training ‘em up to use as scouts and frontline attacks. That they were going to be a problem in the coming battles. He knew with our skills, we’d be a good fit for a sharpshooter regiment, and we’d be valuable; no one would suspect us so long as we proved ourselves. He asked us to be his spies. Since they were pulling all the best shots from every regiment, we’d be able to slip in and our faces being new wouldn’t provoke any suspicion or questions. But it was our only chance to do it clean, see. We had to go right then or lose the chance altogether.”

“He showed us how the information we could send him would prevent whole battles from ever being fought,” Barton murmured when Barnes trailed to a stop. “How we could save a lot of lives, on both sides of it.”

“That’s all we were fighting for in the first place,” Barnes added, his tone almost pleading. He desperately wanted them to see the difficulty in the choice he and Barton had been faced with, at a time when both of them had barely been out of their teenage years. “To end the war, to save the damn country and all the people in it, blue or gray.”

“And we did our job!” Barton growled, pointing at Steve. “We left in the middle of the night like we was cowards, and we joined up with McGowan’s Brigade.”

Sam leaned forward. “McGowan’s Brigade was the first and arguably the best of the Confederate Sharpshooters,” he told them softly. Bucky’s hand tightened in the material of Sam’s jacket, but he wasn’t entirely sure he understood where the sudden urge to hang onto his friends and not let go was coming from.

“We left without a word; not a note of goodbye, not one last chance to see our friends, not a damn thing,” Barnes whispered, ducking his head and wringing his hands. His voice was so hoarse it was hard to hear him. “It was Steve’s . . .” he seemed to choke on the words, stopping and swallowing hard, then clearing his throat. “It was Stevie’s birthday, the night we left.”

“Jesus Christ,” Steve hissed, and even Bucky flinched away from the rage Steve was emanating like he was a goddamn WiFi signal.

Barton seemed to jump like he’d sat on a sharp rock or something. He finally shifted his position, abandoning his duty as his companion’s backrest in favor of scooting around to sit beside him and wrap his arm over Barnes’s shoulder. He squeezed him protectively. His expression seemed to dare the world and Steve Rogers in particular to come after his friend, that even Death itself would have to go through him to get to Barnes. “There was no way we coulda waited, Buck.” He shook Barnes gently, his fingers digging into Barnes’s arm as he leaned forward, both their faces now hidden behind their hats. His voice grew more tender as he whispered, “You didn’t do it to hurt him. You know that.”

Barnes leaned into Barton in a way that evidenced the familiarity and intimacy of two men who’d fought together and lived together and run together for the majority of their lives. He spoke with his head still bowed. “That ain’t the way he saw it.”
Barton obviously couldn’t argue that point, and both men sat hunched together. Barton began to sway side-to-side almost imperceptibly, arm still around Barnes and forcing him to move with him, like the rhythmic rocking would soothe them both.

Bucky wanted to crawl over to them and envelope both men in a protective hug and coo to them until they felt better. It was a decidedly . . . new impulse on his part, he was pretty sure.

“We sent every bit of information we could back North,” Barnes insisted after several awkward minutes of silence. He raised one gloved hand and wiped at his cheek before finally raising his head to look over at Bucky and his companions. “Locations of winter camps, regiment sizes and army movements, anything we could get our hands on. Risked our damn lives every time we asked one too many questions.”

“Buck was the best spy I ever seen,” Barton whispered fondly, almost like he was talking to himself.

“Well,” Barnes grunted. “Maybe second best. We used a woman Fury trusted, a Russian woman, to get things to him.”

“Romanof?” Steve blurted.

“Romanova,” Barton corrected. “Naw, you’re right, Buck. She was the best spy I ever seen.”

Barnes snorted, a smile gracing his lips briefly. “I figured I’d lose you to her if she ever said the word.”

Barton actually snickered. “Oh, you wouldn’ta lost me, you’da joined us and you know it.”

“Maybe so.” They were both silent for a few moments, the heavy mood somehow lifting briefly as they both got lost to whatever memories they had of the woman who was Natasha’s double in this world.

Then Barton shook himself. “The things we sent off with her should have ended the war months earlier than it did. Maybe even years. Battle tactics and numbers, days and days before they were in play. Dwindling supplies and munitions, unhappy and rebellious soldiers, weak spots they could poke with a stick; when and where the Union could strike and win without so much bloodshed. It would have saved thousands of boys, on both sides. We’d have been surrendering instead of killing. Would have had troops chasing their tails instead of each other.”

“We tried to make sure big clashes never happened. We didn’t want casualties, not on either side. But the Union Generals, they never acted on any of it,” Barnes explained bitterly. “We knew it was getting to Fury, Natalia swore to us it was, and he was sending it on up to a General who was supposed to get it to the right people. But no one . . . my God. Half the skirmishes we saw never woulda happened.”

“We’d been with our regiment for damn near two years by the time we put it together,” Barton nearly growled. His eyes were hard and glinting, bitter anger obvious in the lines of his jaw and the tension of his shoulders.

Barnes sighed heavily, his breath billowing through the cold night air. “No one acted on any of it.”

His defeated slump offered a striking contrast to Barton’s gritted teeth and blazing glare.

“One night we put together that everything we’d been doing, everything we’d goddamn given up to get there, was just . . . smoke in the wind,” Barnes said dazedly. “Just like us.”
“So we stopped sending it,” Barton snapped off. “We couldn’t get back to the Union lines by just walking up and asking if they remembered us; we’d made too much of a name for ourselves by then.”

“So, we started just fighting to save the life of the man next to us. Fighting just to stay alive.”

“When the South surrendered, we skinned out of there;” Barton whispered. “Tried to go back home.”

Both men were silent at the mention of home, and Bucky could feel the gloom settling over their little encampment once more.

“When we got to New York, they told us Fury was dead. Sent us on up the ladder to General Pierce.” Barnes was staring down at his gloved hands, sounding like a haunted man. “Pierce told us we was traitors. Deserters. He was the one who withheld all that information, used it to gain influence and fame during the war. It made him a rich man. A powerful man. If people found out how many mother’s sons died because he kept all that to himself, he’d have been ruined. He told us no one could ever know we’d been spies, that we’d be hanged before we could talk.”

“We ran,” Barton said when Barnes seemed determined to leave it at that. He jerked his thumb at Barnes. “We ran right to his best buddy Captain Rogers, trying to get help.”

“He didn’t even give us a chance to speak,” Barnes whispered, still refusing to look up.

Barton tossed a pebble to the ground between them and Bucky’s boys. “So, we ran again. We been runnin’ ever since. At first we were trying to find something or someone to clear our names, so we could go back home.”

Barnes was murmuring from behind the brim of his hat again. “Steve joined the U.S. Marshals. Came chasin’ after us.”

“After our first dust up with the marshals, we stopped trying to go home and started trying to just stay alive, just like the war all over again,” Barton said, voice gone hoarse. “Now, all we do is run.”

Barnes was still staring down, ringing his hands over and over. “He hates me so damn much he’s spent half his life chasin’ me.”

He closed his eyes even as Barton held him tighter.

“What year is it?” Bucky asked after a few tense moments of silence during which no one seemed to know what to say.

Barton sighed heavily and looked up at him. “1874.”

Bucky nodded. He’d been damn close with his guesses.

Barnes and Barton were watching them carefully now, both of them with a wild, sharp look in their eyes like they were ready to handle it should any of them respond aggressively to their story. Bucky could see how they’d made a damn terrifying team during the war. How the opposite side could think of either man as the Angel of Death.

“You believe us?” Barnes finally asked softly.

They all shared glances, eyeing each other critically. Bucky was on board. This sounded far more like the truth than the reality Rogers had believed. He nodded, and the others slowly began to nod.
along with him.

“Yeah, kid.” Tony finally answered sadly. “Yeah, we do.”

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Steve was only half asleep, too cold and too uncomfortable to really fall deeply, even with the other men all crowded around him and Bucky like goddamn puppies. He supposed he should be grateful, though, because he wasn’t sure he would have heard the scuff of a boot on the soft ground otherwise.

He lifted his head, peering into the darkness. His eyes landed on Barnes, who was crouched and staring right at him, one finger to his lips to keep Steve quiet. Steve nodded.

Another scuff came from the surrounding darkness, followed by the loud click of a gun cocking. Barnes pulled his gun, cocking it in answer. Bucky startled up at the almost simultaneous sounds, rolling to his hands and knees and damn near growling like a feral dog.

“Barnes!” Steve’s voice shouted from the somewhere in the misty dawn. “We got you surrounded! Don’t do nothin’ stupid, you damn fool!”

“Aw, Stevie, you say the sweetest things,” Barnes called back, drawling and cocksure even as he coiled like a snake.

Bucky wasn’t coiled, though. He was moving.

“Buck, wait,” Steve hissed, grabbing for Bucky even though the man was already gone, launching himself into the fog.

“What?” Barnes grunted, startled, watching with wide eyes as Bucky disappeared and then looking at Steve askance.

Steve winced and shrugged.

There was a scream, then a loud scuffle which finally roused the others. They were all moving at record speed, grabbing weapons and scuttling closer to the middle of the clearing, putting all their backs to each other.

“Damn you, Barnes!” Rogers roared into the dawn as the scuffling got louder. “You damn animal!” His voice cut off with a pained grunt and a less than dignified squeak.

“Don’t hurt ’em!” Barnes cried, pushing to his feet.

Steve grabbed him and pulled him back down. “He won’t. He won’t!”

There was another terrified, outraged scream. Steve winced and Barnes frowned at him accusingly.

“He won’t hurt them permanently.”

A few seconds later, Bucky came tromping back toward their clearing, dragging a struggling bundle behind him. Marshal Wilson was trussed up like a damn calf at the rodeo, being dragged through the grass and dirt until Bucky stopped and pulled him forward, brandishing him to the others like a Christmas present.

“It ain’t fun, is it?” Bucky shouted at the man before whirling and going back into the darkness. The scene was repeated twice more as he dragged both Marshal Stark, and then Marshal Rogers into the
camp, all of them tied up in ropes and struggling as they cursed Bucky up and down.

Bucky bent down and plucked Rogers’s hat out of the dirt where it had fallen, plopping it on his head. He had somehow acquired a piece of grass and was chewing on the end of it. Steve stared at him, mouth hanging open. Good God, there was something seriously wrong with him because he wanted nothing more right now than to climb Bucky Barnes like a tree.

Bucky grinned back. “I could get used to this.”

Barnes blinked up at him, pushing his hat back as he stood up and took a few wooden steps closer. He eyed Bucky up and down then offered a low, impressed whistle before looking down at the men Bucky had captured. “Jesus wept,” he whispered. He glanced back at Steve. “I have to admit, part of me still didn’t believe you.”

“You damn crazy bastard!” Rogers cried, shimmying his shoulders. It was painfully obvious that the Barnes and Rogers of this world weren’t any stronger than any other man their size. Rogers stopped struggling suddenly, staring up at what could only be Barnes’s bare silhouette. Steve could see his eyes darting between Barnes and Bucky as they stood side by side, their features barely visible in the fog and the low light of dawn.

Rogers finally sneered sarcastically at Barnes. “Didn’t know you had a brother.”

“I used to,” Barnes said softly, waving his hand at Rogers. “When I was a boy.”

Rogers jutted his chin out stubbornly, but his eyes betrayed the emotional turmoil those simple words had stirred up inside him.

Barnes gestured for Steve to step forward, and Steve did carefully, making sure his face was turned toward the best light. Rogers stared up at him, going pale beneath the dirt and the beard.

Barnes knelt next to Rogers, fingers plucking at his badge almost tenderly. “Jog my memory, Stevie. Did you ever have yourself a brother?”

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Tony spent most of the conversation they had as the sun rose either facepalming or wanting to facepalm. The marshals were not as easy to convince as Barnes and Barton had been, and it wasn’t until the sun was fully up and Bucky finally cursed quietly and took the hologram off his arm for all the world to see that Marshal Rogers finally stopped insisting it was some sort of trick.

All five men had stared at Bucky’s metal arm – the sun glinting off it, the plates recalibrating the more tense he got – as if they’d never seen anything like it. Which was probably exactly right. No one had ever seen anything like that arm.

“Ghosts,” Wilson finally said wryly, still trying to squirm out of his bindings. “Sure. Why not?”

And that had pretty much been that. The ten of them made a rather edgy group as they all sat in the warming clearing, three of them still tied up with so many knots Tony wasn’t sure how Bucky had tied them all so quickly in the dark.

Steve cleared his throat, nudging Barnes with his foot. “I think you should tell them the truth now.”

Barnes glared at him. “I told you. We already tried that. He thinks he knows it already and nothing I say is gonna change his mind.”
“You’re damn right,” Rogers snarled.

Tony sighed loudly. This was way too much angst for his tolerance levels. “Marshal Rogers. Do you know Alexander Pierce?”

Rogers was still staring at Barnes, a mixture of anger and longing clear on his face. He tore his eyes away from Barnes to look at Tony. “General Pierce? I know of him. Met him a few times over the years. He’s a war hero.”

Barnes and Barton both began to grumble and growl, both of them tensing. Rogers shot them a dirty look.

“I can assure you, he’s no hero,” Bucky said softly. His calm, quiet voice seemed to cut through Rogers’s anger faster than Barnes’s snarling. Bucky was staring at his hand. He spread his fingers wide. “I don’t know him here, I don’t know the history here. But that man is an evil son of a bitch all the way to his core.”

Tony was shocked by the vehemence in Bucky’s voice. He’d never heard Bucky actually lose his temper before, he was pretty sure. Never heard him express real, frightening anger toward anything but himself. Rogers leaned away from Bucky, staring at him hard. His eyes darted from Bucky, to Tony, to Barnes, to Bucky’s hand.

“He did that to you?” Rogers asked Bucky finally.

Bucky looked up at him, and Tony couldn’t see Bucky’s expression, but the way Rogers appeared to try to shrink into his ropes meant their Bucky had just regained his status as most terrifying Bucky in the multiverse. Tony was perversely proud.

“Pierce is the one pushing the warrants on you,” Rogers informed them slowly, after trying and failing to meet Bucky’s eyes for more than a few seconds. “He’s got a stake in the rail. Claims you robbed one of his trains.”

“Trains,” Barton and Barnes both echoed incredulously.

Rogers nodded, narrowing his eyes at Tony. “There’s no way you coulda known that, none of you. So, you pulling his name out of thin air has my attention.”

“About damn time something did that wasn’t Barnes,” Marshal Stark muttered as he blatantly tried to saw through his ropes with a rock.

Bucky pushed to his feet, startling everyone into flinching. “I’m going to check the perimeter,” he mumbled, turning away from the rest of them.

“You need company?” Tony asked carefully. After everything they’d been through, he was determined that Bucky Barnes would never feel alone or adrift again, not in this world or any other they went to.

Bucky shook his head, offering Tony a weak smile in thanks all the same. “Just need to get some jitters out. I won’t be long.”

Steve stayed put, but the sway of his wide shoulders spoke volumes about how much he wanted to follow the man.

“Give him a minute, Cap,” Sam whispered. It didn’t help the tension in Steve’s frame one bit, but he nodded.
Rogers watched Bucky walk away as well, then he peered at Steve briefly before eyeing Clint for some reason. He gestured as well as he could with his tied hands between Clint and Bucky’s receding shadow in the distance. “You just gonna let him go off alone?”

Clint looked up from the little arrow he’d been drawing in the dirt, eyes widening. “Why the hell are you asking me?”

Rogers scowled at him. “You two are . . . you know.”

“ Fucking,” Stark supplied drily.

“What?” Clint squeaked.

“You and him was pretty cozy in your cell,” Wilson told him, staring at Clint pointedly.

“Oh Jesus, not this again,” Sam grumbled, rubbing both hands over his face and groaning.

“What?” Steve snapped, turning and glaring at Clint.

Clint put up both hands and shook his head. “We had to cover the sound of the iron bending somehow,” he insisted. “It was for show!”

“Barnes’s go-to is the fake make-out,” Tony drawled, picking up a stick and beginning to draw in the dirt as well.

