The Arsonist's Choir
by Brenda

Summary

"It's Bucky," Steve added, helplessly. The buyer was now sitting at Mikhailov's table, but the mission seemed unimportant. "He's been arrested. In Texas. And, uh, apparently, we're married."

"Congratulations," Natasha replied, with a small grin. "Are you registered anywhere?"

Notes

This story was written for and appears in its original format in the Not Without You Anthology.

It's also (as some of you who have read it have already guessed) the continuation of Satellite (I'm Part Of You), but you don't need to read that fic in order to enjoy this one.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Steve didn't have much love for the shitty tenement he and Bucky'd shared back in Brooklyn, but on nights like tonight – when the threat of winter hung in the air and the wind howled, cutting under clothes and digging under skin – he missed the drafty windows and thin walls more than he could say. At least it had provided some shelter, unlike the clearing where he and the 107th had set up camp.

They couldn't even risk a meager fire, not this close to enemy lines. Rations were scarce and the men were running purely on cigarettes and adrenaline and sheer determination. But it was Bucky's face, harshly lined and grey with exhaustion, that made Steve want to march right back to the Hydra base and rip apart everyone who'd survived the explosion with his bare hands. Every single one of them deserved slow deaths, begging for mercy and finding none.

Footsteps crunched behind him, growing steadily closer, but Steve didn't bother to turn to check to see who it was. He recognized the tread – Sergeant Dugan, Bucky's squad leader – even though they'd only met yesterday.

Dugan laid a hand on his shoulder, his voice low, breath visible in the inky-black air. "You should get some rest, Captain. We've got a long few days of marching ahead of us."

Steve wasn't tired, wasn't even close to it. The Army had put him through a series of endurance tests after Erskine's death, and he could function for close to a week without sleep or even feeling fatigued. It still came as a shock to him sometimes, that he could hear and see better than most people, that his heart beat strong and steady now. He could run for miles without flagging, could breathe without his throat closing up in protest. One day, maybe, he'd get used to it.

But he didn't argue, just nodded in acceptance. Even exhausted and injured, the men all wanted to feel like they were pulling their weight, and Steve wouldn't take that from them. Not after everything they'd been through.

"Thanks," he replied. "I could use a couple hours downtime."

Dugan tipped his chin towards Bucky, who was huddled against a nearby tree, cradling his Springfield, tiny tremors wracking his body with every shift of the wind. Even with his eyes closed, it was clear Bucky wasn't asleep.

"Make sure he gets some shuteye too, will ya?"

"Yeah, you bet."

Steve walked over to Bucky, boots barely making any noise on the frost-covered ground. Back when he'd weighed a buck-ten soaking wet, he'd moved like a tank. But ever since the serum, with all this extra height and bulk, he glided like a ghost. Sometimes, it felt like he was one – like he hadn't survived the vita-ray chamber, and everything that had happened after was just his death rattle, a small glimpse of the life he might have led.

He crouched down in front of Bucky, took a moment to study him without interruption, now that they were as safe as they were going to get. Bucky'd never been especially bulky – strong, sure, but not all muscle like some of the guys in the neighborhood. Now, though, he was lean, his skin stretched too tight across his frame. He reminded Steve of a panther, all coiled power and sleek definition.
Still handsome, with his high cheekbones and cut-glass jaw and full lips that were capable of reducing every one of Steve's senses to ash. But there was a sharp edge to his features now, beyond the shadows smudged under Bucky's eyes and the lines creasing Bucky's forehead. An edge that burned away all of Bucky's innocence and bravado, burned away the boy he'd been, and left someone far more dark and dangerous in its wake. A survivor.

Anger, ever present, a steady beat that forever throbbed under Steve's skin, surged within him. Death, even a slow one, would be too good for anyone who'd laid a hand on Bucky, who'd put those marks on his body and the deeper marks on his soul.

He reached out, intending only to brush a light touch across Bucky's jaw, just to feel the warmth beneath chilled fingers, when Bucky started with a silent gasp, eyes popping open as his finger jerked to the trigger of his rifle. Steve quickly laid his hands over Bucky's to still their movement, his thumbs rubbing over the nicks and cuts.

"Hey, hey, it's just me," he whispered, soothing. "You're safe now."

Bucky lurched back, his head thumping against the tree trunk. His eyes, storm-grey and long-lashed, were wide with fear. "Jesus, Stevie, I could've killed you."

Satisfied that he wasn't going to get shot, Steve sank to the ground beside Bucky. He kept their hands clasped together, trusting that the darkness and the lateness of the hour would shield them from any eyes that might roam their way. "I've been told I'm pretty hard to kill now."

"You were hard to kill before," Bucky replied, nudging Steve's shoulder. Between one breath and the next, he visibly relaxed, loosening his death grip on the rifle. "God knows anyone else who'd had all the shit that was wrong with you would be dead by now." Affection and pride laced every word, warming Steve better than a thousand fires.

"You'd be surprised how far a little spit and vinegar can get you in life."

"'A little', the man says," Bucky lightly scoffed. "Sometimes I think you were born angry."

Steve didn't have an argument. None that Bucky would believe, at any rate. "Maybe I was."

"I used to..." Bucky licked dry, cracked lips. "It never made much sense to me, before, why you'd get so mad all the time – Jesus, it seemed like all someone had to do around you was breathe wrong and you'd go after 'em – but now, I just..."

"Now?" Steve prompted, when Bucky went quiet.

Bucky tightened his hold on Steve's hand. His eyes were blazing, fever-bright, even in the dark. "Now I got...all this rage inside of me...it's like...like it's just spilling over, and I don't – what the hell do you do with all of it?"

"Oh, Buck. Steve's heart lurched sideways in his chest. Grief and regret washed over him, as he ached for all they'd lost. For the boys they'd once been. I never wanted this for you, he wanted to say. I wish I could take it all for you and spare you every bit of misery and pain..."

Well, as his ma used to say, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. And he and Bucky were both past the innocence and childish thoughts of their youth. In this new world they found themselves thrust in, the only currency that was worth anything was the truth.

"You learn to live with it. Use it as fuel to get through the day. Eventually..." He shrugged. "Eventually, it starts to morph into something else. Determination. Motivation."
"The need to take on bullies twice your size," Bucky finished quietly. The look he gave Steve was commiserating, weighed with too much knowledge. Adam after the Fall.

Steve nodded. "Yeah, pretty much. It never goes away, not really, but..."

"It gets channeled," Bucky finished.

"Yeah." He shifted, uncomfortable. He'd never wanted to have this conversation with anyone, let alone Bucky. Bucky, who was his light and guide, who'd always seen the best of him, even when his best wasn't good enough.

"How the fuck did it not burn you up from the inside out?"

"I'm not so sure it didn't. Some days, I feel pretty hollowed out."

"Jesus. Jesus," Bucky repeated, and shook his head. "It's a wonder you didn't light a match to the world and laugh."

"There are some days when I still think it might be the best option," Steve replied. "But most of the time I remember that, for the most part, people are decent at heart. Misguided, sometimes, but decent. It helps."

"I swear, if Hydra'd gotten their hands on you first, we'd all either be speaking German right now or be sporting creepy red skulls for faces," Bucky mused. "I guess it's lucky for the human race Erskine found you instead of Schmidt."

