Metal, Steel, and Magic

by Messica

Summary

Cross posted on FFN:
Steve Rogers woke up in New York City and ran directly into a kind stranger named Hermione. She offered him compassionate words before leaving him with an offer to summon her help. Two years passed before he accidentally calls her after recovering his best friend, Bucky, the Winter Soldier. It turns out she's a Mind-Healer and may be just what they all three of them needed. Bucky/Hermione/Steve (V relationship). NOT a true triad but filled with Steve & Bucky BFFness. Slowburn
Prologue:

Steve had panicked. Granted, the last thing he remembered was fighting against Hydra who had been known to torture and manipulate their victims. So he ran and fought and ran.

Eventually, he disappeared down an alley, pausing to lean against the rough brick of a building as he wheezed. His body was still as strong as it had ever been, the wheezing more psychosomatic than anything. He heard steps approach him and he looked up sharply in surprise, positioning himself to fight. A woman stared back at him blankly, one hand gripping something beside her.

"Are you okay?" She asked, eyebrows furrowing in concern. It took him aback.

"Where…where did you come from?" He asked reflexively despite the million more questions he wanted to ask. Distantly, he thought it was the British accent that was so disorienting.

"You didn't notice me…you seemed—seem—overwhelmed?" She asked. He noticed she stowed whatever thin weapon she had had initially. She had not approached him, but he was still wary. The sounds of the city were so loud and his head ached from the stimulation.

"Where am I?" He asked, leaning back against the alley wall. She looked at him queerly.

"New York." She tilted her head slightly and narrowed her eyes. "Today is April 24th, 2012." She said answering a question he hadn't even thought to ask yet the response had left him reeling. He shrank down to the ground, back scratching against the bricks as he held his head in his hands. He could hear his heartbeat above the dins of the street as he began to feel his breathing pick up rapidly. The world faded into blackness, a darkness encroaching on him in his mind. He felt hands placed upon his own, felt callouses on one hand and the smoothness of the other. He raised his head to look at the stranger, the darkness receding as her eyes burned amber hues of brown into his mind. He felt bare before her yet he opened still, revealing all vulnerabilities before her, somehow feeling more relaxed. "You've been asleep for a very long time, Steve." She said to him knowingly. The luster of her eyes had faded but the world had come back to rich colors.

"Do you know me?" He asked. She looked at him pitying.

"I'm not sure any of your friends have survived…it's been probably 70 years for you—that war has been long over." She said sadly. He felt his vision glaze over again, felt burning water in his eyes. He found her eyes again but did not hesitate as he felt the tears drop. His hands had dropped to his lap as she shifted to hold him against her sternum—he could hear the steadiness of her heart, even as another head ache burned his head. He embraced his head against her, hands wrapping around his head. He felt coolness, calmness radiate from her hands as she massaged his temples. He wondered if he was imaging the blue light emitting from her hands.

"How did you know my name?" He asked finally as his tears had slowed. "Do you work for them?" He said, flustered as he pulled out of her embrace. She looked at him cautiously. He just realized that she had kneeled down on the dirty, wet, alley floor in order to comfort him. He felt guilty.

"I don't know who woke you up…I'm not sure who is chasing after you." She began. She looked at him hesitantly, weighing options he did not know. "I…I knew your name because I saw it in your mind…it's a bit of a…it's a bit of a talent I have cultivated." She said finally, though he could hear the guilt in her tone.
"So, you're just a random stranger?" He asked disbelieving. He glanced around her to the street where he had come from. "If you're a civilian—you'll be in danger; men were chasing after me." He said suddenly alarmed. He pulled her up with him as he stood, frowning at her wet and dirty knees.

"They won't see us here." She said sheepishly. "Another…talent of mine." She added cautiously. "Will you be okay? I'm not sure who is chasing after you; I can't ascertain whether they'd be friend or foe." She said with a frown. He shook his head to clear it.

"I…I think they're…not enemies." He settled on the term, not sure whether he would venture to call them allies. "I'll need to confront them eventually." She nodded at him understandingly. He coughed suddenly to clear his throat. "Thank you for your help Miss…" She looked at him and seemed to weigh his worth, rapid decision making flashing behind her eyes.

"Hermione. Hermione Granger." She said finally with a faint smile. She suddenly began rustling through her small purse that had been wrapped around her body. She pulled out two pennies with a triumphant 'a-ha'. She looked up at him suspiciously before turning around from him briefly and muttering something he couldn't quite understand. She turned back around triumphantly and presented him with one of the pennies. He sighed when he realized it was minted in 2012. He looked back up at her confused at why she had gifted him the seemingly random item. She cleared her throat.

"You might have some problems with your memory after waking up from your decades-long coma. If you have pain, trouble recalling, nightmares, anything of that sort—hold that penny and say Hermione Granger." He looked up at her confused at what she was saying but she merely continued. "It will glow blue and then you will tell me an address and I'll come to help you. It will turn red when I'm in route." She finalized. He looked at her, shocked.

"Is this a modern method of communication? Is this common?" He asked. She winced.

"Actually, No…this is really just a special offer for you and you actually mustn't tell anyone else or it will endanger me, I think." She admitted.

"Why me? Why this for a stranger?" He pressed. Her mouth twitched at the question, lips pulling to one side of her face in a faint grimace.

"You were in pain, I was curious, and I pried." She shrugged. "I can't imagine how overwhelming your life will be now—I'm sorry for that. I can't do anything for your time-related dilemmas, but I can help with your mind…so I offered." She looked sincere and he believed her.

"Thank you." He said with a tight nod, he didn't really get exhausted like he had before the serum, but he still seemingly felt it. She patted him on the shoulder gently.

"Good luck, Steve Rogers. I wish you the best of luck." She said before turning and walking out of the alley to the main street. As soon as she disappeared around the corner the noise of the city seemed to encapsulate him once again. In an instant, a black SUV blocked both exits of the alley as men in dark suits emerged. A bald man with a black eye patch exited the car and walked towards him slowly.

"Captain." The man greeted. Steve nodded back warily. "You were able to evade my men for quite some time—an unusual feat, I assure you." Steve kept the surprise off his face, wondering at Hermione's "talents". The man walked towards Steve, stopping a few steps away. Steve felt himself still wound tightly, but was far more relaxed than when he had first run away.

"Look, I'm sorry about that little show back there, but we thought it best to break it to you slowly."
The man continued.

"Break what?" Steve asked, already knowing the answer.

"You've been asleep, Cap." The man said with an annoying amount of informality. "For almost 70 years." Steve was impassive. He had already known that Hermione was correct—had felt it in his very bones. The man watched his lack of reaction. "You going to be okay?" He asked. Steve nodded.

"Yeah…yeah…I just had a date." He realized. He sighed, eyes closing as he thought of Peggy, gone like Bucky and the other Howling Commandos—gone like everyone else. He was alone. The world drowned out his sorrows.
Steve loathed to sleep. When he was often sick in his youth—pre-serum—it was bed rest indefinitely. Post-serum meant he physically required far less sleep than the average individual—something that was extremely useful when he was fighting in the war. Even if his serum advantage and military background hadn’t warped his sleep schedule, his decades-long coma had certainly turned him off the idea of sleeping—forever. The first week he woke up from said coma, he did not sleep until a doctor noticed and threatened to make him sleep. Since then he technically slept, but more often than not spent late nights and early mornings at the oldest looking gym he could find. It was dusty with decrepit equipment. It was going out of business. Nick Fury had given it to him along with an “owed salary” that did not include his 70 years in the ice but did include investment and inflation, courtesy of Howard Stark and Peggy Carter.

Steve hit the bag, wishing that he could be rid of the memories that had been haunting him. The stranger, Hermione, had said that he would have trouble recalling, but he found he recalled everything too perfectly. He recalled every missed opportunity, every failure, and every loss. The pain was not physical and for that reason he never called Hermione, though he thought of her often enough. She had compassionate eyes, a steely determination, and a British accent; she was too similar to Peggy and he felt it would be a disservice to call upon her because of his emotional needs. Frankly, he had trouble talking about it all and even if he wanted to, he had been immediately busy fighting the same fight he had been before he was frozen.

Sometimes he even doubted her existence, especially as the days passed. How had a girl suddenly appeared behind him, seemed to understand everything he had been going through, and had somehow still had the compassion to offer some help. She had protected and hidden him from SHIELD and Nick Fury. She had offered him a strange coin that was apparently capable of things Tony Stark and SHIELD could not do. She had kind words and soothing hands. She still seemed unreal in his mind but he held the penny on his neck—the only piece of proof of her he had.

He kept the penny on him; it grounded him. Natasha had once spotted the trinket he carried with him at all times. She asked him what it was as she inspected the coin that he had rigged to hang like a necklace. His hand had reflexively cupped the necklace as nonchalantly as he could.

“It’s my lucky penny.” He had said defensively and perhaps it was—he had survived seemingly end of world times while bearing the token of someone’s goodwill.

He had, after all, been wearing the coin on him during the entire fight against the Chitauri and they
had won. They had succeeded. If the penny was not lucky when he first declared it so, it was certainly lucky given the (moderate) success of the mission.

As the days after progressed, Steve threw himself into training and SHIELD work—seeking the solace of a position without agency, where he could allow himself to be a mindless soldier and follow orders. Yet he could not quell the discontent within him. He was glad to have met Sam, glad to have developed a rapport with someone who understood what the war had been like—even if they couldn’t quite fathom the feeling of decades missed. Peggy, in her glorious moments of lucidity, was also a constant positive presence, even when Steve later helped destroy the very organization that she had created.

And Steve thought of Hermione, often enough. On good nights when he slept, he fell asleep remembering her glowing eyes. On bad nights when he dreamt of nightmares, he would awaken and rub the penny he kept by his bedside, never managing to actually attempt to request her presence. Those were the days he wondered if she had been a coping mechanism he had developed from the shock of waking up.

And so his days went where she was on the edge of his conscious though, a shadow underneath a surface of water—lingering without intent but present all the same…until she emerged in clarity and vision.

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“You sure you’re up for this, Cap? The doctor recommended no activity for another month.” Sam said for the third time that day. Steve and Sam had left DC for the day, tracing a lead in a rural section of Maryland. They slammed the door shut of the black SUV, as Sam retried his new equipment—the wing-suit still in repair. The field was peaceful and desolate and a forest of trees protected the field for acres.

“The longer we wait the greater chance Bucky gets further and further away. Romanoff’s tip will probably be the only one we’ll have for a while.” Steve said, wincing slightly as he slammed the trunk door shut. Sam eyed him suspiciously. “Why don’t you see if you can use that fancy new toy Stark gave you.” Steve suggested. Sam’s look indicated Steve wasn’t hiding his injury at all but he opened the case anyway. With the controller on his wrist, Steve launched the drone into the air.

“It’s still a prototype—Stark said he’ll connect one to my wing suit when he’s done fixing it.” Sam mentioned as he cycled the drone around.

“See anything?” Steve asked as Sam looked at his wrist monitor.

“This land was used for ordinance—looks like there might be live bombs still in the ground.” Sam said. Steve nodded.

“Okay, so tread lightly. Got it.” Steve said, slinging his shield to his arm.

“There is some sort of shelter about a click away.” Sam spotted.

“As good a place to start as any.” Steve said, following Sam as he left the car and began walking.

The fields they walked through were mostly empty. They followed a deer trail to stay out of the waist high wild plants and foliage but they still had to beat back some of the growing brush in order to move forward. Sam, who had continued to utilize the drone for surveillance, paused on occasion and crouched in the grass to peer at his wrist device. They slowed down as the approached the shelter Sam had identified. There were remnants of a road approaching the building but Sam and
Steve avoided it; they had reached the point where Bucky would be more likely alerted to their presence. They approached the shelter via the grassy coverage. Steve recognized the hardiness of the structure as a bomb observation hut. It looked old but sturdy with two doors to enter and exit. One side of the building was comprised mainly of a large, thick, window pane. The other walls looked to be made of a dense and sturdy metal, able to withstand a degree of ordinance explosion. With a signal, Sam and Steve separated, each approaching the entrances of the structure.

Steve paused in the brush closed to his door. He paused for a moment of mental collection before quickly rushing forward to open the door, his shield in place to protect him. Steve heard the other door open, saw the flash of silver that marked Bucky’s metal arm, and felt an emptiness within him recede at the realization that they had found Bucky. The same pit of relief he felt dropped suddenly at the sound of Sam’s anguished scream in time with a gun shot. Steve rushed through the tiny space and through the other door in time to see Sam collide painfully with the wall beside him.

“Sam!” Steve called out as he spotted blood.

“I’m fine.” Sam responded with a wince. “Get him!” He urged. Steve turned to watch Bucky running off into the brush and Steve took off after him in pursuit.

Steve winced again as he ran; his weakened ribs feeling bruised but Steve knew the adrenaline would help him ignore it. So that was good news. Also, good news; he reminded himself, was that they had found Bucky. Dimly, Steve recognized, Bucky didn’t want to be found and the ordinance was far more active than they should have been—that was pretty bad news. Bucky must have realized where the ordinance was buried and how to trigger them because whatever he had thrown at the ground had triggered the buried bomb. Steve crouched as the explosion rained down soil and hard earth.

“Dammit, Bucky.” Steve whispered to himself as he caught the flash of silver running off in the distance. Steven took off to follow, jumping over logs as Bucky attempted to lose him.

Steve caught him eventually with a tackle, wincing as he felt the stitches on his bullet wound reopen; maybe Sam was right and he was getting back into action a little too soon. Maybe he shouldn’t have sought Bucky so soon but they had successfully found him. Steve exchanged blows with Bucky, irritated that Bucky seemed to be less cognizant than Steve would have liked. Steve dodged another fleshed fist. It was worth noting, Steve thought, that Bucky didn’t seem quite as murderous as he had been as an assassin. He seemed to be nearly equally savage as he defended himself but instead of attacking, he seemed more interested in his attempts to flee.

“Bucky, stop!” Steve said as he tackled his friend again. This time he sought Bucky’s neck, clenching tightly in an attempt to choke his friend out. Bucky roared at this and stood, slamming Steve against a tree trunk and eventually the ground until Steve felt the blood trickle down his back. In retrospect, he probably should have stayed off his feet the 3 months the doctors recommended but he had been eager and desperate to find Bucky. At least there were no new bullet wounds from this latest interaction with Bucky—at least not yet.

Bucky staggered away from Steve as the choke hold broke. He stood before Steve panting deeply after the attempted asphyxiation. Steve glanced up at his friend and decided to change tactics. Steve kept his back to the tree leaning against it for support as he stood.

“Woah there, Bucky,” Steve said hands up in a calming matter when his friend turned to snarl at him. “I’m here to help.” Bucky stared at him, his expression feral. Steve eased forward as Bucky postured threateningly. “It’s me, Buck; it’s Steve.” Bucky gripped his head in sudden agony at the declaration, sinking to his knees. His reaction of pain caused Steve to pause but he decided ultimately to continue.
“Your name is James Buchanan Barnes. You were a sergeant in the 107th until you became a Howling Commando with me.” Bucky continued gripping his head, roaring as he began thrashing around violently on the ground. Steve moved forward, still. “You saved me from the river two weeks ago. You recognized me.” Steve paused. “My name is Steven Grant Rogers.” Bucky roared again and began punching his own head with his right arm, startling Steve. Figuring there was some disagreement between his programming and his memories, Steve continued with difficulty.

“You rescued me in an alleyway in Brooklyn during fourth grade and we’ve been brothers ever since.” Steve said as he finally reached where Bucky was thrashing around on the floor. “I’m with you to the end of the line, Buck” Steve said enthusing as much sincerity as he could manage while offered his hand help Bucky off the floor. Bucky jerked to look at him, the manic look still in his eyes but Steve didn’t dodge Bucky’s metal arm and the fist enclosed tightly around his shirt.

Steve’s eyes widened when Bucky fell suddenly, ripping the front of his shirt and pulling off the necklace that held his lucky penny. Steve looked up to where Sam was holding his arm close to his body—the other arm still outstretched with the tranquilizer gun they had been utilizing.

“Let’s contain him; there’s no way to tell how long it will last.” Sam said. Steve nodded.

“The cuffs are back at the car—”Steve began before Sam’s drone dropped said cuffs off beside them. Steve inclined his head in relief. “Or they’re right here.” Steve amended. Sam walked over to Bucky, gun still aimed, as Steve fetched the specialized constraints. He secured Bucky and was about to haul him over his shoulder when Sam pointed to something on the ground.

“He dropped that.” Sam said. Gingerly, Sam bent over, spotted the necklace, and pulled it out of the grass. “Is this a penny?” Sam asked, inspecting the coin.

“My lucky penny.” Steve clarified. Sam gave him a look.

“A lucky penny from the year you woke up.” Sam noticed pointedly. Steve sighed, sensing questions.

“It was given to me after I woke up.” Steve said, accepting the necklace from Sam who looked particularly interested—which was never particularly good.

“Who gave it to you?” He smirked with an annoying amount of levity given that they were bleeding, injured and hauling an ex-assassin that certainly didn’t want to be found.

“She was a kind stranger passing by spotting someone in need.” Steve said shortly as he rubbed his finger along the year. “She said her name was Hermione Granger, but I hav—.” Steve stopped when the penny suddenly flooded with a blue light.

“Is your penny supposed to do that?” Sam asked suddenly wary. Steve’s eyes widened as the penny continued to glow. He had already convinced himself that she was barely real—let alone that the penny would function as she claimed it would.

“What’s the address, Sam?” Steve asked, wondering how real this interaction was—how real it would continue to be.

“38.280678,-76.759181” Sam replied suspiciously, disregarding his unanswered question. Steve repeated the GPS address aloud, marveling as the penny glowed a brilliant blue before turning into a bright red. Steve felt his heart race. “What’s happening, Cap.” Sam asked, evidently uneasy as the penny turned red.
“She’s in route.” Steve whispered, entranced. Sam bristled beside him, drawing his gun again.

“Who, Cap?” Sam asked with heightened concern. Steve looked at his friend’s posture and began shaking his dazed head. It had been foolish to summon her—assuming he had done just that. He didn’t have time to wait for her to arrive and he really needed to get his stitches looked at again. He glanced down at his lost friend, still tranquilized. The former Soviet Master Assassin was probably a big problem too—assuming his friend was now an ex hydra agent.

“Who, Steve?” Sam commanded again. His name prompted Steve to snap back to reality and he wiped a hand down his face in mental agony.

“Hermione Granger.” Steve admitted, peering at Sam as he grasped Bucky’s restraints—just in case. Sam hesitantly lowered his weapon.

“Who the hell is Hermione Granger?” Sam asked with contained frustration.

“After so much time I thought you’d forgotten.” A voice pierced through the clearing. Hermione Granger, Steve realized, had already arrived. She had answered his call; she was very, very real. Despite the excitement he felt fluttering within him he realized that her somewhat tight voice belied that he might not have thought any of this through—not at all.
Hermione Granger

Chapter Notes

A/N: I own neither universe.

Eventually there will be a Bucky perspective and Hermione perspective. But for now, Steve rules the roost.

Shoot me your headcanon’s/fluffs/etc and I’ll see if I can merge them in. Let me know what you think!

When the voice called out, Sam had gripped his weapon firmly and aimed towards the source. They both had looked around the clearing but neither could identify where the voice had originated. Her ‘talents’, Steve realized suddenly.

“I had asked you to keep this a secret, you know.” The female British voice chastised and Steve spun wildly as Sam, struck with a red light, dropped down to the floor. Steve made to defend himself when he was struck with the same red light, his limbs freezing tight to his body as he fell gently to the ground. He noticed Bucky was also hit and all three of them began to levitate upright, Bucky still unconscious. His body still frozen, all Steve could do was blink as a figure appeared in front of them, revealing herself like rain water washing away the dirt. Steve’s eyes followed as pieces of her were revealed, tracing the trickling paths like liquid until eventually he could see all of her. Steve despaired in his restraints. He was at fault for this capture. He was the one who went out before his body had recovered—probably before Sam was even ready. Reckless. He had been reckless. A bright light hit him and he felt his jaw loosen. He moved it experimentally.

“Friends or foes?” Hermione asked, gesturing with one hand to Bucky and Sam. Steve took a moment to notice her. She was dressed nicely—a sweater dress and boots—he realized idly. Hydra would at least dress a little more tactically—right? Her hair had been held back the first time he had met her but now it sprung around her in voluminous, wild curls. It made her seem bigger than she was in his vague recollection of their encounter. He wondered if that was just a matter of perspective; she was the captor and he the captive. He wondered where she had come from; he wondered how she had arrived so quickly.

“It’s complicated.” Steve finally answered. Hermione raised an eyebrow and he only just realized that she was holding some wooden stick in her hand nonchalantly. A light hit Sam and only Steve’s face was capable of flinching.

“I’m assuming you’re a friend.” She said to Sam, “and he’s complicated.” She gestured with her stick to Bucky who was still knocked out.

“Who are you?” Sam asked and Steve felt both the relief that he was okay and the guilt once again for subjecting him to this unintended variable. Hermione at least looked just as welcoming and compassionate as when he had first met her, if not a little guarded. She walked to stand directly in front of Sam, frowning as she waved her stick at him.
"I'm Hermione Granger and you are injured." She said as her mouth tweaked to the side in a semi-
frown. She waved the stick and she sounded like she was singing softly as the blood that had
dribbled down Sam’s arm seemed to flow back into the knife wound Bucky had favored him with
earlier. The wound began to close rapidly until the flesh looked untouched. Sam looked at him
surprised and Steve knew he mirrored the expression. The young woman before them muttered
something and light particles seemed to reflect brightly as they filtered down on the weakened arm.
“Hmm.” Hermione mumbled as she stared at the injury. She waved her stick and bandages appeared
from nowhere, wrapping the arm tightly. “You’ll need more treatment—it’s broken.” She said
lightly. She walked back to face all three of them, but she turned her gaze to Steve.

“What happened to your face?” She exclaimed suddenly. She rushed over to him and Steve’s breath
cought as her hand ghosted over the wounds on his face. He knew some of the swelling still hadn’t
gone done from their fight with Hydra.

“I’ve had a busy month.” Steve admitted and Hermione looked at him crossly. She began waving her
stick again and Steve watched the lights like his own personal aurora borealis.

“Were you shot?!” She gasped. She glared at him and muttered something that sounded like Pig
Latin. Steve felt the bandaged wrap around his wounds, staunching the blood. Her kindness
suddenly made Steve feel conflicted and guilty.

“I’m sorry.” Steve was unsure why he apologized but felt for some reason he needed to. She sighed,
stepping back from him to meet his eyes with her own.

“Oh Steve,” she began. “What on earth is going on? Who are these two? Why are you injured? Why
did you summon me when you weren’t alone?” She asked, her hands gesturing wildly.

“I’m Sam Wilson” Sam introduced himself helpfully and Hermione turned to give him a wan smile.

“Charmed.” She drawled, reverting her attention back to Steve. “I can’t be known, Steve. The things
I do can’t be known. Giving you that coin was already a risk for me and I don’t know if I can trust
Sam—no offense—with the things I can do: with the things I have done.” She said as she gestured to
the three of them still suspended and mostly frozen.

“I can trust Sam to be discreet.” Steve defended. Hermione glanced at Bucky. “Bucky is…Bucky is
the reason we need the help.” Hermione’s eyes widened as she seemed to comprehend his words and
more. Immediately, she walked up to Bucky and pushed his hair from his face. Her hands flew up to
her mouth, still clutching her stick.

“Oh, Steve.” She said sadly, glancing at him with compassionate eyes. She nodded determinedly.
“I’ll help you… I just… I really can’t be known—this can’t be known. You can’t tell anyone.” She
stared deeply into his eyes, the same amber hues swirling in the fading sunlight.

“I promise.” Steve said and felt his body slowly release as he was lowered to the ground. She had
gone to stare at Sam, staring deeply into his eyes in the way that she had into Steve’s.

“What Cap said.” Sam dittoed and she nodded, lowering him in the same manner.

“So, did you have a plan?” Hermione asked as she began waving her stick at where Bucky floated
before them. Steve brought his hand up to brush the back side of his hair in an uneasy gesture.

“Well, we weren’t even sure this intel would pan out…and I hadn’t actually meant to call you when I
did.” Steve admitted. Hermione glanced at him amused; arms crossed and stick jutting
presumptuously into the air, Bucky’s limp form floating behind her.
“Did you bring a car? Where were you planning on taking him?” She asked and Sam and Steve shared a look, both shrugging. She gave an exasperated sigh and under her breath Steve thought he heard ‘boys.’

“The car is about a half-click that way. If we caught him we were going to go to an abandoned building or something. He was staying in a shelter back there” Sam said, gesturing with his good arm. Hermione eyed him with a frown.

“Let’s go there first.” She determined beginning to lead the way as Bucky eerily trailed in the air behind her.

“Bucky, isn’t the most…aware…these days.” Steve began cautiously in warning.

“What Cap means is that he’s rabid and as soon as he wakes up it’s going to be ugly.” Sam clarified. Steve shot him a look and Sam shrugged. “That tranquilizer shouldn’t have even lasted this long—he’s going to wake up soon.” Sam added. Hermione did not even bother to stop walking as she talked over her shoulder.

“He won’t wake up for quite some time—my spell ensured that.” She said.

“Your spell?” Steve repeated. At this she did stop, turning and waving her stick and a buzzing sound surrounded them. Steve stuck a finger in his ear to rid the sound, but it lingered.

“I’m a witch, Steve. My talents are magical.” She said so matter of fact that Steve was inclined to believe her. Besides him, however, Sam barked out a laugh. She frowned at him.

“Magic?” He laughed and Steve glared at him. After demi-gods and aliens, Steve could believe just about anything. Hermione rolled her eyes and proceeded to walk.

“Doubts aside,” she began, “He’s under my spell—“Sam laughed louder at the phrasing but she carried on over him “—and I will be able to heal you and hopefully whatever is wrong with Bucky.” They reached the structure and Hermione left Bucky floating outside as she stepped inside. Sam stayed behind but Steve took the opportunity to go back into the shelter.

“He pulled me out of the Potomac two weeks ago. It’s taken me a bit of time to find him.” Steve mentioned as he perused the inside. Empty filing cabinets were turned on their side. Papers were strewn around the floor. One particular corner seemed to be a pile of old rags. Steve realized it was most likely where Bucky was sleeping. Beside him Hermione moved her stick. Steve didn’t question it until several knives flew through the air to drop at her feet.

“No guns.” Hermione commented as she glanced at the pile. “He looks like he’s been recovering here from whatever physical and mental ailings he suffered.” Hermione noticed as she crouched down at Bucky’s assumed bed.

“He seems almost less coherent compared to what he was when we last fought.” Steve offered and Hermione glanced at him sharply before shaking her head.

“Where to? We could just wait for him to wake up here and keep him in the restraints—try to get him to talk.” Steve suggested. Hermione’s look indicated that was a terrible idea.

“I’ll take you all to my house. You are all filthy and injured. Besides, there isn’t anything special here; it looks like Bucky really was in a predominately recovering state.” Hermione theorized. Steve sighed.
“I appreciate your offer but Bucky shouldn’t be near civilians right now.” Steve mentioned. Hermione’s look was decidedly offended as she paused in the threshold of the exit.

“There will be no safer place for anyone than the one I’m offering now.” Hermione informed him before boldly walking out the door. She was walking in the direction of their car, Bucky trailing in the air behind her. Sam glanced at Steve and Steve sighed again before heading off to follow Hermione.

“Where are we going?” Sam asked as they walked.

“Back to my house.” Hermione answered succinctly. Sam exchanged a look with Steve but Steve merely shrugged. They walked in tense silence and Steve yearned to ask the questions he should be asking, but he remained quiet out of respect for whatever Hermione had planned. They stopped besides the car they had hidden in the trees.

“Grab what you need, we won’t be taking the car.” Hermione instructed. Sam frowned at her.

“How are we going to get to your house without it?” He asked.

“We’ll be taking a magical way.” Hermione said with exasperation. Sam glanced at Steve wary.

“Just do what she says.” Steve commanded and Sam dutifully moved towards the car. His drone had landed and he was packing it into its travel case.

“You’ll have to leave your technology and car here to reach my house.” Sam frowned harder.

“My drone?” He asked. She looked at him oddly.

“If it has any electricity, I’ll accidentally fry it as we travel. You can leave it in the car and I’ll pop you back here when we’re done. You should leave your mobiles, too.” She conceded. Sam looked at Steve who offered him a shrug. Sam clenched his jaw.

“Fine. But nobody better find this.” Sam threatened lightly, tossing his technologically advanced gear into the back of the SUV. Bucky floated like a macabre balloon behind them as Steve and Sam grabbed their extra backpacks from the car. Around them, Hermione was chanting and waving her hands as she circled the proximity of the car. When she had finished, she turned back to the trio. She walked back to Bucky before beckoning Sam and Steve over.

“This metal arm,” Hermione began. “Has electricity?” She asked. Steve nodded.

“It has some kind of tech, but as far as I know it recharges itself.” Steve mentioned. Hermione nodded.

“We’ll see how this goes.” She said more to herself than the other two. “Steve, can you please hold Bucky tightly?” She asked. Steve did so with confusion and she grabbed his free hand in response. His heart jumped at the contact until she reached out to also grab Sam’s good hand. “This will be a smidge unpleasant.” She warned.

“What will—“Sam began before they were whisked away with a pop. Steve held tightly to Hermione and Bucky as he felt himself being dragged through the smallest tube of existence. They arrived at an atrium of a beautiful home with another crack of sound. Steve had managed to land upright, leaning over to dry heave from the feeling. Sam fell to his knees besides them and did the same. Hermione winced.
“Magic.” Sam breathed finally and Hermione nodded.

“This is my home—you must also keep its existence a secret” She said as she floated Bucky to lie down on a couch. “In fact, as much as I’m inclined to trust you, I’ve ensured that you won’t actually be able to talk about our time together or write it down in any distinct terms; I’ve jinxed you.” Rapidly she began moving her stick—her wand if she really was a witch—over Bucky and Steve marveled as the grime, dirt, and mud was removed. He was still dirty and in need of a bath, but he looked far better than he had when they had first stumbled upon him. Hermione gently cupped Bucky’s face with her hand before standing to face her guests.

“There are two showers, you can both have one at the same time—one in my bedroom and the other in the hall. Are you hungry? Do you want some tea?” She asked patiently. Sam and Steve began looking around the house. Steve realized that the atrium was actually shaped like a domed church and the walls were covered with walls of books—complete with a ladder. A small fire burned in the large fireplace in the library. The floor plan was open and warm and he could see a dining room table and modern kitchen. There were sections for a living room where a large couch faced a television mounted to the wall. A grand piano stood prominently to in another section of the room.

“I could eat.” Sam admitted pleasantly. Steve looked at him exasperated but Sam merely shrugged. Hermione laughed amused and Steve flushed at the sound. He thought it sounded light and airy.

“I’ll make some dinner then. Let me show you to the showers.” Hermione said as she walked towards them. She headed past the kitchen where a hallway showed a few more doors. She opened one of the closest doors and gestured inside to the bathroom. “Shower number one; towels in the linen closet.” She said and Sam nodded before stepping inside. Hermione continued to the back of the hallway where she opened the door to her master bedroom. Steve took a step inside and marveled at the stained glass windows that allowed light to filter in soft golden hues. From where Hermione stood, she seemed to be bathed in the golden light and Steve’s breath caught. She looked magical in this moment; he supposed she was. She turned to open another door which led to her master bathroom. Steve followed her and was awed at the sight. The large shower had a huge shower head. A clawed foot tub rested beneath another large stained window. The room was spacious.

“Wow.” Steve said as he looked around. He glanced at Hermione who nervously tucked hair behind her ear.

“Yes, it’s quite lovely. I’m very pleased with my house.” Hermione admitted. Steve walked towards the window surprised when he glanced down to the alley where she had found him.

“Wait a second—is this New York? How did we get here so quickly?!” Steve exclaimed, looking around through the window to confirm what he already knew.

“I’ve never even seen this building before.” Steve admitted. He had been back to the alley after his initial meet up with Hermione but he had never seen her or the building.

“Magic, Steve.” Hermione said pleasantly. “It’s also why you couldn’t see this place—it’s magically protected and very few are capable of accessing it.” Steve nodded and Hermione moved to procure a towel from another linen closet. She passed it to him and he accepted it gratefully.

“Take off your shirt.” Hermione ordered. Steve nearly fell back in surprise.

“What?” He asked scandalized. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“I need to see your wounds.” She clarified. Steve exhaled slowly.
“Right.” He said as he began to slowly remove his shirt. Hermione sucked in air as he disrobed. Her face was flushed. Steve filed her response away in his mind.

“Wha—what injuries, you have.” She said in a slightly illogical sentence as she removed the bandages she had conjured earlier in the field.

“They’re not all from today.” Steve admitted. The look she sent him made him feel chastised. She reached underneath a cabinet for a bottle of something.

“This won’t be pleasant” She warned again, taking a dropper out of the bottle and dropping liquid over his wounds. He hissed when the wound began to smoke but he marveled as he felt the wounds close.

“Are there anymore wounds that need healing?” She asked clinically, though he could still see the red on her cheeks. Steve flushed as he remembered a certain leg wound. She eyed his response.

“Show me” She demanded.

“I can apply—” Steve began. She looked at him with hard eyes.

“Show me, Steve. Or I’ll strip you completely naked.” She threatened. Steve felt something hot race through his veins and he breathed deeply to thwart the response. He unbuckled his pants and let them fall to the floor, wincing when his buckle hit the floor with a ‘thunk’. Hermione glanced down at his legs and Steve turned slightly. She sucked in air through her teeth and sent a glower his way. She took the eye dropper and dropped the liquid on the old bullet wound from the last time Steve had seen Bucky—on the helicarriers. Steve hissed when the liquid smoked on his flesh again.

“Th-thanks.” Steve eventually managed, flushing at her proximity and the awkwardness of the situation. She nodded blankly before softening slightly.

“Clean yourself up in the shower and I’ll take care of the rest.” She said, a hand ghosting on his cheek where he knew his wound was still healing. Steve closed his eyes, resisting the sudden desire to feel her truly touch him. He was wounded up from the adrenaline, he knew; he was already beginning to feel the fatigue of it crashing. He reasoned that her kind eyes, British tongue, and confident ways were absolutely not the reason he was feeling unusually strung up.

“I’ll be in the kitchen.” She said as she stepped back. Steve breathed deeper with the space placed between them. “I’ll rouse Bucky after dinner, if that’s alright with you.” She offered. Steve frowned, jaw clenched. He had forgotten about Bucky as he explored the wonders of the mysterious home and the hostess.

“Yeah…that sounds…that sounds good.” Steve said looking down at his hand still clenching the towel. He looked up again when Hermione placed her hand on his. It was warm.

“It’s going to be alright, Steve.” Hermione gazed into his eyes again and he watching the hypnotic depths. “You’re here for Bucky and I’m here for you—both of you.” She said with such sincerity that he felt his heart clench.

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Steve said respectfully, startling when she laughed.

“Steve, you are technically far older than me and probably biologically older as well—just call me Hermione you daft ninny.” She said with a fond smile and Steve felt his cheeks heat.

“Thank you, Hermione.” Steve said, raising his eyes bashfully to meet hers. He noticed her blush as well. She coughed nervously and stepped away.
“Well, you have everything you need, so I’ll be in the kitchen.” Hermione said, closing the door as she left. Steve exhaled, glancing around the tasteful bathroom before turning on the shower and stepping in.

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The kitchen smelt fragrant. Sam was already sitting down at the dining room table as Hermione pulled something out of the oven. Her hair was banded back but it still fanned around her as she stood. Steve glanced at Bucky who seemed to still be resting on the couch. Satisfied he was okay; Steve sat down across from Sam. Hermione placed lasagna and breadsticks on the table before joining them.

“Let’s eat.” Hermione said hesitantly and Steve glanced at Sam who began eagerly piling on the meal. Steve followed at Hermione’s encouragement. As they ate an uncomfortable silence descended. Sam was looking around, happy to be eating, but also twitchy and uneasy.

“So what’s a…witch like you doing in the Big Apple?” Steve asked conversationally. Hermione shrugged.

“My parents moved to America and I followed.” Hermione answered.

“Your parents? Are they witches too?” Sam asked.

“Technically a male is a wizard.” Hermione explained. “But no, they don’t have magical abilities—they’re both dentists.” Sam whistled in surprise at the ordinary profession.

“So how did you meet Cap?” He continued and Steve rubbed a hand over his face.

“I came across him in the alley outside my house—he’d newly awoken and seemed panicked.” Hermione answered. Sam looked at her confused.

“In New York?” Sam asked. Hermione nodded. “Outside of this house?” Hermione nodded again. “So we’re in New York right now?” Sam continued as Hermione nodded wearily. “We teleported from Maryland to New York because you’re a witch.” Sam clarified.

“Yes, Sam. We are in New York despite being in Maryland hours earlier”. Hermione said exasperated. Sam raised his hands placating and winced when he jostled his unwrapped arm.

“Bone-mending takes time. If you can’t keep it still, I should bind it again.” Hermione said, pulling a wand out of nowhere before point at his arm. Again the bandages appeared and wound up Sam’s arm stiffly.

“You set his arm?” Steve asked and Sam made a face.

“I gave him a potion.” Hermione said.

“A disgusting potion.” Sam returned with disgust.

“An effective potion.” Hermione clarified. “Just be glad you don’t have to regrow bone—that potion is truly disgusting.” Sam winced at the thought. Sam’s treatment reminded Steve of Bucky’s condition.

“Hermione,” Steve began, blushing at her pleased smile when he used her first name, “Bucky’s mind…he’s been brainwashed. He was frozen like me after he was captured by the enemy. They made him a solder—an assassin; he did terrible things.” Steve admitted. Hermione’s eyebrows turned
in sympathy. “I don’t know how to help him—I know he has begun to remember but it looks like it’s painful for him to remember. I don’t know what you can do for him, either.” Steve voiced his concerns as he stared at his clenched fists in his lap. A swoop of a wand and the dishes and remnants of their finished meals flew to the sink; Sam and Steve watched in surprise.

“I can probably do more than you’d think.” Hermione admitted, standing and beckoning them to follow. Bucky floated towards them as they moved through the hallway to a door they hadn’t used before. It opened to reveal stairs. They descended. “My specialty is broken minds.” She continued as they entered the room. Sam and Steve stared at the basement, a lab desk in one corner surrounded by shelves of items he could not even identify, and another row of shelves filled with small bottles of different colored liquids. The room was the same size of the upstairs main room, with floor length shelves containing more books. There was a green fire burning in a hearth and a chaise lounge placed before it as well as a few large comfy looking armed chairs with high padded backs. She rested Bucky on the chaise and gestured to the extra seats. Sam and Steve each sat down.

“How…why…who?” Steve began but could not articulate what he even wanted to ask. Hermione smiled thinly.

“When I was a child, there was war amongst the magic users in England.” She began. Sam and Steve straightened to listen intently. “Due to circumstances, I was a prime target for…horrendous acts.” She paused as her face grimaced. “My parents, as I’ve said, are non-magical—they were in danger because I was in danger.” She paused to take a breath. “I hid them as best as I could at the consequence of their memory. When the war ended I sought them but the spells were incredibly difficult to undo—they were far too thorough. I studied for several years before I was finally capable of undoing the damage. In the ten years since the war ended, I’ve become the foremost authority on healing mind magic.” She explained.

“There are more of you?” Steve whispered. Hermione flinched.

“A hidden society of us, rather. We can’t speak of this to those who do not know—it’s illegal—hence the risk I carry in confiding with you.” Hermione admitted. Steve glanced at Sam who looked grim.

“You fought in this war?” Sam asked, seeing something that Steve hadn’t even realized—she had said she was a child.

“I was integral to winning the war.” She declared. “My friends and I won the war.” She clarified fiercely.

“You also lost friends in the war.” Sam identified and Hermione smiled grimly.

“There is never a war without loss.” She conceded. Steve felt the breath clench within him. She had said she was a child. He did not realize he had said it aloud until he noticed Hermione and Sam looking at him shocked at his tone.

“We were all children—it did not matter. When the fight came it was inevitable.” Hermione said somberly. “In any case, it means that I am probably more prepared than anyone else you may encounter.” She said briskly. “It’s fortuitous that you accidentally called me for a plan that seemed, frankly, lacking.” She stood and looked at Sam. “Sam, if you’d like I can teleport you back to your car. I can bring you back as well, Steve, but I assumed you might want to stay in the guest room while I work with Bucky and his…programming.” Steve looked up at Sam.

“Go ahead and stay here, Cap. Weren’t you looking to move back to New York anyway?” Sam offered graciously. Steve nodded in thanks.
“Yea. Stark mentioned something about an Avengers’ tower apartments. I’ll keep you updated as I can.” Steve promised. Sam nodded as he stood.

“Alright, instant teleportation from New York to Maryland. I could get used to it.” Sam said and Hermione smirked.

“If you’re really good I may even pop you to some warm beach in the winter—instant vacation.” She claimed. Sam chuckled before following her upstairs to gather his things. Steve moved closer to Bucky. He was still dirty. The last time they met, Steve had stopped fighting him, unable to continue injuring his friend. Bucky claimed he did not remember him, but Steve knew his best friend had been the one to rescue him in the end. Steve moved closer to the chaise, gathering his best friend’s limp hand in his own.

“You never gave up on me, Buck—I promise I’ll never give up on you.” Steve vowed solemnly.

“I think we can wake him up now.” Hermione called out softly behind him. Steve jumped lightly at the sound, flinching slightly when she placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m glad that I can be here for Bucky, Steve. But you know I can also be here for you.” She offered. Steve nodded stiffly, avoiding her eyes. “I know that you’ve been through a lot—I can’t even imagine you’ve had much time to transition.” Steve felt his jaw stiffen. She was correct, of course. She knelt down beside him, hand shifting to rest on the front of his shoulder while the other lifted his face so their eyes could meet. “I’ll help both of you as best I can, Steve. I know you deserve it.” She declared. Her eyes searched his before she removed her hand to open a jar she held in her other. She swept the paste onto her fingers and gently placed it on his wounds. It did not sting like the liquid had; instead it felt soothing and cool.

“How are you doing this?” Steve asked softly. She turned her attention back to meet his eyes once again.

“You’re a good person, Steve.” She whispered. “I think if Bucky is half the man you think he is, he must be a good person, too.” Steve felt his throat clench, swept by emotion. He felt as if all his grief, all his loneliness, had been welling up within him, burning beneath a surface he did not dare allow to crack. Yet Hermione’s gentle eyes and compassionate nature had sprung a leak eternal and before he realized it, hot tears burned down his face. He tried to cover his face, embarrassed by the display, but she merely guided his arms away, tugging his face to rest on her shoulders, surrounded by her voluminous hair. He clung to her desperately as she rubbed soothing circles on his back as she murmured reassurances.

After sometime—longer than he cared to admit—he withdrew slightly, tears subsiding. She did not acknowledge the change in his demeanor, merely took it in stride and he was grateful. She passed him tissues, surreptitiously ignoring him as he wiped his face. When he finally quelled they stood to gaze at Bucky. Hermione reached down to begin undoing Bucky’s clothing.

“I don’t like this shirt; it looks like a strait jacket.” Hermione murmured the answer to an unspoken question. She guided the shirt open but did not pull it off. Instead, her hands brushed tenderly along the ridge where the metal met skin. Steve watched her throat bob as she swallowed nervously. She stood slowly, collecting the small bottle she had left on the end table and gingerly popping the cork. She poured it into Bucky’s mouth. “This is a calming draught; you said he was volatile.” Hermione explained and Steve nodded back. He appreciated her informing him of what she was doing.

Hermione took out her wand, waving it as colors swirled above Bucky. Hermione grimaced.

“He might still be violent when he wakes up.” Steve commented reluctantly. Hermione nodded.
“He was still wounded from earlier, but I already healed him. He might take a second to not recognize the pain. I’d restrict him but I think that’d do more harm than good.” Hermione cringed. “I can take care of myself, so don’t be too concerned—just focus on talking to him gently and listen to any of my commands.” Hermione met his eyes and Steve nodded.

“I’ll follow your lead.” He confirmed. She nodded back.

“Ready.” Hermione announced before stepping back and pointing her wand at Bucky. In a gentle tone barely above a whisper she said “Rennervate.” Instantly Bucky sprung up, awake and alert. He barred his teeth at the both of them. “It’s okay. You’re safe.” Hermione said softly, showing her open palms, her wand disappearing from sight. Bucky eyed her cautiously before turning towards Steve with a vague second of recognition. He tensed up again, roaring as he stood. Steve raised both his hands.

“IT’s okay, Buck. You’re okay. You’re safe.” Steve attempted the soothing dulcet tones Hermione seemed to have mastered. Bucky whined, a guttural noise that caused Steve’s heart to ache as he watched his best friend clench his hair in his hands. Instantly Hermione sprung forward, hands glowing as she shifted Bucky’s hands away from his own head. Whether from the surprise or the potion, Bucky allowed her to touch his head, flinching only from the initial contact. Her hands glowed white where she held both sides of his temple and he slouched dramatically in weariness or relief. When Hermione began a soft humming song in another language, Steve felt his own discomfort and anxiety begin to fade from the room. Eventually, her song ended and Steve was pleased to see that Bucky was far more relaxed than he had seen him since before the big freeze.

“Are you hungry?” Hermione asked softly. Bucky stared deeply into Hermione’s swirling eyes, his face guarded. A frown settled on his face like a childish pout. “Let’s eat and then we’ll clean you up.” Hermione continued patiently as if she was talking to a child. Steve stiffened slightly when Bucky turned a sharp glare his way. “He’s your friend. He’s safe.” Hermione said with a gentle smile. Bucky looked back into her eyes, her hands still glowing as she held his cheeks. Seeing something Steve assumed she liked, Hermione’s hands receded their glow as she brought them down. She grabbed Bucky’s hand smoothly, leading Bucky towards the stairs. He stopped when he was even with Steve, feet rooted as he glared at Steve. Hermione tugged gently but stopped when Bucky could not be moved.

“You need to go first, Steve.” Hermione said after a moment. Steve looked at her questioningly. “You threaten him; he doesn’t want his back to you.” She clarified and Steve tried to contain his disappointment at the revelation. Instead he nodded and deliberately showed his back as he led up the stairs. He did not turn to look at them when he heard the steps follow. He entered the open atrium where they first entered, giving enough berth to be less threatening to Bucky. He watched as Hermione led Bucky out of the basement, emerging from the hallway and stopping abruptly when he entered the golden hues of stained window reflections. The sun was setting in a way that made the room fill with colored light. He watched as Bucky took it all in; his eyes shifted wildly around the room with a critical gaze but the rest of his body remained still and taut with tension. He met Steve’s eyes again before succumbing to Hermione’s insistent tugs to lead him to the table. She sat him in the chair and he complied easily as if he were some moveable doll. She released his hand to walk to the kitchen—Steve guessed she was uneasy displaying magic in front of Bucky—and Bucky’s face contorted with trace amounts of agony. Steve resisted the urge to comfort him or make any sudden movements. Hermione returned quickly with a plate and sat beside him at the head of the table, turning her body to face him. Bucky looked at her uneasily before glancing down at the food and back to her.

“Do you want to eat? It’s lasagna.” Hermione said softly, her hand gently splayed over Buck’s. Bucky’s brows furrowed and he looked at the food again and looked back at Hermione. Hermione
smiled slightly before reaching with her other hand to slowly grasp the fork. She maintained eye contact as she scooped some food and ate it in a single bite. She replaced the fork and smiled again. Bucky slowly lifted his metal arm and Steve felt tension spread in his already on edge body. Bucky grasped the fork in his left arm, breaking eye contact with Hermione to look down at the utensil. He spooked at something and dropped the fork. Steve could see the sweat breaking out on his friends face, despite his distanced perch form the wall.

“It’s okay,” Hermione cooed, reaching across to grab the fork again and attempting to hand it back to Bucky’s left arm. He began to shake his head in quick, small, jerking moments to indicate he did not want the fork. Hermione stopped her effort to look at him thoughtfully. “Let’s try your other hand, hmm?” Hermione suggested lifting her left hand from where it was still resting on top of his right. Steve flinched from the wall when Bucky quickly turned his hand to hold hers. Despite the tight grip, Hermione had not flinched at all. “I see, I see.” Hermione said cheerfully. She allowed him to hold her hand. She picked up the fork with food again and held it delicately to Bucky’s mouth. Bucky watched her warily—his eyes never leaving hers before he opened his mouth to accept the food. She smiled warmly at him and Steve noticed Bucky’s face looked both more flustered and relaxed. She continued to feed him until the plate was finished and he seemed sated.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.” Hermione said, standing from the table. Bucky held her hand, still, as he followed her less hesitantly, though he still waited for Steve to pass first as to not show his back. Steve noticed idly that Bucky seemed to shield Hermione from his view as if Steve was dangerous and she needed protection. Steve thought back to the quick fired spells and thought she was far from helpless.

“To the master bath, please, Steve.” Hermione called and Steve complied. Steve walked into the spacious and paused by the sink, attempting to not react when Bucky tensed as he passed. He did sigh slightly when Bucky changed his manner of walking to once again protect Hermione from Steve’s view. Hermione for her part seemed to ignore the changes and responses. She merely held his hand and began turning the taps to the tub. Bucky stared at Steve in neither a threatening nor familiar manner, instead the gaze only seemed to express that Bucky knew he was there should Steve attempt any challenge.

When the tub filled Hermione made to pull from Bucky’s grasp. At this, Bucky finally turned his eyes away from Steve to look at Hermione pitifully. Hermione smiled gently.

“It’ll be a little too difficult to bathe while holding hands, I’m afraid.” She soothed. Steve was amazed to see that Bucky released her hand, his hair falling to cover his face as he looked down. Hermione moved slowly and patiently as she slid his jacket from his body. His body was tense as she pulled the article off before she kneeled down and started working on the buckles and straps on Bucky’s pants.


“He needs to get clean somehow, Steve.” She chuckled softly. “You can wait in the bedroom if you are uncomfortable.” She offered as she finished undoing all the restraints. “I need to remove your boots,” She said as she touched Bucky’s hand before beginning to unlace his boots. She tapped his foot and he lifted his foot, standing steadily as she pulled the shoe and sock off. Steve grimaced at the dirt and grime and wondered how she managed to maintain such a peaceful face as if Bucky hadn’t been in the wilderness for at least two weeks prior without bathing facilities. She tapped his other foot and the barefoot came down and the booted foot came up. When she had finished with that, she tugged down Bucky’s pants and Steve swallowed uncomfortably. She was still kneeling as she disrobed his friend and the imagery made him fluster, slightly. Bucky stepped out of the pants and
remained only in boxer-briefs. Steve made a noise between a squawk and a yelp and Bucky and Hermione turned their gazes to him once more.

“Her-Hermione!” Steve exclaimed aghast. She rolled her eyes at him.

“He needs a bath, Steve.” She reprimanded. “You can wait outside if you are uncomfortable.”

“He’s going to be naked.” Steve stated, holding his arms across his chest to prevent himself from gesturing wildly. Hermione raised an eyebrow as she gave him a look.

“How else would one bathe?” Hermione asked. She pulled off his remaining clothing and Steve flushed as he looked upward. It wasn’t the first time he had seen Bucky, but in the presence of Hermione he felt embarrassed. He looked back when he heard Bucky get in to the tub. Bucky looked wary and uneasy as he sat upright in the center of the luxurious tub. Hermione had taken off her boots and pulled off her sweater dress swiftly.

“What are you doing?” Steve said, unable to contain his volume as he covered his eyes with both hands.

“My goodness, Steve, one might think you of a different era with your virtuousness.” She laughed freely. Steve felt his face heat up.

“Why are you getting naked—I thought Bucky was the one bathing?” He asked embarrassed and she laughed again.

“Admittedly, I should have changed into something a little more functionally than my out-and-about clothing. But I’m a little too committed to go and change now. You can try to find my some clothes in my dresser—shorts and a tank top if you can stand the immodesty.” She laughed at him again as Steve felt his way to the door, keeping his eyes clothes as he tried to reason that it would be better to rifle through her clothing than watch her without her clothes. He thought of it again as he accidently found her lacey under wear and lingerie. He still had trouble viewing such items on mannequins let alone imagining them on their owner. He grabbed a pair of sleeping shorts and a tank top and made his way wearily back to the bathroom. He could hear the sounds of water falling and the soft humming Hermione had done earlier. Steve closed his eyes as he entered slowly, opening them only briefly to see Bucky standing up in the center of the tub. Steve felt his eyes wearily back to the bathroom. He could hear the sounds of water falling and the soft humming Hermione had done earlier. Steve closed his eyes as he entered slowly, opening them only briefly to see Bucky standing up in the center of the tub. Steve closed his eyes again when he realized that Hermione was in her under wear and bra and he felt all the more awkward when the image was seared into his mind—the closing of his eyes helping no longer. He heard her walk over and felt her grab the garments.

“You can look again Captain Modesty.” She said and Steve opened his eyes to see her changed and back at Bucky’s side. Bucky was sitting upright in the tub and was staring at him with a fixed-stern expression. Steve took his place at the wall again and watched the two interacting. She leaned over the edge of the tub to wash Bucky and Bucky hardly let his eyes stray from her. His look of wariness had changed to something softer when he looked at her, something warmer. She hummed that relaxing song and Steve felt his own nerves soothe at the sound. The steam of the room made it warm and Steve allowed himself to relax in it. She cleaned him thoroughly and Steve felt his heart leap into his throat when she really cleaned everything. Steve felt incredibly awkward as his friend visibly responded and when Steve felt blood pooling to form his own response. Closing his eyes only made the images of Hermione nearly naked surface. He exhaled heavily and attempted to thwart his body’s response. Bucky submerged again, judging by the sound and Steve reopened his eyes. He did not know whether Hermione’s flushed face made him feel better or worse about the whole scenario.

“Couldn’t this all be done faster with magic?” Steve asked, ignoring both set of eyes turning to him.
“Not really, not as efficiently.” Hermione answered. “Magic has limits like technology.” She had taken to massaging shampoo through Bucky’s hair. Bucky was attempting to not relax but he appeared to have turned to putty due to Hermione’s ministrations. Steve couldn’t help but wonder how that would feel on his own head if it managed to relax Bucky so thoroughly.

“What happens after the bath?” Steve asked as Hermione rinsed Bucky’s hair with a ladle that never seemed to empty. *Magic.* He realized and instantly thought of Fantasia. Bucky had convinced to wayward girls to the movies with them and they had watched the film. Steve had laughed when brooms and buckets had multiplied.

“He’s going to need some sleep, I think.” Hermione declared. Bucky looked up into her eyes as she leaned over him, massaging his hair with conditioner. Steve thought he looked spelled or besotted but withheld the thought. When she had finished bathing Bucky she let the dirty water drain away before rinsing him once again. When Bucky stood and Hermione towel dried him, Steve did not avert his eyes. She bade him to lean down so she could towel dry his hair and he allowed her to do so without argument. “To the bedroom,” Hermione said and Steve went first. She followed, hand in hand with Bucky. He seemed just as reluctant to release her hand when she tried but she gave him a look and he released it. He stared at her intently as she ripped sheets, pillows, and comforter off the bed and laid it down on the floor. She also pulled a potion out of her night stand. She pulled Bucky to the floor and covered him in a comforter. He kept his right hand gripped with hers above the comforter as she poured the potion into his mouth. He swallowed dutifully. The potion—some sort of sedative—made his eyes droop with sleep instantly. Realizing the effect, Bucky attempted to fight it and Steve winced at the terror in his eyes. Hermione guided his face to look at hers.

“I’ll be right here, even as you sleep.” She said softly and began to sing so softly it came out as a hum. Steve felt himself relax instantly and Bucky seemed to respond as well. He maintained eye contact with her until his eyes finally failed to open and he fell asleep.

“That song is magic, isn’t it?” Steve said softly when she had stopped. True to her word she was staying next to Bucky. She sighed.

“Yes. It’s a type of soothing magic that I more-or-less rediscovered when I began my mind-healer studies. ‘Mother’s magic’ meant to soothe children, though it works remarkably on anyone.” Hermione answered, twisting her neck in an attempt to alleviate strain.

“How is he? He seems…childish and lost. I don’t know if that is better or worse than when he was psychotic and lost.” Steve admitted.

“This won’t be easy. I glanced into his mind but it is very fractured—someone attempted to rewrite him but programming doesn’t work like that. Even *obliviates* do not completely remove the memory—merely severs the path for recollection.” Hermione said, Steve frowned at the unfamiliar term.

“But he can be okay?” Steve asked again. Hermione’s mouth tweaked to the side as her forehead crinkled in concern.

“Yes...I’ve had comparable cases but he needs time to begin coming to terms with the memories and recollections as they appear. It’s strange though...” Hermione began and Steve made a noise to indicate she should continue. “It seems like his mind is completely wiped—buts minds are not made for that. No short-term memory, no long-term memory, barely the instincts that were integral to his existence—he’s reverted almost to that of a child. I’m not sure how long it will take for those connections to reform so he can access memory more easily but I know that it has already begun to heal.” She explained.

“Can you assist the process?” Steve asked and frowned when Hermione shook her head.
“Yes and no. This type of healing is better when processed on its own, especially as he will be experiencing and retaining new memories every day. I can soothe him when the process is painful—facilitate the connections more organically. When he is further along, I can assist in connecting some of the broken pathways directly. I’ll also be there to support and comfort him when he faces the terrible memories he has—and no doubt that he has them—I can also assist with that.” Hermione paused and Steve felt she was leaving something unsaid.


“Steve, I see words in his head. They are the most prominent thing in his mind but they are foreign and…tainted; they can be triggered and these pathways that are currently at rest—pathways to awful things—can be unlocked.” She looked at him in concern and Steve felt his face harden.

“Can you remove them?” He asked, relieved when she nodded.

“I can but not until his mind is more healed. He’ll have to stay at my house for now.” She determined and Steve exhaled deeply.

“Yeah, okay. I understand.” He said his own brow furrowing.

“I know you are concerned…but you’re more than welcome to stay here for as long as it takes.” She offered and Steve looked at her in surprise. “I have a guest room.” She added meekly and Steve found himself nodding.

“I’d—I’d really appreciate that.” Steve admitted and Hermione smiled sadly.

“I know how much he means to you. It’s going to be okay.” Hermione said hopefully as she slid her free hand over his own. Steve nodded again, feeling his throat well up. “You’re welcome to watch over him tonight, too. Why don’t you take the bed?” She offered but Steve declined.

“Why don’t you?” Steve returned. Hermione gestured to her captured hand.

“He’s terrified of touching but he craves it.” Hermione explained her expression sorrowful. “I dread uncovering all his secrets as I muddle in his mind.” She admitted. Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“It hadn’t occurred to me that you would feel something.” Steve said bluntly before wincing at his tone. “I mean—”He attempted to continue before he was cut off.

“It’s okay. It’s rather that when I’m in someone’s mind to heal them—not skim them as I sometimes do—for the time that I am repairing the damage I become them in a sense. I know everything they know, experience everything they’ve felt; I am them.” She said quietly. “I don’t retain that information necessarily but it often does feel like I leave a little part of myself within the harder cases.” Steve flipped his hand over to grip hers.

“I can’t even imagine. Thank you.” Steve said sincerely and Hermione gave a watery smile as she held his stare. He coughed slightly. “So, um, why didn’t you choose to lie in the bed with Bucky if you were going to be trapped?” He asked.

“The bed is too comfortable.” Hermione explained. “For him, I imagine he hasn’t slept in a bed in a long, long time. Too much comfort can make one uneasy when they are transitioning.” Hermione said in a way that Steve instantly recalled that Sam had identified her as a soldier.

“How long did it take you to adjust to a bad?” Steve asked steadily. Hermione shrugged lightly.
“About five years.” She responded. “Though it was largely based on how long it took me to be okay with the idea of allowing myself to be comfortable. What about you?”

“It’s a work in progress.” Steve admitted. “Though, frankly, I don’t really like to sleep at all.” Hermione gave a soft noise of agreement and Steve looked at her questioningly.

“I was petrified—a sort of magical coma—for a semester. I had trouble letting myself fall asleep in case I’d be in a coma again.” She explained.

“How did that happen?” Steve asked amazed.

“Well, my second year of magical school…” Hermione began. Steve talked with her about her magical life for hours, his back resting against the front of the bed. Eventually she fell asleep while talking, curling around where Bucky still held her hand sturdily. Steve felt his own eyes close as he began to nod off.

“Steve.” A voice garbled and Steve awakened instantly.

“Bucky.” Steve replied his heartbeat erratic.

“Where am I?” Bucky asked, looking around at his surroundings.

“You’re safe.” Steve said, ignoring his own wavering voice.

“Who’s she?” Bucky questioned nodding towards where Hermione was still sleeping their hands still clasped.


“She’s pretty.” Bucky identified and Steve chuckled softly.

“Yea, she is.” Steve agreed but Bucky was already asleep. The interaction was over so quickly that Steve wondered if he had dreamed it.
Steve jerked awake at the sound of a toilet. A sink rushed water and Hermione emerged from the bathroom. She blushed when she met Steve’s eyes.

“I’ve needed to go for hours and he finally let my hand go.” Hermione rationalized when Bucky trailed after her. He was wearing only loose shorts. “He, erm, still doesn’t care to be separated.” She admitted awkwardly.

“Bucky?” Steve asked, wondering if his recollection from last night was just a dream. Bucky looked at him with less heat but he didn’t seem to remember the conversation and was acting just as aloof as the day before. “I thought he woke up last night and recognized me.” Steve said, not wanting to admit he was disappointed.

“He might have. But the connections are taking a while to form; what might form for a minute might not remain immediately. What else did he say?” Hermione asked interested, disregarding when Bucky took her hand again.

“He asked where he was.” Steve blushed and ignored the one other aspect of their conversation. “Then he went back to sleep.” Hermione nodded.

“Well that isn’t bad, then.” She said cheerfully. “Come, it’s time for breakfast.” She began to move Bucky with her as she left the bedroom and Steve was at least pleased to note that Bucky showed his back to Steve, even though he still seemed to guard Hermione’s back.

When they entered the kitchen, Hermione attempted to putter around to cook. She didn’t seem to mind that Bucky was still clinging to her hand but Steve noticed she had a certain inability to cook. Bucky for the most part was acting less hostile towards Steve, shooting glares his way only on occasion to indicate that Bucky still had him on his radar. When Hermione made a large circle to spin
Bucky around in order to cook eggs, Steve finally took pity on her.

“I can cook the eggs, Hermione.” He offered. Hermione glanced at him with relief.

“That’d be great, actually—feel free to grab whatever you need.” Hermione said as she left the kitchen, grabbing fruit from the fruit bowl as she sat at the dining table with Bucky angled beside her. Steve took over cooking the eggs. He found plates and cups and brought them over to set the table. “You’re a life-savior, Steve.” Hermione said as she smiled graciously up at him. Steve chuckled.

“You know, I’ve heard that a few times—but never because I cooked breakfast.” Steve admitted. Hermione laughed along with him and Bucky stared at Steve with a little less heat, his eyes still intense.

Steve turned to get the eggs when he noticed Hermione taking a bite of the fruit she had swiped. Despite her petite bite, the juices from the plum trailed from her lips. She wiped it away casually with the back off her wrist. She offered the plum to Bucky who took a bite, the juices running down his chin as it had for Hermione. Hermione wiped it away in the same fashion. Steve marveled at the change in demeanor. Bucky looked calmer as he stared into Hermione’s eyes, eating from her hand. Bucky was still shirtless and Hermione was still in her tank top and shorts. Somehow their lack of clothing made the act of sharing the plum seem far more sensual than Steve would expect. Startling at his own train of thought, Steve moved back to grab the cooked eggs and orange juice, bringing them to the table. Hermione smiled up at Steve again and Steve sat on the other side of Hermione, situating himself so he was across from Bucky. Bucky looked at him sharply before turning his attention back to Hermione’s face.

“How long will you have to feed him?” Steve asked. Hermione turned to better split her attention between them and Steve caught the pout on his friend’s face.

“I’m not sure. The people I have worked with all had various types and degrees of trauma…though none of them had the touch-comfort necessities that he has.” Hermione admitted. Steve looked up at her in surprise.

“I knew you were some psychologist but I didn’t realize that you dealt with similar traumas.” Steve commented offhandedly. Hermione’s demeanor abruptly closed off and Steve recognized he had broached an inappropriate subject. While she had told him much of the magical world, her adventures seemed largely benign—murderous snakes aside—and he realized as she migrated topics that she was avoiding one particular subject; her war.

“I told you Steve, I’m probably the best person for the job.” Hermione said with a self-deprecating smile. She turned back to Bucky and attempted to hand him the fork to his left hand. Bucky’s face became sullen and while he did not retract the arm, he let the fork flop down to the table. Hermione attempted to position the fork between Bucky and her clasped hands but the situation was impractical and she gave up. “Darling, are you hungry?” Hermione asked. Bucky gazed at her silently. “Do you want some eggs?” She tried again. She seemed to be contemplating something. “Please answer yes or no if you want anything.” She said and something sparked in Bucky’s eyes.

“Yes.” Bucky whispered so softly that Steve almost missed it. It still startled Steve enough that he stopped eating his own eggs to watch Hermione feed him. When his eggs were finished Hermione asked him if he was still hungry but this time Bucky answered negative.

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“Why don’t you use magic around him?” Steve asked suddenly curious as she grabbed what dishes she could to bring to sink. Steve rushed to help her, ignoring Bucky’s protective gaze.
“I don’t want to spook him. I imagine while he probably doesn’t have much experience with magic he probably would view it as something initially negative.” She replied. “I’ll be using subtle magic for the time being.” Steve nodded as they hovered in the kitchen awkwardly. She turned to look at Bucky.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?” Hermione asked Bucky. Bucky stared at her impassively and she seemed to contemplate on his reaction. “Please answer yes or no if you want to use the bathroom.” The spark returned to Bucky’s eyes.

“Yes.” Bucky answered softly and Hermione sighed.

“This will be fun.” Hermione commented, leading Bucky back to her personal bathroom again. Steve didn’t quite understand her frustration until Bucky wouldn’t let her leave the restroom without him.

“How—how will this work?” Steve asked as he witnessed Hermione try five different combinations of attempted exits. Bucky trailed after her every time.

“The same way I went this morning, I suppose.” Hermione commented with a small eye roll. Steve flushed at her response.

“But that’s—" He began.

“Immodest, I know.” Hermione finished, slightly annoyed. “Ah well, I’m somewhat used to it enough. It’s just certainly less than ideal.” She disappeared into the bathroom with Bucky and left the door open. Steve contemplated giving privacy or company before promptly fleeing to the kitchen. He’d do dishes instead because that was helpful and less awkward.

He contemplated Bucky as he was currently. Possessive, childish, feral, besotted—he was like an abused dog finally experiencing kindness for the first time. While the situation was awkward for Steve, Steve knew it must be awkward for Hermione despite all her seemingly nonchalance. When they returned later, hands still locked, Hermione had found Bucky a plain shirt that didn’t quite fit in the shoulders. She herself had thrown on jeans and a shirt as well.

Hermione led Bucky into the living room where she sat on the couch. Bucky, still connected at the hands sat down on the floor in front of her instead of on her couch—much to Hermione’s apparent chagrin. Slowly she moved so her legs dangled around him. She conjured a hair tie from somewhere and somehow convinced Bucky to free her hand. She was pulling his hair back into a small pony tail, though some of his bangs could not be contained and brushed the sides of his face. When she had finished, Bucky was leaning up against the couch, his head nearly resting in her lap as he gazed upwards into her eyes. She stared down at him, her eyes crinkled with kindness and Steve watched as her hands began to glow again. Bucky’s eyes began to close and Hermione looked back up at Steve ruefully.

“This might take a while.” She commented lightly.

“What are you doing?” Steve asked intrigued.

“I’m stimulating the growth of the repairs. When the repairs are more detailed, I will need to be more precise—like pruning a shrub—but for now it’s like watering grass and doesn’t require as much attention.” Hermione commented. Steve nodded in vague understanding.

“Tomorrow is Monday—won’t you have a job to report to?” Steve asked and Hermione shook her head lightly.
“I more-or-less freelance so that won’t be an issue.” Hermione responded nonchalantly.

“Are you a psychiatrist, then?” Steve prompted.

“I don’t exactly have a doctorate in psychology but I am at least a scholar of it.” Hermione smiled wryly. “I do have patients that I see but most of them have outgrown a consistent treatment with me.” Hermione glanced down at Bucky who had nodded off. “These days I spend much of my time expanding my knowledge of magic. I also write books and give seminars on mind healing arts but I’m not currently scheduled for any of those.” Hermione explained.


“What will you be doing as your friend heals? We’re seemingly attached at the hip but you might continue getting a cold shoulder for a while.” Hermione commented. Steve sighed.

“I was really excited when he recognized me last night. But he seems to have already forgotten. He does seem to have less animosity towards me now, at least.” Steve comforted himself.

“Have you ever seen a plasma globe, Steve?” Hermione asked randomly. Steve shook his head no. “It’s a clear glass sphere with an electrical current and various gases that make it seems like there is lighting in a globe. Many tendrils will strike at the glass walls as it attempts to transfer its’ energy; it never stays long and many tendrils will split from each other to continue to compete for space.” Steve nodded at her encouragingly. “When you place a finger on the globe, the tendrils unite into a more intense channel—still attempting to reach the outside through the most potent place. Bucky’s mind is like that. It’s attempting to connect but it constantly is reconnecting when things aren’t sticking like they should. You and I are creating deeper connections that are allowing that tendrils to unite and connect. It will take time; but it will get there.” Hermione said lightly. “In the meantime, you can tell me a little more about Bucky and some of his likes and dislikes—maybe foods? I don’t think I can take him outside yet and I don’t think he’ll even let me out by myself, so I might need to request use as an errand boy.” Hermione admitted with a sympathetic smirk.

“Errand boy reporting for duty, ma’am.” Steve commented and Hermione laughed. “You know, I’m beginning to think that you only invited me to stay here because you wanted someone to do your chores.” Steve remarked suspiciously.

“Steve!” Hermione reprimanded with a smile and this time Steve laughed too. “So,” Hermione continued after a minute. “Tell me about how you two met.” She said as she patted the couch next to her.

Steve smiled eager to share his favorite story. “It all started in a Brooklyn alley back in the fourth grade…” Steve began as he sat down. Hermione laughed as Steve described their first meeting involving bullies in an alley, followed by their harrowing adventures as friends. Admittedly, those adventures often began because Steve had been hot tempered. But Bucky always seem to turn the problems around—which meant Steve probably didn’t learn lessons like he should have.

“You must attract trouble.” Hermione said with a devious smirk. Steve scoffed indignant.

“I just don’t like bullies.” Steve reasoned.

“Neither do I,” Hermione agreed. “Then again, I have been bullied all my life.” Hermione admitted. Steve encouraged her to continue. “I was smart when I was younger—and precocious. I was different enough as it was and then I had magic and found myself even more separated from my
peers. Needless to say, I lacked friends in elementary school. When I went my magical boarding school I had such hope that I would be able to find friends and fit in but I was just as different as I had been; my parents weren’t magical and that was bad, my teeth were too big, my hair too unkempt, my smart clever self was too smart and too clever.” Hermione looked sullen. “When I saw others being bullied I saw myself and couldn’t stand it. I wanted to protect others in a way that no one had ever protected me.” Hermione admitted. Steve nodded in understanding.