Steve rounded on him, mouth agape. “What?” he barked.

“Shh,” Barnes hissed, waving a hand at them. He was peering off into the distance, head slightly cocked. “Shit.”

“What?” Rogers demanded, trying to turn, his fingers twitching like he wanted his gun. His whispers were harsh in the strained silence as Barnes edged toward the perimeter of their camp. “Barnes. Buck. Buck, untie us!”

“Shut up, goddamn!” Barnes grunted.

Tony cocked his head but didn’t hear anything in the ensuing lull.

“Horses,” Barnes whispered finally. He glanced behind him, nodding at Barton, who quickly faded into the high grass with his bow, staying low and scurrying toward a copse of trees nearby.

“Who’s after you?” Rogers demanded.

“Besides you?” Barnes growled, darting toward his horse and pulling a long rifle out of his saddle. He ran to the little rise in the earth they’d been using as a windbreak and laid out, setting the rifle up and peering down the sights as if it might help him see better.

Clint scrambled toward Barnes, stretching out beside him on the hill. He propped himself up on one elbow and placed the other hand on Barnes’s back, right between his shoulder blades, then remained motionless at Barnes’s side, whispering to him. It took Tony a few seconds of utter confusion to realize Clint was acting as Barnes’s spotter.

The wait for one of them to speak again felt like it took a long damn time.

Tony planted both palms against his cheeks, gritting his teeth as they waited. He wasn’t cut out for this shit!
“It’s Rumlow and those two damn dumb henchmen of his,” Barnes finally snarled. “I swear, if their brains was dynamite they couldn’t even blow their own noses.”

“Thought you were riding with him now,” Rogers muttered with a bit of a sneer.

Barnes didn’t look back at him, instead focusing on setting up what must have been a shot of at least a thousand yards. “He’s one of Pierce’s agents. He was supposed to either escort us back to New York for Pierce, or kill us if we put up a fight. He thought he had us fooled, and we let him think that until he wasn’t useful no more. That’s why we went ghost on him yesterday.”

“To my eyes, you all looked awful damn chummy yesterday,” Rogers told him, just the wrong side of angry to sound as wry as he was probably going for.

Barnes tore his eyes away from his target long enough to peer over his shoulder at Rogers, a frown marring his features. “Oh, yeah,” he muttered, almost to himself, as his expression cleared. “That wasn’t actually you with us.”

Rogers scowled in confusion as he watched Barnes shrug and turn back to his rifle.

“Goddamn, that shit’s confusing,” Barnes whispered to Clint. Clint snuffed a quiet laugh and nodded. Tony could just barely see the quirk of a crooked grin on Barnes’s lips, and he was perfectly still as he peered down the gun’s sights and Clint whispered into his ear.

Tony cocked his head at them. Now that he wasn’t seeing the two of them as psychopaths in a zombie world, he could admit that Bucky and Clint made a pretty handsome couple. And they had more in common with each other than just about anyone else in the group, save for perhaps Steve and Bucky with their shared past and their serums. Tony had laughed when Steve asked Bucky and Clint to not touch for a few worlds, but in this light, with both men stretched out and touching from shoulder to toe, with Clint’s hand resting easy on Barnes’s back, whispering into his ear as they did something they were both extremely competent in . . . Tony had a little more sympathy for Steve’s point of view, there. And this wasn’t even their Bucky Barnes he was looking at.

Tony cast a careful glance in Steve’s direction, and his hunch had been right on the nose; Steve was scowling at Barnes and Clint, his head cocked, his brow furrowed in an expression that was somewhere between angry and sad. He was also keeping his mouth shut, which was singularly odd for Steve.

Yeesh, that could stir up a hornet’s nest of problems for their team dynamics that they absolutely did not need to be dealing with until they were back in their own world.

Barnes finally grunted in displeasure after several minutes of him and Clint preparing a shot. “If I take one down, the others will be out of range before I can get another shot off.”

“Not worth it to take out the head rider?” Clint asked softly.

Barnes shook his head, finally pushing away from his rifle and peering off into the distance. He put two fingers into his mouth and gave a sharp whistle.

An answering whistle came from the trees, and Tony turned just in time to see Barton carefully making his way back toward them.

“We need Rumlow alive,” Barnes mumbled. “He’s the only way we can get to Pierce.”

“Hold on,” Wilson blurted. “You’re aiming to kill General Pierce?”
Barnes snarled, baring his teeth to the horizon. “Dead’s too good for him. We don’t want to kill him. We want information, we want evidence, and he’s the only one left with any of it.”

“You and Barton,” Rogers said softly, staring at the ground in front of Barnes rather than looking at him directly. “You’re never gonna stop, are you?”

Barnes turned and sat, slumping against the hillock as he stared at Rogers. “Would you? If stopping meant never going home again? If stopping meant your entire life had been a waste because everyone and everything you ever loved had stopped loving you back and turned on you? Would you stop?”

Rogers gritted his teeth and flexed his shoulders, putting all his strength into trying to wriggle out of the ropes again. “You’re so full of shit, Barnes!” he hissed. “Looking at me like I’m the goddamn villain in your story! You’re the one who left! You’re the one who stopped loving me, and I’m not gonna listen to your lies, you goddamn silver-tongued piece of shit!”

Barton cleared his throat when he walked into camp, and he crouched down to stay out of sight, staring at Rogers blankly. “Seems like I’ve heard this horseshit before.”

Tony shared an uneasy glance with Sam, then looked from Rogers, red-faced from anger and blue eyes sparking in the sunlight, to Barnes, his shoulders slumped, his head bowed so he could hide behind the brim of that goddamn hat. As Tony peered at him, Barnes raised a hand to his face, swiping his fingers across first one cheek, then the other.

Tony looked away quickly, frowning hard at the ground.

It was pretty damn obvious why the remote had brought them here. Tony wasn’t sure the five of them could fix the problems this world was presenting to them, though. It all hinged on Steve Rogers not being stubborn.

And, well . . . they were fucked.

Tony sighed heavily, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Barnes?” he said carefully, giving the man a quick glance. He indicated the three marshals, all of them now blatantly trying to get out of their ropes again. “This is probably going to be your best chance at telling them your whole story. You’ve got a captive audience, if nothing else.”

Steve sputtered and coughed, covering his mouth to try to play off the fact that he’d just snorted out a laugh.

Barnes and Barton locked eyes, both of them staring for long, tense, silent moments. Barton finally gave a tiny nod, and Barnes sighed heavily. He gave one last look behind him.

“They’re still heading toward town,” Clint assured him. “I’ll keep an eye on them. Go on.”

Barnes grimaced, but he did push himself up and make his way toward the center of their pitiful little campsite. Rogers glared at him the entire time, but Barnes sat down right at his feet, legs crossed and hands on his knees like he was proving he wasn’t armed. “I’m gonna talk,” he told Rogers. “And you’re gonna listen until I’m done. And after I’ve said my piece, we can figure out where we all go from there.”

Rogers was still stubbornly jutting out his chin, trying to bore holes into Barnes’s skull with his glare. “No,” he finally snarled. “If I do listen to whatever tale you’re about to spin, what do I get out of it?”

“Name your price, Stevie,” Barnes said sadly.
His easy acquiescence seemed to throw the marshal off, because his glower smoothed out and he stared at Barnes, eyes going forlorn as he stared. He began to nod. “Okay,” he said, his tone almost gentle now. “Let’s hear it.

It only took about ten minutes for Barnes to tell Rogers the entire story that he’d already shared with the rest of them. Tony watched the marshals’ expressions morph through an array of emotions that he was too exhausted to interpret.

“And that’s when you tossed us out into the street,” Barton growled once Barnes had stopped talking. He’d been standing at Barnes’s side, arms crossed, the entire time.

Rogers looked stricken. He’d gone pale as death, and he’d stopped fucking around with his ropes halfway through Barnes’s story. “Buck,” he whispered, sounding like he was in physical pain. He shook his head, closing his eyes. “No. No, I remember, during the Wilderness, you shot at me! Twice!”

Barnes smiled softly and ducked his head. “I was just sayin’ hello.”

Rogers blinked stupidly. “I’d never seen you miss before,” he said, humming and staring off into the middle distance. “I didn’t . . .” His gaze focused and he snapped his attention back to Barnes. “Swear to me,” he demanded. “Swear to me you’re telling the truth.”

Barnes cocked his head, sighing loud enough that Tony could hear it from where he was trying to pretend he wasn’t avidly eavesdropping with the others.

“I’ve never lied to you a day in my life, Steve,” Barnes said, sounding exhausted and heartbroken. “I was trying to tell you the truth that day in New York, and I’m telling the same truth now.”

Rogers growled in frustration. “All you had to do that day was mention Colonel Fury’s name!” He jutted his chin toward the other two marshals. “That’s how we met during the war, we all worked under Fury! If you’d just –”

“Hey, fuck you, Captain Rogers,” Barton snarled.

“You didn’t give me the space to say much of anything, Steve,” Barnes reminded the man. “You opened the door to us and you broke my damn nose before I could even say hello.”

Rogers focused in on Barnes with blue eyes that were swimming with unshed tears. “I remember,” he practically gasped. “Buck, I’m –”

“You know how close we both were to a rope that day?” Barton snarled at Rogers before the man could say the dreaded Sorry word he’d obviously been about to utter. Barton didn’t give a shit that the man was near tears already, because even Tony could see him ramping up for a verbal lashing that had probably been percolating for ten years. “We left your quarters and had to run from the soldiers who were there to arrest us. You kicked us out into the snow and we’ve been running ever since! Ten years of our lives, wasted to your damn stubborn pride!”

Rogers closed his eyes, tears breaking free and streaming down his dirty face into his beard.

Wilson and Stark had been silent up to this point, and while Tony could see that his alternate self was bursting at the seams to speak, it was Wilson who broke the silence. “You said when you got to New York, you found out Colonel Fury was dead.”

Barnes nodded, but Barton turned to glare at the man. “What of it?”
“Colonel Fury’s not dead,” Wilson answered, his voice calm but unsteady.

Both Barton and Barnes snapped their attention to him, mouths parted and gray eyes almost identical in shock. “What?” Barnes rasped out.

“There was an attempt at assassination, right as the war was winding down,” Stark told them. He seemed to be speaking as quickly as he could out of sheer relief that he was emptying the words that had been building up in him all morning. Tony could relate. “He was in a bad way for a long time. But he pulled through, went into hiding until the assassins could be brought to justice. He’s still alive, and still in hiding, as far as we knew when we left New York a few months back.”

Barnes and Barton locked eyes, having an entire conversation without uttering a sound or moving a muscle.

“We can get you to New York,” Rogers offered eagerly. “We can get you there safe. I’ll help you find Fury, take you right to him.”

“Guys?” Steve said softly, craning his head to survey the area while still trying to stay low. “Where is Bucky?”
Bucky hadn’t intended to walk far, or to be gone for very long, but when he stopped his meandering circuit of their perimeter and glanced up, he realized the sun was higher than he’d expected. Whoops.

He also realized he had a faint idea of where he was. The map of the area in his head resembled something from a goddamn Nintendo game from the 90’s, as vague as it was with markers like ‘the river’ and ‘that one weird tree’, but he did know he and Clint had been taken this way yesterday.

He was well over halfway to that one weird tree, so he kept moving in that direction. The others would forgive him for being gone longer than he’d promised if he came back with the remote in hand.

Probably.

Despite the wide open feeling to the land, Bucky couldn’t help but feel closed in as he made his way through the sparse forest. He made sure his steps were silent, and he stayed in the shadows, as was his way for so long.

It didn’t make him feel any better about being in a strange time, in a strange place. He paused and cocked his head, listening as a thought ran through his mind; it was 1873, and he was closer to the year he’d been born now than he would be when they went home to 2015. A lot closer.

Weird.

 Fuck! And the year he’d ‘died’ in the war was right there halfway between now, and then. Or . . . was it then and now? Bucky shook his head, realizing he’d gotten off course.

He heard the horses long before they were anywhere near him, and he hunkered down and stayed hidden, hoping none of the animals gave him away by catching his scent. The riders he could take care of, but he didn’t particularly want to need to do that.

The face that he saw first when the riders came into view almost had him changing his mind. He narrowed his eyes at Rumlow, instinctively wanting to toss a rock at his nose even while telling himself the last Rumlow he’d encountered hadn’t been a bad guy. Still . . . a rock to the nose wouldn’t kill the guy. If he threw it with his right hand . . .

He ducked lower, cursing his luck. He could see the goddamn hollow tree he’d dropped the remote into. It was right there.

This universe obviously had it out for every version of Bucky Barnes, because the riders stopped their horses and tossed the reins over the scraggly branches of the fucking hollow tree as they moved into the denser forest off the path. Great. The only tree in the forest Bucky needed to get to was the rest stop on the path between Outlaw Town and Dysfunction Junction back there.

He settled into his hiding spot, eyes on the men. He had no doubt he could take them if he had to, but he still didn’t want to. He was damn tired of leaving a trail of bodies behind him. He’d already been gone too long, a few more minutes to wait these assholes out wasn’t going to kill anyone.

Probably.
It wasn’t long before the riders were mounting their horses again, pulling the reins off the branches. Bucky flexed a few muscles, preparing to move once they were out of sight. But then Rumlow stopped, leaning over from his saddle, peering at the tree.

“Don’t you do it,” Bucky whispered almost soundlessly. “Don’t you do it, you giant fucking prick.”

Rumlow cocked his head and said something to one of his companions, then dismounted again. He handed the reins of his horse over, then squatted and reached into the hollow of the tree. “The hell is this?” he asked the other men as he held the remote up and peered at it.

Bucky sighed as Rumlow slid the remote into his jacket. “Motherfucker.”

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Almost as soon as the three marshals had been untied, the camp had devolved into hushed squabbling. Steve had almost yanked one of those guns out of a holster and shot his alternate in the face after five minutes of arguing about whether they should split up and go in search of Bucky or stay together.

“I just got Buck back,” Rogers practically hissed in Steve’s face. “I’m not going to risk losing him now just because yours went haring off into the wilderness on his own!”

Steve threw his hands out, whirling on his companions. “Am I an asshole?” he shouted at them. Tony, Sam, and Clint all blinked at him in perfect sync, like they were wired together. None of them ventured an answer.

“Because every version of me we’ve met has been an asshole!” Steve snarled as he turned back to Rogers and pointed a finger in his face.

“Can we take a minute to agree I ain’t a puppy who needs a leash?” Barnes drawled.

“Shut up, Buck!” both Steve and Rogers shouted without looking away from each other. Barnes made a rude gesture at them both.

“My team has never had to operate in this kind of territory,” Steve growled. “We need your help if we’re going to find him!”

The Marshal narrowed his eyes. Steve didn’t care what he was thinking, though. What Marshal Rogers didn’t seem to realize as he was wasting their time rationalizing over why they all needed to stay together, was that Steve was going to go out there and find Bucky, whether he got the go-ahead from these assholes or not.

“You said yourself,” Barnes finally said gently as he valiantly tried to pull Steve back from punching Rogers in the face. “You don’t want to separate again. Remember?”

Steve rounded on the man, teeth bared as he pointed off into the distance. “But we are, and now Buck’s out there with that . . . that psycho! Do you have any idea what that man out there did to him?”

Barnes frowned but kept his eyes on Steve, his expression almost placid. It was hard to stay angry in the face of that sort of calm, but Steve had always been an overachiever.

“I don’t,” Barnes answered. “I do know if they have a run-in, it ain’t gonna be pretty. Rumlow’s out for blood now. But your man would be a long way off if they did have a run-in, you understand? We
watched them head toward town. Your Barnes’d have to cover that ground faster than those horses to even cross their path.”

Steve seethed quietly, nodding. “He can cover more ground than you think.”

Barnes was still gripping Steve’s bicep, and his eyes strayed to the spot before he met Steve’s angry glare again with a quizzical tilt of his head. He seemed contemplative now, but not necessarily suspicious. Neither Steve nor Bucky had displayed any great feats of strength while being in the man’s company, but he got the feeling Barnes suspected something was off with one or both of them, anyway.