It wasn't funny, but Steve smiled all the same. "It's lucky for the human race you found me first," he said, infusing the words with all of the honesty he could muster. If he could give Bucky nothing else right now, he could give him this. This one truth that bound them together more than any other vow or bit of shared history ever could.

James Buchanan Barnes, the magnetic pole that kept him on the right path and banked his rage, tempered it into hardened steel.

"Yeah," Bucky replied, just as quiet. "And I'm lucky you found me."

Then Bucky's lips pressed against his, rubbed over them nice and light, all they dared to do, even as secluded as they were. But when Bucky laid his head on Steve's shoulder and closed his eyes, Steve wrapped an arm around his shoulders and held on. Rested his cheek against Bucky's hair and breathed him in, dirt and gun oil and cedarwood.

"There isn't a length that's too far," he whispered. "Not for me. Not where you're concerned."

"I know." Bucky brought Steve's hand up to place a kiss at his wrist, right over his hammering pulse. "So, what are we going to do about Hydra?"

Steve heard the unspoken question under it: What's your plan to make it right? Where do we go from here?

"I'm going to do the only thing I know how. Fight." He pressed his lips to Bucky's temple. "I'm not asking you to join. No one would blame you, least of all me, if you wanted out."

Steve wouldn't blame Bucky at all if he decided to head home. If he went back to work at his pop's hardware store, and tried his best to forget all about the horrors and indignities he'd suffered. Even though he'd miss Bucky like a limb, he'd probably sleep safer knowing Bucky was out of harm's
way.

For the first time, he knew exactly how Bucky'd felt all those times Steve tried so desperately to enlist.

Bucky nudged him and, when Steve looked over, Bucky's eyes flashed like a lightning storm. Steve shivered, the hairs on his arms standing on end. Electricity crackled through him, a current simply waiting for a spark to set the whole world aflame.

"And let you have all the fun without me?" Bucky asked, with a reckless smile. "Not a chance in hell, babe."

Somehow, Steve wasn't surprised by the answer. Where one went, the other would follow, an absolute that was as indestructible as diamonds, and just as rare.

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Part II - Bid Farewell to Yesterday

It was crazy to think that the royal palace in Birnin Zana was at the edge of a bustling metropolis. Even with Steve's superior hearing, all he could make out was birdsong and the wind rushing through the leaves of the trees. It was quiet here. The kind of peaceful Steve knew he'd never get used to, no matter how long he lived.

He stood on the balcony, looking out over the ravine into the lush jungle that lay beyond the palace walls, the panther statue jutting out like a sentinel, a protective symbol for the Wakandan people, and a warning for the rest of the world. *Come this close, but no further.*

He felt Bucky step out onto the balcony before he heard him – the subtle shift in the air, the way Steve's blood surged, the iron drawn from Steve's cells to Bucky's, a magnet pulling them together. Always together.

"You're stalling," Bucky stated, coming to stand beside him at the railing. The breeze whipped dark hair across his forehead and neck, long now, so unlike the short, clean-cut style he'd had as long as Steve could remember. But the length suited him. Suited this new Bucky, with the ruthless set to his jaw and lurking danger in his eyes.

"I know," Steve replied. What else could he say?

Bucky sighed. "You can spend all night out here and it's still not changing what's happening in the morning, Steve. I'm doing this, with or without you."

"I know you are," Steve said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

Beside him, Bucky tensed, his shoulders drawn back to parade rest. "I don't need your permission. It's not like you asked for mine before you gave yourself over to Erskine for your little science experiment."

"C'mon, that's not fair —"

"Oh, you wanna talk *fair* now? Is that *really* how you want to play this?"

"No," Steve said, conceding the point, even though he wanted nothing more than to argue. To rail at Bucky and the world against the injustice of it all. He'd just gotten Bucky *back*. Didn't the universe owe him at least five minutes of happiness? "But there has to be another way." Some other alternative they hadn't yet considered.

He hated himself for the plea in his voice, for asking Bucky to abdicate the choice he'd made, but it wasn't like he had much pride where Bucky was concerned.

"This is the safest option for everyone."

Steve wondered who Bucky was trying to convince, himself or Steve. Wondered which of them was more selfish – Bucky, for thinking running away would solve anything, or himself for begging Bucky to stay with him despite Bucky's express desires to the contrary.

"Safe," he repeated, glancing at Bucky's profile. The regal slope of his nose, the sharp jut of his chin. Still so achingly familiar, in spite of the years and miles and blood between them. Still achingly beautiful, in spite of the frown lines creasing the corners of his mouth. "You know I wouldn't let anything happen to you."
"Which is why I can't let you take this bullet."

"Don't." The word was sharp, a blade slicing through the air. "Don't you dare pretend you're doing this for me."

Bucky didn't so much as flinch. "Believe what you want. But I am doing this for you. Look at what you've already sacrificed for me – your team, your friends, your job –"

"You think any of that matters to me?" Steve slammed a hand down on the railing, and felt the echo down to his toes. "Christ, Buck, you already know what I'd do for you, and I wouldn't consider it a sacrifice."

Bucky curled his fingers into a fist, the muscles in his jaw ticking. Steve could feel the anger in his bones, and welcomed it like an old friend. "I never asked to have that kind of power over you."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Bucky turned, jabbed a finger to Steve's chest, as solid as a punch. His brows were thunderclouds over his eyes, the grey of them darkening like the skies before a storm. "You fought so damn hard for me, and you never even bothered to ask who you were fighting for."

"I know exactly who you are." He was so tired of this argument. He was already fighting the world where Bucky was concerned; he shouldn't have to fight Bucky too. "I knew before I found you in Bucharest."

"Then you know how much I've changed," Bucky said, softer now. "Entreating.

"I'm not you, Steve. I never was." Bucky sighed, and tipped his face to the heavens. The dying rays of the setting sun burnished his hair to copper, framed his face in soft shades of gold. The artist in Steve longed for paper and pencil, even though he knew he'd never be able to capture Bucky's brilliance and light. He'd never been able to hold Bucky, not even on a canvas, not even if he'd had all of the oils in the world at his disposal.

"I know," he said, raw and aching and hating himself all over again for his weakness.

Bucky cupped his hand across Steve's nape, fingers toying with the short hairs. His lips were distractingly close, a temptation Steve had never been able to resist. "You really wanna spend our last night together, for who knows how long, arguing?"

"I'm not running away from it."

It was a low blow, but Steve was too tired to fight about it. Too tired to beat his head against the wall that separated them now, no matter how desperately he tried to tear it down. "You know I don't," he said, and closed the distance between them before Bucky could respond.

Bucky's lips parted under his easily, their tongues sliding together as they traded moans and kisses. The air was heavy, weighted with regret, but under it was the foundation they'd built, the bricks of it laid a world away and a lifetime ago. Steve clung to that bedrock even as he gave in to the need beating a steady rhythm under his skin. They had this, something no one could take away from them.
They stumbled inside, shedding clothes along the way, and Steve gently pushed Bucky onto the bed so he could look his fill. The join where Bucky's left shoulder met metal was a mass of scar tissue and welts, and his chest and stomach were marked with more scars etched deep into his skin. Another tangible reminder of how much Bucky'd suffered while Steve had languished under the ice.

But he was still – always – the most beautiful thing Steve had ever seen. Especially now, hard and trembling and Steve's, at least for tonight.