“I was sick when I was younger—I had scarlet fever, I was partially deaf, had astigmatism, scoliosis, arrhythmia, stomach ulcers, pernicious anemia, and rheumatic fever—and the days I could make it to school, I was always picked on. In the 40’s the mentality was that I was an invalid—dependent on my peers for the rest of my life. Bucky was the only one who didn’t view me like that. Everyone else…well I had to prove myself to everyone else.” Steve admitted. Hermione’s hands had stopped glowing and Bucky was still asleep with his head lolling back into her lap. She placed a free hand on Steve’s. It was warm and comforting in a way Steve had never felt.

“The wizarding world I entered hinged on the belief that pureblood wizards were better than half-bloods and muggleborns without any magical parents like me. They feared me, they hated me, they spat on me.” Hermione recalled with a solemn eye. “The war occurred and I was everything the reasoned I should not be—powerful, intelligent, magical. I single-handedly disproved all their theories of blood supremacy and that made me dangerous—it made me undesirable. That’s why I put my parents into hiding. By my last year, I had dropped out and was evading the law with my two best friends. They had tried to place all muggleborns on a registry—so they could keep us in check. I was undesirable number 2—second only to my best friend, Harry.” Hermione commented idly. Steve yearned for her to continue but she had stopped and Steve recognized she would not be forthcoming again. Steve placed his free hand on the hand that held his. He glided the hand up comfortingly until he felt scar tissue beneath his fingers. Perplexed at the pattern, Steve twisted her arm so he could look at the marks.

Mudblood.

Steve sucked in air through his teeth and he felt Hermione tense up in response. Bucky, who had been sleeping soundly with his head on Hermione’s lap suddenly awoke and jumped to his feet, pulling Hermione into the crook of his right arm smoothly and standing with his left arm facing forward. Hermione looked dazed in his arms but she looked unalarmed even as Bucky seemingly growled. Steve felt his dog comparison was more apt than ever.

“‘It’s—it’s okay, darling.’ Hermione said slowly, placing one hand on Bucky’s chest and the other on his cheek. Bucky’s eyes were fiercely locked with Steve’s but Hermione managed to guide his vision back to her face. Bucky relaxed slightly before glaring at Steve one more time. Finally, his posture changed and he released Hermione’s body in favor of taking just her hand. They stood awkwardly as Steve remained seated on the couch.

“What was that, Hermione?” Steve said gruffly, disregarding Bucky even as his posture stiffened. Hermione looked uncomfortable and Steve sighed deeply, rubbing between his eyes with a free hand. “I’m sorry, Hermione,” Steve began, breathing deeply to let his rage out slowly. “You don’t have to answer that—I shouldn’t have asked.” Steve apologized. Behind Bucky, Hermione nodded, her eyes wide.

“It’s…well, it’s from the war.” Hermione admitted and Steve clenched his fist in anger. His jaw tensed and he resisted grinding his teeth. Noticing Hermione’s wince and Bucky’s stiff posture, Steve wasn’t doing well in his attempt to calm down. Yet someone had hurt Hermione—had carved into her smooth skin; someone had marked her for life. He felt strangely protective of the kind soul before him; she done so much for them.
The tension was pierced by a ringtone. Bucky’s eyes searched wildly for the source but Hermione was already dragging him towards it.

“My phone!” She exclaimed as she picked up her cell phone by a stain-glass window. “Harry?” She said as she answered her call. “No…no the floo is closed for now. Why? I have company. Non-magical.” She continued speaking in vague terms and small answers. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to visit. Have Ron, Lavender, and Parvati watch them! Harry James Potter, don’t you use that tone with me! They’re your children of course they are the devil! Ha…Harr…Harry!” Hermione exclaimed. “I have company indefinitely. I will keep you posted. Yes, yes, I love you too. Yes…Yes…goodbye!” Hermione said with a sigh as she ended her call. Hermione glanced down at the cell phone in surprise before turning to look back at Steve. “I forgot about my cell phone—you’re welcome to use it as long as you don’t take it down to the basement.” Steve looked at the phone before looking back at Hermione. She looked uneasy still and Bucky was glaring at Steve like some sort of vengeful watch dog. “You might want to call Sam, maybe? Anyone else to let them know your residence is slightly altered temporarily? I won’t be able to apparate you home until Bucky and I are a little more…independent.” Hermione held out the cell phone like a peace offering. Steve stood and walked over, disregarding Bucky’s continued protective stance. Bucky let Steve grab the phone with only a stern glance.

“Anywhere but the basement?” Steve repeated and Hermione nodded.

“Or it will break.” Hermione clarified. “And Steve?” Hermione added just as Steve turned to leave. “ Anything that attempts to track anything within this house will mark the location as a different random place around the word. It is still a vulnerable protection; trustworthy people only, if you will.” Steve, understanding her need for privacy, nodded before heading back to the guest room he hadn’t even used yet. He called Sam.

“Sam Wilson.” The voice answered curtly.

“Sam, it’s Steve.” Steve responded.

“Steve! How’s your lost boy and lucky penny doing?” Sam asked and Steve huffed in exasperation.

“Everything has been fine so far. Bucky still doesn’t seem particularly coherent but he recognized me last night. Hermione says it’ll take time and she’s helping his mind heal but for now he largely acts like Hermione’s personal guard dog.” Steve commented ruefully.

“Which is inconvenient because she is your lucky penny.” Sam countered. Steve bristled at the insinuation.

“Sam, I don’t have time for that.” Steve chastised.

“Whatever, Cap.” Sam blew off his words. Steve sighed again.

“I just wanted to check how you were feeling, whether you were home safe, and to let you know we’re all doing fine.” Steve said.

“Your concern is touching but her magic potions healed me right up—the arm feels great. How are your bullet wounds?” Sam asked.

“Healed—I’m wondering if we could just keep her as the Avenger medic.” Steve added jokingly. Sam chuckled from the other side.

“Aside from the whole ‘you can literally tell no one’ thing it sounds like a good idea.” Sam joked. “You need me to bring anything else up? I could be tempted if Hermione is making another meal.”
“I’ll ask her...as it happens I left my phone in the car and I wouldn’t be surprised if Romanoff or Tony tries to contact me. I’m on Hermione’s secret private cell,” Steve sighed.

“I’ll call Romanoff and let her know you’re occupying yourself.” Sam offered. Steve laughed.

“You know she won’t be satisfied with that answer.” Steve commented. Sam scoffed lightly.

“I’ll tell her you’re staying in Oz.” Sam said and Steve laughed.

“It certainly feels like I’ve been through a twister.” Steve admitted.

“In all seriousness, I’ll bring up your cell and some clothes—I’m sure you didn’t exactly pack for an extended stay.” Sam offered. “I’m free any day this week.”

“Yeah...I’ll ask Hermione and let you know.” Steve finalized. “Thanks again for your help, Sam.”

“No problem, Cap. I’m glad Bucky is going to be alright.” Sam said. “Tell your lucky penny I say hi.” Sam added as an afterthought. Steve made to protest one more time but Sam had already hung up.

Steve returned to the atrium where Hermione had convinced Bucky to lie down on the couch, his head resting on her lap and her hands in his now loose hair. She beckoned Steve over with a hand.

“Sam says hi.” Steve mentioned. Hermione looked up at him curiously.

“How is he feeling?” She asked.

“Good—really good. His arm is healed as is the rest of him.” Steve relayed. Hermione brightened. “He said he was free to drop off my phone sometime this week as well as some clothing for me.” Steve said as he looked down at his last fresh t-shirt. He would be in trouble tomorrow. He wasn’t even sure how Bucky kept gaining clothes when he only had the one Winter Soldier outfit when they arrived. “I wanted to run that by you before I gave him the go ahead.” Hermione nodded.

“He can stop by anytime—just tell him to call me when he’s in the area because he won’t be able to find me otherwise. He’s welcome to stay in the guest room, if he’d like.” Hermione offered. Steve smiled appreciatively.

“I’ll text him and let him know, if that’s okay.” Steve said as he held up her phone. Hermione nodded. Steve texted Sam quickly before turning his attention back to his best friend and his healer.

“Have any plans for today?” Steve asked expectantly.

“We’re going to watch Disney movies!” Hermione exclaimed excitedly. She patted the seat next to her invitingly and Steve chuckled as he sat down beside her on the long couch. Bucky’s eyed him warily but took no further action. Hermione had popcorn on the coffee table before them and was currently utilizing the remote to flip through movies. “There are a bunch of movies out now and we will eventually get to all the Disney Princesses, but I thought we would start in the beginning and work our way through time.” Hermione grinned as she selected. The music sounded and instantly Steve was transported to the old theatre, sitting happily with Bucky and his latest gals. The movie, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, had been the first time Bucky had taken Steve on a double date to the theater. She hadn’t been very interested in pre-serum Steve; Steve for his part didn’t even remember her name. Steve took some of the popcorn that Hermione offered him merrily. She looked down at Bucky, head resting in her lap, her hand still in his hair. They looked intimate, Steve recognized somewhat uncomfortably.
“Do you want popcorn?” Hermione asked. Bucky made no indication. “Please say yes or no.” Hermione compelled Bucky who once again answered with a soft.

“Yes.” Hermione began feeding Bucky popcorn, their eyes locked. Once again Bucky seemed tamer and Hermione’s eyes glowed warmly.

“Tell me when to stop.” Hermione commanded. It occurred to Steve as he watched them that he was jealous of their casual ease. He wanted to think he was merely jealous of his best friend’s attention—especially when he was cool and wary of Steve—but he would be lying if he didn’t admit he was envious of Hermione’s warm and soothing attention she bestowed upon Bucky—the same attention she had initially and sporadically bestowed upon him. He wondered what it would be like to be fed popcorn by a pretty girl. He glanced up at Hermione who was staring at him in surprise. It took Steve a moment to realize he had spoken his last train of thought out loud. He opened his mouth to think of something to turn his faux pas into a joke.

“I can feed you, too, if you’d like.” Hermione said eventually with a teasing smile and Steve felt his face flush. She laughed at him as he took a handful of popcorn and shoved it into his mouth.

“I can feed myself.” Steve said finally after swallowing. Hermione laughed again.

“Stop.” Bucky said softly, turning their attention to him. Steve’s laughter fell at Bucky’s command.

“Done with the popcorn?” Hermione asked. Bucky paused and Steve wondered if it really had been the delivery of popcorn that had spurned his command.

“Yes.” Bucky said after a moment and Hermione seemed to preen at the word. It took Steve another moment to realize she was happy that Bucky did not need to be prompted to respond to her yes or no question. Progress. Steve realized. Very small progress, but progress nonetheless.

They had finished Seven White and the Seven Dwarfs and eaten lunch before finishing Pinocchio. Hermione spoke with Steve about his first time viewing the movies as Hermione’s hands glowed blue at Bucky’s temple. His friend did not fall asleep this time but did seem to be in a peaceful trance. Steve mentioned his list of things to catch up on and Hermione eagerly added her own explanations and opinions.

Eventually, they decided to end the night with one last movie: Fantasia. As the movie played on the screen before them, Steve felt Hermione lean against him. Steve’s heart leapt into his chest; he had already been hyperaware of her proximity. Her head rested on his chest, his arm resting on the back of the couch in a way that implied it was wrapped around her. Her hands were still curled up in Bucky’s hair. Bucky looked back towards Steve, eyeing the way Hermione was leaning before Bucky turned his attention back to the screen. It all felt strangely intimate and yet not nearly as undesired as Steve thought it should feel. Steve peeked down at Hermione—she had fallen asleep. Content to let her rest, Steve resisted the urge to scratch his neck where her hair teased his skin. He did not resist the urge to smell her—warm, clean, pleasant. He let the sounds of the movie lull him into a calm state he hadn’t felt in years.

Hermione suddenly woke at the end of the movie. She flushed as she mumbled an apology to Steve, unintentionally dislodging Bucky who had been lying languidly on her lap.

“Kids these days don’t appreciate the classics, anymore.” Steve faux grumbled with a half-smile. Hermione looked up at him in surprise before laughing delightedly.

“Kids these days get tired when they heal memories.” She teased but Steve felt guilty, muttering his own apology. “Oh stop! It’s literally my job—well, one of them.” Hermione said thoughtfully. “He’ll
be tired more consistently, too. REM sleep is important for memory development and he needs a lot of it.” Hermione looked down at Bucky who was blinking his eyes sluggishly as he rose from her lap. He twisted around to face her more and she looked at him. “Let me know if you need to go to the bathroom.” Hermione told Bucky who hadn’t blinked or turned away.

“Yes.” Bucky said quietly. Hermione smiled patiently and lead him to the bathroom, failing again to separate from Bucky, despite his personal needs. Steve determined that if—when—Bucky was more cognizant of his actions, Steve would have all the blackmail and teasing material in the world. He laughed into his hand as Hermione returned red faced and pointedly ignored Steve’s eyes.

“How much clothing do you have, Steve?” Hermione asked as she turned off the TV and headed back to her room. Steve followed her.

“Running low, actually.” Steve admitted.

“Give me what you have and I’ll take care of it.” Hermione offered.

“I’ll be happy to wash my own if you show me where the washer and dryer are.” Steve said. Hermione gave him a look before flicking her wand out from where ever she had hidden. “Unless you are using magic.” Steve corrected appreciatively. Hermione smiled before picking up her phone to glance at the screen.

“Sam says he’ll be coming Wednesday.” Hermione said as she texted back something with one hand—the other held in Bucky’s right fleshy hand. “You mentioned you were moving?” Hermione asked as she placed the cellphone on her night stand.

“Yeah, down to the former Stark Tower. Tony is turning it into an Avengers tower and my apartment was damaged during Bucky’s…reappearance.” Steve admitted. “I’ve been staying with Sam, actually.” Hermione looked at him thoughtfully.

“You mean you’ve been staying at a hospital with the intention of staying with Sam.” Hermione corrected. Steve blushed.

“Did you read my mind?” He asked, partially serious but mostly joking. Hermione looked at him hesitantly.

“No…that was a guess.” Hermione answered. “Your wounds were still very fresh when I treated them; you should’ve still been in the hospital or at least resting.” She reprimanded and Steve raised his hands placating. “I haven’t read your mind since you’ve been here.” Hermione admitted as she grabbed two towels and moved into the bathroom. She hadn’t closed the door and Steve was intrigued enough to follow.

“Is that how you always know what Bucky is thinking?” Steve asked. He must have sounded more judgmental than he meant too because she winced at his question.

“No…that was a guess.” Hermione answered. “Your wounds were still very fresh when I treated them; you should’ve still been in the hospital or at least resting.” She reprimanded and Steve raised his hands placating. “I haven’t read your mind since you’ve been here.” Hermione admitted as she grabbed two towels and moved into the bathroom. She hadn’t closed the door and Steve was intrigued enough to follow.

“Is that how you always know what Bucky is thinking?” Steve asked. Hermione turned on the tap to the tub, Bucky holding her hand and observing the conversation with seemingly no concept of comprehension.

“His mind is still jumbled, I’m lucky if I can get any pieces of what he wants or feels.” Hermione admitted. “I’m largely guessing with him, too--and trying to anticipate his will.” Steve thought of her power, the invasiveness of the very idea, though he had never personally felt her intrusion into his mind.

“Do you always read everyone’s mind?” Steve asked. He must have sounded more judgmental than he meant too because she winced at his question.

“I try to actively avoid reading people’s minds, actually.” Hermione clarified. “When I learned and
how I learned…made me somewhat susceptible to the projection of the thoughts of others.” She was facing away from him, leaning over to make sure the bath was the correct temperature.

“This is something you learned?” Steve questioned, wondering where she had learned such a useful thing. She turned to face him, Bucky standing slightly behind her as he clasped her hand.

“Most of my kind will never learn legilimency. Most don’t have the disposition for it and even more lack the time to learn it.” She admitted. “I had both the passion and time to learn it and in doing so I found myself with a higher level of aptitude for it.” She crossed an arm over her chest to rub her other arm. “While many have to say and cast the spell, I can enter most minds seamlessly. I can skim people’s minds almost immediately to get an understanding of what they are feeling.” Hermione looked down at the floor uneasily. “Particularly louds thoughts—tied to emotion—enter my mind whether I want them or not. When we first met your thoughts were screaming.” Hermione whispered. “That’s why I approached you, you know.” Steve felt awkward tension fill the room. Hermione seemed guilty before him, but Steve was merely thankful she had been there for him at all.

“Thank you.” Steve told her. She glanced up sharply in surprise. “Your single act of kindness helped me with my transition.” Steve confided. Hermione blushed and averted her gaze.

“Good.” She said softly. She turned back to adjust the tub temperature again. “Well, in any case, it is time for a bath.” Hermione said, regaining her confident mien. “Would you like a bath?” She asked Bucky. Bucky turned to look at her. She waited but he did not respond. “Please answer yes or no.” He paused again, seemingly to contemplate her command more than he had in the past. Eventually he uttered a soft ‘yes’. She turned off the taps and stared at Bucky with an attempt at looking clinical. “Can you take off your own clothing?” She asked. Bucky tilted his head to one side slightly, eying her before releasing her hand to pull off his shirt. She stepped back in surprise, cheeks flooding with color as he began to strip the rest of his clothing. She turned to leave, looking at Steve with poorly concealed embarrassment before she was stopped by Bucky’s grasp.

“Stay.” He requested, solemnly. Hermione seemed to melt at his request—the first one that Steve had heard Bucky make, especially without prompting.

“Of course.” She said tenderly, guiding Bucky into the tub. Steve debated staying for the bath but as Hermione pulled off her shirt and pushed down her jeans, Steve cowardly fled the bathroom. Blushing as he heard her gaily laughing at his expense. He paused to explore her room. He hadn’t seen much of it the night before but now took his time looking at the knick knacks she had collected. One wall was painted with some sort of crest with the words ‘Gryffindor’ beneath it. The room itself exuded the same warmth as Hermione and Steve took a moment to look at a collection of pictures she had on one night stand. Her parents, he assumed of one picture. He saw another of two boys and picked it up. One was red-headed and the other had jet-black hair and glasses. Their arms, he realized, wrapped around a young Hermione where she stood between them. She was young in the picture, all awkward and toothy as she smiled, her hair untamed. He turned as he heard the shower turn on and he instinctively glanced back into the bathroom. The shower door was open and Bucky was standing just outside of it, staring at what he realized must be Hermione.

“Bucky!” He reprimanded and Bucky turned to look at him blankly. “Don’t stare!” Steve whispered harshly. Bucky seemed to look doubtfully at Steve and he instantly turned back to watch Hermione. Steve dragged his hand over his face in exasperation. Her shower was quick, however, and Steve fled the room. He entered his appointed room to find he was still holding her picture. He sighed before placing it on his bed and taking his own shower. Steve stepped into the guest shower, happy to let the hot water rush over him. He closed his eyes, felt himself relaxing, when suddenly images of Hermione returned to his mind. He recalled her warm smile, the feel of her hand upon his. He remembered the ridges of the mysterious scar and the lost expression she had shown. He thought of
her eating the plum, the juices escaping her mouth as she delicately wiped it with her wrist. He thought of her removing her shirt to be--. Abruptly he stopped as he felt himself stirring. He switched the water to cold in self-disgust, helping him tame his reaction before he turned the shower off and headed back to his room to dress. When he returned to his room he realized Hermione had returned his dirty clothes back to him clean and pristine. He wasn’t sure how she had even found his clothes and he wondered if she had gone through his things. He sat down on the bed, picking up the picture he had unintentionally swiped; if she had come in she would’ve seen the picture. He hoped that at least in this regard, she had utilized magic. He held the picture for a few good minutes, hoping to continue to stem his bodily response as he stood resolved and walked to her room. He rapped lightly on the door before she bid him entrance with her voice.

“Hello, Steve!” She said brightly as she made a nest of the pillows and blankets on the floor. Bucky was nestled down inside of them, his head on a pillow as Hermione sat up beside him.

“I was looking at your picture…” Steve began awkwardly. “…and accidently walked off with it.” He admitted. Hermione giggled at his expense and he knew he was flushing in response.

“You can put it back where you found it.” Hermione instructed and Steve crossed the room, replacing the photograph on her nightstand. “Can you grab a potion bottle in the top drawer of the night stand while you’re there?” She asked. Steve opened the drawer finding trinkets, pens and notebooks, and a few small purple potion bottles. He grabbed one indiscriminately.

“This one, okay?” He asked as he held up the bottle. She nodded and he walked over to pass it to her. Bucky eyed the bottle warily and Hermione looked deeply into his eyes.

“I’m sorry, darling, but you need to take this.” Hermione said sadly. Bucky looked wounded at the words but did not fight as she brought the bottle to his lips—he only clasped her free hand urgently. Steve recognized the panic in Bucky’s face as his eyes began to droop. “I’ll be right here when you wake up, I promise.” She told him steadily. She hummed her lullaby as he stared into her eyes. His battle against his drooping eyelids lost, he fell into peaceful sleep.

“That’s the same potion you gave him yesterday.” Steve noticed.

“It is.” She sighed before favoring him with a sad grimace.

“What does it do?” He asked.

“It’s called dreamless sleep. It’s rather aptly named.” She answered.

“Why does he hate it?” Steve questioned. She looked sad again.

“It forces him to sleep—which he needs—but I’m sure that it reminds him of when he was regularly frozen. It’s just like how we’ve felt about falling asleep.” Hermione sighed. Steve felt his chest ache. He really could sympathize. “What’s worse is that while he doesn’t have nightmares now, the dreamless sleep is addictive. I can only give it to him for a few more days to starve off the inevitable.” Hermione winced at the thought.

“What is the inevitable?” Steve asked.

“Nightmares. Night terrors. Who knows how long it’ll be before he’ll sleep peacefully after this.” Hermione frowned. She turned to look at Steve where he was standing. She mulled over her decision before scooting over closer to Bucky. “Come sleep here, tonight.” Steve jumped at the suggestion.

“Wh-what?!?” He exclaimed quietly. She smiled at him gently.
“Last night you fell asleep against the bed and upright. There is plenty of room.” She said as she smoothed the space beside her.

“That’s—” Steve began.

“Immodest.” Hermione finished as she rolled her eyes. “I know. But I’m immodest—what can I say? In any case I shared a tent with two boys for a year—I suppose it’s almost comforting.” Hermione admitted. Steve looked at her questioningly. “Platonically.” She added. “They boys in the picture you stole.” She added jokingly and Steve blushed.

“Are you sure?” Steve asked, hoping she was indeed sure.

“Yes! I know you want to be nearby in case he wakes, anyway.” Hermione added and Steve was reluctantly sold. She opened the blankets for him and he crawled into the warmth. “Just think of it as a friendly sleepover.” She said cheerily as she lay down.

“You shared a tent with your two best friends for a year?” Steve asked as he stared up at the ceiling. Hermione laughed in a way that set Steve on edge.

“Let’s just say I don’t like to go camping anymore.” She said in a private joke with herself. Steve recognized the forbidden topic approach and attempted to steer away from it.

“Do you see your friends often?” Steve asked, hoping that the topic was a happy one.

“I do, more so than you would think given that they still live in England.” Hermione said contentedly. Steve hummed thoughtfully.

“What about your other friends?” Hermione asked. Steve took a moment to contemplate. The Avengers were not without their problems but he could say they were friends—just nowhere near the friendship he shared with Bucky.

“They have their problems, but they’re fun.” Steve admitted honestly. Hermione chuckled sleepily.

“The land of misfit toys.” Hermione muttered. Steve turned his head to look at her. Her eyelashes fluttered against the threat of sleep.

“What?” Steve asked perplexed.

“Broken people seeking broken people to make them whole.” Hermione whispered softly. Her eyes remained closed as her breathing evened out. Not for the first time Steve wondered about Hermione’s past and progression into her field.

Steve felt his hyper awareness of Hermione growing as he attempted to lie down to sleep. He could hear her even soft breaths even as his own came in short, soft huffs. He could smell the shampoo in her hair and he was close enough to see each strand of brown and honey-hued hair glowing through the stained-glass windows. Time had passed and he was sleepless when a voice pierced the calm of the night.

“Steve?” The gruff voice called out and Steve propped himself on his elbow quietly to peer over Hermione’s form at Bucky.

“Bucky?” Steve asked with tentative excitement.

“Do you remember the double date to Snow White?” Bucky asked, his voice dazed. Steve chuckled softly.

“Steve.” Bucky called again.

“Yeah, Buck?” Steve asked with a smile.

“You were the worst person to go to the movies with.” Bucky admitted, his words slurring.

“Why’s that?” Steve prompted, still smiling.

“You always started a fight—we didn’t finish half those movies.” Bucky declared and Steve felt his cheeks ache with barely controlled mirth.

“I didn’t start them—I was just ensuring the patrons got to enjoy the movie they paid for.” Steve defended himself sheepishly. Bucky chuckled to himself. They grew silent again.

“She’s pretty.” Bucky commented idly as he turned to look at Hermione’s sleeping face. Steve looked at Bucky’s face; he looked content.

“You already said that.” Steve recalled in good humor.

“Yeah, well I meant it.” Bucky said petulantly.

“I know.” Steve said.

“She makes me feel at ease.” Bucky whispered.

Steve swallowed slowly. “She has that effect.” Steve said back to Bucky, but just like the previous night his friend was already back asleep. Steve lowered himself back down to the ground, staring back at the vaulted ceiling of Hermione’s room. For a minute, it had seemed like Steve had his best friend back. Steve frowned when he realized that Bucky would probably forget the conversation again in the morning. But Steve had hope—in Bucky and Hermione—that Bucky would remember. Steve was determined to be there for his friend when he did.
Steve awoke to the sound of the bathroom. He looked up blearily expecting to see Hermione with Bucky in tow, but instead it was only Bucky. He realized there was a weight on his arm and that Hermione had shifted to rest on his bicep. Steve flushed but did not move. It was still so early.

"Bucky?" Steve asked as Bucky eyed the two. He came back over and lowered himself into the pile of blankets.

"Steve." Bucky said quietly as he grasped a hand with Hermione's.

"Buck, do you remember me?" Steve asked, yearning to lift his head to stare at his friend but unwilling to rouse Hermione from her sleep with his movements. Bucky did not say anything. Steve heard his friends breathing evenly in time with Hermione's. Steve attempted the same but found he could not return back to sleep, mulling over Bucky's recollection of his name and the possibility of him remembering anything about him. Intermittently his thoughts would return to the woman lying in his arms. She had shifted or he had shifted so that they were nearly spooning. Her scent periodically fluttered into his nose. She smelt clean, smelt like something pure. She was not the floral perfume scent of Peggy, nor the crisp scent of detergent that always lingered around the not-nurse Sharon. Hermione smelt cool and crisp but warm and heated. Another moment passed before Steve realized he had nearly begun nuzzling her riotous hair. He turned, straining his neck to put distance between them, a move that was worthless given she still rested on his arm. Steve felt his heart beating fast as he willed the blood in his body to stop singing. He thought perhaps ninety or so years was a long time to go without making love. He thought maybe his thoughts were inappropriate given why they were both there in the first place. Besides, he reasoned, it was incredibly rude to feel this way around her when she was the consummate professional. He cringed at the word consummate.

His distracted thoughts zeroed in on Hermione's breathing. Suddenly her breath caught and she inhaled deeply; awakening. Her eyes blinked up slowly. She moved to sit up cautiously and Steve noticed Bucky had maintained the hand hold through the rest of the night. As Hermione squinted against the harshness of the rising sun, Bucky responded and woke up in unison.
"Bucky." Steve said softly and Bucky turned his gaze to focus on Steve.

"Steve." Bucky said neutrally, softly. Steve felt the smile threaten his face and Hermione blinked as she watched the interaction.

"You know me!" Steve began with barely controlled excitement. It faded after a moment after Bucky only stared at him blankly. "Don't you?" Steve nearly begged and he was met with disappointing silence. He jumped when he felt Hermione's hand against his arm.

"He remembers your name; it's a big improvement." Hermione commented lightly. Steve frowned but nodded.

"I suppose that's good." Steve began, "he talked to me again last night." At Hermione's curious look Steve continued. "He recalled a memory—when we first went to see Snow White in the movie theater. He also went to the bathroom without you—that's something impressive, right?" Hermione looked excited at the information. Quickly she released Bucky's hand—he released it easily enough, this time—and Hermione hurried off to the bathroom. She came back minutes later, mission apparently successful.

"That's brilliant!" Hermione declared with a smile at both Steve and Bucky. Bucky took her hand as she sat back into the blankets, his face still neutral. "I will not be complaining about this particular freedom." She said pleasantly. She turned towards Bucky. "Are you hungry, darling?" She said good-naturedly. Bucky blinked at her lazily.

"Yes." He admitted. Hermione glanced at Steve.

"And you, Steve?" She asked.

"I could eat." Steve said with a slight smile. Hermione smiled widely back and stood, dragging Bucky with her. She sat Bucky at the island and encouraged Steve to do the same. Bucky released her hand but stared at Hermione intently.

"Would you like tea?" Hermione asked Bucky. Bucky paused again but answered yes. Hermione pulled out a several different types of tea. "Which tea would you like?" She asked hesitantly. Bucky stared at the boxes confused. Hermione briefly described the teas. Bucky still looked conflicted. "Please choose a tea you would like." Hermione authorized and Bucky finally grabbed a tea—mint. Hermione's smile lit the room at his decision. "Very good choice." She said happily. She proceeded to ask Bucky a series of questions for breakfast, all consisting of two choices and asking him to determine this or that. She echoed the questions to Steve who gave much more accurate answers when he realized the options. Hermione began puttering around the kitchen.

"Should I be asking Bucky similar questions?" Steve asked as she prepared the food. Bucky was still watching her intently, though his eyes flickered around the room on a sentry-like rotation. Hermione glanced over her shoulder where she was cooking eggs.

"We should both be, I think. Although I don't think he's quite up to any 'do you remember...' questions." Hermione commented.

"I get the yes or no questions, but how else should I frame them?" Steve asked genuinely interested. Hermione did not turn away from the oven as she multitasked.

"His mental blocks have prevented him from having choices. I've been asking him yes or no questions not just for clarity but to help him reassure himself that he can make decisions. It has required some of my requests to be more...commanding...but he seems to be adjusting to those well
enough. Now I'm having him choose outright between options and then eventually I'll go back to
open ended questions, I think." Hermione took the hot water kettle off the stovetop and poured the
tea for all three of them. "He's doing excellent, though—recovering quickly when I ask him for
opinions."

"What would have happened if we hadn't found him?" Steve asked suddenly as he recalled the
dilapidated hut where his friend had hidden.

"I imagine he'd be doing exactly what he is doing now at a much slower rate. From what I've seen,
they wiped his memory after each mission to optimize his submission. Mind you, they didn't wipe
them very well—it's nearly impossible to do—but there was a certain amount of acceptable time he
could go between each wipe before he reached a cognitive reset. When you reached him, he had
already hit that time limit and was doing the equivalent of a hard reboot; he kept the basics and the
rest would come slowly over a few years, I imagine." Hermione theorized. Steve nodded along as he
followed.

"I can't imagine him alone through all of this." Steve admitted softly as he glanced at Bucky. Bucky
was looking at the tea but had not picked it up.

"He's strong; he could've done this on his own." Hermione said fondly. She placed Bucky's flesh
hand on the tea cup and encircled it with her own. She brought the tea cup, along with his hand, to
allow him to sip. As he was drinking, she removed her hand and Bucky was drinking by himself.
"That aside, I'm glad that we can be there for him, too." Hermione said as Bucky lowered his cup.
Her smile was soft as she turned to Steve. "You are an incredible friend, Steve." She complimented
and Steve felt his cheeks flush. Hermione took the opportunity to flick her wrist, a wand emerging
and plates and cutlery sprung forward to set the dining room table, followed eagerly by the prepared
meal. Steve gaped at the display; it was the first time she had used magic blatantly since Bucky had
awakened. Meanwhile, Hermione was staring at Bucky, her eyes amber as she watched Bucky tense
up before relaxing. Her wand disappeared with a flick and she walked around the table, offering her
hand to Bucky. He did not hesitate as he took it and she smiled as she led them to their normal spots.

"Do you like cats?" Hermione asked suddenly to Steve. Steve looked at her in surprise.

"I don't dislike them. I'm more of a dog person, myself; but I like all animals" Steve admitted.
Hermione nodded.

"Do you like cats?" Hermione asked softly to Bucky as they sat at the table. Bucky glanced at her
and contemplated.

"Yes." Bucky finally responded and Hermione smiled warmly.

"I have someone you both should meet." Hermione said as they finished their breakfast. She flicked
her wand and the dishes and food swept away to take care of themselves. Steve whistled
appreciatively.

"You're doing magic now?" Steve confirmed as Hermione lead them to the hall. Hermione smirked.

"I've been doing magic, but now I'll be doing it a little more overtly." She admitted as she led them to
the basement door. Steve had forgotten it was there—it always seemed to blend into the wall and he
thought the magic might be the reason why. They descended the stairs, Bucky holding Hermione's
hand as he glanced behind him at where Steve followed. Steve left a few steps between them as a
courtesy.

"Crooks." Hermione called into the open basement. The fire was still roaring and Steve wondered if
"Crookshanks!" Hermione called again. Something emerged from the shadows of the walls and Steve jumped in surprise. He was even more surprised when Bucky made no such reactions as a cat—he determined—approached them all. Hermione released Bucky's hand to scoop up the ugly orange cat.

"This is Crookshanks, my familiar." Hermione said proudly as she displayed the squashed-faced feline. Steve made no mention of the peculiar name. It stared up at him balefully before bellowing out a meow that echoed in the basement space. "I had him down here while everyone was adjusting. He's part magical so he will be a little different than what you might have known. He's incredibly clever and intuitive." Hermione continued on as the cat began purring loudly. "He can take care of himself so don't mind him." She summarized. Bucky stared at the best with not a warm expression…but less neutral than he had on his face previously. Hermione placed the cat on the floor.

"What is this place?" Steve asked as he took a minute to look longer at the books and random ingredients along the wall.

"This is my magical basement." Hermione began. "Upstairs is largely non-magical but down here is completely magical—even the room was created to by magical expansion." Hermione continued. "I keep all my magical items down here for various reasons, one of them being that technology doesn't work well with magic, as I've explained. If you use a cell phone or computer down here it will most likely stop functioning. Hermione said with a nonchalant shrug. "I have my potions lab down here and all my books." She said as she gestured to the walls. Steve gaped at everything excitedly.

"This is amazing." Steve finally said and Hermione smiled.

"It is." She agreed. Bucky stood by them, taking it all in but he was not tense; Steve counted that as a success. "I'll be down here all day, I think, working on some magical things." Hermione said apologetically. Steve waved it aside.

"I understand; you have a job. I'm sorry we've been in your way." Steve responded.

"You're welcome to wander around the house. What would you be doing if you were at your home?" Hermione asked. Steve shrugged embarrassedly.

"I'd probably be boxing or some other sort of training. But I wouldn't want to leave Bucky." Steve said. Hermione pursed her lips in contemplation.

"I might be able to help with that." Hermione said, her lips tilting into a smile. "Come with me!" She said as she grabbed both Steve and Bucky's hands and led them upstairs. They took another door in the hallway that Steve had never noticed and they climbed up a spiral of stairs. Hermione pushed the door open and was met with the breeze of the outdoors. They were in an old clock tower—sans clock—and Steve could see New York in all its beauty.

"This is amazing!" Steve exhaled from the sight alone.

"No one can see us up here; it's still protected from my spell." Hermione said. Steve took a few steps and noticed what looked to be a small shack on the roof.

"Is that a greenhouse?" Steve asked as he gestured towards the structure.

"It is." Hermione beckoned him forward as they moved towards it. "I wanted to grow some plants up here—some magical, some not—but I didn't have quite enough time to dedicate to invest properly in their growth." She opened the door and the three entered. It was warm, as its purpose needed, and smelled of earth in a way New York seemed to drown out. The flower beds were empty save for a
single pot of peace lilies, a faucet and gardening items beside it. Hermione took a small watering can and watered the plant. "This peace lily is the only thing I've managed to keep," Hermione said with a laugh. She watched as Bucky fingered the leaves slowly, her face thoughtful.

"Do you like gardening, darling?" Hermione asked and Bucky seemed to look unsure. Steve himself was unsure if Bucky did like gardening—it wasn't something they often had a chance to deal with during their previous years. Bucky never answered but somehow Hermione seemed to accept that as an answer itself. "You're welcome to come up here whenever you'd like—both of you—and if you'd like to plant anything, by all means don't let my greenhouse go to waste." Hermione smiled at both of them before leading them back to the former bell tower. They stood beneath where a clock most likely once hung. She flicked her wand and a large punching bag appeared to hang in the center.

"Here you are, Steve. Will this suffice?" Hermione questioned.

"I've, uh, been known to be a little rough with the bags," Steve admitted awkwardly and Hermione glanced at him in surprise. She swept her wand at the bag again.

"This should hold." Hermione said as she glanced at the bag. "You're welcome to wander around the house but I think I'll be in the basement the most." She glanced at Bucky. "I think we both will." Hermione told Steve. Steve nodded.

"Don't suppose you have any cloth for my hands?" Steve asked jokingly but he held his words when they product sprung from Hermione's wand. "Magic is amazing." Steve reiterated and Hermione smiled.

"Let me know if you need anything else," Hermione offered and Steve nodded.

"Yes ma'am." Steve said. Hermione laughed at his formality before she walked towards the stairs. Bucky took her hand and followed, glancing over his shoulder one final time at Steve and then the greenhouse before he followed Hermione down the stairs.

Steve turned to look at the view of his city. Two years ago, it had been nearly destroyed—barely days after he had awoken from his seemingly endless sleep. It was still being rebuilt, but he found the city beautiful. He stared back at the conjured punching bag wondering of the wonders of Hermione's magic. She had said there were others. She said this house couldn't be tracked. He wondered what other things magic was currently hiding from his view. He turned back to the bag and hit it with moderate strength; it held sturdy. He began his boxing regime, waiting for when the bag would inevitably break. Hours later he was impressed when the bag had truly withstood his abilities.

Post workout, Steve took in the sight of his city once again before he ventured back downstairs. He felt awkward as he procured a glass of water for himself but reasoned that Hermione had emphatically told him previously to help himself. He showered quickly and changed. He walked around the first floor to confirm Bucky and Hermione were not there before he wandered down to the basement.

He descended into the cool atmosphere of the basement. The basement was exceedingly large, nearly equivalent to the first floor in both size and height. Magic made far more sense than a basement naturally existing in such a design. Stained windows he hadn't noticed before spread along the walls. He assumed magic was also the reason light was capable of filtering through the window panes. The rays distributed in merry hues around the room. Steve scanned the room and found them by the ever-glowing fire. Hermione was sitting on the couch near the fire with books and papers spread amongst the coffee table and couch cushions. But she had stopped working at her desk to watch Bucky where he was sitting beside her on the floor. Steve glanced at Bucky and realized that Bucky was...well, Bucky was playing with the cat.
The rays of sunlight that filtered through the stained glass were reflecting off Bucky's arm. Bucky shifted his arm and the ray fractured onto the wall beside him. Crookshanks pounced on it excitedly and Bucky gave a startled laugh that was rusty from disuse. Hermione's face turned heartwarming joyous and Steve felt his lips lift upturn as he watched his friend shift his arm—an arm he often refused to even acknowledge—to reflect the light at various heights and locations on the wall. Crookshanks pounced eagerly on each new location in turn, jumping high and low to attack the presumably foul intruders. Bucky was laughing with barely contained delight for the first time since he had been rescued.

Hermione, still smiling as she lounged on the sofa, summoned a book from the bookshelf to her eager hands without looking. Bucky watched the motion with hesitation before monitoring Hermione. Hermione had not looked up at all as the book had entered the grasp. She calmly opened it and seemed to confer with something as she wrote in her notebook. She placed the book down on her coffee table. Whether through her casual disregard of magic or the safety and trust Bucky was beginning to feel for her, Bucky did not react. He turned slowly, warily away from the occurrence but returned to playing with the cat nonetheless. Steve exhaled, releasing a breath he hadn't even realized he held. Bucky heard the sound and glanced back at Steve, the motion catching Hermione's attention enough that she looked up from her books to smile at him warmly.

"How was working out?" Hermione asked pleasantly. Steve shrugged slightly.

"Good. I didn't break the bag for once, which was nice; your magic is really useful." Steve complimented. Something danced in Hermione's eyes.

"Maybe you're just getting old." Hermione snickered. "You're not as young as you used to be." Mischief. Steve realized, her eyes danced with mischief and Steve scoffed.

"Respect your elders, young lady." He replied jokingly and Hermione smiled widely.

"Yes, Sir." She mocked and Steve chuckled, coming closer to inspect her work.

"What are you working on?" Steve asked curiously. Hermione blushed.

"A few projects...I like to dabble. I'm investigating other techniques for mind-healing, reviewing a few patient cases that I'm advising as a specialist, and I'm working on updating my notes with Bucky's experience." Hermione replied. Steve nodded. Sitting where she had flicked her books away on the couch. Bucky eyed them both from the corner of his eyes but Crookshanks was still playing with him merrily. Steve turned away from watching when he felt Hermione's eyes on him.

"Are you doing okay, Steve?" Hermione asked seriously. Steve attempted a reassuring smile.

"It's been two years since I woke up, Hermione." Steve commented. It did not dissuade her.

"And you've been busy ever since." Hermione pointed out. "That really doesn't give you much time to address the things that occurred or keep occurring." She continued. Steve closed his eyes briefly, wondering if she was reading his mind. "I don't have to read your mind to know what you're thinking." Hermione commented lightly and Steve chuckled mirthlessly.

"Are you sure? Didn't you say they screamed at you when we first met?" Steve inquired. Hermione exhaled slowly.

"They were very loud and I still remember them clearly, but no; your thoughts are currently yours alone." Hermione clarified.

"What were they?" Steve asked curiously. Hermione glanced at him with a weighing gaze.
"I saw you crash into the ice after defeating red skull and hydra. I felt the water freezing around you." Hermione began with a haunted look. "I heard a woman demanding a dancing date." She revealed. "...and I saw Bucky's death." She turned her head slightly to glance at Bucky. "When I looked into your mind I found more context, but those three were the main ones that called out: death, death, and love." Hermione summed. Steve took a shaky breath. He hadn't known what to expect but he knew that what she said was accurate.

"Her name is Peggy; she is still alive." Steve commented casually with a bittersweet smile. "I visited her." Steve admitted as Hermione turned her attention to him.

"How is she?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Old." Steve said with a mangled laugh. Hermione winced.

"Not everyone ages as gracefully as you two." Hermione said lightly as she glanced at Bucky and back to him. Steve snorted ruefully.

"You could say that." Steve conceded. "She also has dementia." Steve added solemnly. "Sometimes I visit and her mind is just as sharp and other moments she doesn't recognize me." He felt Hermione place a soothing hand on his shoulder. "She said I deserved to live my life like she had…but I was prepared to die…" Steve trailed off.

"Now you don't know what to do with yourself?" Hermione asked and Steve nodded minutely.

"I tried to fall into more of the same: be a soldier, take orders, fight Hydra." Steve explained.

"But it felt empty?" Hermione surmised and Steve nodded. "My friend experienced something similar. He had a near-death experience and he unexpectedly survived." Hermione's eyes glistened. "He was so ready for what he assumed was a foregone conclusion and he had long stopped planning for what would happen after because he assumed he would not have one." Hermione seemed to recall the memory. "When everything was said and done he struggled to find his new normal. He tried some of the old life of fighting but it wasn't the same and it wasn't enough. He struggles with it now and again but his wife and kids keep him grounded." Hermione elaborated. "So do his friends."

"How did he get past it? How did he let that old life go enough that he could manage something so normal like a family" Steve voiced his concerns, looking down to avoid seeing Hermione's evaluating gaze.

"His wife understood him. Not perfectly—their experiences were vastly different and his even more so—but all of us were bonded by the significance of the life we held before; we leaned on each other, supported each other, and began to move on." Hermione explained.

"Being a part of the Avengers helps; we're all people who are not necessarily fit for normal society." Steve admitted.

"Being abnormal doesn't mean that you can't experience normal things." Hermione chastised.

"Maybe. I guess we're all trying to find normal even if we're too abnormal to be normal." Steve pondered with a ruefully smile.

"The land of misfit toys." Hermione echoed his rueful smile and Steve glanced back at her.

"You said that before you fell asleep." Steve commented and Hermione looked at him in surprise.

"I suppose it is something I would say." Hermione said vaguely. "Our war was so specialized that
you could hardly find someone who didn't experience it in some awful way or another." Hermione commented. "Given that it took place where it did amongst whom it did, everyone I knew became a misfit toy in a recovering society and I fondly called us all the land of misfit toys."

"You included?" Steve observed and Hermione gave him a wry smile.

"Perhaps me especially," Hermione said under her breath. "I'm telling you Steve, you deserve happiness as part of your normal, Steve. You really do." Hermione said deflecting his observation.

"It's finding happiness that I'm having trouble with." Steve admitted and Hermione nodded.

"You'll get there." Hermione said, she nodded her head towards Bucky. "Having your best friend with you is a good start." Steve smiled slightly.

"Do you know how the moment I realized my best friend was not only alive but also just like me—young and in a different century?" Steve asked seriously and Hermione shook her head no. "He attacked us; he was wearing a mask and I pulled it off and there he was—alive." Steve glanced down at where his best friend was no longer playing with the cat but staring at him impassively. "My world may have been restarted when I woke up from the ice but I don't think I was alive until I realized Bucky was too." Steve felt his eyes welling. Hermione's hand gripped him reassuringly and Steve thought for a second he saw an emotion deep within Bucky's eyes who had been observing their conversation.

When the moment had passed, the conversation stilled. Eventually Hermione put away her books and they went upstairs. They ate and watched more Disney movies though Hermione lamented that Bambi and Dumbo were exceedingly sad.

"Disney and his thing for dead parents." Hermione exclaimed disgruntled. Steve said nothing, having seen both movies before, as they sat at their respective spots; Steve next to Hermione and Bucky on the floor next to her legs. She clasped both their hands at the sad parts and Steve surreptitiously ignored her tears as she sniffled. Despite the sad conversation previous and the sad movies they watched, Steve found their company soothing like balm. By the time they had dinner, the mood had turned more upbeat and the melancholy air seemed to dissipate. Hermione swished the dishes away, Bucky not even flinching at her increased casual magic.

"Why do you have a grand piano?" Steve asked as he stared back at the giant instrument across the room.

"I thought it would match the décor." Hermione said teasingly and Steve flushed.

"I assume you play." Steve asked and Hermione's laugh was light and airy.

"You would assume correctly." Hermione smiled. "I started learning when I was younger but didn't have much time to practice when I went to my boarding school. It was one of the hobbies I picked back up immediately after the war ended." Hermione revealed.

"Are you good?" Steve asked and Hermione looked offended.

"I'm very good." She smirked as she walked towards the piano and lifted the key cover. She pushed a key gently and the sound reverberated. "What are your hobbies, Steve?"

"Saving the world and fighting bad guys doesn't count?" Steve asked playfully.

"That seems rather like a job." Hermione commented lightly. Steve shrugged.
"I liked to draw." Steve mentioned. Hermione glanced at him appraisingly.

"Liked?" Hermione drawled and Steve rolled his eyes.

"I still like to draw—have all the materials at home." Steve assured her. "Though I haven't been drawing much, these days."

"Nothing to inspire you?" Hermione said as turned from the piano to face him. Bucky stood behind her, regarding him in much the same manner as Hermione-veiled curiosity. The stained window glasses reflected colored lights behind them. Steve didn't often draw people but he thought he might draw Hermione, might draw this new Bucky.

"I can think of a few things." Steve said, a smile tugging at his lips when she met his eyes and flushed. She turned back to the piano and pressed another key before closing the cover.

"Well maybe you can draw me something and I'll show you what 'good' sounds like." Hermione challenged.

"Deal." Steve confirmed and Hermione smiled.

"Now, are you joining us for the nightly bathing ritual?" Hermione asked and Steve flushed at the implication. "I'll even put on a bathing suit." Hermione offered. Steve shrugged and followed them anyway.

True to her word, Hermione had on a one-piece swim suit as she bathed Bucky. Steve was hardly mollified when the sight still made his blood rush. She had attempted to let Bucky bathe by himself but she seemed unsurprised when he asked her to stay again. Hermione washed Bucky's hair with no small attention to detail and Steve felt jealousy still. Yet it relaxed Bucky, reasonably so, and Bucky managed to wash other parts of him sufficiently that the entire bathing ordeal seemed far less unreasonable. It was even amusing when Hermione had added bubbles to the tub. Bucky had looked out of place, his face closed off in a serious mien as Hermione blew the overflowing bubbles around in the tub. Steve had laughed in surprised when she playfully swatted some on to his own cheek and he had retaliated by piling them on her head. Bucky's face had warmed during the interaction and Steve was hoping his friend would be more cognizant soon.

Steve did not bother pretending he was sleeping somewhere else. Hermione patted his space knowingly before moving to give Bucky his potion. Bucky's face contorted sadly again.

"Only a few days more, darling." Hermione said softly. "We'll both be right here." She promised and Bucky turned to Steve who nodded in confirmation. "Goodnight, darling. We'll see you in the morning." She fed him the potion, their eyes locked like usual and she sung her lullaby. As she finished, Steve realized he was also fading asleep, disappointed when Bucky did not wake him with a new memory.

Steve woke with a sharp inhalation of breath. Hermione was still breathing in soft even tones beside him and he rose slowly as to not awaken her. He did not have to peek far to see Bucky who was peering at him silently. Steve wondered if he had woken because he felt Bucky's stare. He wouldn't mind if he had; he yearned for Bucky's moments of lucidity.

"Bucky?" Steve asked hesitantly.

"Steve?" Bucky asked disoriented.

"What did you give me for my first birthday as your friend?" Bucky asked slowly. Steve perked up at the coherent question.

"I drew you a picture." Steve said cautiously. "It was the two of us." Steve paused. "I think it said 'Best Friends' at the top." Steve admitted with a chuckle. Bucky had turned his gaze off of Steve's face and was looking down at Hermione.

"I think I kept that picture." Bucky said as his eyes closed. "I think I had it before...before the cold." Bucky said vaguely and his face contorted. "I can't...remember." Bucky said strained. Steve glanced at Hermione who had not awaken from their whispering tones.

"It's okay, Bucky. You can go back to sleep—there is no hurry." Steve said. "I'll be here for you when you wake up again." Steve assured, echoing Hermione's nightly promise. Steve watched as Bucky descended back into the sheets, his hand still gripping Hermione's. Bucky's eyes were tracing Hermione's form in the dim lit room.

"Will she be here when I wake up?" Bucky asked softly.

"We both will." Steve promised.

"Even if it takes time for me to wake up." Bucky asked even softer. Steve frowned at his tone.

"I'm with you till the end of the line, Bucky. You know that." Steve reiterated. He glanced at Hermione's blanketed form. "I don't think Hermione is the type to leave anyone behind, either." Steve determined. Bucky closed his eyes in response and with two deep breaths Bucky was asleep again and Steve soon followed.
Sam Visits

Chapter Notes

I don’t own either universe. Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! I read all your reviews eagerly! Do I respond? Should I PM back? In any case, if you are expecting a PM and I don’t, please know that I definitely appreciate you taking the time to express your love of the story or add comments of your own. As always, if you have a headcanon/fluff/plot bunny you want to see, let me know and I’ll see what I can do! I’m still a few chapters ahead of this one—and striving desperately not to just post them all at once because I’m pretty excited for the next few chapters. Hermione’s POV comes in chapter 8 and Bucky’s follows in chapter 9. It’s a slow build for now, but they pace should pick up after a few plot points. Thank you for reading and please enjoy!

Bucky did not remember the conversation the next morning or if he did he remained just as silent and impassive as he had been the day before.

“It’s still very promising, Steve—especially because it seems on target to what occurs in the day.” Hermione said at lunch. “I’m a little disappointed I keep missing these nightly glimpses—especially given that I’m usually an incredibly light sleeper.” Hermione admitted ruefully.

“He seemed like he was in pain when he was remembering.” Steve commented and Hermione nodded.

“That’s to be expected as he recalls more and more memories; sometimes it will even be physically painful. Hopefully I’ll actually be awake to assist him if that is the case.” Hermione muttered self-deprecating. Hermione’s cell phone rang on the counter and she went to it eagerly.

“Sam?” Hermione asked expectantly into the speakerphone.

“I’m driving around outside, still incapable of seeing your house.” Sam admitted reluctantly. Hermione laughed.

“Good! As it should be.” Hermione teased playfully. “Give me a second and I’ll be outside in the alley to show you in.” Hermione gave Sam an alternate location to wait and then got up from the couch. Bucky mimicked her actions. He had already straightened when she had picked up the phone and spoken to Sam; now he looked uneasy and wary as he moved closer to her.

“Maybe I should go get Sam…” Steve offered as Bucky trailed closely behind Hermione. Hermione turned around and glanced at Bucky hesitantly.

“Unfortunately, I have to be the one who gets him this time.” Hermione seemed to deliberate something in her head before she turned to look at Bucky. “Darling, I need you to stay here, okay?” Hermione asked sweetly. Bucky’s expression was morose. She smiled sadly and used one hand to clasp Bucky’s jaw, brushing her hand against his growing beard. “I’ll be back soon, okay? Steve will keep you company.” Hermione and Bucky’s eyes both flickered over to Steve who attempted to smile reassuringly. They dismissed him to stare into each other’s eyes. Bucky petulantly grabbed the
bottom of Hermione’s sweater and Hermione sighed softly. “Darling, it will be quick—I promise.” She looked at him from beneath her eyelashes and he slowly released his grip, his reluctance apparent. She disappeared through the door that had led to the stairwell to the roof, Steve realized in confusion.

Bucky perched in front of the door and Steve walked over to stand beside him. “She’ll be back soon.” Steve offered in comfort but Bucky continued to stare at the door intently. They stood in silence and Steve resisted the urge to awkwardly shuffle on his feet. Eventually they heard a sound down the hallway and they both perked up. Hermione opened the door dragging Sam excitedly behind her. She looked up from the door with a smile until Bucky snarled at Sam and hauled Hermione into his arms protectively. Steve jumped in alarm before realizing he did not know what to do. Sam had backed up into the door frame with both of his hands upright in a non-threatening gesture.

“Cap, I thought you said he wasn’t dangerous.” Sam stated calmly. Steve sighed as Bucky backed away aggressively, Hermione tucked in his arms and his metal arm facing forward menacingly.

“He’s not dangerous.” Hermione confirmed as she tried to peek over Bucky’s soldier. Bucky adjusted her to hide her again from sight.

“You’re the first person we’ve brought into the house with Bucky.” Steve admitted and Sam looked put out.

“So, he’s not safe.” Sam surmised. Hermione made a noise of disagreement.

“He is safe! Let me just…” Hermione sighed and reached a hand up to Bucky’s face again. “Darling, I brought him as a friend.” Hermione said softly. Her eyes seemed to glow that hypnotizing soft amber and Bucky met her stare, reluctant to turn his attention from Sam. “I know that the last time you saw each other was less than civil…but he’s safe, still.” Hermione said softly. Her thumb stroked Bucky’s cheek soothingly and Bucky glanced back at Sam warily. “I promise he’s not here to hurt you, darling.” Hermione assured and Bucky finally lowered his metal arm. Hermione smiled brightly at him. “See? No danger! Just a misunderstanding.” Hermione explained. She moved towards Sam again but was surprised when Bucky draped both arms over her shoulders, aligning her back to his chest in a possessive hug. Hermione laughed awkwardly.

“We’re still acclimating.” Hermione said after a moment to fill the silence.

“You don’t say…” Sam said as he eyed Bucky’s possessive stance. Steve coughed as he watched the scene unfold.

“In any case, Sam—do you have my cell?” Steve interjected and Sam nodded, lowering his placating hands.

“Yeah, I brought most of your necessities in my truck, actually.” Sam gestured through the door they had come from.

“Steve, why don’t you and Sam head out and grab your things from the garage. You can place everything in your room, Steve.” Hermione said before turning to Sam. “You’re welcome to use the other guest room, Sam.” Sam glanced up in surprise as he eyed Bucky and Hermione standing together. A quick glance to meet Steve’s eyes and Steve knew Sam had put two and two together; with only two guest rooms and three guests, Bucky was sleeping somewhere interesting. Steve was reluctant to explain why they all slept in a blanket nest on the ground beside Hermione’s bed.

“That sounds good, Hermione.” Sam said politely and Hermione smiled. Sam walked back into the
stairwell to the bell tower. Steve was surprised when he walked past the stairs to a door Steve had never noticed. They had barely entered what was apparently a garage when Sam’s questions began.

“So your lucky penny is sleeping with your best friend.” Sam led and Steve rolled his eyes.

“She’s not my lucky penny. And she just wants to make sure Bucky is okay when he’s asleep. Besides, he’s so attached to her that she has to promise to be there when he wakes up just to get him to relax enough to sleep.” Steve admitted.

“Isn’t that dangerous? What if he wakes up and attacks her?” Sam asked concerned as they strolled over to his SUV. Steve took a moment to appreciate the garage—simple but larger than he’d expect anywhere in New York. A simple sedan was the only car there and Sam’s vehicle fit neatly beside it.

“He’s actually more lucid, more Bucky when he wakes up in the middle of the night; he’s never violent—especially not to Hermione.” Steve said casually. Sam stopped walking and Steve mimicked the motion.

“You’re there when Bucky wakes up?” Sam began, ideas clicking in his head. “That means that you’re both sleeping in her room.” Sam accused. Steve rubbed his face with both hands.

“He’s attached to Hermione and I’m just…observing…” Steve reasoned slowly. Sam scoffed.

“I doubt that, but whatever you say, Cap.” Sam said as he unlocked his truck. Steve peeked in.

“What did you do? Bring all my stuff?” Steve asked in disbelief. Sam laughed.

“Not everything.” Sam clarified. “Besides, you’re moving to New York soon anyway and you barely had anything to move; it was already packed up.” Sam rationalized. Steve sighed.

“I really appreciate it. I’ll just bring this all to my guest room.” Steve said awkwardly as he grabbed boxes. He began to haul them to his room, spotting Hermione standing awkwardly where they left her, Bucky still wrapped around her like a cape. Steve dropped off his boxes and thanked Sam when he deposited additional boxes. Steve peeked inside the box.

“You brought my books and drawing pads? Is that my record player?” Steve asked in disbelief.

“It was already packed, man—just seemed convenient.” Sam said with a shrug.

When they had finished moving Steve’s items, he recovered his phone and plugged it in. Sam ventured out to the atrium while Steve waited for the phone to have enough charge to turn on. He started unpacking some of his clothing and set some aside to change in to. The rest he left folded on the bed with hesitation. Hermione had invited him to stay and Steve was hoping she wouldn’t rescind the offer but it felt presumption to hang his items. Steve moved back to turn on his phone. It beeped as it turned on and Steve sighed as he looked down at the phone. Several missed calls from Tony. The phone began ringing in his hand and Steve read the incoming call. Speaking of the devil, Steve thought as the phone read Tony Stark.

“Stark.” Steve greeted, with contained exasperation.

“Cap? What are you doing in Bangor, Maine?” Tony asked quickly before continuing without answer. “You know what? Nevermind. I’ve been trying to get a hold of you—the rooms are almost ready and the interior decorators are due to arrive this week. What do you want for your décor? I’m thinking lace dollies and patriotic colors; 1940’s vintage. I can even get you a radio and an icebox? That sound homey?” Tony asked in an annoyingly jovial tone. Steve sighed in exasperation.
“Tony, I don’t have any requests beyond absolutely not that.” Steve requested.

“Ohhh—testy! Fine, fine. I’ll tell my people to stick with modern patriotism and only one signed vintage poster from the original tour of the star-spangled man with a plan. That way it should be ready by the end of the week. Sound good?” Tony rambled off rapidly again.

“Tony, just…no.” Steve sighed. “To be honest I’m not actually sure when I’ll be moving in. I’m actually staying with—” Steve paused, wondering how he would describe his present accommodations and circumstances.”

“Staying with the bird guy—yeah, Cap, I got it—anyway, I’ll let you know when it’s done so you can come tour it.” Tony continued without stopping. Steve heard shouting in the background. “Happy? Happy, take the car around to the other entrance…no…not…not…Happy.” Tony had turned away from the phone but Steve could still hear him clearly. “Cap, I’m going to have to call you back, whenever the room is done. I’ll let you know.” Tony said as he hung up. Steve blinked as he pulled the phone away from his face to stare down at the screen disbelieving. He hadn’t even gotten a chance to correct Tony’s assumptions. Steve sighed again as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. He’d deal with it later he supposed because he was certainly not suffering another unnecessary call with Stark. He left the phone on the window sill and returned back to the main room. Sam was sitting on the kitchen island with hot cocoa while Hermione sipped tea as she stood across from him. Bucky was still locked protectively over her, his arm glinting in reflection of the light. Sam, however, was adaptable and seemed to be taking everything in stride. Steve was appreciative of his friend.

“So broomsticks.” Sam was asking. Hermione smiled self-depreciatingly.

“Very real, very fast, and very out of my league—I hate flying them.” Hermione admitted honestly. Sam looked at her like she was crazy and she chuckled. “My friends all play Quidditch so they enjoy flying enough for the lot of us.”

“Quidditch?” Steve asked as he entered the conversation. Hermione nodded.

“Death-defying game with flying broomsticks and sentient equipment.” Hermione roughly explained. “Needless to say, I prefer my games much more peaceful and less likely to kill me.” Steve chuckled.

“Miss any calls?” Sam asked.

“Several. Tony called as soon as it was on.” Steve mentioned. “He said my room at the tower would be available by the end of the week.” Steve turned to Hermione whose face was carefully blank.

“That’s good, right?” Sam prodded. Steve looked at Bucky, his head resting on Hermione’s shoulder, arms still wound around her form in a manner that did not inhibit her tea drinking. Bucky’s eyes were alert, scanning, and wary.

“I wanted to be there for Bucky…” Steve trailed off and was relieved when Hermione jumped in.

“You’re welcome to stay here for as long as you want.” Hermione smiled warmly. Steve nodded respectfully.

“I’d really appreciate that. Feel free to toss me out as soon as I become a burden, though.” Steve requested. Hermione scrunched her nose disdainfully at him.

“I’m sure that day will never come.” Hermione said as she relaxed her face back into a warm smile.

“That’s good because I’ve already started hanging up my clothes.” Steve admitted and Hermione
perked up.

“That’s right! You’ve changed! Your clothes are here!” Hermione said excitedly. Steve nodded in confused confirmation. “Brilliant! That means you’ll let him borrow some clothing, right?” Hermione said as she nodded her head upwards to indicate the looming man draped around her. Steve nodded with a chuckle.

“Help yourself.” He added and Hermione smiled widely. She began moving forward, walking awkwardly with Bucky holding on to her as she navigated to Steve’s room. Bucky guided her from behind in a manner that kept her most protected from Sam. When Bucky glared at Sam, Steve caught Hermione’s exasperated look. Steve gestured to Sam to follow and they both hovered just inside Steve’s room. Bucky was still connected to Hermione like a shadow but had relaxed enough that she could open more boxes. Steve began helping her as he sorted the apparel onto piles on the bed. He flushed as she reached the underwear and carefully took the box from her.

“It’s all…we don’t have to really lay it out.” Steve mentioned embarrassed. Steve glared back at Sam who was chuckling and Steve flushed when Hermione acquiesced with a smirk. When the clothes had been assembled into piles and Steve had hung some of his jackets up, Hermione turned in Bucky’s awkward embrace.

“Darling,” She began as she cupped Bucky’s face—Steve ignored Sam’s prodding looking at the pet name— “please pick what you’d like to wear today.” Hermione requested. Bucky looked at her blankly and everyone waited for a moment to see if the request took. When it didn’t, Hermione rephrased it. “Darling, please pick a shirt.” Hermione said softly as she gestured to the shirts laid on the bed. Bucky seemed to process the request as he guided Hermione to the furthest corner away from the threshold where Sam and Steve stood. Bucky glared at Sam solidly.

“Come on! You’re the one who broke my wing suit and stabbed me in the arm!” Sam complained loudly. He glanced to the ceiling in frustrated disbelief. Bucky eventually turned his glare to the shirts, his face still fixed in an angry look of concentration. After what seemed like minutes, Bucky finally snatched a shirt from the bed. Sam shocked Steve when he burst out in laughter beside him, the noise catching Bucky’s attention so he turned to glare at them. Steve glanced back at Hermione who looked amused. When Steve saw the shirt, he understood why—it was a dark blue shirt with an image of Captain America’s shield upon it; Bucky had chosen to wear something that directly connected him to Steve and damn if Steve didn’t think it was precious.

Bucky passed the shirt to Hermione like a dog presenting his toy. Hermione nodded and smiled as she whispered a quiet “Good job.” Bucky stripped of his shirt, causing Hermione to flush, before he replaced it with the new shirt proudly—at least Steve interpreted the set stony expression as such.

“Right.” Hermione continued in a daze. “Do you think you have pants that would fit him—athletic perhaps?” Hermione asked. They were different sizes but the athletic pants would fit him well. Steve tossed the grey pants towards Hermione and Bucky ripped them out of the air as if they were deadly inbound missiles. Sam laughed again, far more amused than he had been previously as the target of Bucky’s suspicions. Bucky turned his glare back to him but Sam only smirked.

“Don’t forget the underwear, Cap.” Sam taunted and Steve flushed, recognizing the truth to the statement. Steve sighed as he tossed the underwear at Bucky, recognizing any attempt at Hermione would be intercepted. Bucky swept the article in his hand. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Alright, Darling, please put them on.” Hermione instructed and she shifted her eyes to the ceiling when Bucky stripped down completely.

“Shit!” Sam cursed before Steve reprimanded him with a harsh “Sam!”
“Does he always just strip down?” Sam asked unsettled after Bucky’s impromptu undressing. Hermione grimaced.

“Let’s just say he is loath to let me out of his sight.” Hermione answered vaguely. Sam’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“What about when you—“

“Let’s just say he is loath to let me out of his sight.” Hermione interrupted Sam sharply and Sam raised his hands placating again. Hermione huffed before glancing around the rest of the room. “Steve, you have an extraordinary amount of blue in your collection.” Hermione noticed with less heat. Steve shrugged slightly.

“Bucky liked blue.” Steve said softly. Hermione’s mien softened. She reached across the bed to grasp Steve’s hand—much to Bucky’s apparent chagrin who retaliated by picking up her other hand in his own.

“It looks like he still does.” She said with a nod to the man beside her. Steve gave an amused grin.

“Yea, I suppose he does.” Steve smiled. Hermione patted his hand before straightening.

“I think I should start working on dinner. You two have free reign of the house, of course.” Hermione said pleasantly.

“You sure you don’t need anything from us, Hermione?” Steve asked congenially. Hermione’s face turned mischievous.

“Oh, not tonight.” She began lightly enough. “But tomorrow…I’ll be troubling you with quite a few chores, I’m afraid.” Hermione said with a disconcerting delight. Steve and Sam shared a look before Hermione ushered Sam through a series of complicated retreats so Bucky would allow her to leave. Sam stepped back into the room while returning Bucky’s departing glare. Sam shut the door behind him.

“The Winter Soldier is that girl’s guard dog.” Sam confirmed and Steve gave an amused laugh.

“It’s a little cute?” Steve prompted and Sam exhaled.

“It’s a little cute.” Sam agreed. “But still annoying.” Sam amended as he muttered something about his wingsuit and knife wounds. Steve ignored it in favor of putting away his clothes. Sam helped unpack Steve’s personal effects and laid them on the top of the dresser. “Why does she call him ‘darling’?” Sam asked after a moment and Steve shrugged.

“I’m not sure; I haven’t asked. She hasn’t called him anything other than that, actually.” Steve mentioned as he glanced down at another blue jacket he was hanging. Perhaps he should add a little color to his wardrobe…

“How’s he doing?” Sam asked seriously. Steve sighed and stopped his packing to face his friend.

“Hermione says he’s doing well but he’s essentially been reset.” Steve wiped his hand over his face. “All of his memories are attempting to restore themselves and Hermione is helping with that but for now he’s just…” Steve trailed off.

“Volatile?” Sam supplemented.

“No!” Steve exclaimed. “He’s just…a shell—I guess.” Steve attempted to explain. “Hermione’s been
giving him something to taper his bad memories from resurfacing as nightmares…but she’s only able to give it to him through the end of the week.” Sam nodded thoughtfully.

“You’re concerned that he’ll revert when he remembers the bad stuff?” Sam asked. Steve exhaled again.

“I think he’ll want to run. I think he’ll be ashamed and he’ll think we’re better off without him—that he doesn’t deserve help.” Steve expressed his concerns quietly.

“You said Hermione’s dealt with the stuff before?” Sam asked and Steve nodded. “Then I guess you gotta trust that she knows what she’s doing—that she expects this fall out and that she can handle it.”

“She does—expect it, I mean.” Steve said.

“Then you support her supporting him.” Sam explained. Steve nodded grimly.

“Of course, I will.” Steve declared. Sam clapped him on the shoulder.

“Good. I’ll support you supporting her supporting him.” Sam smirked and Steve looked back at him appreciatively.

“Sounds like a plan.” Steve affirmed.

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The rest of the night unfolded with less tension. Bucky still clung to Hermione in most of her endeavors but she seemed to accept it with patience and grace. Sam watched on in newfound amusement. Sam spent most of dinner asking more questions about Hermione’s magic and Hermione traded the answers for more insight of Sam and Steve’s experiences together. Steve inevitably described their meeting and subsequent re-meeting at Sam’s house.

“So far from being an exception to the norm, it seems your modus operandi is trusting random strangers.” Hermione teasingly chastised as Sam laughed. Steve felt his ears turn red.

“Well clearly that’s worked out for me.” Steve defended and Hermione rolled her eyes. They moved to sit on the couch so Hermione could work on Bucky’s healing. Bucky seemed wary as he took his place on the floor in front of her, Steve beside them and Sam on the other side of Steve.

“Are you ready for healing?” Hermione asked as she looked deeply into Bucky’s eyes. Steve caught his friend’s eyes darting to Sam. “He’s not going to hurt us, darling.” Hermione said as they maintained eye contact. Her brows furrowed at whatever she saw. “Even if he did attack, Steve would protect me.” Hermione placated and Bucky turned sharp eyes to Steve, measuring. Steve stiffened at the sudden attention.

“Th-that’s right.” Steve flattened his tone to something more serious. “Sam won’t hurt anyone here but even if something did happen I’d protect you and Hermione, Buck.” Steve assured and Bucky held his gaze a moment longer before he closed his eyes. When he opened them again they were locked with Hermione and her hands began to glow. It took longer for Bucky to relax than it usually did, but eventually he was putty in her hands and Hermione turned her head to converse with Sam and Steve.

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“Why do you call him, ‘darling’?” Sam asked suddenly and Steve blanched at the question, looking at Sam sharply. Sam shrugged but Hermione chuckled.