“You’re saying your boy could cover more ground than a horse in less than an hour?” Barnes asked dubiously.

“He bent iron bars with his bare hands,” Rogers muttered as he sidled up closer, looking like he thought he might have to pull Steve and Barnes apart now, when it was him Steve was wanting to smack around. “He’s stronger than any man I’ve ever seen.”

“That doesn’t mean he can’t be hurt. Or shot!”

Rogers hummed. “I’d wager he can take care of himself.”

Steve bared his teeth. “You have no idea what he’s capable of. Or what I’m capable of, when someone’s standing between him and me.”

“Steve,” Sam said gently, coming closer with careful steps. “Calm down.”

Steve turned to him, teeth gritted and angry words on his tongue, when he realized that he’d bunched both his hands into fists, that he’d squared his shoulders for a fight, that he was looming over Barnes and Rogers both, threatening. Behind them, the other two marshals were watching him warily, hands on their recently returned guns, and Barton had his bow loose in his hand, hanging at his side.

Steve blinked at them. Jesus . . . he’d been so caught up in thinking of all the horrors that could have befallen Bucky out there in this wild universe . . . he blinked again and looked back at the hand Barnes still had resting on his arm. He peered back up at Barnes, into those steel-blue eyes of Bucky’s, and realized Barnes was the only man there who didn’t look edgy. He was either trusting Steve not to lose his temper and hurt anyone, or he was a master at concealing his fear.

Steve blew out a breath and nodded. “I’m sorry. But I spent too many years without him. I need to get to him.”

Barnes smiled sadly, nodding. Behind him, Marshal Rogers had his head bowed, his shoulders hunched. If anyone could even begin to understand how Steve felt, he realized it was probably this world’s versions of himself and Bucky.

“Clint’s a tracker,” Barnes told Steve before Steve could say anything more. “A damn fine one, at that. We can go after your boy and still stay together.”

“Buck,” Rogers said with a frown.

“Did I ask your opinion, Marshal?” Barnes asked without taking his eyes off Steve.

The marshal didn’t reply, and Steve nodded gratefully, breathing out a gust of air so hard that it fluttered the feather on Barnes’s hat. Barnes patted him gently, then took a careful step away from him.
They gathered their sparse belongings. The marshals’ horses had all wandered off in the night after they’d been captured, so the three horses Barnes and Barton had escaped with were all that remained, their saddles loaded down with everything the two men owned. Steve’s group had all somehow managed to retain their packs, even Bucky and Clint, who’d had to circle back into the jail to retrieve theirs.

It was better luck than Steve was used to, frankly. But he hated that even those meager preparations had to be taking time away from him running off into the forest, shouting Bucky’s name.

By the time they had everything gathered and ready to go, which only took about ten minutes but felt like a goddamn lifetime as Steve vibrated in place with both his and Bucky’s packs on his shoulders, the sun was high in the sky.

Barton did a circuit of the ground on the edge of the camp where Bucky had walked off, and it took him no time to pick up Bucky’s trail.

“If he was trying to cover his tracks, we’ll lose him,” Steve assured Barton and Barnes grimly.

Barnes cocked an eyebrow at him, smirking. “You think so?”

“Oh, I know so,” Steve said with a playful answering smirk that he didn’t really realize he was giving. It was just instinct to banter with a man who looked and sounded like Bucky.

Rogers cleared his throat pointedly, nodding off to where Barton was already trailing through the high grass. “We doin’ this?”

Steve couldn’t shake the feeling that the marshal would be jealous of a prairie dog if Barnes was looking at it instead of him right now. It was kind of the same way Steve had felt when he’d finally had Bucky back in the Tower again.

The others followed Barton in a ragged line, of sorts, Rogers giving Barnes a hard stare that made Barnes blink at him questioningly as he passed by.

Steve couldn’t be fucked to think about that, though. Not while Bucky was out there by himself. He closed his eyes and lifted his face toward the sun, taking a deep breath to keep himself from rattling apart as he was left alone in the little clearing.

“Oh,” he breathed out finally, opening his eyes. “Okay.”

He jumped three inches off the ground when he realized he wasn’t alone anymore, and he was halfway into a defensive crouch before he even looked at the man’s face. Bucky was looking at him with a confused smile, both hands up to show he wasn’t a threat.

“Buck!” Steve shouted almost angrily.

“Were you leaving me?” Bucky asked Steve teasingly as he dropped his hands and peered off at the group making its way through the grass. “Where are we going?”

Steve smacked him on the arm, cursing when metal clanged against his hand. He shook his suddenly numb fingers. “Dammit!”

Bucky looked wounded as he turned to face Steve, rubbing the metal arm like it had hurt. “The hell was that for?”

“Where were you?” Steve shouted. The new volume and pitch his voice reached alerted the others
and some of them turned to investigate.

Bucky winced. “I’m sorry,” he said softly, glancing at the others, who were trudging their way back with body language that read, ‘sure, why not?’

Steve narrowed his eyes.

“I got turned around in the damn Nintendo woods. Then I saw the marshals’ horses and I apparently do not have a good rapport with horses so I chased them around for a while, and –

“Oh, my god, eat my ass, Barnes!” Steve shouted.

Bucky looked like he was valiantly trying not to laugh at Steve’s poorly concealed worry and relief. He sobered quickly, though. “I went to get the remote”

Steve blinked at him. “You didn’t have it on you?”

Bucky shrugged helplessly. “I hid it when we were captured,” he explained, lowering his voice even more. “When I was about to turn back, I realized I was close to it, so I went after it.”

“Christ. We saw Rumlow, I was losing my mind, thinking about you out there.”

Bucky merely gave him a sad smile. “I know. I’m sorry. I hoped getting the remote would make up for wandering off.”

Steve stepped closer to him and pulled him into a hug. If he clung a little tight, Bucky wasn’t tattling on him. Bucky patted him on the back, kissing his temple. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“It’s fine. We’re fine. We’re all fine,” Steve muttered into Bucky’s shirt. “Let’s just put a new battery in that fucking thing and get out of here.”

Bucky’s body went tight and stiff in his arms. “Well . . .”

Steve pulled back, frowning at him. “You do have it. Right?”

Bucky hummed and waved his hand in the air with another wince as he took a step back. “I mean, I know where it is.”

Steve squeezed his eyes closed. “If the answer is not ‘in your pocket,’ I may not be able to handle that like a mature adult.”

Bucky made an odd groaning sound that seemed somehow sympathetic.

“Hey, asshole,” Tony greeted as he hopped off the little hillock into the clearing, grinning widely. Despite his greeting, he actually looked and sounded pleased to see Bucky standing there, whole and unharmed. “Did you circle around on us?”

“I had to make sure I couldn’t be tracked back,” Bucky said, sounding defensive. “And there were . . . horses. Where are we going?” he asked again, since Steve had never actually answered him.

“We were going off to find you,” Sam answered, and he threw himself to the ground to sit, looking just about as done with their adventures as a human could look. Steve could relate.

“What, all of you like a wagon train?” Bucky asked incredulously.

Steve’s hand shot out and he had Bucky by the neck before either of them could really register the
movement. He dragged Bucky closer, pulling the tips of their noses almost together. “I am going to
tie your ass down and cart you around on my back, do you understand? You’re not going out of my
sight again, and you’re not going to bitch one word about it or I swear to God –”

“Stevie,” Bucky said, laughing softly. He clapped his hands to Steve’s face, a little harder than
strictly necessary, and kissed him before Steve could finish his threat.

Marshal Stark cleared his throat. “Are they fighting, or . . .”

A series of groans from Steve’s teammates was the only answer he received.

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“He took it,” Tony repeated, voice deadpan, face blank. He wasn’t even sure that he was surprised
by Bucky’s news.

Sam sighed loudly. “Of course he did.”

Bucky, for his part, looked sort of sick about it. “I’m sorry. I should have jumped them, gotten it
back.”

“No,” Steve growled. He looked like he wanted to throw Bucky to the ground and sit on him. “You
did the right thing.”

“This is the, uh, what’sit that will get you back to where you come from?” Barnes asked, his voice as
uncertain as Tony had heard it. He was kneeling, dragging his finger through the dirt in what Tony
realized was an infinity symbol, not looking up at any of them.

“Yes,” Bucky finally muttered. “Without it, we’re stuck here. We have to get it back or I’ve fucked
us all. Again.”

Tony scowled at him. “Hey,” he said sharply. Bucky’s head shot up and he met Tony’s eyes, a flash
of that gut-twisting fear Tony could now easily spot in his expression. Tony’s heart stuttered. He
stepped closer and laid a hand on Bucky’s metal shoulder. “This? This is not your fault, Buckaroo.
You did the right thing.”

It made Tony’s stomach churn with even more nausea when surprise, rather than relief or
acceptance, crawled across Bucky’s face. Tony was pretty sure Bucky Barnes would feel guilty for
being struck by lightning. It was possible, the slightest of possibilities mind you, that Tony was
staring at the only other person in the multiverse who doubted himself as much as Tony did.

“Well,” Barton said slowly, as if he wasn’t sure if he should break the tense silence. “With ten of us,
we should be able to get the doodad back from Rumlow pretty easy. I wouldn’t mind putting an
arrow in his ass, either. Just for old time’s sake.”

Barnes barked a laugh.

“What? No,” Marshal Rogers blurted, wide eyes landing on Barnes. “We have to get you to New
York, get your names cleared and pardoned. There’s a price on your head until we do.”

Barnes peered up at him with a frown, then glanced at the rest of them, all of them hovering
awkwardly in an approximation of a circle. “Steve,” Barnes said as he pushed to his feet. “We can
take care of whatever needs taking care of when they’re gone. Clint and I been running with a price
on our heads for ten years. And I ain’t even sure New York is gonna fix that.”
“Bucky,” Rogers began to argue, taking an imploring step closer.

“Whole world may think we’re scoundrels, Steve, but my heavenly soul has always been clear. I intend to keep it that way. We can’t just up and leave, they need our help.”

Rogers jutted his stubborn jaw out. “Oh, so now you can’t just up and leave. Thought that’s what you did best.”

Barnes pushed the brim of his hat back with the tip of one finger. It was such a simple gesture, but one Tony recognized as a dangerous one, from this man. He looked wistful, though, almost sad. “I thought, these past ten years, I’d find it was me who changed too much to stomach it. But it was my little Stevie Rogers who really got lost the night I left, wasn’t it?”

The words seemed to hit the marshal like a wrecking ball to the gut. He took a step back, almost staggering, as he stared at Barnes, looking betrayed and heartbroken.

“What’s all that anger done to you, Steve?”

“You got a lot of nerve,” Rogers whispered shakily.

Barnes stood his ground, though, squaring his shoulders, the calm of his words making them somehow more devastating even to Tony’s ears. “I ain’t leavin’ here ’til I see them off, safe and sound. You want to take me to New York before that? You’re gonna have to arrest me, Marshal Rogers.”

Rogers didn’t say anything as he stared at Barnes, merely darted his eyes back and forth like he was desperately searching for something before he turned and stiffly walked away, toward the horses Bucky had managed to retrieve.

Stark and Wilson both watched him go, and then Wilson silently followed without even a glance at Barnes or any of the rest of them. Stark took an angry step toward Barnes, though, jabbing a finger into his sternum. “You’re even more of a lowlife than we’ve thought all this time,” he snarled before stomping off after his two companions.

Tony shifted uneasily, glancing over his shoulder to find both Sam and Clint watching with carefully blank expressions.

Steve seemed to be holding himself carefully, but he placed a hand on Barnes’s shoulder. “You don’t have to do this for us,” he said softly. “You and Barton should go with them. We can handle it.”

Barnes smiled sadly and ducked his head.

“Ten years you been trying to earn back his approval,” Barton spat as he came up to Barnes, bristling like an overprotective guard dog. “Piece of shit, he’s not worth the saddle leather your ass wears out.”

Barnes sighed and raised his face to the sun briefly before he looked at Barton. “You never much cared for him,” he said wryly.

Barton tore his blazing eyes away from the three marshals to settle it on Barnes. “It was hard enough, during the war, man I loved pining away for some asshole I’d never compare to. But after what he did to us? And you still pining away all these years, Buck, I –”

Barnes raised his gloved hand slowly, but the motion cut Barton’s words off as surely as if Barnes had slapped him silent. He blinked when Barnes rested his hand on his shoulder, his thumb gently
caressing Barton’s neck. Barnes was still smiling sadly. “You really think I been doing all this, all these years, for him?”

Barton cleared his throat and ducked his head, but Barnes wouldn’t let him stay that way. He stepped closer and lifted Barton’s chin with his thumb, then he kissed him. It was easily one of the most tender kisses Tony had ever witnessed, and it was obvious that it wasn’t anywhere close to the first these two men had shared. They even knew exactly how to move to make sure the brims of their hats didn’t entangle.

Tony realized as he cocked his head at them, that he was pulling for these two, and maybe had been since he’d watched them in the moonlight with their backs pressed together like that was all they needed.

Barton looked stunned when Barnes ended the kiss, still blinking stupidly. Barnes cupped his face between both hands and whispered, “How many times I got to tell you I’d die for you before you start hearing what I really been saying? You got to know I love you, Clint. Loved you from the very first shot I saw you take.”

Tony glanced at Steve and Bucky carefully, but his apprehension was completely unfounded. Both Bucky and Steve were watching the two outlaws with gentle smiles on their lips, their shoulders pressed together so naturally that neither man probably even realized they’d leaned into each other for contact.

Tony didn’t believe in soulmates or any of that crap. He didn’t expect every Steve and Bucky in every universe to be like their Steve and Bucky, especially after the things they’d witnessed in other worlds. All he could see now, as he looked between the two sets of men, was people who loved each other.

The thought made him feel light inside, and Tony realized he was mirroring the soft smile.

“Always thought I’d lose you, once you found him,” Barton was telling Barnes morosely.

Barnes merely smiled and kissed the man again. “Do I feel lost to you?”

Barton finally began to return the smile, looking at Barnes like a man who’d just seen a Harvest Moon for the first time. They stared at each other indulgently for a few more seconds before Barnes kissed him one more time, then ducked his head and turned back to the rest of them, his smile almost melancholy once more. “I know we don’t have to,” he told Steve resolutely. “But we’re helping you get home.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, his voice gone gentle, like the display had softened his insides just as much as it had Tony’s.

“So are we,” Rogers said from behind Steve and Bucky.

Tony absolutely did not startle because he had absolutely not lost track of the marshals while watching cowboys kissing . . .

Everyone turned to stare at the three marshals; Rogers looking determined, the other two merely tired and angry.

“Can’t let anyone think goddamn Bucky Barnes or Clint Barton is a better man than we are,” Marshal Wilson grumbled unhappily, crossing his arms over his chest.

Clint clapped his hands together, the sound and the echo shockingly loud in the tense silence. “That’s
the spirit!” he said, his tone as dry as Tony’s fucking elbows after all these weeks without his fucking moisturizing lotion.

Less than five minutes later, they were making their plodding way toward the town where the two pairs of Bartons and Barneses had apparently left the jail in ruins. Tony wasn’t sure they were going to get the greatest reception if they tried to waltz down the middle of the street when they got there.

They only had six horses for ten men, but both Steve and Bucky had insisted on walking. Tony kept glancing back at them worriedly. He could do that because he sure as fuck wasn’t controlling where this beast was walking, he was merely holding on to Barnes’s waist for dear life as he rode behind him.

Sam actually knew how to ride a horse, so he and Clint were riding together. Tony took comfort in the fact that Clint looked just as dubious about the horses as Tony felt.

Bucky gave Tony a little salute the next time Tony chanced a look back at him and Steve. “We’re okay, Stark,” he assured Tony, his tone amused and something Tony might call fond.

“You sure you don’t want to ride?” Tony called back to him.

“Have you ever tried to lift one of us, Tony?” Steve asked wryly.