He knelt between Bucky's legs as he ran his hands along heavily muscled thighs. Felt the strength and reveled in it, the warmth of the flesh under his hands, and Bucky's soft sighs filling the air. "There are so many things I want to do to you."

"Do them," Bucky said, lashes fluttering down to rest at the top of flushed cheeks when Steve touched him again, fingertips sliding over his stomach and across his hips. "Make me yours."

*Make me yours.* Even though Steve's heart was still splintering into tiny pieces, he cherished the words and the sentiment behind them. Whatever they were now – however much they'd changed, and not always for the better – they *still* belonged to each other.

He dipped down to trail kisses along one collarbone, lingered in the hollow of Bucky's throat as his fingers drifted over Bucky's torso, sought out every spot that made him sigh and groan with need. "I will," he promised. "Gonna ruin you for everyone else."

Bucky arched into Steve's touch as he ran shaking fingers up Steve's back to tangle in his hair. "Like you didn't already do that back in 1935," he breathed, the sound broken, more beautiful than any symphony.

"Shhh...I've got you," Steve whispered, and moved down, steady and slow. He mapped Bucky's body through touch and taste, savoring every gasp and sigh, greedy for more and more still. Part of him wondered what it was about Bucky that brought out all of his protective instincts, even though he knew Bucky was more than capable of taking care of himself. It was enough that Bucky was here and wanted this, wanted him, even after everything that had happened. Somehow, their jagged edges still fit.

Steve took his time, relearning every bit of skin, committing every new scar to memory. Proof that Bucky'd survived the horrors of his past to make his way back to Steve. "Look at you." Steve breathed the words across Bucky's stomach just to see his skin pebble. "Open and ready and begging for me; you're a goddamn miracle."

"Steve, please..." The words were torn from Bucky's lips as he arched up, clutched at the comforter beneath him.

"I know." He reached for Bucky's hand. Their fingers twisted together, Bucky clinging tight to him, as Steve dipped his head to run his tongue up the length of Bucky's cock.

Bucky's breath exploded in a sharp gasp as Steve closed tight lips around the head and sank down, took him deep. He wanted to linger, to draw this out, but the way Bucky twisted under him, the heavy taste of arousal on his tongue, stoked the fire into a conflagration of want. He surrendered to it, the flames swallowing him whole, as he moved his head, savored every broken sigh, more proof that Bucky was still with him.

"*Steve, *" Bucky demanded, urging Steve up and wrapping those strong thighs around him to hold him in place. "Now."
"I'm here," Steve promised, swallowing the grief threatening to drown him, and fumbled for the bottle of lube on the nightstand, need making him clumsy as he poured a generous amount onto suddenly shaking fingers. "Let me up," he whispered, mouthing kisses to Bucky's jawline and throat, drinking him in like a man in an oasis after years in the desert.

Bucky nodded, but reeled him in for another kiss before spreading his legs out and lifting his hips so Steve could slide his fingers between Bucky's cheeks. Bucky groaned and opened his thighs wider, clawed at Steve's arm like he was the one afraid Steve would leave. Steve wanted to assure him there was nowhere else he would rather be than right here, with Bucky open and ready for him, needing him in a way that soothed every aching, serrated edge of his heart. But the words stayed lodged in his throat, buried under the ever-present ticking of the clock that meant their time together was fleeting and going by far too fast.

Instead, he scissored his fingers and watched as grey eyes, hazed with lust and need, fluttered shut as Steve pressed deeper. "Goddammit, babe, stop teasing and fuck me already."

"Yeah, yeah." Steve bent down for a soft kiss as he added a third finger, relishing every new groan. His free hand fumbled with the lube as he tried to get it into Bucky's grip. "Get me ready for you."

"Finally." Bucky flipped the cap open to pour a generous amount, and then closed slick fingers around him, slowly stroking up. Steve let out a shaking breath; his skin was too tight, stretched over muscle and bone, every nerve singing as Bucky's fist moved over him in a lazy, assured rhythm, playing Steve's body like a well-loved instrument.

He only lasted a few strokes before his own need overtook him, and he pulled his fingers out so he could take his cock in hand. He sucked air into starving lungs as he pressed forward, Bucky's body enclosing him inch by slow inch.

Bucky crossed ankles around Steve's back, urging him down. "Move."

It was easy enough to give in to the demand. He thrust, slow and steady, his hips rolling with every push as he captured Bucky's lips again for kiss after kiss. He could do this forever, could stay inside all that heat, wringing moan after moan from Bucky's lips, until the sun collapsed and took the earth with it in a final blaze of glory. Time slowed, folded in around them; there was only this, only Bucky urging him deeper and deeper, only their harsh, mingled breaths as their tongues tangled together. Sweat rolled down Steve's neck, along his forehead, stung his eyes, and he blinked to clear his vision, not wanting to miss a second of Bucky under him, lips parted, eyes closed, cheeks flushed, and so fucking beautiful that Steve's soul broke apart.

"I love you," he whispered, because it was true, it had always been true, and he wanted Bucky to hear it, to know that Steve meant it with everything in him. That his heart would beat only for Bucky until it ceased beating altogether. Need and want built as Bucky moved with him in harmony, a dance they'd perfected a lifetime ago.

"Steve..." Bucky's eyes fluttered open as Steve slid a hand between their bodies to curl around Bucky's cock, and Steve's super-human hearing deserted him, the roaring in his ears and the pounding of his heart drowning all other sound as he moved faster and faster, fist moving in perfect time with every thrust of his hips.

Steve couldn't tell which of them came first, just that one orgasm triggered the other, an overwhelming cascade. Stars exploded behind his eyes, and he slumped, boneless, over Bucky, struggling to remember to breathe, as Bucky's fingers trailed up his sweat-slick spine.

He started to pull away, and stopped when Bucky's legs, still wrapped around his hips, tightened.
Held him in place like a lifeline in an angry sea.

"Don't," Bucky said, his voice raw and low. "I like you inside me like this."

Tears pricked behind Steve's eyelids. Despite the lassitude in his own body and the warmth of the body beneath him, he felt hollow. Like he'd lost something precious. Something he'd never get back, no matter how hard he tried.

"Okay," he whispered, gathering the ragged edges of his courage around him like a shield. One hand smoothed damp hair from Bucky's forehead as he repeated, "Okay."

They had tonight, he reminded himself. The world could burn to ashes, as long as he had Bucky with him.

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Steve was with Natasha, on a mission in Lisbon, when the call came.

They were soaking in the late afternoon sunshine and drinking tiny cups of exquisitely brewed espresso at one of the pastelarias, holding hands and leaning across the table to trade coffee-bitter kisses, the perfect picture of deliriously and obliviously in love. All the while, Natasha's watchful gaze observed their mark – Alexei Mikhailov, a Russian scientist who'd been part of the Winter Soldier project in Siberia – while Steve catalogued everyone coming and going, searching for Mikhailov's buyer, ready to intercept when the time came. It was rookie work, honestly, an insult to his and Nat's talents, but Steve wasn't about to complain. Not after the lengths T'Challa and the Wakandan government had gone through to make sure his team had diplomatic immunity and the freedom to return home to their lives and families.

They were on their third cup, and the buyer had just stepped up to the counter to order, when Steve's phone rang, a number Steve didn't recognize.