“Isn’t he just?” She asked with a smile. Sam looked at her askance and she laughed again. “His name
is significant.” She began to explain more seriously. “I look inside his mind and the name is tied to
Steve; it’s always Steve calling his name and I don’t want to conflict with that positive association.”
Steve looked at her surprise.

“He…thinks of me?” Steve asked in awe. Hermione nodded with a smile. “But then why is his
behavior towards me different than you?” Steve asked with ill-disguised petulance.

“He has glimpses of memories of you that he doesn’t quite understand; you make him very confused.
He doesn’t understand why he feels the way he feels and why it emerges when he thinks of you.
You ARE an overwhelmingly positive association…just that he doesn’t quite understand why.”
Hermione explained gently. “Meanwhile, I’ve only had positive interactions with him on the short
term—memories that he still retains because it’s after his reset. In any case, I’ll call him his name
when he tells me it.” Hermione finished and Steve soaked up her words.

“What about me?” Sam interjected and Hermione smirked.

“He doesn’t remember much about you but you remind him of pigeons.” Hermione admitted and
Sam’s mouth opened in shock.

“It’s ‘Falcon’ not ‘pigeon’” He said with no small amount of disgruntlement. Hermione laughed.

“His memories are still reforming; unless you have a significant past with him you could probably
change the association.” Hermione mentioned playfully. “Perhaps something more fearful like a
lion?” Sam scoffed.

“Falcons are a bird of prey.” Sam muttered resentfully and Hermione laughed delightedly again.

Steve felt himself melt at the sound.

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When they retired for the night Sam did nothing but smirk as Steve followed Bucky and Hermione
into her room, whispering a quiet ‘goodnight’. Hermione did not deign to explain nor did she even
seem to care about the implications of their ‘sleep over’; she merely returned his goodnight with a
smile and nod. Steve followed Hermione to the bathroom as she prepared Bucky’s bath, remaining
with him when Bucky muttered a soft “Stay.”

Bucky seemed to have figured out the routine of his bath, washing himself without the need of
Hermione’s help, prompting Steve to wonder why Hermione was even there. Bucky grasped gently
at her t-shirt when Hermione attempted to move away from the bath, his hands dripping with suds.

“Wash. Hair.” Bucky nearly whispered and Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise. More progress,
Steve noticed and judging by Hermione’s warm smile she was delighted by his request. At Bucky’s
blissful mien—Hermione washing his hair in her sports bra and Steve controlling his blush—Steve
reassessed that determination when Bucky fought to open Hermione’s shower door as she showered.

“Bucky, no!” Steve attempted to chastise his friend again but Bucky looked at Steve like
he was the
idiot. Steve attempted to drag Bucky out of the bathroom, eyes carefully averted from Hermione’s
showering form—Steve attempted not to think about it—but Bucky gripped the shower door with a
force that would break it clean off the hinge.

“Steve, it’s okay. He’s not a pervert, he’s just concerned.” Hermione said through the muffle of
water. Steve turned his back away from her as he let Bucky go.

“It’s a little distur—“Steve attempted to reason but Hermione cut him off.
“It’s something from his past experiences—it’s the reason he also prefers bathes.” Hermione explained and Steve paused to pay attention.

“What do you mean?” Steve ventured. Hermione sighed.

“How do you think they prepped him, Steve? It certainly wasn’t a bubble bath.” Hermione said bluntly and Steve winced as his imagination ran wild. “He doesn’t want to be in the shower and he doesn’t want me to be in the shower without him being able to make sure I’m safe.” Hermione said softly. The shower stopped; Hermione’s shower was quick. “Pass me the towel, please.” Hermione said loftily and Steve turned around surprised to see Bucky was the one complying. “Thank you, darling.” Hermione complimented and Steve watched as her glistening arm extended to accept the towel. Steve turned around again with a flush. It deepened as he listened to the rustling of her movements and Steve’s mind naturally began conjuring imagery. Steve escaped further into her room. He sat down amongst the covers on the floor and began reciting presidents.

Hermione emerged from the bathroom towel drying her hair. Her skin looked dewy and flushed in her thin pajamas. Bucky was wearing the shorts Steve had lent him and no shirt. Hermione reached into her nightstand to retrieve the potion bottle before they curled up in the nest of pillows and blanket. Steve sat up, angled into the sheets enough to cover his legs but also allow him to watch. Hermione moved to her customary spot bent over Bucky and gazing into his eyes. Steve clenched his eyes when he saw the resignation and acceptance on Bucky’s face; somehow Steve found it more painful than his friend’s wounded look the night before. Hermione said her promises and sang her lullaby. When Bucky’s eyes closed the tensions seemed to fade from his face as he entered the dreamless sleep.

“What else do you see in his mind?” Steve asked quietly as Hermione settled into her spot. She turned on her back so she could hold Bucky’s hand and still make eye contact with Steve.

“I’m not reading his mind all the time.” Hermione commented sourly. Steve looked abashed.

“But you’ve already seen—“

“I’ve already seen the most important things in his mind and sometimes the memories and feelings associated with my questions.” Hermione clarified. “You are his first surface of memories.” Hermione said and Steve felt his heart swell at the implication. “You’re also the most complicated.” Hermione continued and Steve deflated. “You’re a defining existence within him and he can’t remember all the ‘why’s’ and ‘how’s’—but you are there.” Steve smiled grimly.

“Have you seen any of the bad stuff?” Steve asked and Hermione shook her head no.

“I haven’t, which is worrying enough.” Hermione commented. “He is unlike my other cases; they usually have a case of magical interference.” Hermione explained. “I still stand by my decision to give him this potion—it’s giving him time to allow his pathways to heal—but I fear that although it delayed the negative associations, they will all come back suddenly and that it might be overwhelming. He still feels certain things tied to those negative experiences but he doesn’t truly understand what he’s done and that is working in his favor right now.”

“But when he does…” Steve prompted.

“When he does, I imagine he’ll be horrified and depressed.” Hermione said.

“I’m concerned when he gets his full memories.” Steve admitted. Hermione made an inquiring noise. “Bucky’s a good guy—a great guy—he’s going to take this hard. I’m concerned he’ll run away thinking he’s a lost cause.” Steve cringed. “But I just found him. I wouldn’t want him to go.” Steve
spoke quietly and glanced down at his lap where Hermione’s hand had found his. “I don’t care what he did under their control.” Steve said determinedly. “I’m just glad Bucky’s back.”

“He’s not the same as your childhood friend, you know.” Hermione whispered back and Steve clenched his jaw.

“I don’t care.” Steve said resolutely. “I just want this Bucky that’s here—whatever form he is—I just want him back in my life.”

“We just have to let him know and keep reminding him that is the case.” Hermione smiled softly. Steve nodded attempting to ignore the sudden need to sniffle. They sat in solemn silence.

“What was it like to realize he was alive?” Hermione murmured. Steve tensed at the question before he exhaled.

“He was the Winter Soldier.” Steve began. “He was shooting people—trying to shoot me. It was a simple case of take out the bad guy until his mask ripped off and it was Bucky.” Steve felt his eyes welling. “The last time I saw him he was falling to his death on a hydra-train; his death was on my hands because he followed me and he died for me…and then we’re seventy years in the future and he’s an assassin. He didn’t know his name, didn’t know me, he was just this…this dangerous murderer—my mission—and I needed to take him down but he was…it was my best friend. But I couldn’t…I could never…” Steve wondered regretfully if he would always cry every time he had a heart-to-heart with Hermione. Hermione’s hand moved up his arm to where she could just barely brush away his tears. Steve felt himself lean into her touch and she cupped his face in her hand, thumb soothing the tears on his cheek.

“He won’t ever be the same, Steve.” Hermione began. “But he’s here now, with you, and you’re not alone.” Steve clenched his eyes shut at the declaration.

“What if he runs?” Steve whispered.

“You’ll find him.” Hermione predicted. “But we’ll make sure he doesn’t.” Steve exhaled again, reassured by her determination. Hermione withdrew her hand and patted the space beside her.

“Come on, Steve. Don’t sleep against the bed again—you’re using it wrong.” Hermione teased and Steve gave a warbling chuckle as he crawled in beside her. She grasped his hand between them and Steve felt her proximity radiate through his core.

“I think we’re all using it wrong.” Steve joked as he glanced at the abandoned bed. Hermione’s giggle held an edge of sleepiness.

“What errands do you need me to do tomorrow?” Steve asked. Hermione seemed to brighten briefly from her sleepy haze.

“Ah the time has come for me to utilize my errand boys! Hmm…definitely groceries—I’ll have to make a list—and a new wardrobe that he can call his own.” Hermione said as she nodded towards Bucky. Steve nodded. Hermione looked thoughtful. “I suppose we’ll ask him what he wants tomorrow.” She added. Steve laughed as she contemplated more errands internally. She began mumbling items until she faded into the arms of sleep.

Steve did not lie down next to her long before he propped himself back up on his elbow, content to just watch and observe the two sleeping. Bucky’s progress was small but significant. Steve had mixed feelings about the revelation that Steve was the first and foremost of Bucky’s mind and thus was one of the prime confictions in Bucky’s mind. Steve dwelled longer on the subject than previous nights and found himself waiting for…something…anything from Bucky’s rare moments of
lucidity. It reminded him of when he was talking with Peggy—sharp wit one second and a complete disconnect the next. Steve listened to the breathing patterns of the two before him with closed eyes. When he heard the change of breathing, Steve’s eyes shot open. Bucky’s eyes followed soon after. Steve recognized it was earlier than Bucky usually awakened and he wondered if Bucky was already gaining immunity to Hermione’s potion.

“Steve.” Bucky greeted quietly as he sat up from his sleeping place—his hand was still entwined with Hermione’s as he blinked sleepily.

“Bucky.” Steve greeted back, wondering what memories flashed in Bucky’s head. Steve found himself wishing he had Hermione’s abilities. Bucky scratched his chin lazily and frowned.

“How long is this thing?” Bucky asked as he attempted to pull his beard into his sight. Steve chuckled.

“It’s pretty long, Buck; you’re getting sloppy.” Steve joked and Bucky shot him a luke-warm scowl.

“Your mom would call me a ruffian.” Bucky said with a glassy-eyed look.

“She would.” Steve said with a sad smile. “A clean-shaven face is the mark of a gentleman.” Steve quoted and Bucky gave a rough chuckle.

“You were always so messy from your brawl fights—why did a shaved face matter?” Bucky teased, his voice gruff, and Steve laughed quietly. “Do me a favor, Steve.” Bucky said after a pause.

“Sure thing, Buck.” Steve waited eagerly.

“I need a shave.” Bucky commented and Steve nodded amused.

“Anything else?” Steve prompted and Bucky’s eyes seemed to glaze over more.

“A notebook, Steve.” Bucky garbled out as he lowered himself back down to his pillow.

“A notebook?” Steve asked, fighting the rising panic that accompanied whenever he felt Bucky’s lucidity slipping.

“I want to remember, Steve.” Bucky slurred. “But it’s hard.”

“You’ll get there, Buck.” Steve promised as he watched Bucky’s eyes droop; he was staring at Hermione.

“If I could draw like you, I’d draw her.” Bucky mumbled and Steve smiled sadly as his friend faded.

“I want to.” Steve admitted and Bucky ‘hmmd’ back.

“I’m still a better dancer.” Bucky muttered before sleep took him again. Steve lowered himself into bed and turned to face Hermione. She was still on her back, her lips parted as she breathed. Steve may be the first thoughts Bucky had but Steve was under no disillusion that Hermione wasn’t the last thoughts Bucky held before his mind quieted. Steve thought it was perhaps the same for himself.
Steve woke in time to catch Hermione waking. Bucky had apparently already awakened and he darted a quick look at Steve before they both watched the witch open her eyes slowly. She attempted to blink away her daze. Her eyes looked watery and before long tears began to drip down her cheeks. Steve shared an alarmed look with Bucky who seemed just as panicked at the tears.

“Hermione?” Steve whispered softly in concern. Hermione sat up and Bucky and Steve mimicked the motion. Hermione peered around the room with unseeing eyes and Steve looked on in concern. “Hermione?” Steve asked again, distraught as the tears continued to trace tracks down to plop in her lap. His hands hovered around her but he wasn’t quite bold enough to touch. Idly, she brought her own hands up and wiped her tears. She attempted to blink the sleepiness out of her eyes.

“Harry?” Hermione asked softly. Steve glanced at Bucky whose face was shuttered. When Steve looked back at Hermione, her head was tilted to the side and her eyes were still glazed as she scanned the room.

“It’s…it’s me—Steve… and Bucky.” Steve answered slowly. Hermione turned towards Steve and closed her eyes.

“Steve?” She asked quietly before opening her eyes with noticeable clarity. Steve gave her a half-smile that she tentatively returned. “Sorry.” She began on the end of whatever confusion had shuffled her mind. “I was a little disoriented.” Hermione clarified.
“That’s alright.” Steve said soothingly. He tried to ease the concern from his eyebrows. “Are you okay?” Steve asked tentatively. Hermione gave a warbling laugh.

“Just the occasional disorientation; I’m fine.” Hermione assured him. “Good morning.” She added awkwardly. Silence descended and Steve observed Bucky grab Hermione’s hand gently. She patted the hand reassuringly.

“So…errands today?” Steve asked and Hermione released a sound that was something akin to relief before she resumed the list she had sleepily began the night before.

Sam was wearing a shit-eating grin with his arms folded across his chest.

“I know.” Sam enthused and Hermione rolled her eyes beside him. Steve forced his mouth to close from where his jaw hung dropped.

“How…when…where?” Steve began but he could not fully articulate the question he could not completely understand he wanted to ask. Hermione had convinced Bucky to let her leave the room with Steve and Sam for a brief moment. Steve noticed that he was becoming more compliant and more cognizant with each day that passed, though he still rarely talked beyond short words and glares. Hermione had explained that she had to be with him the first time he entered the house the manual way and had escorted him through the garage door. When they stepped out the door, Steve turned back around to find the alley where they had first met and nothing else—no church-like house and no stained glass windows. She had passed him a piece of paper that revealed her address and he read it quickly before Hermione set the paper ablaze. When Steve looked up again, the building seemed to push itself out from nowhere. It had blown Steve’s mind.

“As far as the charm is understood, it’s more-or-less a distorted reality.” Hermione explained, pleased.

“You just casually distort reality? You can do that? Why wouldn’t everyone use it?” Steve asked flabbergasted. Hermione frowned.

“It’s a rather complex spell…” She seemed to pout. Steve fought the urge to grab his head with his hands.

“I…this…you…” Steve continued particularly inarticulate and Sam laughed behind him. Steve gave him a stern look. “I at least believed her when she said she was a witch.” Steve defended and Sam shrugged.

“Between the teleportation and distorted reality I am content to be wrong—as long as I get those beach vacations.” Sam qualified. Hermione laughed lightly behind him.

“The garage actually connects to the alley so you can drive back in and out. You won’t be able to bring anyone in—I have a lot of other protections around the house.” Hermione mentioned. Steve nodded dumbly.

“What are you hiding?” Steve suddenly thought to ask. Hermione gave him a wry smile.

“Currently Bucky.” Steve flushed. “Do you have the list?” Hermione continued. Steve held up the list with a suppressed eye roll. They had attempted to ask Bucky for anything he particularly wanted or needed but unlike the night before, Bucky had simply requested plums—much to Hermione’s amusement. The list, in addition to food, included clothing for Bucky, the notebook he had mentioned wanting the night before, and shaving equipment. Steve’s fingers fumbled against the
shadow on his chin; he could sympathize.

“Feel free to buy anything that you think he might want or need.” Hermione authorized as she passed him a bank card.

“Hermione, I’m perfectly capable of providing money for Bucky’s needs.” Steve reprimanded and Hermione gave him a look.

“Steve. You’ve seen my house; I’m doing quite well.” Hermione chastised but Steve maintained his hard stance as he folded his arms across his chest. Hermione sighed before pulling out a few bills. “At least take money for my groceries, please.” When Steve did not accept the outstretched hand for cash, Hermione stuffed the bills between the folded arms before ducking back quickly. Steve frowned harder as he attempted to hand them back.

“Hermione…” Steve said as he waved the cash at her. “It’s not like your charging for your work; I can afford this.”

“Just take the money, Steve. I’ll see you two when you get back.” Hermione said as she continued her retreat. She nodded at Steve and Sam. “Call me if you have any questions!” She turned around and went back inside, leaving Steve with his hand still outstretched.

“You’re going to find a way to give that back to her, aren’t you.” Sam observed. Steve glared at the house.

“Absolutely.”

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Sam and Steve pulled into the mall parking lot to take care of their first set of chores: clothing.

“Cap, that looks like something my grandpa would wear.” Sam said as he snatched the pants out of Steve’s hand. Steve gave him a look.

“Then it’s appropriate; Bucky might prefer something similar to the past he can remember.” Steve decided as he took the pants back. Sam returned the deadpanned look. “Besides,” Steve continued, “I thought you weren’t interested in clothes shopping.” Sam looked thoughtful.

“On second thought, I think we should get him a ‘Hello Kitty’ shirt.” Sam said as he began rotating towards the little girl section.

“Sam!” Steve exclaimed and Sam gave a half-laugh.

“I’m joking.” Sam appeased before muttering “mostly,” under his breath. Sam sighed as he pulled more modern pants from the rack and tossed it at Steve. “Your lucky penny should’ve been doing this.” Steve gave Sam a warning glance.

“She’s not my lucky penny, Sam.” Steve said as he pulled a button down shirt and looked at it appraisingly.

“You’re missing a sweater vest.” Sam commented idly and Steve ‘hmmd’.

“I think it still isn’t quite cold enough—“Steve was interrupted by Sam’s laugh. Steve sighed. “You were joking.” Steve identified and Sam laughed again.

“Give him a t-shirt, Cap.” Sam recommended as he pointed to the buy-one get-one. Steve picked up
a red and blue plain t-shirt. Sam tossed a few colored tank tops in and workout pants. “Does he…
does he need boxers or briefs?” Sam asked and Steve shrugged.

“Both? Either?” Steve hazarded a guess as he tossed some into his rapidly filling cart.

“You mean you haven’t seen…” Sam trailed off as he idly searched a clothing rack for a jacket.

“We’re just sleeping, Sam.” Steve said warningly again. Steve threw socks into the cart along with a
sweater. Sam added a blue jacket. “I think this is a decent selection.” Steve appraised as they headed
to the checkout line. Sam snickered as he tossed a hoodie with a Captain America shield printed on
the front. Steve glanced at it with exasperation and Sam shrugged.

“He liked the shirt…” Sam said as Steve paid the clerk. They grabbed the multiple bags and left to
walk around the mall. Steve barely noticed Sam glancing back into the store.

“What, Sam?” Steve prompted, his eyes swiveling for a perceived threat.

“That clerk was checking you out.” Sam commented and Steve scoffed. “No—really, you didn’t
even notice? She was pretty and she looked interested and you just completely ignored it.” Sam
complained.

“Bucky is—“Steve begun.

“Bucky is safe. Wasn’t that the new reason you had for not calling that nurse?” Sam asked
resurrecting a previous conversation.

“She’s not a nurse.” Steve said as they continued passing various stores. Steve pulled his hat down
further to shadow his face from potential recognition.

“Isn’t that better?” Sam questioned and Steve didn’t respond. “Look, man. I’m not trying to say you
need to go date now, but Bucky will get better if Hermione has anything to say about it and when he
does, you won’t have anything to hold you back.” Steve contemplated the words.

“I have time.” Steve said and Sam shrugged.

“Just keep your eyes and options open for when Bucky’s better.” Sam recommended. Steve felt his
throat tighten. Steve didn’t want to look. Steve didn’t want; it was safer than realizing no one could
match him now. Steve turned around when he realized Sam had stopped in front of a window.

“Captain America teddy bears.” Sam smirked and Steve felt his face turn pink with embarrassment.

“They have Iron Man, too.” Steve pointed with his bags at the other display. Sam’s smirk looked
darker even as his eyes lit up.

“I’m getting one.” Sam laughed as he ducked into the store.

“Sam, no!” Steve pleaded as he hastily followed him into the store. He maneuvered his bags to
dodge the small children acquiring teddy bears, squealing with delight. Steve shuffled towards Sam
but was forced back when an onslaught of children danced around the shelves and impeded his path.
When Steve made it to Sam he realized his attempts were all for naught and Sam emerged from the
store victorious. Steve sighed as Sam looked gleefully at his own personal purchases--two Captain
America bears complete with uniform.

"You spent nearly $80 dollars on a gag-gift; you realize that--don't you?” Steve commented
disparagingly as Sam smirked.
"So they’d be like 10 cents in the 40's?" Sam joked. "Besides, Hermione said we should buy anything that might be helpful; I'm being helpful." Sam rationalized.

"What makes you think Bucky would want one? What makes you think Hermione would either?" Steve asked with a sigh. Sam gave Steve a look as they continued walking through the mall.

"Hermione is your lucky penny--" Sam began.

"Sam, She's not--" Steve interrupted with exasperation but Sam continued.

"And Bucky clearly is a fan of Captain America if his shirt choice reveals anything." Sam finished before he muttered something about a guard dog needs a chew toy. Sam turned back to Steve to favor him with another long look. "Trust me, Cap; you might need a little help in understanding the modern woman."

"Weren't you the one asking me to stop by your work just to impress women?" Steve asked suspiciously but Sam waved him off.

"Woman throwing themselves at you and you sealing the deal are completely separate things." Sam justified.

"I'm not trying--"

"Exactly." Sam summed. "You need to try." They loaded their purchases into the back of Sam's SUV.

"You're worse than Natasha." Steve grumbled as he sat in the passenger seat.

"Somehow I doubt that--imagine if Romanoff knew about Penny." Sam commented idly and Steve shuddered to think what Natasha would do with the same information Sam was privy to. Sam was still speaking on the subject when they entered the grocery store.

"All I'm saying is that you have pretty high standards for women and Hermione hits them; she's loyal, smart, and strong. Captain America has a lot of enemies and they wouldn't be able to find Hermione, let alone take her." Sam reasoned and Steve was reluctant to admit he had a point.

"All that aside, Sam, we have a mission and it's already been hours since we left; I just want to hurry up with the groceries and then get back to the house." Steve groused and Sam shrugged minutely.

"Fine." Sam agreed as he took the list from Steve. He squinted at it. "What the hell is an aubergine" Sam asked as he passed the list back to Steve. Steve looked at the list thoughtfully.

"Let's skip that for now." Steve finally said as he glanced around the produce aisle. "She said to add food that Bucky liked so I'm just going to grab some fruit..." Steve puttered around the store and picked up several apples. He spotted a bunch of bananas and recalled that Bucky and he had had their first banana near the end of the war in England. It was a rare enough fruit and they celebrated taking down another Hydra base by partaking in the delight. Steve placed the bunch in his cart. He glanced back around the fruit aisle. It always astounded him when he went into grocery stores. After two years, it was slightly less overwhelming to see the saturation of products, produce, and variety. Steve still remembered rations. Steve spotted citruses and grabbed grapefruits and oranges. He knew that Bucky only liked grapefruits with sugar and he was curious if Bucky would remember that in his current state. Steve looked down at the cart that was essentially becoming a fruit basket. Committed, Steve began grabbing nearly every fruit he could find. Steve was still reluctant to try a lot of the modern foods that assaulted his senses every day. He tended to try new foods when Clint, Natasha--or in the case of the shawarma—Stark presented to him to try. All the variety of fruits and Steve still
routinely chose apples and peaches. Now as Steve grabbed kiwis, mangoes, starfruits and papayas, he thought perhaps Bucky and he could try new things; Bucky always liked trying new things.

"You planning on adding meat to that basket?" Sam asked amused as he dropped vegetables into the cart. Steve looked up from where he was holding plums before setting them back down into the cart.

"Yeah...let's move on." Steve said as they pushed through the aisles. Steve attempted to stay more to the list.

"You think one of those was an aubergine?" Sam wondered as he stared at the heavy-laden cart. Steve grimaced.

"Hopefully." Steve said as they threw in additional grocery item. Steve meandered through the aisles with newfound appreciation. The choices that were once overwhelming before suddenly seemed inviting. Steve grabbed his usual oatmeal and breads but lingered at the ones he always tended to avoid. He glanced at the maple-bacon cupcakes. He inspected the brightly colored cereals. He resolved to one day return with Bucky and try all the new things Steve had previously ignored. Bucky would love it and Steve would love that. Steve paused at the shaving equipment before decisively grabbing a kit for Bucky. He grabbed regular composition journals per Bucky's request and hoped that he wasn't expecting anything extravagant. Steve couldn’t imagine Bucky would particular care about the quality and he would probably get reprimanded for anything too nice anyway.

They grabbed various meats and chocolate—per Hermione’s request—and made their way back to the car. The drive back to Hermione’s house was filled with Sam’s disgruntlement at the traffic and detours.

“I thought DC traffic was bad.” Sam grumbled. “So if you aren’t moving into the towers immediately, when do you think you will?” Steve grimaced.

“I hadn’t thought about it. I need to see what Bucky wants to do, too. He might not be comfortable staying at Stark’s.” Steve surmised. Sam glanced at him before looking back at the cars in front of him.

“What makes you think Barnes will want to live with you?” Sam asked and Steve bristled unintentionally.

“Bucky and I have lived together since my mom died.” Steve explained. Sam exhaled slightly.

“Look man, people come back from things and they’re different sometimes. Bucky is probably going to be one of them. I don’t want you to get your hopes up in the event that Bucky needs time to recover privately.” Sam explained and Steve attempted to relax. Steve was sure Sam had seen a lot of examples in Veteran’s Affairs but that was different. Steve knew Bucky; their home was each other and they always went back home.

“We’ll see when everything is over.” Steve conceded.

“The thing is—it’s never over.” Sam said solemnly and Steve frowned. He was saved a remark as they pulled onto the alley way that led to Hermione’s residence. Now that Sam and Steve knew the location, it did not pop into existence like when he read the address—instead it just stood proudly as if it had been there all along. Sam pulled into the garage and they grabbed a few bags inside. The door was not locked and Steve entered. He heard a rush of movement and squeal, prompting Steve to rush inside and observe Bucky once again protecting Hermione from potential intruders. This time he had barred her into a corner so he could effectively block her.
“Darling! It’s Steve and Sam!” Hermione called and Bucky only relaxed when Steve entered his sight warily. Bucky tensed again when Sam followed but he ultimately relaxed and allowed Hermione to push him aside as she walked towards him. When Bucky hung protectively over her shoulders again she sighed before continuing her walk towards them in an awkward four-legged shuffle. “We were doing so well, too.” Hermione muttered. She brightened visibly as she got closer. “How did it go!” Hermione inquired with a smile. Steve returned it and Sam positively smirked.

“Steve bought a fruit basket and I got you presents.” Sam announced and Hermione’s head tilted in confusion despite her pleased glanced.

“Oh-kay?” Hermione hedged warily as Sam rooted around his bags. Steve sighed.

“Really, Sam? We can’t even unload all the bags first?” Steve asked ruefully but Sam disregarded him. He procured his purchase and pulled them out with a flourish.

“Ta-da!” Sam said as he displayed the bears to Hermione. Hermione looked to barely be containing her mirth.

“Is that…” She questioned and Sam nodded proudly. Steve wiped a hand over his face.

“Captain America bears!” Sam identified as he passed them to Hermione. He shuffled back quickly when Bucky glared over Hermione’s shoulders. “One for you and one for him.” Sam said as he nodded towards Bucky. Hermione smiled.

“They’re precious.” Hermione declared. She turned in Bucky’s protective arms to face him. Steve noticed it seemed less protective and more romantic when she faced a different direction. “Darling, this is yours.” Hermione said softly and Steve noticed her amber eyes swirling into Bucky’s. Bucky’s face became impassively shuttered as he released his hold on her in order to take the bear; he looked at is strangely as if he could not understand the concept of the bear. “Thank you, Sam!” Hermione beamed at him and Sam nodded back.

“Some people thought it wouldn’t be appreciated.” Sam commented as he threw a significant look at Steve. Steve flushed when Hermione inspected him, too.

“Well.” Hermione said as she inspected the bear. “It is much appreciated.” Hermione declared as she looked back to Bucky who was still contemplating the stuffed toy’s existence. Steve supposed so.

Steve and Sam had brought all the bags into the house when Steve felt his phone vibrate. A quick glance down at the unidentified number and Steve felt that perhaps he’d better answer the call in his room. He excused himself without any resistance as Hermione and Sam were occupied in laying out the purchases on the dining room table. Steve winced as he realized they perhaps had gone overboard with their purchases. Steve was a minimalist by nature but he did like to buy gifts for Bucky—not that he really ever could when he was poor--but he was making up for lost time.

Steve entered the guest room and flicked the phone open.

“This is Steve.” Steve greeted.

“Bout time you answered—I thought I might need to hunt you down.” Steve recognized the voiced immediately as Natasha. “You’re lucky Sam called or I’d be using my new-found free time to check up on you in person. Although, according to Sam I’d have to find a way to get myself to Oz…?” Natasha trailed off in question. Steve chuckled softly.
“Sam and I found Bucky and we currently have him in a safe house. Sam has declared the codename is ‘Oz’” Steve regaled. Dimly he thought the moniker actually fit well.


“Bucky needs to recover. He’s lucid sometimes but less lucid other times.” Steve admitted.

“Is he dangerous?” Natasha asked.

“Not where we have him.” Steve decided.

“Where is that? For some reason I’m inclined to believe that you are not, in fact, in Tokyo, Japan.” Natasha prompted. Of course she had already tracked the call, Steve thought. It was a good thing the house was protected from tracking the signal but Steve worried about the vast differences in locations it seemed to project.

“We found someone who could help him.” Steve began. “She’s trained, she’s discreet. When I say safe house I really mean that she’s the one who makes it safe.”

“Steve, I’m starting to get a little jealous.” Natasha teased back lightly. “What’s her name? How do you know you can trust her?”

“We’ve been here for half a week and no one has found us.” Steve said. “I’m sure you were already trying to track me before this call--despite Sam’s call--but you haven’t found us.” Natasha remained silent.

“Name?” Natasha prompted.

“She’ll keep our secrets if we keep hers.” Steve said seriously back. “That’s all I’m going to say about that.” Natasha paused again.

“Are you sure she is safe? We thought a lot of places were safe and we have been wrong before.” Natasha recalled.

“I’m staying with both of them and she is helping. I’d take the risk anyway.” Steve pronounced and Natasha sighed on the other line.

“How are your bullet wounds?” Natasha asked changing subjects. Steve knew it was not the end of the conversation, but he was pleased that Natasha had seemed to drop it for now.

“Healed.” Steve revealed.

“That’s some super soldier ability if you healed that quickly.” Natasha said with feint approval. Steve chuckled.

“I had a little help.” Steve revealed.

“Bullet wounds and stab wounds is considered a little help? Do you think you can convince her to be the Avenger medic?” Natasha joked and Steve laughed outright.

“I had the same thought!” Steve declared.

“Speaking of which, did you ever call back that nurse?” Natasha asked lightly. Steve laughed in disbelief.

“I was a little busy with Bucky.” Steve admitted. “Besides, she isn’t a nurse.” Steve corrected.
“If you’re so keen on someone who can fix you up, maybe you should make friendly with our future Avenger Medic?” Natasha said and Steve could hear the smirking in her tone.

“She’s not--.” Steve began. “That’s not--.” He tried again. Steve paused recalling her warm compassionate eyes and teasing demeanor. Unwittingly he recalled her shedding her clothes to help Bucky bathe.

“Wow, poor Sharon--replaced already.” Natasha commented and Steve flushed.

“Her—The owner of this safe house is off limits. She’s doing Bucky and I a huge favor by housing us and it wouldn’t be right.” Steve declared. Natasha was quiet over the phone.

“Whatever you say, Rogers.” Natasha said later. “Just remember to use a little more tongue next time you kiss.” She recommended with a laugh.

“You said it wasn’t bad—” Steve barely finished his sentence before Natasha cut him off.

“Keep me updated, Steve. I’m glad you found Barnes.” Natasha said quickly before she hung up. Steve looked at the phone balefully. She had said that the kiss wasn’t that bad. Steve knew she had been lying, he thought resentfully. He put the phone back into his pocket and sighed.

First Sam, then Nat, Steve closed his eyes to collect himself. Sure Hermione was pretty, and she was kind and compassionate, and she seemed so utterly strong and capable—all things that Steve did indeed like but she was healing Bucky. They were imposing on her life with their own personal problems and Steve was extremely grateful but he didn’t want her to feel obligated or burdened by the crush Steve was unintentionally developing. He didn’t even know if Hermione was dating some! He sighed as he rubbed his face with his hand. If everyone else had noticed, had Hermione? She seemed no different than the start of the week, seemed just as welcoming. So maybe Steve’s attempts at maintaining distance were working. Steve reminded himself again of all the reason why he shouldn’t even try. When he was satisfied with the logic, the man-out-of-time went back to his broken ex-assassin best friend; a summary of problems in two sentences or less. He approached the atrium slowly when he overheard voices.

“Do you know how difficult it is to drive an SUV in this city?” Sam was complaining.

“Well why do you even have it? You live in the city, too; shouldn’t it be something more practical?” Hermione countered.

“It’s far more practical than a car when a certain assassin is determined to kill your new friends.”

“Don’t look at him like that! You play nice Sam or there will be no pudding for you!”

“I don’t like pudding; it’s no loss.”

“No—pudding means dessert and today’s dessert is seven-layer chocolate cake which apparently you won’t be getting!”

“Don’t threaten the cake, Penny!”

“Penny?”

“It’s your call sign.”

“Isn’t that for flyers? Haven’t we already established I do not enjoying flying?”
“It can be used as a nickname in general.” Steve interjected as he entered the space. Hermione was standing with her arms crossed; her ire was directed at where Sam was sitting at the table amongst the material items they had purchased. All the groceries looked put away. Hermione turned to Steve and smiled.

“We were waiting for you!” She exclaimed as she beckoned him forward. “How was your phone call?”

“It was my friend, Natasha. She wanted to see how we were doing.” Steve glanced at Bucky and then pointedly at Sam. “Why were you waiting for me?”

“We’re seeing what he likes out of your purchases!” Hermione seemed excited as she glanced between Bucky and Steve; Steve felt it was infectious. Bucky was still hovering close to Hermione as usual but something else caught Steve’s eye. Steve had made a double-take to make sure, realizing that Bucky was holding the Captain America bear with one hand. Steve nearly laughed aloud when the image of Bucky holding a blanket and sucking his thumb appeared in his mind. He looked forward to the time he could tease Bucky about all of this and instantly regretted not getting a camera. Thinking about what Sam had showed him the other day; Steve whipped out his phone and snapped a covert picture of Bucky. Judging by Sam’s sudden laugh, it was far less covert than he thought. Steve coughed to cover his own laugh.

“So what exactly are we going to be doing?” Steve said as he pulled one of the dining room chairs out to sit on.

“Well, you have a lot of options for clothing so I’m going to see what he likes first.” Hermione said as she guided Bucky closer. She grabbed a button-down shirt and a t-shirt. “Which one do you like?” She asked as she stared at Bucky. His face was largely emotionless except the faint comprehension that seemed to be struggling to reach the surface. “Please take the one you prefer.” Hermione asked again and this time Bucky grabbed the t-shirt. Steve flushed when Sam laughed loudly. Hermione glanced at them both.

“Is there a reason why Sam keeps guffawing like a loon?” Hermione asked icily and Sam quelled instantly at her tone.

“Steve thought Bucky would like old man clothes and I chose all the modern clothing.” Sam explained. Hermione glanced at them both before a smile emerged on her face.

“Oh that is funny. I’m curious now; keep a tally!” Hermione instructed with an appreciative chuckle. Steve sighed as he hunched his shoulders reflexively.

“I thought it was a nice shirt.” Steve complained and Hermione humored him with a smile.

“We’ll just set it aside, then.” She said as she bit her lip to contain her laughter. Hermione picked up two more items and played the same game. Steve frowned when Sam’s laughter echoed Bucky’s choice. Steve looked at Bucky sternly.

“You’re killing me, Buck.” Steve groaned and Bucky glanced over at him innocent and unaware. By the end of the unintentional competition, most of Sam’s choices were preferred over Steve’s picks—especially anything with the Captain America logo, leaving Steve with mixed feelings.

“I bow to your prowess in dressing.” Steve deadpanned and ignored the urge to hit Sam and his stupid smirking face.

“You should let me dress you, too.” Sam offered and Steve rolled his eyes. Hermione and Bucky
returned from putting the new things away just as the oven clicked.

“Dinner time, children.” Hermione joked as she sat the two at the table. Sam and Steve broke apart from their antics to sit at the table just as the dishes began floating by. She joined them at the table. “What were the notebooks for?” Hermione asked. Steve glanced at her in surprise. He didn’t realize he hadn’t mentioned.

“Bucky requested them when he woke up last night. He also requested a shave.” Steve said.

“You didn’t mention that!” Hermione complained. She was fiddling with the fork and pushing it into Bucky’s good hand and he finally began to eat on his own—progress! “I’m a notoriously light sleeper,” Hermione began again, “Yet I somehow keep sleeping through all these discussions! I am going to stay up tonight just so I can witness it!” Hermione declared. “I want to hear fun and interesting stories, too!” She pouted. Steve thought it was adorable, a smile tugging at his mouth. He forced it down.

“To be fair, all he said was essentially he wanted notebooks to help him remember and a shave.” Steve placated. Hermione harrumphed.

“To be fair, he needs a shave.” Sam added. Hermione narrowed her eyes at Sam and Sam diligently returned to stuffing his face. She huffed but summoned a chocolate cake to the table. She divvied up the cake onto plates and passed them to everyone but Sam. Sam looked up at her, his face drawing into a frown.

“You are lucky I am kind.” Hermione groused before she placed the cake in front of Sam. Judging by the muted pleasure she displayed as everyone devoured the cake, Bucky included, she probably had never intended to withhold the cake at all.

When they retired for the night Steve took the shaving kit with him. Hermione changed into a bathing suit with a roll of her eyes and Steve followed her into the bathroom. She stared at the shaving kit awkwardly.

“I don’t…know how to shave a face.” Hermione commented awkwardly as she inspected the foam.

“I don’t suppose you could use magic?” Steve hazarded a guess. Hermione winced.

“Like enchant the razor? That’d be far too dangerous. Besides, normally wizards just use their wands but I’m hesitant to point anything towards his face.” Hermione frowned. She looked at Bucky. “Darling, do you want Steve to shave your beard?” She asked calmly. Bucky seemed to observe both Steve and Hermione before he picked up the razor and passed it to Steve.

“Steve.” Bucky nearly commanded and Steve and Hermione both seemed to melt. For Steve, it was the first time he was getting a request from not-lucid Bucky. Steve turned on the sink for water and turned to look at the impassive Bucky. Bucky had taught him how to shave, Steve remembered fondly. Steve, who had never known his father, who had never been taught such things, learned everything from Bucky who learned it first. Steve watched as Bucky’s hair fell to the floor. When he was finished he looked back at Bucky who grazed his hands over his shaven chin. Steve thought he looked appreciative.

“Alright, into the bath.” Hermione said as she pushed Bucky towards the tub. She swept her wand and the fallen hair disappeared. Steve marveled at the useful spell. Hermione seemed to make a half-hearted attempt to leave before Bucky pulled her back to his side. Steve noticed her face was tinged
with guilty pleasure. Steve sighed as he left the room to prep for bed himself. When he returned he
placed a notebook, light, and pen on Bucky’s side. Hermione fed him potions, sang her promises and
lullaby and Bucky faded into sleep.

“He’s recovering well.” Hermione said into the softness of the night. Steve propped himself on his
elbow to look down at Hermione. She looked good, he noticed. Her hair fanned around her in wild
tumbling waves and her face looked flushed in the dim light.

“That’s good.” Steve said dumbly. Hermione pulled up the blanket to her chin as if to hide.

“The potions will be ending soon.” She said nonchalantly. “His increasing recollection will be more
apparent afterwards.”

“I hope the notebook helps.” Steve commented and Hermione nodded.

“It’s a great idea; I hadn’t realized he was ready for it.” Hermione admitted. “Seeing as I’m never
awake for his lucid conversations.” She muttered crossly.

“Are you planning on staying up tonight?” Steve said teased. Hermione scrunched her nose up
adorably. He wondered if she’d be angry that he thought so.

“I’ve decided you have sleep pheromones and it would be a foregone conclusion.” Hermione said
decidedly. Steve raised a brow.

“Sleep pheromones?” He repeated. Hermione nodded.

“Yes, well, I can’t emphasize how unexpected it is that I don’t wake up when you do--or that I sleep
so thoroughly at all.” Hermione expressed seriously. Steve contemplated the knowledge; she always
seemed so peaceful when she slept that he couldn’t imagine her being disturbed at all. Thinking back
to the morning, Steve wondered about the large gaps of knowledge Hermione carefully avoided
when discussing her life. He glanced at her and watched her eyes begin to droop.

“Well, you’re healing Bucky everyday—that’s surely a factor.” Steve proposed. Hermione ‘hmmd’
noncommitting.

“I think it’s something about you two in particular.” Hermione confessed sleepily and Steve felt a
swell in his heart.

“Well, then it’s good that we’re here.” Steve determined. Hermione chuckled softly and then she was
asleep. Steve waited. He waited until Bucky stirred so quietly that Steve would not have noticed if he
hadn’t been waiting and watching.

“Steve.” Bucky said.

“Yea, Buck.” Steve returned eagerly.

“Thanks for the shave.” Bucky said quietly.

“Mark of a gentleman is a clean shaven face.” Steve laughed.

“I don’t know if I’m much of a gentleman but I don’t think I want a beard.” Bucky admitted and
Steve laughed softly again.

“I don’t know, Buck, they’re apparently in fashion.” Steve teased good-naturedly. Bucky scoffed.

“I’ll pass.” Bucky determined. Bucky sat up and let go of Hermione’s hand so he could grab the light
Steve had left him. Steve looked at him surprised.

“You remember something?” Steve asked and Bucky nodded, flipping the book up to begin writing.

“I need to write it down, Steve.” His voice had a frantic quality that made Steve hesitate. “I need to write it all down before I forget.” Steve watched as Bucky wrote furiously, Steve yearned to hear what he was remembering but he didn’t want to intrude on his friend’s concentration. Instead he kept a vigil over his friend as he worked. Eventually Bucky began to flag and Steve watched him fall asleep hunched over the journal. Moving lightly, Steve assisted his friend back down to sleep, turning off the light and moving the journal and pen to the side. He held the book, tempted to read what Bucky had written. He knew Bucky was recovering and he hoped that when he was in a better state of mind he would tell Steve himself. Even if Hermione could read his every thought, Bucky deserved a semblance of privacy. Steve sighed before setting the book down. He lay in bed thinking of Bucky and Hermione in endless alternating intervals. He had not even realized he slept until he awoke the next day.
A Witch's Company

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own either universe.

Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! I love getting reviews as they fire up my writing spirit! I also blush and squeal into my hand loudly but what you don't see won't embarrass me!

I'm sad to realize that I started uploading this too late to get my holiday chapters matched up. I might do an alternative one-shot closer to Halloween that would basically be the left-over plotline fluff I won't be using in this story. I'm hoping that I'll end up linking this story to my upload dates by November so they are festive to the season. We'll see how I do as I chug this little story along.

As always, if you have a headcanon/fluf/plot bunny you want to see, let me know and I'll see what I can do!

Thank you for reading and please enjoy!

At 28 years of age, Hermione Granger had done much with her life already. She had learned she was a witch, helped stop a dark Wizard, finished her education with record results while simultaneously passing legislation to rebuild Wizarding society. She admittedly had initially failed at bringing back her parents memories—the charms were too thorough, their cover too deep—but defeat was something Hermione would never suffer idly. With less turmoil in the Wizarding world she was able to channel all her obsessive energy and passion into becoming the foremost mind-healer in the world.

As part of the hero group that had saved Wizarding Britain, she found doors opening and resources suddenly became easy to access; people bent over backwards to assist the Golden Trio. Despite her inability to find someone capable of healing her parents, she did find the forefront of mind-healing academia and experimentation—and they were more than willing to teach her. Becoming a Legilimens was the natural first step in the process and with the time set aside, it quickly became a reality. She did not expect for it to be quite so bittersweet. She had aptitude for the study. More than that, it seemed as if she was always meant to be a Legilimens; within the first few months of learning a dam broke and suddenly it was natural. As if some part of her had been locked away, her forays into the mind suddenly became second-nature. Sometimes she could not suppress the power and thoughts began to invade, unwelcome. They cried. They screamed. They struggled. She heard all of it. It served to alter her long-term goals and it took longer to focus on the recovery of her parents when she suddenly realized that everyone around her needed help. They were all struggling.

Hermione began taking psychology classes in addition to her magical academia. She began offering counsel to the people around her who had all suffered in the war. She began to experiment with her willing patients. She developed her own techniques and now she was proud to say that she was largely responsible for single-handedly helping the majority of the veterans of the second Wizarding War.

When she turned 25 she spent her birthday back in Australia finally healing her parents. Their new
relationship was not an easy transition—but they managed. No longer content to stay in neither Australia nor the United Kingdom, they opted to move to the United States. Due to Hermione's own personal circumstances she was favorable to move to the United States with them. One such reason was the conveniently timed inheritance of a New York home from a very close friend and mentor who had assisted her in her newfound Legimimens abilities. She would always be thankful to Luna for getting her in contact with her husband’s great-Aunt.

She had only been in New York for a few days when she had stumbled across Steve. She supposed that in the instant she spotted him, she saw herself: lost, so very lost, and alone. When his thoughts screamed into her mind in great piercing wails, she was helpless to be idle. All she could offer him was a few kind words and a magical penny before she let him go. He didn't summon her for two years. When aliens rained down on New York City the week after their meeting, she suspected he might've been a tad busy.

After the battle of New York, her parents promptly decided to relocate their practice closer to Albany rather than New York City where Hermione lived. They advised her to leave but she had almost been comforted by the doomsday scenario. In any case she reassured them that the MACUSA had handled the problem behind the scenes and had minimized damages as best they could given the statute of secrecy. Hermione reluctantly admitted that in cooperation with the organization she had also been on the outskirts of the streets warding the aliens in and compelling the muggles out of the vicinity into safety. In a strange turn of events, she had been scolded by Ron and Harry for going into battle without them. She defended herself in saying that the event was over before they could even organize an international floo or portkey over.

Since that day, Hermione had connected her basement floo internationally to Harry's office in the Ministry—a unique diplomatic perk to the war heroes. While the time difference and life differences ensured that they didn't see each other every day or even every week, Hermione was grateful that she could visit her friends and unofficial family. She loved to visit Ron and Harry's kids who called her Auntie 'Mi' and smudged her face with kisses. She had just visited them both at the Hogwarts Battle Memorial Ball when a few weeks later her penny had heated on her flesh and she had apparated to Steve, surprised at the sudden call. One thing led to another and suddenly Hermione was living with two boys again—not that she minded.

Hermione peeked out of the greenhouse to watch Steve work out. It was not much space but he seemed to utilize it well enough. He was quick with the jump rope and smooth with his pushups but what Hermione really enjoyed watching was when he boxed. She watched him glisten as he moved. He was precise and quick and powerful. His arms bulged and his muscles rippled. Hermione felt her mouth go dry. No, she did not mind having these two men for company at all.

Turning back to the new dirt in her planter, Hermione guided Bucky to drop seeds into the holes. While his mind hadn't recalled anything about gardening when she had asked him about it initially, he still had a feeling of curiosity and interest that she wanted to develop and cultivate. Hermione took Bucky's hand and used it to gently cover the holes with dirt. Then she guided his hand out of the way so she could water the seeds.

Bucky always lingered in her space in a way that she found comfortable. He was strangely protective of her and instead of being irritated she found it strangely charming and welcomed it. Where Steve barely touched Hermione, maintaining a respectful distance that left Hermione hypersensitive, Bucky always seemed to permeate her personal space—even as his protective tendencies finally gave way to allow her to maintain more privacy. Still, he was always within a hands reach from her. In fact, he still held her hand frequently. She still touched him to guide him. He still rested between her legs on the floor when she sat on the couch. She still washed his hair. The only thing he was loath to let her touch was his metal arm. She had given up attempting to reach for it as he always turned to catch her
with his human arm instead—always gentle despite the sharp movement. He seemed to disdain the arm and only really acknowledged or consciously used it when he thought she was in danger, which he perceived more often than Hermione would've liked. More than once Bucky had reacted to Steve's returning presence as an unknown threat until he was verified. Given that Bucky's defensive instinct was to completely shield or cover Hermione, Hermione had often been whisked away into corners, behind furniture, or brought down flat on the floor with Bucky hovering above her. She had to repair several tea cups from the surprise.

Hermione took Bucky's hand to guide him again into repeating the planting process. Hermione found that the rare touches she experienced with Steve shot through her like electricity while touching Bucky felt like warmth and searing heat. She admittedly yearned for both. With a sigh, she brushed the dirt off her hands, washing them before instructing Bucky to do the same. She passed by Steve with Bucky trailing behind her. She slowed down to appreciate his boxing form again but he paused to drink water. Idly, she conjured a towel for him, watching the sweat drip down his neck languidly. He nodded his thanks, his eyes wide at her magic.

"We'll be downstairs. Take your time." Hermione smiled and Steve nodded again.

Some days had passed since Sam had returned home and the trio in the house had developed a routine that Hermione enjoyed. Hermione worked on her papers and academia, Steve worked out, and Bucky would play with Crookshanks using the sun spots he projected with his metal arm. They would all eat together, sitting around the island as Hermione cooked. Bucky was capable of eating by himself but occasionally looked longingly at Hermione as if he still wished she fed him. She resisted his eyes—the blue pools were dangerously compelling. Later they would watch Disney movies and Hermione would marvel at Steve's apparent fascination and Bucky's muted joy. They were already on the Sword in the Stone, though she had skipped the movies she wasn't even a little familiar with. Steve had enjoyed Peter Pan and had taken to calling Bucky and himself 'Lost Boys'. When Steve had asked whether she was a Tinkerbell or a Wendy she had scowled so hard he had burst into peals of laughter and decidedly began calling her Tink. She had lectured him on her proper name over the next few hours several times but he only returned to laughter when she did. When they had watched Sleeping Beauty, Hermione had resisted the urge to question whether the two Sleeping Beauties had awoken from a kiss. She figured she would save that for when they were less emotionally raw.

Hermione looked up at the door as Steve descended into the basement. He was clean and fresh from his shower, already done with his workout routine on the roof upstairs.

"All done with your workout?" Hermione asked rhetorically. Steve nodded and favored her with a kind smile. Hermione wondered how her parents would feel about his beautiful, perfect teeth.

"Your bag is still holding up nicely—way better than the gym I used to go to." Steve complimented as he sat down on the sofa. Bucky glanced up from where he sat on the floor, back resting on the couch.

"Steve." Bucky greeted in a way that was becoming familiar. He never spoke much beyond simple requests and responses but he seemed to greet Steve regularly enough; he had yet to say her name, however.

"Bucky." Steve returned the greeting with a smile. Bucky turned back to his favorite past time of amusing Crookshanks and Hermione wondered if Crookshanks would slim down from the unintentional exercising. Steve pulled out his drawing pad and hunched over as he drew.

"Any closer to the big reveal?" Hermione asked playfully and Steve angled his pad dramatically to ensure she could not peak.
"You can't rush perfection!" Steve declared indignantly and Hermione laughed, ruffling his hair as she walked back to her desk. His face bloomed in a blush as he brushed his hair down. Hermione was a little disappointed; she kind of liked it mussed.

"I can't play the piano until I see it, Steve, and I'm becoming concerned my skills will be compromised from disuse." Hermione eyed him pointedly but maintained a half-smile. Steve flushed.

"I'm sure you'll manage." Steve pouted as he returned to drawing. Hermione took the time to study him.

Steve with his gold hair and blue eyes and soft, shaven face and big bulging muscles looked every bit the hero and knight in a romance story. He was steadfastly loyal and good-natured. He made her stomach flutter when he glanced her way. Her eyes tore away to study Bucky instead. His hair was tied back in a man-bun she had fashioned upon him herself. Wisps of hair still surrounded his face and the stubble on his chin made him seem rugged as opposed to Steve's clean cut. Steve had offered to shave his face regularly but Bucky had declined. Hermione had offered to cut his hair but he had also declined her offer. Secretly, Hermione was happy that he did because she enjoyed his roguish good looks and his continued requests for her help washing it. It wasn't that he was incapable of bathing himself—no, he did so every night—but before Hermione could leave he would gently grasp her wrist and whisper 'stay'. Inevitably, she would melt at his irresistible eyes. She let her eyes trail up and down his form. Slightly scruffy but clean, piercing eyes and a brooding stare, if Steve was a knight, Bucky was every bit the sympathetic anti-hero.

Hermione could romanticize the duo as the day and the night but it would be clichéd and unnecessary; despite her Shakespearean name, a poet she was not. Besides, they were less true opposites and more so they seemed to be cut from a similar cloth—if that cloth made muscular, tall, good-looking men that made more than just her heart throb. Hermione had no shame in admitting that she got thirsty sometimes just looking at them; it had been years for her. It was wrong, however, to allow her own desires to affect her perception of them and their needs; they were patients, after all. Steve might deny so if he were to be asked outright, but he was one. Despite Hermione never placing glowing hands to his temple—she couldn't while she spent so much time healing Bucky—they spent long hours fading into the twilight of the night meandering through the thoughts he was willing to share. She found that as time had progressed, he was willing to share a lot more. While they spoke of sadder subjects, Steve always eventually switched to happier stories of his youth. The benign conversation and Bucky's strong hand clasped in hers always lulled her to sleep. What was remarkable was it always such a peaceful sleep. It was peaceful enough, even, that she had yet to wake up for Bucky's nightly moments of lucidity—much to her chagrin. It would have irked her to no end but the alternative to not waking was not sleeping—and sleeping so peacefully and restfully was something she had been lacking for a long time. She credited the sleep to the boys.

Steve's stomach grumbled loudly. When Hermione looked at him, he looked away with a flush. She glanced at the time, surprised that it was so late.

"Steve, I told you to tell me when you were getting hungry!" Hermione chastised with a smile. Steve flushed more.

"You looked busy." Steve said meekly and Hermione rolled her eyes.

"It's easy for me to be engrossed with something; it's more difficult to tear myself away. I'd have carried on all night if your stomach hadn't been singing the sound of its people." Hermione smirked and Steve flushed deeper as his stomach echoed its discontent.

"Well…I think I am hungry." Steve acknowledged and Hermione laughed. She turned to Bucky.
"Darling, are you hungry?” Hermione asked and Bucky jerked his head down in a nod. Hermione shepherded the boys upstairs, pulling out cut kiwis from the fridge and placing them on the island where they sat.

"You could always get a snack if you wanted, Steve." Hermione offered again as she bustled around the kitchen.

"I just don't want to be rude." Steve commented and Hermione huffed at his response.

"Honestly, Steve. You should feel more than welcome to raid the fridge that you stocked." Hermione opened the fridge again and eyed the overflowing fruit. She turned and gestured to it. "In fact, I highly recommend it. You do know produce goes bad?’” Hermione arched an eyebrow in the same way she had when she had first put the fruit away.

"I just thought we'd eat it all.” Steve said awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his neck. Hermione lifted the tub of kiwi she had placed before them.

"Feel free to do that now.” Hermione said pointedly as she shook the Tupperware at him. Steve reached in and plucked out a fruit. His first attempt at eating a kiwi had been less than successful. Hermione had to stop him when he took a bite of the kiwi—skin and all. Afterwards he had awkwardly explained that he had never had most of the fruit he had purchased and thought Bucky and he might enjoy experiencing new things together. Hermione’s heart had exploded; even at half-capacity their friendship was breathtaking.

Hermione cut the vegetables and stirred the meat on the stove, eying the boys in between tasks. They always kept her company when she cooked. While she always expected Bucky wherever she was—he lingered like a shadow—Steve also came to sit with her as she completed many of her mundane tasks. He had offered to help her cook but she had politely declined. She supposed she ought to give him a chance but for now she just enjoyed basking in his presence as she prepped.

It had been so long since she routinely saw people every day that she hadn’t realized she was quite so starved for companionship. Harry and Ron still checked up on her periodically, she often spoke and saw her parents, but she hadn’t realized how much she had missed living with people. After living with Harry and Ron in the tent while on the run she had moved into Grimmauld place. When Ron had gotten married and moved out she had stayed with Ginny and Harry until they were pregnant with James. Concurrently to Ginny’s pregnancy, Hermione had finally wandered back to Australia to recover her parents—this time a success. It wasn’t until she moved into her beautiful big home that she lived by herself for the first time—alone. Thinking of the emptiness that would return when Steve and Bucky left, she ignored the pang in her heart and wondered instead if she should get a roommate just for the semblance of company.

Steve spent all of dinner regaling funny stories from his war. Surviving life-or-death situations seemed to make it okay to joke about them, she surmised. Steve had begun by speaking of the first missions he had gone on with his 'Howling Commandos.' Steve, who had more or less fast tracked through boot camp, had been somewhat more oblivious than the average recruit while he navigated the Hydra bases. On more than one occasion, Bucky as their primary sniper had saved Steve’s arse from a close call.

"So then I kind of saluted Bucky as thanks!” Steve continued his story as he imitated the gesture. "But it turns out, you really aren't supposed signal the location of your sniper—because they're trying to stay hidden." Steve laughed as Bucky scoffed—his personality beginning to emerge from the slush of his memories. "I got such a dressing down by Bucky every time.” Steve chuckled in fond recollection and Hermione thought she saw Bucky’s eyes soften.
"You didn't learn your lesson immediately?" Hermione chided with a laugh.

"I just wanted to give my thanks properly." Steve explained and Hermione laughed again.

"Your chivalry nearly got you both killed." Hermione pointed out. Steve had the decency to flush.

"Well, it didn't." Steve reassured in exasperation.

Hermione graciously excused Steve for his negligence before they headed off to watch the Sword in the Stone. Hermione, exhausted from working and the earlier session of healing Bucky, felt herself drifting sleepily almost immediately. She could feel Bucky's soft hair wrapping around her fingers; he still preferred to sit on the ground and lean against the couch. Steve was sitting to her right with his arm resting on the back of the couch. She gleaned comfort from them existing in her space. It was pheromones, she decided—good-looking man pheromones that were apparently highly-potent and could whisk her off to sleep. She barely registered when her head drooped to Steve's shoulder. She certainly didn't recall lying outright on the couch and cuddling into Steve's side, but she woke there at the conclusion of the movie. Her hand that had nestled in Bucky's hair was wrapped around his shoulder in a lazy hug; he must have scooted closer. She exhaled as she rested the urge to nuzzle into Steve's lap, especially when she felt his hand resting on her arm, thumb gliding in soothing circles across her skin. She could stay here forever, she realized—with Steve and Bucky watching Disney movies. She blinked at the thought and forced herself to yawn purposely, feeling Steve retract his arm almost violently as he attempted to be nonchalant.

"Sorry, Steve." Hermione whispered softly. She could tell Steve's cheeks were dark in the blue glow of the screen. She was continually amazed that someone so utterly attractive was still so consistently shy.

"It's fine, Hermione. I half-expect it." Steve said with a forced chuckle and Hermione felt her own cheeks flare. Falling asleep on Steve had also become somewhat part of her routine—not that she actively resisted it. Hermione stretched.

"Alright, darling," Hermione said as she looked down at Bucky, "time for bath and bed." A flash of excitement and sadness flashed across Bucky's eyes as he stood. He proffered his hand and Hermione took it surprised. She figured it was another aspect of his personality emerging but he had never done anything quite so gentlemanly before.

Hermione sat in her one piece bathing suit that still made Steve blush. He didn't always escort her into the bathroom for Bucky's bath and since she had made quips about his drawing he seemed to favor working on his piece instead of blushing awkwardly as Bucky bathed. Hermione drug her nails against Bucky's scalp and he moaned softly—a sound that cause Hermione's gut to quiver and a blush to spring to her cheeks. Bucky was becoming more vocal with her ministrations and she was lucky Steve had opted out—lest he witness his friend's effect on her. Bucky leaned his head back against the tub's side and stared at her unabashedly. The internal quiver returned and her chest constricted at the wanton look of longing he offered her. Conscious of her panting breath and heating insides, she finished as quickly as she could. He stood as she passed him a towel and she tried desperately to not acknowledge the glorious erection that stood promptly at attention. He was a patient. Hermione reminded herself sternly. It was wrong of Hermione to ogle him when he couldn't even remember who he was—no matter how long it had been since Hermione had experienced any semblance of intimacy. Hermione scrunched her eyes in anguish. She'd done this before and it never ended well. She pushed Bucky out the bathroom door so he could change. He looked at her curiously; he normally stayed to guard her as she showered. Steve looked up from his drawing pad.

"I'm going to bathe." Hermione announced. She looked into Bucky's eyes. "I won't shower—just
bathe." She announced. She looked into Bucky's eyes to skim his thoughts. His memories of her in
the shower shifted to him bathing with her assistance. He comprehended the concept but moved in
an attempt to assist her like she had assisted him. Her own thoughts sent sizzling heat through her
body as she imagined his assistance. "No," Hermione swallowed before forcing herself to speak
evenly and calmly, "I'm doing it alone." She said. Satisfied that he understood her intent—even as
she sensed his dissatisfaction—she disappeared back into her bathroom and started the tap. She
stripped her clothing and added bubbles; she was going to luxuriate in this bath because she needed
it.

All day she had been on edge thinking of the future. As the night descended she knew her mood had
turned somber but she couldn't prevent the threatening melancholy. Bucky was healing and when he
was healed, they would leave. It was a simple fact. Hermione tried diligently to chase the thoughts
from her head but she only succeeded in returning to the men of her interests in a much more heated
manner. There was a burning inside of her she had never really felt before. She tried to wash her
body but every touch felt erotic, her own hand echoing the true feeling for which she yearned.

This was the danger of living with two attractive men. Harry had never aroused her—she thought of
him as a brother—and Ron, bless him, was always more of a comfortable luke-warm heat. When
they had lived together in the tent and then in Harry's house, it was not fire when they touched or
electricity; it was companionable and contenting—albeit fumbling and slightly awkward. It was one
of the many reasons they had amicably broken up. At no point during her relationship with Ron had
he ever thrilled her in the anticipative way that Bucky and Steve unintentionally had and anything
else she had pursued after Ron never progressed beyond hot snogging and heavy petting—none of
which comparing to her current need. She brushed her hands down her sides in a way that wasn't just
to clean her body.

The other night she had dreamt of them both. It was uncommon for her to dream pleasantly if she
dreamt at all. She still couldn't determine if the dream had been torture or pleasure. She could still feel
their touch and feel the heat in their eyes. Steve had sent electricity through her body with his touch
and Bucky—Bucky had been cognizant and aware. When Bucky moaned her name in between
kisses she knew it was a dream; he had yet to say her name even once since he had arrived in her
home.

Hermione suppressed a frustrated groan as she clutched her legs together. The heat and the buzzing
feeling beneath her skin wouldn't go away by itself, she knew. She glanced back at the closed door.
It was unlocked in anticipation of interruption; this was the longest time alone she had had since their
arrival. The thought of them just beyond the threshold made her blood course and she gave up
resisting her simple pleasure as she descended her fingers down to her entrance.

It was quick and fleeting—chasing her completion. It would only quell her for so long, she knew,
especially when she was returning to their omnipresent existence. Yet for a glorious moment she was
sated and felt that much saner as she came down from her high. She took a moment to calm her
breathing when the door burst open and Bucky took a step inside. Hermione jumped and squeaked
in surprise watching Bucky survey the room for threats.

"Hermione?" Steve called from her bedroom in concern.

"I'm fine!" Hermione's voice rang out, high-pitched and shrill. She collected herself. "Just surprised." Hermione said in a low and contained tone. She heard Steve try to guide Bucky out of the bathroom
but Bucky was determined to stay. Dimly Hermione realized that her showers were usually much
shorter and that Bucky was probably uneasy leaving her alone for so long. She sighed.

"It's fine, Steve. You can leave him; I'm just finishing up." Hermione sighed as she drained the water
and bubbles. Her charmed refilling ladle helped her rinse off and she attempted to ignore Bucky's blatant stare as she toweled off. She felt herself blush and the heat return to her body at his unwavering hungry gaze; her reprise had only lasted minutes before the churning returned within her. She summoned clothing from her bedroom and chuckled at Steve's squawk of surprise. Her laughter stopped when Bucky caught the clothing defensively and she sighed as she retrieved the garments from his grasp. Properly clothed, she escorted him to bed. He climbed into their floor-bed without complaint and took out his notebook. Hermione had not peeked but she noticed that he was beginning to write in it at various intervals. She knew his complex writing came in the middle of the night—per Steve's relaying—but throughout the day he was beginning to write words, associations, and small sentences if her observations were anything to go by. It was all good signs of his progress.

Hermione stopped in front of her nightstand. She opened the drawer and pulled out the last potion she had readily available. Hermione looked at the purple potion in her hand with no small amount of disdain. She hated the potion; it was addictive. She recalled the brief period where she had understood the dependence first hand—had dealt with the repercussions of overcompensation and withdrawal until her friends had finally noticed and intervened. Knowing this as she did, she respected the benefits and adversities the potion presented. She closed her hand around the bottle with a finality that acknowledged her resignation of the end. Even if she deigned to give Bucky more potions, he was already fighting the effects. It was an inevitable conclusion that the potion would not even work before long; it was a miracle that the bad dreams had been kept at bay for as long as they had. She turned around and spotted Bucky who was eyeing her with the muted look of despair and acceptance she dreaded. But tonight she wondered if she would prefer this agony she knew to whatever came next.

*Who would Bucky be?* Hermione wondered for the hundredth time. She cursed herself. Highly logical or not she had always been marked with passion and steadfast attachment—and she knew that she was already *very* attached. She felt herself begin to skim Bucky's thoughts, memories still swirling in an attempt to be recognized and *remembered*. She could not deny him that opportunity… even if it meant that it would hurt him… even if it meant that he would pull away. This was her *job*. This was her *ability*. This was something only *she* could do. He might fall apart—she expected him to. But she'd be there when he did. She would be there to fix his patchwork mind. Steve would be there to fix Bucky's patchwork heart and then—*then*—well, they would probably leave and be *gone*. Which was okay… even if it meant she would be alone again. She'd get used to it, like usual. She was different than others, she told herself; she could take what others could not. She could be strong when others were weak and she would be strong for herself because she was the only one who could.

And that was *fine*.

She could see this future—this known reality. She could see it for what it was and what it would be and she did so willingly. If she didn't fix his broken mind, who would?

Steve moved towards her and Hermione only dimly registered it until he spoke up.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Steve asked cautiously and Hermione blinked in surprise.

"Oh! Steve! Um, yes—everything is fine." Hermione said with what she hoped was less a grimace and more a reassuring smile. Steve's face indicated it was the former.

"What's going on?" Steve said in a casual disarming way. His face relaxed into something inviting but Hermione disregarded it.

"Just getting the last potion!" She said with false cheer. Steve maintained his evaluating gaze.
"Do you know what happens after that?" Steve asked as he looked pointedly at the potion.

"Yes…yes I do have some expectation of what will come." Hermione confirmed.

"Does having an expectation make it better?" Steve hedged and Hermione faltered.

"No, I'm afraid not." Hermione answered solemnly and Steve frowned.

"It's okay, Hermione—we'll get through it together." Steve reassured her and reached out to touch her hand in a way she had done for him previously. The same electricity shot up her arm and Hermione smiled in a way that felt laced with pain.

"Yes, Steve. We will get through it together." She agreed. Hermione walked over towards Bucky smiling slightly at the Captain America bear he slept with on his other side. She yearned to tell Sam that Bucky kept it regularly beside him as he slept. The benign thought was silenced as she kneeled down in a way that allowed her to peer over Bucky into his eyes. She fed him his potion, promising to stay by his side all night and began her lullaby. She stared into his eyes.

She hated this part.

She knew that maintaining eye contact helped convey her sincerity but his feelings were always loudest as the potion forced itself on his system. Every time he fell into his sleep she relived one of his few clear memories: ice, so cold it burned, swallowing his form and chilling his heart until he was still and contained. When his eyes drooped closed and his breathing evened out Hermione congratulated herself for managing not to cry once again.

"He's progressing well." Hermione reiterated as she did every night. The words were unnecessary in some ways but made her feel grounded in her duty amid the conflict of her heart.

"I can tell." Steve said back softly. He inched closer to her, as he had progressively done every night unintentionally. Sometimes their hands brushed and she wished she could hold it like she held Bucky's.

"His body has largely overridden the effects of the potion so we can expect fluid lucidity starting tonight or even tomorrow." Hermione expressed clinically. The sheets shifted as Steve nodded. He was close enough that she could feel his warm breath on her cheek.

"Thank you, Hermione, for being here for Bucky…for me." Steve said softly and Hermione resisted the instinct for her breath to catch.

"Of course, Steve. It's what I'm here for." Hermione responded. She existed to help people like this; it was the gift only she had. "When he becomes more cognizant, I'd like to heal some of your mind, too." Steve looked back over to her, his face displaying surprise in the dim lighting of the room.

"Me?" Steve asked confused and Hermione felt her lips upturn in a smile.

"Yes, Steve—you." Hermione returned playfully.

"I don't think I need any healing…” Steve disagreed.

"Anyone can benefit from what I do, Steve." Hermione chided. "Even you."

"You should still concentrate on Bucky." Steve muttered petulantly and Hermione turned to regard him.
"Of course Bucky's healing requires diligence and concentration, but I won't be negligent about your needs, Steve. Besides, by the time I'll be able to give you healing attention, Bucky will need the breaks to properly assimilate the mending." Hermione reasoned.

"You won't be tired?" Steve asked hesitantly. Hermione shook her head.

"No more than I've been lately." Hermione assured. Mentally she added a 'probably'. Steve seemed to contemplate her response.

"What…what exactly do you do?" Steve questioned. Hermione thought of how to explain it.

"I would describe it as creating acceptance with your bad memories." Steve looked confused so Hermione tried again. "Deep down, we are impacted at a subconscious and conscious level from our experiences. They leave fissures in our soul and mind that I help mend and fix."

"You don't take the memories away?" Steve asked.

"No! No, you keep the memories naturally but you…accept the experiences for what they are…you become at peace with them and they don't linger negatively on your heart and mind." Hermione explained. They sat in tense silence.

"That's a handy talent. You must benefit a lot from it." Steve finally said and Hermione hid her grimace in the sheets. Steve had a tendency of having false assumptions. She chose not to correct this one.

"I'm thankful that I've been able to help people like you and Bucky." Hermione said as she returned to the original subject. Steve laid an appreciative hand on hers and she nearly sighed aloud when it shifted naturally to holding hands.

"Thank you again, Hermione. Even if Bucky's memories come back and he reacts poorly, I'm glad that you found me in that alley and I'm glad that you're here now." Steve whispered sincerely and Hermione's heart constricted.

"I'm happy to be here." Hermione said her sentence loaded with meaning she hoped Steve didn't recognize.