“Hell yes,” Sam grunted. “Strained my trapezius on both you two heavy assholes.”

Bucky laughed softly. “I’m even heavier than Steve. I wouldn’t do that to a horse.”

Barnes grunted and Tony turned back around, worried his twisting and turning had somehow messed up the steering on the unholy beast between his legs. But Barnes was peering back at Tony over his shoulder, a small smile on his lips and his eyes shadowed by his stupid fucking hat that Tony was going to steal.

“So, when is someone gonna explain to us what’s so different about those two?”

Tony grunted. “I’m not sure we have the time to go fully into what’s different about those two.”

“Uh huh,” Barnes said dubiously.

“They’re very strong,” Tony finally decided to say.

“And very fast,” Clint offered from the horse that was plodding along beside Barnes and Tony.

“And very stupid,” Sam grumbled.

Tony barked a laugh. He’d have to remember to tell Sam he was impressed with how he was able to handle a horse. It was a skill none of the rest of them seemed very proficient at.

In fact, Tony’d had no idea that Sam seemed to be a fan of the whole Old West thing. He knew a lot about it.

Up ahead, Rogers had come to a halt and turned his horse in the trail, looking back at them. He seemed grim, and Tony couldn’t decide if he was upset because Barnes and Barton had refused to be taken to safety, or because they’d called him out on not wanting to help the visitors to his world, or because Barnes and Barton had declared their love for each other right in front of him.

Really, it could be any combination of the three, and Tony couldn’t blame the guy for being all sour about things. He did hope the guy didn’t turn into another Evil Steve, though.
“We’ve come to the trail that leads to town, the one we took you by,” Rogers said, eyes darting between Clint, Bucky, Barnes, and Barton. They landed on Bucky, finally. “I need you up here.”

Bucky nodded, then slapped Steve on the back before jogging up toward the head of the group.

“Would you like to ride?” Tony heard Rogers ask Bucky. His voice had gone softer, his head bowed as he looked down at Bucky.

“I’m better on my own two feet,” Bucky answered, giving the marshal a small smile and a nod.

Something about the interaction, Tony had no idea what, caused the marshal to huff a small, almost fond laugh. He took his hat off and dropped it onto Bucky’s head, briefly covering Bucky’s eyes like a toddler trying to wear his father’s clothes. Bucky pushed the hat back and peered up at Rogers quizzically, a smile still flitting across his face before he turned and began walking down the trail, leading the group now.

Tony glanced over at Sam and Clint. Clint shrugged at him. Tony looked over his shoulder at Steve, who was actually smiling now instead of frowning like he’d been doing most of the morning. Steve’s eyes darted to Tony and he nodded, mouthing something that was either something about ‘Buck’, wanting to fuck, or that he ate a pot-luck. Tony did not lip-read.

Tony shook his head and was forced to grab onto Barnes’s waist frantically when the man clucked his tongue and got the horse moving. “Does this thing come with seatbelts?” Tony griped, scrabbling for a better hold.

Barnes glanced back at him, one eyebrow raised. “What is a seatbelt?”

“A belt. On a seat. That keeps you from flying out of it.”

Barnes began to chuckle softly, and he held up the soft leather reins, letting them rest on his fingers. “I been known to lash myself to the saddle.”

“He’s only done that once,” Barton called over his shoulder. “And he was –”

“Drunken,” Barnes interrupted quickly, his voice louder than Barton’s and carrying over the whole group of men listening.

“Right. Very drunk,” Barton said wryly. “Definitely not bleeding out all over his horse.”

Tony felt Barnes tense under his hands, and Marshal Rogers predictably glanced back in alarm. “What was that?”

“So drunk,” Barnes answered with a charming smile.

“Wow, for an outlaw you are a surprisingly shitty liar,” Tony mumbled into the man’s ear.

“He don’t need to know he landed one that almost killed me,” Barnes whispered, still smiling and barely moving his lips to speak.

“You two are so fucked up,” Tony muttered. “And that’s coming from me, you should be offended.”

“Noted,” Barnes said, chuckling again. He was the most cheerful tragic outlaw Tony had ever met.

Up ahead, Bucky halted and put a fist into the air, crouching slightly. Marshal Rogers almost ran over him with his horse. There was a brief scuffle as Bucky danced out of the way and the horse danced out of the way and Rogers cursed under his breath trying to stay in the saddle. The others all
veered their mounts away, avoiding what Tony could only imagine would have been the horse equivalent of a six-car pile-up on the highway.

“What the hell are you –”

Bucky hissed for Rogers to be quiet. He held his fist up again and pointed at it with a metal finger. “That means stop and shut up! Is that not a thing yet?”

Rogers shrugged helplessly.

Bucky’s shoulders slumped and he straightened up. “Sorry,” he offered. He pointed off, ahead of them on the trail. “It’s up here.”

“This thing you hid, you did that when we stopped to let you two take a piss?” Rogers asked, sounding exasperated.

Bucky shrugged again, entirely unapologetic.

“We took everything you had off you when we caught you,” Rogers asked as he dismounted. “Where were you hiding this thing?”

Bucky’s cheeks actually went pink. Tony stared in fascination. Had he ever seen Bucky blush when it wasn’t for an act? This was amazing, he needed a camera.

“Bucky,” Steve called. “Don’t answer that. Please.”

Bucky gave him a stubborn, offended look and pulled the edge of his blue jacket out. “It’s got the same hidey holes mine did,” he explained, pointing to the inside of his jacket.

“But that’s not where you hid it, is it?” Steve said joyfully. He was laughing. It was a nice sound. Tony wanted to hear it more often.

“Anyway!” Bucky called, shaking out his shoulders but still blushing as he pointed. “It was that tree there, the hollow one.”

Barnes shifted in the saddle, jostling Tony’s hold on him. “Clint,” he said, nodding to Barton. “It’s your show now.”

Barton gave a curt nod and gracefully slid from the saddle. He peered up at Tony, then at Sam and Clint. “One of you want the reins?”

Clint groaned and he and Tony shared a dubious look.

“That’s all you, buddy,” Tony told him.

Clint patted Sam’s shoulder, then started trying to get out of the saddle. Steve eventually came over and offered him a hand. Tony might have smacked the help away just to save his pride, but Clint just let Steve pull him off the horse like he was taking a baby out of a stroller.

“Thanks, Cap,” Clint said happily as Steve set him on the ground. Steve laughed softly as he helped Clint struggle up into Barton’s saddle. “This thing better have cruise control,” he muttered as he took the reins.

Barton joined Bucky up at the front of the group. Marshal Rogers’s easy demeanor immediately went cold and stern, his jaw clenching so hard even Tony could see it from all the way in the back. Barnes tensed under his hands again, and Tony patted his side. “It’s none of my business,” he said
softly. “But you’re going to have to address that if there’s going to be a happy ending here.”

Barnes nodded and sighed heavily. “You ever loved two people with all your heart, but in different ways?” he asked Tony, sounding sad and a little forlorn.

Tony hummed. He thought of Pepper and his heart suddenly hurt too much to beat properly. He thought of the four men he’d been traveling through the multiverse with, and how the thought of needing to kill someone who merely shared one of their faces had made panic press into the edges of his mind in that last world. He was nodding before he realized it. “Yeah,” he answered with a soft smile. “Seems to me, though, that one is your past and one is your future. You’re going to have to deal with that.”

Barnes nodded, the feather on his hat waving sadly.

A hand landed on Tony’s knee and he jumped, looking down at Steve almost guiltily. He knew he was the last person in their group who should be giving advice on relationships. But Steve was meeting his eyes, nodding and giving him a small, sad smile. He patted Tony’s knee again before moving away.

“Looks like you were right, they’re headed for town,” Barton said to Bucky up ahead.

“I can’t believe they’d show their faces there,” Barnes called up. “You think they’re headed for the train?”

Barton nodded grimly. “Probably going right back to Pierce.”

Marshall Stark looked between the two of them, scowling. Tony was struck by the realization that this was actually the first world they’d come to where he’d met another him. It wasn’t as jarring as he’d thought it would be, meeting himself. Life was weird.

“Thought Rumlow was supposed to bring you two back to Pierce,” Stark said finally.

Barnes and Barton both nodded and then shrugged, in sync like they’d planned it.

“If he goes back without you,” Stark said, clucking his tongue and shaking his head. “I doubt that’s their plan.”

Rogers nodded, frowning. “I’d wager they’d try to get you back before they turned tail and ran. Makes them heading for town even more confounding. They weren’t even looking for you out there.”

Barnes leaned over and rested his elbow on the pommel of his saddle. “We might be giving Brock a little too much credit for his brains.”

“Even so,” Rogers responded, cocking his head. “Don’t make sense they’d give up so quick.”

Barton chuckled and rubbed a gloved hand down his face. “Shit. Last he saw us, we were riding off with three US Marshals. Even if it wasn’t actually you three, he might know we’re all together.”

“Telegraph office,” Wilson blurted suddenly. “He’s going for the telegraph office. He has to tell his boss what happened.”

“Only two options he has for that,” Barnes added. “He’d have to either send someone else in with his message, or . . .”
“Go in by force,” Barton finished for him.

Steve was slowly making his way between the restless horses to the front of the group. “Buck, did you hear them say anything?”

Bucky shook his head. “I had to stay far enough away to keep the horses from spooking and giving me away. And I didn’t follow when they left.”

“How big is this town?” Tony asked.

“It’s just a rail town,” Wilson answered. “Pierce is the end of the line right now, so it swelled up some, but it ain’t so big to hide in for long.”

Tony stared at the man. “The town’s name is Pierce.”

Wilson nodded and winced.

Tony glanced at Sam, hoping for some enlightenment. Sam was rubbing his eyes. “In the territories, railroads were built to lure people out to settle. A lot of the towns were named after the owners of the railroads. I thought you said he had a stake in the rail,” he called up to Rogers. “Does he own the railroad?”

Rogers nodded, looking shamed to have been called out for his vague wording last night.

“Okay,” Tony said. He held up a hand. “That still doesn’t change things. So he’s a railroad tycoon and a war hero, he’s still an evil dick and you still know what you need to do to fix things.”

Barnes and Barton were silent, and both men had their heads bowed. They’d obviously known what was stacked against them, what had been stacked against them for ten years. Getting the three marshals on their side hadn’t done much to better their situation and they had both known it from the start. Tony understood their reluctance to go back to New York a little better now. They would still be fucked right up to the day Pierce was dead.

“Let’s just . . . one problem at a time,” Steve finally said as he held both hands up. Then he pointed at Rogers. “If Rumlow makes the telegraph office and tells Pierce that Barnes and Barton have joined forces with you three, Pierce is going to have the whole country looking for all five of you before you can blink.”

“You’ll all be fucked,” Clint blurted in alarm.

“Ain’t a party ’til everyone’s fucked,” Barnes muttered under his breath. Tony wheezed behind him, trying not to laugh.

“We can’t let him reach the telegraph or all five of them will be in danger,” Steve said urgently, turning to Bucky. They stared at each other, silently communicating, and Tony’s heart absolutely sank.

“Steve,” he said in warning. “You threatened our lives if we split up.”

“We can make it there faster than the horses,” Steve argued. “We can keep them occupied until you catch up.”

“Wait, what?” Rogers said as he whipped his head from Steve to Tony and back. “You can’t—”

But Steve was already dropping his pack, Bucky tossing his to Barton and causing the poor guy to
stumble back. “We’ll see you in town,” Steve promised, and before anyone could take a breath to shout at them for being morons, both men turned and sprinted off down the trail.

The burst of speed both men put on startled both riders and horses, causing a stir amidst the group that almost had Tony losing his death grip on Barnes’s unfairly solid muscles.

“Jesus fuck!” Barnes cried as he fought the reins. He was staring off at the now empty trail. “How . . . holy shit.”

“Are they,” Rogers stuttered and glanced around at everyone. “Are they . . . human?”

“They are where it counts,” Sam answered defensively, tapping his own chest right over his heart.

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Steve could almost have fooled himself into thinking he and Bucky were racing through Central Park, laughing at each other as they tried to trip each other up and Steve shouting about cheating as Bucky parkoured over benches and street vendors and a baby carriage that one time to cut corners and get ahead of him.

But neither of them were laughing now. They were pushing themselves harder than they ever did on their runs. Steve was actually breathing hard, sweat beading on his forehead. Bucky was in the same state, but neither of them slowed.

If Rumlow got a telegraph off telling about the daring escape Barnes and Barton had made with Steve, Tony, and Sam, if the marshals were put into the same situation as the outlaws because of it, it would all be on Steve and his teammates. Steve couldn’t allow that to happen, and the knowledge chased him along the dirt path with its wagon wheel ruts.

“Come on, sunshine,” Bucky called to him breathlessly when the guilt began to slow Steve’s pace and make his breaths harsher. Steve pushed himself, coming abreast of him again and shooting him a smile as Bucky glanced at him with eyes that sparked like lightning in a stormy sky.

They rounded a bend in the path, Bucky actually running up the shallow embankment and kicking off it instead of slowing to make the turn, and right ahead of them were three riders, their horses plodding along at a slow trot.

Steve and Bucky both skidded to a halt and looked at each other, both of them sort of shocked to have caught up with the men before they even reached the town.

One of the riders must have sensed they were no longer alone on the road, because he peered over his shoulder and saw Steve and Bucky standing in the road like assholes trying to catch their breath. He shouted and the other two men pulled their horses around, drawing their weapons at the same time.

Steve pulled his shield off his back, crouching behind it. Bullets pinged off it. He peered over it to stare in momentary horror as Bucky propelled himself forward rather than taking cover. Bullets spit into the ground around him as he moved, and Steve ran after him. More bullets hit the shield, but Steve was still able to watch as Bucky launched himself into the air and tackled one of the men right off his horse.

The horses reared and neighed in alarm as Bucky and the man he’d attacked wrestled for his gun.

Rumlow pointed a weapon at Bucky’s head, cursing as his horse moved and ruined his shot. Steve tossed the shield, hitting the third man and knocking him out of his saddle.
“Rumlow!” Steve shouted, trying to pull his aim away from Bucky’s vulnerable back.

Bucky threw a devastating punch with his metal fist, which he’d been avoiding using for reasons Steve couldn’t begin to guess. Then as Rumlow swung his aim toward Steve, Bucky lunged at the man’s horse, waving his hands and shouting.

The horse reared up on two legs, kicking at Bucky with its front hooves. Rumlow managed to stay in his saddle as Bucky basically nipped at the horse’s legs like an angry wolf, but all his shots went wild and Steve moved in closer.

“Damn you, Barnes!” Rumlow roared, and Bucky kicked off the embankment again, grabbing Rumlow and rolling him out of the saddle in a flurry of cursing and flailing arms and legs. Steve was honestly very impressed that Marshal Rogers’s hat was still on Bucky’s head at this point.

They scrabbled on the ground, both men throwing punches, Bucky blocking with his metal forearm when Rumlow tried to brain him with his empty gun. Steve danced around the horses, knowing enough about the animals to know that he did not want a hoof to the face. He could hear the pounding of hooves behind him, but he didn’t dare take his eyes off the fight.

“Rogers!” Clint called out. “Get down!”

Steve didn’t question it, he just dove to the ground, watching over his shoulder as Clint aimed his bow from the back of a horse, letting the animal have the reins. He realized it wasn’t his Clint, though, but Barton, standing in the stirrups as the horse bore down on them at a dead gallop. The man was rather magnificent, if Steve was being honest with himself.

Steve prayed that this Clint Barton never missed a shot just like his Clint Barton, and he turned to shout for Bucky to get clear. The words died in his throat when he saw Bucky and Rumlow, locked in a tug of war for the remote.

Bucky was straddling the man, and had obviously subdued him enough to be able to pull the remote from Rumlow’s pockets, but he didn’t seem willing to knock the asshole out to get the remote from him.

“Buck!” Steve shouted, not even sure what he wanted Bucky to do.

He watched in horror as Rumlow got a thumb on the buttons of the remote, and when he pressed it, blinding blue light lanced out in a perfect sphere, enveloping both Rumlow and Bucky before it compressed into itself like a dying star and poofed out of existence.