Natasha quirked an eyebrow. "You gonna answer that?"

Steve frowned at his phone for another second. "No one should have this number." In fact, there were only five people on the planet who did, and one of them was sitting next to him. Belatedly, he put it to his ear and hit answer. "This is Steve Rogers."

"Well, it's about time you answered," came the all-too familiar – and achingly missed – drawl. A voice Steve hadn't heard in a year. Every particle in his body tensed, coiled into tight springs.

"Bucky?"

"Yeah, sorry, sweetheart, I know you're on assignment, but I kinda got myself into a bit of a pickle and I need my dearly beloved husband to come bail me out of jail."

For a long, drawn moment that stretched into infinity, the words didn't register. Steve's gaze skittered across the table. A half-eaten biscotti lay next to his saucer. Coffee grounds littered the bottom of his cup. The sun beat down mercilessly on his bare neck. "What?"

"I know, I know, I promised I'd behave while you were gone, but –"

The world abruptly snapped back into focus. Got myself into a bit of a pickle. An old code from their Commando days. In trouble. Come ASAP. Play along.

"Where are you?" he asked, all business.

Bucky chuckled, low and richly amused. "Right where you left me, in Bulverde, Texas."

Bulverde, Texas? Steve didn't even know where that was. What the fuck was going on? Natasha gave him an inquisitive look, but he shook his head. This was too bizarre to try to explain using sign language.

"I thought you were still in –"

"Babe, I'd love to tell you all about what happened, but I've only got two minutes before I get cut off."
"I'll be there in nine hours," Steve told him, and hung up without even waiting for a reply. He stared at Natasha. "I need to go."

She blew on her espresso and took a small sip, her look indecipherable above the rim.

"It's Bucky," he added, helplessly. The buyer was now sitting at Mikhailov's table, but the mission seemed unimportant. "He's been arrested. In Texas. And, uh, apparently, we're married."

"Congratulations," she replied, with a small grin. "Are you registered anywhere?"

"You're hilarious. I didn't even know he was out of cryo." He wondered why no one had bothered to tell him. Why T'Challa, at the very least, hadn't reached out to let him know.

"You need the quinjet?" she asked, and sat back in her chair, soft curls swaying forward across her cheeks.

He nodded, and half-rose out of his seat before, belatedly, asking: "You'll be alright?"

The smirk returned, full-lipped. "I think I can handle it."

He didn't know why he'd even bothered. Natasha was one of the toughest, most self-sufficient people he'd ever met. She probably wouldn't even miss him.

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Eight hours and change later, Steve strode into the Bulverde police station, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder, a weathered Real Madrid ball cap on his head, and sporting a week-old beard that he hadn't bothered to shave off. On the long flight, he'd had time to do some digging into Bucky's situation – he'd been charged with one count of public nuisance and resisting arrest – neither of which made any sense. Bucky was way too smart to pick a fight with anyone, let alone a police officer. He shouldn't even be in the States. What the hell was Bucky playing at, and why?

Steve rubbed the grit from his eyes and strode to the front desk with what he hoped was a friendly look on his face. "Uh, hi. I'm here to post bail for, uh, my husband."

The officer, who looked like she was just biding time until her pension hit, glanced up from her paperwork and assessed him out of cool, flat, cop eyes. "And you are...?"

The way she asked, Steve knew she'd already made him. "Steve Rogers."

She nodded, looking a little pleased with herself, then her gaze narrowed slightly. "You look bigger on TV."

You should've met me before 1943. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

"Wait here. Chief wanted a word with you first."

"Thanks."

He kept his head down and his ball cap pulled low while he tracked the movement around him, and catalogued all of the points of egress, just in case. Bucky hadn't used their code for immediate danger, so he was probably okay. But it never hurt to be prepared.

"Captain Rogers?"

He looked up. A kind-looking mid-thirties man of mixed race, with a cowboy hat pushed back on his
"Chief Skip Jameson, like the whiskey, and can I just say what an honor it is to meet you. What you did during your War and later on with the Avengers has been a privilege to witness —"

"Thank you, but I was just doing my job," Steve said, cutting him off before he could go further. He wasn't a hero. Just a soldier doing his duty.

The Chief's eyes crinkled when he smiled. "Understood."

"So, uh, what do you need from me?"

"Well, I called to get Barnes brought up, and there's some paperwork I'm gonna need you to fill out, but we'll try to make this as painless as possible," Jameson said, leading Steve to a small, cramped desk in the corner of the room.

"I appreciate it," Steve replied. He still wasn't sure what he was doing here, but he and Bucky had spent a lifetime getting each other out of trouble. The muscle memory was engraved in his bones, grafted to every cell of his body. And Bucky'd saved his life at least a hundred times over – the least he could do was go along with whatever this was, and back Bucky's play.

Jameson tapped a small pile of papers on the desk. "Just a few things for you to sign, and then you and your husband can be on your way."

Steve took the offered pen, and set his duffel on the floor so he could read over the documents. Everything seemed straightforward enough. When he was finished, he handed Jameson the pen, and watched him counter-sign everything. Then Jameson heaved a sigh and stuck his thumbs into his belt loops.

"I can't rightly say I condone what Barnes did, but I watch CNN same as everyone else, and I got a lot of sympathy for what he's been through. It ain't easy coming back from war, and especially with being tortured and forced to do all the horrific things like he was. It's good he's got you to help him integrate back into society."

"Uh, yeah," Steve offered, pasting on his best USO smile. At any other time, he'd be thrilled to know that Bucky had people in his corner who believed in him, but right now, he just wanted to get the hell out of the station with Bucky in tow, and get some answers.

"Odd that your marriage didn't make the news," Jameson commented, with a far too shrewd look.

"Um, we wanted to keep it quiet. Private," Steve added, floundering. He'd never been good at improv.

Jameson hummed. "Yeah, Barnes said the same thing."

Steve said nothing in reply. He was too busy staring at the figure in thick ankle shackles shuffling his way toward him. Shackles Steve knew full well wouldn't do a damn thing to keep Bucky Barnes in them if he didn't want to be, even with an empty sleeve where his new metal arm – one Steve knew T'Challa had personally designed – should have been. Why didn't he have it?

Another question he could add to his list.

He slowly got to his feet as let his gaze roam as he looked his fill at Bucky for the first time in a year. Bucky's hair was still long and curling in the back, he still had the stubble that emphasized the
sharpness of his jawline and cheeks, and there was a small cut across his lower lip that Steve wanted to worry with his teeth. His t-shirt stretched across a thick chest and shoulders, and his jeans were molded to tree-trunk thighs, hugging hips Steve knew as intimately as his own. Even with only the one arm and in the shackles, Bucky still radiated that same innate grace and swagger he'd had pretty much from birth, so much a part of him that Steve could have picked him out in a crowd, blindfolded.

The surge of lust jolted through him like a kick to the gut; Steve was helpless in its onslaught. He'd never known how to resist Bucky, not in any iteration. He'd never bothered to try.

"Hey, babe," Bucky said, eyeing him just as intently, the look as intimate as a caress. "Do I get a kiss hello, or you still mad at me for getting arrested?"