"We'll help Bucky, together." Steve surmised and Hermione squeezed his hand in agreement. He squeezed back but didn't let go and Hermione was happy to hold both of their hands within her own.

For the moment, she allowed herself to be sated and happy. For the moment, she chased away the melancholy and allowed herself to bask in the warm hands that kept her grounded. She did not think about what came after. She did not think of that which she truly dreaded. The moment was just that—a moment—and when she could not will herself to sleep she found herself fighting against the foundations of a rising panic attack.

_Only one more day_, she thought. She had one more day of unfettered enjoyment before everything went pear-shaped and she was determined to enjoy it; she needed _sleep_. She was grateful when Steve began his soft conversation—a lullaby she always enjoyed—and she thanked him mentally that he could lull her into her own deep, dreamless sleep—no potion necessary.
He opened his eyes. The golden hues of the sun were just beginning to filter into the room. He exhaled loudly and looked at the surroundings—familiar yet so strange and new. He rubbed his face with both hands before pulling them back to regard them. The metal of his hand had been cool—easy to distinguish from his original. He held them above his head to inspect them; perfectly similar in size and shape, yet made of different materials. His hand was made of foreign materials; that much he knew. He closed his eyes again attempting to just remember, dammit. Instantly he found himself above his body, as if he was a leaf floating peacefully on the surface of a still lake. Yet the world around him was blurry, even the sounds were blurry, and all he could hear was a single word. Soldat. Soldier. Was he a soldier? Sergeant Barnes. He had been called that before, he felt it in his bones. He was on the edge of a memory, like listening to the last thrall of an echo in the mountains, unable to make out the words. James Buchanan Barnes. He recalled that name with more warmth but the name still felt…off. What had Steve called him? He wondered and for once was rewarded a glimpse of a skinny and frail blonde boy. He was mouthing something but the sound was distorted like he was speaking underwater. The boy was Steve but not. The man still sleeping nearby—he was also Steve. He had called him…called him…

“Bucky”.

He said the word reverently aloud. It was his name; it was his identity. “I am Bucky.” He said again to affirm the knowledge. His words stirred the two others lying in the makeshift bed but Steve was up first.

“Bucky?” Steve asked hesitantly as all three moved to a seated position. She was looking at Bucky hopefully and Bucky could feel the adrenaline beginning to course through his veins—he had remembered something significant.

“I am Bucky.” Bucky said in an assured declaration. Steve and her smiles were broad and welcoming.

“Hello, Bucky. I’m Hermione.” She greeted warmly and Bucky felt as if the sun had already risen to beam down on him.

“I know.” Bucky said and Hermione’s eyes crinkled to match her very wide smile.

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It felt natural for Bucky to hover around Hermione. He recalled the time he spent with her always knowing that she was warm, comfortable, and welcoming. In many ways, she felt like safety and home. She was important to him, he realized and it made him feel better to watch her and to guard her to ensure that she stayed safe. What was less than usual was the way Steve hovered around them both. Bucky could feel the energy beneath his friend’s skin and Bucky felt his entire being vibrate in anticipation or in recognition of the significance of what had occurred and what would be occurring. Bucky couldn’t tell if being with them both made him feel balanced or like a pendulum swinging from one side to the other. He decided it was the latter because he knew he wasn’t completely whole…but he wasn’t completely right.

His name hadn’t returned his memories instantly but they had been returning the last few days
anyway, instead he just felt connected to them in a way he hadn’t been before. Bucky sprawled back on the couch where he was sitting and covered his eyes with his hands. He summoned his memories and attempted to recall them. The memories that came had the same lull of warmth and welcome; had the same feeling of home. Bucky tried to ignore the tears burning behind his eyelids as he embraced the memories he had long forgotten.

Steve had once been small and sickly.

Steve’s mother was named Sarah.

Steve always ate apple pie for his birthday because it was patriotic.

Steve’s birthday was July 4th.

Bucky laughed aloud, the sound somewhat unnatural and rusty from disuse. When a small hand touched his own he grasped it, recognizing the familiarity. He opened his eyes to see Hermione’s concerned but encouraging face.

“Bucky?” She asked hesitantly and Bucky squeezed her hand reassuringly. It was only the second time she had said his name—that Bucky did remember—not that he minded when she called him darling. He brought her hand to his lips, closing his eyes as he kissed her palm, smoothing her hand to allow it to cup his cheek. When he opened his eyes, he caught her own doe-like browns wide and unblinking. Bucky nearly laughed at her expression and the flush spreading quickly across her face. He instead settled for the half-smile that tugged at his lips.

“Hermione.” Bucky said pleasantly and he did give a short laugh when her entire face lit up, aflame. It was the first time he had said her name and it was long overdue; her visceral reaction was more than encouraging. Behind her, still hovering, Steve looked torn between shock and amusement. His image flickered between Bucky’s skinny childhood friend and this muscular adult version and Bucky felt a wave of confusion. His face pulled down into a frown but he pushed through the moment and stood, taking Hermione’s hand in a way that was different than usual but still incredibly natural. He was leading, he realized; that was what was different. “I’m cooking!” Bucky declared as Hermione nearly stumbled in shock. Steve behind them continued to look torn between one extreme and the next—this time wariness and fondness.

“I can cook.” Hermione offered dazedly as Bucky deposited her in the seat at the kitchen island. “I owe you a few meals, darling.” Bucky returned her endearment with a wink that enflamed Hermione’s face once again. He felt good—so good. He had gaps in his mind, yeah, but they were going to come back—he could feel it. He felt alive in a way he hadn’t felt in a long time. He had his best pal with him and a girl that made his heart leap and it all felt good.

“We should probably let him cook, Hermione.” Steve’s voice tinged with amusement as he sat beside Hermione. “As long as it’s only breakfast.” Steve amended. Memories came back to Bucky of several attempts he made at making dinner—none of them very good.

“Yeah, Steve took care of dinner, I took care of breakfast.” Bucky remembered as he tilted his head to the right in recollection. He righted his head as he opened the fridge to look for eggs. Bucky stared at the various fruits he had never tried before. Bucky laughed again at Steve’s over exuberance, still feeling light, as he dug around them to pull eggs and vegetables out. He placed them on the counter and sought a frying pan and cutting board; he knew where both were.

“I tried to get Hermione to let me cook but she resisted.” Steve complained and Bucky turned around to smirk at his friend. Steve looked happy and at ease, whatever hesitation he had been facing was
fading. Hermione looked strangely numb at their interaction and Bucky frowned a little.

“You should let him cook, Hermione.” Bucky said softly and her eyes turned up to meet his, more alert. He smirked again. “As long as it isn’t breakfast because his idea of breakfast is six raw eggs.” Bucky teased and Steve visibly ruffled.

“Eggs are filled with protein and nutrients!” Steve argued and Bucky laughed harshly. Hermione looked hesitant but amused at the conversation and Bucky reached across the table to grasp her hand. He brushed her knuckle to his lips, smiling against them when her face heated up again. He ignored Steve’s harsh ‘Bucky!’ in favor of searching Hermione’s expression. She looked confused and surprised which irritated Bucky. He didn’t understand why she felt either. Didn’t she realize what she meant to him? Hadn’t he made it clear? Bucky dropped her hand so he could start cutting vegetables, resolving to be more obvious with his intentions. He folded his fingers on the bell peppers as he began to dice them.

Memories began to return to him and he halted the path of his knife as he recalled them. Multiple memories overlapped of him cutting vegetables. Steve usually made dinner but Bucky was better at prep work. Yet nowhere in his memories did he recall cutting vegetables with his metal arm. He looked down again at how the realistic hand curled to protect his fingers from the knife, even as he knew that the blade would not pierce it. What had happened to his real arm? The metal one felt powerful and strong but for some reason he didn’t feel like he liked it. Something was rising like a tide in his head and unlike the memories he had summoned, this wave felt dangerously like an undertow. He pushed the thoughts away as he kept dicing.

He turned on the stove. It was different than how he remembered it but he still knew how it worked. He had observed Hermione cook—he was always watching her. The pan heated and Bucky cracked eggs with his right hand, dexterous enough that he could do it with just the one. He caught Hermione’s appreciative glance—she always used two hands to crack hers. Steve always got shell in whatever he tried making so Bucky had taken to cracking eggs whenever they were needed; it was part of the reason he had taken on making breakfast when they first moved in together.

Bucky mixed the omelet perfectly, throwing in the vegetables and cheese. He swirled the spatula around the edges of the egg to ensure it wasn’t sticking. He glanced over his shoulder at Hermione and Steve with a look he hoped said ‘watch this’ and turned slightly to increase their vision as he flipped the omelet in the pan. He smiled triumphantly at Hermione’s impressed smile.

“Show off.” Steve muttered with faux-irritation if his suppressed smile was anything to go by. Bucky shrugged in response. He returned the pan to the stove and pulled out a plate from the shelves. He delivered the plated omelet with a flourish to Hermione.

“Bon Appétit!” Bucky said with a poor exaggerated rendition of Frenchie’s accent. For a moment he paused as he heard Frenchie counting down in French. The overlap caused a cold feeling to settle across his limbs. Bucky escaped the recollection when Hermione thanked him for the meal and took the plate. He waited as she took a hesitant bite. Her features lit up with her first bite.

“It’s good!” She exclaimed and Bucky scoffed.

“No need to be surprised!” Bucky complained lightly and Steve laughed.

“Yeah, when he makes a soup that doesn’t make you gag is when you should be surprised.” Steve taunted and Bucky bristled.

“Alright, alright—peanut gallery, enough from you or you’re back to drinking your eggs!” Bucky threatened. Steve held his hands up in a conciliatory gesture of peace and Hermione gave a surprised
laugh. Bucky felt his heart swell. “There you go, darling; laughing is easy when you’re next to a knucklehead like him.” Bucky said as he gestured towards Steve.

“Hey!” Steve said indignantly. “Hermione, don’t listen to a jerk like him.” Steve defended. Bucky laughed as he threw vegetables into Steve’s omelet. He peeked over his shoulder at Hermione who was alternating between politely smiling and eating her omelet. She was quiet, Bucky realized. She normally spoke animatedly with Steve and her silence made Bucky feel self-conscious.

“You don’t have to eat it if you don’t like it.” Bucky told her as he passed Steve his own omelet. Steve was distracted, however, as he had also turned his attention to Hermione when she jumped.

“No! It’s not—that’s not—“Hermione took a breath to compose herself. “Bucky, it is good; I promise. Thank you for making it!” Hermione’s smiled sincerely but it tinged like something was barely holding it up. Bucky felt his brow furrow and a frown pull at his lips. Hermione reached forward and grasped his human hand. “Thank you, Bucky; I mean it. I may have to assign you breakfast duty.” Hermione joked and Bucky felt himself finally ease.

“His breakfasts can get repetitive so you might not want to assign him that duty yet.” Steve interjected. Bucky was thankful that the comment eased the tension that had arisen but it didn’t stop Bucky from playfully snatching the omelet back. “Hey!” Steve protested and Bucky took a bite of it before returning it to his best pal. Steve grabbed the plate possessively and Bucky ruffled his hair. Steve scowled as he patted it down again and Bucky was pleased when Hermione snorted out laughter behind her hand. He cooked his own omelet before turning to stand by the island to eat.

“We can move to the table.” Hermione offered when she realized he was standing. Bucky waved her off.

“A little standing isn’t going to kill me.” Bucky said. For some reason he felt incredibly fit—more in shape than he ever was before he joined the military. An echo of a conversation passed through his head.

“I joined the army…”

Bucky blinked as he forced himself to take another bite. The echo had a painful undertone to it and Bucky strived to ignore it. He caught Hermione staring at him pensively and he reflexively paired a wink with a grin. Girls loved it. When Hermione’s turned red—God, he could do this all day—he knew she was just as susceptible to it as the girls he had taken out before. He could recall a lot of girls—he took different ones out all the time—but none of them had an ounce of comparison to Hermione. He suddenly wanted to take her out somewhere. He realized he hadn’t even left her house since he had been there. What did outside look like? He remembered cars were different, buildings were different, people looked different. His memories were shuffling but they all seemed to have that sad tinge that he wanted to avoid. Instead he looked at the finished plates as Hermione primly wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“Hermione,” Bucky said and she looked up, catching his eyes. “Can you do the thing?” Bucky said as he waved his hand. Her eyes lit with recognition and a piece of wood—her wand—popped out and sent the dishes to the sink to be washed. Bucky whistled appreciatively. “Magic.” He said and Steve nodded with his own smile. “All done?” Bucky asked rhetorically. Steve and Hermione nodded and Bucky walked to the other side of the island to grasp at their hands. He led them to the center of the atrium before depositing them there.

“Bucky?” Steve asked in confusion as Bucky began walking towards the bedrooms.

“Stay there!” Bucky commanded as he went to Steve’s room. He found Steve’s records and began
filtering through them. He glanced at the records and scoffed. Steve’s music was always too slow for
the style of dancing Bucky preferred, but given that Steve had two left feet, it made sense. Bucky
found one disc that would be sufficient and took it with him. He returned swiftly catching Steve and
Hermione ending some sort of hushed conversation. Bucky disregarded it.

Next to Hermione’s grand piano that she still hadn’t played, Steve’s record player had been set on a
table. They hadn’t used it yet but as Bucky placed the record and moved the needle, he was
determined to amend that. The music began playing and Bucky turned around excitedly. Steve’s
groan caused Hermione to look up at him bewildered.

“Please tell me we aren’t doing what I think we’re doing.” Steve whined and Bucky slapped a hand
on his back.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Stevie!” Bucky said cheerfully and Steve groaned again.

“What…what are we going to be doing?” Hermione asked hesitantly. Bucky offered his hand with a
slight bow.

“May I have this dance?” Bucky requested in response. Hermione’s wide eyes blinked in surprise as
emotions filtered across her face. The long moment before she answered made him feel like a ham
and he exhaled his bated breath when she determinedly placed her hand into his. He pulled her to
him tautly, enjoying her expression of anticipation and excitement. Steve stomped off beside them
towards the couch.

“I’ll just be over here.” Steve complained.

“Don’t mope, Steve! You better be watching ‘cause you’ve got the next dance!” Bucky laughed as
Steve’s face paled.

“Bucky!” Steve drew his name out in irritation but Bucky turned to fix his stare on Hermione. She
was short enough that she had to lean back a little to meet his eyes with her own.

“Ready?” Bucky asked and Hermione gave a sharp nod. Bucky tapped his foot to the beat before
launching into movements on the correct step. He smiled freely when she kept up with him—her
movements losing their insecurity as Bucky guided her around the room. She missed some of the
more complex cues he displayed but she got most of them in an indication that she apparently knew
at least a little dancing. He guided her wrist across her body and she followed through on the turn;
this definitely was not her first dance and Bucky felt a thrill of petty delight when he realized Steve
would have his work cut out for him. Steve’s groan confirmed that Steve also understood.

“You’ve danced, Hermione?” Steve grumbled as the song ended. Hermione was flushed but smiling
pleasantly in Bucky’s arms.

“Well, yes, I went to some lessons for swing—after we met, in fact.” Hermione admitted as she
patted down her voluminous hair; it had taken flight during the dance in a way Bucky liked but it
remained that way when she stopped.

“Maybe we should put you in shoes.” Bucky said with a snicker. Hermione wiggled her toes. She
looked at Steve warily.

“Steve, are you going to clip my toes with your feet?” She asked.

“No”

“Yes.”
Steve glared at Bucky’s affirmative answer and Bucky shrugged and beckoned him. Steve trudged forward and Bucky passed Hermione into his arms. Bucky corrected Steve’s form—ignoring Steve’s exaggerated sigh—before he walked over to the record player.

“We’re going to do a slower song, Stevie, that’s hopefully more your speed.” Bucky mocked and Steve shot him a dark look. The song was familiar to Steve, Bucky knew, because this was the record Bucky played whenever he tried to teach Steve how to dance. He hoped that having Hermione in his arms might help his dancing ability along.

Steve kept it simple as he danced, focusing on staying on beat in a fixed dancing form. Hermione seemed tickled by Steve’s face of concentration and Bucky had to quell his own desire to laugh.

“Give her a turn, Stevie.” Bucky instructed and Steve sent an impressive glower his way but complied. They danced the length of the song, Steve stepping on Hermione’s feet once lightly enough that she only laughed. Steve’s red-faced pout was enough to have Bucky clutching his sides in laughter and Steve stopped dancing to glare harder at his friend.

“Steve, how are you still so bad at this?” Bucky teased and Steve glowered. Bucky wiped a tear from his eye as Steve angrily stomped away. Hermione looked concerned and moved to follow but Bucky caught her arm. She looked at him inquisitively but he could see disappointment and displeasure in her eyes. Bucky sobered up immediately. “Don’t worry, Hermione; Steve and I have played this game before and he always comes back with something.” Hermione glanced sullenly towards the hallway where Steve had disappeared.

“You were being surprisingly rude to him.” Hermione ventured to say. “I shudder to think what you’d say of me if I had stepped on your toes.”

“Steve and I tease each other like that ’cause that’s what brothers do. Trust me; he’s been just as bad if not worse before.” Bucky said ruefully before smiling at Hermione fondly. “Your dancing was really good—and I’m not just saying it because you didn’t step on my toes. But even if you did step on my toes the pleasure of holding you in my arms would make it worth it.” Bucky smiled and Hermione’s face pinked again. He thought it’d be a fun game to see how many time she could blush in a day. She was saved a response as Steve rounded the hallway corner.

“I’ve been agonizing over whether or not this is finished all yesterday but Bucky’s forced dancing lesson settled my decision.” Steve interrupted, sauntering over with a swagger that made Bucky narrow his eyes. Bucky scoffed. Clever bastard. “Bucky needs a lesson in humility.” Steve said as he tossed Bucky a smirk. Bucky took the pad and sat down on the couch as she gazed at it.

“I’ve been agonizing over whether or not this is finished all yesterday but Bucky’s forced dancing lesson settled my decision.” Steve interrupted, sauntering over with a swagger that made Bucky narrow his eyes. Bucky’s eyes followed as Steve passed his drawing pad to Hermione. Bucky scoffed. “Bucky needs a lesson in humility.” Steve said as he tossed Bucky a smirk. Hermione took the pad and sat down on the couch as she gazed at it.

“Steve...this is...is that me?” Hermione whispered reverently. Bucky frowned and leaned over the back of the couch so he could glance over Hermione’s shoulder.

“Is that me?” Bucky added as he leaned down to look. Something pitted in his stomach as he observed the drawing. Hermione was bent over Bucky with her hands posed around his temples. They were staring deeply into each other’s eyes with a visible intensity. The library was drawn in the background with a detail Bucky expected from Steve. “You don’t normally draw people.” Bucky said as he straightened up to look at Steve. Images of Steve’s doodles from childhood all the way to his detailed landscape sketches in adulthood filtered through Bucky’s mind but he could only recall a few drawings of people—most of them exaggerated and caricaturized.

“I followed my inspiration.” Steve said meekly. Hermione looked up at Steve.

“This is really good.” Hermione said sincerely. Steve’s ears turned red and Bucky knew he was both
extremely embarrassed and pleased. Bucky clapped him on his shoulders.

“Really good job, Stevie; I think I’m properly humbled.” Bucky said lightly and Steve only scowled in playful disbelief. “Granted, art is easy when you start with two beautiful subjects.” Bucky said with a shrug. He laughed when Steve shoved him.

“Alright,” Steve said after he contained his own chuckle. “Now that I’ve wowed Hermione, she owes me a stunning piano piece.” Hermione looked up in panic.

“I haven’t practiced since you took so long to draw!” Hermione complained as she passed the pad back to Steve.

“I hadn’t drawn in 70 years but I did just fine.” Steve teased and Hermione huffed in a way that made her hair fan out behind her.

“You!” Hermione exclaimed as she rushed around the couch. Bucky and Steve both laughed as she began to shepherd them back into the hallway. “If I’m performing, I get at least a few minutes to warm up and practice! Steve, you take Bucky to the roof—the plants need to be watered!” Steve reluctantly led the exposition upstairs after they both got a look at Hermione’s serious mien as she told them to not return until the signal came. Steve trudged up the stairs, petulantly. The silence became stale when they reached the roof.

“What were you and Hermione talking about when I left to get the record?” Bucky asked with a feigned nonchalance. Steve’s shoulders hitched up in alarm but Steve did not even break his stride as he walked towards the greenhouse.

“Just commenting on your progress.” Steve said lightly as he reached to open the greenhouse door. Bucky caught his friend on the shoulder and forced him to turn around. Steve’s face was guarded and that was enough to make Bucky uneasy.

“Steve, come on—I know I don’t remember everything but I remember you’re a shit liar with a shit ton of tells.” Bucky said and Steve eyed Bucky in a way that was searching. When Steve exhaled, Bucky knew he had won.

“You’re making her uncomfortable, Buck.” Steve explained calmly. Bucky yanked back in surprise.

“Did she say that or are you saying that?” Bucky asked suspiciously.

“She said that your…behavior was just more intense than it has been since she’s known you—and it was already pretty intense.” Steve clarified. Bucky felt his eyebrows furrow in confusion.

“She didn’t seem like she got it before.” Bucky elaborated. Steve took a turn to be confused.

“What didn’t she get?” Steve asked and Bucky looked at his friend in surprise.

“You don’t get it either?” Bucky countered and Steve sighed in exasperation.

“Apparently not.” Steve ground out. They stared at each other, eyes searching the other’s.

“What she means to me.” Bucky finally said.

“What does she mean to you?” Steve asked, his face guarded. Bucky scoffed.

“The same thing she probably means to you.” Bucky answered vaguely. Steve’s nostrils flared.

“Neither of us should be feeling anything for Hermione except for appreciation, gratitude, and
“You don’t feel things because you should, Steve. Stop speaking nonsense.” Bucky chided as he pushed Steve to the side. Steve moved enough that Bucky could open the greenhouse door.

“I’m serious, Buck. You are her patient—it’s not right.” Steve said again and Bucky paused from filling up the water canister to turn to his friend.

“So, what—I don’t remember enough to be attracted to someone so I can’t? But you can?” Bucky made a sound of disbelief before he turned off the facet and began watering the seedlings like he remembered.

“I’m…I’m a patient, too.” Steve admitted as he awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. “I should only feel gratitude towards Hermione.” Bucky gave him a pitying look.

“But you don’t feel just that.” Bucky pointed out and Steve exhaled.

“I’m…I’m a patient, too.” Steve admitted as he awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. “I should only feel gratitude towards Hermione.” Bucky gave him a pitying look.

“But you don’t feel just that.” Bucky pointed out and Steve exhaled.

“No. But that’s beside the point. You and I can’t tie her down because of our personal damages.” Steve determined. Bucky hung the canister on the hook before turning to evaluate his friend.

“Even if I agreed that I shouldn’t be pursuing anything with Hermione, I don’t understand why you think you shouldn’t either?” Bucky said in confusion. “As far as I can tell, you’re healthier than you’ve ever been and just as gutsy—if not more so. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you manage your composure around a girl like Hermione.” Bucky took the time to filter the memories he could access but they were all filled with bumbling, oblivious, awkward Steve.

“What we went through…it isn’t easy to adjust.” Steve said in a quiet voice. It was the kind of voice Steve never really used. It was filled with insecurity and shame. Bucky hated it. But the memories associated with the voice were not triggered and instead Bucky’s mind spun around the sentence.

“What we went through.” What had they gone through?

Ice crept up his limbs and Bucky felt himself shudder harshly.

“What happens when you start over?”

Electricity, burned through his mind and core. Bucky fell to one knee in shock and tasted copper in his mouth where he had bitten his tongue.

“Bucky?!” Steve exclaimed loudly as he rushed over to help Bucky up. But Bucky could barely react to his friend. Not when he was feeling the undertow he had been avoiding lapping at the recesses of his mind. Bucky could feel the thoughts dragging him under and turning his vision black. Dimly he could hear Steve’s panicked echo of his name but it was quiet compared to the crescendo of another voice.

“Dobryy utrenniy soldat” Good morning soldier.

A bright light flew swiftly into the darkness that had appeared, shocking away the edges of black with its brilliance. Bucky heaved a relieving breath and his lungs expanded greedily. Steve had also turned in surprise, ready to attack what Bucky now identified as an otter. It gamboled around them both and Bucky felt a lightness surround him once more. Steve’s smile echoed his sentiments before the otter paused to regard them.

“I’m ready. Come downstairs” Hermione’s voice filtered through the glowing corporeal creature. It faded into the breeze as Bucky stood shakily, clutching the wall of the greenhouse in order to catch
"I take it that’s the signal." Bucky said with a hollow laugh.

"What happened, Buck?" Steve asked sincerely, resting his hands underneath Bucky’s elbows in case he fell again. Bucky shrugged them off gently.

“Well, a shimmering semi-aquatic animal seems to have stolen Hermione’s voice and commanded us to go downstairs.” Bucky concluded and Steve shot him a baleful look.


“You’re right, Steve—I’m not all there…but it’s coming back.” Bucky admitted. His look seemed to convince Steve to back up because Steve allowed Bucky to head towards the stairs.

“It’s all the more reason we shouldn’t get involved.” Steve reiterated and Bucky shot him a nasty look over his shoulder.

“Look, Steve. Maybe there is some truth to what you’re saying or maybe you’re wrong. All I know is that I know enough to want to be with a girl who has a wide smile, kind eyes, and a big heart…and if she makes glowing river mammals appear on rooftops in New York—well, I won’t lie to myself and say that’s not what I need to feel whole and human.” Bucky said. Steve frowned but didn’t say anything as they walked out of the hallway in silence.

Hermione was waiting with a beaming smile. She had procured two wing-back accent chairs that were seated next to the piano in a way that allowed them to view her side profile.

“You look far more excited than you did when you shoved us out of here.” Steve commented pleasantly enough, though Bucky could see the small crease in his forehead that indicated he was still unhappy with him.

“Well, I haven’t gotten to show off for anyone new in quite some time and my fretting over my skills was all for naught.” Hermione said with a mischievous smile. Bucky and Steve sat in their chair watching as Hermione gracefully sat down on the piano stool, her posture upright and controlled. She turned to face them.

“Have you heard of the Moonlight Sonata?” Hermione asked. Steve, who was terrible at anything music-related shrugged, unsure. Bucky nodded the affirmative. “I’ll play the beginning of the first movement.” Hermione said as she began only the very first stanzas. Steve’s eyes brightened from comprehension but Bucky was mostly focused on the deftness of Hermione’s capable hands. She stopped before long but Bucky could already understand that she was already excellent at the piano.

He chalked it up as one of her many, amazing talents. Steve was clapping when she stopped and Bucky hit him on the shoulder to get him to step.

“She’s not done, dingus.” Bucky chastised. Steve was properly cowed and Hermione looked amused.

“Yes, thank you, Steve, but that’s actually not the song I wanted to play to show you what very good sounds like.” Hermione said with a smirk that crinkled her eyes. Something shifted and the very air around her turned serious and intense. “I’m going to be playing the third movement. It’s far less common than the first movement and also my favorite piece; I hope you enjoy it.” Hermione said before she turned to hover her hands above the keys. Then, she was off.

Bucky’s mouth dropped open along with Steve’s beside him as her nimble fingers worked effortlessly along the keys. The sound was brisk and her movements crisp as she floated along the
ivory. She wasn’t good—she was amazing. Bucky much preferred dance music to classical music but he was stunned by her abilities. She finished the song with a flourish before lifting her hands. The air paused in the silence that followed before Steve began clapping enthusiastically. Bucky followed a moment later and Hermione turned to face them with a pink face.

“That was amazing, Hermione!” Steve said awe-struck.

“Incredible!” Bucky added and Hermione rotated on the bench to face them.

“Thank you! I really enjoy playing.” Hermione said as she meekly tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

“How did you learn to play like that?” Steve asked, still gushing over her performance.

“Well, I wanted to balance aspects in my life and I needed a … benign hobby. I took lessons and now I’ve been playing for nearly eight years now—not including my forays into the hobby as a child.” Hermione said with a pleased smile.

“I think we’ve both been humbled.” Bucky determined and was rewarded with Hermione’s laugh; it pleased Bucky immensely.

“You wouldn’t be the first pair of boys I’ve proved wrong.” Hermione teased and Bucky faded a little at the inside reference he didn’t get. Bucky sucked the inside of his cheek in a pout.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” Steve asked with feigned frustration. Hermione’s mouth tweaked to the side in amusement.

“I’m rather poor at drawing so you have me beat there.” Hermione admitted and Steve brightened. “Well, in any case, now that I’ve put two cocky boys in their place, my goals for the day have been met.” Hermione’s face still lingered with a smile that Bucky felt to be equal parts welcome and enchanting. His plans for the day wouldn’t matter as long as she was there with him.

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By the time they had begun their nightly routine, Bucky had to steer both Steve and Hermione away from negative emotions. Steve seemed to be conflicted with whatever he thought he shouldn’t be feeling for Hermione and Hermione kept dipping into some spiral of sadness, reason undetermined. Bucky had distracted them by throwing a fruit party so they could finally finish trying all the new fruit Steve had procured. Unfortunately, there were only so many jokes about fruit and sweetness that Bucky could make before he was silent and the mood turned somber again.

Bucky exhaled as he stripped his shirt. He tossed the article in Hermione’s clothing bin and noticed her appreciative gaze and heated face. She had been hyper-sensitive to Bucky’s proximity all day, to his immense pleasure. Bucky took a step towards her and her eyes jumped to his, connected.

“I can help you if you need it.” Bucky offered his voice low and husky in a way he had perfected. Hermione’s eye’s widened.

“Bucky!” Steve yelled in a reprimand that had Bucky snickering.

“Get in the tub.” Hermione finally said as she shoved Bucky towards the bathroom. He glanced back at Steve’s stern face and couldn’t resist.

“You’re welcome to join.” Bucky suggested and Hermione retracted her shoving hands in order to cover her face in exasperation. Bucky still noticed the red beneath it. “Steve can be chaperone.”
Bucky baited.

“This isn’t appropriate, Bucky.” Steve said in a seething tone that caused Hermione to flinch. Bucky sent a glare towards Steve who looked abashed at Hermione’s reaction.

“Who’s going to wash my hair?” Bucky said softer as he reached for Hermione’s hand. He drew it from her face to hold it gently before him.

“Your…hair?” Hermione asked still refusing to meet his eyes.

“You always wash it.” Bucky spotted. Hermione’s mouth tweaked to the side.

“I do…but…” Hermione trailed off uneasily.

“Bucky, you can wash your own hair.” Steve said with exasperation.

“Don’t be jealous, Steve, that Hermione and I have a system.” Bucky reprimanded. Hermione had finally turned her head to meet his eyes.

“Don’t you want privacy?” Hermione asked genuinely confused.


“Oh.” She said softly, her eyes downcast.

“What do you say, Hermione? Can I borrow your hands?” Bucky waggled his eyebrows suggestively to lighten the suddenly somber mood. It tricked a smile onto her face that she quickly stowed.

“I suppose so.” Hermione finally said. “But just to wash your hair.” Hermione elaborated and Bucky considered it a blinding success. He shot Steve a triumphant look that ruffled his friend’s feathers as he walked deeper into the bathroom. Steve stomped in after them.

“Oh, you joining, Stevie?” Bucky joked as he started the tub and diverged of his pants. Hermione had pin-pointedly turned her face upwards even though Bucky was still in his underwear.

“I’m chaperoning.” Steve said through clench teeth. Judging by the tick on Steve’s jaw, he was less than pleased at Bucky’s antics. Bucky could care less. Bucky stripped and hopped into the tub.

“If you ever want to hear Steve’s voice go up two octaves, stick him in a freezing cold water.” Bucky taunted to be willfully childish.

“Bucky wears all dark colors because he always stains his light colors with something—usually food.” Steve returned crossly. Bucky narrowed his eyes, intent on retorting when a wave of water trickled over his head and caused him to sputter unintelligibly in surprise. It stopped and Bucky turned to Hermione who was holding an upright wand that had rained water like a fountain.

“I’m not here to chaperone children; I’m here to wash your hair, Bucky.” Hermione said waspishly. “So I suggest you finish quickly before I put you in time out.” Bucky pouted petulantly before diligently washing himself. Hermione had turned away to give him the semblance of privacy Bucky didn’t want. Steve was glaring at Bucky, eyes shifting towards Hermione with a look that promised retribution.

“Hermione?” Bucky inquired lightly and Hermione looked down at Bucky, taking the outstretched
shampoo bottle from Bucky’s hand and squeezing the liquid into the palm of her hand. Bucky closed his eyes at her touch—eager to have it. He moaned blissfully at the sensation, noticing Hermione’s brief pause of her digits before she continued her relaxing ministrations.

“Thank you.” Bucky purred affectionately, drunk from the simply satisfaction of feeling her caress. He heard her breathing as it hitched and panted, he wanted to look up at her and see her face but he didn’t want to spook her and cause her to stop. Steve, the bastard, cleared his throat behind them and Hermione jumped in surprised. She rinsed his head quickly.

“You’re done. Get out of there before you start pruning.” Hermione commanded as she passed him a towel. Bucky stared at Steve sourly before accepting the towel. Bucky dried off slightly, wrapping the towel loosely around his waist and allowing his hair to drip water down his body. Hermione sighed before summoning another towel that she used to towel-dry Bucky’s hair. Bucky smirked even as she roughly dried his head. “Off you go—it’s my turn.” Hermione shooed them off as she prepared to go to the shower. Bucky turned around quickly.

“I’m not leaving.” Bucky said steadfast. Hermione frowned.

“Bucky, let her shower by herself.” Steve said irritated.

“Steve can stay and chaperone, but I’m not leaving.” Bucky reiterated. Hermione was staring at him intently.

“I don’t want to chaperone. Bucky, this is a matter of privacy!” Steve ground out harshly. Bucky didn’t turn away from Hermione’s intense gaze.

“It’s a matter of danger, Steve.” Bucky said solemnly. Steve scoffed slightly.

“It’s a shower—not a battlefield, Buck.” Steve said and Bucky tore his eyes away from Hermione to give his friend a nasty look.

“Maybe not for you.” Bucky muttered bitterly under his breath. Steve looked taken aback by the comment and seemed to immediately deflate and acquiesce to Bucky’s demands. He moved further into the bathroom to stay carefully out of view of where Hermione would be.

“Are you okay with this, Hermione?” Steve asked hesitantly and Hermione shrugged.

“It is what it is.” Hermione said calmly. Bucky walked himself across from her shower door and leaned back against the wall. She gave him a look and he rolled his eyes as he turned his head. When the water turned on he snapped his eyes back to her. She had turned to show him her back in an effort to shelter herself from his eyes.

The truth was Bucky wasn’t really sure why he hated the shower. Staring into the closed, tiled area just seemed to fill him with dread. The sound of the water as it rushed through the showerhead grated on his nerves. He couldn’t even admire Hermione’s body as she showered; he was too panicked that something would happen to her. The pressure of the water could become blinding...might become choking. He just wanted to make sure she was safe. He preferred the tub and wished she had chosen to use it. At least the large porcelain beast only inspired memories largely centered on Hermione and her diligent attention. Part of him was disappointed that she didn’t wash all of him like he remembered but he was pleased enough that he at least got her to wash his hair.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed, Hermione.” Bucky said as he noticed the tension in her bent shoulders.

“Well, yes, talking to me while I’m starkers is hardly going to put me at ease.” Hermione bit out
snappishly. Bucky sighed.

“I do this all the time.” Bucky said exasperated. “I’m just keeping you safe.” Bucky explained. “Is that so bad?” Hermione’s face scrunched in pain before she opened her eyes sadly.

“No…no…it’s not. Give me a second and I’ll finish quickly.” Hermione said remorsefully. She was quick as she showered and rinsed off, her posture never leaving from its hunched and protective shape. Bucky hated to see her like this—she always held herself well. Within minutes he was passing her a towel and he turned to allow her the privacy she apparently deemed she needed. Bucky and Steve eyed each other apprehensively until Hermione cleared her throat behind them, already dressed for bed. They marched out awkwardly and Bucky felt the tension and melancholy raise to an all-time high.


“Good.” Bucky said fiercely. Hermione shifted a little as they hovered by the makeshift bed.

“I haven’t healed you today.” Hermione said softly. “Do you mind if I do that before bed?” Bucky raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“You don’t even have to ask.” Bucky said seriously as he lay down inside the covers. Hermione positioned herself to lean over him and Steve sat upright beside the bed, his toes tucked into the covers. Bucky returned his gaze to Hermione and caught her eyes. Color glowed from beside his temples but all he could focus on was her swirling amber eyes, turbulent with something. Before he knew it, she was done.

“Are you okay?” Hermione asked quietly.

“Peachy.” Bucky said with a slur. It always left him drowsy and exhausted when she healed him. Hermione seemed to hesitate by the covers, unsure of her next step until Bucky lifted the sheet and moved his bear to his other side in order to free up her spot. At the invitation, she clambered in beside Bucky and Bucky turned on his side to regard her. “You’ll be here tomorrow?” Bucky asked, already feeling the weight of the day pressing down on his lids.

“I will.” Hermione promised back.

“What about you, punk?” Bucky asked Steve, cursing his numb tongue for his strange sleepy accent.

“Couldn’t get rid of me if you tried.” Steve remarked arrogantly. Bucky scoffed.

“Hermione.” Bucky called out as he looked into her eyes. Her eyebrows were furrowed and wetness was glistening in her eyes. Her breathing looked short and chopping and Bucky wanted to wake up just to push whatever sadness weighing on her away. “Hey.” Bucky mumbled. “I’ll be here in the morning; no need to look so uneasy.” Bucky commented. Hermione’s sad smile caused him to ache.

“Okay. I’ll be here.” Hermione reiterated in a whisper.

“Darling,” Bucky reiterated the endearment that she had stopped using since he woke up. “Mind if I request a lullaby?” Her smile was upturned but her eyes still looked despondent as she sung the familiar tune. Bucky couldn’t help but feel it was a little sadder than usual but it didn’t change the fact that it still eased him to sleep. Her eyes were the last thing he saw before he faded into the night, her voice his last sound, and her hand grasping his was the last thing he felt before he was gone, not knowing what tomorrow would bring but confident that Steve and Hermione would be there when he awoke again.
A/N: I don't own either universe & Hermione can’t draw…
I’ve been waiting soooo long to post this chapter. It’s my favorite chapter that I’ve written so far. I do have to warn you, though. Bucky’s personality is in transition—his memories still blocked. Tell me what you think about Bucky’s personality and how’s he interacted with Hermione and Steve; I’m curious for your perspective in how he’ll end up being in the future.
As always, thank you so much for your comments, reviews, follows and favorites! Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites!
If you have any headcanons/fluffs/plot bunnies you want to see, let me know and I'll see what I can do!
Thank you for reading and please enjoy!
He was drowning in his sleep. The lake that had been still and calm before had turned into an ocean. Riotous waves threatened his buoyancy before he was suddenly pulled under. He awoke, gasping for air.

The memories that had felt like nightmares were the first thing he remembered when he woke up—shot, after shot, after stab, after explosion. Distantly he could recall he killed a president. Less distantly he recalled killing a man who gave Steve his shield; he killed that man’s wife, too. Tears threatened to leak from Bucky’s eyes when he finally opened them. He felt comfortable and warm but also entirely too constricted with his own anguish and agony. The world around him seemed to burst with a new clarity compared to the wide brush strokes he had viewed it as before. In his newfound vividness, he realized his hand was clutched by the most beautiful woman. Granted, she was the first thing his eyes had remarked in the brand new same world—but he found the sight of her stunning and overwhelming. The world around him was so blindingly beautiful that it hurt him to even exist in it at all.

He closed his eyes to rid the rising light of the approaching day but he couldn’t escape it. The interruption only came when he saw the silver hand unfurled before him. He felt his breath intake sharply as the world dimmed until all he could see was the silver arm killing. He knew he was imagining the blood but it painted a terrifying image with its proximity to her—Hermione—and despite still having gaps in his memory he knew she was too pure and too kind and too good to even be touched by his real hand. He remembered suddenly that he was a monster. The realization propelled adrenaline into his system as he jumped away instinctively. She awakened in response to his motion. He observed, still panting breathlessly, as her brown eyes moved from sleepy to alert. She took in his stance and her eyes brimmed with compassion and worry. She stood. He felt his breathing become shallow and choppy as she focused her attention on him. It scared him, he realized, that he would kill her because that was what he did now—what he had been doing. He was relieved when he saw Steve rise from the floor beside Hermione, his face cautious and wary—like it should be.

“What were you thinking?” Bucky growled out and Steve and Hermione both looked at him in surprise.

“What?” Steve asked hesitantly, his brow furrowing.
“I could’ve hurt her! I could’ve killed her!” Bucky whispered harshly as he took another step back. Something in her eyes flashed and she leapt towards him, hands outstretched. He jumped back again and hit the wall with an anguished moan; her hands managed to grab his own murderous ones.

“You won’t kill me. I already know you won’t.” She said so earnestly—so confidently—that he desperately wanted to believe her. He held her stare—her eyes shining that dangerous amber—before he turned to Steve with no doubt a pleading expression.

“Please, Steve.” Bucky did not quite beg but judging by Steve’s clenched jaw he conveyed his message.

“Hermione.” Steve said commandingly and Hermione attempted to pin Bucky’s eyes with hers. Bucky steadfastly avoided them and Hermione sighed, releasing him and letting go slowly. Bucky slid down the wall as she took a reluctant step back.

“How are you feeling?” She inquired softly, voice sounding properly disconcerted.

“What do you remember?” Steve asked. Bucky placed his head in his hands, scrubbing roughly at his face.

“Too much.” Bucky responded and he really did. Yet despite his self-identification, he couldn’t seem to compel himself to truly shake Hermione off when her cool hands glowed blue against his temples—his agony rescinding enough to be manageable.

“I need to leave.” Bucky said as he quickly stood, his breath coming out in erratic bursts. “It’s dangerous. Hydra can—“

“No one will find us here.” Hermione said with a sudden clinical nature that startled Bucky as much as it soothed him. “Not unless I will it.” Hermione continued, piercing him with eyes he had never seen—not dead, just detached and cool. Her manner must have been truly different because Steve also looked taken aback.

“Hydra isn’t the only danger—“Bucky tried again.

“You are safest from hurting others when you are here.” Hermione succinctly addressed his concerns. Bucky felt his hair flop in front of his face as he looked up at her.

“You two aren’t.” Bucky admitted. Hermione looked at him grimly as something leapt into her open palm.

“We really are.” Hermione said and aimed a stick at him. Light struck him and he felt even his metal arm tighten stiffly to his body. His eyes could move and he stared at her intently as he struggled against the invisible bonds. “You have to stay here to heal.” Hermione continued emotionlessly.

“There are triggers in your mind—words that anyone can say and you will be forced to do their will.” He spotted the remorse in her eyes before she hid it behind her cool exterior. “Your mind needs to heal before I can remove them and that means you will have to stay and heal here until that time I deem you clean.” She waved her wand—he recalled she was a witch—and he dropped to the floor on his knees. He could not manage a proper glare as he stared up at her resentfully, his heart clenching at the emptiness in her eyes. “Do you understand? You cannot leave.” Hermione said authoritatively. Bucky paused before nodding and her eyes closed, her face shuttered. “I’m going to put on a pot of tea—bring him up to speed, Steve.” She disappeared quickly out her door and Steve looked up at Bucky hesitantly.

“Welcome back?” Steve greeted cautiously. Bucky looked down at the cozy nest they had all been
sleeping in together.

“I’m not sleeping here.” Bucky finalized as he looked at the ruffled blankets. Steve sighed.

“I’ll show you the guest room.” Steve offered, turning to lead the way. He glanced over his shoulder frequently to look at Bucky, to ensure he was still there. Bucky could tell that Steve was attempting to appear neutral but Bucky remembered Steve’s tells. Steve might try to hide it but Bucky recognized the concern…the disappointment. Steve opened the door to the room Bucky had never used for anything beyond his new clothing. He took a moment to inspect it further. Neutral. Simple. Clean. Empty. He flopped down on the corner of the bed and held his head in his hands.

“Bucky.” Steve said his tone unsure.

“What did I do?” Bucky bemoaned.

“You didn’t do anything.” Steve was adamant.

“I did everything.” Bucky responded, recalling the faces of the people he had murdered and now he dared touch Hermione with his hands. He had flirted with her, he realized in alarm. Yesterday, he was honestly intent on pursuing her. Steve had been right; he hadn’t remembered enough to be allowed to be attracted to anyone. Bucky didn’t deserve either of their consideration.

“What you did all those years…Hydra used you, Bucky; it wasn’t your fault—you didn’t have a choice.” Steve determined resolutely.

“I know. But I did it.” Bucky whispered. He heard Steve shuffle his feet anxiously.

“It’s going to be okay, Bucky.” Steve said softly and Bucky let out a mirthless laugh of disbelief. “Hermione can help.” Steve added confidently.

“You were right, Steve.” Bucky added quietly. “I should never have pursued her…should never have touched her or held her hand or—God—I slept beside her.” Bucky felt the tips of his metal fingers dig too deeply into his flesh. He unfurled them slowly.

“I was there, too.” Steve defended and Bucky brought his hands down to glare at him.

“The last time we saw each other, I nearly killed you.” Bucky bit out viciously. Steve’s lips pulled into a frown.

“Well, I wasn’t too keen on that—but I got better.” Steve admitted morosely. Bucky felt his lips twitch at his friend’s casual disregard for nearly dying. “Do you remember the time you’ve been here? You did yesterday but…”

“Yesterday I thought I was going to sweep Hermione off her feet despite not remembering that I had been frozen on and off for the past half-century as a preserved assassin.” Bucky added angrily. “I remember my time here just fine but I’m not going back to that…behavior.” Bucky finished with a scowl. Steve’s perpetual frown deepened.

“I think you upset Hermione.” Steve commented and Bucky wondered how anyone could see through the wall she had built up so thoroughly in an instant. “I’ve never seen her like that before.” Steve continued as an explanation.

“Yesterday you said you wouldn’t lie to yourself—you said that she made you feel whole and human.” Steve pointed out. Bucky didn’t refute his point.

“You should be happy, Steve; now you can have her all to yourself.” Bucky baited petulantly.

“Dammit, Bucky!” Steve cursed, visibly angry. Bucky’s eyes did not even widen at the outburst. “My priority is your health and happiness. Pursuing Hermione as a romantic option does not even compare to pursuing whatever path it takes for you to be well!” The air turned stale around them as the words sank in. Bucky had averted his eyes to the metal hand furling and unfurling on his lap. Bucky swallowed uneasily, thick with emotion.

“I need time, Steve. Can’t you just—can I just be alone?” Bucky asked. Steve waited a moment to respond.

“You aren’t going to leave?” Steve clarified hesitantly. Bucky looked away from his hand to look up at his friend.

“She was right, Steve; I can’t be used if I’m locked up here.” Steve winced at Bucky’s phrasing.

“It’s not like that, Buck.” Steve pleaded softly. Bucky gave him a bleak smile.

“It’s what it needs to be.” Bucky said, waving off his friend so he could be left alone. Steve paused again, unsure.

“We’re right outside, Buck—the both of us.” Steve said solemnly. Bucky let out of an exhale as he watched the door close, flopping back on the bed to stare up at the ceiling. What had he been doing here? He still recalled the day before with glaring clarity. He was playing house. For a single day, he had forgotten the monster he truly was and allowed himself to feel normal and safe. He wasn’t, he knew. He thought even if Steve had been the one captured by Hydra he would’ve somehow escaped their mind-control. Bucky still couldn’t recall everything he had done and everything he had been, but he thought there had been plenty of opportunities to off himself. Steve would rather have died than kill innocent people. Maybe Bucky had suffered at the hands of Hydra and their conditioning tactics, but he had done what he needed to survive; he chose to live at the expense and loss of others. Maybe that simple fact indicated that there had always been a monster lurking within him.

Bucky stood up and walked to the single window in the room. He peered outside to see the concrete alley indicative of New York. He should leave, he knew. It would be safer if he just disappeared or killed himself, that way he wouldn’t hurt Steve or Hermione. He thought of Hermione’s cool, detached eyes, as she casually incapacitated him—him, a Hydra assassin super soldier. Bucky thought of the way even his metal arm was unable to shake the invisible restraint.

The house was the safest of options and now that Hermione and Steve recognized him as dangerous, they would be on guard against him and ready to protect themselves. Bucky thought of Hermione’s composed demeanor, sure that she finally understood.

Thinking of her made him think of the warmth of her hand when she held his. He thought of her soft hands as she brushed back his hair. He thought of falling asleep as he gazed into her eyes and waking up to hear her soft breathing beside him. Before he realized it, he was crying and it surprised him because he thought monsters couldn’t cry.

“I’ll be right here when you wake up, I promise.”

Bucky heard her promise clear as day, searing him with reassurance every night before he fell asleep. He felt disgusted that he yearned for her comfort even now, conjuring the image of her cool eyes
instead of the warmth she often deigned to shine upon him. Still, he recalled how she put him at ease, how she had soothed his raging heart and how he had admitted she made him feel whole and human. He dared to hope he could bask in her presence just a little longer.

He wondered if it was selfish for a monster like him to choose to live time and time again.

Steve had been unfathomably happy when he went to sleep the night before. The day had felt like a breath of fresh air—the best day he had had since before the war, even. Steve had never expected Bucky to be so cognizant and alert and normal. Even the brief moments of clarity he had displayed during the night did not assure Steve that Bucky would regain such lucidity. Yet Bucky had emerged exactly as Steve had remembered him—from cocksure flirt to teasing upbeat older brother. Despite the shock and hesitation Steve felt initially, it had all faded to the onslaught of normalcy he always felt when Bucky was being…Bucky. Steve was never capable of withstanding Bucky’s ability to draw him out of any ill-mood. Hermione however, had been unable to shift her feelings of unease at Bucky’s new flirtatious and cheerful disposition. Steve remembered the rushed conversation they shared when Bucky had disappeared in search of a record to play.

“It’s amazing, how different he seems…” Hermione commented awkwardly.

“What’s amazing is your healing ability! He’s doing great!” Steve returned excitedly. Hermione looked at him hesitantly.

“He’s giving me more attention than I’m used to…” She responded and Steve gave her a glance.

“He’s followed you around like a shadow since he’s met you.” Steve deadpanned. Hermione blushed.

“Yes, well that was an instinctual response to a caregiver. Now he’s apparently cognizant and he’s posturing and…and flirting…and I don’t know what to think about that.” Hermione admitted.

“It’s all traits of the old Bucky. He’s finally acting like himself.” Steve brushed off her concern but paused when she looked at him queerly.

“This isn’t his true self, Steve. Maybe once before but…he’s still missing significant, life-altering, personality-altering details. He may seem like he is exactly what you remembered him as but he’s not done changing yet; his other memories will drop and when that happens…well…he’s going to be reeling from the backlash of those negative experiences.” Hermione whispered her warning quickly.

Steve was saved a response when Bucky had returned.

Now Steve cursed himself for being so naïve. Hermione had completely recognized the day for what it was—another dream that would never come true. Steve sighed as he finally moved to depart from the front of Bucky’s door. He had promised not to flee but Steve was still concerned. He found Hermione in the kitchen drinking a cup of tea, her face emotionless. Steve had forgotten how surprising her personality change had struck him.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked as he approached. Her eyes darted to his before she gave him a small mirthless smile that unsettled him. In some ways, it reminded him of Natasha and he wondered briefly if the Hermione he knew had been a façade. A coldness settled into his body at the thought.

“I should be asking you that.” Hermione returned. Steve went to the cabinet to grab a mug but Hermione nudged an already made cup at him. Steve took the black tea slowly and thanked her. He had never enjoyed tea, preferring coffee, until living with the British witch before him; the dark teas
had grown on him.

“You were right.” Steve said finally. “He isn’t—. He doesn’t think—.” Steve stopped to collect himself. “He’s not the same.” Steve realized.

“You can’t take everything that he says seriously until he’s gone through therapy and healed.” Hermione stated neutrally. Steve frowned.

“I don’t think he was lying about anything yesterday.” Steve ventured in his friend’s defense. Hermione scoffed lightly.

“I believe that he believes what he said.” Hermione stated diplomatically. Steve’s frown remained.

“I think that who he was yesterday is still him—he just needs to get back there.” Steve returned. A pained look broke through the stillness of Hermione’s face and had he not been staring so intently, he might’ve missed it in its brevity.

“He’ll be someone new when he’s healed, Steve.” Hermione said authoritatively. “No one ever goes back to who they were before, they just move on…” Steve sighed deeply. He took a sip of his tea and peered at her over the lid. He wanted to question her behavior, wanted to ask her why she was appeared so emotionless, but the words burrowed in his throat.

“So, what’s the plan, now?” Steve finally asked, unable to voice his real questions. Hermione looked at him with a glint of appraisal in her eyes.

“We heal him.” Hermione said simply before taking a sip of her tea casually. Steve shuffled uneasily. She had maintained her impassivity throughout the conversation and something about it squeezed at his heart. He clenched his jaw tightly to starve off the feeling of despair that was creeping up his body. He could deal with Bucky reverting back or changing into whatever mood he was currently facing but Hermione was supposed to stay the same. He couldn’t help Bucky without her, he realized. He thought he would be supporting her but he realized he also needed her support. Unintentionally or not he had relied on her since he had first met her in the alley. Steve reached up idly to touch the penny she gave him. He still wore it, hidden beneath his shirt.

“Steve.” Hermione called. Steve looked up at her, her face still shuttered as she passed him a plate with toast, bacon, and eggs; he hadn’t even realized she had been cooking breakfast. “Can you take that to Bucky?” She requested as she slid a napkin and cutlery. Steve nodded and grabbed the plate.

“Eggs over easy for you?” She asked and though the evenness of her normally dynamic voice still unnerved him, the banality of the conversation was a comfort.

“Yes, please.” Steve said and picked up the orange juice she had poured for him. He wandered back to the hallway and knocked on Bucky’s door with his foot, his hands full.

“Bucky, it’s Steve—I have breakfast.” Steve called as he kicked the door lightly again. There was no response and lead dropped into the bottom of Steve’s belly at the thought that Bucky had broken his promise and had run away. “Bucky?!” Steve called, panic etching into his voice as he deliberated whether or not he should break down the door or call Hermione.

“Just leave it, Steve.” Bucky’s voice came through the door and Steve exhaled the breath he had held.

“It’s bacon, eggs, and toast.” Steve described. “And orange juice.” Steve offered as an afterthought.

“Just leave it there.” Bucky said again and Steve sighed, realizing Bucky had no intention of opening the door again.
“It’s going to get cold if you take too long.” Steve said finally as he set it down. “It’s outside the door.” Steve announced before turning and walking away. Hermione passed him a plate and he sat down at the kitchen table with a sigh.

“He didn’t open the door so I placed it on the floor outside his room.” Steve informed Hermione who still looked expressionless at the knowledge.

“Hopefully he’ll eat it.” Hermione said. She exhaled softly. “Give him time for now. We’ll address everything later but for now I’ll be in the basement.” Hermione said.

“What about your breakfast?” Steve asked.

“I already ate.” Hermione said as she swept the dishes away and headed downstairs. Steve watched her go before gazing around the large atrium. He had never realized how big and lonely Hermione’s residence could be.

He loved staying at her house, or so he thought, but confronted with her sudden icy demeanor it occurred to him that maybe he had just enjoyed staying with her. Bucky’s words rattled around his brain—mocking the feelings Steve had desperately attempted to keep buried. Yet despite his determination, he still sought her sweet smile that greeted him freely in the morning. With no small amount of shame he realized he luxuriated in the sound of her soft-breathing—his own lullaby at night. There was a certain familiarity and comfort he had developed since he lived with Hermione and Bucky. It was a feeling he hadn’t thought he’d ever feel again; it had begun to feel like home and the outline of something like contentedness.

Steve stared down the hallway where doors led to Hermione and Bucky. He sighed as he refocused on his priorities. Bucky was here out of Hydra’s reach and Hermione was still helping. It was more than he could ask for.

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Occlumency was not the antithesis of Legilimency. A common misconception, they were not mutually exclusive areas of studies. In some ways, they were nearly identical although great disparities between the practice and pedagogy did exist. Hermione did not excel at Occlumency in the same natural fashion she had at Legilimency though she had still trained in the subject—as was common for students of mind healing arts. From the experience, she learned that when she engaged in Occlumency, she could do so effectively against another Legimens. When she attempted to utilize Occlumency to shield herself from the unintended effects of her own brand of Legilimency, it was ineffective. While eventually Luna had found a mentor to help block most of the voices of the others around her, she had learned something else in her studies. She had learned that like many practitioners of the mind arts, she crashed after she released her Occlumency shields proportional to the exertion and time. The first lesson had been excruciatingly painful; she hadn’t dropped her shields for a few days and the resulting backlash had been devastating. She had learned to avoid invoking her shields unless it was absolutely necessary. The fact that she had raised them almost instinctively at Bucky’s visceral dismissal belied the dependency she had already developed for Bucky to be…favorable towards her.

Hermione sighed though it came out more emotionless than frustrated; she’d have to drop her shields to heal Bucky but she would only last for a short amount of time before the dam of her mind truly broke in release. She let herself kick the can down the road a little longer. She recorded Bucky’s behavior in her journal she kept of patients, each one codenamed without discerning identification. She used the records to improve her magical techniques as well as to look for statistical trends and analysis. Her forays into healing Bucky had revealed something she had long suspected: none of the healers she had trained would be able to undo his damage. Steve, experiencing largely PTSD but
unique in his physiology, could potentially be healed by one of her trainees—but Hermione would be most apt. If she was honest with herself, she knew that’d she’d never want to pass their case along for less than altruistic reasons.

She recalled Bucky’s awakening. He was not the first patient to be horrified at what they had done. He was, however, the first that she had grown attached to prior to his…regression. She wanted to be upstairs, giving him the comfort he still craved beneath his surface, but she feared extended exposure to her would increase his self-loathing; his thoughts had been just that since he had awakened, shouting loudly into her mind. She had done what was optimal given his condition but it still hurt; it hurt everyone.

She filtered through the rest of the work all afternoon, looking over work requests that she had been putting off in order to starve off the negativity of the morning. Now that Bucky was less possessive of her, she would eventually be able to leave the house. Once she was sure he definitely wouldn’t attempt to flee in her absence—she would be taking house calls again for clients around the world that required her services. She wouldn’t be able to actively heal others when she was healing Bucky and Steve, but she often worked as a consultant and could still be utilized as such. Glancing at her calendar she endeavored to remember to see her parents and her friends soon.

She stood from her desk and rolled her shoulders, disregarding the crack of her back from her hunched posture. It was already lunch time and she wandered back upstairs to investigate. Once she was on the main floor she cast her spell, identifying that Steve was on the roof presumably working out his frustration and Bucky was still in his room presumably still pouting. A quick glance down the hall revealed he hadn’t eaten his breakfast and the knowledge flickered rage underneath her Occlumency shields. She quelled the feelings before she began preparing sandwiches for lunch. She climbed up the many stairs to reach Steve at the top who was indeed training tirelessly.

“Lunch.” Hermione stated, her inflection still monotone. Later she would reflect on Steve’s visible cringe but he turned around with a hesitant smile anyway. “Bucky didn’t touch his breakfast.” Hermione regaled. Steve frowned.

“So he’s just going to starve himself?” Steve asked depressed.

“I’ll talk to him.” Hermione offered. She passed Steve the sandwich before looking at the city view.

“It’s quiet up here.” Steve commented and Hermione ‘hmmd’ noncommittally.

“It’s spelled to muffle sounds.” Hermione revealed. She felt amusement at Steve’s surprised and appreciative face but knew her own would not reveal it.

“Are you…are you okay?” Steve asked finally as she felt his eyes survey her form. She looked at him listlessly.

“Ask me again tomorrow and I’ll be able to explain.” Hermione suggested before turning to walk down the stairs. She glanced down the hallway to where the spoiled plate rested. She flicked her wand and the food and plate were sent off. She summoned Bucky’s plated sandwich from the kitchen before she returned to knock on his door. He did not respond but she knew that he was still there.

“Lunch, Bucky.” Hermione said crisply. She must have surprised Bucky because he sounded like he had dropped a book—probably his notebook.

“I’m not…I’m not hungry.” Bucky said from behind the door and Hermione had to strain her ears to hear him.
“Weren’t you ever taught not to waste food?” She drawled but she received no response. She gave up. “I’m leaving the food outside your door and I will return for dinner. You will answer the door when I return so we can have a talk about expectations.” Hermione stated firmly. She did not linger for a response before returning to the basement to hide herself in more work.

At dinner time, she went back upstairs rubbing the sides of her neck and rolling her head to the side. Steve was not in the atrium and she sent a quick spell to locate both men. They hadn’t moved. Hermione glanced down the hallway and summoned the plate and uneaten sandwich with no trace of surprise that Bucky hadn’t accepted her offerings. She banished the sandwich away with a sigh. She looked around the atrium in all its emptiness. She kept her shields tight, still, and began preparing dinner alone for the first time since she had opened her home. When the pasta was ready Hermione steered herself. She could send her Patronus only after she dropped her shields and she would need to erect it back immediately to prevent fallout from occurring in the kitchen. She was quick as she sent it, noticeably less bright than when she had sent it for her impromptu piano recital. Her shields came back up and she waited.

Steve shuffled down the stairs first; his sketchpad gripped in his hands and apparently changed from his earlier work out. The magic of the Patronus had apparently lightened Steve’s heart as he greeted her with a small smile.

“You called?” He said and she pointed to the dinner.

“I’m going to get Bucky.” Hermione said after he didn’t show. She walked back towards his room. She knocked on the door loudly wondering whether or not he would test her. She knocked again.

“Open the door, Bucky.” She said authoritatively. She waited another minute, ready to knock when the door opened slightly. She pushed it open and lingered in the threshold, unwilling to come inside. Bucky had retreated to the window, his posture hunched over and defensive. He very much looked like he was a prisoner in a jail cell despite the painted walls and patterned bed spread.

“It’s dinner time.” Hermione regaled tonelessly. Bucky hunched over himself more.

“I’m not hungry.” He answered gruffly. Hermione stared at him but he did not turn her way.

“I know you don’t want to be here—I’m sure you’d rather be off running away from your problems—but I have a solution; I am the solution. I understand you are overwhelmed, I understand this is not ideal. I will even pretend that you don’t want to eat dinner tonight but I won’t be compliant tomorrow.” She watched as Bucky’s shoulders pinched up in surprise at her declaration. “I need you to understand that there will be a new daily schedule. Starting tomorrow, you may skip meals or seek meals outside of the time Steve or I eat but you will have dinner with us. At any point of the day you are welcome to join Steve or me. You are also welcome to suggest something in particular to do. At the minimum however, I will see you before you retire to bed at the end of the night so I can heal you.” Bucky was still looking out the window, refusing to meet her eyes. She continued on. “In return, I will try not to enter your room unless emergencies dictate such or you permit it. Understood? Dinner and healing are my only two requirements. You can go anywhere within this house but I don’t recommend you leave.”

“Recommend or authorize?” Bucky questioned bitterly.

“Do you really want an answer?” Hermione wondered aloud before exhaling a controlled breath. “My primary goal as a mental health professional is to get you well enough that you can leave here of your own free will and maintain that free will. Take that however you will but I have a wide range of success stories beneath my belt.” He still had not turned to face her. “You’re excused from dinner tonight but I’ll be returning later tonight to heal you or you can come find me whenever and I’ll do it
then.” She waited another moment for a response before closing the door and returning back to the kitchen. Steve, it seemed, had eavesdropped on the conversation and looked properly abashed when she eyed him.

“How is he?” Steve asked hesitantly.

“Withdrawn.” Hermione answered tiredly. She hated when she had to be forceful with patients but each patient needed a different level of push and pull.

“What can I do?” Steve asked.

“For now—wait for him.” Hermione answered. She paused to eye him over, he wasn’t quite as hunched over as Bucky had been, but Hermione knew that he was still hurting. They returned to the kitchen and ate at the kitchen island in silence. She appreciated Steve staying to eat with her though she recognized she was emotionally distant. She’d have to explain it to him tomorrow. She wished she was capable of helping Steve now—she’d be stupid not to recognize that he wasn’t also suffering from Bucky’s demeanor. Unfortunately, she had to take care of her emotional health before she could reach out again. Somethings drained a person’s emotional wellbeing, other things refilled it. Prior to realizing she could find her unusual solace in Bucky and Steve, she had had another coping technique. Hermione swept the dishes away and walked towards the rest of the atrium.

“What are you doing?” Steve asked as he hovered behind her, unsure. Hermione gave him a grim smile.

“I’m going to play the piano.” Hermione said as she flipped up the piano key cover.

“What?” Steve asked, his eyes squeezing in confusion. Hermione sat in the piano chair and looked him over.

“I’m going to play the piano before I go and heal Bucky.” Hermione answered, she waved her hidden wand and summoned a couch pillow, with a swish it was transfiguring into the large wing-backed chair she had created before. Steve moved forward dumbly and sat down primly. “You don’t have to stay and listen.” Hermione said with trace amounts of muted amusement. Steve coughed politely.

“I’d like to stay and listen…if that’s okay?” Steve added unsure. Hermione would feel bad about contributing to his unease later but instead she merely nodded and turned to play. Today was a day for nocturnes; she decided and began playing Chopin.

In the books Hermione had written for rising magical mental health specialists, Hermione emphasized the need for individual balance and self-collection before engaging in concentrated healing. Those who insert their conscious into others must be both empty and receptive when they entered. In many ways, the process was like using a mental filtration machine, funneling the stream of ill memories through her conscious and returning them back cleaner and purer. If the filter was dirty, the memories would stay tainted or become more polluted.

When Hermione had first started seeing clients she had been unable to empty herself of their feelings. It had taken her a long time to cope and even then the method was not without problems. Hermione played more than an hour before she noticed Bucky skulking in the shadows in order to watch. She finished her Opus and let the keys ring with finality. Hermione turned slowly from the keys, looking beyond Steve to Bucky.

“Are you ready for healing?” Hermione asked. Her face had relaxed from the strictness of Occlumency to be open again. Compassion was a large part of what she had to do and she needed to
allow herself the ability to feel. Bucky slunk from his shadows and Steve turned around wildly in 
surprise.

“Bucky?” He commented surprised. He stood up quickly and Bucky drew back slightly. He kept his 
vision firmly on the floor.

“You would have dragged me out anyway.” Bucky said miserably. Hermione frowned slightly.

“Please come here, Bucky.” Hermione said, her voice regaining gentleness in inflection and tone. Bucky took a few steps forward but still remained at a distance. Hermione nearly rolled her eyes.

“Where would you like to do your healing?” Hermione asked and Bucky’s shoulders twitched. He did not answer so she continued. “I want to give your room to you as your own space—a space where I will not intrude but for the exceptions we mentioned. It’s my hope that you might feel like you have control over your room. Additionally, I want you to feel like you have agency in the decisions regarding your mental health. We have to do a treatment every day to maximize the efficiency and potency of the treatment and I think you should do it before you sleep for the same reasons. You can, however, choose the location it will take place: the basement, the living room, in my room, or in your room; this decision is up to you.” Bucky did not move though Hermione knew he heard. He seemed to staring resolutely at the floor but Hermione could see the twitch of his clenching jaw.

“You’ve done this before?” Bucky asked, glancing up at her quickly between his stringy hair.

“I have. When I have patients here, I usually use my basement office. You can choose wherever you’ll be comfortable, however.” Hermione clarified.

“The basement.” Bucky determined and Hermione nodded.

“Do you want Steve there?” Hermione suggested and Steve, who had been following the conversation intently, turned to Bucky with pleading eyes.

“The triggers…are in my mind?” Bucky asked.

“They are…but I won’t be accessing them right now.” Hermione attempted to allay his fears. When he clenched his jaw harder she knew he failed.

“Steve should be there.” Bucky said and Hermione frowned. Steve was at least pleased, though.

“If you’re ready, you can follow me.” Hermione said as she stood. Steve trailed behind her and Bucky followed the edges of the room until they descended into the darkness of her basement. Hermione pointed Steve to a chair before she gestured to Bucky to lie down on the chaise lounge. He did so uncomfortably.

“Before when I applied my healing abilities, I largely buoyed your ability to reclaim memories.” Hermione looked at Bucky who reluctantly met her eyes. “Now I will look for the ones that do not want to connect and facilitate guiding them. Additionally, I will take the ones that are traumatic and apply healing techniques to facilitate your mind’s acceptance of then.” Hermione smiled softly at him reaching out to touch his hand. She withdrew it quickly when he flinched away. She maintained her composure and her soothing mien. “I can only do so much right now as you assimilate these memories because while they aren’t necessarily foreign, they are no longer natural as the ones you already have; this will take time.” Hermione stared into his turbulent eyes. “Steve and I will both be here for you.” Hermione said as sincerely and emphatically as she could manage. Her hands began to glow and she watched the panic rise into his eyes. “I will be right here for you, darling.” Hermione whispered slipping back into her endearment. His eyes met hers and she entered.
It was only thirty minutes by the time she retracted herself out of his mind. She felt her lungs tighten, felt the tears welling in her eyes. Just a little longer. She willed herself to be collected. Bucky opened his eyes looking as emotionally drained as she felt. He would not remember what she had seen—wouldn’t directly recall what memories she repaired—yet he still averted his eyes before they met hers. He curled in around himself as if he was dealt a great injury.

“Bucky?!” Steve cried as he jumped up from his chair to see to his friend.

“He’s okay, Steve. He did very well.” Hermione said warmly. She placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and retracted it violently when he flinched away again. She kneeled down next to his couch. “You did very well, darling.” She told him softly. Her hands hovered, desiring to touch, but she withheld herself. His own hands were clenching his head firmly.

“Do you see…?” He ground out, his voice thick with emotion. He didn’t know what she had done within his mind, only that she had been there and that itself was bad enough. Hermione swallowed and forced tears not to fall from her eyes. His self-loathing hurt her the most.

“It doesn’t change anything, dar—Bucky.” Hermione said reverting back to his name. “Tomorrow, I will come back to heal you, and then the next day, and then the next day, until you can see yourself as I do.” She paused. “We can talk about it…if you’d like? Otherwise you’re more likely to go to sleep now.” She offered hesitantly. When he made no move she stepped away. With the space between them, he rose up, his eyes still averted. He walked up the stairs sluggishly and bee-lined to his room.

“Bucky!” Hermione called before he completely disappeared. He turned slightly and eyed her through his curtain of hair. “Do you… I can sing a lullaby to help you sleep?” Bucky turned away from her quickly.

“No.” He determined and before she could even finish her disappointed “oh.” He was already gone. She and Steve went upstairs. Bucky’s shut door indicated his location for sleep. Hermione lingered uncomfortably outside his door before turning back to Steve.

“Steve?” She said his name questioningly and resisted the urge to peek into his whirling mind. He cleared his throat.

“I suppose I’ll go back to my room…no more waking up to crinks in my neck.” Steve said with a forced laugh. Hermione looked down in disappointment, though it made perfect sense for him to no longer stay with her when Bucky wasn’t there.

“You’re welcome to…come in…if you…if you need to talk or anything.” Hermione offered quietly. Steve’s small smile had a tinge of sadness dragging it down.