Steve was left on the ground, panting, as he stared at the empty dirt where Bucky and Rumlow had been just moments before. “Oh, my God,” he breathed.

“Lord almighty,” Barnes breathed as he pulled his horse to a stop just yards away from where Steve was still on all fours. Barnes and Tony were both staring at the trail ahead, looking as shell-shocked as Steve felt.

Tony’s mouth moved, but no sound came out.

“Oh God,” Clint was saying, over and over. He struggled out of his saddle and hit the ground clumsily, staggering toward the spot where Bucky had just been. “Oh my God.”

“Buck,” Steve gasped, his breath hitching uncontrollably as it began to sink in.

With the remote gone, they were stuck here.
And Bucky was now lost in the multiverse. Alone.

A hand came to settle on his shoulder, and Steve realized Tony was kneeling beside him. The man was still staring at the spot, though, almost like he didn’t know Steve was even there. “Tony,” Steve choked out.

Tony looked at him, blinking dazedly. He pulled Steve into a hug before Steve even realized he was sobbing.

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Bucky pitched forward and gasped, his head spinning and his stomach churning with the sudden jolt.

“What’d you do to me?” Rumlow asked, sounding almost pitiful as he held himself and curled into a ball beneath Bucky.

Bucky looked up, seeing a busy sidewalk, skyscrapers, and dozens of people staring at them in shock. Modern people.

“Jesus!” someone shouted. “It’s the Winter Soldier!”

Bucky blinked and looked back down at Rumlow, at the remote still in both their hands. With only two people to transport, the battery must have still held enough juice to do the deed. “Oh my God,” he whispered, feeling panic begin to swell in him.

Rumlow was just now noticing where they were, his eyes wide and full of abject fear and confusion. “What is this?” he asked Bucky shakily.

“Oh, my God,” was all Bucky could say as he began to shake.

“Someone call an ambulance!” another stranger shouted. A few brave souls moved closer, looking more concerned than afraid.

“Where are we?” Bucky asked, his voice hoarse.


Bucky blinked and glanced around. The jump hadn’t hurt him at all. In fact, he felt like something had slid into place inside him, something right, like a thorn being removed after too long in his paw. He was home.

“It’s okay, son,” the older man was saying to him, and Bucky realized the civilians surrounding him could see the confusion and panic clearly on his face.

He began to shake his head. “No,” he breathed out even as someone tried to help him to his feet. He shook the hands off, and people backed away. “No, I have to go back for them. I can’t leave them there!”

Rumlow grabbed at his blue jacket, holding on tightly. “Please,” he said shakily.

Bucky just nodded at the man. Whether he was an evil asshole in his own world or not, there was no way Bucky was going to strand anyone in a universe that wasn’t theirs. But . . . “I don’t know if we can get back,” he admitted, and he pulled the marshal’s hat off his head, clutching it to his chest and trying to get one, solid breath into his lungs.
It wasn’t working. He was getting light-headed, hyperventilating.

“Back away!” he ordered of the people who were trying to help him. “Please,” he added, his voice cracking. “Just . . . clear out. It’s not safe.”

People did as he asked, giving them space. He could hear sirens in the distance. He closed his eyes, and he bent forward. Rumlow held onto him, seeming to sense that wherever they were going, they were going together.

Bucky nodded jerkily and shoved the hat back onto his head. Then he closed his eyes, bowed his head into Rumlow’s chest, and hit the button.

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Tony didn’t know how to console Steve. He didn’t know how to console himself. Bucky was just gone, poof. Everything they’d been through and they’d lost him to a press of a button.

Tony hadn’t even begun to process the fact that he and the others were stuck in 1873. Honestly, he wasn’t sure that really mattered. Without Bucky, Tony didn’t think Steve would stick around for very long.

Clint had hit his knees on the edge of the disturbed dirt, and Sam was standing in the middle of the trail, staring but not really looking like he was seeing anything.

“What just happened?” Marshal Stark asked, his voice hushed.

“We . . .” Tony swallowed hard, but found he couldn’t get anything else out.

Steve curled over in Tony’s arms, pressing his face into Tony’s chest as his breaths hitched. The sounds he was making were heartbreaking.

And Tony couldn’t do a thing for him.

A pop and fizzle was the only warning they got, and then hot air was rushing past them, ruffling Tony’s hair, tugging at their jackets. Clint was blown backwards, splayed on his back and groaning when the rush ended.

Bucky and Rumlow were there again, both of them clinging to each other, Bucky’s face hidden by Marshal Rogers’s hat.

Bucky raised his head carefully, his expression both desperate and hopeful.

“Buck!” Tony cried happily.

Steve’s head shot up and he was scrambling out of Tony’s arms even as Tony tried to push himself to his feet.

“Steve,” Bucky breathed out. His eyes widened in alarm as Steve barreled toward him. “Easy!” he shouted, even as Steve tackled him to the ground.

Chapter End Notes
I alllmost left this one on a cliffhanger too. Almost. Couldn't do that to you two times in a row, though!
Natasha stood in front of the giant screen, hands on her hips, scowl on her face. “So we have reports of the Winter Soldier poofing into existence in the middle of Times Square?” she asked FRIDAY.

“Yes, Agent Romanov. Many reports.”

“Is there any video?” Wanda asked, her hand held in front of her lips like she was preparing to gnaw on her nails like she’d been doing for the last month. She and Natasha both needed a serious spa day.

FRIDAY brought up several feeds, most of them from phones, but several from security or traffic cameras. They were all synced to show the same event. One moment people were walking around, the next, two men appeared out of thin air, without a whisper of disturbance, both of them huddled on the ground and wearing costumes from WestWorld or some shit.

Natasha cocked her head as the man with the metal arm raised his head. His hair was cut short, and the cowboy hat didn’t exactly scream ‘I am James Barnes’, but he had the remote in his hand. And Natasha had seen that panicked, lost look in Barnes’s eyes before.

“Is it them?” Wanda asked breathlessly.

Natasha nodded decisively. “It’s James, anyway.”

A moment later, both men were gone again, enveloped by angry blue light.

Natasha sighed heavily, hands still on her hips. “Well, fuck.”

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No one could convince Steve to let Bucky go, and when Steve Rogers didn’t want to do something, well . . . Tony was of the opinion that Steve could cuddle Bucky until they both passed out.

“Stevie, I can’t breathe,” Bucky finally mumbled from under his burden.

“I don’t care,” Steve huffed, not moving an inch.

Tony glanced away from them, worriedly looking over the natives of this world. None of them were handling what they’d witnessed particularly well. Sam and Clint had been trying to keep order, keep sanity, but Tony figured that none of the five dimension hoppers were particularly cut out for that task anymore.

“What,” Marshal Stark finally gasped, waving a hand. “What was that?”

Tony turned toward them, where they all sat on the ground. “You want the details or the basics?” he asked lightly.

Stark glared up at him and Tony tried a smile.
“Short answer, we don’t know how it fucking works, or we’d be home by now,” he said blithely, shrugging. “Long answer?”

“Shut up,” Wilson said weakly, shaking his head. “Please.”

Tony nodded. That was fair.

“Help!” Bucky called pitifully. He jolted when Steve tweaked something between their bodies. “Ow! Motherfucker, Steve!”

“Don’t ever leave me again,” Steve mumbled against his chest. “I will find you. And I will murder you.”

“This is getting dark,” Clint whispered to Sam, who shrugged helplessly.

Bucky wrapped both arms around Steve, and for a moment Tony wasn’t sure if they were hugging or if Bucky was strangling the air out of Steve so he could escape. Honestly it was always a little hard to decipher between affection and violence, with these two. But Steve seemed content either way, and Bucky finally kissed the side of Steve’s face, murmuring to him.

“Where did you go?” Steve finally asked as he pushed up and allowed Bucky’s lungs a little freedom of movement. “How did you get back here?”

“I went home,” Bucky answered, his voice choked. “It took me home.”

“Home home?” Tony blurted, stepping closer.

Bucky nodded as he looked up at Tony desperately.

“How’d you get back here? How did you aim it?” Tony demanded.

“I don’t know,” Bucky answered, and he sounded despondent, resting his head in the dirt and closing his eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

“I thought it was the hat,” Rumlow said softly.

They all turned to look at him. He was sitting pretty much where he’d reappeared, elbows on his knees, head hanging. His two companions hadn’t lived through their encounters with modern Vibranium, but that wasn’t what seemed to have upset Rumlow so thoroughly. He didn’t look great, and Tony almost felt sorry for the guy. It couldn’t have been a fun trip, between the dimensional shifting and Bucky Barnes beating the crap out of him.

He glanced up and winced when he saw everyone staring at him. He pulled at the brim of his hat, lowering it over his eyes like he was hiding, but he looked over at Bucky. Steve had finally let the man free, but Bucky was still splayed on the ground, propped up on his hands and blinking at Rumlow. Rumlow pointed at the hat on Bucky’s head. “You took it off, held it over the . . . that thing,” he explained, waving at the remote. “I thought that’s what told it where to go.”

Tony blinked at the man, then looked at Bucky to see the stunned look on his face. “I did,” Bucky said distantly, his eyes going unfocused. “I wasn’t thinking anything but to get back to all of you. I couldn’t breathe. I took the hat off . . . uh. I don’t know, it felt like I’d be able to breathe better without it. I was . . . wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“You put it back on before you did the thing,” Rumlow murmured.
Bucky was nodding again. “I did.”

Tony looked up into the clear blue sky and tried to think through all their misadventures. From the start, they’d been picking up things from each world; supplies, clothes, doodads. What if those objects were screwing with the directionality of the remote’s capabilities? What if it had been trying to send them home all this time, but getting thrown off course by too many input fields?

“Holy shit,” Tony breathed out.

Bucky pushed up off the ground, staggering a little, whether from the remote’s effects or from Steve’s, Tony couldn’t be sure. He walked up to Rumlow and to Tony’s utter shock, he sat down on the ground beside the man and sighed loudly.

Rumlow flinched away, but he didn’t try to move.

“Are you okay?” Bucky finally asked him, his voice gentle like he was talking to a small child or a kitten in an alley. Tony realized they were all seeing Bucky Barnes, the empathetic, gentle, protective Bucky Barnes who’d kept a scraggly, angry, combative little shit named Steve Rogers alive in Brooklyn right up until the war had pulled them apart.

Still. Everyone stared at Bucky in shock, even Rumlow. “Yeah,” he finally answered carefully. “Thanks for not leaving me there. I know you could have.”

Bucky nodded and ducked his head. “There’s a way you can repay me,” he said, glancing at Rumlow from under the brim of Rogers’s hat.

Rumlow stared for a second, then began to nod. “Yeah.”

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“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” Rogers asked them, worrying the hat Bucky had returned to him.

“As okay as we ever are,” Steve said with a weak smile.

Rogers didn’t look happy. None of them looked particularly happy, actually. But this was the safest, smartest plan. Steve knew that, just like everyone else did.

Stark, Wilson, and Rumlow were all already on their horses, waiting for Rogers. They were heading for the train, and then to New York, where they were going to compile all the evidence they needed against Pierce and get the man put into a guarded hole in the ground where he belonged. It was the only way to make sure Barnes and Barton wouldn’t be hunted for the rest of their lives.

Rogers couldn’t seem to get on the horse, though. He cleared his throat, glancing at Steve and the others. “Thank you for bringing him back to me,” he said softly, a little choked up. “I don’t know how much he told you. But we were best friends. We were brothers. And it’s been like half my soul was missing all these years.”

Steve offered his hand to shake. “Next steps are yours,” he told the man, half stern, half sympathetic. “Don’t tell us. Tell him.”

Rogers nodded as he shook Steve’s hand.

Bucky stepped in and pulled the marshal into a hug. Rogers went stiff at first, but then he clung to Bucky long enough that Steve could only smile sadly. Bucky finally extricated himself and patted Rogers on the face with his metal fingers. He nodded to where Barnes and Barton were standing
with their horses. “Go on,” Bucky urged, giving Rogers a shove.

Barnes glanced to Barton worriedly, but Barton nodded with a small smile, giving Barnes a similar push on the shoulder.

Barnes and Rogers met in the middle of the dirt road, both of them with tense shoulders and bowed heads.

“Buck, I –”

“I never shoulda left like I did, Steve,” Barnes whispered before Rogers could struggle through what he’d been about to say.

Rogers looked up at him, blinking in surprise.

“If I’d known then what I know now of the world,” Barnes whispered. “I woulda trusted you over some spy in the night. I know that now.”

“Buck,” Rogers whispered pitifully.

“I shoulda told you I was leavin’. Told you where I was goin’ and why. You were my brother, Stevie.” Barnes pressed his lips together and nodded, looking at Rogers and then letting his eyes slide sideways, going unfocused. “All that anger you been living with; that’s on me.”

Rogers didn’t try to say anything more, he just stepped into Barnes and grabbed him, holding him in a hug that both men seemed incapable of releasing once it started. Steve had initially believed that they’d been lovers, that the anger and betrayal between them stemmed from broken hearts and jealousy. He was beginning to realize, though, that he might have been wrong. Even if he’d never been in love with Bucky, he’d still have loved him. If Bucky had done to him what Barnes had done to Rogers, back before they’d ever started anything romantic, it still would have hurt. Rogers hadn’t lost a lover. He’d lost a brother.

The hug was still going strong, and the others were all beginning to smile at the two men.

“Where will you be?” Rogers finally asked against Barnes’s shoulder.

“With no damn stubborn mule marshals on our tails we won’t have to cover so much ground,” Barnes answered, voice wavering as he clutched at Rogers’s coat. “We’ll ride into Laramie once a month. You can find us there.”

“I’ll find you,” Rogers assured him, finally stepping back.

“Hey,” Barnes said before Rogers could turn away. He nodded his head toward Marshal Stark pointedly, smiling when the man glared at him. “Don’t be an idiot, Stevie.”

Rogers blinked at him. “What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me,” Barnes warned playfully. “Man follows your ass over hell and half of Georgia, you don’t let him go.”

Rogers went absolutely pink as he ducked his head and smirked.

Marshal Wilson groaned loudly. “Thank Christ someone finally said it, good Lord.”

Stark was still looking at Barnes angrily, flushing as if he’d had a secret exposed to the world.
Rogers walked right over to Stark and peered up at him. “If you ain’t ever gonna say it, I will,” he warned before he pulled Stark down by his cravat into a sort of dirty kiss.

Barnes and Barton both wolf-whistled. Wilson joined them happily.

“Wait, what?” Tony blurted, sounding fully offended.

“Hey, if I have to watch other me make out with other Bucky, you have to suffer too,” Clint grumbled, almost laughing as Tony made another offended noise.

When they separated, Stark and Rogers were staring at each other like they wanted to eat each other whole and Barnes was chuckling happily. Steve . . . Steve didn’t care who these men found their happily ever after with, he was just glad they were finding it. It was an odd feeling, after the wash of anger and jealousy and insecurity he’d been fighting since the last world, seeing Barnes and Barton together, and then coming here to find Barnes and Barton together yet again.

But these men were not carbon copies of him and his boys. This Barnes was not Steve’s Bucky, and this Rogers was not Steve. Happy was happy, and Steve realized he was feeling that way himself.

Once Rogers was in the saddle, the mood dipped back down, and Steve found himself moving closer to Bucky, needing the contact. Bucky slipped a hand around his back and pulled him close.

“Stay low until you hear from us,” Rogers told Barnes and Barton. “We’re gonna fix this.”

Barnes nodded, then he met Rumlow’s eyes. “You be good, Brock.”

Rumlow smiled slightly. “Truth be told. I can’t wait to be out from under that bastard. I’ll do you right, Barnes. You got my word.”

Barnes nodded again.

Tony came up next to Steve and tugged at his sleeve. “Give him the shield,” Tony whispered.

Steve looked over in shock, lips parted on a question. But the look in Tony’s intelligent eyes, the surety he saw there, silenced Steve’s objections. He pulled the shield off his back and handed it to Bucky, then unstrapped the holster as well. He took the shield back and stepped up to Rogers’s horse, handing it up to him.