Steve wasn't sure what he felt, exactly, but he knew the role he was expected to play. And it wasn't like he was ever going to say no to getting his hands on Bucky, no matter the reason. In three long strides, he was in front of Bucky, looking deep into those tempest-grey eyes, and then they were kissing, hard and hungry, Bucky's fist in Steve's hair, his tongue pushing past Steve's teeth. Steve plastered himself to Bucky's body, gulped him in, breath and taste and scent all filling him until he was drunk with it.

They parted on a gasp, and it was only then that Steve remembered they were in the middle of a police station, with a very curious audience. But this was good, he reminded himself. This was probably exactly what Bucky'd wanted.

"Hey there," he murmured, pitching his voice so it would be overheard, and brushed Bucky's hair from his forehead. "I came as soon as I could."

"I know. Thank you." Bucky's eyes fluttered, heat and affection spilling out of him as he leaned into the contact like he was a flower following the sun. Then he looked Jameson's way with an abashed shrug. "Sorry about, um, the PDA."

Jameson let out an amused chortle. "I'm guessing you two are still in your honeymoon phase."

Steve flicked his tongue across his bottom lip, chasing the gunmetal tang. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Is there anything else you needed?" Bucky asked Jameson.

The other man shook his head. "Just make sure you don't miss the hearing date and don't leave the country."

"I won't let him out of my sight," Steve promised, giving Bucky a pointed look that he returned without blinking. Still the best poker face Steve had ever seen, even better than Natasha's.

The bailiff unlocked the ankle shackles and Chief Jameson stuck his hand out to Bucky. "You've got yourself a good man, Sergeant. Keep out of trouble, alright?"

A small, rare, warm smile graced Bucky's face. "I know I do. And I'll do my best, Chief. See you soon."

Jameson clapped Steve on the back, then he and the bailiff left them alone. Bucky cocked his head in the direction of the doors. "You ready to head out?"

Steve stepped closer, under the guise of brushing another kiss across those tempting lips, and breathed out, "You mind telling me what the fuck is going on?"
Bucky slid his hand across Steve's hip, resting over it in a proprietary manner. His own murmur was just as soft. "Not here."

Fair enough. He picked up his duffel and took Bucky’s hand, making a production of lacing their fingers together, nice and easy. Played along, just like he knew Bucky wanted. "We still in the same place or...?"

"Of course," Bucky told him, with a heated sidelong glance. "The bed's been pretty empty without you in it, though."

_Christ._ Bucky was going to kill him. "That's, uh, good to hear," Steve said, as they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Bucky hailed a passing taxi. "Thanks for coming. I owe you." His gaze dropped to Steve's crotch and his lips stretched into that wide, familiar smirk. "But I'm sure I can find _some_ way to work off my debt."

Steve didn't bother to argue. There wouldn't have been a point.

***

The cab dropped them off in front of an old ranch-style house. The exterior paint might've once been a vivid green, but the sun and weather had beaten it to a dull moss color. The yard surrounding it was scraggily and patchy, although someone had tried to keep the place looking nice, judging by the flowers planted around the outside. At least the street appeared to be quiet.

"Cozy," Steve remarked, following Bucky up a short flight of stairs to the front porch.

"Came furnished and utilities were included," Bucky replied, and unlocked the door, holding it open for Steve to step inside.

A decent-sized living area with a sofa, armchair and a wall-mounted TV greeted him, with a narrow kitchen at the other end of the room. There was a short hallway next to the kitchen, which presumably led to the bedrooms and bathroom, but he wasn't in the mood to get the tour. Instead, he dropped his duffel and turned Bucky's way, ready for some answers.

"Buck," he started, but Bucky shook his head once, quickly, and grabbed his hand, tapping out 'Place bugged' in the abbreviated Morse code they'd used back during the War.

The house was _bugged_? Why the hell were they _here_, if they couldn't talk freely?

Some of his frustration must have shown on his face, because Bucky gave him an apologetic smile and stepped forward. "Come to bed," he said out loud, and brushed his lips, nice and light, over Steve's. "Let me make it up to you."

Steve's body reacted, as it always did, to Bucky's proximity. It didn't matter how confused or irritated he was. "This probably isn't—"

Bucky's lips slanted more firmly over his, stealing his words and his breath. "I've missed you."

This was a terrible idea – especially if the rooms were tapped – but it had been a year of way too many lonely nights, and Steve was too tired to pretend like he didn't want this with every fiber of his being. Like he wouldn't crawl through glass just for a smile or a touch or the sound of Bucky's voice in his ear.
"I missed you, too," he replied, truthfully, and gave in to the inevitable. He could allow himself this, he thought, as he buried his hands in the weightless silk of Bucky's hair, bringing their mouths back together.

They careened down the hallway, pinballing off each other and the walls as they tore at each other's clothes, a year's worth of pent-up need and lust bleeding into every press of their bodies against each other and every slide of lips on lips. By the time Bucky shoved Steve backwards onto the bed, Steve was so hard, he couldn't think straight, and when Bucky wrapped clever, heated fingers around his cock, what little cognitive abilities he'd managed to hold onto flew right out the window. He lost himself in desperate kisses and fevered touches, and found sanctuary in the broken sound of his name on Bucky's lips, and their mingled sighs as they moved together as one.

It was only after, with Bucky a solid, drowsy weight on top of him, both of them sticky with come and spit, that Steve remembered the million questions still swirling in his head. But, as true sleep dragged him under for the first time since an opulent guest room in the Wakandan royal palace, he pushed all of them to the back of his mind.

Everything could wait until the morning.

***

Steve woke, alone, to a bright shaft of sunlight on his face, and immediately regretted opening his eyes. Every muscle in his body ached like he'd gone a few rounds in the gym with Thor or Natasha, and there was a dull ache pounding right behind his temples that he could already tell was going to get worse before it went away. He still sometimes forgot, even after all these years, that this body needed a lot more in the way of fuel to run at optimal levels.

He was just pulling himself to a sitting position when Bucky strolled into the room, wearing only a pair of black boxers, and cradling two bottles of water in his hand. In the pale light of the early sun, Steve noticed the scars crisscrossing all along Bucky's left shoulder, bleeding down into the rounded metal stump, were paler now than they had been, light pink instead of angry red. He had mottled bruises from Steve's fingers on his thigh and beard burn on his nape. Steve wanted to drag him back to the bed and mark him up even more.

"Morning, babe," Bucky said, smiling softly at him. "Thought you'd still be passed out."

"Tried, but..." Steve waved vaguely at the sunlight pouring in from between the slats of the blinds. "Time's it?"

"Seven-ish." Bucky sat on the edge of the bed, almost close enough to touch, and passed Steve one of the bottles. Bucky ran quick fingers through his hair, already sticking up in all directions, then rubbed them over his stubble. "We'll need to go somewhere for breakfast. Got jack shit here to eat, unless you wanted mustard and soy sauce."

Steve chugged half the contents in one swallow; already, he felt marginally more human. "As appealing as that sounds, I'll pass."

Bucky uncapped his own bottle and took a long, noisy sip. "There's a decent diner just down the road that serves a great scramble and pretty good pancakes, if you were up for a walk. You want the shower first? I'd offer to wash your back, but you look like you need food more than another blowjob."

"Tempting, but you're probably right." As much as he wanted Bucky's lips wrapped nice and snug around his dick, he needed to eat.
Bucky grinned. "Thought so."