“Thanks for the offer but…it wouldn’t be…I wouldn’t want…” Steve trailed off and Hermione’s face flushed in embarrassment.

“Right, yes. In any case, please let me know if you need anything, I will see you tomorrow. Good night.” Hermione said quickly as her throat started to close with emotion. She hurried to her room, waving her wand subtly at Steve and Bucky’s door before heading to her own. “Your healing will be tomorrow after lunch!” Hermione spoke over her shoulder to Steve before disappearing into her room and closing the door swiftly. She did not hear his response. Instead she flopped down to the floor with weak knees. The dam holding up her mind, that had sprung a leak in order for her to heal Bucky, was finally breaking completely and she was all alone. She sat, knees curled to her chest, arms wrapped around her knees and attempted to ease the beginning of her hyperventilation.
Poor Bucky.

She had long since learned how to separate herself from the agony of others, a strange combination of apathy and empathy in order to protect herself as she healed the broken mind of others. It was another imperfect system as it still left her emotionally drained…especially after occluding. Hermione felt herself choking back ragged sobs that threatened to emerge; these emotions were her own. She twisted her wand quickly to silence her room. The first cry trickled out hesitantly before the next until she was weeping openly. Her thoughts were spiraling down as her own dark feelings rose like dementors in the night. She thought of them leaving her alone again. She was already agonizing over the sudden divide. The next spiral was blame on herself for ever reaching this point. She was a fool.

She lifted her face from her hands. Through her blurry, tear-stained vision she was able to spot her Captain America bear, she crawled over to it to lay down in the sheets, clutching the present. Beside it was Bucky’s bear. Her crying calmed to whimpering as she observed them both. With a twist of her wand, one of the bear’s arm took on a metallic sheen. A large red star tattooed itself on its shoulder. She thought to change the uniform to the one he had arrived in, but thinking better of it she kept them identical—save the arm. She clutched them to her chest. She nuzzled into her floor nest, pulling the blankets and pillows toward her like a cocoon.

She caught Steve’s scent in the sheets and warmth bloomed in her chest. His shocked expression drifted through her mind. He had been hurt by her withdrawal…she’d have to explain properly tomorrow. By the time she had stopped occluding, he had already been put off by her behavior. She felt overwhelmed. This why you weren’t supposed to take work home, she reminded herself un成功fully. Catching Bucky’s and Steve’s scent on the pillows calmed her but she lamented their loss.

The room was quiet. There was no lullaby, no sweet soothing tones as Steve engaged in random banal chatter. It was uncomfortable and empty. It was cold.

Time passed slowly as the night crept on. Hermione was still awake, yearning to avoid the impending doom. She glanced at the clock—four in the morning; she’d suffer tomorrow. She charmed Bucky and Steve’s room to indicate if their night terrors warranted intervention; she refused to call the charm a glorified baby monitor but she knew Harry and Ginny used it for that precise purpose. Her own room was silenced hours ago when she first began crying; she did not want them to potentially hear her then or as she slept. She had used all her dreamless sleep on Bucky but thought today might’ve been a good day for her to take it preemptively. It was a moot point because she knew she had to be cognizant if Bucky required assistance.

She doubted he would call for her even if he did require it. His demeanor had shifted so quickly upon his lucidity—his withdrawal so sudden—that Hermione had occluded to prevent herself from having a panic attack then and there. His thoughts had been ringing through her head; he was so concerned he was dangerous. She would’ve been concerned that he would run away but she had deeply established that her home was safest. She knew her show of force was a deciding factor in his decision but it bordered dangerously on the edge of forced captivity; it left a filthy taste in her mouth.

Waiting for sleep now, Hermione could do little to distract herself from the emptiness of her bed. Hermione had wanted to give Bucky space but it had been agonizing all day; she had grown accustomed to his hovering over the last week. She missed him flopping his head into her lap. She missed tying up his hair. She missed him holding her hand even if it meant that he followed her into the bathroom. She missed sleeping with him, a large, strong, calloused hand clasped with hers. She was thankful Crookshanks seemed to identify her needs, purring at her reassuringly as he cuddled with her on the floor. Crookshanks purr was nothing like talking to Steve before she slept, however.
Hermione felt his absence well. Hermione knew his departure was also to be expected; Steve had stayed for Bucky—not for her. It was Hermione’s own fault that she had latched on to the lost boys as she was wont to do. She had been so isolated these days, all things considered, and it made her even more vulnerable to the weakness of her character. She was poisoned by the needs of others, their emotions tangling with hers to the point where she could not determine what were hers and what were theirs. She had set herself up for failure and she need to reel herself in before she got even more hurt. Her eyelids were shuttering closed and she felt the tears leaking in anticipation of a night without relaxing rest but she could resist the thrall no longer. The fitful sleep came and though she expected it she was still unprepared—a week of respite was not enough protections from the horrors of her own mind and insecurities she could not purge.

What was the point of a power you couldn’t use for yourself?

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Chapter End Notes

Post Script AN:

This chapter was hard. I realized something while writing it; I hate writing sad things. I had terrible motivation for this chapter. Reviews, especially specific ones, are super helpful because they help me center my thoughts. Sometimes I’m sad that I don’t think I can fit something in or that I know something contrary will happen in the future, but I’ve been surprised with how much your reviews help the coherency of the chapter’s flow. So thank you!

The next few chapters are shaping up to be as long as this one so I might be a little steadier with updating only once a week. I also still intend to post my Halloween “one-shot” that is really just an AU diverging from this story. Keep an eye out Sunday for when I post it. It'll be titled Candy, Pumpkins, and Costumes. So hopefully if this chapter brought you down, the Halloween one will make you happier. See you next update!
Steve didn’t sleep all night—not even a mimicry where his awakening was the only testament to a semblance of rest. Instead, Steve spent the tedium of the twilight hours with his eyes propped open, struggling to get comfortable in his soft, empty bed. By four in the morning, he had moved from the mattress to the floor in hopes he would replicate the comfort he had felt in Hermione’s room. He was disappointed when the change only served to surge the sleepless energy that he felt keenly within his body and underneath his skin.

For once he yearned for sleep, as if he could awaken and the day past could be bad remnants of a dream. The events had admittedly overwhelmed him and he still felt the anxiety clawing at his mind. Bucky’s about-face had done considerable damage to his mental state but he had been far more devastated by the unexpected change in Hermione’s demeanor—a change he could never have fathomed. He still shuddered when he recalled her looking so utterly…emotionless. It was only in the vacuum of her expressions that he realized the entire time he’d known her she had seemed to radiate with energy akin to his own—the disparity left him reeling.

In addition to the emotional conundrum that had exploded within him, attempting to sleep in his actual room left him feeling decidedly empty. After Hermione had healed Bucky for the night, she had implied before outright inviting him back to her room but the enormity of that decision was something he shied away from in the moment; without the guise of Bucky’s health the decision seemed far too intimate and real. Remembering her suddenly emotive face closing down again as she quickly dismissed him, Steve had regretted his choice. He spent much of his sleepless night agonizing over that regret and no small part of him recognized he’d probably be unable to bring himself to request the offer again. He exhaled deeply into the crisp morning air.

The room was unbearably quiet. He had initially appreciated Hermione’s charm that dulled the sounds of the city to maintain an inner sanctum of silence. Now, however, he yearned for the boisterous city around him to fill up the stifling silence. He had grown accustomed to the soft breathing of Bucky and Hermione beside him. Through the suffocating quiet of the early-morning, Steve easily heard a door opening and closing. Finally, someone else was awake. Blinking his dry, tired eyes, Steve rose. He was hesitant to see whoever it was outside—Hermione or Bucky—but there was no sleep for him that night and none would occur that morning. He ventured outside,
finding Hermione awake and preparing tea in the kitchen.

“Hermione.” Steve greeted awkwardly and softly. The air around them seemed to be filled with both their reticence.

“Steve.” Hermione responded in kind. She turned to face him, her face returning to the usual soft and empathetic smile, though it seemed her eyes were tinged with sadness and guilt. Beneath her melancholy, Steve could still distinctly identify the warmth and compassion. He let out a breath of relief at the familiar sight. “How are you this morning?” She asked as she rubbed her throat gently. Steve paused to watch her pour honey in to her drink. Hermione had strong opinions about tea and honey was never to be included. He eyed her speculatively.

“I’m doing fine. How are you doing?” Steve returned even as he silently inspected her. She looked well—her hair was the usual ruffled state it took in the morning, but there were no bags under her eyes or any other visual clue indicate any type of disturbance had occurred. The most he could credit to the previous night’s upheaval was her somewhat sluggish facial expressions. Still, she did not even look tired, Steve thought resentfully.

“Quite well.” Hermione chimed as she sipped her tea. She seemed to pause to gather herself. “I’m going to do your healing after lunch.” She announced and Steve jerked in surprise.

“What?” he asked unintelligently. She looked at him measuredly.

“We talked about this; Bucky will be receiving moderated healing and that means I can begin working on you.” She chided gently.

“Oh. Right.” Steve nodded dumbly. Hermione had already begun making breakfast so Steve sat, as usual, on the kitchen island chair. He watched her as she cooked.

“Can I ask if you’re alright now?” Steve questioned bravely. He chose to ignore how meek it seemed to sound to his ears. Hermione flinched before turning to give him a sad smile over her shoulder. She sighed.

“I’m sorry about yesterday, Steve.” Hermione apologize as she favored him with her full attention. “I…wasn’t quite myself.” She explained.

“It was…shocking.” Steve admitted and Hermione’s forehead furrowed.

“Yes…I…it’s called Occlumency and it’s a manner of protecting your mind…and emotions.” Hermione described. Steve followed along.

“You did that to protect yourself from Bucky?” Steve wondered aloud. Hermione’s lips tweaked to the side.

“The way Bucky was acting, I thought it’d be…more receptive if I was clinically detached.” Hermione said politely. Steve attempted to relax the wrinkles developing on his forehead in thought.

“That’s why Bucky agreed to stay—your clinical nature?” Steve ventured doubtfully.

“I think he agreed to stay because I took the time to prove we could...protect ourselves and others from his...concerns.” Hermione admitted aloud. Steve nodded, recalling the conversation in Bucky’s room. “I won’t be utilizing the technique much more often, I think.” Hermione said and Steve looked at her in surprise. “It is not the most...effective.” Steve noted the hesitancy in her voice and decided not to push the subject. “I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to explain it to you yesterday.” Hermione continued, looking guilty. Steve felt a lump in his throat. His fist was clenched beneath the table and
he consciously unwound it.

“I’m sorry, too, I—I was just…” Steve struggled to explain. Hermione smiled patiently.

“You were overwhelmed from Bucky and I contributed to that feeling.” Hermione smiled sadly. 
“Don’t let my less than auspicious start turn you off from healing, however—I think you’d still do better with it.” Hermione continued and Steve nodded unsure. The silence returned only for a moment before Steve’s ring tone pierced the emptiness of the room.

“My phone.” Steve answered the unasked question and Hermione waved him off so he could retreat back to his room to answer it. He sighed when he realized who it was.

“Stark.” Steve greeted briskly.

“Capsicle! Great news! The room is ready—I kept it tasteful, don’t worry—so you are welcome to move in as soon as you are ready. I’ve been working on the Iron Legion robots and I’ll send them to help you move your delicate World War II memorabilia.” Tony continued quickly. Steve felt his irritation rise from both the conversation and the grating way Tony talked. Steve sighed as he closed his eyes, willing himself to summon his internal strength and fortitude.

“I can’t move in right now.” Steve finally said. Tony paused on the line.

“What do you mean you can’t move in right now? The whole reason we started this was because your original mission still hadn’t concluded; Hydra is still out there with Loki’s scepter.” Tony began angrily. Steve rubbed his forehead; Tony wasn’t wrong which made it ten times worse.

“I have something important that I’m working on and I can’t just leave it alone right now.” Steve clarified.

“Is it something related to Hydra? Because we can all help you with that—that’s the point of a team, Cap.” Tony continued scathingly.

“It’s personal, Tony.” Steve conveniently left out that Bucky had technically been an unintentional part of Hydra. “I’ve got it under control—I just need time to give it my attention.” Steve reasoned. He could hear Tony’s angry huffs.

“Last time you took a break, Hydra got the upper hand.” Tony continued bitingly.

“And we stopped them no thanks to your break.” Steve returned angrily, his temper rising.

“Exactly.” Tony said solemnly. “I’m funding this little adventure, Cap, but you’re the one who is supposed to be leading.”

“Do you even have any leads?” Steve asked to deflect from the guilt he was feeling.

“Romanoff is working on that right now. But you and I both know that we should be training together in the meantime. Even Thor should be coming back soon. So, we all need to start focusing on the good of the world.” Tony lectured sternly. Steve felt the annoyance creeping up as Tony of all people reprimanded him for his selfishness.

“I sacrificed my life for the good of the world.” Steve reminded him bitterly.

“So did I!” Tony added scornfully. Steve could hear his angry, heavy breathing and forced himself to calm down.
“Look, Tony, I’m in NY right now—“ Steve began in a more even tone.

“Not according to your GPS signal in Tallahassee, Florida.” Tony pointed out.

“You won’t be able to trace where I am, Tony—that information is protected.” Steve revealed gravely.

“Don’t issue a challenge, Cap; you know I love puzzles.” Tony postured and Steve let out an exaggerated sigh.

“I’m in NY right now, Tony,” he reiterated “which means that I can head over during the week to train and keep updated, okay?” Steve capitulated. Tony paused on the line.

“That’ll do for now. I expect you—

“Next week, Tony.”

“Cap, that’s not really—“

“Next week, Tony.” Steve reiterated sternly. “I mean it. Can’t you just cover for me for one week while I make sure my affairs are in order?” Steve could tell that Tony wanted to say more but he surprisingly held back. Unfortunately, Steve knew that the next time he saw Tony it would be that much worse.

“Bring the Bird Guy, Cap. He might as well come too now that his suit is fixed. Yours is too—you’re welcome by the way; I’ve updated everyone’s gear to look better and function better.” Tony said with no small amount of petulance sneaking into his tone.

“I’ll give him a call.” Steve agreed.

“He’s welcome to stay in your room since you apparently won’t be using it. I’ll let you know when we have practice set up.” Tony said churlishly before hanging up. Steve sat on his bed and rubbed his face with his hands. He didn’t want to leave Bucky and Hermione to deal with the world’s issues. Bucky was obviously in a bad place and he needed to be there for his friend…even if he would only be gone during the day. The Avengers only really needed to assemble when the world was literally going to be destroyed within 48 hours. Steve exhaled angrily before picking up his phone and ringing Sam.

“Cap.” Sam greeted easily and Steve nearly sighed in relief that someone was not affected by whatever negative air had surrounded everyone else.

“Sam.” Steve returned and something in his voice must have caught Sam’s attention.

“What’s wrong?” Sam demanded and Steve felt thankful that Sam was…well…Sam.

“You’re invited to train at Avengers Tower.” Steve said to avoid the topic.


“Bucky’s got most of his memories back…but he’s different.” Steve summed. He could imagine Sam nodding as he took the news. “The day before he was literally exactly how I remembered him and then the next day…just…” Steve trailed off.

“How did Penny react?” Sam asked.

“She was…she was so cold when Bucky starting shutting down…it was like she was Nat on a
mission; I couldn’t tell what she was thinking or feeling.” Steve rambled.

“Which threw you off because Hermione wears her heart on her sleeve.” Sam confirmed aloud.

“It was like both of them were the opposite of what they had been the day before.” Steve continued.

“What do you mean?”

“Bucky was…Bucky was normal the day before. He didn’t remember everything—he seemed to have completely blocked everything he had done under Hydra—and he was just…he was just how I remembered him. Hermione tried to warn me but I didn’t listen, I was just ecstatic and it just felt natural to be myself around him. Then when it happened she snapped and suddenly she was completely different and…” Steve trailed off as he rambled.

“Well, what’s she like now?” Sam questioned.

“She’s…she seems fine. She’s at least back to acting normal.” Steve admitted.

“But now you don’t know if everything had just been a show?” Sam guessed. Steve’s exhale was the only answer he could give. “I don’t think you have to worry that the Hermione you knew was a lie, Steve.” Sam comforted.

“How can you be sure?” Steve asked self-consciously.

“Cap, she gave you a magical penny to summon her if you ever required her.” Sam reminded him bluntly. “After meeting you for all of ten minutes.” Sam added. Steve’s brow furrowed. “A single day of her acting differently doesn’t negate the weeks she spent caring for you when you needed her. Not to mentioned she waited for—what—two years before you even called for help and she still appeared immediately.” Sam reasoned and Steve thought it over.


“Give the girl some credit, Steve.” Sam reprimanded before the conversation began to lull. “But what was this about training?” Sam said returning to the topic with faint excitement sneaking into his tone. Steve felt a smile creeping onto his face.

“Tony said he finished your suit…” Steve gave a low chuckle when Sam exclaimed in excitement.

“When can I get it?” Sam asked.

“Training is sometime next week. I’ll let you know.” Steve said. “Tony says you can even stay in my room, though knowing him, he probably has a hundred extra rooms that you could easily make yours.” Sam and Steve spoke for a while longer and Steve felt himself relaxing. He was thankful to Sam; it was good to have friends—especially ones who knew you were housing an ex-Hydra assassin in a witch’s home. Steve trusted Sam’s opinion, he reminded himself as he lied down on the sofa in the family room in order for Hermione to heal him.

“It won’t hurt?” Steve asked as if he was a child, as if he hadn’t been soldier who had been shot and stabbed while saving the world. Hermione smiled patiently at him, as if she had never looked cold or emotionless or dead inside the day before.

“If anything, it’ll seem like a daze.” Hermione answered. “You may feel tired after, however.” Hermione amended. Steve nodded resolutely. She had conjured a short stool that she sat on as she leaned over him. “It’ll be okay, Steve. I’ll take care of you.” Hermione whispered as her eyes swirled the amber hues. Sam’s words had calmed him enough that he returned to his near-obsessive
observation of her. A small pull of her forehead gave Steve the impression that her smile lingered with sadness. For some reason, staring into her glowing eyes, he felt less inhibited. To his own surprise he lifted his hand from where it was resting on his chest to graze the side of her chin.

“We take care of each other.” Steve slurred as if he was going under but he caught her look of surprise. The flood of light from her hands shone brightly as he completely fell into her trance. When he came out of it, he felt heavy and light. He felt emotional but relieved. He felt like he was drowning and flying. Hermione was swiping the wet paths on his cheek with her thumbs, cooing words he didn’t immediately register.

“You did well, Steve.” She whispered tenderly. “The first part of healing is always the hardest.”

“What’s the first part?” Steve asked slowly. Hermione’s eyes were fond as she held his hand. Steve usually resisted his desire to be affectionate with Hermione, but he found his control slipping at every turn. His defenses weak against such wishes, he allowed Hermione to keep his hand.

“The first part is allowing yourself to be receptive to healing.” Hermione said. Steve clutched her hand harder in response.

“What’s it like when you heal; when you’re in someone’s mind?” Steve asked curious as he continued to blink away his daze.

“For a second, I am everything the patient is.” Hermione admitted after a pause. Her eyes were brown now, warm and comforting, but not the hypnotizing amber.

“And after?” Steve questioned. Hermione exhaled as a forlorn smile graced her lips again.

“Afterwards, I feel like I leave a little bit of myself behind.” Hermione said quietly as she glanced away. Steve couldn’t resist the hand that traced the soft edge of her chin again. She glanced back at him—her eyes wide and her cheeks flushing.

“Thank you.” Steve enthused. Her face relaxed.

“Of course.” Hermione returned easily. But something about her responses had made Steve uneasy. He filed away the thoughts, intent to return to them with more consideration. Hermione’s healing did not immediately affect him in a way that he noticed, but he had changed in one regard—his resistance to her physical touch had waned and instead he actively sought it. His hand sought hers to guide her to another room, he crowded her space when he could, he found reasons—excuses—to touch her. She leaned into his touch most of the time but for the briefest flicker resistance. Steve never spoke of the reason why he had increased his affection but if anyone asked he could say that he didn’t want Bucky’s sudden withdrawal to negatively affect her—though he had a feeling it affected her anyway. One sleepless night, he nearly confirmed it when he found her in the kitchens in the twilight hours of the morning.

“Steve!” Hermione called out in surprise. Her eyes blinked blearily as she regarded him. Steve let out a self-deprecating chuckle.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Steve guessed. Hermione looked guarded but nodded at him slowly.

“You?” Hermione asked softly. Steve exhaled as he pulled out a cup for his own tea.

“Got a lot on my mind.” Steve admitted.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Hermione asked, her eyes clearing as she gave him her attention.
“I’d rather know what’s on Bucky’s mind?” Steve baited. Hermione’s face pinched.

“I’m not going to reveal Bucky’s secrets.” Hermione declared. Steve was taken aback.

“I already read his file… I know what he’s done.” Steve informed her. Hermione looked at him askance before she wrinkled her face.

“Still… it wouldn’t be right.” Hermione determined. Steve raised his eyebrows in surprise. Hermione must have determined it required elaboration. “He should be able to keep his own secrets.”

“Does it count as a secret when you see his memories?” Steve wondered sincerely. Hermione shrugged.

“Privacy is an illusion for someone like me.” Hermione described. “In an instant, I can take everyone’s secrets, know their every fear—I could do the same to you.” Steve swallowed thickly.

“So why wouldn’t you always read minds?” Steve ventured to ask. Hermione looked up to the ceiling as she contemplated her response.

“I would lose myself in others.” Hermione answered after sometime. “Privacy is an illusion but it is an illusion that I need—that’s why I don’t read your mind here. It’s also why I’m never in Bucky’s mind unless I’m healing it.”

“That takes some fortitude.” Steve had identified, but Hermione had shaken her head.

“It takes a few overwhelming lessons.” Hermione told him. Steve didn’t get a chance to explore another vague statement before she abruptly changed subjects to what Steve could do to support and help Bucky who after two days had yet to emerge from his room beyond mandatory sessions. The topic of interest succeeded in distracting Steve once again from his concern.

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Bucky’s self-imposed exile had not lasted long. Aside from the mandatory dinners and healing sessions that Bucky attended, Bucky had maintained solitude for only a few days before it was broken—by the cat.

Healing was taxing in a way that Hermione had warned. Unlike her other cases, the memories he had were raw and frayed like nerve endings and even healing them would leave him more taxed than most patients she had had. She also warned him that his self-banishment would do little to ease his lingering mental anguish. Hermione had resolutely offered her companionship, but Bucky could not be tempted; no matter how much he yearned to bask in her presence, no matter how he wished to lean back into her touch—he was not worthy of her time. Bucky would be content to just spend his life hiding his heart away.

But Steve was persistent. As expected from a boy born with the biggest chip on his shoulder, Steve never listened to reason. Bucky shouldn’t have been surprised when Steve stubbornly started spending the day camped outside his door reminiscing about their past through the wood. Bucky never conversed back with Steve, but he reluctantly found himself close to the door, comparing the memories with his own tattered recollections. His poor attempt at maintain distance lasted less than a week before it was broken.

Bucky had all of his memories from the time he first arrived at Hermione’s home. Unfortunately, the memories he had were biased by his past perspective, meaning that he tended to remember protecting Hermione from false alarms more vividly than he remembered what he did the rest of the days. He did, however, remember regularly playing with Crookshanks. Bucky always liked cats but his
mother had been allergic—as had Steve; it made sense that he had enjoyed the cat’s presence. Even so, Bucky had closed the door away from everyone—cat included. He was therefore incredibly surprised when Crooks somehow broke into his room. In fact, it wasn’t until Bucky felt paws on his chest that he even realized the cat had entered. Bucky looked up at the cat on his chest.


“Mreow.” Crooks bellowed into his face, unaffected.

Bucky sat up abruptly in surprise, dropping the cat into his lap. Crookshanks gazed up at him balefully before curling into a ball atop his legs.

“You can’t!” Bucky exclaimed aloud. He wanted to move the cat from his lap—from his presence, from his room—but he was even more wary of touching the creature with his hands. He clenched his fingers in the air at the thought.

“You think you’d be immune?” Bucky whispered harshly. “You think I wouldn’t kill you?” Bucky asked. Crookshanks looked up at him with one eye before blinking languidly. “I’ve killed innocent people; I could just as easily kill you!” Bucky groused, his frustration overflowing as he dug the heels of his palm into his eyes. He was ranting to a cat; Hermione was probably right about his isolation, in retrospect.

“All I can do is kill.” Bucky continued mournfully. “You shouldn’t be touching me; no one should be touching me or even near me.” Under his breath, Bucky added an even truer statement. “I can’t be trusted.”

Bucky looked up again when he felt paws on his chest again. The cat stared at him eye-to-eye impassively before letting out a loud, deep ‘mrrrrreow’ that resonated in Bucky’s chest. Whatever Crookshanks saw, it dictated the cat should boop him between the eyes with a single paw before settling back down in his lap for a nap.

Bucky spent an inordinate amount of time processing what had just occurred before awkwardly relaxing back into the bed. Crookshanks came back the next day and the next day until Bucky just accepted that the cat was going to visit him. Whether it was Crookshanks or the healing or both, Bucky slowly felt himself become more responsive to the two other people in the home he shared. One day, as Steve loitered by Bucky’s door, asking idle questions about nothing, Bucky finally snapped. When Bucky violently wretched the door open, Steve fell back through the threshold; he had been sitting against the door.

“Bucky?” Steve asked as he popped up from the floor.

“Leave, Steve.” Bucky commanded. Steve’s face took the stubborn tension that indicated he wouldn’t back down. Bucky blinked. “Go find Hermione. Go back to your friends. Go do something else with your life.”

“You’re my friend, Bucky—I’m staying here.” Steve jutted a jaw out resolutely. Bucky looked down at the floor as Crookshanks wove inside his room.

“You deserve something better than this.” Bucky closed his eyes.

“So do you.” Steve returned. Steve placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and Bucky tried desperately not to flinch away. Steve noticed but did not retract his hand. “I told you once, I’ll tell you again and again until you finally get it—I’m not leaving you alone again!” Steve’s voice had risen and Bucky’s eyes shot up to gauge Steve. Steve felt guilty, Bucky realized, that Bucky had been alive and Steve had continued on thinking Bucky was dead when he wasn’t. Bucky considered that maybe Steve
needed this more than Bucky thought.

“Steve--,” Bucky tried again.

“Even when I had nothing, I had you.” Steve emphasized. “I don’t care how things are now; I’m always going to be here for you.” Bucky regarded his friend again. His throat was welling with emotion as he began to nod his head.

“Yeah…ok, Steve.” Bucky mumbled as he turned his vision away. “You never did know when to give up.” Bucky said with a slight strained smile. Steve visibly relaxed at the proclamation, a half-smile curving at his mouth.

“Yeah, well I’ve found persistence pays off.” Steve joked. Bucky felt his mouth twitch in response. He pushed his door open further.

“You can come in…punk.” Bucky said quietly. Steve entered without hesitation and just like that, Bucky and Steve were back to talking.

It was not the same dynamic as when they were childhood friends. Bucky was still self-conscious about his state of mind and what he had done in the past. Steve, it was weird—in a way—that Steve was looking after Bucky given that Bucky had always been the one to look after Steve. Steve stumbled around his words and gestures as he attempted to comfort Bucky. It didn’t work precisely as it was meant to, but Bucky found Steve’s awkward and fumbling attempts at comfort were more amusing than anything—and that was a comfort in and of itself. In the end, the two of them were beginning to settle into something closer to what they used to have—an innate understanding born of the formative years of their lives that they spent together watching each other’s back. Steve and Crookshanks both made it a regular part of their day to visit Bucky and Bucky, despite being holed away in his room, felt admittedly less lonely and burdened than the day he first awoke from his nightmares.

“I need to go back to the Avenger tower and start training again.” Steve said one day without pretense. Bucky stopped writing in his notebook to nod dispassionately. Bucky spotted Steve’s jaw as it twitched. “I know Hermione will also be out at different times throughout the day for work.” Steve clenched his jaw again slightly when Bucky maintained silence. “Bucky, you need a hobby.” Steve finally said. Bucky frowned as he looked down into his hands.

“I have a hobby.” Bucky replied as he waved his journal at Steve. Steve sighed, agitated.

“Being sad and writing about it isn’t a hobby—or if it is, it shouldn’t be your only hobby.” Steve chastised gruffly. Bucky averted his eyes and scoffed but Steve continued. “Hermione said you’re welcome to her books. I’m sure you’ll find several you like.” Steve continued. Bucky did not reply; he had already found several titles he was interested in, but hadn’t had the courage or gumption to ask. Bucky tapped his finger on the bed beside him in thought. He realized that Hermione had probably suggested the entire conversation. “Hermione also said the garden needs watering and care.” Steve stated purposefully and Bucky exhaled a breath, defeated. The second quest had more or less confirmed his suspicions; even though Bucky kept Hermione at a distance, she was looking out for him.

“Alright, Steve. I’ll read the books and grow the plants.” Bucky finally agreed with faux-reluctance. With his book shut, Bucky decided to resume their unofficial game.

“Real or not real.” Bucky started. “You put newspapers in your shoes.” Steve sat down on the corner of the bed.
“Real.” Steve confirmed.

“Real or not real—we fought a guy with a red face.” Bucky asked again. Steve chuckled, his tension dissipating slightly.

“Also real. You were concerned I had a fake face but I assured you I did not.” Steve answered amused. Bucky contemplated the first time he had been captured before jumping to the memories of his second. Dimly he could feel the weight of the trigger words in his mind. Hermione had said she wanted to recover his memories before she removed them. She told him his mind had to be ready for the task and it would more than a few weeks for him to be ready. Bucky shuddered.

“Real or not real.” Bucky continued, his voice lowering into a sound barely above a whisper. “I’m a weapon.” Bucky was looking down, his hair filtering his vision as he hid behind its curtain. Still, Bucky could tell Steve was staring at him.

“You are Bucky.” Steve said. “You are who you choose to be—and that’s no weapon.” Bucky gritted his jaw, clenching back his emotion before nodding sharply. The moment of his insecurity passed and they went back to their lighthearted conversations. Bucky appreciated that Steve didn’t dwell on his issues; Bucky didn’t need a healer—he already had one.

_Hermione._

Despite the initial icy response that still clung to the fringes of Bucky’s memories, Hermione had immediately returned to emitting waves of warmth and patience. She spoke softly to him as she healed him, whisking him away into his trance and bringing him back with the same low, soothing tones. Bucky had been reluctant about her healing him that gradually had morphed into resentment for everything, blaming the world for his cursed existence.

Despite Bucky’s petulance Hermione had come and healed him every day, without fail. He’d have been lying if he said he didn’t notice the correlation between his improved mental health post healing sessions. He chose to ignore his feelings, still. Even as the warmth of her gaze caught his breath, Bucky resisted his attraction—or he tried. In reality, Bucky knew he was more than a little fond of her—that his fondness had actually only grown for her. How could he help but adore her when she knew what he was—what he had done—but still sought his touch and attentions and health? How could he help but adore her when after every healing session she grabbed his hands—his murdering hands—and whispered resolutely that he had done _so very well_ and she’d see him tomorrow? He allowed only this small touch. Despite her endless compassion, Bucky still recognized the monster within him. In fact, his dreams reminded him so.

His dreams were nightmares that he had every night—memories, he knew—of all the people he had killed. He had grown accustomed to their screaming in his dreams, every day waking in a near panic as his mind recalled the memories. It was only when he allowed himself to think of Hermione and her soothing tones that he could regain normal breathing. Bucky recognized such a connection was dangerous—he was dangerous. He was glad when she began her plans to resume work.

“I have my first appointment Monday.” Hermione said at dinner. Bucky glanced up from his plate before dragging his eyes back down—it was tempting to look at her, to engage with her, but he resisted. He glanced up again when a penny on a necklace dropped in front of him. “I want you to wear this—if you ever need me you’ll be able to say my name and the location and I will immediately show up.” Bucky touched the coin cautiously.

“What about Steve?” Bucky found himself asking.

“He already has one.” Hermione commented and Steve’s eyes went wide.
“You knew I still wear it?” Steve asked aloud. Hermione looked at him bemused.

“Why wouldn’t I—I had plenty of opportunity to see it.” Hermione said and Bucky felt his lips twitch when Steve’s face pinked. “They aren’t paired to each other, though.” Hermione frowned. “Just me.” Bucky contemplated the accessory before placing it around his neck. If Steve had one, Bucky could too.

“How long is your appointment?” Steve asked genially.

“Only a few hours.” Hermione admitted. She glanced over at Bucky with her lips pressed together. “I…also set up a bank account for you.” Hermione finished quickly. Bucky blinked as he processed the information.

“I can pay for Bucky.” Steve interjected with a frown. Hermione looked at him amused.

“You can add money to his bank account if you’d like, I’ll give you the information.” Hermione suggested.

“What do I need a bank account for?” Bucky asked harshly as he grasped the situation.

“For a debit card.” Hermione said. She summoned a card to the table before dropping by Bucky. Bucky frowned.

“It says your name.” Bucky noticed as he inspected it. Hermione gave him an apologetic smile.

“I couldn’t exactly sign up with your name; the details of your legal status are somewhat up for debate.” Hermione admitted. Truthfully, Bucky knew she was right. For the rest of his life, Bucky doubted his name could be used anywhere that could be traced; the Winter Soldier bounty still seemed to be surprisingly high—and any trace could be found by Hydra. Bucky felt himself shrink into his chair but Hermione continued. “You’re going to be here for at least a few additional months—until I can remove your triggers. After that, there will most likely be a few months of clean up for the rest.” Hermione projected vaguely as she waved her hand through the air. “Until you are clear and decide to leave, that guest room is yours. I know you don’t want to leave the house until the triggers are gone, but I also know you probably have wants and needs. I thought it’d be best to give you another method of procuring those items.” Her smile was hesitant as she looked at Bucky for approval but Bucky was not pleased. Her smile faltered as he stared at her mulishly.

“I don’t need or want anything.” Bucky sulked.

“If there is concern about money, the debit card has a reasonable monthly limit; it’s not like I’m giving you thousands of dollars to blow.” Hermione said and Bucky felt the weight of her stare as he pointedly ignored her. “Consider it treatment.” Hermione finally said and Bucky sighed, recognizing he’d lost this battle. Hermione seemed to recognize his acceptance because she smiled, turning to Steve excitedly. “Steve, would you mind terribly if you taught Bucky how to shop online?” Hermione asked. Bucky watched as Steve looked up embarrassed from across the table. He brushed his hand against the back of his neck awkwardly.

“I…don’t actually know how.” Steve admitted and Bucky nearly laughed. Hermione was blinking owlishly, evidently surprised and Steve looked uncomfortable about his confession.

“I see.” Hermione muttered.

“I don’t really shop anyway, especially not online. Anything I needed, I just asked Natasha for…” Steve explained.
“I’ll show you!” Hermione said with a warm smile. “I have time, so I should just teach both of you. It’s a little tricky anyway given the protections on this house making it impossible to have regular mail—I actually have a P.O. Box so they could drop the packages off somewhere.”

After dinner, Hermione convinced the both of them to sit with her on the couch. She was resting her laptop on a table before the couch as Steve sank easily into the spot next to her on the couch. Bucky paused, awkward, as he debated his place. Finally, for practicality’s sake, he sat on her other side to view the screen. Bucky focused as she explained the process. He was already familiar to some extent with some of the new technology he had interacted with and understood the basics quickly. Steve had already begun learning about technology since his return two years ago but seemed content to follow a walk-through anyway. Hermione pulled up a shopping site and insisted Bucky order something just for the sake of a trial run.

Bucky resisted the urge to flush. He didn’t want anything. He had clothing, food, shelter; he was doing alright. What would he need? He clicked through the site unsure. He marveled at all the random items he could buy: books, clothing, shoes—a giraffe shaped ladle. Bucky was simultaneously fascinated and horrified what random items the future had created. Hermione was nearly vibrating with excitement and anticipation beside him. Bucky had to choose something. Bucky paused when he saw a tea cup. It was larger than Hermione’s cups, darker than her white ones with a nice shade of blue. It was a hardy mug. It was cheaper than most of the other things he had seen. He paused as he felt Hermione’s anxious energy beside him. Giving up, he purchased the cup following the procedure she had listed.

“Nice, mug.” Steve commented with a teasing tone that had Bucky glaring beyond Hermione to his friend; Steve was smirking.

“Don’t be jealous, Steve! Now you can buy whatever you’d like as well!” Hermione chimed, grinning so unnecessarily happily that Bucky felt his own smile tugging at his lips. They lingered in the living room for a bit—a reprise from the isolation and separation the trio had dwelled in prior to this moment. Steve kept asking the same questions in different ways in what Bucky recognized as an attempt to keep Bucky in Hermione’s presence. Bucky shuffled restlessly. Eventually, Bucky began shifting away from Hermione, uncomfortable as her scent invaded his senses and the commentary too benign to distract him. Hermione must have realized his growing anxiety for she sighed and stood. She gave him time to shower and prepare for bed before she healed him and he returned to watch her nightly routine on the piano. He admired her deft hands, as did Steve, Bucky noted. They watched her as she played and Bucky felt himself easing without the healing even starting. He shook himself out of his daze to wander downstairs, waiting for his treatment.

-0-0-0-

This too shall pass.

Hermione told Bucky in reference to the pain and agony he felt. Bucky used it to assure himself that he would get over his feelings for Hermione; that he’d stop craving her presence. When weeks had passed, Bucky was disappointed to learn time did not pass quick enough. He still missed her. He still missed touching her. She still smiled at him and each time she did he resisted the urge to crumble and allow himself to beg his return into her fold.

Steve felt the same way. Since Steve had begun allowing Hermione to heal him, Bucky noticed that he had become more affectionate with Hermione—more touchy. Bucky knew that Steve often had tea before bed with Hermione. She helped him relax, Steve had said. Bucky didn’t know why Steve had felt the need to tell him; it wasn’t like Bucky was chasing after Hermione. In fact, Steve would
be a hell of a lot healthier to date than Bucky—more honorable than Bucky.

Bucky sighed. The house was empty today. It was one of the days where Hermione and Steve had both left for work at the same time. They both let him know before they left, eying him with regret before sadly departing. Bucky didn’t mind. If anything, he was more inclined to wander the house without them, lest he stumble into Hermione and feel the temptation to linger in her space again; he could still intimately recall the feel of her when he was still a memory-less shell.

Bucky wandered upstairs to the roof, Crookshanks trailing after him. Bucky opened the door to the roof and inhaled the morning air. Something about Hermione’s magic made even the air seem like it wasn’t from city, despite the rooftops and skyscrapers Bucky could see all around. He opened the door to the greenhouse, noting the familiar as he ducked in and took his usual spot on an empty shelf.

With further encouragement from both Hermione and Steve, Bucky had been ordering more things online. Bucky had to admit that he enjoyed opening the packages, feeling a little like they were presents. Admittedly, he was beginning to acquire a whole slew of random items of the modern age—he secretly loved the novelty—but Bucky mostly bought things for the greenhouse.

Bucky glanced at the seedlings he had purchased, planted, and cared for; they had grown significantly overnight. Bucky felt something akin to pride as he watched their growth. He was happy that his hands weren’t killing something but making it better. He watered them the way Hermione had first showed him before retreating back downstairs, Crookshanks at his heels. Crookshanks had taken to following Bucky when he was alone in the house and he sometimes marveled at the creature’s intelligence and perceptiveness. He wondered if magical familiar’s reflected their owner’s traits or if they had bonded because they were similar.

On the main floor Bucky eyed her personal library again, hand trailing over the titles. Bucky had always loved books—especially fantasy. Bucky used to read to Steve when he was sick but Steve always preferred books on military strategy—usually from Steve’s father’s personal library. Bucky plucked a book of the shelf: *Lord of the Rings*. He read the summary before he moved towards the sofa, intent to dissolve into the fiction. Instead, Crookshanks twined between his legs bellowing. Bucky paused to regard the cat. Crookshanks tended to do things for a reason. He sighed as he set the book down and gave the cat his full attention. Crookshanks looked at him approvingly before leading him to the hallway. The cat paused before the basement door and Bucky stopped. The door always seemed different than the rest. Bucky found he forgot the existence of the basement unless he was actively thinking of Hermione when she was there or when he went down for healing. He assumed it had something to do with her magic. Crookshanks placed a paw on the door and Bucky turned the handle nervously. For some reason, despite it not being explicitly said, he felt like he shouldn’t be descending into the basement without Hermione. Crookshanks, however, was setting a quick pace that left Bucky unable to hesitate further.

Ominous green flames lit the far end of the room where the fireplace burned eternal. It would have seemed more ominous but the charmed windows seemed to leak golden sunshine from the reflecting window panes. Bucky took his time inspecting the space, eying shelves in a way he had felt too guilty to do before. He saw a familiar colored bottle on a shelf and paled unintentionally; it was the potion that reminded him of his Hydra-inflicted sleep. He turned abruptly to look elsewhere, turning his attention to the additional bookshelves she kept under ground. His fingers ghosted over the spine of one book but Crookshanks batted him in the leg, startling Bucky who stared down at the cat. The cat stared back meaningfully.

“Alright, Crooks. What do you want me to see?” Bucky asked with restrained frustration and outright confusion. Crookshanks gave a ‘Mreow’ of approval before hoping onto the narrow shelf
and placing a paw on the binding of a book, tugging on it slightly until Bucky assisted. Sometimes
the intelligence of Hermione’s familiar frightened him. He glanced at the book title.

The Modern Mind-Healing Arts By Healer Hermione Jean Granger, Master of Mind Healing
Arts

Bucky started at the author. In retrospect, he knew Hermione had written books, but he hadn’t
thought to read them—hadn’t seen them upstairs in her top library. Bucky thumbed through the
pages.

The prime candidate to learn healing, in my experience, has the aptitude, drive, and empathy.
Without any of these qualities, the true capability of a mind-healer will not be reached.

Bucky strolled over to the chaise-lounge and laid back like he normally did for healing. He flipped to
the beginning of the book.

Foreword by Luna Scamander: The Mind Healing arts are as fluid as society and as everlasting as
humanity. Few are capable of grasping the intricacies of the mind—fewer still can heal it. In
addition to being the foremost healing authority for all matters of Mind Healing, Healer Hermione
Granger, MMHA is also well-regarded for her brilliance while attending Hogwarts School of
Witchcraft and Wizarding and as a primary driving force behind numerous legislations passed by
the Ministry of Magic of Great Britain post Second Wizarding War. Despite delaying her NEWTs in
favor of conquering the Dark Lord Voldemort as a member of the Golden-Trio, Healer Granger
scored record results of the past half-century...

Bucky read the foreword hesitantly, wondering if this was considered an invasion of privacy. It was
a published book, however, and she frequently entered Bucky’s mind through healing that Bucky
justified himself as he began at the beginning.

There is a rare talent in a natural Legilimens. It should be said, however, that a natural Legilimens
does not always display talents in youth. Indeed, I did not discover my ability until it was unlocked in
my initial learning...

Bucky found the book to be an insight into Hermione’s habits.

One must maintain balance...My benign choice is piano, though I have found others whom enjoyed
reading Quidditch statistics, cooking, or painting.

It wasn’t until the book addressed actual studies that Bucky realized Hermione had been hiding more
of herself than Bucky had realized.

Damage inflicted by dementors, reflects back to the healer if the healer has previous exposure to
dementors...

...Those who are inflicted with the presence of the darkest of magics and whom are not healed from
the damages will feel the magnification of memories within them. It is the utmost importance to
maintain a mental balance before entering the afflicted, lest the damage become overwhelming for
the healer. The darker the magic and the longer the exposure the patient experienced, the more
tainted the pathways and thus the greater potential for damage to the healer. The effect will create a
backlash that usually manifests in nightmares or night terrors...

...The Crucius curse, as an unforgiveable curse, predominately inflicts torture via stress to the
nerves, leaving frayed memory paths that can become disconnected with prolonged exposure.
Healers who have experienced the Crucius curse are also at risk to feeling increased negative
effects from the remnants within the patient. It is advisable to seek healers who have never
experienced the curse to heal those who have. Mind healers who have experienced the curse may be
healed of the effects—even by mind healers who have experienced the curse, though their utilization
is ill-advised due to side-effects. See study below.

Subject: Master of Mind Healing Arts, Sarah Mitchell - Cruciatus curse exposure age 25 for ~ 1-
minute interval, 3 times over 15 minutes.

Healer: Master of Mind Healing Arts, Hermione Granger - Cruciatus curse exposure age 18 for ~1-
3-minute interval, ~25 times over 45 minutes.

Healer Granger, MMHA was able to successfully healed Healer Mitchell, MMHA’s Cruciatus-
damaged mental paths. Subject later healed several Crucitus-exposed minds without facing the
negative repercussions of exposure.

It should be noted that exposure and duration of Cruciatus Curse to patient increases magnification
effect to the healer as noted below.

Subject: Master of Mind Healing Arts, Akira Takahada - Cruciatus curse exposure age 25 for ~ 1-
minute interval, 7 times over 35 minutes.

Healer: Master of Mind Healing Arts, Hermione Granger - Cruciatus curse exposure age 18 for ~1-
3-minute interval, ~25 times over 45 minutes.

…For those tortured into insanity via Cruciatus Curse, they can be guided back to sanity with
extensive mind-healing repair. As of the writing of this book, I am regarded as the only successful
Mind Healer to resolve the marks of insanity via the Cruciatus Curse. Failed attempts are listed
below. The first successful attempt, patients F.L. and A.L. were cursed into insanity during the first
Wizarding War of the Dark Lord Voldemort (1981). Subjects had been in extended patient care for
20 years…

Bucky’s stomach eventually grumbled in protest of the lunch Bucky skipped in order to keep
reading. Dimly Bucky registered the sound, but the only thing he could feel was the chill sneaking
into his body. He didn’t recognize a lot of the terms he came across, gathering only what he could
from context clues, but words like ‘torture’ and ‘insanity’ were pretty much universal and
Hermione’s name was splashed all over the book as a subject of intense physical agony. Bucky felt
something in his throat welling.

“Crooks,” Bucky rasped out “Do you think something is wrong with Hermione?” Bucky stared at
the cat whose eyes nearly glowed in the dark shadows of the room. Bucky jumped, the book tossing
in the air when the wall clock struck three. Bucky caught the book as it fell, realizing that Hermione
had estimated her return to be shortly soon after. Bucky leapt from the spot and placed the book back
on the shelf before dashing up the stairs, two steps at a time.

Safe in his room, Bucky paced. The book had given Bucky an inclination that Hermione wasn’t as
well as she let on. Bucky squared his shoulders. He had been wallowing in his own agony that he
hadn’t even thought of Steve’s or Hermione’s issues. She was their healer—but she was more than
that. Bucky was unwilling to say what she was but it didn’t stop him from wanting to help her as she
helped him. Bucky glanced at Crookshanks who had followed him up from the basement. Bucky
had the distinct feeling that the feline was pleased. The familiar’s reaction only strengthened Bucky’s
curiosity and resolve.

He was smart, Crookshanks; Bucky resolved to never be on his bad side.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: I rewrote this chapter maybe five or six times before I created a satisfactory version. I still not big on the sad stuff—I miss my fluff—so look forward to the rise of the fluff again in the upcoming chapters. The chapters are becoming longer because of the increased POV so this might be the new regular length. Thanks also to everyone who read and reviewed Candy, Pumpkins, and Costumes—my Halloween one-shot(ish)!

Side note: Saw Thor Ragnarok last night—it was amazing.

Thanks for reading and let me know what you think!
Wrong and Right

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don’t own either universe.

Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! Please continue to do so!

Sorry for any grammatical errors. I reread my chapters constantly and hate when I catch errors—hate it.

We’re working our way back towards fluff with a plot so the next chapters are consistently longer. I’m still thinking I might be done at chapter 20 (until I work on the sequel) but I’m still working on the chapters and will have to see. One piece I had written since I first started this fic was finally going to be uploaded…but it’s been relegated to the next chapter after determining it’d be a better fit there and 18,000 words was too long for a single chapter. So, I’m excited for next week!

Some fun things are upcoming and you can contribute as you please! I don’t think I’ve rejected anyone’s suggestion yet so shoot me your headcanon/fluffs/plot bunnies and I’ll see if I can find a home for it.

As always, thank you for reading and I hope you keep enjoying!

Oh boy. This one is a doozy in length. (over 10,000 words!)

-0-0-0- Wrong and Right

Hermione was dying. She reminded herself for the umpteenth time that it was only figurative and she hypothetically was getting enough sleep to prevent a sudden collapse. Still, she thought petulantly, she at least felt genuinely miserable. Her nights had become a mix between sleeplessness and the ragged agony of her usual nightmares that left her throat sore from screaming herself awake. As she had done prior to the appearance of Bucky and Steve, Hermione distracted herself with additional work. Sure, she was probably running herself a little ragged, but it was better than sitting idle in despair.

Her days of comfort and happiness were over but Hermione still trudged along. After all, she recalled like a mantra, who could heal Steve and Bucky but her? Despite her own declining mental health—not declining per se but perhaps just returning to the previous state—Steve and Bucky were apparently improving. Better yet, they were improving together.

She cringed as she reflected on her own limited capabilities in mind-healing; there was only so much she could do for Bucky or Steve at one time. She had prioritized the recovery of Bucky’s memory as well as lessening the agony of his memories with Steve. She was pleased that Bucky was less wary towards Steve, but the result was hardly a surprise; the repair of their mental relationship bolstered their friendship. Dimly, she acknowledged that it served to isolate Hermione from the both of them. She really only saw them when she healed them and that was fine. The healing sessions were
seemingly inadequate compared to the nonstop presence they shared before—but it was appropriate as their mental health care provider to only see them in a professional capacity. So she tried—really, she did. Admittedly it was lonely, but it was appropriate. Even if it meant sleepless nights and tired eyes because peaceful sleep could no longer find her without Steve and Bucky at her side.

So Hermione distracted herself with more work. She had taken a brief reprieve from her pedagogical work and free-lance consulting in order to initially welcome Steve and Bucky. Now, as days had passed and she had grown confident that Bucky would not run away from treatment in shame and self-loathing, Hermione could regularly leave the house again to conduct her work. Steve had apparently also returned to work with the Avengers, meeting with his team almost daily to train or plan. Between Hermione and Steve’s new erratic schedule needs, Bucky sometimes was left alone at the house. He seemed to prefer it that way.

“I’d rather not be alone.”

Hermione remembered Bucky’s words the first day of his lucidity—before he had withdrawn. She knew she had to respect what he was saying, even if it wasn’t what he was feeling, even if she desperately yearned to not be left on the outskirts of best friendship again. But his needs were greater than her own and more than anything, he needed to feel like he had control and autonomy. So Hermione left him alone. Crookshanks, aware of her will and probably possessing reasons of his own, often shadowed Bucky as the only comfort Hermione could offer without intruding.

While Bucky had been actively avoiding her, Steve had been another story. Their first healing had been a session of mending for both of them. She had been glad when Steve seemingly eased from the wariness he carried after her Occlumency incident. She had been stunned when Steve had suddenly become more forward. She recalled him at the cusp of his trance, touching her blatantly in a way he never managed when she looked at him head on.

“We take care of each other.” He had said and her heart had nearly burst from just the idea. Since that day—since his healing had begun—Steve had begun to touch and seek her touch more willingly. It was all little things, like passing items and grazing fingertips or a hand on her back to guide her in a certain direction. It never was inappropriate or crass and Hermione admitted only to herself and Crookshanks that she did in fact enjoy his caresses. But even with Steve’s sudden lingering brushes, Hermione found it did not fill the void that Bucky’s affection had left. If anything, Steve’s sudden fascination with her skin coincided with the beginning of their healing sessions—a fact that was not lost on her. She resolved to concentrate on healing both Steve and Bucky quicker lest she continue to stare her temptations in the face daily.

Hermione was familiar enough with the healing Steve required. Steve reminded Hermione of Harry in many ways. Prone to self-sacrifice, they were two people in her life who easily sacrificed themselves to the literal death for the benefit and life of others. They also seemingly didn’t expect their miraculous return back to life. Some people would be overjoyed with a second change but people like them, well, they were often martyrs because they had not seen a life beyond their war.

Hermione followed the wounded paths inside of Steve’s mind until she reached his memories of life before the war and the war itself. Steve had feared the end of the war for a variety of reasons but at the end of the day the war had made Steve capable and his fear extended to what would happen when it concluded; how he would leave that capability behind. Like many of Hermione’s friends who had spent so much time involved in fighting a brutal war, they had no idea where to channel their energy after.

Hermione could also relate.

Another unsettling thing that Hermione encountered was Steve’s own self-loathing for Bucky’s
tragic demise. Resolutely, Steve had determined to never leave his friend behind again. Hermione sought to mend the negative feelings Steve held towards everything that had occurred to Bucky. They ran deep, taking root within Steve’s soul, grit, and determination, but Hermione could mend them—so she did. Yes, Steve was a mind she could fairly easily work with all things considered.

Bucky, however, was a mind of mysteries. Whatever Hydra had done to him had resembled the Cruciatus curse. Since Hermione had trained her protégés to heal Cruciatus damage, Hermione had not healed someone with similar-type damage in over a year. Her students were proficient and Hermione was lucky enough to have subsisted on their abilities during that time. Hermione personally only treated very important people or cases that were deemed impossible—a category Hermione had determined included Bucky. She had been fine enough on the first phase of healing; increasing growth rates of memories was not particularly painful—just taxing. But now that Hermione was on the second phase of healing—focused and specific healing—it was taxing and painful. Hermione hadn’t even entered the third or fourth phase! Which was why, Hermione thought angrily, she needed proper sleep.

Regardless of her personal distaste of sleep deprivation, Hermione was a creature of routines even as she developed less than ideal patterns. Her new one started when she woke up dead-exhausted. She worked, healed, worked, and healed. When she went to bed, she attempted to stay awake despite her compounding sleep deprivation. Eventually, she’d fall reluctantly into a fitful sleep. Rinse and repeat. She was appreciative the day she had stumbled into Steve in the kitchen. Talking with him—even in the middle of the night—put her at ease and so she happily added late night tea to her itinerary. The idle chatter before sleeping did wonders to improve her growing sleeplessness.

Still, Hermione thought ruefully, a bandage only helped so much when you had a festering wound. Regardless, Hermione woke with only a small sound of protest, eyes bruising from her lack of peaceful rest. When she opened her eyes to the offending morning light she protested vocally again. She could stay in bed, she thought. Crookshanks would fetch her food—she was sure of it. When Hermione spent five minutes contemplating whether she could subsist on a diet of mice, she finally gave up on her daydream and dislodged Crookshanks softly from his place beside her. The Bucky Bear and Captain America bear slid down the sheets as she stood. She dressed slowly. She brushed her hair ineffectively. She looked at her bloodshot and baggy eyes in the mirror and sighed. A quick twist of her wand and the usual glamour was set; she didn’t want the boys to notice or worry. She didn’t want to know how she would feel if they saw her state and didn’t react either so she didn’t give them the chance.

Hermione sipped her black tea and quietly ate her oats before descending into her magical basement. She was in the process of organizing her work documents when the green flames in her hearth echoed her name. She answered the call.

“Harry.” Hermione greeted with a small smile. His hair was disarrayed but he looked happy and whole.

“Morning, Hermione!” Harry greeted good-naturedly, he was fumbling with something beyond her sight “I had some legislation I wanted you to—“ Harry looked up and paused abruptly at the sight of her. She drew back a little warily.

“You’re wearing a glamour.” Harry noticed immediately despite the green tint of the flames. Hermione bit her lip, guiltily. The problem with glamours was that certain imperfections disappeared; people who knew where those marks were supposed to be could notice the absence.

“I’ve had a few rough days at work.” Hermione said vaguely. She withheld her wince when Harry looked at her sternly, gauging.
"I thought you just took a break? Then you go back to work and you’re pushing yourself too hard? What’s the point of a vacation if you aren’t actually able to rest and relax?" Harry chastised. Hermione cursed mentally. As the main person who mothered others, it was difficult to receive it from anyone—especially Harry or Ron.

"I’m fine, Harry." Hermione said as she waved off his concern. His expression remained stony.

"That remains to be seen. Are you coming to the burrow next dinner?" Harry asked pointedly.

"No, I’ll still have company." Hermione responded wearily.

"Muggles who aren’t your parents?" Harry hedged suspiciously. Hermione attempted a faint smile.

"Just two friends." Hermione answered. Harry’s suspicions were clearly rising.

"Oh? Where do you know them from?" Harry asked nonchalantly but Hermione recognized he was fishing for answers.

"They’re local." Hermione mumbled as she stared down at the hem of her skirt.

"Uh huh." Harry drew out the expression. "Local muggles who are staying at your place? How did you meet?" Harry called her out obnoxiously. Hermione pursed her lips.

"Well, I met one in the alley outside my house two years ago and then I met his friend." Hermione offered vaguely.

"He?" Harry noticed.

"Yes. He." Hermione answered succinctly.

"I see…" Harry trailed off lightly, though his lips were forming a smirk.

"Oh, Harry, stop! Honestly. You’re worse than Ginny and Molly!" Hermione complained suddenly. She was glad he was no longer focusing on the original topic but this topic was one they revisited far too often.

"Can you blame me? I just want someone to take care of you." Harry offered.

"I can take care of myself." Hermione bit out. "I’m not pursuing a relationship with either of them. I’m just letting them stay until they move into their New York apartments."

"First of all, you obviously can but don’t take care of yourself—despite promising Ron and I you would when you moved to New York—and secondly, you’re telling me you let two muggles into your sanctuary of protection and you’re doing it so they have somewhere to stay? That’s the only reason?" Harry baited. Hermione crossed her arms over her chest defensively.

"It’s not like the house is just a Fidelius charm, you know that; having them here won’t erase my protections." Hermione pouted.

"Come on, Hermione. I know you better than that; you don’t invite random muggles or wizards over unless you have a good reason. You’ve only known them at max for two years—how do you even know they’re safe?" Harry questioned. Hermione sucked her cheek and sulked.

"I knew you for less than a year before I was gallivanting with you." Hermione recalled.
“And now you have great friendships and several children who call you Auntie. So is there something else?” Harry reiterated relentlessly.

“They’re just… I’m just helping them out and they are fine. Crookshanks approved and everything.” Hermione responded weakly. Harry ‘hmmd’ on the other side of the flames.

“Alright. I’ll accept that you are currently not pursuing either muggle and you will be missing Burrow dinner, but you better be at the one after, am I understood?” Harry demanded. Hermione snorted a laugh.


“I’m looking out for you, Hermione—just like you did for me. Okay?” Harry told her softly. Hermione melted at the placation.

“Yes, Harry.” Hermione smiled back. “Fatherhood becomes you.”

“I know.” Harry smirked. “Oh, right—papers! Can you look over the legislation that’s circling around over here and let me know what you think?” Harry asked. Hermione nodded. “I’ll send them right over.” Harry flashed her a grateful smile.

“I love you, Harry.” Hermione told him fondly.

“I love you, too.” Harry said with a smile.

“Give my love to the others, as well.” Hermione demanded and Harry nodded.

“Will do. Take care.” Harry said as he removed himself from the call. The papers shot through a short time later and Hermione Accio’d them into her hand before sitting back on her heels.

That was close.

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Steve was happy to report his friendship with Bucky was healing. They were not the same—no—but their friendship was evolving into something new but no less deep than it had been in the past. Steve was unsure if it was Hermione’s healing or the techniques they were both employing to benefit Bucky but whatever the tactic, it seemed to be working. Despite spending nearly every day training with various Avengers, Steve still spent much of his time back at the house in Bucky’s room. Sometimes they talked, other times they just coexisted in the same space together. Hermione had suggested to Steve that Bucky might benefit from more hobbies and after Steve badgered his friend, Bucky had finally taken up additional hobbies—including reading Hermione’s books and gardening on the roof. Hermione’s library was rich with all types of books—save the military books that Steve favored—but it particularly favored fantasy books. Steve remembered Bucky’s preference for sci-fi and fantasy and thus he was not surprised when Bucky began talking about one plot or another, a character or conflict. Unfortunately for Bucky, Steve was never able to offer much to the conversation about books Steve never had read. Fortunately, someone else in the house was far more apt.

“Hermione has read all these books, Buck.” Steve suggested to Bucky. “I’m sure she’d love talking about them—they’re in her library after all.” Bucky, however, had mumbled some excuse, continuing to avoid Hermione. It irked Steve that his friend was warming back up to him but was still frigid and avoidant with Hermione. Steve might acknowledge there was progress, but Bucky making regular eye contact hardly seem like such a big accomplishment, especially given how Bucky was
especially diligent to not touch Hermione in any way. Occasionally Bucky would even duck so obviously out of the way that Steve was amazed Hermione never got offended. Granted, Bucky’s touch-reluctance seemed to extend to Steve as well. While in their past life, Steve and Bucky had jostled, wrestled, and embraced one another on the daily, nowadays, Steve was lucky if Bucky bumped shoulders without flying backwards against the wall in alarm. Despite this there was one being who was the sole exception—Crookshanks. The mercurial, bowlegged cat seemed indifferent to Bucky’s preferences and brushed by Bucky’s ankles constantly. Bucky would flinch at anyone else’s touch but he seemed no longer surprised as Crookshanks swept by him with feline authority. Steve resolved to not be jealous of the cat.

Given Bucky’s predisposition to avoiding Hermione with deliberate consistency, it was with great surprise that Bucky seemingly flipped in the complete opposite direction once again. It was the end of dinner when Hermione had already swept the dishes away that Bucky had called out from the table.

“Hermione.” Bucky said softly, yet her name seemingly echoed in the sudden stillness of the room. “Can we—” Bucky croaked out before pausing. He regarded Hermione as Steve regarded him; Hermione had paused mid-stride and turned towards them in surprise. “Can we watch a movie?” Bucky finished hesitantly. He swept a tongue across his lips as if to wet his dry lips. Hermione and Steve both looked at Bucky stunned.

“Yes.” Hermione authorized slowly. She was smiling; her eyes were alight with joy, exuding a spirit of complete contentedness. “I would like that very much.” Hermione ventured and Bucky melted from the sight, Steve saw. Steve was glad he was currently escaping notice because he had no doubt his face mirrored the contained adoration he also felt for a happy Hermione. They assembled by the couch, Steve sitting in his usual spot immediately while Hermione turned on the next Disney movie. They had waited for Bucky in order to continue their Disney Marathon and were starting exactly where they had left off. When Hermione sat down in her normal seat she glanced up at Bucky. Steve followed her gaze. Bucky had not shifted from where he stood beside the couch. He looked unsure as he looked between the couch and the floor. Finally Bucky sat down. He was on the couch but sat distantly from where Steve and Hermione sat side-by-side. If Hermione was disappointed, she did not reveal it.

After that day, Bucky had seemingly decided to shuck his self-imposed isolation. Where he used to be found only in his room, Steve now found Bucky dwelling somewhere in the openness of the atrium. Instead of avoiding Hermione, Bucky began to seek opportunities to spend time with her and Steve. Every night after dinner, they would retire to the couch where they would continue their movie list. Though the three did not sit as intimately as they had previously, Steve noted that just spending time with both of them still eased his mind and soul. He was therefore reluctant to spend evenings away despite the urging of the other Avengers. Steve was fortunate, however, that Natasha had continued to be away on missions and conveniently had been unable to corner Steve to ask any additional questions—which was good because Steve was a shit liar. Unfortunately, Natasha wasn’t the only one asking questions.

“So I’ve come up with a new theory.” Tony said one day in the practice room of the Avengers tower. Steve closed his eyes in annoyance and he ended his round on the boxing bag with a hit so powerful, the bag broke. Steve frowned. Hermione’s charmed bag had held up to every punch he had ever thrown at it but it was back on her roof.

“That’s the third bag this week, Cap.” Clint said with an amused grin as he fired an arrow casually at a moving target. “Why don’t you try boxing a metal beam instead?”

“Ah ah ah!” Tony reprimanded. “We were focusing on my theory!” Tony drew Clint’s attention.
Clint sheathed his bow to walk over to listen.

“What theory?” Clint asked curious.

“Why I haven’t been able to track Cap’s home.” Tony elaborated and Steve’s hackles went up in surprise.

“You’ve been trying to track me?!” Steve exclaimed. Tony’s eyes widened slightly as he looked awkwardly away from Steve’s scorching glare.

“Only to update your contact information, of course.” Tony reasoned and Steve looked at him in deadpan disbelief.

“Where are you staying, Steve? Nat said whenever she calls your phone when you’re at your ‘house’ it reads in different places.” Clint questioned in a non-threatening manner.

“I’ve been getting false reads, too!” Tony exclaimed, his interest peaking. Steve looked up to the heavens for strength.

“Can you please not track me?” Steve begged in exasperation. “Has it occurred to you that maybe I don’t want to draw attention to myself? That maybe I like living somewhere a little more subtle than ‘Avenger tower’?” Steve ranted. Clint seemed to be weighing the merit of the idea but Tony was pouting.

“You issued a challenge, Cap, I need to know where you’re staying.” Tony explained.

“Why don’t you just tell him where you’re staying, Steve?” Bruce was still in his lab coat as he entered the gym; he never trained—didn’t really need it. “You know he won’t drop it until his curiosity is sated.” Steve felt his jaw jut out in determination.

“It isn’t my secret to tell.” Steve reiterated for the thousandth time. “I promise I’m safe, protected, and well cared for.” Steve said.

“Well good for you, Steve!” Clint said with a friendly pat on Steve’s shoulder before disappearing back into training. Steve turned to Bruce and Tony.

“Can’t I get a little privacy?!” Steve asked gruffly before picking up his towel to head back to the changing rooms. Over his shoulder he heard Tony shouting his latest theory but Steve ignored him—whatever it was, it was wrong. Determinedly done for the day, Steve rolled out on his new Harley. The ride was quick; Hermione lived relatively close to Avenger tower. Steve pulled the bike into the garage, grateful Hermione allowed him to park it there after the utilization of a cab became impractical. Steve was already in a bad mood from the usual questions as he collapsed into the sofa, eyes closing in an effort to will away his frustration.

“Steve.” Bucky greeted from where he was lounging on the other side of the sofa reading a book. Steve nodded tiredly back. Bucky was peering over the top of his book to look at Steve and Steve, already irritated, was a little more confrontational than usual.

“Yes, Bucky?” Steve questioned as patiently as he could. Bucky did not even flinch at the less than patient tone.

“Did you see Hermione eat breakfast?” Bucky asked softly. Steve opened his eyes and looked back at Bucky who had pulled the book down into his lap.

“What?” Steve asked confused. Bucky was looking at him searchingly for some reason.
“You left early this morning—did you see Hermione eat?” Bucky elaborated. Steve stared at his friend blankly. Steve had gotten up first and had seen Hermione wander into the kitchen. Slowly, the realization fell into place. Hermione had entered the kitchen but she had only grabbed a cup of tea, mumbled her itinerary, and then had disappeared into the basement.

“She had tea and then disappeared downstairs.” Steve remembered. Bucky was still looking at him seriously.

“No food?” Bucky clarified. Steve nodded.

“She didn’t eat anything while I was there but she might have come back after I left.” Steve reasoned. Bucky was frowning.

“No. I came out here right after you left and I haven’t seen her all day.” Bucky explained. Steve felt his brow furrow.

“Maybe she popped out for lunch?” Steve asked. Bucky shook his head again.

“She always tells me when she’s leaving.” Bucky said as Steve began to rub his eyes.

“What are you trying to say?” Steve finally asked.

“I’m saying I don’t think Hermione has eaten all day.” Bucky determined. Steve glanced at the clock. It was already dinner time. Steve’s own stomach grumbled in hunger and Bucky rolled his eyes at the ill-timed reminder. “Why don’t we make dinner today?” Bucky announced as he set his book aside and headed towards the kitchen. Steve stood and followed as Bucky began pulling ingredients out of the fridge. Remembering past experiences, Steve took the lead.

“Woah, Buck—better let me handle that.” Steve said with a hint of a teasing smirk appearing as his foul mood began to dissipate. He delegated Bucky off to the side to prep vegetables, so Steve could take control of the meal plan. “How did you notice Hermione missed her meals? Does it happen often?” Steve asked during his search for ingredients. Bucky scoffed at the question.

“I’ve been in the atrium all day. This is the first time I’ve been able to confirm she missed meals, but I think it’s happened a few times.” Bucky mentioned ruefully. Steve eyed him over his shoulder as he took flour out of the pantry.

“You’re keeping an eye on her?” Steve asked with a feigned nonchalance. Bucky’s eyes narrowed in suspicion and Steve regretted his friend could see right through him.

“Somebody has too.” Bucky finally said as he jutted out his jaw. He was still focused on slicing the carrots but Steve could feel his friend’s faint disapproval. “Haven’t you noticed anything…different over the past few weeks?” Bucky baited in a way that sounded accusatory.

Steve, irritation returning from early, felt his temper rise.

“I just happened to notice.” Bucky finally said as he jutted out his jaw. He was still focused on slicing the carrots but Steve could feel his friend’s faint disapproval. “Haven’t you noticed anything…different over the past few weeks?” Bucky baited in a way that sounded accusatory. Steve, irritation returning from early, felt his temper rise.

“I’m surprised you noticed anything from inside your room.” Steve bit out, annoyance creeping into his tone. Truthfully, Bucky had been emerging from his room more frequently. Reluctantly, Steve recognized he probably should have been more patient but Bucky was leading to something and Steve just wanted to know what.
“I’m not surprised you didn’t notice despite not restricting yourself to your room.” Bucky returned. Steve flushed in surprise.

“What does that mean?” Steve asked as he narrowed his eyes in growing frustration. Steve flipped the meat angrily in the pan.

“It means; I hadn’t left Hermione alone just so you could neglect her.” Bucky growled. Steve shook the pan angrily.

“I’ve been a little busy with work—as has she—and I already said you were my priority.” Steve groused back at the unstated blame. Bucky was peeling the potatoes with exaggerated flourishes.

“I shouldn’t be anyone’s priority.” Bucky countered harshly. Whatever Bucky had intended by the conversation was halted when they both jumped at the sound of a door shutting. Hermione turned the corner not long after.

“Oh! I’m so sorry! I got caught up in work; I didn’t even notice the time—wait—are you… cooking?” Hermione rambled as she took in the sight of the kitchen. Steve glanced at Bucky. He was flushed as he ducked his head behind the shadow of his hair. Steve looked back at Hermione who looked confused.

“I’m finally getting a chance to show off my cooking skills.” Steve covered breezily. Bucky was covertly eyeing Hermione so Steve did the same. Her hair was barely contained by her hair tie, but it looked healthy. Her skin glowed, pleasantly flushed. She looked just as attractive and healthy as he had always seen. Crookshanks jumped on the kitchen chair and Hermione scooped him into her arms to pet him, chattering away banally as the cat pretended to be interested. Steve determined that Hermione looked as she always did. A glance to his side revealed Bucky narrowing his eyes. If Bucky thought something was wrong with Hermione she was damn good at hiding it, Steve realized.

After dinner and Bucky’s healing, Steve joined Hermione as she poured him a cup of decaffeinated tea. Steve took it willingly. He allowed his hands to brush hers as she passed the cup to him. She ducked her head away with a pretty blush.