Rogers took it, his expression full of questions that he didn’t voice.

“You might need it, it comes in handy,” Steve said with a small smile. “Let Tony paint it for you.”

Rogers smiled gently, ducking his head as he shrugged into the harness. Steve helped him clip it in, and then stepped back, taking up his spot between Bucky and Tony again.

Rogers obviously wanted to linger, but Stark and Wilson urged him to get his horse going. “Come on, Steve,” Stark finally said gently. “Gotta leave ’em to save ’em.”

Rogers ducked his head, then tipped his fingers to the brim of his hat before he turned his horse away. The rest of them stood in the middle of the trail, watching them head off into the distance.

Barton nudged Barnes with his shoulder. “You okay?”

Barnes stared for a few seconds, then he began to smile. “Yeah,” he said, sounding surprised. He turned to Barton and pulled him closer, kissing him tenderly. “Yeah, I am.”
They both turned to look at Steve and the others. “Now we gotta get you home,” Barton said with a grin.

“Oh God,” Sam groaned. He didn’t choose to elaborate.

“I think we need to lose everything we’ve gathered,” Tony told them. “Everything we’ve taken from the other worlds, we have to leave it.”

Bucky nodded, as if he understood what Tony was talking about, and he began shrugging out of his blue coat.

Steve looked from him to Tony for an explanation. “What Rumlow said about the hat,” Tony said with a wince. He then explained his theory, that the things they’d been picking up could have been throwing off the remote’s directions. Steve shrugged. It made as much sense as anything had.

They left all their stolen clothing and the food supplies they’d taken with Barnes and Barton.

“Are you sure?” Barnes asked worriedly. He was smart enough to realize that they could be zipping off to parts unknown without any supplies. Hell, neither Tony nor Sam was even left wearing shoes.

“It’s worth a try,” Steve assured him with a shrug.

Bucky handed his blue coat to Barnes with a wistful smile. “It’ll keep you warm,” he told him. “Might even stop a stray bullet or two.”

“Let’s hope we’re past that,” Barton grumbled.

They’d loaded all the packs of supplies onto several of the horses. Wherever Barton and Barnes were heading to lay low, they’d probably need those supplies more than Steve and the others would anyway.

“Just don’t show anyone those zippers until, oh . . . the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893?” Tony said with a smirk.

Barton and Barnes just looked at each other blankly, but they nodded anyway.

Bucky pulled his Zippo lighter from a pocket, turning it over to look at the dent the bullet had made. He rubbed his thumb over it slowly, the look in his eyes wistful. He finally held it up and showed it to Barton, then he flipped it open and lit it, flicking it closed quickly.

“That like the ones they make out of flintlock?” Barton asked warily.

“Yeah. Except it’s not going to explode in your hand because of hydrogen gas.” Everyone stared at Bucky stupidly, probably all of them wondering how the fuck Bucky knew that. But he didn’t take any notice; he was still looking at Barton. “The fluid won’t last forever. But it should get you through the winter.” He handed it to Barton, closing the man’s gloved fingers over it carefully. He held on to Barton’s hand for a second, until their eyes met. “Take care of each other, huh?”

Barton nodded solemnly. “We always have.”

“We always will,” Barnes added assuredly.

Hugs and handshakes were shared all around. And then Tony was carefully putting a new battery into the remote as Bucky instructed the two cowboys to move away to a safe distance. The others waved morosely as they pulled their horses and began to walk away. Steve wouldn’t have minded
staying here longer, now that things seemed more settled. He’d really liked these guys.

As soon as Barton and Barnes were far enough away with their horses, Bucky joined the group, shoulders slumped. “Feels bad, leaving here like this,” he mumbled to Steve.

Steve put an arm around him, pulling him close. “They’ll be okay.”

“Yeah.” Bucky ducked his head. “Guess it ain’t them I’m worried about, huh?”

“We’re so close,” Tony said, placing a gentle hand on Bucky’s metal arm. “We can do this.”

They all knew, if this jump didn’t get them home, they’d be in trouble. They may have five more batteries, five more tries, but Bucky’s arm was the only Vibranium they had on them now. Each jump that didn’t get them to the right universe was going to take a lot out of him. They had to get home.

Everyone moved in closer, and Steve saw Clint give the two outlaws one last wave. He laughed as he closed his eyes for a few seconds. Bucky held the remote out between them all, blew out a shaky breath, and then pressed the button.

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They didn’t get dropped this time when they landed, which was good, but as soon as the rushing ended Bucky still hit his knees.

Tony and Steve both lunged for him, trying to keep him upright, but neither of them were quick enough. Bucky saw just enough as the others panicked around him to know they were in the Tower. Then darkness encroached into his vision and he pitched forward.

He was out before he hit the ground.

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“Buck!” Steve cried desperately, pulling Bucky until he was on his side, where he’d be able to breathe. Tony was already on his knees, helping Steve move Bucky’s dead weight as Sam dove to the ground, checking Bucky’s pulse and breathing.

“He’s alive,” Sam yelled.

“Shit. Shit!” Clint cried, whirling and going into a crouch in front of the group, like he could save all four of them from whatever he’d just seen.

Steve looked up, peering around Clint to see the Iron Man armor standing there, arm raised, repulsor glowing.

The faceplate popped back and Tony’s face stared at them, eyes wide and blinking quickly. “You could have knocked,” he said as he looked at Steve.

“Please,” Steve said to the man, praying this was a world where Iron Man wasn’t some evil villain or some shit, they were in for some luck for once.

The Tony Stark in the Iron Man suit cocked his head, squinting at Steve. “Cap?”

Steve looked back up, eyes wide.

Stark tilted his head the other way. “Jarvis, call off the red alert. Looks like Cap’s back with us. And
he’s brought friends this time.”

Steve stood shakily, staring at the man in the Iron Man armor. “I’ve been here before?” he asked carefully.

Stark looked at him like he was insane. “How many different worlds have you traveled to with that thing? You know we didn’t make it for repeated use.”

Steve stumbled to the man and hugged him. Stark wasn’t prepared and Steve’s weight sent the Iron Man armor listing to starboard. They both tumbled over as Steve continued to hug the guy and Stark sputtered and struggled like an overturned turtle.

Running steps couldn’t even jar Steve from his relief. He looked up to see himself – Other Steve! – with Buck at his side, both staring at the lot of them, looking stunned at first but then slipping into professional efficiency.

“Jarvis!” Other Steve called as he and Buck ran to the tight knot of men in the middle of the floor. “Get MedBay up and running, we have at least one man down.”

“Back up, we got him,” Buck ordered, shooing the others out of the way. He and Other Steve picked Bucky up easily, making it look like they were carrying a normal human rather than an enhanced pile of solid muscle and metal. “Sam!” Buck snapped. “Report.”

“He needs fluids, IV nutritional supplements, treat him as if he’s dehydrated and suffering from exposure,” Sam answered, like Buck had hit a button inside him that made him hop to.

Steve sort of wanted to know where that button was, because that was a neat trick.

“Cap,” Buck called as he and Other Steve carried Bucky carefully out of the room. “Come with us. Don’t break any doors down.”

Steve scrambled to follow.

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Bucky could hear the beeping that meant he was in medical. He had obviously not handled that jump in any way that he should be proud of. He cracked one eye open, surprised to feel sort of floaty and nice.

A face swam into his vision. It was his own face. “Oh no,” he groaned.

The guy grinned. “Hey, dumbass,” he greeted happily.

“Hey, kid,” Bucky rasped.

“Bucky?” Steve said, a hand squeezing his.

“Are we in your favorite world?” Bucky asked. He scowled. “Why doesn’t my tongue work?”

“Flowers,” the kid said with another grin. He patted Bucky’s metal shoulder. “Favorite world, huh?” he said to Steve, sounding teasing.

Steve groaned. “After . . . yeah, you know what? After all the things we’ve seen? Yeah, it’s my favorite world.”

“We’re not home,” Bucky groaned.
“No,” Steve answered regretfully. “But we are safe. We’re safe here, Buck. And we can stay here until we’re sure we can get home.”

“We now have two Tony Starks,” the kid told him, sounding a little put upon. “And Bruce working on the problem. We’ll have you home in no time.” He patted Bucky’s metal arm again, which Bucky decided probably wasn’t unusual since the guy had one of his own. “Until then, we’ve got quarters for all of you. We’ll get you unhooked once you’ve been cleared to leave and you can get some rest somewhere that’s not beeping.”

“You’re okay, kid,” Bucky mumbled, closing his eyes.

The kid laughed. “God, don’t tell anyone else that. You’ll ruin my reputation.”

“Fucking twink cupcake,” Bucky growled. “I hope you know I get to kiss your Steve before I leave.”

The kid just laughed harder, but Steve made an offended noise that turned into a possessive growl that made Bucky’s spine tingle pleasantly.

“I’ll be right back with a responsible adult,” the kid promised as he headed for the door.

“Can I keep the flowers?” Bucky called after him.

The kid laughed lightly. “I’ll get you a juice box.”

He left them there, and Bucky peered up at Steve. He was smiling. Bucky found himself smiling in return. “That’s good to see.”

“What’s that?” Steve asked, his voice gentling.

Bucky raised his hand and ghosted his thumb over Steve’s lower lip. “That smile of yours, sunshine.”

Steve lurched forward, standing and bending over Bucky so he could kiss him. Bucky slid his hand into Steve’s hair, gripping it hard so Steve couldn’t get away.

“I don’t know how many times my heart can go through thinking I’ve lost you,” Steve whispered as he pressed his forehead to Bucky’s cheek.

Bucky held him harder. “That heart of yours. It’s the strongest thing I’ve ever seen, Stevie.”

Steve hit him weakly in the chest. “Then stop trying to make it seize up!”

Bucky laughed and grabbed for Steve’s face, kissing him again. “But that’s my job, babydoll.”

“Ugh!” someone said from the doorway. Steve pulled away just enough to look over his shoulder. Sam stood there. Bucky knew immediately that it wasn’t their Sam, though.

“Hey, Other Sam,” Bucky mumbled.

“I hear you’re a real hardass,” Sam said as he moved into the room.

Bucky just hummed, watching Other Sam warily.

The man pointed at him and laughed. “Suspicious hardass, got it.” He proceeded to disconnect some of the wires and sensors, carefully removing everything except for the port in Bucky’s hand that
allowed the saline and medicine to flow. “Figured you wouldn’t be happy to see a new face. I can get all this off for you. But you won’t be able to leave until one of the docs comes in to make sure your vitals are running steady.”

“Thank you, Sam,” Steve offered.

Bucky stayed silent and watched everything he did carefully. Steve might trust easily, but Bucky most certainly did not. Once he was disconnected from everything he could be disconnected from, Other Sam gave him a small smile. “Better?”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “Thanks.”

Other Sam grinned widely, an expression Bucky hadn’t seen on his own Sam’s face in a long while. Then he patted Steve on the shoulder. “Good to see you again, Cap,” he said, voice low.

“You too, Sam,” Steve offered, keeping his voice low like they were trying to put Bucky to sleep.

“I’m not impressed!” Bucky called after the man, causing him to laugh gleefully as he disappeared down the hall.

A moment later, the kid that Steve wouldn’t stop calling Buck walked back into the room. “Cap? We’ve got your old room ready for you two.”

Steve nodded, but Bucky found his grip tightening on Steve’s hand. Steve paused, looking at Bucky carefully, not giving away that something might be wrong but waiting for Bucky to elaborate. Bucky blinked at him, shocked by how shaken he suddenly was. “Just us?” he asked warily. “What about the others? Where are they? Where will they be?”

His eyes darted between Steve and the kid, who was looking at them both with a look of dawning understanding. “This particular residence is where Cap stayed when he was with us before, and it used to be my quarters, before I moved in with Steve. The sightlines are amazing from inside and astoundingly shitty from outside, I made sure of it when I moved in there. You’ll love it,” he offered. “There’s three bedrooms. If the five of you want to be together, that won’t be a problem at all.”

Bucky found himself relaxing as Steve squeezed his hand. “It’s okay, Bucky,” he whispered, smiling gently. “We’ll keep everyone in sight.”

Bucky blew out a shaky breath. “Jesus. Sorry, I just –”

“I know,” Steve said, leaning closer to kiss Bucky’s forehead. “Me too, sweetheart.”

Bucky was torn between smiling and feeling himself blush. Steve wasn’t usually the one wielding the pet names.

“I’m going to go with Buck to make sure everything’s ready for all five of us. You’ll be alright alone for a bit?” Steve asked, and somehow the wording gave Bucky the easy ability to nod, even though he wasn’t sure that was true. Medical wasn’t his friend, after all. But he trusted Steve. And Steve trusted these people. He could fake it for a few minutes alone.

Steve’s smile looked particularly proud, and he kissed Bucky carefully before stepping away.

“You want some company?” the kid asked with a hopeful smile. Bucky thought he was addressing Steve, but when he glanced up again, Buck was looking at him with a kind smile.

Bucky squinted. Did his face look like that when he smiled? He was pretty sure it didn’t, because
even when he’d been dying, the kid had looked all trustworthy and shit. No one looked at Bucky like he was trustworthy . . .

“I got someone here who’s real eager to talk to you,” the kid added when Bucky didn’t answer him.

Bucky gave a put-upon sigh, but he nodded anyway. “Help me sit up, huh?”

The kid grinned wider. “Oh, I’m sure he will,” he promised before ducking into the hall along with Steve.

Bucky stared in consternation for a few seconds before Steve poked his head back around the doorway. Bucky cocked his head at him, frowning harder.

“I know we’ve met,” Steve’s stupid face said as he came into the room. It wasn’t Bucky’s Steve. The guy was wearing flannel Avengers sleep pants. “But I wanted to meet again, under less fraught circumstances. You mind if I sit?”

“Are you going to anyway if I say no?” Bucky asked with a raise of his eyebrow.

Other Steve pursed his lips, wincing. “I might. I’d do it in the hallway, though, where you couldn’t see me to make fun of me.”

“At least you’re honest with yourself. Sit,” Bucky invited with a huffed laugh. He eyed the man carefully as he did so. “You look better than the last time I saw you.”

Other Steve grinned widely. “Well. It’s been a really good few months. I want to thank you for that. You pretty much cleared the board here for us.”

Bucky nodded, suddenly uncomfortable with receiving praise or thanks for all the blood he’d drained into the soil of this world.

Other Steve seemed to pick up on it, and he leaned his elbows on his knees, his face the picture of neutrality. “Bucky told me you and Cap grew up together.”

Bucky nodded, trying to push up in the bed. Other Steve immediately moved to help him, and Bucky was proud of not flinching. He got situated before he looked closely at the man. “We did.”

“What was that like? You mind my asking?”

Bucky smile fondly. “It was terrible,” he said, beginning to grin.

Other Steve barked a laugh. “Sounds about right. Still . . . makes me wonder what I would’ve been, someone like you having my back when I was younger.”

Bucky waved a hand at the door. “You’ve met him. It made him an idiot.”

Other Steve was still chuckling, but Bucky sobered quickly, brow knitting into a frown. “We’ve seen a lot of alternate versions of ourselves recently,” he said, surprised when his voice came out hoarse. “We’ve only seen two other worlds where me and Stevie were together.”

Other Steve blinked, his lips parting. “Really?”

Bucky nodded. “Most of them, they grew up together, just like me and Steve. The ones who were still in World War Two, they were together. Seemed happy, for being in the midst of a war. And then there’s you two. That’s it. The rest of them . . .” Bucky shook his head. “Shit happened and . . .”

Bucky looked him over carefully, and he realized he was smirking slightly as he did it. “I was afraid my Stevie would be upset by it. The last two worlds, those Buckys were both banging Bartons.”

“Say that three times fast,” Other Steve challenged with a rich, soothing laugh.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Shaddup.”

“Was he?” Other Steve asked when Bucky didn’t continue. Bucky gave him a questioning glance. “Upset?”