"I'll take a raincheck," Steve said, then polished off his bottle, and stood. His skin felt about as crusty as three-day-old bread.

Bucky got to his feet and pressed a light, lingering kiss to Steve's unresisting lips. "I'm gonna put the coffee on."

"Sounds good, thanks," Steve replied, and walked, naked, into the bathroom. It wasn't much to look at, but it was clean, and the water pressure was pretty damned good. Compared to some of the places he'd been staying the past year, he felt like he was back at the Avengers facility in New York.

When he stepped into the living room, dressed and toweling his hair, it was to the mouth-watering smell of freshly brewed coffee. Bucky just waved vaguely at the pot and then disappeared down the hall, presumably to shower himself. Steve rummaged in the cabinets for a mug, and drank the first cup leaning against the counter. It was strong enough to strip paint, black and thick, exactly how Bucky'd made it all their lives, and, somehow, the proof that Bucky still couldn't make coffee worth a damn made Steve feel a little bit better.

Bucky strolled back into the room ten minutes later, dressed in a tee shirt and jeans, damp hair clinging to his forehead and neck. Steve wanted to lick every droplet of water off his skin, wanted to relearn every inch of his body from the inside out. Need, ever-present and ever-bright, pulsed under his skin, a rhythm that beat for Bucky alone. He hadn't had nearly enough last night to slake his thirst.

"You good?" Bucky asked, reaching out to brush Steve's bangs from his forehead.

He tilted his face into the touch, soaked it in like sunlight. "Once I eat, I will be," he said, and placed the mug in the sink. "You ready?"

"Yeah, come on." Bucky snagged his sunglasses from the counter next to the sink, and Steve unearthed his shades from his duffel. But when he went to grab his phone to put it in his pocket, Bucky shook his head once, minutely.

Okay, no phones, then. Steve left it on the counter and followed Bucky out the door.

They fell in step with each other when they got to the sidewalk, fingers brushing together. Steve took a look around the area – most of the houses looked like the one Bucky'd rented, old and faded, but in decent enough shape. A few people were out watering their lawns; they all waved and called friendly greetings as he and Bucky passed. It was a lot like how Steve remembered their old neighborhood.

They turned the corner and started down a main thoroughfare, passing a small grocery store and gas station. "Is it safe for you to tell me what I'm doing here yet?" Steve asked.

"After breakfast, I promise," Bucky replied. "Did I put the op you were on in danger?"

"No, it was nothing Nat couldn't handle on her own. I was mostly there as eye candy."

Bucky made a show of leering at him. "You've always been that, even when you only came up to my chest."

Steve huffed out a laugh, heat suffusing his cheeks. It was nice to know that Bucky was still a world-class flirt, even after all this time. "You are still so full of shit."
"It's the truth," Bucky said, and opened the door to the diner. It was mostly empty – there were a few people at the counter around the register, but that was about it. The interior itself looked like something from his and Bucky's childhood, with Formica counters and cheerfully red vinyl booths, and it smelled like bacon and hash browns and melted butter, which was good enough for Steve.

"Mornin', Bucky," one of the waitresses called, and Bucky lifted his hand in a wave.

"Morning, Jackie." He slid into one of the booths and Steve slid in across from him. Their hands met in the middle, fingers lacing together easily, instinctually. Bucky smiled at him, eyes crinkling at the corners, and Steve fell in love with him all over again, tumbled right over the cliff and embraced the freefall. He had never, not once, been able to resist that smile directed his way.

The waitress – Jackie – walked over, pad and pen already out. She had the looks of someone who'd been a stunner when she'd been younger, and was gracefully sliding into middle age, with a wide grin that invited the world to laugh right along with her. Steve liked her immediately. "Well, it's about time you finally brought your man in to meet me."

"I told you I would as soon as he got home," Bucky replied, his thumb scraping possessively across Steve's, sandpaper-rough and slow. "Steve, this is Jackie. Jackie, meet Steve."

"It's good to finally meet you, Captain."

Steve nodded. "Ma'am."

"Don't worry, she's been good company while you've been gone," Bucky told him, with another one of those rakish smiles, so much like the ones he used to pull out when he was trying to charm the girls back in Brooklyn. "In fact, I'm thinking about throwing you over so I can ask for her hand."

Steve chuckled, amused. "You always were a sucker for a redhead."

Jackie's eyes danced with laughter. "As if you ever would, or that I'd take you up on that offer if you did." Then she nodded at the menu sitting in front of Bucky. "You havin' your usual, hon?"

"Yeah."

"You ready to order?"

What Steve really wanted was to take Bucky back to bed and block out the world for the next week or two. But he dragged his gaze from Bucky's mouth and offered Jackie his own smile. "Two of whatever scramble plate you have that comes with bacon and fries or potatoes or something with starch."

"We've got you covered," she said, and if she put a little extra wiggle in her step as she walked away, Steve was definitely man enough to appreciate the view.

"She's a good sort," Bucky said, after a moment. "Knew me straight off, even with the scruff on my face and missing my arm, and didn't even blink."

"People giving you space is always a good thing," Steve agreed. God knew he could sympathize. "Which is why I'm having a hard time reconciling why you went and got yourself very publicly arrested, and then just as publicly dragged me out here to bail you out."

"Yeah, yeah, I told you already we'd talk. But after breakfast," Bucky added. "You need to eat, remember."

"Okay," Steve agreed, just as Jackie came back around with coffee and water. "It's not like I'm going anywhere."
Bucky was definitely right about the food. The eggs were nice and fluffy, the bacon was crisp, and the roasted potatoes were sprinkled with rosemary and exactly the right shade of greasy good. Bucky's regular turned out to be perfectly golden waffles that he drowned in a vat of pure maple syrup. Something else about him that hadn't changed over the decades.

After Jackie cleared their plates and refilled their coffee, Bucky sat back against the cracked vinyl seat. His appearance was still open and relaxed, but Steve knew Bucky was now in mission mode.

"Before I get started, I just...I know you're disappointed I didn't tell you I was out," Bucky said, peering at Steve from under his lashes.

"A little bit," Steve mildly replied, although, from Bucky's snort, he didn't do a good enough job masking the anger or the hurt.

"Jesus, you're a piece of work." Bucky shook his head like he was disappointed. "I forgot how well you can hold a grudge."

"Well, damn, Buck, what else did you expect from me? The first I hear about you being out of cryo is you calling me from a jail cell. I'm supposed to, what, be okay with that?"

Bucky sighed. "And you can't just trust I had a reason?"

"I do trust you," Steve protested, stung. "You know I do. I just..."

"You're frustrated?" Bucky asked, with a knowing look. "Impatient? Raring to jump into whatever fire there is feet first, fuck looking both ways, just like always?"

"Yeah," Steve admitted, with a rueful smile, the anger dying down. Bucky, as always, knew him far too well. "You could say that."

"Some things never change," Bucky said, with another sigh, then fixed Steve with an expression that was all business. "Does the name Alexander Lukin mean anything to you?"

Steve's pulse tripped. All of the blood in his body went Arctic cold. "You know it does," he said. "But I thought he'd fallen off the grid."

"T'Challa woke you from cryo because someone thought they spotted Lukin?" That didn't make much sense. Why not just alert Steve or, hell, even Tony? Why wake Bucky for a rumor without doing any legwork to see if the intel was good? "Is he after you?" Steve asked. Why the hell was Bucky out of Wakanda, if that was the case?