“The food was good.” Hermione complimented. “I should’ve let you cook for me ages ago.” Hermione said with a light laugh. Steve smiled down at his tea.


“You’re right! I have a gardener and cook…do you think Sam could be a pool boy?” Hermione wondered aloud. Steve looked at her askance.

“Do you even have a pool?” Steve asked. Hermione smiled amused.

“No…but I’m sure I could figure out how to add one.” Hermione said as she hefted the wand in her hand playfully. “How is Sam by the way?”

“Good…good. He has his own room at Avenger tower now. He said that Stark kept calling him the Eagle while he stayed in my designated room, so he demanded a new one. He only comes up occasionally though; he still has some Veterans Affair business in DC.” Steve told her as he tapped his finger on the edge of his mug. Hermione was smiling softly as she looked at her own mug. Steve regarded her again. Her hair was still messy and riotous but still looked healthy; her skin still looked well; she still looked fine. Yet, something in Bucky’s hinting had struck home for Steve. She was still
evasive about questions of her own past. Steve still didn’t know about the origins of her scars. Her smiles still seemed sad. He finished his tea sooner than usual and bade Hermione goodnight. She looked disappointed and just as reluctant as he felt when they parted to their respective rooms to sleep. She always had a brief look of dread as she entered her room but Steve had always thought it was because she missed their sleepovers. Steve sat in his room on the edge of his bed for a long time, contemplating. What had Bucky meant? What had Bucky noticed? Steve’s door opened and he looked up in surprise.

“Notice anything?” Bucky whispered softly as he entered and closed the door behind him. Steve glanced at the clock. It was already the early twilight hours of the next day.


“I always wake up at this hour.” Bucky admitted. Steve looked at him significantly and Bucky capitulated. “Nightmares.” Bucky clarified. “But don’t pretend you don’t have sleepless nights, too.”

“You’re right.” Steve acknowledged. “So if we all suffer from insomnia…what about Hermione?” Steve asked. Bucky crossed his arms.

“Exactly.” Bucky said grimly. Without thinking, Steve opened the door and strode to Hermione’s. Bucky was beside him as they lingered outside of her room and listened. The house was unusually quiet for New York but there was nothing coming from Hermione’s room. Steve should have been able to hear shuffling or breathing.

“Buck—can you hear anything?” Steve whispered to his friend beside him. Bucky shook his head negative. Steve knocked lightly on the door. “Hermione?” Steve voiced tentatively. Steve felt his anxiety grow as the silence held; there was no movement, no indication of life. When his second attempt yielded no answer, Steve began to panic. Impulsively, he threw the door open. “Hermione?!” He called, dimly acknowledging Bucky entering behind him. Steve’s concern was unnecessarily as the figure they were searching for jumped up from the bed with a wand pointed in their direction.

“Steve?” Hermione whispered in disbelief. A light emerged from her wand, casting a low glow around them. “Bucky?” She echoed incredulously. “What’s wrong?” She asked, her face scanning both of them in the illuminating light. But Bucky did not answer nor did Steve and he imagined it was for the very same reason; Hermione looked awful. Her eyes were sunken. She appeared to have lost weight in her face which gave her a gaunt expression. Her bushy hair seemed drier and brittle. How could they have missed this? Steve wondered angrily. How could they not have noticed? They were so wrapped up in their own recovery and friendship that they have completely missed Hermione’s own suffering. Steve blamed himself; he had prioritized Bucky but he should have been there for them both. Hadn’t he told Sam he’d support Hermione, too? She was staring at them blearily as she awaited an answer neither had given.

“We couldn’t hear you…” Steve explained awkwardly, still concerned with the sight before him. Hermione sighed, as she dimmed the light to a more manageable level.

“It’s a silencing spell…so everyone could sleep better.” Hermione explained tiredly. Steve suspected the last part was a lie. “Thank you for your concern, but I’m fine.” Hermione placated. Lie. Steve identified.

“O-kay.” Steve continued uneasily. “We—um—we’ll let you get back to sleep. Sorry for the disruption and goodnight?” Steve finished hesitantly. Hermione gave him a brief smile.
“I’ll see you two in the morning.” Hermione said softly as she settled back into the bed. Feeling a rush of affection for their caretaker, Steve trailed over to her. “Steve?” Hermione asked, surprise coloring her voice. The wand light was gone but Steve could still make out her form with the moonlight from the windows.

“I’m tucking you in.” Steve replied loftily. Hermione made a strangled noise but acquiesced as Steve pulled the blankets to her chin. “Goodnight.” Steve whispered as he allowed himself a soft caress on the corner of her jaw.

“Goodnight, Steve. Goodnight Bucky.” Hermione said quietly back. Steve closed the door behind him and exhaled as he closed his eyes. When Steve opened them, he saw Bucky leading back to his room—his shoulders hunched in contained rage. Steve followed and was not surprised when Bucky closed the door swiftly behind them. Steve looked around. Bucky must have gotten packages from his online shopping because there were boxes, knick-knacks, and packaging everywhere.

“Fuckin’ hell!” Bucky exclaimed as he dropped onto the corner of his bed.


“Crookshanks does things for a reason. He showed me the book she wrote. I read it—and—and she was tortured, Steve.” Bucky explained. Steve closed his eyes.

“The scar…on her forearm.” Steve recalled as he rubbed between his eyebrows. “She said it was from her war.”

“What does that mean? I keep coming across it but I don’t know what that actually means!” Bucky ran his hands through his hair. Steve looked at the floor sadly.

“She always changes the subject when I asked for details. She hadn’t—I thought I was respecting her by not pushing.” Steve exhaled in frustration, still rubbing his face. “What do we do?” Steve asked.

“What can we do?” Bucky retorted his tone echoing Steve’s own realization that he didn’t have a damn clue. Their late-night brainstorming ended inconclusively. The next day Steve was still thinking about solutions when he realized that Hermione was doing more than avoiding conversation topics. When she entered the kitchen in the morning, Bucky passing her eggs and sausage to her surprise, Steve inspected her features. She looked the same as she had always looked. She still
looked fine. She still looked put together and healthy. Steve commented as such when she disappeared into the basement later that day.

“No…” Bucky pondered. “Something isn’t right; I know what I saw.” Bucky confirmed. Steve turned and looked at Bucky as the answer seemed to hit them both.

“Magic.” They agreed ominously. Hermione was using magic to cover up whatever negative effects were occurring.

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“People always crack, Steve. Even people who are good at hiding it.” Sam said at the practice gym in Avenger tower.

“But why is she hiding it? How long has she been hiding it?” Steve wondered. Sam shrugged indelicately. Realization struck Steve. “You don’t think it’s because I make her uncomfortable—touching her?” Steve asked worryingly. He hoped desperately that wasn’t the case. Sam snorted.

“Steve, I think Penny has eyes for only you and her guard dog.” Sam commented with amusement. Steve frowned.

“But he’s not like that anymore…and he might kill you if you call him that.” Steve warned. “Do you think that’s why she’s upset?” Steve continued to wonder, just as he had for the past few days since the discovery.

“Well, I’m calling him that until you give him a new nickname.” Sam said idly as he drank from his water bottle. “Listen, maybe Penny’s trying to choose between you, maybe she’s not trying to choose either of you at all—she’s your doctor, after all. All I know is that when I saw her, she had it bad for both of you and the way everything has been lining up, that’s got to come with a whole slew of problems.” Sam pontificated. Steve was so deep into considering Sam’s opinions that he hadn’t even noticed as Tony snuck up behind him.

“Ohhhh?” Tony drew out in a grating voice that immediately put Steve on edge. “What’s this about your lucky penny, Cap?” Tony said with a Cheshire cat smile. Steve resisted the urge to flinch.

“My necklace?” Steve questioned deceptively. Tony could not be fooled if his smile was anything to go by.

“Noooope.” Tony said, releasing the word with an exaggerated pop. “You’re too late, Cap; I’ve already heard it. Dr. Penny. Penny with a capital P, as in a proper noun, as in a person!” Tony smiled.

“Thank you for the grammar lesson.” Steve deadpanned. Sam gave Steve an apologetic look but Steve knew he was at fault for asking Sam so publically. Tony stepped out of his iron man suit and procured water from the fridge.

“You know, Cap. Good ol’ falcon over here has been unwilling to reveal the details of your little chateau.” Tony took a drink of water. Steve flashed Sam an appreciative look and Sam nodded back. “The most I got out of Wilson is the same thing Agent Romanoff got: a Miss Penny of Oz.” Tony accused. Steve felt vaguely like he was being interrogated but he had been expecting Tony to bring his accommodations up again; he was just lucky he still hadn’t seen Nat yet while she was on her own intelligence missions. “So who is she? Wouldn’t Dorothy be more apt?” Sam snorted.

“Dorothy and Toto—that sounds about right.” Sam seemed to contemplate the metaphor and Tony brightened in response.
“But who would be Steve? The cowardly lion?” Tony needled aloud. Steve bristled.

“If I’m the lion, you’re the tin man.” Steve projected, glad that in terms of pop culture metaphors, this was one he could actively participate in.

“This is all wrong.” Sam admitted. He pointed at Steve. “Steve is Dorothy and Toto is still Toto.” Tony glanced back at Sam in confusion.

“A: Who is Toto? And B: Then who does Penny become?” Tony questioned.

“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtains.” Sam said as he waved his hands in front of his face. Tony’s brows furrowed.

“So you’re all going to her to have your wishes come true?” Tony extrapolated. Steve sighed.

“It’s not a perfect metaphor.” Steve said as he rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know, Cap.” Sam disagreed. “I think the tin man could use a little bit of her magic.” Sam said under his breath. Steve gave him a sharp look at the mention of magic but Tony was too annoyed to apparently notice.

“I want to meet her!” Tony demanded petulantly. “Why haven’t you invited her over?” Steve snorted.

“So you can interrogate her? Absolutely not.” Steve vetoed.

“Why hasn’t she invited us over? Doesn’t she know about us?” Tony continued to whine as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“She’s not meeting any of you.” Steve groused out. “She’s got enough going on as it is and I’m not subjecting her to any of you.”

“Wilson’s already met her and seen her house?! Aw, come on, Cap!” Tony looked nearly close to begging.

“Your birthday? Tomorrow? Invite her?” Tony asked. Steve blinked at Tony, then at Sam and Clint. Steve had completely forgotten his birthday. “Romanoff will be back tonight! We were going to
watch the fireworks from the tower?” Steve was still staring at Tony. His birthday was July fourth and he had completely forgotten. “You weren’t listening.” Tony noticed with a frown. “We mentioned watching the fireworks the day before yesterday.” Tony reminded him. The day before yesterday, Steve had been preoccupied with Hermione’s hidden health issues.

“Wow, Cap. Did you forget your own birthday?” Clint commented with a laugh. He slapped Steve on the back and Steve jumped.

“I— “Steve paused. He what? He didn’t want to celebrate with the Avengers? He wanted to celebrate with Bucky and Hermione? Sam caught his eye and seemed to get his hesitation.

“The fireworks are pretty early. You could always stay for those and just head back to Penny and Toto after.” Sam commented. Steve nodded slowly.


“We’ll see you tomorrow then.” Clint agreed as he pulled back an arrow and launched it at a far-off target. It struck. “Nat’s been upset she keeps missing you.” Clint smirked as he jumped back into the training field. Steve felt the blood from his face drain. He had forgotten about Nat.

Steve’s birthday started off well. He had wandered into the kitchen to spot Bucky and Hermione perched over the frying pan making pancakes. Hermione noticed him first and smiled warmly in his direction.

“Happy Birthday, Steve!” Hermione greeted delightedly. Then Hermione did something she had only done for comfort; she hugged him. It took Steve a moment to comprehend what was happening as she tightly gripped his torso. When Steve realized, he wound his arms around her—slouching down to embrace as much of her as possible. His body heated from the touch and despite the smell of the pancake batter in the air Steve inhaled deeply as he fondly recalled her scent; he hadn’t been close enough to savor it since they had all slept together. When Steve finally let go, Hermione backed away shyly. Her face was red as she switched spots with Bucky in order to flip the hotcakes.

“Happy 96th, old man.” Bucky said with a small smile. Bucky outstretched his hand and Steve shook it. He was surprised again when Bucky swept him in to an embrace. It was quick but strong and Steve pulled away with the feeling of tears welling in his eyes. He heard Hermione sniffle before clearing her throat.

“Have some pancakes, Steve.” Hermione said as she blinked away her own emotional tears with a smile. Steve sat down and Hermione gave him a huge stack, slathering the pancakes in maple syrup, whip cream, and strawberries—Bucky’s recollection of his favorite, no doubt.

“Thank you, you two.” Steve said sincerely as Hermione and Bucky joined him at the dining room table. After breakfast, Hermione and Bucky procured presents.

“It doesn’t really count as a present from me, given that the money is Hermione’s.” Bucky commented ruefully as he passed the present towards Steve. Steve opened the gift warily followed by outright surprise and amusement. It was a mug—a tacky mug.

“I’m not 96; I’m 21 with 75 years of experience.” Steve read the words on the cup with amusement and confusion that he expressed with a laugh.

“Thanks, Buck!” Steve said as Steve displayed the mug proudly. Hermione stepped forward next
with a chest.

“This doesn’t really count as a present from me—Bucky was the one who had the information I needed.” Hermione said with a pointed look towards Bucky. Bucky’s hair had fallen to hide his face and Steve opened the chest with cautious confusion. It was a folder of papers—some old and some new. “Bucky told me enough details about your friends that I was able to call in a few leads and track down their relatives.” Hermione continued hesitantly as Steve shuffled the papers and gawked. “It seems a lot of your friends had some letters they had written to you when they disappeared, letters that their relatives kept—letters that are before you. Most of the relatives also wrote up some information about your friends lives and some are even willing to meet you if you have any additional questions.” Hermione finished. Steve clenched his eyes tightly as he perused the letters. Dum-Dum, Jim—all of the Howling Commandos appeared to have written him and even SHIELD had not procured this information for him.

“Thank you.” Steve said sincerely. He glanced at both Hermione and Bucky before swallowing his emotions again. “Thank you so much.” Steve felt his eyes watering and he coughed. “Have you read them, Bucky?” Steve asked. Bucky’s expression was guarded.

“No. Those letters weren’t meant for me.” Bucky said and Steve felt his heart tug. His friends had also been Bucky’s friends. Surely he deserved the same closure. Hermione coughed to bring attention to herself.

“I hope you don’t mind, Steve…but I also used the opportunity to get the letters for Bucky. I’m not sure meeting the relatives would work quite the same, but it seems they also had a few letters to you, Bucky.” Hermione added and Steve was pleased. He noticed that Bucky’s face had become sterner, harsher, but now Steve recognized the mask for what it was; Bucky was deeply moved despite his single nod of thanks.

After presents, they watched Disney movies all day in the closest semblance to the comradery they had had since their big fallout. They sat, all three of them, on the couch that Hermione magicked into a bed so they could all lay back as they watched. Hermione had smiled widely as Steve had idly chatted throughout the film and Bucky had even cracked a few jokes. It was so enjoyable, so calming, that Steve was loath to leave. It was with some trepidation that Steve returned to Avengers Tower. Even as Steve’s motorcycle approached the tower, Steve felt his place on the couch calling him back home.

Steve had told Hermione about Tony’s fascination with meeting her as well as his birthday party, but Steve already knew Bucky wouldn’t leave the house until his triggers were removed. The whole ‘still wanted criminal thing’ was also an inconvenience. Steve had insisted that Bucky and Hermione stay home together. Hermione had frowned but had expressed interest in meeting the team in the future. That left Steve with some hope.

“Happy Birthday!” The team cried out, Sam included, as Steve entered the main floor of the housing levels. Steve laughed as Jarvis played ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’ over the speakers and Tony showered him with confetti. Thor had apparently returned from Asgard and hauled Steve up on his shoulders to jostle him around. Sam, Clint, and Natasha were twirling sound makers in a far more reserved manner. Bruce was clapping politely.

“Thor! Thank you!” Steve exclaimed. “You can set me down now!” Thor’s booming laugh echoed in the high ceilings of the room.

“May you celebrate many years of birth, Midgardian Steve!” Thor proclaimed joyously. Steve smiled politely.
“Now, I know you think you can process alcohol too fast to properly imbibe…but I convinced Thor to bring some of his Asgardian liquor.” Tony said with a smirk. Thor pulled out a small flask.

“This, Midgardian Steve, was aged for 1000 years from the barrels built from the wreck from Grunhel’s fleet—it’s not meant for mortal men!” Thor said with a grin. Steve accepted the small pour and smelled the potent brew. He nodded his head. *This*, he thought, might actually succeed in getting him drunk. A few shots later, he was surprisingly—and unexpectedly—tipsy.

“Hey there, Cap.” Natasha said as she cornered him by the bar. *Shit.* Steve thought.


“No work tonight, Steve. Instead, I’m more interested in hearing about what you’ve been up to.” Nat stared Steve down and Steve attempted to blink away his altered state; it failed. “Tell me about Penny.”

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Steve liked the Avengers, well enough. They had their flaws, had their issues, but they were genuinely good people underneath it all. Their small get together had been the first time the Avengers had actually assembled since the tower had become the Avengers Headquarter; it was nice that they had done so for him. They were good people—well on their way to becoming even better friends if not family—but Steve *missed* Hermione and Bucky. Despite spending the larger part of the day with them both, Steve regarded the fireworks with a sort of melancholy. He wanted to be back on Hermione’s roof, watching the fireworks in the distance. The melancholy seemed to linger the longer he stayed and Steve wondered if he was just sad when he drank; it had been far too long since he had even been capable of checking that Steve could hardly remember the before.

“You alright, Cap?” Sam asked as he approached with a water bottle. Steve drank it gratefully. The rest of the Avengers were lounging on the couch. Nat caught his eye and smirked. Steve rubbed his face. Their conversation had not been pleasant. Steve had not yielded much useful information about Hermione but he had proceeded to fill the silence with an unnecessary soliloquy of all the things he liked about her and how she was awe-inspiring with the vaguest of reasons. Natasha had seemed surprised at the hour long monologue but eventually she was interrupting with questions, clarifications, and suggestions. Steve stopped rubbing his face as he leaned back to face the ceiling.

“The party was great, I just…” Steve trailed off unsure.

“You miss Penny and Toto.” Sam said understandingly. Steve gave a smile laugh.

“You know Sam, he might kill you if you call him that, too.” Steve reminded him.

“He called me a pigeon.” Sam remembered bitterly. Steve flopped his head back into a normal posture.

“I told Natasha nothing and *everything.*” Steve revealed miserably. Sam looked at him with amusement.

“She tried to hit me up early for information but apparently deemed you the weaker of us two.” Sam smirked. Steve groaned, still feeling the room tilting. “You can leave, Steve.” Sam said a moment later more seriously. “You can go home.” Steve looked around. Natasha was talking with Banner and Stark. Thor was talking with Clint.

“I don’t think I should be driving my motorcycle.” Steve said as he stood. He was embarrassingly
tipsy for how early it was; at least Thor and Tony looked equally inebriated.

“Woah, there Cap.” Stark said as he spotted Steve’s tottering. A light flashed and Steve realized Stark had taken a picture. Steve closed his eyes in annoyance. “If only we had a designated room for you to sleep this off. Oh I know! We could put you in your room!” Tony suggested.

“I’ll take him home.” Sam offered, guiding Steve slightly though it was largely unnecessary. “Cap’s heading back home. I’m sure we’ll see you tomorrow!” Sam announced to the groans of disappointment in the room.

“If he’s so dedicated to returning home, I’ll take him home.” Tony graciously offered.

“You won’t be able to.” Steve piped up, seeing through his ploy.

“Then just call Penny here to pick you up.” Tony suggested.

“That wouldn’t make any sense.” Sam noticed.

“Then I’ll go with you so you aren’t alone on the return.” Tony bargained.

“I’ll just stay over at Penny’s again; she won’t mind.” Sam was steadfast.

“Then I’ll return by myself— “Tony continued stubbornly.

“Tony. Let the poor guys go.” Natasha called from Bruce’s side. Clint snickered at the reprimand but Steve was thankful for the support—despite the reason he now had it. He flushed at the reminder of their conversation. He hoped Hermione’s spells really did hold up because Tony and Nat were hard-pressed to find her.

“Alright, see you all tomorrow and thanks again!” Steve waved goodbye. The ride back to Hermione’s was quiet.

“So Romanoff seems to approve.” Sam commented and Steve groaned, covering his face.

“She’s never going to let it go.” Steve complained and Sam made a noise of agreement.

“Maybe you should do something about it.” Sam commented. Steve looked at him askance. Sam had already texted Hermione who had confirmed that Sam was indeed welcome. Sam parked in the empty spot of the garage.

“Sam!” Hermione greeted happily as they entered. “Welcome back, Steve! How was the party?” Hermione asked. Steve brightened at the reception.

“It was good.” Sam offered. “Steve even managed to get tipsy on some alien wine.” Hermione flashed an amused look at Steve and he flushed at the appraising gaze.

“Oh? Remind me to see how magical alcohol works on you.” Hermione said with a smile. “Bucky, you remember Sam?” Hermione said as she looked at the two who had been exchanging subtle hostile looks that stopped when they became the center of attention.

“Barnes.” Sam nodded in acknowledgement.

“Wilson.” Bucky returned with quiet control. Hermione coughed awkwardly as if she sensed the tension.

“Well I’m sure you already had cake…but Bucky mentioned you had a birthday tradition and I
managed to run out and get this from a friend—they’re really the best bakers in New York, you know—and well…I hope you like it.” Hermione said, rambling as she dragged Steve forward. On the counter in the kitchen, a pie was loaded with candles. “Bucky purchased the candles…so we…well…they’re on there.” Hermione’s mouth tweaked to the side but Steve gave a chuckle. 96 candles—there were 96 candles on the pie.

“It’s apple.” Bucky said from the side and Steve flashed him a grateful look. They had had cake at Tony’s—very good cake—but apple pie was Steve’s birthday tradition. They sang happy birthday before Steve blew the candles out. Hermione cut them pieces and he dug in with relish. They were the best pies in New York, Steve determined.

“Where did you get this?” Steve murmured appreciatively. Sam looked equally interested in the response.

“Kowalski bakery—I’m friends with the owners.” Hermione revealed proudly. Vaguely Steve recalled a bakery by a similar name; the bakery must have existed for quite some time. The pie was polished off before the group moved to the living room to watch TV. At Steve’s request, the Disney marathon continued but after the first movie Sam was begging off.

“You’re welcome to take my room.” Hermione offered. Sam adamantly refused. “I can just transfigure myself a bed from the couch in the basement.” Hermione placated but Sam still refused.

“You can use my room.” Steve offered.

“It’s your birthday, Steve.” Sam chastised. Steve shrugged.

“This couch is already made up and I’ll be up late anyway.” Steve defended. Reluctantly, Sam headed off to his room and they started the next movie. By the third movie, Bucky had allowed himself to relax beside Hermione, lounging in the transfigured bed so only his head was propped up to see the movie. Steve was equally relaxed, the sounds of Hermione’s deep breathing lulling him into a similar sleep.

“You have a good birthday, Steve?” Bucky asked quietly from Hermione’s other side.

“Yeah.” Steve whispered tiredly. They shouldn’t sleep here, cuddled up in the magic bed, but it was still technically Steve’s birthday and he wanted to. “How was she?” Steve asked.

“Missed you, I think. I occupied her by talking about books.” Bucky admitted and Steve was grateful Bucky was finally talking to her and keeping her company.

“We should stay here—make sure she’s sleeping okay.” Steve reasoned, not altogether altruistically. Bucky took a moment to respond.

“Just to keep an eye on her.” Bucky capitulated, his voice tinged with the same sleepiness Steve felt.

“Protection purposes only.” Steve mumbled. The sound of breathing, the warmth of his companions, and the utter radiating peace beckoned Steve into the most peaceful sleep he had had since they last slept together as a group.

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“Isn’t this cute.”

Steve blinked slowly before his eyes propped open. The voice had been soft and low and now Steve realized why. Hermione was plopped across his chest and breathing deeply. A sound in the kitchen
indicated Bucky was awake and cooking while Sam stared down at Steve, a cup of the newly stocked coffee in his hands. Sam was smirking at Steve and Steve realized why; now that Steve was awake he was going to be conscious of the way Hermione draped across him but unwilling to wake her up. Sam slinked off with a knowing look as Steve resisted the urge to stiffen.

The dins of the kitchen were followed by a wafting smell of bacon. After some time, Hermione’s eyes finally fluttered open lazily as she made an appreciative sound that set Steve’s insides on fire. Slowly she adjusted to her surroundings, eyes blinking. She looked well rested, the bruising of her eyes fading, though the gauntness seemed to have only moderately improved. Whatever magic she had done previously had seemingly faded and Steve took the time to study her so close.

Her nose was dusted with faint freckles he had forgotten existed. A small scar he never noticed graced her upper lip. Her cheek had a thin scar he could barely see even up close. She inhaled deeply before seemingly recognizing the position she was in. She leapt up in surprise so quickly that she fell back on the bed in a tumble of sheets.

“Good morning.” Steve said with amusement.

“I-I’m sorry Steve.” Hermione said as she was untangling her cloth prison. “I must have fallen asleep! Merlin! I’m terribly sorry about that.” Hermione had freed herself and was looking at him abashed. “And Bucky, too.” Hermione added.

“Breakfast.” Sam called merrily from the kitchen. Bucky had laid out the table and Hermione excused herself briefly to her bedroom. Sam was smirking at Bucky and Steve from across the table.

“You know what I don’t get?” Sam said nonchalantly. Steve looked at his friend. “Why do you both act like you don’t want to wake up next to her every morning? Barnes here sprung up like a daisy the minute I stepped out of the hall.” Sam continued. Steve and Bucky looked at him equally aghast.

“We’re not—that’s not— “Steve was interrupted when Hermione returned in a change of clothing. She was directly across from Steve as they ate, avoiding Steve’s gaze in embarrassment but in doing so she allowed Steve to regard her unhindered. He noticed that the freckles on her face had disappeared, the small scars were no longer visible; she was using magic, he realized. Sam disappeared to shower and change before their return to Avenger tower, leaving the trio alone at the table. Silence was descending but all Steve could do was think of the calm he felt as he went to sleep the night before and the happiness he felt with Hermione in his arms. Secondarily, he remembered that her magic had failed overnight and had allowed him a glimpse behind her mask.

“Sorry about last night.” Hermione apologized again. Bucky waved off the apology but Steve was still contemplating.

“I enjoyed it.” Steve admitted. Hermione and Bucky were both glancing at him in surprise. “I haven’t slept that well since our last sleepover.” Steve continued.

“So did I.” Hermione admitted softly, jumping in surprise as if she realized she had admitted it aloud.

“Do you mind if we have more?” Steve continued boldly. Hermione was flushing and Bucky was looking at him like he was crazy, but Steve did not retract his statement.

“Ye-yes! I mean no! I mean—of course you are welcome; you’re always invited.” Hermione still looked shocked but she perked up significantly in a way that reassured him. It wasn’t until Steve had returned from Avenger tower again that Bucky had a chance to address his decision.

“I’m not sleeping over.” Bucky began gruffly. “I shouldn’t have fallen asleep next to her last night.” Bucky continued with regret. Steve waved him off.
“You and I—and Hermione—all slept better together. If that isn’t a good enough reason than you should know her magic faded overnight.” Steve observed. Bucky looked at him curiously. “When she was asleep this morning I saw her freckles and scars but after she went to her bedroom and returned, they were gone.” Steve explained.

“So if we see her when she sleeps, we can check if she is getting better or worse.” Bucky identified. Steve nodded. Bucky sighed but seemed to agree with his logic as they both followed Hermione into her room that night. Hermione blushed as she set up their old blanket nest.

“I can make the bed larger instead if you’d like.” Hermione mumbled softly. Bucky shook his head.

“The floor is fine.” Bucky announced. Steve was adjusting the blankets when two plush bears rolled out.

“Is this…are those our bears?” Steve asked as he picked one up. Hermione blushed as he observed them.

“This one has a metal arm.” Bucky recognized quietly. Hermione’s face turned a deeper red.

“I can transfigure it back—it was your gift, after all.” Hermione offered. Bucky shrugged.

“I wasn’t using it; you can keep it however you please.” Bucky dismissed as he adjusted in the nest for sleep. They slipped into bed, an odd energy in the air. The night was a mix of conscious tension and unconscious reassurance. Hermione did not sing a lullaby but Steve chatted amiably with her. Though Bucky still refused to touch Hermione, Hermione seemed unfazed. As she fell to sleep again, Steve noticed Bucky remaining vigilant, but Steve was warm and sleepy. Steve faded into a deep sleep.

Steve noted in the morning that Hermione’s complexion seemed better—that she seemed better. Bucky agreed and despite his blatant hesitations, Steve noted, dutifully climbed into bed beside her the next night and the next. A new routine developed, stolen from their once-routine, and it all began from Steve’s very happy birthday, he reflected. As his hand inched closer to Hermione’s—almost touching but not quite—Bucky’s presence reassuring on her other side, he realized that this was right. This was where he belonged; this was home.
Despite the several days of successful peaceful sleeping as a group, Bucky didn’t realize the screaming wasn’t in his dreams until he felt Steve pull Hermione into his arms. “Hermione! Hermione!” Steve called, clutching her as she seized in his arms. Instantly Bucky was at attention, grasping at Hermione’s hands as they grasped the air wildly. “It’s a fake! It’s a fake!” Hermione screamed a raw terrorizing sound that haunted Bucky in a way he felt deep within himself. Steve responded just as negatively; holding her even tighter in desperation. “Hermione! Hermione please wake up!” Steve pleaded. Bucky felt horrified as he watched tears rush down her face—her face was contorting in agony as she writhed on the floor. Bucky felt the need to touch her, comfort her somehow. He tentatively tried to wipe the wet trails on her face. He thought to attempt it but the sound of feet hitting the floor surprised Bucky and instantly he turned with his left arm forward to confront the noise. Steve clutched Hermione protectively from the two men who had appeared in her bedroom. “Hermione!” The black-haired man cried as he rushed to pick her up in his embrace. “Ron—the potions” He directed. A red headed man, presumably Ron, disappeared from Bucky and Steve’s sight. They could hear him rummaging around Hermione’s drawers. “Got them!” He called, returning to where the black-haired man attempted to force Hermione’s mouth open. She was babbling nonsensically and Bucky could only make out pleas for her parents and her freedom. The redhead poured the potions down Hermione’s throat and the black-haired man hit her with a beam of light. “I told you we should have come over tonight.” The red-head—Ron—said irritably. “She said she had company; clearly she had company.” The black-haired man replied shortly. The redhead squatted down to wipe the tear tracks on Hermione’s face as Bucky had attempted to do;
Hermione’s flailing had already begun to fade.

“Hermione.” The Ron whispered and Bucky saw her eye lashes flicker.

“R-Ron?” She rasped. The black-haired man passed her a glass of water. “H-Harry?” She breathed as Ron sat down beside her, sandwiching her between the two men. She had begun to cry again. “My…my parents?” Hermione asked and the two men clutched her between them.

“Everything’s okay, Hermione. Your parents are safe.” The black-haired man—Harry—claimed and Hermione’s face contorted in agonizing relief. She opened her mouth to ask another question but the redhead, Ron, beat her to it.

“We’re safe; you’re safe. The war is over.” He said definitively. Hermione hid her face in Harry’s shoulder and cried loudly. Ron and Harry clutched her between them harder and together began to hum another version of the lullaby; Hermione visibly relaxed before nodding off into another, less fitful sleep. The boys picked her up and laid her in bed, waving a wand to conjure a blanket to cover her with.

“What about the muggles?” Ron asked with a sigh. Bucky felt the insides of him clench as Harry sighed.

“Let’s let them talk, first.” Harry said, levitating them upright to face the bed. Bucky wanted to clench his teeth when he saw the two men in pajamas still holding the witch between them. Bucky and Steve were hit with a light that made him able to move his head from side to side.

“Who the fuck are you?” Bucky asked viciously—angry at the apparent Brits breaking and entry, angry they had stunned him, and angry that they were holding Hermione between them so protectively.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” Ron spat back just as vicious. Bucky watched as Harry and Steve exchanged exasperated looks.

“I’m Steve, this is Bucky and we’re…Hermione’s roommates.” Steve said with contained politeness.

“Funny—she never mentioned she had two blokes for roommates—or roommates at all.” Ron accused.

“Well she never mentioned you fuckers either.” Bucky snarled. Harry narrowed his eyes from behind the glasses.

“How long have you been staying here?” Harry asked with restrained calm.

“None of your fucking business.” Bucky replied fiercely. He heard Steve sigh next to him and knew he was going to get a talking to about language.

“Bucky, enough! Clearly these are her friends.” Bucky turned to glare at Steve who turned his attention back to Harry. “We’ve been here for a few weeks—nearly two months.” Steve answered. Harry nodded.

“Ron, she mentioned them when I called her a while ago, said she had muggle company.” Harry recalled. The redhead hardly looked mollified.

“Well what are we going to do to them? Clearly they’ve seen us.” Ron said as he gestured to where Bucky and Steve were still hovering. Harry seemed to be contemplating.
“We have to wait for her to get up.” Harry declared. Ron looked like he wanted to argue something but Harry cut him off. “It’s not like you or I will be able to obliviate them properly—she’ll have to do it.” Bucky bristled internally at the words, feeling their negative intent. “Besides,” Harry continued “I have a feeling they might be the sort of company that doesn’t require obliviation.” Harry finished with a smug smile. Ron looked at him angrily.

“What’s that supposed to mean.” Ron asked suspicious. Harry peaked down to where the pillows and covers were on the floor.

“Two men, already comforting Hermione, and pillows and sheets on the floor.” Harry speculated. Bucky flushed at the implication and looked at Steve who mirrored his embarrassment.

“We’re not…that’s not…We’re right here!” Steve finally said irritated. Harry turned to look at him.

“Well? Is there a reason why this set up looks like a cozy place for three people to cuddle?” Harry asked suggestively and Steve’s face flushed again.

“We’re not doing that to Hermione—that’s immoral!” Steve cried indignant. Ron sat up equally indignant.

“Oi, there’s nothing wrong with a Triad!” He defended. Bucky turned to look at him in shock. “My wives and I work just fine, thank you!” He said angrily. Steve sputtered unintelligently.

“Polygamy is illegal!” He shouted. Ron snorted.

“Maybe to you backwards muggles. Triads get married all the time in the magical world.” Ron clarified. Bucky nearly laughed as Steve attempted to wrap his head around the concept.

“Do…all magical people have multiple spouses?” Steve asked flummoxed. Bucky wondered if he would be able to see smoke pour out of Steve’s ears; he could practically hear the gears grinding.

“I’m happily monogamous.” Harry added cheerily. “I’m surprised Hermione hasn’t explained this to you! You’re obviously important to her if she is sleeping in front of you.” Harry mused.

“Why’s that?” Bucky asked cagily. Harry looked at him queerly.


“These were her first ones.” Steve answered. Harry’s eyebrows lifted up in surprise and Ron looked at them strangely.

“She hasn’t been taking potions, either?” Harry asked and Steve shook his head.

“No, she’s been sleeping pretty peacefully from what we’ve seen.” Steve answered, his eyebrow crinkling. Bucky recognized the facial tick as Steve’s confusion. Bucky echoed his sentiments.

“You must be more important than I realized.” Harry commented appraisingly. Bucky felt strangely mollified but Steve was blushing.

“We aren’t really…we’re…well we’re patients—that’s all.” Steve identified modestly. Instantly Harry and Ron’s body language stiffened. Judging from the sudden coolness of Harry’s expression, Bucky had a feeling that Steve had said something that was bad—very bad. The light hit Bucky before he could contemplate further.

He woke up to a voice saying rennervate. Instantly Bucky jumped to his feet prepared to dodge the
spells that had been catching him. Steve had done the same when Ron had awoken him. Their attention however turned to Hermione who was looking down at her feet rather than at them. Bucky took a second to survey the two men behind her. They looked irritated and sullen. Bucky surmised that Hermione had been up long enough to have a conversation with her friends and that her friends had definitely been the losers of the argument.

“These are my best friends, Harry and Ron.” Hermione introduced them awkwardly. Both of her friends scowled and refused to look at Bucky or Steve. Hermione cleared her throat. “Sorry about the stunning spells…it was just a little miscommunication over here.” Hermione said with a forced smile before her face turned into a frown. “I’m sorry for my, um, behavior last night.” Instantly, Bucky felt his tension drop from his shoulder as he crowded her space, hovering around her but unwilling to touch. Steve had moved to join him and they both ignored Hermione’s friends when their stance tightened.

“Are you okay, Hermione?” Steve asked softly, fingers hovering under her chin so she could alternate looking into their eyes. She sighed and her eyes fluttered close.

“I’m sorry. I should have expected last night.” Hermione admitted.

“She should have been with us last night.” Ron added testily behind her. Bucky glared at him and watched the redhead’s face turn purple in rage.

“It’s a significant date for me—a bad date—and I usually have night terrors.” Hermione clarified. Bucky felt Steve stiffen with him in unison.

“How did they get in here?” Bucky asked as he glared venomously at her friends. Ron was rapidly returning to purple but Harry had remained stony with only the hint of anger or discontent underneath.

“They have instant access.” Hermione stated. “I trust them with my life.” She added.

“We always know when she needs us.” Ron said haughtily. “We can always show up here if she is in danger.” Ron taunted. Bucky heard the accusation in the tone and so did Hermione because she turned to glare at her friend. Harry visibly wilted.

“I hope you still feel safe here. The boys won’t give you any trouble—they’re my Bucky.” Hermione said as she turned to look at Steve who still had a crinkled eyebrow. “They’re my Steve.” She added as she looked at Bucky and he felt himself nod back reluctantly. Hermione nodded before glancing at the clock on the wall. She seemingly contemplated something before reaching a decision quickly. “I need to call my parents now. So everyone out.” Hermione commanded as she shooed them away.

“Hermione!” Ron complained loudly and Bucky noticed Harry also looked putout. She seared them with a look and they exited the room meekly. Bucky nearly smiled until Hermione turned towards the two men out of time.

“You, too, please.” Hermione said softly. Steve took a closer step and Bucky moved to hover just as close, both observing her. She gave a wane smile. “Play nice, please.” Hermione requested and Bucky and Steve reluctantly nodded. She shooed them out of her room and they hovered outside of her door. Harry’s face was still withdrawn while Ron was looking studiously anywhere but at them. Steve sighed, rubbing the back of his head.

“I’m going to start a pot of tea if anyone is interested.” Steve said heading off to the kitchen to play peacemaker. Harry followed reluctantly after him while Ron stayed to glare at Bucky. Bucky glared
back, unshaken. Finally, after enough of a staring contest, Bucky smirked at the redhead before jaunting towards the kitchen. He could practically hear the redhead fume at Bucky’s casual dismissal.

Bucky opened up the fridge, rummaging around for no other reason than to show he felt comfortable in Hermione’s house. Eventually he pulled out fixings for a sandwich which he made with forced relaxedness on the kitchen island. Harry seemed unaffected by his showy play but Ron was still steaming much to Bucky’s pleasure.

“Make me the regular, Steve, with my cup.” Bucky said with a smirk. Ron visibly bristled while Steve barely contained his eye roll. It was entirely unnecessary to make his request; Bucky knew Steve would use both. Bucky took the time to observe Harry who was still collected and cool despite his small frown.

“When are you leaving?” Harry asked curtly, surprising Bucky with his direct confrontation. Steve had pulled the kettle off the stove and placed two additional tea cups before Hermione’s friends.

“We haven’t discussed a time frame.” Steve answered softly. The question had unnerved him, Bucky realized.

“You don’t have a time frame for your treatment?” Ron bit out viciously. Bucky fought his own unbridled response.

“We don’t.” Steve said shortly.

“Maybe you should.” Harry chimed in as he sat at the stool at the kitchen island. “Maybe you should focus more on your treatment than whatever you are doing or not doing with Hermione.” Harry continued as he casually flicked his wand. Bucky was on edge enough and prepared to dodge, but it was unnecessary as sugar and tea containers soared through the air behind him.

“What’s going on between Hermione and us—“Steve began.

“Is nothing.” Ron continued angrily. “You said it yourself; you’re patients. She has a medical duty to fix you because it’s her job.” Each jab of truth hit Bucky in his gut. It wasn’t incorrect; he wasn’t wrong. But it still hurt. Bucky glanced at Steve, he also looked stricken. Harry sighed before them, ruffling his messy hair with his hand.

“I’m sure you two are a couple of good blokes.” Harry began. “Ron and I appreciate you taking care of Hermione so far.” Ron snorted in disagreement. “But as patients, you aren’t in the right state of mind to be pursuing relationships with your mental health care provider.” Harry said his tone conciliatory.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Bucky questioned indignantly. Harry sighed again.

“Hermione’s fixing you up—it’s only natural that you’d fall for her compassionate nature.” Harry spelled it out. Bucky and Steve bristled in unison but Harry raised his hands placating. “All I’m saying is you wouldn’t be the first person or even the second person to do the same—we just don’t want Hermione to have to deal with that after math.” Harry said as he downed the rest of the tea. Harry glanced at Ron and Bucky followed his eyes. The redhead looked grim but smug.

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“Hermione’s probably wrapping up her phone call with her parents, Ron. Let’s say our goodbyes and head out.” Harry suggested. Ron stood, leaving his unused mug on the countertop and the two wizards headed back towards Hermione’s room.

Bucky leaned back against the countertop while Steve hunched over his tea cup solemnly. “Fuck.” Bucky exclaimed as he stared up at the ceiling. Steve sighed beside him.
“You think there is a history behind that warning?” Steve asked deprecatingly. Bucky didn’t favor him with a response. Steve exhaled dramatically, rubbing a hand down his face. “I get what they mean.” Steve seemed reluctant to admit. “About falling for her when she’s the healer.” Steve ventured. Bucky shot him a dirty look.

“There are plenty of reasons to fall for her.” Bucky said under his breath. He was so irritated he could nearly feel the energy buzzing below his skin. Steve did not respond as the door down the hall opened and the subject of their conversation trailed behind her friends. Bucky peeked down the hall to watch them descend into the basement, catching the redhead with a glare that the ginger returned. Hermione shut the basement door behind her friends gingerly before seemingly collecting herself, bracing her shoulders as she turned to walk towards the kitchen. Steve awkwardly pushed a cup of tea towards her. She accepted it gratefully, courage seemingly deflating as she stared into the brew. The silence continued almost painfully before Steve thankfully broke it.

“Hermione,” Steve began gingerly, “You could’ve told us.” Hermione seemed to smile ruefully into her cup.

“It’s not really appropriate.” Hermione explained. “When I’m the one looking after you.”

“But who is looking after you?” Bucky questioned softly, all his irritation disappearing as he searched her eyes. Hermione met them only briefly.

“Normally the boys, but they both have children and of course you two were here…” Hermione trailed off.

“But you didn’t even tell us” Steve protested. “We could’ve helped; we could’ve been more than useless sacks who didn’t know what to do.”

“It’s okay I’m used to it.” Hermione’s smile was still edged with pain and Bucky found himself annoyed that she was putting this brave front up.

“You shouldn’t have to be used to it.” Bucky reprimanded softly. “Steve and I…we can take care of you; you just need to let us.” Bucky said. Hermione grimaced before her expression closed off. Bucky had a feeling that whatever she would say next would be a lie.

“I’m okay, really.”

“Bullshit, Hermione.” Steve said without the soft tones he had been using throughout the conversation. Bucky looked at him in shock; Steve had never cussed in front of Hermione. “You tell us every day it’s okay to not be okay but you aren’t practicing what you preach.” Hermione winced but Steve continued unaffected. “You tell us that we should rely on each other, rely on you, rely on others to support us but you aren’t even doing that! Even if you think you can’t trust us to take care of you, your friends could have been there—should’ve been there. You deserve that.” Steve pleaded earnestly. Hermione had looked down throughout Steve’s speech and Bucky noticed a slight tremor in Hermione’s shoulders.

“Hermione?” Bucky asked tentatively. Hermione brought her hands up to her mouth to stifle the sobs that poured from her mouth.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Hermione.” Steve cussed again as he gathered Hermione into his arms. Bucky reached forward to grab one of her hands as she stood limply. She stayed crying into Steve’s chest until she finally shifted, clutching Bucky’s hand suddenly and grabbing Steve’s shirt desperately with her other. Steve led them to the couch and Bucky trailed after—hands all still connected. Steve positioned her to sit between them, draped almost across their laps as she continued to cry into
Steve’s shoulder. Bucky, still hesitant to touch her fully, held her hand with his arms hovering around her in an approximation of a touchless embrace. When she had calmed considerably, she conjured a handkerchief to wipe her face.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered eventually. Steve sighed.

“I’m the one who should be sorry—I shouldn’t have gone off on you like that.” Steve began. Hermione shook her head violently.

“You’re not wrong and it’s not like I don’t trust you two or Harry and Ron, I just…” Hermione clenched her hands in her lap. “I’m just not as put together as I present and I didn’t want you to see…I didn’t want you to know.”

“Why?” Bucky pressed and Hermione shook her head.

“It’s hypocritical, I know; I tell you one thing and do another.” Hermione chuckled mirthlessly.

“Well, all you have to do is do what you would tell us to do.” Steve suggested. Hermione took a shuddering breath.

“I don’t want to burden you.” Hermione admitted softly.

“You tell us that we aren’t a burden to you.” Bucky began. “And we’re…friends…aren’t we?” Bucky asked the question that had brewing insecurely in his mind since the arrival of her self-declared best friends.

“Ye-yes.” Hermione agreed. “We are friends.” She confirmed. Steve nodded.

“Good. Friends don’t let other friends get left behind.” Steve said. Crookshanks had emerged from the shadows to jump in to the witch’s lap. She gave a wet chuckle.

“What do you say, Crooks? Should I practice what I preach?” She asked the cat who gave a low and loud ‘Mreow’ in agreement. Hermione smiled sadly.

“I mentioned today was a day that tends to trigger.” Hermione started with a shiver. Bucky reached for a throw and pulled it over them. “Today was the day I took my parents’ memory away…” Hermione began. Hermione went on to tell them how she watched herself literally disappear from the pictures on the wall, how her childhood house was packed up and empty within the week, how a few weeks after that it had been burned with dark magic. “It didn’t make me feel vindicated.” Hermione explained. “It made me more worried because I had done everything I could but there was always a possibility that they would be better, smarter. That they found my home and burnt it meant that I was right and that they were after me and my family.” Hermione had shifted to lean her head into Steve’s shoulder, but she leant her back into Bucky’s chest. For once, he pushed his insecurities aside; she wanted to touch him—maybe needed to touch him—and he would not deny her.

“You said something else while you were sleeping, you said something was fake.” Steve recalled and Hermione looked stricken once again.

“That’s from the night my arm was scarred.” Hermione admitted. She chewed on the inside of her cheek, seeming to contemplate something. Bucky, eager to hear, leaned in further so he had wrapped around her fully. Sandwchiched between Steve and him, she looked flustered but comfortable—safe—-even. It gave her the boost she seemingly needed. “Perhaps I should just tell you the full story…” Steve nodded eagerly and Hermione began again. “It started with a man named Tom Riddle and his very, very, impractical plan for immortality…”
She couldn’t heal herself.

Bucky let the implications circulate in his head. Despite everything Hermione had told them—the torture, the madman, the near-death experiences in her wizarding school—what stayed in his mind was that single fact.

Hermione, despite being capable of healing Bucky and Steve and all the people she had healed before them, was unable to mend her own personal trauma—and she had it in spades.

“She helped all of her friends, even her enemies, and she can’t heal herself.” Steve reiterated the same conclusion beside him. They were still sitting on the couch where Hermione had left them, staring dimly forward at nothing in particular. Bucky wished she had remained but he understood her desperate desire to see her parents after the contents of her dreams.


“She didn’t mention that.” Steve said numbly. Bucky wondered what else she hadn’t mentioned.

“She needs us.” Bucky determined. Steve nodded at his side.

“She needs you, too, Buck—that means you can’t be as hesitant around her.” Steve addressed Bucky’s other conclusion. “You saw how she responded to her friends—how she responded to us when we held her.” Bucky exhaled as he leaned backwards into the couch, hands covering his eyes.

“It’s not that simple, Steve.” Bucky whispered. He wanted to hug her—he definitely wanted to heal her in any way he could—but he wanted more and more was bad.

Bucky needed self-control.

“Make it that simple, Buck. It’s the least we can do. You heard her friends’ surprise when these were her only nightmares she has had with us.” Steve urged. Bucky moved his hands to look at Steve. Steve was inspecting him seriously, determinedly, Steve had that face that he wore whenever he was about to do something that would get them both in trouble. Bucky was very familiar with that face. Whatever Steve thought he was doing—or most likely not thinking enough at all—it was not simple.

Bucky sighed and gave Steve a half-assed smirk.

“Lead the way, Steve.” That Bucky was sure to follow did not need to be said aloud.

Hermione awoke quietly; one minute she was deeply asleep and the next she was coherently awake, staring at the ceiling. For once, she was able to hear both Bucky and Steve sleeping soundly beside her. They were close to her—so close that she could feel the soft puffs of warm air as they exhaled. She turned her head. Bucky was holding her hand. His long, growing hair was pushed behind him.

She felt…light. She felt…heavy. It was a strange experience, regaling the whole story to Bucky and Steve; everyone she knew already knew the entire story. In the week that had passed, they had been attentive and affectionate. But she still didn’t know if she had made the correct decision by telling them. Yet selfishly she realized she felt better than she had in years. She felt even better than when they first had all slept together. Hermione walked into her bathroom and stared at her reflection.

Some of the weight she had lost from forgetting to eat had been gained back—Bucky and Steve always insured that she ate sufficiently. Far from being put out, Hermione admitted it was nice that they noticed and cared. The tired lines beneath her eyes had receded as she finally slept at ease in the arms of the two men. Their sleeping arrangement was benefitting more than just her.
Steve and Bucky both looked less tired. Her monitoring wards had tracked their sleeping patterns and she admittedly felt a rush of pleasure when she realized they slept better with her. They were becoming cohesive again and as a result their healing was surging. Bucky seemed to be remembering almost everything and Hermione had taken to easing the pain and strain of his previous memories. She could see her work in the reflection of his demeanor with every small smile and hesitant joke.

Bucky was even allowing minimal contact—hand holding predominately—no longer flinching from her touch and sometimes actively initiating it. His mind was healing from the self-hatred and self-loathing that seemed to magnify when he was around her. Instead, he was opening himself back up and allowing her in. She recognized it benefited him emotionally to take care of her; he benefited from doing the same for Steve. Bucky was a lot like her, Hermione had realized, he healed through healing and caring for others. She wondered if people even recognized that aspect of his personality or if his ability to kill so thoroughly had disillusioned even himself.

Hermione stepped back into her room, stopping to gaze at the two men still asleep on the floor. A rush of fondness fluttered around her stomach as she looked at them. It was followed swiftly by a climbing in her throat that caused her to swallow painfully. Everything was still dangerous. But for now she was happy; for now she was where she needed to be.

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“Hermione!” Harry called when Hermione entered the pub. Hermione smiled when she spotted him and rushed over to give him a tight hug.

“Harry!” She greeted. “Happy Birthday!” He pulled her back to inspect her and she rolled her eyes but allowed it.

“You look better.” Harry noticed quietly. Hermione felt the blush rise to her cheeks.

“I’ve been getting better sleep and the boys have ensured I haven’t forgotten my meals.” Hermione revealed. Harry frowned slightly, his mouth opening for a comment she no doubt would’ve disliked when he was interrupted.

“Hermione!” Ginny called happily as she launched herself at her friend. Hermione laughed as they embraced. “You have missed two dinners—you criminal!” Ginny accused.

“I’m sorry, Gin.” Hermione apologized, pulling back to inspect Ginny and where she suspected a tiny human was just started to grow with her. “How’s my girl doing?” Hermione asked and Ginny placed her hand upon her stomach.

“She’s a lot easier going than her brothers were that’s for sure.” Ginny said as she rolled her eyes exaggeratedly. “Now what’s this about live-in lovers?” Ginny asked salaciously. Hermione felt heat flood to her face as Harry slapped a hand over his face.

“Come on, Gin. I don’t want to hear this!” Harry complained. Ginny gave him a stern look.

“Then leave.” She commanded. Hermione chuckled as Harry wisely chose his argument and shuffled away mumbling about ‘birthday boys getting no respect and fetching a drink before returning’. Ginny made a face at him as he left before turning her attention, alarmingly, to Hermione. “Talk.” She commanded.

“Ginny, I don’t know what they told you but we aren’t lovers.” Hermione began. Ginny looked unconvinced as she inspected her nails.

“Yes, yes, they’re patients and they said so themselves and blah blah blah. Harry and Ron are both
suspicious so I know something is up.” Ginny’s smile was unnerving when she looked back at Hermione. Hermione shivered.

“They are patients and I haven’t done anything scandalous with them.” Hermione defended. Conveniently she did not mention her many thoughts on the subject.

“Which in and of itself is interesting. I thought you didn’t heal muggles unless they were magicked.” Ginny asked genuinely confused. Hermione felt her haunches drop a little at the academic nature of the question.

“Interestingly enough, they have an almost—almost magical residue on them; it’s unlike anything I’ve ever encountered. I presume that their unique experiences directly interfered with some degree of magical something.” Hermione had been pondering her discover for some time. “I didn’t notice initially, but that was what presumably caused them to resonate with me and allowed me to hear them above the din of other people like I do with other magical beings.”

“Should the magical community be worried?” Harry asked, overhearing the conversation as he returned. Hermione frowned.

“Well, I’ve treated them per MACUSA guidance—they’re jinxed from revealing anything.” Hermione started.

“Handy spell you made.” Harry acknowledged. Hermione smiled at the praise. They were still working on getting her legislation passed in Wizarding Britain so that more Muggles could know about magic without destroying the Statute of Secrecy.

“Anyway, they won’t be spilling secrets any time soon and while I’m healing them I’ll be able to continue taking data.” Hermione elaborated.

“You aren’t worried the MACUSA will want to steal them and study them for themselves?” Ginny asked concerned. Hermione smiled easily.

“The MACUSA gives me far more autonomy than the ministry ever did and I’m confident in the rapport I have with President Quahog.” Hermione explained with a grin. “The muggle government would be my only concern but I’m confident I can protect them if need be.” Hermione admitted. Ginny looked thoughtful and interested but Harry was frowning beside her.

“You’re attached and compromised. Healing them is dangerous and you should pass them to one of your students.” Harry determined quickly.

“No one else could heal Bucky, Harry.” Hermione told him.

“Bucky? What kind of name is Bucky?” Ginny asked in surprise. Hermione blinked at her.

“Have you even listened to the names of wizards and witches? Bucky is where you draw the line?” Hermione asked incredulous.

“Subject at hand.” Harry interrupted sternly and both witches turned back to regard him. “No one else can heal him? He’s a muggle!”

“Which brings me back to the strange type of damage that was done to his mind; it’s almost like he was shot with a Cruciatus curse until his memories were wiped.” Hermione theorized. Harry and Ginny were both frowning now.

“If his damage replicates the Cruciatus—is it hurting you now to heal him?” Harry asked and
Hermione winced at the question.

“Well…not really anymore.” Hermione hedged. They appraised her with their eyes.

“Oh, Merlin! You fancy him!” Ginny recognized first. Her eyes lit at the realization. “Or is it both of them? Does the other one have the same damage?” She asked excitedly. Hermione felt buoyed by her positive reaction and smiled meekly.

“Steve doesn’t have the same type of damage, but he wouldn’t accept healing from anyone else—especially if it meant leaving Bucky behind.” Hermione explained, ignoring Ginny’s other observations.

“You’re attached. You’re compromised; this is dangerous.” Harry’s thundering voice interrupted. Hermione blushed when several people she hadn’t even managed to greet yet turned towards their conversation. Harry sighed before dragging Ginny and Hermione off to a quieter location before casting muffliato.

“Harry, don’t you think you’re being a little harsh?” Ginny reprimanded. Harry’s temper did not abate and he did not so much as acknowledge the question.

“You know how this works, Hermione. You know why this doesn’t work. You’re setting yourself up for another M—“

“Harry!” Hermione shouted. “Enough.”

“And now there are two—which means twice the pain, twice the rebound, twice th—“

“Harry, please!” She pleaded angrily. Her throat was clogged with emotion and her eyes were beginning to water at his tone.

“Harry, stop.” Ginny commanded seriously.

“They didn’t even know a triad was possible, Gin!” Harry accused. Harry was breathing heavily as Hermione closed her eyes. She longed to be back home with the very subject of the conversation and she didn’t know if that realization made her feel better or worse.

“I see everything they are…how can I help but feel the way I do?” Hermione asked sadly. Harry was only echoing her own insecurities and conclusions—it was hardly his fault that he was concerned. Harry exhaled slowly and Hermione listened as his anger seemingly dissipated into the air. She cleared her throat. “I’m going to say hi to Neville—it’s his birthday party, too.” Hermione reasoned as she fled for her other friends. She was glad that Ginny had been non-judgmental despite her husband’s opinions. Words could not describe how thankful she was that Ron had not been there to add his own comments to the conversation.

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Steve and Bucky tried watching TV but most shows on the air were awkwardly sexual—and Steve got embarrassed—or they were unnecessarily violent—and they both found it distasteful. That was why they preferred their benign Disney movies. Unfortunately, the unspoken rule was they couldn’t proceed in their movie marathon without all three present, so they couldn’t very well watch any more until Hermione got back. It was a damn shame, too, because they had truly entered the modern princess era and Steve and Bucky both suffered from having the lyrics to “I’ll make a man out of you” stuck in their head. All day Steve had on more than one occasion caught himself or Bucky humming or singing along unknowingly.
Despite their inability to watch satisfactory TV, they still parked themselves on the couch out of comfort and habit. Bucky had made a sizable dent in Hermione’s library but she was profoundly well read and Bucky’s choices were still plentiful. Steve preferred to draw and was working on a few sketches to frame and add to his displayed collections. They were still on the couch when Hermione returned home, clambering up the stairs with a series of loud noises. Bucky jumped in time with Steve when they distinguished additional voices and they immediately took defensive positions as they approached the basement door. The door flew open and Steve watched as Hermione stumbled in, supported by a tipsy Harry and a redheaded female he did not recognize. The redhead noticed them first.

“Oh, Merlin! No wonder Hermione keeps you locked up in her house.” The redhead looked nearly predatory as her gaze shifted between Bucky and Steve. “You never mentioned how dishy they were.” She commented affably to her companions. Steve watched his friend stand stiffer as the redhead’s eyes wandered up and down, assessing.

“Ginny!” Harry protested beside her and Steve could hear the slight edge of intoxication in his voice. Steve rushed forward to relieve them of their burden. Hermione was less-than coherent, her eyes observing everyone and everything but she was blinking often and her face was blank.

“What happened?” Steve asked alarmed, even as Harry pulled Hermione away from Steve petulantly. Harry and Ginny guided her to a chair before Ginny took out her wand. Bucky and Steve immediately tensed at the sight of the weapon but she merely seemed to summon a glass of water for her intoxicated charges. She glanced at Steve.

“Make them drink.” Ginny commanded. Unlike the other two, Ginny did not seem intoxicated as she disappeared in the direction of the hallway. Hermione was still blinking frequently as she gazed around the room with doe-like eyes. Bucky had shifted towards her and was encouraging her to drink slowly.

“Um… she said you should drink this.” Steve said awkwardly as he pushed the glass into Harry’s hands. He eyed Steve suspiciously but dutifully consumed the liquid.

“No sober up potion.” Ginny complained as she returned. “Just a hangover prevention potion.” She said as she held up the vial. Harry was rubbing his face underneath his glasses.

“We just need to wait until she throws up.” Harry determined as he began to sober up. Ginny had refilled both glasses and Bucky was still assisting Hermione as she drank. Ginny was eyeing their interaction, Steve noted.

“How do you know she’ll throw up?” Steve asked as he inspected Hermione. She was unusually quiet when intoxicated, he determined, a stark comparison to her normal.

“Hermione always throws up when she’s this pissed.” Harry sighed.

“She throws up when she’s mad?” Steve asked in confusion. Ginny looked at him blankly before laughing.

“No! No—she’s never been so angry she’s vomited in a rage.” Ginny said with amused chuckle. “Pissed means drunk—she’s just drunk.”

“That much was obvious.” Bucky chimed in unhelpfully. Hermione was done with the water but had grasped Bucky’s hand when he took her glass and seemed unwilling to relinquish it. Bucky looked uneasily at Steve but Steve merely looked on amused.
“In any case, Hermione has three stages of sozzled: affection, nausea, and then the desire to shower.” Ginny counted off the stages. Steve narrowed his eyes in confusion.


“I’m just warning you. First, she’ll become affectionate and then she’ll throw up. Once she throws up we can give her the potion to prevent a hangover tomorrow and then she’ll want to shower away her drunk.” Ginny described.

“Is that…a magical thing?” Steve asked and Ginny looked amused again.

“The potion is magical…the showering…not so much.” Ginny answered with a smile.

“She didn’t strike me as a heavy drinker.” Bucky commented quietly, hand still attached to said subject.

“She’s not—she doesn’t drink much.” Harry added.

“What made her drink so much tonight?” Steve asked. He caught Harry’s subtle wince and Ginny’s not so subtle glare.

“Why indeed.” Ginny seethed. Something devious crossed her face and Steve took a step back warily. “We should leave her with her boys.” She suggested slyly.

“They’re patients, Gin…” Harry rebutted. Steve spotted Bucky’s shoulders tense up at the term.

“They’re grown men, Harry, and they can take care of her.” Ginny deadpanned before turning to measure Bucky and Steve with her eyes. “Oi. You can, can’t you—take care of her?” Ginny challenged with critical eyes. Steve and Bucky nodded determinedly and Ginny favored them with a pleasant smile. “Good.” Harry was still inspecting them, his tipsiness fading.

“Can I trust you?” Harry asked looking them both in the eye and weighing their worth.

“Wait for her to throw up, give her the potion, let her sleep—got it.” Steve confirmed. Harry narrowed his eyes and turned to Bucky expectantly.

“Of course you can trust us.” Bucky sniped, rolling his eyes.

“See, there—I trust them.” Ginny approved.

“He had a metal arm.” Harry added incredulously with a gesturing hand. Bucky’s arm flexed at the acknowledgement but Ginny seemed unfazed.

“Moody had a wooden leg.” Ginny returned.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Harry asked.

“What does a metal arm have to do with anything?” Ginny countered. She sighed. “Harry—drop it. The children are at mum’s and the house is empty. These two will take care of her and I will take care of you.” Ginny added, and Steve became distinctly uncomfortable with her insinuation and her blatant bedroom eyes.

“They better…or else…” Harry threatened, though he seemed largely distracted by Ginny’s offer.

“Alright, gents, I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again really soon.” Ginny was wearing a triumphant smile as she passed the vial to Bucky. “I trust you to take care of our Hermione.” Ginny’s
voice teased lightly. Her smile turned easy but her eyes turned cold and Steve felt his spine tingle uncomfortably. “Just so you know I have a spell that makes bats crawl out of your nose.” Ginny’s smile was ill-matched for her words and Steve attempted not to flinch when she slapped him soundly on his back. Redheaded women with easy smiles were dangerous, Steve knew. He nodded his head slowly. “Excellent.” Ginny walked back over to Hermione who was blearily watching their interactions. Harry stood from his seat and ducked down, kissing Hermione on the head in a familial manner. “Bye, love.” Ginny called as she mimicked the kiss on Hermione’s head before she dragged Harry away. They disappeared down the hallway. Steve looked at Bucky who looked back at Steve, equally flustered.

“Well—now what?” Steve asked and Bucky snorted. Gently he attempted to guide Hermione to the couch but she circled her arms around Bucky’s neck. Bucky attempted to pull her off, but she clutched on strongly, glancing over Bucky’s shoulder to blink owlishly at Steve. Steve laughed at Bucky’s expense.

“I’m guessing she’s in the affectionate phase.” Bucky muttered speculatively. “She’s stronger than I thought.” Bucky added as he stood, Hermione dangling from his neck—feet both off the floor. Steve laughed again as Bucky shot him a dark look before gathering Hermione into his arms. “Hermione?” Bucky spoke softly. She shifted her eyes from where they had been watching Steve in favor of looking at Bucky. “Are you hungry?” He asked delicately. She shook her head violently, riotous hair hitting Bucky in the face with each turn. Steve laughed again before strolling up to the pair.

“You sleepy, Hermione?” Steve asked. She peered at Steve before nodding shyly. Steve felt a smile tug at his lips. He wondered if she was like this at a child. Bucky led them to her room, setting her on the bed and attempting to dislodge her from his neck.

“No!” She protested and Bucky sighed before sitting beside her on the bed. She eased her hold enough that she could glare at Steve until Steve sat beside her with faint amusement. Bucky gave an exasperated look outside of Hermione’s vision that had Steve chuckling. Hermione turned to look back at Bucky who had schooled his face to something passive. “You!” Hermione pointed. “You still hold back.” Hermione complained. She moved quickly, suddenly in an attempt to straddle Bucky. Bucky, utterly alarmed at the advance jumped out of the bed leaving Hermione nearly falling off the bed to the floor. Steve snuck an arm out to catch her at the waist.

“Woah, there, Hermione. Stay on the bed.” Steve chastised, thoroughly amused. He adjusted her center of gravity back towards safety.

“You!” She said as she turned in his grip. “You won’t turn away from me, right?” She asked before throwing her arms around his neck and pulling herself closely. Her lips rose to meet his in surprise. Her lips were soft and pliant and he could taste the alcohol in her kiss. She eased deeper into his hold and Steve could feel the warmth of her body so close to his, causing the blood to thrum under his skin. He wanted.

“Steve!” Bucky yelled and Steve threw his hands up in the air in surprise. Hermione still had her arms around Steve’s neck as she broke the kiss to pout at Bucky.

“I’ve wanted to do that for so long, but you both hold back! So rude!” Hermione complained with a whine. Steve’s hands were still up in the air as she attempted to kiss him again. Bucky struggled with indecision before moving to help pull Hermione off of Steve, keeping her at a distance to ensure she did not turn on him. Steve’s heart was beating erratically inside his chest as he recalled the kiss and her words. Did she say—

“Steve, you made a promise!” Bucky reprimanded as he struggled with Hermione; she was still attempting to turn on him.
“Technically she kissed me.” Steve defended. “And technically I didn’t make any promises—you did.” Steve said out of pettiness. Bucky glared at him before noticing that Hermione had calmed down significantly.

“Ah…darling…” Bucky commented as Hermione turned a sickly green.

“Stage two.” Steve noticed and Bucky did not respond as he hefted Hermione up and rushed her to the bathroom. Steve followed more leisurely, stopping in the threshold of her bathroom when he heard her retching. Bucky was holding her hair, talking to her soothingly. Steve passed Bucky a glass of water and Bucky encouraged Hermione to drink it. She stood uneasily, Bucky hovering around her with each misplaced step until she reached her sink.

“I have to brush my teeth.” Hermione stated as she fumbled around searchingly. Bucky frowned.

“Why don’t we take off your makeup first?” Bucky asked as he searched for her makeup remover. Hermione pouted as she attempted to apply some paste onto her brush. Steve snatched the tube from her hand when he recognized it was not toothpaste.

“MY PARENTS ARE DENTISTS AND I HAVE TO…I HAVE TO…BRUSH!” Hermione bellowed and Bucky winced, finding the tooth paste and placing some on her brush to appease her. She brushed her teeth sedately, staring at her reflection with unfocused eyes. Bucky and Steve waited for her. She stopped brushing after a few minutes and seemingly fell asleep upright, toothbrush still in her mouth.

“Uh…Bucky?” Steve addressed tentatively. Bucky sighed before coaxing the toothbrush from her mouth. She jerked awake and rinsed her mouth. Bucky wiped away the foam that smeared across her face. Bucky was doing well to care for her, Steve realized.

Then she ripped off her shirt.

“Ah!” Steve exclaimed as he turned around and covered his eyes. Bucky snorted.

“You kiss her and you allow it but she strips and you panic?” Bucky asked.

“She kissed me!” Steve defended as he listened to Hermione complain behind him.

“I want to shower…” Hermione bemoaned.

“Stage three.” Bucky chimed, and Steve could hear Hermione shifting as more clothing hit the floor.

“Bucky, don’t look!” Steve demanded but Bucky only chuckled noncommitting.

“I want to wash away the drunk.” Hermione slurred. “I hate this…it feels like…it feels like Dolohov’s curse.” Steve turned around to peek at Hermione. Bucky had a towel loosely wrapped around her as she pouted, visibly distraught.

“Dolohov’s curse?” Bucky echoed softly, his cheeks faintly pink. Hermione nodded.

“If feels like fire…and my head is light and my body is disconnected and I’m sleepy and it’s blurry and I’m hot.” Hermione complained. Tears were beginning to fall down her face and Steve sighed, walking towards her to wipe the paths. Steve tried not to think of her nudity beneath the towel as he began to wipe the liquid. He spotted her makeup removing wipes and wiped them across her face. He bit his cheek to hide his laugh when he made dark circles appear underneath her eyes from where the makeup smudged.
“Give me that.” Bucky said annoyed as he focused on cleaning her face more effectively.

“Do you want me to start the shower?” Steve asked. Bucky paused in his cleaning before nodding his head. He still didn’t like showers, though he seemed to be overcoming the issues that caused his dislike. Steve tested the temperature before allowing Hermione to enter. She did so and Bucky and Steve both turned around to give her privacy. She was humming as she bathed and Steve laughed when he realized it was the same song that had been stuck in his head all day.

“You must be swift as the coursing river!” Hermione sang offbeat. Steve smiled when he noticed the smile tugging at Bucky’s lips.

“With all the force of a great typhoon!” Steve added softly and Bucky continued to struggle to suppress his visible amusement.

“With all the strength of a raging fire.” She continued.

“Mysterious as the dark side of the moon.” Bucky finished reluctantly and Steve gave a ‘woop’ of triumph followed by Hermione’s echo of joy that faded into a shriek. Bucky and Steve turned around to where she had apparently slipped in the shower.

“I’m done…” Hermione said in a pathetic and small voice. Her hand was on the back of her head and Steve ripped the door open. Steve reached in to turn off the shower, eyes closed as he attempted to respect her very appealing form as he fumbled for the handle. When he opened them, Hermione was covered in a towel. Bucky walked her to the bed and Steve grabbed her another glass of water.

“Time for your potion.” Steve commented as he passed her the cup. She took it and the potion, tossing them back dutifully.

“In to bed, darling.” Bucky added tenderly as he lifted her comforter. He had apparently found her clothing because she was wearing only a small shirt and her underwear as Steve turned his vision away until she was settled beneath the covers. Bucky was tucking her in.

“Wait!” Hermione cried when he leaned back from the bed. “My bears!” Hermione demanded and Bucky rolled his eyes. He found the bears resting in their sleeping nest and placed them dutifully by her side. “Now you!” She commanded and Steve and Bucky exchanged glances before sitting upright on either side. “No! Under the covers!” Hermione demanded. Steve shared an uneasy look with Bucky before they both got under the sheets. “No shirts!” Hermione demanded as she began tugging at Bucky’s shirt.