Bucky looked from him to the door. “I don’t know,” he said, biting his lip worriedly. “But I’ll be sure to ask him.”

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Steve was hovering like a mother hen when they finally sprang Bucky from the medical floor. Tony had been in the lab with Stark and Banner almost since they’d landed, but Clint and Sam were both there with Steve, and Other Steve and Buck were present as well. Bucky’s cheeks were a healthy pink as they forced him into a wheelchair.

“I’m not an invalid. I can walk.”

“Not off the medical floor, you can’t,” Other Steve scolded.

Buck, who had insisted he be able to push the wheelchair, bent and whispered something into Bucky’s ear. It made Bucky’s eyes widen briefly before he damn near guffawed, and both of them proceeded to giggle evilly as Buck pushed him toward the elevators.

Steve glanced around at the others in alarm. That sound was never good, coming from Bucky. Any Bucky. It was a glorious sound, don’t get him wrong, but it had preceded almost every clusterfuck Steve had ever lived through before the age of twenty-five.

Other Steve was smiling gently, watching Buck walk away and pretend to almost slam the wheelchair into a door as he passed it. “First time Buck was here, he broke out of the Tower from that very same bed as I took a nap beside him. He’s never let the medical staff, me, or Jarvis live it down.”

Steve snorted, glancing back at the two men.

Bucky held up a metal fist as he allowed himself to be pushed down the hallway, and Buck gave him a metallic fist bump with a gleeful, “Poundcake!”

Sam and Clint trailed behind them, both shaking their heads and trying to hide the fact that they were laughing.

The residence didn’t look any different from the morning Steve had left it when he’d been returned to his own world the last time. It was comfortable, modern but not overly so. When he’d first gotten there, he’d almost drowned in all the personal touches he’d been able to pick out that screamed Bucky, and the man’s smell had lingered then, driving Steve to the common room to avoid a breakdown.

The personal touches were still sparse but there, and the smell was nothing but expensive cleaners and low-key, welcoming candles. It didn’t matter, though, because Steve had Bucky in arm’s reach.
“Can I stand now?” Bucky asked gruffly.

“Give it a try and see if you go all weak in the knees and stuff,” Buck offered. He was apparently enjoying finally being able to return the tough love medical care Bucky had shown him when he’d been gutshot.

Bucky grumbled but pushed to his feet carefully. He turned and held both hands out, checking for balance. Then he nodded. “Think I’m solid.”

“Excellent,” Buck said cheerfully. He tossed Bucky a packet of something with a wink. “Flowers for your recovery.”

“Bucky!” Other Steve cried, his expression a mask of horror and disapproval.

But both of the men with Bucky’s face were grinning wickedly. Bucky pocketed the flower stuff, giving Buck a wink. “Thanks, kid.”

“Getting railed while high on that stuff is an ethereal experience, I highly recommend it,” Buck offered, shooting both Bucky and Steve finger guns.

Other Steve immediately blushed bright red, flushing just as hard as Steve suddenly was, and Steve covered his face to try to hide it. Other Steve grabbed Buck by his ear. “Oh, my God,” he said in exasperation, tugging Buck toward the door. “Leave them alone, you pervert, Jesus!”

“That’s not what you were saying the last time I did that!” Buck argued, feigning insult. “I mean, the ‘oh my god’ part is accurate, but –”

“Bucky!”

Steve snorted out a laugh. He remembered quite clearly how hard these two went at each other once the clothes started coming off, and it made him blush deeper.

Bucky . . . Bucky was laughing – he was laughing hard – so hard that Sam and Clint both wandered back into the entryway to check on the sound.

“Jarvis will take care of anything you need,” Other Steve told Steve, speaking fast like he was desperate to get out of the door now as both Buck and Bucky laughed and seemed to feed off the hilarity in a feedback loop of evil giggling.

Steve was . . . overjoyed by the sound. He gave Other Steve and Buck both a fond, exasperated smile. “Thank you.”

“We’ll see you all for dinner, right Cap?” Buck asked as his Steve tried to shove him into the hallway.

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Steve promised.

When they were gone, Bucky was still chuckling, and Clint and Sam were looking at him as if they’d never seen him before. Slowly, both men began to smile as well.

Steve stepped closer, taking Bucky’s elbow in one hand.

“I didn’t realize how much I enjoyed that kid,” Bucky said, grinning at Steve. The grin went soft, pleased and so fucking beautiful, when he met Steve’s eyes. “You look happy.”

“I am,” Steve said, his voice a mere whisper as he stared into Bucky’s eyes.
It took Steve a moment to realize that Sam and Clint were both making noise, shuffling around and clearing their throats. When Steve finally tore his eyes away from Bucky’s face and looked over, both men seemed relieved to have managed the feat of getting Steve’s attention.

“We were thinking we’d let our alternates give us a tour of the Tower,” Sam explained. “They offered earlier, but we wanted to make sure you two were okay first. That way you two can have some alone time.”

Steve nodded, a frown flitting over his face. “Are you sure? You both must be even more exhausted than I am.”

“Steve,” Clint said carefully. “To be perfectly blunt, we know the last few worlds can’t have been . . . easy. For you two, I mean. Uh . . . I mean, seeing our other selves . . . what . . .” He grunted in frustration and looked to Sam for help.

“Clint’s worried you’re going to hate him for all the alternate Bartons that have fucked alternate Barneses out there,” Sam supplied, sounding tired and far too gone for tact. “But we wanted to give you two time alone to make sure you were okay with each other before we had to tackle that problem.”

Clint groaned and put both hands over his face.

Steve blinked stupidly at both men, then glanced to Bucky, only to find Bucky’s face going through a complicated series of emotions that included fear, anger, sorrow, and then concern.

Steve reached for him instinctively. “We’re okay,” he said softly, speaking to all three men, but hoping that Bucky, most of all, was listening.

Bucky met his eyes carefully, eyebrows tilted down in the beginnings of a frown.

“I’m serious,” Steve assured them all. “I realized, when we were watching the cowboy guys say goodbye, that when I asked you two not to touch in the zombie world, I wasn’t being fair at all.”

Clint and Bucky both shifted uneasily, sharing a furtive glance.

“I’m serious,” Steve said, reaching out for both men. “It took me a long time for it to sink in, but just because all those other versions looked like us and mostly had our names, they weren’t us. They weren’t us. The tiniest difference in one universe can change a person’s personality, change their choices. Change what’s best for them.”

“Butterfly flaps it wings in Peking,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve cocked his head, frowning in confusion.

“Chaos theory?” Clint asked carefully.

Bucky snorted. “Jurassic Park, but sure.”

Clint barked a laugh, and even Sam grinned fondly.

“I guess,” Steve said slowly. “What I’m trying to say is; I was jealous, and maybe hurt and a little angry, but it was misplaced onto you two. I almost deprived both of you of a good friend, and that’s something we all dearly need in our lives. It wasn’t fair of me.”

Clint blinked at Steve rapidly, his eyes suspiciously shiny. “I appreciate that, Cap,” he said finally. “I


Steve glanced at Bucky then to find the man he loved staring at Clint in shock. He had a feeling, before the last several weeks of unusual closeness between all five of them, that Bucky hadn’t thought he had friends back in their own world, living in that Tower. Steve hoped they all were on board with being determined to prove him wrong.

“I am?” Bucky blurted, and Clint laughed almost hysterically.

“Yeah, Buck. You are. And I was afraid I’d lose that. Just . . .” he ducked his head and nodded at Steve, unable to meet his eyes. “Thank you.”

Steve couldn’t help himself, he stepped closer and pulled both Clint and Sam into a hug. They both returned it with enthusiasm. Steve’s breath left him when Bucky slammed into his side, and suddenly they were all being enveloped by one more set of strong arms.

“We’ll have to remember to do this again when Tony comes up for air,” Steve mumbled.

Sam groaned against Steve’s collarbone. “I hate to say it, but I love you guys,” he admitted, choking up on the last words. He tightened his arms around them all, and Bucky actually snuffled near Steve’s ear.

“Me too,” Bucky admitted, gruff and mumbling.

“Is this trauma?” Clint asked. “I think this is the aftermath of severe trauma. Are we hugging the trauma away?”

Bucky nodded in answer and Steve laughed, but no one broke the group hug for a long time.

“Oh, Sam finally said with a breathless grunt. “Let me go, I gotta go hunt some dignity.”

“Same,” Clint muttered.

They all separated, and Steve found that he didn’t really want to. The only person he’d ever felt that deep affection for in his early life – the feeling that was forged and gilded in a furnace of shared struggle – had been Bucky Barnes. The men he’d fought with during the war had come close as well, although no one would ever reach Bucky’s level, obviously. But Steve knew the men he’d been flopping across the multiverse with would come closer still.

He loved them. He’d die for them. They were his.

He smiled as Clint and Sam moved to the door.

“We’ll be gone until dinnertime,” Sam told them as he opened the door and ushered Clint out. Both men looked lighter, especially Clint, who was walking with that spring back in his step. Steve felt lighter himself. Sam waggled his finger between Steve and Bucky. “You two . . . well. You do whatever it is you two do that makes Steve look all dopey and smiley in the morning and shit,” Sam said, grinning as he pulled the door closed.

The residence seemed overly quiet once Steve and Bucky were alone. Steve turned to look at Bucky, raising one eyebrow in question.

Bucky bit his bottom lip, ducking his head just enough to look predatory as he met Steve’s eyes.

“Buck,” Steve whispered.
“I hope that look in your eye means what I think it means, Stevie,” Bucky replied, moving closer.

Steve met him halfway, shoving his fingers up under Bucky’s shirt as Bucky pulled him into a kiss. Actually, it wasn’t so much a kiss as it was a mauling. Bucky bit at Steve’s lower lip, moaning as Steve ran his tongue along the backs of Bucky’s teeth.

“It feels like it’s been too fucking long since I got to touch you like I want to,” Bucky whispered. His hands were digging into Steve’s hipbones almost painfully, like he was afraid Steve would be ripped away.

“God, you’re so beautiful, Buck,” Steve murmured, tugging at Bucky’s shirt demandingly. Bucky raised his arms and Steve yanked the shirt off, getting his hands back on Bucky’s warm skin as fast as possible. “I’m so fucking lucky.”

“Stevie,” Bucky groaned, kissing his way across Steve’s face and down to his neck. Steve tilted his head back to give Bucky better access, and Bucky’s hands shoved up under Steve’s shirt as he nipped at Steve’s throat. He leaned away and started working Steve’s shirt off as he kept talking. “You’re so fucking good, sweetheart. Your heart is so fucking pure.”

“Take me to bed,” Steve begged quietly as Bucky tossed his shirt aside.

“Whatever you want, doll,” Bucky growled, sending shivers up Steve’s spine, raising the hairs on his arms. Bucky pulled their bodies flush again. “God, Stevie, whatever you want.”

Steve held on to Bucky’s shoulders for dear life and hopped, wrapping his legs around Bucky’s waist as Bucky grunted and adjusted his hold. He didn’t even stagger under Steve’s weight. “Fuck me,” Steve said between kisses. “Please. I want you inside me.”

“Bedroom,” Bucky snarled, his fingers digging into the meat of Steve’s ass as he held Steve up. Steve pointed in the general direction of the bedrooms without taking his lips off Bucky’s. Bucky grinned ferally into the next kiss.

Anticipation rippled through Steve’s enhanced body, setting his insides aflame. Bucky stalked down the hallway, only stopping once to slam Steve against the wall and steal a deep, filthy kiss. Steve just held on tighter, squeezing his thighs tighter. “Feel so good between my legs, Buck,” he sighed.

Bucky hummed, almost a growl but not quite, and dragged Steve’s lip between his teeth. “Then I need to get in there, don’t I?”

“Yes,” Steve hissed, squirming in Bucky’s arms like an over-excited puppy.

“I’m gonna need you flat on your back,” Bucky growled as he started moving again. “This is gonna take a while.”

Steve smiled blissfully as Bucky carried him into the bedroom and tossed him unceremoniously on his ass. Steve was still grinning as he bounced on the mattress and flopped to his back. He would never get tired of the sight of Bucky’s slow predator’s approach to a bed where Steve was splayed out for him like a buffet.

And Bucky had been right. It was taking a while. Someone had been kind enough to stock the bedside drawers, so finding lube wasn’t an issue once Bucky had yanked all the clothes off both himself and Steve, tossing them here and there carelessly.

The lube was even self-warming, so when Bucky’s fingers slid inside him, it was just as warm as his tongue had been just moments before. It wasn’t the foreplay that was taking a while.
Steve taunted and prodded and begged in a hoarse voice as Bucky prepped him, making even that go faster than perhaps they should have allowed.

What was going to take a while, what Steve intended to make last for fuckingever, was the way they kept being distracted by the kisses they shared as Bucky crawled up Steve’s body and settled himself between Steve’s spread legs. Bucky couldn’t seem to get enough of the way their lips and tongues slid together, and neither could Steve.

“Love the way you taste, sugar,” Bucky drawled, his voice full of gravel and lust as he kissed at Steve’s collar and scraped his teeth across the ridge of bone.

“Buck,” Steve whimpered. He tightened his knees against Bucky’s hips, shoving his throbbing cock up against Bucky’s body, seeking friction. “You feel so fuckin’ good, Buck.”

Bucky hummed deep in his chest, the sound barely human. He ran his nose up Steve’s neck, his lips a teasing flutter over Steve’s pulse point.

“Please!” Steve gritted out. “I need you in me, Buck. Please. I need it!”

“Ain’t you the one always preaching patience?” Bucky teased. The bastard. The head of his cock was teasing at Steve’s ass, sliding through the lubricant Bucky had slathered all over them both. He kissed just under Steve’s jaw, both hands holding Steve’s wrists to the mattress.

“Either you stick that in me, or I’m gonna take matters into my own hands,” Steve threatened.


Steve grinned at the challenge and pushed at Bucky’s restraining hold. He immediately heard the whirring of mechanics in Bucky’s arm, and Steve realized he couldn’t shift Bucky’s weight off him, couldn’t get free of Bucky’s restraining hands. He gasped and groaned wantonly, his cock twitching.

“Oh no,” he gasped. “Oh, God, Buck, that’s so fucking hot. Why is that so fucking hot?”

Bucky grinned, and it would have been a terrifying expression in any other situation. Steve wasn’t sure what it said about him, that he was ready to blow his load at the mere hint of Bucky being able to hold him down. Steve shifted his legs, wrapping them around Bucky’s thighs and pushing his ass off the mattress. Both of them groaned when the head of Bucky’s cock slid along his ass.

“So fucking wet, Steve,” Bucky moaned as his eyes fluttered closed. He panted a few breaths, but then those beautiful ice-blue eyes were meeting Steve’s, and Steve couldn’t breathe.


Bucky rolled his hips, forcing the head of his cock against Steve’s asshole but not breaching those tight muscles. “Sweetheart,” Bucky murmured, voice and expression both full of adoration.

Steve put both heels into the small of Bucky’s back, shoving his hips up and pulling Bucky’s hips down. It forced the head of his cock past the tight ring of Steve’s muscles as Steve writhed, and they both moaned in pleasure and surprise.

“Jesus, Stevie,” Bucky gasped. Steve could feel the head of Bucky’s cock twitching inside him. “Fuck!”

“Oh God, you feel so fucking good,” Steve told him, thrashing his head from side to side and wriggling his whole body. He tried to shove his hips up harder, but Bucky moved with him, the head of his cock throbbing right inside the entrance of Steve’s tight ass.
They hadn't even really started and Steve was already well on his way to losing his mind. He flexed his fingers against Bucky’s hold, and Bucky slid both hands up until their palms were pressed together and he could tangle his fingers into Steve’s.

“I love you,” Bucky said, his voice low and desperate and breathless.

“I – fuck!” Steve shouted as Bucky slowly rolled his hips, sliding the tiniest bit deeper, the thick shaft of his cock spreading Steve open. Steve gasped out. “I. I love you. I love you so fucking much. Please!”