Bucky's lips curved in a horrible approximation of a smile. "Not exactly. But it wouldn't be difficult for him to bring me to heel."

"Does he...?" Steve forced the words out of a tight throat. "Is there another notebook? Is that...is that why...?" Just the idea that someone had devised a different method of forcing Bucky into compliance filled him with a rage like he hadn't felt since the day Bucky'd fallen from the train. He should have burned Hydra off the map seventy years ago and salted the earth so nothing could grow in its place.

Bucky shook his head. "No, Lukin had another set of trigger words for me."

"Jesus," Steve breathed, horrified.
Bucky threw down enough money to cover their tab and tip, then slid out of the booth. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

Steve followed, setting off next to Bucky on the sidewalk. The sun was beating down overhead, the sky robin's-egg blue and cloudless, the sort of perfect day that used to mean afternoons at Coney Island splashing in the surf. But Steve couldn't appreciate it. He was too busy reeling with everything Bucky'd told him. With everything Bucky had yet to say. Somewhere out there was yet another person who had the ability to make Bucky forget himself, his past, Steve.

He wanted to grab Bucky's hand, to reassure himself that Bucky was here and real beside him, that this wasn't a fever dream or his own desperate imagination. But, he knew if he touched Bucky now, he'd be too distracted to demand answers.

They'd gone a couple of blocks before Steve spoke up. "You wanna tell me why I'm here now? Or can you at least tell me why you are?"

Bucky glanced at him, then fixed his gaze up ahead, assessing the tree-lined storefronts and window-shoppers taking advantage of the beautiful weather. Strands of hair framed his face, emphasized the proud angle of his jaw. He was still – would always be – the most beautiful thing Steve had ever seen.

"Buck?" he prompted, when Bucky stayed silent.

"There's a Hydra base under the police station," Bucky said, still staring straight ahead.

Of course there was. "Okay," Steve replied, drawing out the word. "That explains you allowing yourself to get arrested."

"It was the quickest way to case the place," Bucky agreed.

Steve gestured between them. "So why the, uh, I mean, why'd you tell the police we were married?"

"I needed to get you here without arousing suspicion," Bucky replied. "And the only way I could get T'Challa to let me out of his sight was if I promised to call you as backup. Besides, if everyone thinks I need you to come swoop in and save me from myself, then they're not paying attention to me or what I'm really doing."

"Smart," Steve commented. "Let everyone think you're weak and helpless. It's a good strategy." But then, Bucky'd always been underrated as a tactician. He'd spent over two years with the entire world looking for him, and had managed to slide under the radar until Zemo exposed him. Hiding in plain sight was second nature.

"Thanks." Then Bucky bumped his shoulder, offered a small smile. "I think I owe you a better honeymoon, though."

"You can make it up to me," Steve told him, with a heated look that Bucky returned. "You mentioned last night you think the house is bugged."

"Nothing to do with Lukin," Bucky assured him. "It's Stark tech. Which, I can't say I was surprised that he'd want to keep an eye on me."

Steve winced. "I'm sorry –"

"Don't. Stark has every right to hate me."
"Okay." Steve wanted to argue, but that wasn't a hill he felt like dying on today. God knew he had enough of his own guilt where Tony was concerned. "I'm still not sure why you need me. Checking out a Hydra base seems like a milk run."

From where Steve was standing, it looked like the sort of op Bucky could have done in his sleep, even before all of the Winter Soldier training. Even missing the arm T'Challa'd made for him.

"Maybe I wanted the backup."

"You wanting backup? Who are you and what have you done with Bucky Barnes?"

Bucky scowled. "Look, do you want to come with me or not?"

"I'm always up for a fight, you know that." If Bucky wanted Steve there, then Steve would have his six, always. But something about the way Bucky was acting was off, and nothing he was saying was adding up. "I'm just trying to figure out what's going on, and what comes next. Are you out of cryo for good, or...?"

Bucky's gaze flicked over to him, the look hard to decipher. "Why would you think that?"

Tiny prickles of unease feathered up Steve's spine. Was Bucky really suggesting...?

"You want to put yourself back into cryo?"

"What choice do I have?" Bucky asked, like he couldn't conceive why Steve would want anything different. "It's not like the trigger words are out of my head."

This was last year in Wakanda all over again. And, just like last year, Steve knew the right response was to respect Bucky's choice and his autonomy. But, he couldn't make himself say the words to let Bucky off the hook. Not this time. Not after living through the lonely days and nights without Bucky beside him, where he was meant to be.

"You fucking coward." Steve let the words linger in the air, long enough to settle, weighted, between them. "Haven't you run away enough by now?"

Bucky lengthened his stride, his jaw jutting out stubborn and granite-still. "You can call it what you want. I'm not safe."

"Spare me the self-sacrificing platitudes, alright," Steve retorted. "It was bullshit a year ago and it's bullshit now."

"Is that how you –?" Bucky cursed under his tongue. "I guess only you get to play that card," he said, razor-sharp and just as deadly. "You're the only one allowed to fall on the goddamn grenade to save the world, is that it?"

Steve was sick to death of all of the excuses. What Bucky was suggesting had nothing to do with protecting anyone, least of all himself. "Did you ever even bother to think about what this has done to me? What you going back under would do to me? Or do you just not care?"

He'd forgotten how fast, how silent, Bucky could move now. One second, they were on the sidewalk, and the next, he was in an alley and slammed against the side of a building, the back of his head thudding dully against unforgiving brick. Stars burst behind his eyes, his head ringing. For a moment, he was nine, twelve, sixteen again, being jumped before school or after work.

Bucky's fist twisted in his shirt, his mouth a thin line, gaze flat and tundra cold. Steve braced himself for a blow that never came. Instead, Bucky leaned in, anger pouring from him, so palpable Steve
could taste the ozone in the air.

"Fuck you," he hissed, a tsunami raging in every cell of his body, close enough Steve could see the flecks of blue in slate-grey eyes. "You're the only thing that's ever mattered, and you fucking know it."

Steve met the challenge head on, chin raised, daring Bucky to take the hit. "Then prove it."

"What's the point?" Bucky ground out, through clenched teeth. "You want some ghost from 1938. I haven't been that guy in a long time."

"Is that really...? Jesus, you stupid sonofa... I want you. I don't care what you've done or who you are now. I never did." It felt like he had smoke in his lungs, every breath choking him. If Bucky left him now, he wouldn't come back from it. Not even his heart would survive a break of that magnitude. "You don't get to do this. I won't fucking let you. For two years after the helicarrier, I gave you space and time to figure out what you wanted and if that included me—"

"You chased after every lead you could to find me, that's not giving me space—"

"— I still gave you time. And I did it because I knew — I knew — how important that choice was. And just when I thought maybe you were finally ready to come home, to be with me, you chose to go under...and I let you do it, I let you go again, but I can't..." Steve thunked his head against the brick, shoulders sagging as despair washed over him, an undertow pulling him into the deep. "I'm so tired, Buck."

"I know, babe," Bucky replied, that same indecipherable look on his face. "I am too."