“Woah! Hermione-no-no! Leave the shirt!” Bucky complained as he attempted to scoot her hands away.

“No shirts, darling!” Hermione demanded cheerfully before she gave up and waved the wand she kept underneath her pillow. Bucky and Steve’s shirt disappeared suddenly and they froze at the cool air of the night.

“Do you find it a little uncomfortable that she used magic while intoxicated?” Bucky asked uneasily as Hermione snuggled back under the comforters.

“Yeah—a little.” Steve admitted unsettled.

“Bed time!” Hermione declared again as she tugged and prodded Steve into the positions she wanted. She pulled Bucky’s head down to the pillow until they were face to face. Steve was yanked behind her as she forced him to wrap his arms around her torso. She nuzzled her butt into his groin and Steve groaned in frustration at the contact. He thought it unfair that she chose now of all times to
try spooning. She adjusted his arm so that it lay cushioned between each breast and Steve nearly whimpered at the contact.

“Hermione…” Bucky was still complaining as she placed his hand on her hip, his face still aligned with hers, her hands sneaking up to caress his face before burrowing them into his hair.

“Good night, Bucky! Good night, Steve!” Hermione chimed happily.

“Why did you drink so much, Hermione?” Bucky asked as she started to fade, apparently tired.

“Because I make bad decisions.” She slurred as she spoke, her eyes closed.

“What type of bad decisions?” Steve asked and felt something roll within him when her eyes popped up to search Steve and Bucky. She closed them again.

“The bad kind.” Hermione answered though she didn’t seem particularly regretful. Steve attempted his questions again but was met with her soft breathing that began to sound like a snore. Bucky snorted at the sound and Steve glanced at him in amusement.


“Got plenty of practice.” Bucky added significantly as he looked over Hermione at Steve. Bucky had taken care of Steve almost every time he was sick.

“You were doting.” Steve elaborated with a grin.

“Laugh it up, Stevie. You’re the one she was kissing before she threw up.” Bucky smirked. Steve’s good humor fell at the reminder. Romanoff’s questions about their kiss rattled awkwardly around in his head.

“When’s the last time you’ve kissed anybody, Buck?” Steve asked bitterly and Bucky gave him a dark look. Steve winced; he had meant it quite like that.

“Yeah, it may have been a while but I can confidently say I’ve never made anyone sick—in fact I’ve never had any complaints.” Bucky laughed viciously and Steve cringed. He exhaled slowly.

“Did you ever practice?” Steve asked curiously and Bucky laughed in surprise.

“Oh Stevie…” Bucky said between laughs. Steve felt the need to shuffle but he resisted; Hermione still in his hold.

“It was a real question.” Steve commented self-consciously.

“Look, Steve—each kiss is practice to make it that much better. Just keep trying and you’ll find what a girl likes.” Bucky answered. He looked at Hermione before glancing up at Steve. “You deserve someone like her, Stevie and I know you’d do right by her, too.” Bucky added quietly. There was a sadness in his eyes and Steve turned away to avoid looking at it.

“I’m not the one who held her hair when she threw up.” Steve said though he nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent. “For all the sickness I personally experienced, I don’t know a damn thing about taking care of someone.” Steve admitted.

“That’s because I was always taking care of you when you were sick. Seeing as you were always sick, I got plenty of practice.” Bucky scoffed.

“All the more reason that I know you’d do right by her too. You’d take better care of her than I
would.” Steve commented softly. Bucky was staring at Steve, something unreadable passing through his eyes. Bucky chuckled to himself.

“You’re Captain America, Stevie. You’ve always outranked me.” Bucky said evenly. Steve attempted to make a comment in return, but Bucky was already falling asleep. Bucky’s words, however, settled heavy in Steve’s stomach.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: I’d written the introduction for Harry, Ron, Steve, and Bucky from the beginning. It is the last of my original dialogues that I spit-fired when I went crazy one weekend writing this fic before deciding to post it. I can’t believe I’ve made it this far. This fic has consumed me—90,000 words in two months, haha. Thanks so much for your support and I hope you continue to like what you read!
Act Natural

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own either universe.

Don’t worry! I’m not dead! Sorry for the two-week hiatus—I anticipated posting around Thanksgiving but didn’t have much opportunity to write and I needed to restructure the upcoming chapters. Thank you to all the concerned inquires—they were extremely flattering! I was especially taken aback by the response from the last chapter! I love reading them and I’m very thankful that you took the time to write them!

As always, thanks for ALL your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! Please continue to do so!

If you have any headcanon/fluffs/plot bunnies you want to see, I’m still flexible and willing to attempt to add them.

Thanks for reading and please enjoy!

Hermione woke up hot. Despite being only in her knickers—and wasn’t that interesting given that she usually slept with shorts—there was a heat radiating all around her. Heat radiated from the weight across her stomach. Heat radiated from the weight between her legs and on her hip. She gave a noise of complaint, shifting the weight so she could shimmy her shirt up and expose her stomach to the cool air. When it was still too hot, she shimmed the shirt up further before tugging it over her head. Bare-breasted, she felt cool enough that she could grind herself into the heat source behind her with a satisfied hiss, her hands fisting into something soft and silky in her clutch.

A noise of delight echoed behind her. She smiled softly at the noise. She pushed herself back further, her hands dragging down to splay themselves on that something firm before her. Her mind was slow to register the world around her. In the back of her throat she tasted something. It took her a moment to register the soapy, minty residue covering up the minor lingering of alcohol on her breath—a hangover prevention potion, she realized.

Because she had gotten drunk.

Because Harry was mad at her irresponsibility.

Because she was sleeping with two men whom she was healing and definitely not dating.

Sleeping...

She wondered if she was still asleep and merely dreaming; she had had dreams like this before. Hermione pushed into the heat source behind her again and heard a strangled groan. The shape nuzzled between her arse cheeks was identified as a decidedly male hardness when it twitched at her movement. The hand flexing on her ribcage had fingers dancing an anxious trail beneath her bare breast, sending her heart thumping in her throat. Her own fingers began a tactile exploration on the
firmness before her—heat and skin with a smattering of hair. Reflexively, the hand at her waist echoed her exploration with a firmer grip on her hip and a sweep of a thumb against her apparently erogenous hipbone—judging by the shot of electricity to her core. She stifled her moan into a titillating exhale of air.

Oh, Merlin.

This wasn’t a dream, she realized with stunning clarity. She was actually feeling up the most attractive men she had probably ever fancied. Which left her with a new dilemma: what was she supposed to do? The little Harry on her shoulder was reprimanding her but the Ginny on her other shoulder was encouraging her advantageous position. Neutrally, she decided to pretend to keep sleeping, eyes closed despite the rapid inhale and exhale of her breath in time with her erratic heartbeat. They could leave first, she reasoned and they would avoid any awkwardness. Her conclusion was not to be when fingers grazed her under-breast in time with the delicate sweep of the thumb on her hip, causing her to emit the most indecent of sounds. The bodies beside her stiffened and she cursed herself as her heart beat jumped. Slowly the hands all retracted, the two men beside her breathing deeply. Hermione lamented the loss as she slowly shifted to lie on her back to cover her face with her hands.

“Good Morning.” Hermione greeted hesitantly. Steve jerked in the bed and Hermione opened her eyes against the harshness of the daylight and squinted at his red, flushed face.

“Ah!” Steve yelped, leaping from the bed shirtless. Bucky followed pursuit after he shifted the covers to shield her nudity; she had been flashing them unintentionally.

“Good morning to you, too.” Hermione said under her breath as she clutched the sheets to her body, burrowing her face in the material to hide her flush. She peered up at her two bedfellows reluctantly.

“We didn’t do anything inappropriate—just sleep.” Steve began defensively. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“I’m well aware—I remember my…unfortunate decision to drink myself into oblivion.” Hermione exclaimed with exasperation. The hangover prevention potion also prevented blackouts—Hermione remembered every embarrassing detail of the night.

“Yes. We just—you just—and then you’re naked!” Steve determined as he averted his eyes, red coloring his face vividly. Hermione frowned as she buried her face into the covers again.

“My apologies for making you uncomfortable. You are, however, free to leave.” Hermione dismissed them through the cloth, still refusing to look at them so she could admire their bare chests.

“Right! Yes. We’ll be—breakfast! Breakfast sounds good!” Steve stammered as he threw open the door quickly to vacate her presence. Hermione winced as the handle embedded into the drywall but Steve seemed too flustered to even notice. Bucky followed, lifting the door handle out of the indent in the wall in order to close it.

Hermione sighed. Despite the hangover potion, Hermione could feel a burgeoning headache between her eyes. Her hair was still damp from her shower and she was unfortunately recalling the night before with perfect repetitive clarity. Her breath caught when she remembered she had kissed Steve. She moaned in despair as she buried her face in her hands. What kind of kismet ensured that Harry would progress the very relationships he was trying to inhibit?

Hermione stayed in bed in order to contemplate. Unfortunately her contemplation led to other thoughts like the feel of Steve’s manhood against her and the muscles she could feel under Bucky’s
skin. She sighed in frustration. She had already begun dreaming of them in the most compromising of ways. Her dreams of the feel of them, however, held no candle to the actual tautness of their flesh and the headiness of their smell. She resisted the budding urge to grant her self-satisfaction and reluctantly rolled out of bed. She changed into proper and modest clothing as if they were protection from her own unsatisfied needs. She wasn’t sure what she would say to the boys when she found them but she figured an apology was a good place to start.

Hermione clasped the inside door handle only to notice sudden grooves and ridges as she attempted to close her hand around it. Curious, she removed her hand to inspect the handle.

It was crushed.

Steve must have been truly flustered if the indent marks on the handle were any indication. She had never seen him accidently destroy anything with his freakish strength—he was usually very delicate and composed. Hermione flicked her wand out and eased the metal back into the original handle shape, erasing any sign that Steve had crushed it in his super-soldier grip. She brushed the drywall with another spell to seal the door handle shaped indent. Steve’s emotional demonstration only proved that Hermione needed to tread carefully for the sake of everyone’s mental wellbeing.

Hermione didn’t see them in the kitchen or the atrium when she cautiously left her bedroom. She waved her wand and located them on the roof upstairs. She didn’t blame them for seeking a little fresh air. She reluctantly trudged forward when a small, worn, red book caught her eye from the coffee table. Captivated, she felt herself instinctively drawn to it. Her fingers traced the gold lettering of a book she hadn’t touched since she had moved into her new home. But that was not the most profound memory she held—no, she began to recall with perfect memory why she had kept the book in the first place.

The light of the day filtered through the window. Hermione felt the sun beating down on her face pleasantly from her window sill seat in her London apartment. With a sigh of contentment, she leaned back against the firm chest behind her.

“Turn the page, Granger.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at the demand.

“Are you reading it seriously?” Hermione asked sternly. She turned to glare at him when he scoffed.

“It’s a love poem.” He told her with his natural condescension. “I understand it completely. ‘Her face her tongue her wit/so fair so sweet so sharp/first bent then drew then hit/mine eye mine ear mine heart.’ I don’t need to dwell so deeply in the words when I so richly live the nuances of the poem in everyday life.” He told her with an ostentatious air. She would probably have hit him if she didn’t find his words so decidedly charming. Instead she favored him with a withering look.

“You are a pretentious arse.” She informed him.

“You could fix that.” He said with that sly sort of look she had grown to love.

“You can’t fix stupid.” She told him snottily.

“You can fix everything else, though.” His eyes were challenging, his tone playful, and she felt the swell of emotion beneath her bosom. “’Mine eye mine ear mine heart/with life with hope with skill/ her face her tongue her wit/doth feed doth feast doth fill.’” His words caressed her ear before she slowly shifted in his hold to face him. She grasped the sides of his faces.

“Maybe you are paying attention after all.” Hermione smirked, closing the distance between them to
Hermione broke from her daydream with a shudder. Dimly she registered the welling of tears in her eyes. She attempted to blink them away as she gingerly placed the book back on the shelf. Bucky must have been reading it, she realized and she wondered if he had always liked poetry or if he had made so much of a dent in her fantasy books that he had expanded his parameters to read.

She turned away from the bookshelf, the dull ache in her chest attempting to recede like every time she unintentionally recalled her contentious trysts. That time was over, she reminded herself. Now, he had a wife and a child and happiness and he was precisely why Harry was so protective of her. One lost love had sent her into the numb of arms of eternal dreamless sleep—what would two do?

Inside her heart was a chest filled with everything she locked away. She visualized the chest—the locks already opened and resting idly on the floor ineffectively. She locked up her treasure again. Once opened, the locks were loath to close, but she would persist—at least until they could manage on their own.

By the time she reached the rooftop, Hermione had composed herself. She paused at the door when she overheard Steve’s voice from outside.

“She felt so good—she pushed up into me! I couldn’t control my reaction.” Steve complained as Bucky chuckled lowly. “I can’t look at her again.” Steve lamented.

“I’m sure you’ll manage, buddy.” Bucky teased. Hermione moved away from the door, walking down a few steps before loudly climbing up again.

“Bucky? Steve? We should probably talk…” Hermione preempted as she opened the door. Steve was pink in the face and avoiding her gaze. Bucky was eying her with cautious curiosity and speculation. Hermione took a deep breath. “I wanted to apologize for last night. It was utterly inappropriate of me and I hope you know I would never want to jeopardize our relationship as patients and healer.” Hermione gave them a grim smile. “I don’t suppose we can all just pretend last night never happened?” Steve was still averting his gaze but Bucky had narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Harry and Ginny said you don’t normally drink.” Bucky mentioned lightly. “Any reason why you decided to last night?”

“It was Harry and Neville’s birthday party.” Hermione ventured awkwardly.

“Uh-huh.” Bucky said as he stood up and walked towards her. Hermione felt herself tense up in response, blushing as she recalled the feel of his chest beneath her hands. “Those bad decisions you spoke of last night had nothing to do with it?” Bucky came to a stop before her to peer down at her accusingly. Hermione felt the need to fidget and contained it to a slight tap on her leg.

“Harry and I had a bit of a disagreement.” Hermione admitted meekly. Steve perked up at the words, joining Bucky at his side to tower above her.

“What do you mean? What did he say that upset you so much?” Steve asked darkly and Hermione felt her eyes widen at the sight. Instinctually she reached out to grasp his forearms. The touch was jarring as apparently Hermione and Steve both recalled the morning with equal blushes. Hermione retracted the hand quickly.


“So he has said.” Bucky said ruefully. Hermione glanced at him in surprise.
“Did…did Harry say something to you?” Hermione asked nervously. Bucky and Steve shared a look that sent unease down Hermione’s spine.

“Harry wanted us to focus on our healing so we could get out of your hair.” Steve informed her. “He said that—he seemed to imply that we were crossing patient-healer lines inappropriately.” Steve summarized. Hermione winced, unsure if she was grateful to Harry’s meddling or annoyed.

“Harry isn’t wrong.” Hermione admitted. “He was very adamant to make that clear the other night…which did contribute to my overindulgence.” She looked at Bucky and Steve who were looking back at her ominously. “There is a very common correlation between the positive association a patient has to their healer. It’s important to maintain a professional degree of distance for when the healing is largely concluded and the patient develops their true feelings.” Hermione described as clinically as possible. Steve and Bucky looked unreadable, their eyes shuttered from her piercing gaze. It would be simple to pluck the thoughts from their head—but Hermione was always diligent at resisting the temptation.

“So, we should go back to sleeping alone.” Bucky finally said in a soft tone that made Hermione frown.

“No. I don’t think—“ Hermione paused and bit her lip uneasily. “No.” She tried again. “I think we all benefit from our sleeping pattern at night that it would be more detrimental to dissolve that particular habit.” Steve and Bucky visibly relaxed before her and she felt her heart leap at the thought that they could be so concerned for that outcome. “It just means that I shouldn’t drunkenly try to take advantage of you.” Hermione clarified with embarrassment.

“Harry won’t be happy that we are still sleeping together.” Steve identified with a faint blush. Hermione nodded in agreement.

“Yes, well, I can handle him.” Hermione said defiantly.

“You’ll come home the next time he upsets you—before you get drunk?” Bucky said as his fingers trailed underneath her chin. They guided her eyes to his and she widened at the protectiveness that lingered behind his request.

“Yes.” Hermione breathed out. He held her gaze for a second longer before dropping both his stare and hand.

“He’s an asshole.” Bucky determined with a scoff.

“Bucky!” Steve reprimanded and Hermione was tricked into a laugh. “Bucky didn’t mean that!” Steve said with a glare to Bucky. Bucky looked petulantly away.

“That redheaded guy from the other day was worse.” Bucky added under his breath and Hermione laughed again as Steve began to chew Bucky out for his behavior.

“Despite your disagreement, I think you and Harry would get along famously.” Hermione interrupted with a smile. “He’s actually regarded as very kind and welcoming amongst my friends.”

“What about Ron?” Steve added in a way that seemed to indicate Ron had been less-than-polite.

“Ron gets worked up very easily.” Hermione grimaced. “He isn’t quite as welcoming as Harry but he always bends to my will if I so will it.” Hermione said with purpose.

“What do you will?” Steve asked hesitantly. Hermione glanced at him in surprise.
“I suppose they want you to get out of my house and life as soon as possible and I understand why they feel the way they do, but I want you to stay as long as you want and need—and that is all that matters.” Hermione said primly. “Now, you mentioned breakfast?” The boys jumped at the reminder, the meal seemingly forgotten.

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Despite Hermione’s plea to forget her drunken endeavor, Steve seemed incapable of forgetting. While on the surface the trio was still carrying on as ‘normal’, Steve couldn’t help the awkwardness that seemed to spring up whenever they approached their bed. Every time Steve even glanced at the new extra-wide bed they dwelled in, Steve would feel his blood race and his manhood twitch. How could he possible forget the feel of her skin against his, the softness beneath her breast, and the ease with which her entire being seemed to meld into his. Bucky had laughed at him when he had lamented the embarrassing truth that he was taking ‘morning wood’ to a mortifying extreme. It was a dangerous game to ensure he wasn’t unintentionally prodding Hermione or tenting the bedspread. He still wasn’t sure if he had even been completely successful in that regard.

“You alright there, Rogers?” Clint asked with amusement as they scoped out their target.

“I’m fine, Barton.” Steve answered gruffly, cursing himself for being distracted. He heard Natasha scoff over the earpiece.

“The sooner we take out this Romanian cell, the sooner you can return home to Dr. Penny.” Tony chimed in with a saccharine smile. “After that, we can all celebrate with Korean Barbeque—Oz would enjoy that, wouldn’t she?” Tony added in an ongoing attempt to meet Hermione. Steve groaned.

“Come on Stark, we need to focus.” Steve reprimanded in an effort to get the team to focus. It was their first time going on a mission since Loki and Steve was hoping they’d find more information on the Scepter before they returned home. Steve touched the penny under his uniform idly, tracing the shape beneath the rigid fabric of his uniform. Hermione and Bucky were waiting for him at home and all he could think about was the fact that they would be sleeping for the first time without him tonight; Steve doubted he could even manage a nap without them.

“We got movement up here, Cap.” Sam added from his vantage point on the other side of the European farmers market.

“Send the image, Wilson.” Tony commanded and Steve was sure JARVIS was already analyzing whatever Sam saw. “JARVIS recognized them as the three we’re looking for.” Tony announced and Steve eyed the crowds with focus.

“Let’s go.” Steve commanded as his team took off in heavy pursuit of the Hydra henchman.

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While the Hydra cell was successfully neutralized, they were still no closer to locating the scepter. The quinjet had already lulled Bruce to sleep—despite the Hulk never being utilized—and Clint and Nat were holed up looking ready to nap as well. Sam looked exhausted and Steve had a feeling he looked rough as well.

“Sam.” Steve called through the quiet of the ride. Sam looked up at attention. “Penny invited you over for guys’ night Friday.” Steve mentioned, having already committed to the nickname around the Avengers when they began utilizing more probing questions about Hermione and to a lesser extent Bucky.
“Penny being there doesn’t make it a guys’ night.” Sam pointed out and Steve shook his head.

“She’s going to visit her parents for the day.” Steve clarified.

“Does anyone else think it’s weird that your roommate still hasn’t met us?” Clint asked as he began to seemingly awaken from his near sleep.

“I agree!” Tony quipped from the front of the vessel. “I mean, I have access to basically any database I want and nada, zilch, nothing! I just need a name!” Tony begged causing the rest of the plane to roll their eyes.

“What does she even do?” Clint asked with wide eyes.

“Doctor—clearly. Hasn’t that been established?” Tony responded smartly. Natasha flicked a bottle cap from her water bottle at his head with enough force to make him yelp in pain.

“She’s a specialized mental therapist.” Steve clarified with a frown.

“That’s even weirder. Aren’t you scared she’s going to mess around in your head?” Clint shuddered at the idea, presumably overcome with his own mental intrusion experiences. Steve did not mention how applicable Clint’s question was.

“Everyone can benefit from therapy.” Steve said, repeating Hermione’s motto. “Besides, she’s probably the best there is.”

“Hey, she’s a real sweetheart, too. Penny isn’t the type to go mucking around with someone’s head for her own gain.” Sam determined. Steve nodded slightly.

“So how did this beautiful, smart, well-to-do doctor end up with you as their roommate?” Stark asked. “If she’s as good as you say, she probably has enough money that she wouldn’t have to rent out her apartment…or penthouse…or skyscraper?” Tony trailed off and Steve rolled his eyes when it became apparent Tony was only fishing for information.

“Good try, Tony.” Steve noticed and Tony pouted. “She certainly doesn’t need roommates but she offered anyway.” Steve answered. Jarvis informed them of their descent and Steve gave a sigh of relief when they neared the tower. Conveniently distracted, Steve finished his debrief, showered quickly, and proceeded to make a hasty exit.

“So why did she offer you her home?” Clint asked as he appeared around a random corner of the hallway.

“She likes to help people.” Steve answered without slowing his steps. He had already waved goodbye to Sam who was staying the night at the tower and he was eager to finally go home.

“And you met how?” Clint wondered aloud.

“Mutual friend.” Natasha supplemented, appearing from another random hallway and matching Steve’s stride seamlessly.

“Aren’t you guys staying here?” Steve asked in frustration as they followed him to the garage. Clint shrugged.

“Yeah, but I like a good mystery.” Clint answered. Steve moved to straddle his Harley, eyeing Clint in contemplation. Eventually Bucky was going to get better and Hermione already said she’d be willing to meet the team. Steve tapped his finger on the handlebars before reaching his conclusion.
“I’m not telling Tony or Bruce yet, but Nat and Sam already know…” Steve began. Clint looked at Steve like he was surprised Steve was revealing anything. “Penny’s taking care of my friend—Bucky.”

“You found him?!” Clint blinked, eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“Thanks to Nat’s tip. We located him pretty quickly but his mind was damaged. I happened to have previously met Penny and she was the one who we ended up calling. She’s been healing Bucky ever since.” Steve summed, attempting to gauge Nat’s stoic appearance.

“The Winter Soldier.” Clint asked.

“Bucky Barnes, my friend.” Steve corrected with a frown. Clint raised his hands to his temple, expelling air and moving his hands to simulate an explosion.

“Mind. Blown. That’s insane!” Clint was glancing at Nat, reading something in her unreadable expression. “How did SHIELD not know a doctor so good that they claim they can undo Hydra damage? I mean, even Tony’s search for any possible connections has resulted in nothing!” Steve felt appalled at their intrusive investigation while simultaneously strangely pleased at Hermione’s consequential success staying under the radar.

“She’s good but very private—so good she’s still private.” Steve elaborated.

“Wow. Now I really want to meet her.” Clint commented sincerely.

“Well, join the line.” Nat smirked. “Any chance I can get a name besides Penny?” Nat asked with a lifted brow and a teasing smile. Steve revved his engine in response.

“Not out of me.” Steve offered before taking off into the witching hour of the night.

Steve pulled up to the house, relief and drowsiness increasing with each step into the residence. He passed the door to Hermione’s room, opening it quietly to check on his friends. When the sheets were still made, Steve felt his heart drop. Quickly, Steve peered into his own room as well as Bucky’s, noting the markedly empty beds. He moved into the atrium and stopped when he finally spotted them.

There on the couch was Bucky and Hermione, curled up and asleep. It was a strange moment for Steve when he realized he could fit his entire heart on a single couch. Steve’s feet instinctively brought him closer. Bucky looked so relaxed as he held Hermione in his arms. It was a testament to Hermione’s healing that Steve could see the darkness fading from his mind; could see happiness and levity returning to his friend’s heart. Steve thought perhaps he could already see the truth; Bucky was falling in love with Hermione. Reflecting on the conversations they had had; Steve suspected Bucky was already in love with her. Steve dropped onto the couch to stare at them, really stare at them. Bucky was lying on his back with his head propped up. Hermione was using Bucky’s chest to prop her own head up, a book collapsed on top of her chest as if she had fallen asleep reading. She probably had.

They looked good together, Steve realized. Steve was surprised when he didn’t feel any jealousy just a deep pang of sadness from being left behind. Steve exhaled and startled when Bucky’s eyes opened in sudden awareness. Steve blinked.


“Yeah, Buck. Mission went okay but we still have a ways to go.” Steve admitted and Bucky nodded.
understandingly. Hermione seemed to jar at either the sound or Bucky’s nodding, waking and
blinking tired eyes.

“Steve.” She greeted, her voice husky. “You’re safe.” She whispered, still blinking away sleep. Steve
nodded.

“No injuries.” He confirmed. Hermione smiled.

“Good. Come to bed.” Hermione beckoned and Steve’s lips tweaked up in a soft smile.

“That’s a couch, Hermione.” Steve noticed. Hermione whipped out her wand and with a wave the
couch expanded in width so that it was enough room for the trio. Their pillows, sheets, and covers all
seemed to appear from their bedroom.

“Now, it’s a bed.” Hermione determined, stuffing her wand under a pillow and rearranging herself so
she could still rest in the crook of Bucky’s shoulder. Steve shuffled, unsure. Hermione huffed.
“Sleep, Steve.” Hermione demanded as she patted the bed behind her. Steve shed his jacket and
removed his socks, leaving his pants and shirt on. He entered the bed and shifted to maintain as much
distance as possible. Hermione disregarded his courtesy when she grabbed his wrist and pulled him
forward, winding his arms around her torso as he spooned her from behind. His manhood twitched
from the proximity and he nearly groaned at Hermione’s contented sigh. “Goodnight my darlings.”
Hermione whispered, nuzzling her face into Bucky’s neck. One of her arms was thrown over
Bucky’s chest while the other was gripping Steve’s hand in hers. Feeling buoyed from the position,
Steve even allowed himself to nuzzle Hermione’s neck as he faded into sleep, sated.

It took Steve exactly one week after that night to realize something new and strange; *he* was falling
in love with Hermione. He had always been attracted to her, he had always admired her intelligence
and compassion, but he hadn’t realized he had crossed the line of friendship into something deeper
until he had seen it on Bucky’s face first.

What Steve felt was different than how he had felt with Peggy, especially now that he viewed her
only as a missed opportunity for something significant. No, Hermione was already significant.
Hermione was under his skin and in his lungs and in the corner of his eye; simply put, Steve was as
smitten as Bucky.

And boy, Bucky was smitten.

Steve could see it in the way his features lightened, in the way he occasionally stumbled over his
words, in the tint of pink as he ducked behind his hair; they were both in love. And men in love do
stupid things.

“Hermione,” Steve greeted when he came home one day. Hermione was still in her practical and
modest business robes but Steve found her utterly attractive nonetheless.

“Steve.” She greeted warmly and her smile lit his heart aflame. He stepped closer to her, invading her
space, compelled to inch closer to her presence. She took a step back in surprise but didn’t seem
bothered by his behavior. He watched her breath hitch when she hit the wall and Steve realized he
had backed her against it. Her lips were parted slightly in surprise and she was peering up at him
with wide eyes. It was unfair, he thought, that at any given moment she need only skim his mind and
find the dark truths he desperately tried to keep from her. What was even more unfair was that he
knew that she wasn’t; if he ever wanted her to know how he felt for sure, he’d have to tell her
himself.

“Steve?” She questioned in a breathy whisper. He had been staring down he realized. He grasped
her chin gently in his hands. She was so delicate compared to him yet infinitely more dangerous and powerful. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to taste her power. He wanted but he refrained, opting instead to swipe his thumb across her chin.

“You had a smudge of ink on your chin.” Steve lied before strolling away. He could feel her eyes on his back as he left thinking of Bucky and the way the two had fallen asleep reading on the couch so many nights before. Bucky and Hermione would be a better match, Steve realized. As much as Steve wanted—and he had never wanted as much as he did now—Bucky also wanted. Steve owed Bucky but more than that Steve wanted Bucky to be happy. If that meant stepping away from pursuing Hermione…than that was what he’d do. But Steve didn’t step away from Hermione so much as shove her towards his friend.

“You know, every time I draw Bucky, I can’t seem to capture the brilliance of his blue eyes and the softness of his chestnut hair.” Steve commented from his position on the couch. Hermione was reading a text of some sort and Bucky had disappeared into his garden on the roof.

“That seems like a struggle…” Hermione commented, unsure of what to say. Steve proceeded boldly forward.

“His metal arm is just so shiny—really an attractive aspect of him if you think about it.” Steve observed. Hermione had brought down her text to stare at Steve, baffled.

“I suppose…” Hermione ventured and Steve felt himself flush, feeling foolish. He tried another tactic.

“You know,” Steve began again. “Bucky always took care of me as a kid—that’s why he was so good at taking care of you when you were…intoxicated.” Hermione looked at Steve askance. “What I mean is that he’d take care of you and he’s loyal to a fault.” Steve clarified. Hermione’s look became one of amusement.

“I’m aware, Steve.” Steve blushed at her patronizing tone. He knew she was wondering the relevance of his comments but she was refraining from outright asking.

“I’m just saying that he wouldn’t hurt you if you cared for him.” Hermione’s expression suddenly became withdrawn and then wan.

“Steve, what is your point?” She finally inquired.

“You should try dating him some time.” Steve attempted casually, eying her reaction from the corner of his eye. She looked at him disbelievingly.

“Are you seriously acting like a wingman for Bucky right now? Does he know you’re attempting to play matchmaker?” Hermione asked incredulously, her voice raising to be almost shrill.

“No—but that’s irrelevant! You’d be good for Bucky and Bucky would be good to you! You obviously get along, he’s already read most of your library so you have the same literary appreciation—and you both can dance; it’d be a great match.” Steve rambled off quickly. Hermione was still looking at him like he was an idiot, her jaw dropped in something akin to disgust.

“I can’t even…” Hermione uttered with exasperation, turning away from Steve resolutely.

“Look, maybe, just consider it? He’s a great guy! Handsome, considerate, caring and strong—“ Steve attempted to continue.

“Steve!” Hermione cut him off. “The only thing I’m considering is purchasing more books for my
library because poor Bucky has no doubt been so desperate for stimulation that he has even thumbed through my most obscure novellas.” Steve frowned.

“I don’t think Bucky needs more reading material—“

“That’s not the point.” Hermione interrupted again as she began to rub her forehead. “This conversation is utterly preposterous and a dreadful waste of brain cells.” She uttered scathingly. “Do me a favor and desist with whatever asinine conclusions you have drawn from flawed observations.”

“I just want you and Bucky to be happy and I know that both of you like each ot—” Steve attempted to reason.

“You don’t know anything. This is just like the time you thought Bucky was exactly as you left him only to realize everything had changed!” Hermione’s temper flared in her voice and she stood to gesture with her hands violently. “You still have trauma, Bucky still has triggers and trauma and you both don’t know a damn thing about anything! A mind needs to heal before someone can even think about whether or not one does or does not fancy me. I’m sorry Steve, but mental health patients still receiving my care still need to grow and dating me or pursuing me is not an option.” Hermione finished, huffing with leftover anger.

“How do you know?” Steve asked resentfully somewhat off put by her unexpected rant. She snorted disdainfully as she grabbed her text.

“Oh please, Steve. You have to trust me. I’m a professional; I’ve seen it all.” Hermione said bitterly before quickly disappearing into her lab down below. Steve sighed heavily.

“Fuck.” He uttered when he was sure no one could hear him. He had fucked up in his presentation and now Hermione was pissed at him. More than that, he was pissed at Hermione’s parting statement. The context clues of various conversations between Hermione and her friends indicated that some asshole had made Hermione gun shy with relationships. Steve closed his eyes.

Fuck that guy.

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Steve had been spending nights out late, Bucky had realized. Whether it was because the Avengers were prepping for more missions or were receiving prominent information, Bucky did not know. Bucky was inclined to believe Steve was purposely avoiding Hermione who had begun to act out of sorts the same time that Steve started staying out later. Bucky had noticed the correlation and he was irritated for it.

Prior to Steve screwing up—and Bucky knew it was probably Steve who had—Bucky and Hermione had entered into a new semblance of relaxation. The night that they had decided to wait up for Steve, they had laid on the couch and cuddled up to read the same book together. It was intimate in a way that didn’t feel threatening and Bucky appreciated being able to talk about the book in real time with her; he appreciated being able to hold her in his arms even more. They hadn’t stopped reading like that until Steve had done something. Now Hermione was pointedly reading her own books silently as Bucky stared at her expectantly. The pursuing of her lips but the diverted gaze indicted she was steadfastly ignoring Bucky’s invitation.

It frustrated Bucky—knowing how close he could be but seeing her steadfastly refusing out of some misguided attempt at proving something. She was sitting right next to him and Bucky dug his fingers into his palm to prevent his reflexive instinct to clutch her hand. She was right there within range of his touch, a breath away from his need for completion. Given the hypersensitivity he felt from just dwelling in her proximity, it would have to suffice. With a stilted breath, he pulled away and walked
down the hallway. He grabbed his composition journal and meandered into Steve’s room.

Bucky was searching through the drawer Steve told him held his extra pens when he spotted Steve’s drawing pad lying on the desk. Unreasonably curious and always appreciative of Steve’s art, Bucky found himself flipping through. There were multiple New York skylines charcoaled from the viewpoint of their roof; scenery still Steve’s preference. Bucky paused when he found the picture Steve had labeled ‘Sergeant Barnes’. It was Bucky in his uniform, crisp and ageless as the day he first shipped out. Bucky stared at it for an inordinately long time, wishing to be taken back to that time and innocence. When Bucky finally flipped to the next page his breath caught again. Entitled ‘Modern Bucky’ the picture was the current him—long haired and scruffy and wearing a half-smile that no longer seemed out of place. Bucky stared at the picture, wondering if it was how Steve saw him. The longer Bucky stared, the more he saw himself as the picture, the more he thought maybe he was as okay as Steve believed. He was joking, he was laughing, he was teasing and smiling; he was healing. He wouldn’t be Sergeant Barnes again, he knew, but maybe this Bucky—this modern Bucky—was okay too. With a shuddering breath he set the pad down and grabbed a pen, escaping to the roof above. Steve had art but Bucky loved the written word. Prose and poetry and everything in between filled three pages before Bucky finally went into his green house to check his plants. He turned from where he was watering them when he heard the green house door open; Hermione had sought him out.

“How are you doing?” She greeted softly.

“Good. Good.” Bucky responded, peering around at the space and feeling oddly vulnerable. “I, uh, I think I grew some vegetables.” Bucky commented, lifting a basket of cucumbers and tomatoes he had collected off the vine.

“Wow! These look amazing.” Hermione admired as she entered his space to inspect the harvest. “I’m glad that I gave you this green house after all…certainly seems to be benefiting from use.” Bucky flushed at the comment, knowing that it had begun to look nearly overrun from the various greens he had planted.

“I appreciate it.” Bucky said sincerely and Hermione hummed in agreement. The silence that followed was not awkward yet somehow it left Bucky unfulfilled. “I—it’s nice to have something actually be created from these hands instead of destroyed.” Bucky admitted and Hermione smiled in understanding.

“You’ve come along way, Bucky.” She observed and Bucky agreed—he knew that it was true because he felt immensely better with each new day. Hermione took a deep breath. “I actually came up here to talk to you about it.” Hermione said, stepping back through the threshold so Bucky could follow. They stood in the shadow of the bell tower where Steve’s punching bag still hung.

“What is it?” Bucky asked, a small degree of trepidation lingering in his chest. Her smile seemed mixed and Bucky couldn’t interpret it.

“September…I think we’ll be able to remove your triggers in September.” Hermione informed him and Bucky felt every nerve ending jumping with electricity.

“What?” Bucky asked slow and confused.

“Your healing is at the point where you have your memories…but you also have come to peace with a lot of the more volatile memories. Now your mind can handle the stress of my removal of your triggers.” Hermione elaborated.

“September is barely over a week away.” Bucky realized flabbergasted. Hermione nodded.
"You've progressed well...I think in large part Steve’s grounding presence has helped that.”
Hermione commented and Bucky exhaled a long and controlled breath. He thought long and hard about the implications of the sudden date. He was happy to progress, anxious about the procedure, and secretly concerned that Hermione was just desperate to rid herself of the men who had run amok in her house.

"You know Steve is the most stalwart and true guy I know.” Bucky commented, remembering the way Hermione had begun to skirt around him. "You should've seen him back in the day.” Bucky continued wistfully. “He was 5'7” and 110 pounds. I kept trying to get a girl to look at him and each and every single one ignored him.” Hermione was listening attentively. “They couldn’t see what I saw until he suddenly matched the image.” Bucky admitted ruefully.

"And what do you see now?” Hermione asked, her eyes peering deeply into his—searching.

"The same thing I always saw,” Bucky realized. “I still see a scrawny kid from Brooklyn, a real bull-headed idiot who is far too stupid to ever do anything less than what he things is right.”

"Yeah.” Hermione agreed fondly. “I have that feeling about him too.” She was smiling off into the distance and Bucky felt an ache in his chest. At least he found one girl to look at him.

"The best guy I've ever met,” Bucky continued. “And you're the best girl I've ever met. Tell me what’s so wrong about that combination?” Hermione looked startled at the comment, her mouth gaping for a second before something flashed across her face. Bucky thought it looked like terror and shame, leaving Bucky feeling uneasy and guilty. The moment passed quickly and only annoyance remained visibly.

“I'm not entertaining this conversation with you, too.” Hermione grumbled angrily standing and moving in such a way that her irritation was apparent but confirming what Bucky had suspected; Steve had talked with Hermione about dating or something romantic.

"Tell me you have no interest in him and I'll leave it alone.” Bucky added quickly, knowing that Hermione might deceive or conceal truths but would be hard pressed to outright lie.

"That's not the point.” Hermione ground out uneasily.

"What is?” Bucky asked patiently. Hermione had crossed her arms and begun to shift awkwardly from one foot to the next.

"Is there a reason that both of you have decided to hit on me for each other?” Hermione asked petulantly and Bucky took the moment to realize that Steve wasn’t pursuing Hermione for himself but rather for Bucky. The moment of contemplation cost Bucky as Hermione began to hastily begin her retreat.

"Hermione!” Bucky followed, catching her before she disappeared down the stairs. “I get that you have reasons—reasons that for some reason you don’t want to elaborate on—but at the least I’m just asking that you act natural.” Hermione had turned to stare at him skeptically.

"Bucky that’s not—” Hermione began uneasily.

"Steve and I will stop insinuating anything; we won’t try to force our opinions on you but I know that you’ve ignored things that feel right because you think you shouldn’t. Steve and I—we aren’t going to take advantage of you.” Bucky expressed as sincerely as he could.

“I’m not concerned that you’ll take advantage of me...” Hermione admitted significantly as she crossed her arms and seemed to curl into herself.
“Hermione, we’re two genetically engineered super soldiers—I think you can be confident that we’ll let you know if we aren’t comfortable with anything you’re doing.” Bucky teased lightly, frowning when Hermione still looked torn. “Hermione, come here please.” Bucky requested as he opened his arms for a hug. He watched the indecision flicker across her face before she entered his embrace tentatively. When Bucky closed his arms around her, she wove hers around his waist. “Won’t you read with me again?” Bucky asked, smiling when he felt her nod into his chest, hair tickling his neck.

“Ok.” She confirmed in a small voice.

“All I ask is that you do what makes you happy.” Bucky whispered, resting his chin atop her head and weaving his hand to rest at base of her neck. She squeezed him tighter.

“Ok, Bucky.” She agreed, her voice muffled into his clothing. He held her for a moment longer, happy to feel like her mind had begun to still.

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The next day, Bucky was left alone while Hermione and Steve worked. He hadn’t gotten a chance to talk with Steve yet, but he was already sanguine, confident that he had resolved the unnecessary tension that had lingered in the house. It was with this mentality that Bucky went about his daily routine, gathering more of his growing vegetables and bringing them down for later consumption. Bucky had just come down from the garden when he spotted the fridge door open. Frowning, he closed the open door, miffed at the waste of energy.

“You have a metal arm?!” A small voice exclaimed and Bucky jumped back in surprise as a small child darted forward to grab him. “Cooooool!” The voice called. Bucky backed up as the child advanced.

“Who are you?!” Bucky demanded, flustered. The boy giggled, advancing even as Bucky wound around and behind furniture.

“Piggy back! Piggy back!” The boy continued and Bucky wondered how the hell this child had managed to break Hermione’s wards.

“Hermione?!” Bucky called. “Steve?!” Because surely there was a reason this little gremlin was chasing him through the atrium with the intent to bum a ride on an ex-assassin’s super soldier back. “Hermione!” Bucky called desperately again as he opened a random door and ducked inside. It was the hallway bathroom.

“Auntie Mi! Auntie Mi!” The boy giggled as he slammed on the bathroom door. Bucky sat on the closed toilet, eyeing the small fingers that had begun to wedge themselves beneath the door.

“Who are you?!” Bucky asked again but the child only giggled louder in response.

“James?!” Bucky recognized Hermione’s frantic voice on the other side of the door.

“Hermione?” Bucky asked wondering why Hermione was calling him by his first name.

“James, what happened?! What’s wrong?!” Hermione asked panic still edging into her tone. The hands disappeared from under the door and Bucky decided to try and escape.

“Clearly, there is a child who has beat your security defen—“

“Not you, Bucky; I mean James Potter—my godson.” Hermione chastised. She was kneeling next to James—the child—and asking him questions. “Is your father okay? Did he send you here? What did
he say?” Hermione looked uneasy as she gripped her wand steadfast. She glanced up at Bucky who was still lingering in the threshold. “I need to check on Harry. James wouldn’t be here unless there was an emergency.” Bucky tensed at her determination.

“No! No! Auntie Mi! I haven’t seen you in forever!” James protested. Hermione glanced at James, placing her hands on his shoulders before her eyes swirled amber. She exhaled, head dipping in relief.

“James, did your dad take you to work?” Hermione asked and the child nodded. “Did you jump into the floo when he wasn’t looking?” Hermione asked. The child toed the ground bashfully and Hermione laughed in relief. “Merlin, Harry’s in trouble—so are you, young man. You know better than to disappear on your father.” Hermione reprimanded. James pouted. Hermione looked back to Bucky. “Can you watch him? I need to get Harry before he has a heart attack.”

“Wha—I’m not—I’m not exactly the safest option!” Bucky sputtered in disbelief.

“Yes. Bucky Barnes: a man so dangerous that I found him cowering in the bathroom from a five-year-old.” Hermione said as she rolled her eyes. Bucky was still sputtering a response when she left him. Bucky looked down uneasily at the little boy who smiled up beatifically. Bucky didn’t trust it. When the boy took off running again, Bucky was pleased to know his instincts weren’t wrong.

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“James Sirius Potter.” Harry thundered as he stepped out of the hallway. James cowered behind Bucky at the sight of his father. “You come here right now.” Harry demanded. James shook his head, clutching on to Bucky’s pants and hiding his face in his leg. James, like Crookshanks, did not seem to care that Bucky had murdered people—or that he preferred innocent beings to stay away from his personal circle of death. James, like Crookshanks, was very difficult to deny.

“You have to the count of three or I will call your mum.” Harry upped the ante. Immediately, James ducked out and ran directly to his father. Harry pulled his son up into his arms. “You can’t do this again, James. The floo to Auntie Mi’s is for emergencies and special occasions only.” Harry reprimanded softer.

“It was! Auntie Mi missed dinner!” James pouted. Harry gave Hermione a reproachful look.

“She did. But she will be at the next one.” Harry clarified.

“Promise?” James looked at Hermione with wide eyes and Hermione smiled slightly.

“Promise.” Hermione confirmed.

“And metal?” James asked. Hermione glanced in Bucky’s direction hesitantly.

“…Metal…has a cold…so he won’t be able to make it this time.” Hermione answered.

“Are you okay?” James asked Bucky. Bucky melted a little at his concern; the little kid had already endeared himself to Bucky ages ago.

“I’ll be fine, buddy.” Bucky answered. James squiggled out of his father’s arms, Harry letting his son down reluctantly. James launched himself at Bucky who patted him awkwardly on the back. He mouthed ‘help me’ at Harry and Hermione, causing Hermione to laugh and Harry to smother his own chuckle.

“Alright, little marauder, it’s time to go back with dad.” Hermione called and James pulled back.
Bucky was not quick enough to stop the child from sticking something on his metal arm.

“That’ll help you feel better.” James proudly informed Bucky. Harry and Hermione were clearly containing their laughter as James made his way back to them. They said their goodbyes and disappeared down the hall. Bucky and Hermione stood in silence, eyeing the hallway they had departed.

“I like your My Little Pony sticker.” Hermione commented smugly. Bucky peeked at the sticker on his forearm. It was, indeed, a little pony. It also sparkled neon pink.

“Well if you like it so much, I’ll make sure to keep it.” Bucky commented sarcastically. Hermione shot him a look so mischievous it caused the hair on Bucky’s neck to bristle.

“I’ll help!” Hermione offered with a laugh. Her wand appeared and disappeared before his eyes and Bucky looked back at his sticker. He had a feeling it would not be coming off until she deemed it so. He was nonetheless pleased, however, by her genuine laughter—no longer holding the tinge of tension. It sounded like bells of happiness in his ears.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: This chapter turned out a lot more different than was originally intended—mostly because people had such interesting suggestions that ended up causing me to restructure the next few chapters. I also wanted to start moving away from the angst and back to the fluff—so I made some changes.

As for the inspiration to some of the changes: way back in chapter 8, taylormarierome wanted some James Potter & Bucky friendship and I thought—yeah, sure, ok! Margareitha Malfoy-Nott wanted some flashbacks so I’ll be playing with that concept as well. I had a bunch of other suggestions and ideas that I’ll be working into the story in the future—but I don’t like to give anything away until it’s published. If you want to contribute, feel free to send me your thoughts.

The poem featured is “Her Face” by Arthur Gorges.

Thanks again for all your reviews!
Hermione flicked away the soot and ash with a practiced hand.

“Auntie Mi, Auntie Mi!” James shouted before launching himself into Hermione’s arms. She caught him with an ‘oomph’.

“Let her breathe, James.” Ginny called from the door. James relaxed his hold reluctantly so Hermione could kiss Ginny’s cheek. “How are you, hmm?” Ginny said with an insinuating smirk. Hermione shoved her shoulder lightly.

“Not even a minute before you ask.” Hermione teased back, ignoring the slight flush to her cheeks.

“Hermione?” Harry called from the other room. He was beaming at her. “You look great!” He said, pecking her on the cheek as well.

“Is that Hermione?” A loud voice bellowed from the dining room. Harry and Hermione rolled their eyes in unison, disappearing further into the house where the cacophony was located.

“Hermione!” The table shouted in unison before everyone stood and passed Hermione around for hugs and kisses.

“Oh, sit, Hermione! We were just about to start!” Mrs. Weasley ordered pushing Hermione into the only vacant chair.

“Auntie Mi, where is metal?” James asked as Hermione sat down. Hermione gave him a sympathetic look.

“I’m sorry, James. I told you metal would still be sick. He couldn’t make it today.” Hermione apologized.

“But I gave him a sticker.” James reiterated, confused, as if stickers made everything better.

“And he loves it.” Hermione mollified. “He still wears it.”
“Then I’ll give him another!” James determined, reaching into his pockets to pull out a lightening-shaped sticker. “This one is like dad’s scar so I know he’ll get better.” James told her imperiously Hermione took the sticker with no small amount of amusement, meeting Harry’s eyes before he rolled them.

“I’m sure he’ll be well soon, sweetheart.” Hermione placated and James nodded before running back over to the kids’ table.

“Bout time.” Ron added with a snort from his place down the table.

“Oh? What’s this, little brother?” Charlie asked, entering the conversation with a sly smile. Ron sniffed with disdain in a way that faintly resembled Percy.

“Hermione is living with two male patients who are so close to her they literally sleep in her bed!” Ron tattled. Hermione flushed at the looks of the people who overheard, mentally thankful that Molly had not.

“What’s this?” Lavender added as she leaned in from the one side of Ron.

“Oh, congratulations, Hermione!” Pravati added from his other side. “I hope they’re nice!”

“They’re actually wonderful—I’ve met them.” Ginny added helpfully, causing Harry and Ron both to share mirrored faces of disgust.

“The point is not that they’re good people, I think they’re good people, too. But the last time Hermione lo—“ Harry began to complain, pausing when Ginny kicked him under the table.

“I’m right here!” Hermione complained. “I can hear literally everything you are saying.” She pouted. Ginny shot her a sympathetic look.

“We’re just worried at the potential—like the last time.” Harry elaborated, rubbing his shin. Bill and Charlie had also apparently caught wind of the conversation as they shared a significant look that Hermione caught.

“Harry, I get that you’re concerned…” Bill began. “But Hermione is a big girl. She’s allowed to make her own choices for reasons that we may or may not understand.” Bill reprimanded and Hermione flashed him a grateful look.

“For reasons you may or may not agree with.” Charlie added and Hermione favored him with a smile.

“I’m trying to protect her.” Harry added with irritation, stabbing his food with a force that Hermione would’ve found more suited by Ron.

“And maybe that’s the problem.” Charlie continued reproachfully. “You should focus less on the protecting her and more on supporting her.” Charlie flashed a smile back at Hermione and her heart soared with his words.

“We’ll be here if you need us.” Bill added and Charlie nodded. Ron looked like he was swallowing nasty comments, probably contained by the calming presence of his wives who always seemed to temper him. Harry looked reluctantly thoughtful.

“Besides, that guy was always a bit of an arsehole.” Charlie commented with an afterthought.

“Here, here!” Ron said with a laugh as Hermione frowned and rolled her eyes causing the others to
“That last bit aside—thank you.” Hermione said to Bill and Charlie sincerely.

“Of course, Hermione. You’re like our little sister. You deserve the moon and stars for everything you’ve done for so many people.” Bill affirmed. Bill and Charlie had both grown remarkable close to her in the aftermath of the war, so much so that she viewed them truly like older brothers.

“You won’t reprimand me?” Hermione asked in a small voice. Her head bowed, she still noticed Harry frown from the corner of her eye.

“For what? For feeling? Compassion is a key component of your job. I love dragons, Hermione. That’s why I do what I do. And sometimes they burn me, sometimes they scratch me, and there is always the possibility that one day they might kill me. But it’s a risk I take knowingly every day because I can’t imagine a life without them.” Charlie explained and Hermione wondered about the phrasing of his sentence—wondered if he suspected more than he was letting on.

“I supported this first!” Ginny interjected and Hermione laughed. “They’re very fit—definitely the type to keep Hermione on her toes!”

“Ginny!” Ron flushed as Lavender and Pravati snickered beside him.

“How do you feel about them—aside from physique?” Bill asked, ignoring Ginny’s comment. Hermione smiled sadly.

“I feel far too much for them, I’m afraid.” Hermione admitted. Bill made a small noise of comprehension.

“What about them? How do they feel for you?” Charlie asked, staring at her intently.

“I haven’t looked—I can’t—I wouldn’t.” Hermione defended, because she certainly wouldn’t use her powers for as selfish of a reason as her own peace and security. “They…they were trying to set me up with each other for a bit.” Hermione explained with uncertainty. Bill and Charlie echoed her confused look.

“Don’t they like you?” Charlie asked with a glance towards Ginny.

“They both like her,” Ginny confirmed as Hermione flushed.

“They both like her,” Ginny confirmed as Hermione flushed.

“Then why…” Bill trailed off.

“I don’t know.” Hermione admitted with frustration. “I eventually cornered one and told him to knock it off. He said that I shouldn’t limit myself and should just ‘act naturally’.” Hermione scoffed.

“Don’t they know about triads?” Pravati asked in surprise, confirming that everyone was still invested in Hermione’s conversation about her maybe-love life.

“No—they don’t. It’s not something really done in the muggle world—you can’t even legally marry. Besides the whole point is that they’re still patients and as much as I hate how overprotective Harry has become I agree that I can’t take them seriously until after they’re done healing.” Hermione finished, attempting to resolve herself.

“When will that be?” Charlie wondered aloud. Hermione tweaked her mouth to the side in contemplation.
“Bucky…Bucky I’m taking care of his implanted triggers in the next few weeks. Steve is…Steve is also receiving healing but has been staying for Bucky and they will no doubt both require some work after the triggers are removed.” Hermione determined.


“Well,” Hermione started, “from what I can tell Bucky and Steve are completely muggle and the damage was done by muggles but they still seem to have some sort of magical residue. I’ve theorized it is the result from their extenuating circumstances, but it is nothing that I’ve previously seen or have even heard about. I’m wondering if it is residue from a magical object of some sort.”


“Well they were both frozen for long periods of time and had a super soldier serum added into their DNA.” Hermione clarified. Charlie’s jaw dropped in shock.

“Wait a second—is one of them Captain America?!” Charlie exclaimed and the listening group jumped a little in shock.

“What? Do you know him?” Hermione asked.

“He just did a raid in the village closest to the reserve! He’s famous! He’s a muggle hero.” Charlie explained, causing the others at the table to look at him strangely. As much as Hermione tried, the group rarely interacted with any muggle culture.

“I didn’t realize you knew…” Hermione trailed off.

“This is hilarious!” Charlie said with a laugh. “One world’s superhero is interacting with another world’s super hero. You know, Harry, some might say he should also be called ‘the-boy-who-lived’.” Charlie added causing Harry to frown.

“Super heroes?” Harry asked in disbelief.

“Steve is part of the group that is actually directly responsible for saving New York from the aliens.” Hermione added hesitantly. Harry and Ron’s mouth dropped open in shock, as their wives giggled.

“Bloody hell…” Ron whispered.

“So you two were arseholes to the saviors of the world?” Charlie asked with another disbelieving laugh.

“What? Like it’s hard?” Harry pouted as he crossed his arms over his chest. Ginny smacked him across the back of the head. “Ow!” He exclaimed. Ginny’s frown flipped into a beaming smile when she turned to Hermione

“Well! Good for you Hermione. You’re doing fine if a hero is one of the boys you’ve taken in.” Ginny approved.

“So you think his uniqueness is why you could hear him?” Bill asked returning to the topic. Hermione looked up in contemplation.

“I suppose. Muggles, in general, are fairly easy to tune out, so to speak, but Bucky and Steve—they have such loud tones; I couldn’t help my desire to heal them.” Hermione explained.
“The magical residue is strange.” Bill said, shifting backwards to lean easily against the chair’s back rest in contemplation.

“Tell me about it.” Hermione confirmed. “I don’t have any inclination that either of them are particularly innocent—they both did fight in World War 2—but they just called to me over the white noise and my protections and it was just…” Hermione trailed off unsure how she could describe them.

“Have you encountered anything like this before?” Bill asked. Hermione shook her head.

“They’re the only two muggles who I’ve heard above the white noise. They didn’t resonate quite like magical beings—but they were still significant in my mind.” Hermione concluded.

“Muggles don’t register?” Lavender asked questioningly. Hermione shook her head.

“No—they do. When I first started hearing passive legilimency, I was overwhelmed by what I heard. Eventually I learned how to protect myself but I still found that magic sings louder in my mind to the point that I still can’t actively block magical agony completely.” Hermione clarified. “But enough about my love life—I want to hear about what’s happening in your lives!” Hermione began changing the subject. "Tell me, Ginny—what happened when you found out James floo’d to my house?” Harry paled at the question, causing Hermione to laugh as Ginny began to furiously explain the situation. Staring at the redhead regaling the story to the amusement of the table, Hermione briefly recalled a redheaded muggle woman who had had a different unique tone so many years ago. Ginny said Hermione’s name aloud causing her to switch her focus back to the story, the memory returning back to the storage of her mind.

When the night got later in England, it approached evening hours in New York. With a glance at her watch, Hermione stood and made her round of goodbyes, lingering in their embraces with promises of regularity once again. Harry asked if she wanted to take a quick walk indicating he had a desire to talk. Hermione waited patiently as Harry shuffled restlessly. He turned suddenly as if he had been inspired with courage.

“I’m sorry about how I’ve been treating you.” Harry rushed out and Hermione blinked. She had been expecting more berating instead of apologizing. “I know that you’re grown up and usually it’s you looking out for all of us but you have to understand that I’m just—I just want—“ Harry sighed, running a hand through his messy hair in frustration. “You have to understand,” Harry tried again. “When I found you after…when I saw you passed out—when I thought—“ Harry’s face crumpled a little and Hermione swept him into her arms. He had grown taller than her several years after the war but was still fairly normal in height. He rested his head on Hermione’s shoulder.

“Harry, if a basilisk, a Bellatrix, and a barking nose-less loon can’t kill me, I’m certainly not going to kill myself.” Hermione placated, the main point of contention finally being addressed. “I wouldn’t go back to getting addicted to dreamless sleep, either.” Hermione assured him as she rubbed soothing circles on his back before bringing glowing hands to his temple. Harry took a shuddering breath.

“Then I will support whatever you do.” Harry determined as he brought his head back to stare at her sincerely. Hermione smiled.

“Good.” Hermione approved. “Though I haven’t the faintest idea what I should do.” Hermione admitted. Harry’s face began to relax again, the adrenaline leaving his body so he looked more worn than usual.

“Well, what do you want to do?” Harry asked and Hermione laughed.
“Snog the daylights out of both of them.” Hermione said with a grin as Harry chuckled.

“Well do that.” Harry suggested and Hermione sputtered.

“Absolutely not!” Hermione shrieked shrilly. Harry outright laughed.

“Not yet, maybe.” Harry teased and Hermione swung feigned blows into his shoulder as he half-heartedly batted her hands away.

“Assault!” Harry jokingly cried. “Assault on an auror of the law!” Harry said again and suddenly Hermione was laughing like Harry hadn’t been an arsehole for the past month or so—their equilibrium returning. Their shared humor eventually died down as they turned their walk around to head towards the house.

“So he’s a hero, then?” Harry eventually asked.

“Yup.” Hermione answered breezily.

“More famous than Harry Potter?” Harry asked jokingly.

“Certainly a bigger fan following.” Hermione said with an impish grin and Harry scoffed.

“He can have mine.” Harry said darkly and Hermione laughed. “And the other one?” He asked, causing Hermione to frown.

“Bucky is more complicated.” Hermione elaborated. “He was a hero out of loyalty to Steve—“

“Sounds familiar.” Harry said as he bumped shoulders with Hermione. She favored him with an indulgent smile before continuing.

“Unfortunately, he was captured and under mind control—bad things happened against his control and you know how people are when they come out of the imperio.” Hermione said. Harry frowned as he nodded.

“Well I don’t question you’re doing right by them.” Harry conceded as they arrived at another door to the Burrow. He swept her into a hug in front of the second fireplace. “I’m sorry again for how I behaved. Ginny, Charlie, and Bill were all right and from now on I’ll support whatever makes you happy.” Hermione stepped back from his embrace.

“What about Ron?” Hermione asked curiously and Harry shrugged.

“With his wives and kids, I doubt it will take too long to get him on your side.” Harry theorized and Hermione smiled.


“Love you, too. Bye!” With a toss of floo powder and an uttered destination, Hermione was home.

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Her parents were both loving and welcoming, but they did not serve to distract her in the same way the Weasley family could. Hermione yearned to spend time with the boys, especially having spent the last night in the UK. Both boys had seemed off put by her absence, neither sleeping while she
had been gone despite the twilight hours. She was glad that Sam was stopping by to keep them company; she had been concerned he couldn’t make it when she had rescheduled her family night with her parents.

Hermione discreetly stepped outside to call Sam and inquire about the boys. Sam had said only positive things that put Hermione at ease as she hung up.

“Darling you seem fairly concerned for your cats. Are they okay?” Hermione’s mum murmured sympathetically as she approached her from behind. Hermione turned around to look at her.

“They’re fine. My friend is taking caring of them; they just don’t like to be left alone for too long.” Hermione waved off her mother’s concern.

“Uh huh.” Her mum said as she continued to walk over to Hermione. “And do your cats have long dark hair and short blonde hair as fine as a human’s?” She asked, brushing Hermione’s shoulders and picking up a brunette strand of hair. Hermione stiffened.

Shit.

“Sweetheart,” her mother continued. “When you said you had picked up strays, I assumed that they were cats—not men.” Her mother teased, patting Hermione on the sides of her arms.

“How do you know they’re men?” Hermione asked mulishly and her mum flashed her an amused glance.

“Because they have you in an utter tizzy as only men are wont to do.” Her mother responded. Hermione sighed deeply. Her mother was observant, clever, and dead-on.

“They’re just roommates, mum.” Hermione defended ineffectually.

 Uh huh. I see. Roommates who comforted you when you were out of sorts from your nightmare? Roommates who have all but cured you of your nightmares?” Her mother glanced at her significantly.

“Mum…they’re just…” Hermione gestured with her hands as she grasped for an appropriate description.

“Honey, I’m not going to judge.” Her mother chastised. “Your world is filled with things I’ll never understand. But this? I think I can manage, just fine.” Hermione flushed.

“Mum, it’s not—”

“Hush.” Her mother commanded. “Your father has a particularly gripping story about orthodontic-related decalcification and a root canal; he’s been saving the story all week and we shan’t deny him his chance to tell it.” Her mother said, changing the subject abruptly. Hermione was still pink in the cheek as she allowed her mother to lead her back inside to where her father indeed looked antsy to regale a tale.

By the end of the night, Hermione was feeling pleasantly replenished. Every dinner, Hermione felt like her relationship with her parents was more and more repaired and deepened. It was especially comforting to know that her mother would support her unconventional life style if that was what it became.

Upbeat and enjoying the cool night that promised approaching fall days, Hermione strolled out the front door determined to enjoy the walk to a secondary apparition point she had created for this
A voice whispered, soft, female, and unfamiliar. The word was Russian and Hermione recognized it immediately, willing herself not to twitch. Witch. “Znakarka.” The voice continued and this word Hermione only recognized from her brief trip to see Serafina. Healer. Before Hermione could demand the voice to step forward, a red-haired woman emerged from the shadows to stand in the light. “What are you doing here?” She asked in unaccented English. The words registered but Hermione could only gape. There before her was the young woman Hermione had met in Russia. More miraculous than that, Hermione realized, was that the small, timid voice Hermione encountered only once several years ago, was suddenly crying openly and as sad as the sound was, Hermione was pleased she was willing to express it at last.

“You’ve grown.” Hermione said finally with deep emotion, feeling an immense amount of pride for the female before her. “What are you doing here?” Hermione asked in return. The redhead looked as mystified as Hermione felt.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

Bucky reflecting light into Sam’s eyes, smirking as his eyebrows twitched with irritation.

“Will you cut that out?” Sam ground out irritably. Bucky shrugged with feigned nonchalance.

“I can’t help it if my arm is metal.” Bucky said indifferently. Steve glared at him but Bucky only stared impassively back.

“Come in, Sam.” Steve offered as he allowed Sam to fully enter the home. He was caring boxes from the same bakery Hermione favored. “Kowalski Bakery? What did you get?” Steve asked as they walked into the kitchen. Bucky followed them reluctantly, more uneasy with Sam than Sam apparently was of Bucky.

“Everything.” Sam said proudly. “Ever since that pie, I’ve been hooked.” Steve passed Sam a plate. “They have some really, really good pastries.” Sam demonstrated by pulling out his haul.

“Sam, why do you have this?” Steve asked, raising an eyebrow at a chocolate tulip of chocolate mousse.

“What? I can’t have an éclair without criticism? I ran my laps—I earned them. Here, you’re welcome to them too. Bucky hesitantly picked up an éclair.

“That’s not my name, Pidgeon.” Bucky said darkly before taking a bite. Instantly his mouth was alive with flavor. Fuck. It was really good. Steve laughed at his expression.

“Bucky’s always had a sweet tooth!” Steve claimed and Bucky suppressed his annoyance at Sam’s smugness.

“You can have Steve’s share.” Sam offered gregariously. Out of pettiness, Bucky wanted to refuse but instead he settled for petulantly grabbing three more treats.

They were also extremely good.
“So tell me more about when you two were younger.”

Bucky attempted to contain his laugh as Steve attempted to convince Sam that their elementary school had a literal bear for their mascot.

“Absolutely not.” Sam determined. “You couldn’t have—that’s not—You’re lying.” Sam decided and Bucky and Steve both dissolved into laughter.

“Okay that one wasn’t real.” Steve admitted, hunched over and gripping his sides in laughter. Buck wasn’t faring better as he felt his own side ache from guffawing at Sam’s confusion. “But the parachute jump at Coney Island was real.” Steve admitted. Sam looked at him askance.

“It’s true, bird-brain.” Bucky agreed, petulantly adding his taunt in retaliation for Sam’s designated nickname for him.

“Bucky has a picture in his room.” Steve said. Bucky rolled his eyes at the unspoken request before rising and roughly gesturing them to follow him. He opened the door, suddenly embarrassed by his messy room, overflowing with random items.

“Woah what’s with the packaging? You getting a head start on Christmas shopping?” Sam asked with lifted brows.

“…Hermione encouraged me to buy my own things since I can’t leave the house.” Bucky answered reluctantly as he stepped in to his room. His desk was cleared but for a few pictures he had received during Steve’s birthday as well as a few sketches Steve had drawn—including one of Hermione. He felt awkward knowing Sam could see them, but Bucky made no effort to hide them as he looked around for a specific picture.

“How did you get a bank account set up…magic?” Sam asked, inspecting all the various paraphernalia.

“Hermione got it set up for him.” Steve commented. “I keep trying to input money but it keeps rejecting it. What bank rejects deposits?”

“Hermione probably blocked it.” Sam waved him off. “Or magic? Man, Toto, I’m sure Christmas will be interesting when you do start shopping for gifts.” Bucky snorted.

“Yeah, I’ll be buying Hermione a gift with her own money. Very original, very festive.” Bucky deadpanned, more apparently bitter than he would have liked to show. Sam sat on Bucky’s made bed—Bucky did keep some tidiness.

“Well why don’t you make her something?” Sam asked easily enough when he glanced at Steve’s drawings.

“They didn’t exactly program me with arts & crafts.” Bucky ground out. He was sensitive to the fact that he couldn’t really gift Hermione with anything as personable as Steve’s drawings.

“Woah, Buck.” Steve flashed him a disapproving look. But Bucky ignored him, opening a drawer to pull out the box of letters and pictures Hermione had given him.

“This is all online purchases, right? Why don’t you just google something to make—girls love that handmade stuff.” Sam asked as he gestured to the computer.

“Google?” Bucky asked, turning to look at Sam with confusion. Sam’s face blanked before looking
at him in blatant shock.

“What? You’ve been shopping online but you don’t know how to google anything? Even Steve knows how to google.” He exclaimed.

“What do you google, Steve?” Bucky asked, slightly embarrassed that he didn’t know.

“Ah…weather? Usually?” Steve winced in thought.

“That’s it!? No! Steve. The world is at your fingertips and your googling weather?” Sam ran his hands over his head in frustration. “Unacceptable. I’m using your laptop.” Sam switched chairs so he could use the laptop. Bucky did not even deny him, instead he peered over his shoulder, curious to what he was doing.

“The internet is a wonderful thing.” Sam began, clicking around familiar screens that Bucky recognized until he didn’t. “Here look. Google. Just type in something to search for. ‘DIY gifts for her.’”

“DIY?” Bucky repeated in question.

“Do it yourself. Here. It’ll teach you how to knit scarves, write a song, leather crafting? Draw on a mug. That’s cute.” Sam commented, moving quickly but slowly enough that Bucky followed with ease.

“What is this?” Bucky asked in awe, looking at pictures of so many different crafts with directions and instructions.

“This is Pinterest.” Sam said returning to the homepage of the site.

“Pinterest?” Bucky asked again, sitting down on the bed so he was eye level with the monitor.

“Yea. Here, look. Just check it out.” Sam said, shifting his chair to the side so Bucky could get a little more hands on.

“There’s everything!” Bucky continued, enamored with the site. There were recipes, electronics, world travel—there was everything he ever wanted to see and more.

“Exactly, you just have to look for it.” Sam agreed. Sam sat with Bucky going over various internet tips, tricks, and explanations that Bucky barely registered when Steve left the room, leaving Bucky and Sam alone for the first time. When his back started to ache from his position, Bucky stood and stretched. Sam followed. Bucky stopped stretching to regard him.

“Wilson,” Bucky began by addressing him properly. “…thank you for covering Steve’s back when I’m out of commission.” Bucky said quietly, knowing that much of Bucky’s unease around Sam had been jealously and fear. Sam’s eyes twisted up with the hint of a smile.

“Hey, it’s no problem.” Sam said, shifting in a way that made his body language more open.

“It kills me not to still be out there following him but I’m—I can’t just—I’m too—“ Bucky admitted tense and frustrated.

“Hey, Barnes,” Sam began to placate. “He’s always got a bunch of us following him and watching his six. His dumbass is probably too stupid to even realize he needs it covered.” Sam said with a laugh. Bucky contributed a knowing chuckle of agreement.
“Call me Bucky.” Bucky decided suddenly and Sam nodded meaningfully.

“Call me Sam.” Sam returned and Bucky nodded decidedly as well. Anyone who took care of Steve like Sam did was a good guy in Bucky’s book. Remembering the purpose for entering his room in the first place, Bucky reached back to his bed and handed him a picture. Bucky and Steve were standing in front of the Parachute Jumps tower at its original location for the New York World’s fair. Sam whistled as he inspected the picture. “Cap really was a twig of a kid.” Sam commented. Bucky laughed.

“Still had the same attitude, though. He got out of my eyesight for five minutes and he was already in a scrap in the back alley.” Bucky recalled fondly. “I couldn’t take him anywhere.” Sam laughed and Bucky felt a little better inside. He wasn’t losing his best friend to Sam and Sam…was a far better ally than enemy.

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Bucky was far too distracted by whatever internet nonsense Sam had showed him to notice when Steve went back to the kitchen to grab a beer. Sam emerged from Bucky’s room a while later.

“Bucky?” Steve asked as Sam grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“Still captivated.” Sam said with a smirk. “He’s alright.” Steve stared at Sam in shock.

“What did you do?” Steve asked in amazement. Bucky and Sam had been at each other’s throats all night.

“Bonded over commonality.” Sam said succinctly as he drank his beer. “How are you and Penny? You were hanging around Avenger tower for a while” Steve sighed and winced.

“Hermione and I had a disagreement and I thought it prudent to avoid her.” Steve admitted, rubbing the back of neck nervously. Sam leveled him with his gaze.

“What did you do?”

“I…was trying to hook her up with Bucky.” Steve answered with a grimace.