Bucky readjusted where his knees were planted, shoving his thighs right up against Steve’s ass and sliding one hand under Steve’s hips to tug him off the mattress completely. He worked his way deeper with gentle, slow rolls of his hips, panting breaths against Steve’s jaw as Steve groaned and babbled to him.

“There you go, doll,” Bucky crooned against Steve’s skin as he settled into a rhythm that worked him in deep. He stayed there once he was fully seated, giving Steve time to adjust. “You’re so fucking tight, baby. Get those knees up higher for me, hmm?”

Steve hitched one knee up higher on Bucky’s hip, squirming as Bucky began to really fuck him, slow and steady, pulling way back to allow for the long slide back in. “Bucky. Bucky!”

“Spread those legs wider for me, Stevie, come on, let me get in there,” Bucky growled. He slid an arm under Steve’s bent knee, helping to push it higher. Steve nearly screamed as Bucky’s next thrust hit his prostate. Bucky hummed, deep and hungry. “That’s it, baby. I want to hear you.”

“I. Buck!”

“What’d I just tell you, sunshine, hmm?” Bucky asked, the dangerous undertone to his sweet voice making Steve shiver in delight. “Get those fucking legs spread for me so I can fuck you good and proper.”

Steve scrambled to get his other knee up higher like he’d been told, opening him up wider to Bucky, pushing his hips up into Bucky’s thrusts as Bucky pulled almost completely out and then slammed back in. “Fuck,” Steve whimpered, squeezing his eyes closed tight. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Mm, you better tell me now, Steve. You want me shooting off inside you?” Bucky asked, speaking the words against Steve’s lips.

“Yes,” Steve answered immediately, clutching at Bucky’s massive shoulders now that Bucky’s hands were busy and not holding him down.

Bucky groaned in response. “You’re gonna look so fucking good, all full of my spunk.”

“Your mouth is as dirty as what you’re doing to me, Buck,” Steve said appreciatively. He dragged his nails all the way from Bucky’s shoulderblades down to his hips. He held on, loving the way Bucky’s hipbones felt as Bucky fucked into him. The noises Steve was making were no longer something he could control, nor was the way he was bucking his hips to meet each of Bucky’s thrusts. The friction from Bucky’s hard muscles on Steve’s cock was almost too much for his overstimulated body to handle.

“Fuck, you’re getting tighter. You gonna blow on me already, Steve?” Bucky teased, his voice almost a song it was so fucking beautiful.

Steve nodded desperately, moaning as the shaft of Bucky’s cock slid past the muscles he was
“You need it harder?” Bucky whispered, kissing the edge of Steve’s lips and then licking into his mouth lasciviously before Steve could find the wherewithal to answer.

“Fuck me,” Steve begged. It was the only thing he could think to say. “Harder, Buck, please! I wanna come on your dick, come on!”

Bucky growled and slammed into him, pushing all the breath from Steve’s lungs. He pulled back and did it again, wrapping Steve up like a pretzel with the straining muscles of his strong arms, his hips moving in a delicious roll between Steve’s thighs. A few more deep, hard thrusts against Steve’s prostate and Steve was shouting plaintively, writhing under Bucky’s weight, begging to be pushed over the edge.

“Fuck,” Bucky said through gritted teeth. “Fuck, that’s it, sweetheart, come on and let me feel you. Give it up, doll.”

Steve cried out his lover’s name, bucking underneath him like he was trying to throw him off. Bucky’s heavy body didn’t budge, of course, keeping up those damn near debauched rolls of his hips even as Steve’s thrashing almost forced him out. Whenever he did pop out, he shoved the head of his cock right back in and it was so damn good every time.

Bucky had sped up, his powerful body doing all the work, chasing Steve’s release for him. It all felt so fucking amazing. He never took Steve’s dick in hand, though, and neither did Steve. They both wanted him coming on Bucky’s dick and nothing else. And good god, it was good dick.

Bucky rammed home with a feral growl, and Steve sobbed as he emptied against both their stomachs. Bucky stilled, his body trembling as he allowed himself the pleasure of experiencing Steve’s throbbing muscles from inside him.

Steve went limp, completely spent, staring up into Bucky’s liquid silver eyes adoringly. Bucky wasn’t done with him, though. He was still whispering breathlessly, words full of praise and love that Steve couldn’t quite process, back to fucking him even harder now, keeping Steve on that cresting wave where the world boiled down to the pinpoint of just the two of them.

Then Bucky cursed viciously and pulled out, earning another hoarse shout from Steve. He pushed himself up, grabbing Steve’s hip and tugging, and he forced Steve over to his belly so he could drape his overheated body on top of Steve’s. He kissed the back of Steve’s shoulder, and his hand gripped Steve’s ass into the air, his hard cock slid through the lubricant that had dripped all over Steve’s ass.

Bucky shoved into him again without any further warning, and Steve shouted his name into the soft quilt under his face. Bucky’s weight pressed him down, panting breaths in Steve’s ear still praising him with words Steve wished he would be able to remember. The only thing Bucky was moving was his hips, fucking Steve nice and slow again, like a lazy Sunday afternoon where neither of them had a thing to do all day but fill each other up.

Bucky’s knees were on either side of Steve’s rather than between his legs, and he tightened his fingers on Steve’s hip. “Feels so fucking good, babydoll,” Bucky crooned to him. “Tighten that sweet ass up for me, Stevie.”

Steve pulled his legs together, squeezing his knees against each other. He missed the feeling of Bucky’s hips moving against the sensitive skin of his inner thighs, but tightening down on Bucky’s thick cock inside him more than made up for it. He groaned loudly.
“Fuck,” Bucky gasped. “God, that’s good, doll. You were made for getting fucked, Steve, I swear to God.”

Steve flexed his fingers against the quilt. “Hold me down,” he begged. “Hold me down and fuck me ’til I scream, Buck.”

Bucky complied with a pleased rumble deep in his chest. Steve could feel it against his spine. Bucky’s hands gripped Steve’s wrists again, holding so tight Steve could feel the bones protesting. He leaned all his weight into Steve as he fucked him good and hard, and yet again Steve was certain that he couldn’t have gotten out from under Bucky even if he’d wanted to.

He absolutely, unequivocally, categorically, undeniably, without question, did not want to try anything that would make Bucky stop what he was doing right now.

Steve’s body was on fire. He was already hard again, had been the moment his sticky belly had hit the quilt under him, and he could feel the impending orgasm already swirling deep in his groin. Bucky was goddamn amazing and Steve loved every inch of him. Especially the inches that were inside him right now.

“M’close,” Steve managed to grunt.

Bucky yanked on Steve’s hair and sank his teeth into the back of Steve’s shoulder in response to the warning. “Mmhmm, you’re trembling. It’s gonna feel so good, Stevie,” Bucky snarled against Steve’s skin. “You’re all mine, baby.”

Steve gasped in shock when his second orgasm hit him hard at the mere thought of it. Every muscle in his body seized up and he choked on a breath.

“Fuck!” Bucky cried. His hips stuttered while his cock was buried deep in Steve’s ass. “Shit, Stevie,” Bucky said plaintively. “Fuck, I’m gonna come.”

“Yes,” Steve whimpered.

“Steve!”

“Come in me,” Steve pleaded, voice gone just as weak as his body. “Come in me, Buck, come on.”

Bucky stilled over him, growling against the shell of Steve’s ear. “Not yet,” he panted. “You make the hottest sounds when you’re getting fucked, Steve, I need to hear more.”

Steve squeezed his muscles in retaliation and grinned when Bucky gasped in his ear. “Buck,” he begged. “Come on, baby. Get nice and deep and shoot off for me.”

Bucky damn near whimpered as he drew back, the slick slide of that thick shaft against Steve’s muscles almost too good for Steve to stand. Bucky rolled his hips a few more times, then shoved deep just like Steve had asked, and he rocked there, body wracked with tremors. He was biting his lip. His fingers clutched at Steve’s hair hard enough to sting, and he panted open-mouthed against Steve’s cheek as he kept going with shallow thrusts of his hips.

“Gonna come, doll. Stevie . . . Steve!”

He was emptying into Steve as Steve tried desperately to tighten up for him one last time.

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered pitifully after almost a full minute of still silence. He shuddered and they both moaned through the aftershocks.
Steve closed his eyes, enjoying the weight of Bucky’s body against his. “You’re so fucking good at that.”

Bucky smacked a messy kiss against Steve’s cheek and pushed to his elbows. “Proper motivation will do that,” he said wryly, his voice wrecked. “Ready?”

Steve groaned in protest, but Bucky shushed him as he carefully began to pull out, fingers kneading Steve’s ass muscles in an entirely insubordinate act of groping. “God, Buck, you still feel so fucking good. Stay in there.”

Bucky grunted, sounding offended. “I’d still be fucking you if you hadn’t shortened my fuse!”

Steve grinned, exhausted and pleased with himself, and he closed his eyes.

“What you said,” Bucky gasped, pressing his forehead to Steve’s temple as he went boneless over Steve. “To Clint and Sam. Did you mean it?”

Steve turned his head until their foreheads were pressed together, and he tried his best to wrap his heavy arms around Bucky. “Every word. We’re solid, Buck. We’re always going to be.”

Bucky nuzzled at him until they could manage a kiss. Bucky was smiling into it. “Yeah we are.”

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Bucky wasn’t sure when they’d both fallen asleep, but it hadn’t been too long after he’d flopped to the side and pulled Steve to him to snuggle, because they were still in the same position, lying in what was soon surely to be classified as the wet spot. They were both obviously still worn out from their adventures. In fact, this might be the first time they’d been able to sleep in a bed without worrying since they’d been in the world with the actors. The last time Bucky’d been able to fuck Steve, in fact.

Steve shifted and sighed in Bucky’s arms, and Bucky squeezed him, echoing the sigh happily.

He wasn’t sure how long they’d been asleep, but it was obviously long enough for his boner to recover. He was hard again against Steve’s ass, and he had to fight the primitive urge to rut against him.

He ran his fingers lightly up and down Steve’s flank, watching as goosebumps rose on his skin. God, they hadn’t even bothered to get under the covers before they’d passed out.

“Stevie?” Bucky asked almost soundlessly.

Steve shifted, humming. That didn’t necessarily mean he was awake. The last time Bucky thought Steve was awake and tried to move away from him, Steve had bit him. In his sleep. Goddamn animal.

Steve threw his leg back over Bucky’s hip, muttering as he twisted and turned his face into the pillow.

Bucky’s boner appreciated his efforts. He rolled his hips, feeling the head of his over-eager cock pushing against Steve’s slick ass. He kissed the back of Steve’s shoulder, right where a bite mark was already fading. “You give me a tiny indication you’re awake and aware, and I can slide right back in, sunshine.”

Steve sighed quietly. Bucky couldn’t see his face to find out if he wore a smile, nor could he tell if
Steve’s eyes were open. The only indication he got that Steve might even be half aware of Bucky’s presence was the way Steve shoved his hips back harder.

With all the lube Bucky had used on him, and Bucky’s cum still sliding out of him, and as hard as Bucky was with all these miles and miles of Steve’s naked body rubbing up against him, Steve’s shift and shove was all it took for Bucky’s cock to force its way right back inside him.

Bucky gasped in shock, then groaned as his hips moved almost without him realizing it. He clutched at Steve’s hip to keep them both still.

Steve echoed the groan. “Fuck, that’s hot.”

Bucky laughed soundlessly, fumbling for a better handle on Steve’s hip. “Are you awake?”

Steve’s voice still sounded groggy and distant. “Am now. Awake enough to know that ain’t a gun in your pocket.”

Bucky grabbed a handful of that sweet ass and spread Steve apart, looking down so he could see himself pushing into Steve. He eased his whole body closer, sinking in, working his way in deeper. They both moaned again.

“Steve.” Bucky slid his hand up and down Steve’s flank, like he was soothing him. “You’re still so full of slick, doll,” he whispered, kissing the back of Steve’s neck. “Slid right in without even trying.”

“That’s a good way to wake up, Buck,” Steve gasped.

“You can go back to sleep. But me and my gun are staying right here until you’re all filled up again.”

“Oh no,” Steve sighed, giving a full body shiver. “Buck. Fuck, you shooting off in me while I’m still asleep. Why’s that so fucking hot?”

“I don’t know but I’m about blow my load just talking about it,” Bucky admitted, voice strained. He had to stop the movements of his hips or he really was going to come.

“Oh no,” Steve drawled out again. “Did we just discover a new kink?”

“Oh no, Stevie,” Bucky nearly sang as his hand slid up Steve’s flat belly to rest against his chest and keep them pressed together.

Steve hummed, lazy and contented. “You have my express permission, for the rest of our lives, to wake me up with your hard dick buried in any and all deposits of slick you’ve left in my ass.”

Bucky twitched as Steve’s words zapped through him like lightning. “Oh no,” he repeated, laughing as they began to move together, slow and sensual. It didn’t take long at all, not with Steve’s sleepy, mumbling, filthy words in Bucky’s ears and the indolent shimmying of his body in Bucky’s arms, for Bucky to fill him up all over again.

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Tony sat with Sam, Clint, and the AlternAvengers from Steve’s favorite world, drumming his fingers against the dining table.

“I’m not going to get them,” he told Sam and Clint as both men stared at him. “There is no force on heaven or earth that will get me to go through that door. My eyes are too innocent for that.”
“I’ll do it,” Other Natasha offered, a wry smile pulling at her lips.

“Oh, pick me!” Other Clint offered, raising a hand eagerly.

Tony found himself chuckling softly. The others were, as well. Other Tony had been all too happy to ramble on about how this world’s Bucky Barnes had joined the Avengers after the Chitauri attack on New York, a tale which had included relating Other Clint’s no-chill crush that everyone seemed to just accept as part of life.

It had given Tony pause, at first, wondering how Steve and Bucky were dealing with everything they’d have to absorb from the worlds they’d visited. His worries had been allayed when Clint and Sam had come by to check on his progress and told him when they’d left the apartment that Bucky and Steve had looked like they wanted to eat each other alive.

“Jarvis?” Other Tony said, glancing up at the ceiling.

Tony frowned at him. “So that’s where Steve picked that up.”

“Hmm?” Other Tony said, wide eyes landing on Tony. Tony pointed up and Other Tony actually blushed. “Oh my God, shut up. Don’t judge me. Jarvis!”

“No.”

“Tell our visiting Cap and HimBuckToo that dinner is almost served,” Other Tony requested.

JARVIS was silent for several seconds as they all stared at each other sort of awkwardly. When he came back over the speakers, the AI actually sounded embarrassed. “Your visitors will be here shortly, sir.”

“Poor Jarvis,” Other Bucky muttered. Beside him, Other Steve’s cheeks were growing pinker.

“Like a damn Hallmark movie in here,” Other Tony groaned.

It was only a few minutes before Steve and Bucky showed up, both looking sheepish but happier than they had in days. Maybe weeks. God, how long had they been on their dimension hop, anyway?

“Sorry. We lost track of time,” Steve offered.

“Fell asleep,” Bucky added as he sank into one of the empty chairs around the table. “We need memory foam mattresses, Tony.”

Tony was just shaking his head at them, smiling crookedly. “Happy’s a good look on you two.”

Bucky and Steve shared a glance, both of them smiling. Steve’s arm moved, and Tony instinctively knew they were linking their fingers under the table.

“How did the sciencing go?” Steve asked Tony as food was passed around the table, the others chattering happily.

Tony nodded. “We don’t have it yet. But we’re a hell of a lot closer than we could ever have gotten without those two on the job,” Tony answered, nodding his head toward the other side of the table, where Other Tony and Other Bruce were talking excitedly about the tests they’d been running on the remote. He found himself grinning as he looked at the four men he’d been sharing this highway to hell with. “We’re gonna go home.”
End Notes

I've transferred the Desperate Historian's Note to the end of my timeline, partly because it's better suited there, but mostly because I was tired of seeing the damn thing at the end of every mothertruckin' chapter and I'm sure y'all were as well.

Works inspired by this one:

[ANART] The Fourth Wall by DraejonSoul

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!