They were a fucking tragedy, the both of them. Stupidly in love and destined to keep finding each other, but destined to lose each other every time. And Steve was done, he couldn't do this anymore, couldn't pretend to be the better or stronger man, or whatever it was Bucky needed him to be. Trying to be that person was ripping him apart.

"You didn't call me out here to help you raid a base, did you. It wasn't a question. "We both know you don't need me for any op, not even —" He gestured at the empty space where Bucky's metal arm used to be.

A small smile flickered across Bucky's lips. "The base is real. Been deserted for decades, but there's no harm in making sure, since we're both here. And I wasn't lying about Lukin. He had another set of words for me. He just never wrote them down – too paranoid someone would do to him what Zemo eventually did to Karpov."

"So why...?" Steve didn't bother moving. Somehow, having this discussion in a filthy, trash-infested back alley seemed appropriate. Their lives coming back around full-circle to their scrapes as kids back in Brooklyn. "Why lie to me? Why am I here?"

"You know why."

He really didn't. "Pretend I don't."

Bucky dropped his head to Steve's shoulder, his sigh drawn out. Defeated. "You can't make this easy on me, can you?" he asked, voice muffled.

"When have I ever chosen easy?" Steve asked. He lifted a hand to smooth over Bucky's hair, but left it hovering in mid-air. He couldn't – he couldn't – touch Bucky. Not yet. "Tell me why I'm here."
Bucky swallowed, flicking his gaze to meet Steve's, then just as quickly dropping it to their feet. "Because I..."

"Just tell me," Steve urged. "Please."

He wasn't above begging. Not where Bucky was concerned.

Bucky finally lifted his head. "Because I missed you," he said, the words simple and all the more devastating because of it. "But I wasn't sure if –"

"If?" Steve prompted.

"You said it yourself: I left you. I had so many chances not to run away from you – from this, from us – and I didn't take any of them." Bucky looked shaken, raw, shadows lined under his eyes, but Steve couldn't give in.

"So, what, you thought...?" He licked parched, cracked lips. "You thought I wouldn't want to see you?"

"Something like that."

God help him, he was in love with a fucking moron. "You're a goddamn asshole."

"You may have mentioned that once or twice over the years," Bucky told him, with a brief smile that Steve didn't return. There was nothing funny about this.

"You set up this whole charade for, what? To test me? To see if I'd actually come?"

"No. I mean, yes, a little bit, but it wasn't –"

"Fuck you." He jabbed his finger hard enough at Bucky’s sternum to back him up a step. "Haven't I earned your trust – haven't I proven myself –"

"It wasn't about that," Bucky interrupted, impatient. "This is about me, alright. I...I just thought maybe you were...that you might've moved on. I wouldn't have blamed you if you had."

Wouldn't blame you if you had... "Are you kidding me? Moved on?"

"Steve –"

"Shut up, Bucky. I want you to shut the fuck up and listen, because I'm only going to say this once." He clenched his hands into fists to keep from reversing their positions, and slamming Bucky against the wall. Maybe a blow to the head might get through to him. "There will never be a time or place or life where I don't choose you. Ever. Are you hearing me right now? Ever."

Steve held Bucky's gaze, willed him to hear the truth. If Bucky tried to walk away from him now... Well, Steve would just follow after him until he got it through his thick skull that Steve wasn't leaving. The end of the line meant the end of the goddamn line, no matter what.

They stared at each other, silent, the distance between them miniscule, the gulf between them oceanic. Steve wanted to say something else, wished he had some poetic words that would bridge the gap, but he couldn't think of anything other than please.

Please don't do this. Please don't leave me again.

Bucky held firm for another minute, then the mask started to crack; his fingers trembled, his throat
"I'm sorry." Bucky slumped forward, a puppet with cut strings, and buried his forehead against Steve's nape. His fist was still wrapped in Steve's shirt. "I love you. I love you, you know I do."

"I know. I love you, too." Steve held on, just as tight. His heart was splintering, fracturing into broken shards in his chest. Every breath was sandbag-heavy, weighing him down. For the very first time, he had no idea what to say to comfort the man he'd known and loved his entire life. "I'm sorry I can't give you whatever it is you need from me –"

"You got it all wrong, as usual." Bucky's voice was subdued, the sound reverberating through Steve's chest. "It's me who can't give you what you deserve."

"And what is it I deserve?"

"Someone whole, someone..." Bucky's shoulders rose in a half-hearted shrug. He didn't lift his head. "You deserve the man you fell in love with when we were young, not –"

"You're an idiot," Steve repeated, firmer now. "I've loved every iteration there is of you since I was old enough to know what loving someone meant. Doesn't matter the year, or how many mistakes you've made or what you had to do to survive. The man you are, the man you were, the man you will be...I love all of them. And if that's not what you need now, so be it, but –"

Warm lips, salty with tears, pressed against his. "I need you, Steve, you gotta believe me, okay," Bucky murmured, finally looking Steve in the eyes. His own were shining, brilliantly bright. "I need this. You were right. It's time I...It's time I stopped hiding."

And this...this was courage. This was bravery unlike anything Steve had ever seen. After all of the trauma and loss, all of the misdeeds and scars both inside and out, Bucky was here, everything laid bare between them, and willing to start again. They were still together, the iron in their blood calling to each other. They were still each other's magnetic north, even now.

He brushed stray wisps of hair from Bucky's forehead. His lungs were clear now, breaths steady and even. "Why did you come out of cryo? The truth."

Bucky eased back slightly, but kept his fingers curled in Steve's shirt. "I asked T'Challa to wake me up in a year. To see if I wanted to...reassess my choice."

"And now that you've had some time to think?"

"I'm still a danger, Steve. Karpov's words are still in me, and Lukin has another set."


For a long time, Bucky didn't move, didn't even so much as breathe. He just stood there, looking at Steve, looking into Steve, and Steve held his own breath, held still, right along with him, waiting, waiting, just like that day on Wakanda, just like –


"After everything," Steve assured him. Assured them both. He was right where he wanted to be, with the only person he wanted to be with. "We've always been an unbeatable team."

Bucky let out a low, fond laugh that sounded as relieved as Steve felt. "Still wanna light a match to the world, is that it?"
"For you, I'd set fire to the goddamn universe."

"Okay," Bucky said, and laid his hand over Steve's. The calluses slid over his skin, caught, held. "I think it sounds reckless and dangerous and just like all of your other hare-brained ideas." Then he stepped forward, and moved his hand so it was a tight fist in Steve's hair, molded their bodies so close it felt like they were sharing heartbeats. "And if you really want to do this, you'll need someone to watch your back."

Steve grinned, wild and reckless and triumphant. His entire being was that match, only waiting on Bucky's word to strike. "Oh? You have anyone in mind?"

"You know what?" Bucky asked, the fire shining in his eyes, a beacon calling Steve home. "I think I've got the perfect guy."

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(Art by InedibleSushi)
Thanks to Steph and Boop for their endless well of patience and their betas and in putting up with me through all of the rewrites.

Thanks to Lindsay for all of her amazing work on putting together the NWY Anthology and driving its overwhelming success. It was an absolute honor to be a part of such an amazing collection.

Thanks to MaxKennedy and Tuntematonkorppi and InedibleSushi, for creating the incredible artwork for the Anthology version of the story (and a special thanks to InedibleSushi for allowing me to embed her art here.)

You can now find me on Tumblr. :)

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