“You what?!” Sam exclaimed, nearly spit-taking his beer.

“Bucky and I have never fought over a woman and I’m not about to start now!” Steve defended himself. Needless to say, Steve had never been in a position for that to even be an option—but the point remained!

“So what happened?” Sam asked.

“Apparently Bucky was doing the same for me.” Sam laughed loudly.

“You two…is this some old gentleman and chivalry thing?” Sam asked rhetorically. Steve frowned.

“I think it’s a Bucky and Steve thing.” Steve said. “Thankfully he convinced her to just carry on as normal so it’s been far more relaxed.”

“Hmm.” Sam murmured, sipping his beer as he inspected Steve. “You two could both date her; you obviously have no problem with the other one succeeding.” Steve gave him a look.

“What would the Avengers say about that?” Steve asked, already know what some of her friends would say.
“Would you care?” Sam asked in surprise.


“Well I wouldn’t care. Stark would probably hold it over your head and be jealous. Banner problem wouldn’t even notice. Clint would probably be supportive, and Natasha…I don’t know, I can never read her.” Sam said with a shudder. Steve sighed though he largely agreed with Sam’s observations.

“I mean, I’m just glad that Nat hasn’t been pushing as much as I thought she would.” Steve said casually as he drained his bottle.

Sam paused to give Steve a look.

“Are you serious?” He asked.

“What?” Steve wondered.

“Wow. You are serious.” Sam realized, jaw dropping and face looking slightly ill.

“What do you mean, Sam?” Steve asked darkly in concern.

“You know that Nat, Clint, and Tony have all been trying to follow you home? They’re probably camped out somewhere on this block trying to figure out how one second they’ll see you and the next they won’t.” Sam revealed.

“What?!"

“Yea. Whatever Penny did makes it so anyone leaving the house doesn’t appear to society again until some—I don’t know time or distance. Now that they have it narrowed down to a three block radius, they’ve started taking bets. I thought you knew.” Sam whispered.

“You didn’t think to tell me about this sooner?” Steve chastised with sudden anxiety. If they broadsided Hermione…

“I thought you knew! Literally Barton, Romanoff, and Stark all follow you home—like, every day.” Sam exclaimed.

“How did you know?” Steve asked, suddenly compelled to look out the window and check if they were close.

“I overheard them and they asked for my advice. I just didn’t realize that you didn’t notice them on your way home.” Sam continued, following him as he looked out the window. Steve didn’t spot anyone.

“You don’t think they can figure out where this is, do you?” Steve wondered.

“I don’t even know if I can figure out where we are. Whatever Penny did, I don’t think anyone will figure out anything beyond the three block radius unless Penny so decides.” Sam placated. Steve swallowed uneasily. Hermione had been agreeable to meet them, but Steve was still concerned about inconveniencing her. He didn’t even know what to do with Bucky. Steve turned quickly when he heard a door open but calmed when he saw it was Hermione. She looked at them in surprise of their surprise.

“Hello?” She greeted questioningly. Steve walked over and greeted her with a hug, inspecting her from head-to-toe for wariness or fatigue. She looked relaxed and whole. He supposed it was a good
“thing she visited her parents. How have you been?” Hermione asked with amusement.

“Good…good. You?” Steve asked as he let her go reluctantly.

“Fine.” Hermione chirped. “How are you, Sam?” She turned to Sam and gave him a quick hug. He kissed her on the forehead, smirking a look up at Steve when he flushed with annoyance.

“Good. Had a really good time teaching Toto the internet.” Sam answered.

“Toto?” Hermione repeated.

“Yeah, Bucky. He needed some more computer skills.” Sam chastised.

“You are right; I’ve been remiss. Thank you, Sam.” Hermione said sincerely. “So if Bucky is Toto, what about Steve?”

“He’s obviously Dorothy.” Sam stage whispered conspiratorially. Hermione inspected him before humming in agreement. Steve made a noise of discontent that made Sam and Hermione laugh.

“He’s right, Steve—you’re a Dorothy.” Hermione laughed. Sam was still laughing as he said his goodbyes.

“Thanks for letting me come over!” Sam said politely as he headed out.

“No problem! You’re welcome any time! And thanks for keeping them company.” Hermione waved goodbye as he left through the garage. When Sam was out of sight, Hermione turned around to face Steve.

“Steve.” Hermione said with a hint of nervousness that made Steve uneasy. “Do you know a Natasha Romanoff?” She asked and Steve felt his heart drop.

“Yes…why?” He asked warily. Hermione looked down at the floor before glancing up at his face.

“She invited me to coffee.” Hermione responded. Steve felt his jaw drop.

“What?!” He exclaimed. Immediately he was dashing off to his room, grabbing his cellphone and dialing her number.

“Steve.” She greeted with amusement—as if she was expecting his call. “What can I do for you?”

“Nat. How did you find Hermione?” Steve asked urgently.

“I tracked her phone.” Nat answered succinctly.

“How did you get her phone number?” Steve continued.

“I didn’t.” Natasha revealed. “Sam did. He had it listed as Penny. I swiped his phone, traced it to one Hermione Granger and found nearly nothing about her after she turned 11. Did you know she won a spelling bee at age nine? The word was chiaroscurist by the way. But after that spelling bee, all I could find was that she attended a prestigious alternative school, graduating with high honors before attending several university classes in psychology. All her information was forwarded to a P.O. box. I tried stalking the P.O. box but that failed. When I put a trace on this number, it more often than not placed me in random locations until it began showing up in New York in locations I was able to investigate. I missed her several times until she appeared at her parents’ home.” Nat regaled. Steve was conflicted—angry? Concerned?
“She said you invited her to coffee. If you—“ Steve began to threaten.


“What?!” Steve exclaimed, the entire conversation throwing him for a loop.

“I met her in Russia, right before I defected.” Nat said shortly.

“How…”

“I understand now.” Natasha said quietly into the phone. “She is extraordinary.” Natasha said with something Steve had never heard from her before: awe.

“But…”

“She different than you or I” Natasha continued.

“I’ll say.” Steve retorted, thinking of her magic and wondering if Natasha knew.

“You have to protect her.” Natasha determined causing Steve to blanch.

“What? She can protect herself.” Steve said, though he was concerned by Natasha’s statement.

“She has secrets, doesn’t she? I’m not even a hundred percent sure but…” Steve was convinced that Natasha at least suspected about Hermione as she trailed off. “We’ll talk more in person but I just wanted to let you know that I think she’s a good person and worthy of your protection.”

“Thank you?” Steve said suspiciously.

“And I’m taking her to coffee.” Nat added quickly.

“Wait what?!” Steve shouted.

She hung up.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: At little shorter than my new normal…but kind of a lot going on. Chapter 16 & 17 will be longer ones. I wanted to post this before I left for the weekend so I didn’t really get a chance to review for errors. Super sorry if it’s terribly out of sorts. If anything is too erroneous, I’ll update it Sunday night!

A guest named Elizabeth wanted some Hermione healing Natasha in the past and I was like…sure! I can work that in. Also, another guest pointed out that I accidently had Steve say ‘Hermione’ instead of ‘Penny’ in the last chapter and I had to change that because I already knew Natasha was going to track her down using Sam’s phone. I still have aspirations to finish this in January sometime before starting on the sequel—which will be very different to this one (I think) as it will be more action/plot oriented as opposed to my angst & fluff. We will have to see how much writing I can get done but I hopefully will stick to a weekly update if not two.
15.5 Avenger Aside

Chapter Summary

What happens when the Avengers try to track Hermione by following Steve.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own either universe.

Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! Please continue to do so!

If you have any headcanon/fluffs/plot bunnies you want to see, I’m highly susceptible to suggestion.

This is a small aside chapter as I’ve been struggling to update the intended 16th chapter. If I don’t finish it tonight, I’ll have it up by Thursday with hopefully another update on Christmas eve.

I’m such a bad egg.

In any case, thanks for reading and please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“I’m heading out for today. Goodnight, everyone!” Steve called over his shoulder with a friendly wave. A chorus of goodbyes followed him out. In the living room, Natasha, Clint, and Tony shared a glance. The door clicked shut as Steve left the main floor of Avenger tower. For all intents and purposes the noise may as well have been a starting gun as the three Avengers burst into a flurry of motion.

Tony was quickly encased in his suit before flying backwards out an open window. “Today’s the day!” He taunted. Clint fired an arrow at Tony, who attempted to swerve away from the hit, but the arrow quickly secured itself to his ankle with a descending cord of rope. “Barton—what the hell?” Tony complained as Clint smirked.

“Thanks for the ride!” Clint called before hooking his bow to the rope and diving out the window. Tony’s suit dipped slightly as some mechanism on the bow slowed Clint’s descent.

“Mad as a hatter.” Tony whispered under his breath.

“Agreed, sir.” JARVIS reassured him.

“Alright, JARVIS, where were we?” Tony asked as they took off over the city.
“We have narrowed their location down to a three-block radius.” JARVIS recalled.

“Let’s go and see if we can find our yellow brick road.” Tony said as he approached the designated area.

“There are 36 buildings zoned with housing in this radius.” JARVIS chimed as they approached. “Of the 36 buildings there are 40,583 individuals registered with New York Census with 88.3% of female population linked on social media.”

Tony crossed the border of the three-block radius with a slight static that always seemed to occur as he approached—a defense system that Tony couldn’t figure out.

Tony suddenly paused. He had a dentist appointment. He had forgotten; he was going to be late.

“JARVIS, why didn’t you remind me about the dentist—set a course there now.” Tony complained as he did an about-face and began navigating back to the tower.

“Sir, you don’t have a dentist appointment today. Your next appointment is March 15th and Dr. Klosei will show up at the tower per usual.” JARVIS regaled. Tony stopped in midair, contemplating.

“You’re right. I don’t know what came over me.” Tony said as he turned around intent to find Steve’s land of Oz.

“As I was saying, sir. There are 4515 profiles matching women between the ages of 22-39.” JARVIS droned. There was a slight interruption when the static hit again.” Tony stopped his flight. “Sir?” JARVIS asked.

“I left my stove on, JARVIS, lets head back to turn it off.” Tony said, turning the suit around again.

“Sir, you have never used your oven and even if you had, it is wirelessly connected to me. I assure you, it is currently off.” JARVIS declared. Tony stopped in the air again. Briefly he looked down to notice plenty of people watching his apparent indecision.

“You’re right, JARVIS.” Tony sighed. “Let’s keep going deeper.” They turned around again.

“I have cross referenced the profiles of the women with their education and have found 2709 have attended or are attending university. Of the 2709, 273 have taken more than one class on the psychology track.” The static hit and Tony began rambling.

“I should learn French. Why haven’t I learned that yet? Pepper wanted to go to Paris but we can’t go if we can’t speak it.” Tony turned around, intent to learn the language right now.

“Sir,” JARVIS interrupted. “I am fully equipped with translation capabilities and Ms. Potts has just returned from her own business trip to Paris.”

“Right…right.” Tony said turning around again to head deeper into the radius. Dimly he realized he had progressed no further despite his attempts.

“Sir, if I may?” JARVIS inquired.

“What is it, JARVIS.” Tony asked, slightly distracted.

“It seems the three-block radius seems to encourage you to remember some mundane task or desire.” JARVIS identified.
“So it seems.” Tony admitted. “You have the nav, Jarvis. Good luck.” Tony said, enabling JARVIS to hopefully get closer to their destination and goal.

“Indeed, sir.” JARVIS took the suit forward, continuing his monologue of research. “Of the 273 psychology students 87 continued into graduate school.”

“JARVIS, I need to do laundry.” Tony interrupted.

“Sir, you don’t do laundry.” JARVIS took the suit forward.

“I need to pay bills.” Tony realized.

“Ms. Potts pays the bills.” JARVIS returned.

“I need to clean the kitchen.” How had Tony forgotten that?

“You have a cleaning staff.” JARVIS rebutted.

“I wanted… I need…I forgot…” Tony droned on and on as JARVIS circled around the blocks gathering information. He scanned faces, he recorded data, but millions of people traversed through this location on any given day—today was no exception.

JARVIS never felt annoyed, he was not programmed for such negative emotions, but he recognized easily how it might occur in humans. Finally succumbing to his creator’s desire to return home and walk a dog he did not have, JARVIS recognized that he had neither located Captain America nor studied all inhabitants of the complexes.

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Clint landed on the sidewalk with an internal ‘oomp’. His joints weren’t what they used to be. People on the sidewalk had fallen over in shock at his descent but Clint disregarded them as he disappeared into the shadows. Covertly, as was the nature of a man with his skills, Clint glided into the shadows behind Steve as he emerged from the underground garage. Clint leapt from building to building above Steve’s Harley as it cruised down the traffic-laden streets. Sometimes he utilized his bow to zipline between structures, other times he peered over a railing when Steve stopped in traffic. Eventually, he passed a point where he suddenly remembered he had a doctor appointment. He stopped, and turned around thinking that if he didn’t hurry, he’d be late. He took only one step before he realized he certainly did not have a doctor’s appointment.

He turned around again and continued his tracking with a strategic zipline. Halfway through his descent he thought he needed to pick up medicine, he needed to sort his library, and he needed a haircut. Clint landed to the ground with annoyance. He needed none of those things, he thought mulishly as he reverently patted his hair. His hair was fine. An eye on the tail end of Steve’s Harley, he glanced around and remembered a small little café he had wanted to try down the street somewhere. Instantly, the desire to do irrelevant things alleviated and he calmly walked to the restaurant between crowds of people and shadows in the alley. One eye was trained on Steve as he determinedly sought out his café. When he reached it however, he wanted to continue pursuing Steve instead of immediately eating. Instantly he was bombarded with reminders and realization and things he really ought to do and when he blinked his eyes, Steve’s Harley had completely disappeared from view. Despondent, Clint entered the café establishment. He had lost Steve but he was at least going to eat something. He texted Nat, curious if she wanted to join him. As he opened the door, he narrowly dodged a smaller, younger lady.

“Oh! I’m so sorry!” She apologized as she glanced up in surprise, brown eyes widening. Clint noticed her British accent immediately and bushy hair that seemed to be barely contained by a braid.
“Not a problem—it is dinner time and you’re obviously very hungry.” Clint joked as he looked at her very large take out bag. She blushed slightly.

“I might be a tad hungry.” She conceded.

“Food’s good at least? I’ve never eaten here.” He asked and she smiled up at him.

“It’s even better than you’d expect!” She declared. He stepped aside to allow her exit through the threshold. “Have a good evening and enjoy!” She called over her shoulder.

“You, too!” He echoed, the interaction far friendlier than a normal New Yorker. Clint stepped in further as he allowed the smells to waft into his senses. “I’ll have what she’s having.” Clint told the cashier as he pointed towards where the bushy mane had exited.

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“You aren’t going to race them?” Sam asked from the kitchen as he watched the two men disappear outside. Nat smiled up at him.

“They’re not going to win, Wilson.” Nat said devilishly. “They’re too straightforward and this Dr. Penny is smart.” Sam nodded in agreement. Nat had sauntered up to where Sam was making his sandwich. Sam eyed her warily as she approached, closer than she usually dwelled in his space. She leaned in a way that emphasized her figure and eyes—a distracting sight that left him unsettled.

“What could you tell me about her, Wilson? You’ve been to her place, already have seen her.” Sam eyed her warily and her posture shifted to something less threatening, a pose that minimize her threatening demeanor. “I just want to keep Steve safe.” She explained. Sam eyed her up and down, pulling out left overs from the fridge.

“Yeah. That’s not going to work on me. Penny’s not dangerous to any of us and she’s a lovely person. She takes care of the two of them just fine.” Sam said as he pulled out a beer. Romanoff moseyed into his space, patting his shoulder sympathetically.

“You’re a good friend.” Natasha said with a small smile. She swept out of the room and Sam shuddered. That woman was terrifying.

Natasha disappeared into her room with a natural nonchalance. She opened her palm, revealing the phone she swiped from Sam. With the right gadget, she uncovered his swipe code. A quick flip through the contacts revealed a ‘Penny’ as a contact. She wrote the number down—disappointed that they never apparently texted—and ‘accidently’ ran back into Sam, covertly placing the phone where she had previously taken it. She picked up a drink in the fridge as if that was always her intention before she delved back into her everlasting mystery.

In her room she frowned when she searched all the information she could on the number. It was registered to Hermione Granger, a British Citizen currently living somewhere in New York. She had no social media, had no address beyond the P.O. box listed for online purchases and her bank account information was unusually protected. She also seemed to have diplomatic immunity. Nat frowned. This mystery woman was a little too secretive—or at least a little too good at it. Further digging revealed a single picture of a brown-bushy haired little girl with teeth that seemed to take up all her face; she had won a spelling bee in elementary school. Her parents were dentists and Natasha was surprised to find limited information on the doctors beyond their practice location and the fact they lived in the New York Suburbs. Well, the information was probably better than whatever Clint or Tony could manage. Natasha looked down at her phone as it rang. *Speak of the devil…*

“Mission failed, but I’m finally eating at that little café—want anything to eat?” Clint asked. Natasha
“Just bring me a coffee.” Natasha requested. Clint sighed from the other side of the phone.

“You found something—didn’t you?” Clint identified with disappointment.

“Ah-ah. That would be telling, Clint.” Natasha said with a laugh. She could hear Clint grumbling on the line.

“Well it’s not over yet.” Clint defended. Natasha smirked.

“I’m going to win, Clint—I always do.” Natasha retorted.

“Yeah, whatever. We’ll see. As long as you beat Tony, I’m content.” Clint admitted. “I’ll be back with the coffee soon. Don’t suppose you’ll show me what you found?” Clint asked. Natasha’s laugh was a resounding no. He hung up with a huff and Natasha stared up at the toothy girl. Something about her appealed to Natasha’s memories but Natasha could find no link. Turning back to the information she collected, she wondered if pursuing this Hermione’s diplomatic immunity might be the best way to find the good doctor.

In the end, just like Clint, Natasha didn’t care as long as Stark lost. Natasha paused as a newscast on the corner of her screen showed a clip of Iron Man. She enlarged the clip and turned on the volume.

“Thousands of New York City residents were confused when Iron Man appeared to dart back and forth over their heads several times for the duration of ten minutes.” An anchorwoman said. The clip showed Iron Man darting forward, stopping, turning around, stopping, and turning back again. He continued to do so several times. “Iron Man did not return our calls for a comment, leaving many to speculate if the suit is malfunctioning and what that could mean for the defense of New York City and the world.”

Natasha watched the clip far longer than she needed to, laughing quietly. Whoever Hermione Granger was, Natasha had to at least compliment her for marking Tony Stark look like an idiot on national TV.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: The Avengers are so delightfully petty sometimes. This chapter is dedicated to a guest named Helen who wanted the backstory to the Avengers trying to follow Steve to Hermione. You all have such wonderful ideas that I simply must explore!
Triggers

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own either universe.

Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! Please continue to do so!

If you have any headcanon/fluffs/plot bunnies you want to see, I’m highly susceptible to suggestion.

In any case, thanks for reading and please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Hermione was early at the coffee shop, a tiny corner café that she often stopped by for dinner. It was not too far from her house, only a block or two, and Natasha had actually been the one to suggest it. Hermione looked around the shop, wondering if Natasha would be able to see through her notice-me-not spell, assuming Natasha came early to the shop. Hermione very much expected she would. Hermione had only met the woman once, but Hermione was sure that Natasha had an uncomfortable number of secrets. Hermione had known that from the single instant of connection when she had been in Russia.

Despite being part of the Golden Trio, Hermione found that she had difficulty accessing Russian Mind-Healers. It took months before she finally persuaded the Russian government into allowing her to visit—something that only occurred, Hermione suspected, because she had accidently befriended the daughter of a government official.

“It’s dangerous here.” Her friend, Healer Serafina Barkova, greeted her as soon as she stepped out of the international floo. They had met at a mind healing arts seminar in Genova. Serafina swept the ashes away with a quick wave of her wand. “The muggles here are far more dangerous than yours—they try to mimic magic with some terrifying results.” Serafina continued as they did a brief tour of the facility. It was not a full tour; the magicals here were much like their muggle counterparts in their desire to focus inward to their secrets with a focus on security.

“Thank you for allowing me to come.” Hermione demurred. She liked Serafina, who was calm and had a mind to match; it did not flare into Hermione’s as much as everyone else’s seemed to do. Serafina’s lips twitched, the only sign of sympathy Hermione received.

Hermione only had a half day to spend at the facility and the two made quick work of interviewing and speaking with the other mind-healers. By the end of her time there, Hermione began to feel the disappointment spread through her veins like poison; no one would be able to help her or her parents here. At 23 years old, Hermione was beginning to feel she would never help her parents return to their memories.
“I am sorry, Hermione.” Serafina said, her hand touching Hermione shoulders. Hermione nodded dully.

“Thank you, Serafina—I couldn’t have followed this lead without you.” Hermione said sincerely, despite her looming melancholy. Serafina nodded gruffly. “I’m going to take the muggle exit and walk my way back to the international floo.” Hermione explained. Serafina nodded again.

“Just...be careful, Hermione. The muggles—they are dangerous in their curiosity and perceptions.” Serafina warned. Hermione nodded, instinctively dismissing Serafina’s concern as a biased, privileged pureblood witch; Serafina was perfectly lovely but she did not spend much time with muggles at all.

When Hermione felt a shadow on her back as she made her third consecutive evasive turn, Hermione realized she had a bias towards purebloods as well; maybe Serafina was right about the Russian Muggles. Hermione palmed her hidden wand nonchalantly, irritated that her notice-me-not charm was no longer working because the person had already noticed. Hermione turned into a dilapidated building, empty, broken, and abandoned. She was surprised when a beautiful redheaded woman her age appeared, her eyes empty like she was occluding, despite the fact that she was smiling a haunting look. Despite sensing the woman, Hermione had predicted that she would appear behind her—not before her so confidently.

“ты заблудился?” She said and Hermione stared at her blankly. It occurred to her suddenly that she was hearing nothing from the girl’s mind—not even white noise. Hermione tilted her head to the side. Occluding didn’t work on Hermione anymore and though Hermione was not attempting to penetrate the girl’s mind, it was odd that it was still so quiet. She was neither magic nor machine—so why?

“What?” Hermione said dumbly because she realized she had no idea what the Russian woman had said. The woman was standing in a way that looked nonchalant but Hermione recognized it as a stance that could produce weapons in an instant. Hermione kept on guard.

“Are you lost?” The woman asked in a tone that seemed softer than her appearance. Hermione let her eyes drift around the dodgy building.

“Are you?” Hermione retorted, becoming uneasy at the disquiet of not hearing. As if hearing her distress at the silence, Hermione finally heard the softest of cries. Listening again in what had previously been the first mental quiet she had had in years while with company, she heard a child’s cry, soft and unassuming—locked away and used to be ignored. The heart of a child was locked away within this woman, suspended in her growth for the needs of whatever caused her to be so closed off and effective. It cried aloud, a small, tiny voice and something about the muted sorrow left Hermione aching. Hermione felt her own heart lodge itself in her throat and before she realized what she was doing, she had taken the woman by surprise as she brought glowing hands to her temple. “You are lost.” Hermione realized. “This isn’t you.” Hermione determined. The woman’s eyes were half-lidded, filling with emotion as she seemed to struggle against the healing benefits Hermione was offering. “You’re capable—you must be—but you’re even more capable than what anyone suspects because they did not break you!”

“какой?” She asked, switching back to her native language in her confusion.

“You are stronger than your demons!” Hermione said fiercely because this woman was a warrior, like Hermione and her friends, but she was also a good person who wanted to be good. Hermione could hear the child’s voice cry louder. Hermione was unsure how long she had stood there, healing the damage of whatever had caused the child with this woman to be locked away. She was the first muggle she had ever attempted to heal—not yet confident enough to attempt the damage she had
done to her parents herself—and healing her mind felt like watching a movie on fast-forward; Hermione would barely remember the contents. An hour must have passed before Hermione’s wand vibrated with a reminder of her approaching international floo appointment; Hermione had to leave. “I have to go.” Hermione said quickly despite her reluctance. “Please remember what I said; please keep fighting to be who you really are.” Hermione begged and the woman opened her eyes enough to study Hermione in wonder and confusion.

“Who am I?” The redhead asked in English, her expression of being lost was far more real than anything else Hermione had seen all day.

“You’re a good person.” Hermione said confidently, still feeling for the second that she was everything this woman was despite not recalling the why’s and how’s of it. Hermione withdrew her glowing hands, dashing out another door into an alley as he wand rumbled a reminder. She disappeared as quickly as she could. With minutes to spare, she barely had time to contemplate the experience before she was whisked back into London with green flames and soot.

“Ved’ma”. Natasha’s voice called and Hermione smiled warmly. Natasha had been early but had not immediately spotted Hermione. “You came.” Natasha commented, sounding a trace relieved.

“Of course.” Hermione responded. “There was no reason why I wouldn’t and every reason that I should.” Hermione gestured to the seat before her. Natasha sat down gracefully and looked around.

“They don’t see you.” Natasha commented, inspecting the patrons who brushed by her unnoticed. Hermione nodded as she sipped her drink.

“They don’t hear us either.” Hermione said with some significance. “Nor will my face be recorded on any cameras that attempt it.” Natasha regarded her blankly, but Hermione knew she was awestruck at her capabilities.

“I didn’t notice you right away.” Natasha admitted. “And I am very attentive.” Natasha leaned forward. “What are you?”

“You already know.” Hermione said with trace amusement. “I’m a witch!” Natasha stared at her blankly.

“So you are real?” Natasha marveled. “The KGB—they suspected that there were enhanced individuals—but they could never know for sure.” Natasha explained.

“There is an entire world of us—hidden—though regretfully you can’t speak about it to anyone else who doesn’t know.” Hermione said, wondering if Natasha realized that she literally wouldn’t be able to speak—not when Hermione utilized her spell.

“Rogers knows, doesn’t he?” Natasha asked with a sudden realization and Hermione nodded with a smirk.

“I’m the only one who can help with his ‘problem’” Hermione confirmed.

“And Barnes? Is he dangerous?” Natasha inquired with protective sternness. Hermione fought the instinct to bristle at the comment.

“You’re all dangerous.” She reprimanded sharply. “But he will be…uncompromised soon.” Hermione admitted less heatedly. Though Natasha seemed to still be unreadable in her expressions, Hermione felt the coil of relief escaping her. “But I’m still wondering—how did you escape that life; you worked for the KGB?” Hermione asked, returning to the main subject. They had only spoken briefly the other day on her parent’s property, confirming only a few aspects before agreeing to
“You saved me.” Natasha admitted, holding onto the coffee and staring into it dazedly. “Whatever you did to me, it gave me the courage to defect to a SHIELD agent the next day.” Hermione glanced at her in surprise. “What did you do?” Natasha asked. “Why did it help me?”

“I healed your mind.” Hermione answered. “I didn’t have much time to fully heal you, but I repaired the broken parts as best as I could in what little time I could. Some people respond faster than others but you were already largely determined to be something good—you probably would’ve made the decision without me.” Natasha set her coffee on the table and reached a tentative hand out to touch Hermione’s.

“Still, thank you.” She said, enthusing sincerity and appreciation in a way that Hermione recognized made the agent uncomfortable.

“It’s what I do.” Hermione responded breezily, although she was touched. Natasha nodded. “Why were you following me that day?” Hermione asked with no small amount of curiosity.

“The KGB were concerned about enhanced individuals and they attempted to discover more about them. You emerged from a targeted area that had been a hotspot for strange interactions. I was charged with finding more information on your types.” Natasha explained and Hermione’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. She definitely needed to tell Serafina about this—who knows how close the Russian muggles were to truly finding the magical world. She should probably alert Kingsley in Britain and President Quahog of the US. She made a mental note. Hermione straightened, eying one of the employees looking around the café with no success. Hermione disabled her charms and the employee instantly spotted her.

“Here’s your muffins.” The employee said brusquely, depositing the baked goods in a New York minute. When he was gone, Hermione brought the charms back up.

“Muffin?” Hermione offered as Natasha warily grabbed the offered pastry. Hermione took one and took a bite before setting it down on her plate. “Now,” Hermione began, wiping her crumbs away quickly. “Why were you looking for me yesterday? How did you find me? And what do you want?” Hermione asked bluntly. She was confident enough that Natasha wouldn’t hurt her, despite Steve’s concern that she would be interrogated by his friend.

“I wasn’t actually looking for you, I was looking for Steve’s roommate and psychologist—Penny.” Natasha began. Hermione chuckled at the name.

“Oh, Sam.” She said under her breath fondly at the nickname. Natasha blinked at her before Hermione motioned for her to continue.

“I took Sam’s phone and found your number—I traced it but didn’t find much.” Natasha continued and Hermione chuckled again at her expense. “I only found your phone was registered to your name and was able to trace your parents from that. I’ve been tracing the phone’s location when you make calls but it largely sent me somewhere unrealistic—like Guam and Indiana.” Natasha admitted.

“Is there a reason I’m being stalked?” Hermione asked with a lifted brow and a degree of irritation. Natasha did not shrink from her gaze but Hermione knew she felt guilty nonetheless.

“Steve hasn’t been very forthcoming about you—“

“For good reason.” Hermione interrupted.

“And as a team we look out for each other—“
“What you think is best for one another.” Hermione added.

“And I’ve read Barnes’ case file. I’ve been shot by him—twice—so I know what he is...was capable of.” Natasha continued. “I never suspected that he would be in such good hands. Hydra—they did a number on him and that kind of impression is difficult to undo.” Nat finished. Hermione studied her. Hermione was largely aware of the subterfuge and clandestine deals of the magical world, but she never really thought about what hidden politics muggles delved into.

“Who is Hydra?” Hermione asked, her anger at being stalked surpassed by her curiosity at Natasha’s perspective.

“They’re dangerous.” Natasha said fervently before launching into a brief overview of the organization and the Avenger’s mission.

“Should you be telling me this? Steve never discusses work with me.” Hermione admitted.

“You need to understand, Ved’ma.” Natasha continued. “If they knew about you—and your world as you say—you would be in danger, too. They’re looking for their Winter Soldier—they know he has gone rogue—and if they find you through him, they will be all the more powerful.” Natasha looked utterly sincere as she pleaded her concern to Hermione. Hermione sat back in her chair and took another bit of her muffin and contemplated. She would definitely be due for another conversation with Harry soon.

“If it wasn’t me that was taking care of Bucky and Steve, what would you be saying to their healer?” Hermione questioned.

“I’d want to make sure they could adequately contain Barnes.” Natasha said bluntly. Hermione’s mouth tweaked to the side in disapproval of the phrasing.

“And you no longer have those concerns?” Hermione wondered. Natasha smiled gently.

“You already said it yourself; more than containing him you can heal him.” Natasha responded. Hermione smiled slightly back. “How do you heal? Is it something all...witches...can do?”

“It’s uncommon.” Hermione revealed. “Especially my abilities. I hear and feel the minds of others more fluidly and more instinctively than anyone else I’ve found.” Natasha was listening attentively, idly nibbling her muffin. “I didn’t always hear the minds of others; I developed the ability though I’m sure I was already naturally predisposed to it.”

“You hear people’s thoughts?” Natasha asked with concealed concerned. Hermione smiled wryly.

“I’ve learned to block it as best as I can to the point that muggles—non-magicals—always sound like white noise. I don’t go prying through people’s minds anyway—lest I go insane. I already have enough voices breaking through my barriers that I never actively seek to read minds for fun.” Hermione assured. Natasha relaxed slightly.

“So when you came across me in that abandoned building…” Natasha trailed off.

“I didn’t actually hear you, at first. I heard nothing.” Hermione explained. “It was so strange to be next to someone and unable to feel the presence of their mind; it took me by surprise.” Natasha looked startled.

“Then how did you…”

“Eventually you did cry out; your voice was suppressed within you. It was so soft and sad that I
couldn’t help but reach out to you.” Hermione described. Natasha was staring blankly into her coffee. Compelled again, Hermione reached out to gently touch her hand. Natasha looked back up into Hermione’s eyes. “I said before that you’ve grown and you have. You are no longer suppressed in the way you were before—you still need healing—but you have definitely reached a better level of mental health.” Hermione enthused. Natasha smiled faintly.

“You still hear it now?” Natasha asked.

“I do.” Hermione nodded.

“How do you make it stop?” Natasha questioned.

“You heal it; I heal it.” Hermione took a breath. “Natasha, I’m going to be finished healing Steve soon—”

“Steve?” Natasha asked and Hermione gave her a grim smile.

“We all have demons.” Hermione answered the unasked question. “When I’m finished healing him, I want to help you again.” Natasha’s eyed her intensely.


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“You’re okay?” Steve jumped to his feet when Hermione returned. Hermione gave him a cheeky smile.

“I’m perfectly fine, Steve.” Hermione agreed. Bucky was beside her in an instant tossing dirty looks Steve’s way. “Bucky.” Hermione chastised as she rolled her eyes. “It’s hardly Steve’s fault that his friends stalked him.” Steve grimaced, wiping a hand over his face.


“No, Steve. Natasha was perfectly wonderful.” Hermione declared. Her lips thinned in contemplation. “I…while you are here…I want to talk to both of you about something.” Bucky and Steve sat on the kitchen island stools before her in concern. “Bucky…I want to remove your triggers this week.” Hermione said as slowly and calmly as she could manage. Steve and Bucky both looked floored—Bucky’s face paling considerably.

“So soon?” Bucky asked softly. Hermione smiled sympathetically. Hermione, in some ways, was loathe to reach this point; cresting the hill only meant the journey was almost over and Hermione dreaded thinking what Steve and Bucky would do when they no longer needed her.

“You’re ready—you’ve been ready.” Hermione admitted. She turned to Steve. “I know we’ve already decreased the healing schedule for you, Steve, but after Bucky’s triggers are removed…I don’t think you’ll require much more than a few more sessions with me before I’m no longer…needed.” Hermione said softly. Bucky still looked floored but Steve’s forehead began to crinkle with thought. It hurt Hermione to approach this phase—the end—but seeing Natasha as someone else who needed her healing ability had grounded Hermione in a way she had been lacking. She existed to heal people and delaying their progress in fear of what it meant would be unacceptable.

“When will we do it?” Bucky asked, eyes gauging her shakily.
“Whenever you want.” Hermione offered.

“Can—can Steve be there? Just in case it…” Bucky trailed off but Hermione knew the word that followed. *Fails.*

“Steve is welcome to stay with us but I warn you both that I imagine this session will be longer and more stressful than anything we’ve done so far.” Hermione cautioned. Bucky still looked shaken as he turned to look at Steve. Steve nodded firmly in response.

“Friday.” Bucky uttered.

“Friday.” Steve agreed. Hermione gave them both an encouraging smile, despite the nerves of the significance in her stomach.

-H-0-H-

Hermione was nervous as she paced around her room. She could feel the desire to dwell on her fear and the negative emotions that followed but she resisted—focusing instead on the healing she wanted to give Bucky; that Bucky deserved. She exited the room to sit before her piano. She assumed Bucky was still in his room preparing himself in his own way. Steve, she saw in his room drawing something or another. Hermione placed her hands on the keys reverently. She needed to prepare herself. She peppered the keys gingerly before launching into a series of haunting concertos, eager to rid herself of any internal turbulence.

Hermione’s wand shuddered in her pocket an hour later, indicating it was time. Hermione took a deep breath. She knocked gently on Steve’s door first.

“It’s time.” She told him as he looked up from his sketch pad. She gave him a grim smile when he nodded. They walked the two steps to Bucky’s door together before pausing. Hermione took another breath before knocking. Bucky opened the door slowly.

“I’m ready.” He sounded determined, though Hermione could hear the waver in his voice. They marched down to the basement quietly and tensely. Bucky relaxed onto the chaise loungers while Steve took a seat on an empty chair. Hermione dragged her stool over to Bucky so she could access him easier.

“This will be the longest session we’ve had.” Hermione informed them. “I’ve seen the trigger words already but I will be deeper and more present in your mind than I’ve been before.” Hermione gave Bucky an apologetic smile as he nodded. “Are you ready?” She whispered. Bucky nodded slightly.

“You’ll both be fine.” Steve added from his chair. He was bent over, resting his elbows on his knees and staring at them both intently. Hermione imagined he planned to stay that way for the entire session.

“You’re going to be okay, darling.” Hermione agreed softly. Bucky met her eyes, despite his fears and concerns and Hermione found him to be terribly brave. She relaxed the control she held on her powers and delved into Bucky’s mind—further and more purposefully than she had before.

The first thing Hermione noticed was that the experience was far more visual that Hermione normally dealt with as a mind healer. Normally, she did not necessarily view memories but instead facilitated the paths of thoughts in a way that was born more from feeling than the mental imagery of true legilimency. Unfortunately, despite the experience being the first time Hermione would deal with triggers like Bucky’s, she already knew she would have to experience them at a deeper level—reliving the triggers to understand their depth and meaning before she could untangle the foulness
Hermione spent the past week preparing for the session. She had conferred with other healers and had asked Serafina for translations of the Russian words lodged into Bucky’s brain—they stayed in the native language of those who had sought to impose their will on him. Hermione kept the reasons vague, still uncomfortable revealing the information given her concerns about Hydra and other muggles attempting to mimic dangerous magics. Hermione was also concerned about the various government entities that existed in the magical and muggle world; she never trusted a government unless she personally trusted the people running it. Hermione hoped that after she successfully removed the triggers, she’d be able to confer with Serafina somewhere more secure.

Hermione paused in Bucky’s mind, sifting through the embedded words. The triggers felt foul in a dark magic kind of way and Hermione attempted to stay alert in the mind space. She mentally prepared herself before deepening her presence in his mind. The first memory she came across was all the words being read. They were read backwards from the way they were implanted, Hermione realized. Debating her strategy, Hermione finally decided she should start at the true beginning to dismantle the web of tainted memories.

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root easily as if it should have always been the way Hermione had connected it.

Добросердечный. Benign. Hermione watched as they emptied Bucky of his memory but could not change the man. They gave him skills and attempted to suppress his personality but he still remained. Hermione had already worked with Bucky on this part. When they had emptied Bucky they had left a man who could be a hunter and killer. They left a man with incredibly focus and loyalty who was aggressive in his desire to protect. As he regained his memories, he had struggled with the fact that all those traits of the Winter Soldier were still him. He had come to terms that the traits were part of his identity that were manipulated by Hydra, but it was still embedded with in him with a single word. Benign. Despite the traits that made him an effective soldier, before Hydra those traits had still left him as a benign man. Hermione shifted the lamentation for the loss into a recognition of the present. Bucky was still benign. Hermione tied the word to the careful garden Bucky tended, to the gentle way he interacted with James and Crookshanks and even Hermione. The word was synonymous with Bucky and Hermione ensure that it was for all the right reasons.

Девять. Nine. The second number in Bucky’s year of birth. Like the number one, Hermione allowed the word to associate naturally as it should. She untangled the word from Hydra’s touch and soothed it back to its normal path. She felt elated when it rooted happily back to where it belonged. Bucky was more than ready to be healed and his mind was supporting her abilities to do so.

Печь. Furnace. The memory appeared swiftly and suddenly as the metal arm was painfully attached to Bucky’s side. It scorched and scarred his skin. Hydra trained him, forged him into the killer had become with the deadly skills that had rivaled SHIELD and Steve’s abilities. Hermione was struck. She could not rid himself the memory, as prominent as it was. She struggled to find a silver lining in the memory itself. Finally, she resolved to create a new memory association. She was forging him right now. Like metal being tempered in a furnace, he was becoming stronger and resilient. He would survive what Hydra did; he would succeed. His mind accepted the metaphor, clinging to the new memory resolutely.

Рассвет. Daybreak. The next memory was when Bucky truly awoke after the arm was affixed. A voice called him Hydra’s newest weapon. In Bucky’s memory, a man with beady eyes was responsible. The man looked skittish and opportunistic in a way that reminded Hermione of Wormtail. She managed to not recoil in disgust. That day was the first memory they let Bucky keep — it was the dawn of a new life and the daybreak of a new day. Hermione contemplated the memory before her. After some time, she decided to shit the association, opting to tie the meaning instead to the day Bucky awoke in her house knowing exactly who he was. A thought later and she added the day after, when he unfortunately remembered the terrible things he had done as the Winter Soldier. She couldn’t prevent the significance of both days and instead opted to allow them to exist organically within him. The two memories successfully severed the word’s significance to Hydra. Though it was tinged with the melancholy of one memory, Hermione was happy that the two together were a good balance.

Семнадцать. Seventeen. Bucky was born in 1917 and the entire number sequence was apparently an attempted to dig deeply into his existence. Like the other numbers Hermione had already encountered, she decided to detach and reassign. Hermione paused after she was confident the numbers were safe. There were two words left that Hermione would need to heal. She also knew they were the most difficult. She centered herself and plunged back in.

Unlike the previous words that were tied to specific memories, the two words that Hermione had left were based on his feelings. Ржавый. Rusted. The word was significant and descriptive. Hermione dwelled on the word and focused on Bucky’s feelings. He felt abused and jaded. He felt worn down. He felt like a machine that had been neglected and left to rust. Hermione’s heart ached at the realization but she preserved. She disconnected the negative emotions and facilitated the healing of
Bucky’s emotions. Unlike the previous memories, his feelings have no specific memory, so Hermione observed with trepidation as his mind made new connections and pathways. When Hermione inspected them, she was happy to note the associations had become positive.

The last word: желание. Longing. Hermione once again had no memory to observe so she allowed herself to be swept by the emotion; Bucky longed to be free. He longed to be home. Hermione already knew what to do and not allowing herself to dwell on the sadness she felt for Bucky’s longing, she cut the connection and facilitated a new growth. She watched amazed as the connections not only shifted, but also the word. Instead of longing, the focus changed to content. Hermione watched in awe as memories of Bucky’s time with her and Steve rapidly replaced the negativity of his previous longing. Again, Hermione was struck by the significance of her presence in Bucky’s mind; it humbled her.

The word was the last trigger but Hermione stayed in his mind to stimulate the healthy growth of positive associations. When she was satisfied that the changes were stronger than the previous connections—that there was no way the triggers could reconnect—Hermione finally left Bucky’s minds pace. She returned back to the world with a shuddering gasp, dimly noting Steve reacting on her right. She felt utterly exhausted in a way she hadn’t felt since she healed her last difficult case two years ago. She gave Steve a tentative smile when he made a noise of inquiry.

Hermione knew it was completed the minute she withdrew from his mind. The healing was successful and just like the time she had healed her parents she felt a different kind of significance in her healing. Bucky’s eyes were open when she finally met them, he was breathing heavily—his eyes wild. He also knew but seemed disinclined to believe it.

“Say them.” He ordered frantically as Steve watched the interaction between them. Hermione knew he would ask this of her—she had practiced the foreign words diligently until she was comfortable with the pronunciation. She was confident in the healing but she could not prevent the quiver in her voice as she read.

“желание.” The first word caught Bucky’s breath but she continued. “ржавый. Семнадцать. Рассвет. Добросердечный. возвращение на родину. Один. грузовой вагон.” She finished the words and paused before reading the final check—the final piece in the code. ”добрый утренний солдат.” Good Morning, Soldier. Hermione focused on Bucky, eager to watch his expression.

“It’s gone.” Bucky whispered softly into the air. He looked up at Hermione, catching her eyes. “It’s gone.” He said again, looking so in awe of her that Hermione’s breath was struck. “Finally—I’m free.” He said into the air. Hermione smiled, a shaky thing filled with hope. There were tears in her eyes but she ignored them.

“Finally.” She repeated. Bucky reached across the space between them to embrace her. The air sang with Bucky’s happiness and relief. Hermione thanked the powers she had, happy to help someone so dear to her.

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Bucky knew he was free the moment Hermione withdrew from his mind. Still, he demanded she say the code that often led to the slaughter of those around him. Each word she said was both relief and terror. When she finished, when she completed the code and he realized he was in control and unaffected, he finally allowed the realization to sink in. He was free and Hydra could no longer control him.

The freedom was strange, like some barrier had finally been dismantled and before Bucky knew what he was doing, he was embracing and then lifting Hermione into the air with a spin, laughing in
a way that was truly wholehearted—the sound rusty from disuse. Her arms wrapped around his forearms in surprise before she was laughing too, her hair swinging around in wild curls. Their spinning slowed, their laughter softened and he slowly lowered her down the length of his body. She did not shift back when her feet hit the ground, instead she seemed to almost lean back into him. Her face was in his and he thought he could kiss her—knew he wanted to. Her eyes seemed alive in a way he’d not seen. He could see the jumping of her chest, erratic as his own. He leaned in to do something but was thrown off when Steve threw his arms around them both to give a loud ‘woop’ of joy. Hermione blushed when the eye contact broke and Bucky rolled his eyes at Steve’s unfortunate timing but the triangular hug was still just as warming as the laughter bubbling out of his chest.

For once he felt free.

The effect of Hermione’s healing was not always instantaneous or detectable. Her healing before showed only in the small amount of levity he felt when he knew he’d normally feel anguish—when he recognized he was not falling into his usual despair. The removal of his triggers, however, granted him a sudden clarity as if a literal weight had been lifted off the pressure in his mind. The day after they were removed he was eager to laugh and joke and feel in a way that had always seemed reigned in before.

He was not the same as before his capture—wasn’t the same as before the war—but he was suddenly more himself than he had felt in a long time as he laughingly allowed Hermione to stick another sticker on his arm—a lightening bolt courtesy of little James.

“This one is like the scar his father has,” Hermione clarified. “So James insists you get better post haste.”

“Well consider my post hastened.” Bucky smirked back, eying the new lightning bolt sticker. He thought it would make more sense for this particular sticker to glitter instead of the pony—but he would not complain.

Bucky’s quick ease spread fast to Steve who seemed to instantly revert back to the childish asshole who liked to jump Bucky at every opportunity to play fight. Though they had both been super soldiers for what had now been years, they sometimes forgot how much stronger they truly were.

In one childish incident over the next day, Bucky and Steve were play wrestling when they fell over the couch. The coffee table split magnificently down the middle with a loud crack and the two froze in horror when they realized they had destroyed Hermione’s furniture. She appeared not two seconds later with her wand out and caution on her face. Bucky and Steve felt her gaze as she gauged their guilty faces. She fixed the table in an instant, snorting about childish boys before she departed for the basement again.

Bucky and Steve watched her go, feeling very much like they were just caught by their mom stealing cookies from a cookie jar. Steve snapped out of it first, sticking another sticker on Bucky’s metal arm so quickly that Bucky didn’t deflect it, instead attacking Steve again with more courtesy to prevent furniture disasters. Later, Bucky found the sticker covered his entire red star with a Captain America shield. Bucky did not hesitate to ask Hermione to permanently stick it to him—forever covering up the emblem that reminded him of his past.

Still, with all Bucky’s recovering, it took him another week to feel comfortable enough to go outside the house—and it was only with Hermione’s insistence.

“My spell will ensure that no one actively looks at us, it’ll feel like they don’t even notice us.” Hermione comforted. Bucky adjusted the cap on his head, wearing a thick long sleeve and a jacket with pockets to hide his metal arm. It was uncomfortably warm.
“What about cameras? Hydra might not be able to control me if they grab me but they can always continue to hunt me down.” Bucky asked in concern, avoiding her eyes. Hermione rested a single hand on his forearm and Bucky could not resist gazing upon her face.

“I have another spell, it works like a reflection, any camera or recording device blurs at the face or causes sunspots or something so your face cannot be recorded.” She assuaged his concern. “Besides, we’ll be there in case anything goes wrong.” Hermione glanced at Steve who nodded in agreement.

The spell worked exactly as Hermione said it would. People’s eyes seemed to pass through the trio as if they weren’t even there. Still, people seemed to dodge them as they walked, unconsciously avoiding them and giving them wide berth. Their destination was only a block away from their home. They entered the store and Bucky tried to be discreet in his staring.

“This place is so big.” Bucky whispered to Steve who chuckled.

“Yeah, the first time I saw a modern grocery store I got lost.” Steve admitted. “You should see the kind of food they have—you’d never have imagined it!” Hermione was unfurling her list beside them as she moved towards the produce.

“Put whatever you want in the trolley.” Hermione said absently.

“The what?” Buck asked as he squinted his eyes. Hermione turned around and raised an eyebrow.

“The trolley.” Hermione said pointing to the shopping cart Steve was pushing.

“A shopping cart.” Steve corrected.

“A trolley.” Hermione said with narrowed eyes. Steve wisely yielded.

“What do we need?” Steve asked. Bucky eyed the plums, packing a few into the cart when they smelled sweet.

“Aubergine. Courgette. Carrots. Cos lettuce…whatever produce you want.” Hermione ran her finger down the list as she walked. Bucky and Steve both stopped to stare.

“All I understood was carrots.” Bucky said and Steve nodded in agreement. Hermione turned around with a huff.

“Aubergine. Courgette. Cos lettuce.” Hermione said as she picked up and tossed the produce into the cart.

“Eggplant. Zucchini. Romaine lettuce.” Steve corrected as he picked up each respective product. Hermione huffed again and stomped her foot. Bucky snickered at her tantrum. She wandered off down the aisle.

“Playing a dangerous game there, Steve.” Bucky said over his shoulder. Steve gave him a half-smirk and a shrug, following Hermione’s irritated steps.

“This?” Steve asked, holding up the green herb. Hermione narrowed her eyes.

“Coriander.” She identified.

“Cilantro.” Bucky chimed in. Hermione pursed her lips and Bucky struggled to contain his grin.

“You have coriander seeds, why wouldn’t it be called coriander?” She debated.
“What about these?” Bucky asked as he looked at the cookies, knowing already what she would say.

“Biscuits! Weren’t you in Britain once before? Shouldn’t you both have an inkling as to the correct names of these items?” Hermione said hotly. Bucky and Steve shared a snicker.

“What do you call fries?” Bucky asked with a small smirk.

“Chips.”

“But what do you call chips?” Steve added.

“Crisps!” Hermione declared shrilly. “English is from England and you Yankees are the ones who are utterly incorrect!” She continued primly. Bucky and Steve laughed at her expression as they navigated the junk food aisle.

“Alright, alright. Crisps and chips, aside…” Bucky began in a placating tone. “What even are these?” Bucky asked as he picked up one brightly colored package. “Chicken and waffle flavor? Bacon Mac and Cheese?” Steve and Hermione both grimaced beside him.

“Perhaps you should just stick to BBQ or salt and vinegar.” Hermione suggested, grabbing the bags from his hand to return them to their place on the shelf. Bucky looked at the flavors in concentration.

“I don’t know, I think we should try at least one strange one. What do you think?” Bucky said, turning to Steve and holding up the bright colored bag.

“I did want to experiment…” Steve smirked, grasping the bag to toss in the cart. Hermione gave a look of disgust.

“Continuing on…” Hermione said as she passed by the cold goods and items. “Grab some orange juice, if you’d like.” Hermione instructed. Bucky looked at the cartons on the cold shelves.

“Pulp or no pulp?” Bucky asked, knowing he preferred pulp but wanting to please Hermione.

“I prefer with bits but you can get whatever.” Hermione said loftily as she picked out some other cold items. Steve and Bucky exchanged a look at the terminology.

“Bits? You mean pulp?” Bucky continued teasingly. Hermione rolled her eyes. “How can you claim your English is superior if you can’t even describe pulpy orange juice?”

“With bits or no bits works just as fine.” Hermione defended. “Are you too really going to do this all day?”

“One more—what do you call this?” Bucky asked picking up molasses.

“Treacle.” Hermione said primly.

“Maybe we should have an English food night.” Steve suggested as they paid for their groceries. “We already know pudding is dessert—but what about other English food phrases.” Steve asked. Bucky snorted beside him. Suddenly, he recalled a memory of his distant path.

“We should all go out to eat some time.” Bucky suggested, eying the crowd outside the grocery store warily. Their eyes still slid past him, but the effect was still unsettling.

“That’d be lovely! Where to?” Hermione asked, looking pleased that Bucky was even suggesting anything at all.
“I want to eat at Melting Pot…” Bucky requested with a sudden smirk. Steve did not even tense; Bucky assumed he probably had never heard of the restaurant Bucky had googled online.

“The fondue restaurant?” Hermione asked in confusion. She looked even more confused when Steve let out a groan of frustration.

“Really, Buck?” Steve said with an air of dismay.

“What’s wrong? I don’t understand…” Hermione trailed off as she tried to follow the conversation. Bucky was eying Steve, laughing when the pink tinted his cheeks.

“Let’s just say…Steve isn’t exactly a food connoisseur.” Bucky started.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, tilting her head slightly.

“Our boy, here, is not a linguist.” Bucky said with a small gesture towards Steve.

“I know French! I just don’t know slang!” Steve defended.

“I didn’t know you knew French!” Hermione said, glancing at Steve with what looked like faint approval. Steve seemed to preen at her appreciation. Bucky rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, Pepe Le Pew, misunderstood Peggy and Stark’s fondue date for a fun do date.” Bucky snickered.

“That was one time! I didn’t know French slang and I admittedly didn’t know many culinary delights.” Steve pouted. Hermione blinked before giggling at his expense.

“Bucky, your incorrigible! The only reason you want to eat there is to rub it in Steve’s face—isn’t it?” Hermione accused. “This must have happened decades ago!”

“Technically, it’s only felt like a few years.” Bucky defended. “But yes—I figure that Steve needs to experience fondue first hand.” Hermione was still giggling, while Steve looked abashed but amused.

“Let’s say we finish dropping off these groceries and then we can go out tonight. I have this money that I strangely found in a random book in my house.” Hermione continued mildly. “A strange place for a strange amount of money that seems suspiciously like the amount I once gave someone who was buying my groceries and assorted items.” Hermione trailed off. Steve coughed awkwardly and laughed, reminding Bucky of the fact Hermione had paid and was still paying for his food and personal items. He was suddenly reminded of all the things he owed Hermione. He stopped walking as he paused.

How could someone ever pay her back for the things she had done?

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for all my delayed writings—I have to admit, I’m losing steam a little bit as it’s been transferred to the Reylo train from Star Wars (and now I want to write fics for
that). Of course, I’m still aiming to finish this fic in January. It is difficult; I have strategic points in this story I want to hit—including a chapter that’s already written—but I keep adding new content and chapters! I like adding to the depth of the story but it seems like I take one step closer to the next big plot line and two steps back! Despite that, I love all your suggestions and I still love to receive them. I’m hoping to get some more writing done this weekend. I might even be tempted to do a one-shot for Christmas. Stay tuned to find out! Thank you for reading!
Trouble

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own either universe.

Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! Please continue to do so!

If you have any headcanon/fluffs/plot bunnies you want to see, I’m highly susceptible to suggestion.

In any case, thanks for reading and please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

-0-0-0— Trouble

“So you can formally date Steve.” Ginny commented idly as she stirred her tea. Hermione smiled wanly as she peered outside the window of the renovated Grimmauld place. Ginny’s pregnancy had reached the second trimester and Hermione had come to help modify the nursery for fun more so than necessity.

“I haven’t told him yet, but yes, Steve no longer requires my services.” Hermione clarified, pointedly ignoring Ginny’s insinuations. Ginny still flashed Hermione an impish smirk.

“Oh, I think he has plenty need of your services.” Ginny continued obnoxiously. Hermione huffed as she threw her cloth napkin at the redhead. It stopped short of hitting her but Ginny laughed as she caught it. “Oh honestly, Hermione, just tell him he’s done,” came Ginny’s pithy suggestion. Hermione remained silent as Ginny swept measuring eyes over her taciturn form. She clucked her tongue in a sound that reminded Hermione of Molly Weasley—something she did not reveal to her friend. “You don’t want to release Steve until Bucky’s ready—do you?” Ginny identified knowingly. Hermione couldn’t stop her grimace of undeniable agreement.

“Bucky still requires some time.” Hermione admitted, breaking off a bit of her biscuit to distract herself from the heaviness of the conversation’s intentions. “Releasing Steve before Bucky will only create more uncomfortable situations, I think.”

“They do seem to be a package deal.” Ginny continued with a soft hum. “When do you think you’ll clear Bucky?”

“Late October.” Hermione mumbled.

“That’s not far away at all!” Ginny gaped. “You’ve already turned the corner!” Ginny said easily, waving her tea biscuit before taking a bite. “Still, if you did tell Steve now you’d be able to snog him sooner.” Ginny added as an afterthought. Hermione blushed hotly.

“Once again, I don’t expect anything!” Hermione reiterated with some frustration. “I’m fully aware that any possibility will crash and burn once they put distance between us.” Hermione clarified, attempting to keep the melancholy from her voice while urging Ginny to get to her point.
“Hermione, any relationship will fail if you just walk away.” Ginny reprimanded with a scowl. “Though those two might be stubborn enough to flutter about you until you get your head out of your arse.” Ginny amended. Hermione huffed, annoyed. Ginny rolled her eyes and tossed back the cloth napkin, hitting Hermione in the face and surprising her into silence before she could begin her rant. “Those boys are smitten, Hermione, and so are you. Merlin! Is this what everyone dealt with when Harry and I danced around each other?” Ginny groused bitterly. Hermione frowned. “I understand your history and even your reasoning for waiting,” Ginny continued with a calmer tone, “but once the healing ends the feelings will still be there. When they pursue you—and I know they will—how long will it take before you realize they feel what they feel and it isn’t because your powers lingered in their minds?”

Despite Hermione’s persistent fear of a tragedy repeating, she allowed herself to contemplate the question as if it had merit. “It took two months before everything was completely pear shaped.” Hermione thought aloud, glancing briefly at Ginny. “I suppose if—if—they were still interested I might believe they were serious.” Hermione winced with further consideration. “Though I did delve deeper into Bucky’s mind which might have more of an eff—“

“They won’t let you down, Hermione.” Ginny interrupted with determination. “They’re sincere and I think their feelings for you will only grow. You just have to give them that chance when it’s time.”

“Their feelings are for their healer—not for me.” Hermione speculated meekly.

“Oh, bullshite!” Ginny said loudly, throwing her own napkin down on the table in anger. “You only love Harry because he’s a hero!”

“Okay, Gin!” Hermione said, raising her hands placating. “You love Harry for a multitude of reasons!”

“Who? I love him because he was a hero…and because he was a brilliant seeker, because he was loyal to his friends, brave, selfless, witty and remarkably sassy, because his eyes were emerald green, because his hair never seemed to lie flat, because he still walks in a way that doesn’t take up space—“

Hermione sighed and stared into her tea. For a brief moment she wondered what it would be like to divine her future in her tea leaves—skip to immediately knowing if they would work out. She snorted at the thought—divination was utter rot after all. “Here’s to hope.” Hermione raised her teacup with an air of self-deprecation. Ginny shook her head wryly before tapping her tea cup against Hermione’s with an audible ‘clink’.

“Hope’s done well for us before.” Ginny commented before sipping her drink. Hermione added no final retort.

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Days later, the conversation with Ginny still weighed heavily on Hermione’s mind. She still hadn’t told Steve; instead she merely reduced the amount of time she healed him—which conveniently coincided with an increase in his work. Between her decreased healing schedule with Steve and Bucky and a general lull in her regular work, Hermione had some available time. Unfortunately for Hermione, free time meant time unintentionally relegated to fretting over the relationship potential of her roommates. Disgusted with the emotionality of it all, Hermione took to frequent walks and stops about her neighborhood.
People-watching was a useful escape from her stress and between the boys and the uneasy conversation she had with Serafina about magical muggle mental residue, she was stressed. Admittedly, even her people watching hobby came with ulterior motives; she had heard more voices calling out in unique but similar ways that Steve, Bucky, and Natasha had—including a man she had all but bowled over when she entered her favorite small café. His mind had called to her with traces of pain but he seemed shockingly upbeat and well adjusted. Her lingering curiosity made her regret not questioning him then and there, irrelevant to the surrounding muggles.

Hermione shuffled into said café just at the tail end of lunch rush, lingering at a small table against the wall—a single tea in hand. She always liked to pick a good vantage sight to maximize her people-watching. Some of that desire was born from her war time instincts demanding to keep everyone in her view but Hermione could ignore that reasoning in favor of creating various narratives for the people around her. Admittedly, she could cheat and read their minds—but there was something exciting about watching people and creating elaborate back stories that were usually incredibly false. All things considered, it was fairly benign artificial judgements of people.

Like the pot-bellied man with grey temples and a warm smile. He seemed like the age and demeanor of a proud grandfather picking up lunch for his family. He had a rough relationship with his daughter after his wife died but when his daughter welcomed her own child into the world; they had bonded over their love for the little girl. The straining in his take-away seemed to indicate she could be correct—or the man was gluttonous. She supposed it didn’t matter either way.

Hermione picked a new stranger, drawn to a pretty and prim redhead with fantastic postures and incredibly high red-bottomed shoes waiting dutifully in line. She was most certainly not a Weasley because she looked decidedly mismatched with the boho vibe of the café. Hermione thought she might seem more at home in some sleek and modern restaurant signing contracts and forcing mergers. She chuckled to herself as one young teen nearly ran into the door as he stared at the (presumably) businesswoman. Or maybe she was a banker, Hermione wondered arbitrarily.

Hermione’s good humor dipped when she noticed a middle-aged, rotund, and balding man creep closer to the pretty redhead from his place in line. He was unremarkable in the way that blended him into the world around him—so unlike the pretty redhead who seemed to both command attention and shift uncomfortably as the man conversed with her. Rather instinctually, Hermione stood from her chair and meandered over to the two. She broadened her senses but could sense nothing magically about either of them. She did not delve into their minds but she did hear snippets of the conversation, enough that she was already steaming by the time she finally approached.

“Hey, I’m just trying to give you a compliment.” The man said with a degree of entitlement that Hermione hated. “You should be grateful that I’m complimenting you at all; you obviously dressed up for a reason.” The man continued, looking a mixture of offended and flirtatious. Outraged on behalf of the woman, Hermione continued forward, striding up to the conversation and aligning herself beside the woman to face the man with her hands resting on her hips.

“Have you considered that perhaps the reason this woman is wearing business attire is because she was in fact conducting business? Maybe she dressed up for a presumed occupation and not for the intention of being noticed by some random pedestrian in an offbeat café?” Hermione interrupted scathingly. The man had turned to face her during her rant, his face pinching into something foul-looking. The man had turned to face her during her rant, his face pinching into something foul-looking.

“No one asked you, you uppity bitch.” The man bit out, immediately hostile.

“Excuse you!” Hermione continued heatedly. “Don’t be so foul! No one asked for your opinions, I’m sure!” Hermione’s loud tone had drawn a crowd and Hermione resisted the urge to hex the
muggle. The guy eyed the growing crowd before mumbling, his posture forcibly relaxing into something a little tense.

“I was just offering my company to someone who seemed lonely—that’s all. God forbid a guy try to be nice to someone.” The man complained bitterly.

“She was waiting for me.” Hermione snarled with narrowed eyes. The crowd infinitely curious, the man infinitely shammed, and Hermione infinitely protective; she did not relax until the man grabbed his preordered food and left. Hermione turned immediately to the woman. “Are you okay?” Hermione asked politely. “I hope I wasn’t being too presumptuous—you looked uneasy and the conversation seemed to indicate he wasn’t welcome.” Hermione mumbled apologetically, concerned that her Gryffindor tendencies had operated a little too ‘leap first, look later.’

“Thank you—I’m fine.” The woman uttered gratefully. “I’m fine.” She reiterated. “I’m unfortunately used to it and he was certainly not welcome.” Hermione frowned at that.

“Well, it always seems easier to stand up for someone else, in my opinion.” Hermione said with a sympathetic smile. The woman seemed to brighten.

“Let me get you a coffee!” She offered generously.

“Oh no, I’m quite alright—I was already sitting down when I noticed his little show.” Hermione said as she gestured towards her table. Hermione paused to regard the woman. “I’m Hermione.” She greeted after a moment, her hand outstretched.

“I’m Pepper—nice to meet you.” The redhead said offering a dainty hand that Hermione shook quickly. It was dainty but firm, Hermione noticed.

“Pleasure to meet you, too. You’re welcome to sit at my table if you’d like.” Hermione offered. “No pressure of course.” Hermione waved the suggestion off casually. Pepper smiled at her shyly.

“Actually, that sounds nice. Are you sure you don’t want anything?” Pepper offered again.

“Well I suppose I wouldn’t deny a muffin.” Hermione said with a smile. Pepper smiled back, apparently grateful to repay Hermione with some small token. Hermione waited with Pepper as she grabbed her coffee, salad, and Hermione’s muffin. “So, it happens a lot?” Hermione questioned after a moment as they sat at her table. Pepper took a bite of her salad before nodding.

“Unfortunately, yes—it is New York City, after all. I take it by your accent you aren’t from around here?” Pepper ventured.

“I’m from Britain, yes.” Hermione replied. “Though I’ve lived here for several years now.”

“Oh? Did you move for work?” Pepper asked. Hermione nodded, sipping her drink noticeably lukewarm tea.

“I did. I take it you’re taking your lunch break now?” Hermione asked with a glance at her attire. “Banking?” She guessed. Pepper chuckled.

“No, I actually work for a tech conglomerate.” Pepper corrected.

“Over in the tech hub corridor?” Hermione asked with a nod in the general direction. Pepper nodded. “What brings you out here? It must have taken some time in rush hour to get here.” Hermione commented idly, knowing the muggle traffic to be halting at the hour.
“I was in the area and a friend recommended this restaurant.” Pepper added.

“I’m quite fond of the food.” Hermione said with a small smile.

“Good reviews online, too.” Pepper agreed. “So, what do you do for work, Hermione?” Pepper asked as she took a few more bites of her salad. Hermione had attempted to nibble delicately at her muffin but she had nearly devoured it in a handful of bites.

“I’m a mental health specialist.” Hermione responded breezily enough. “I came over for some education and collaboration opportunities.” Pepper blinked in surprise.

“Wow, do you have a business card? I know a few people who could really use the help.” Pepper questioned in a joking-yet-serious tone. Hermione laughed lightly.

“Unfortunately, I’m not currently accepting new patients—but I could recommend a few for your friends.” Hermione offered kindly. “What kind of experiences did they have—if you don’t mind me asking.” Pepper set down her fork gently.

“Well...they have had some near-death experiences…there are some definitely narcissistic tendencies…egotistical problems…attachment problems.” Pepper seemed to contemplate longer. “They just… they just have problems.” Pepper summed with a grimace. Hermione nodded along sympathetically.

“Well everyone can benefit from therapy but it really seems like your friends especially could.” Hermione said, pulling a card out of her wallet and passing it to her new friend. “Here’s a friend of mine who might be able to help—they’re a great psychiatrist.” Pepper took the card gratefully.

“You know who else could benefit from help?” Pepper said under her breath. “That guy…” Pepper began, drawing Hermione into a conversation about the men of New York and their cat-calling tendencies. It was only sometime later, after Pepper had left, that Hermione had realized she had successfully distracted her stress away.

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Bucky smiled at his perfect cupcakes, popping one into his mouth and grinning at the flavor. Baking, unlike cooking, was far more of an exact science—and Bucky could do science. His icing technique was subpar, but the articles he was reading online were helping him perfect his technique. Between baking and Bucky’s secret attempts at knitting, Bucky was confident he would be able to have a suitable present for Hermione by Christmas.

“Bucky!” Steve called as he rounded the hallway corner. “Are you ready?” He asked, frowning as he spotted Bucky still in the kitchen. Bucky turned off the oven, taking off his apron and hanging it on a hook and switching it for a ball cap.

“I’m ready.” Bucky said with an easy smile. “Where’s Hermione?” He asked.

“To reiterate—I am not riding the roller coasters or giant swings or spinning things.” Hermione said begrudgingly as she emerged from the hallway. Bucky and Steve exchanged a look of amusement.

“Not even one?” Bucky teased. Hermione bristled.

“Set your expectation to zero; I am not thrilled about thrill rides.” Hermione grimaced. “Now—are we ready?” Hermione asked as if Bucky and Steve weren’t waiting for her.

“Ready.” Bucky and Steve chimed in synchrony. Hermione grasped their hand and Bucky allowed
himself a small trickle of fear before she apparated him. His first (conscious) apparition experience was disconcerting, mildly alarming, and not nearly as nauseating as he was led to believe—super soldier benefits he supposed. He frowned as his arm seemed to stutter for a moment before it ‘whirred’ back into movement.

“Sorry.” Hermione apologized with a frown. “The last time you were apparated, you were unconscious and it didn’t seem like you had any side effects.” Bucky shrugged it off.

“Just a small delay with the electricity; it’s not a problem.” Bucky brought his thumb up to brush the frown off Hermione’s face, causing her to smile slightly as her cheeks tinted with a flush.

“Come on!” Steve urged excitedly, grabbing Hermione’s hand and causing Hermione to latch onto Bucky as Steve pulled them out of the random alley to cross the street. Bucky allowed himself to take in the sight briefly before tugging the ball cap down over his face; he was still uneasy around large groups of people, having left the house only a handful of times for groceries—never alone. This entire trip, however, had been Steve’s idea to accustom Bucky to crowds.

“Coney Island seems a little bit different than I remember.” Bucky commented softly as he forced Steve to walk more sedately down the streets of the neighborhood. “Why didn’t you come here before?” Bucky asked, taking in Steve’s enthusiasm. Steve sobered for a moment, eyes averting. “Didn’t seem right.” Steve murmured above the din of the crowds. “Until now.” Steve corrected brightly, moving with an eager energy that amused Bucky and Hermione judging by her reluctant smile. They continued walking down the streets—Bucky noticing that everything had shifted, changed or been outright demolished. Steve noticed the same, commenting that at least the park had remained open. Judging from the couples all filtering around, it was also still a great place for dates. Bucky, inspired, slowed his step further to pace with Hermione. She glanced up at him questioningly but he just smiled and shook his head. Ahead of them, Steve was still walking quickly.

“Your spell is amazing.” Bucky commented, knowing without a doubt that Steve would have acquired national press if he had been recognized.

“It was made out of necessity.” Hermione said with a snort. “I may not be recognized here but I am still accosted in Wizarding London routinely.” Hermione came to stop when Steve paused. She glanced up, her features tightening as she paled. “No.” She declared fiercely when Steve gazed at her expectantly. Bucky chuckled. “Absolutely not, Steve!” She continued. Bucky stepped forward to throw his arm around Steve’s shoulders who despite being a block of muscle and height still managed to look like a kicked puppy.

“I don’t know, Stevie, you think you can manage to hold your stomach this time around?” Bucky teased, glancing up and reading the renovated ‘Cyclone’ sign.

“I’m just amazed that this is still around.” Steve commented in awed surprise.

“The last time I went on a roller coaster I was eight.” Hermione mentioned dispassionately beside them, her arms hugging her form around her middle. “I think I cried.” Hermione recalled darkly. Bucky struggled to thwart his grin—it was rare to see Hermione so petulant.

“This is the Coney Island Cyclone!” Steve continued gesturing at the ride. Hermione grimaced. “It’s the top of the to-do list in New York—the mother of American roller coaster culture!” Steve enthused.

“There are only two seats—really you two should just go by yourselves.” Hermione attempted to persuade.
“I’ll sit behind you.” Bucky offered, causing Hermione to shoot him a glare. He smirked at her, shaking his head fondly. “If you can ride dragons, I think you can manage this.” Bucky insisted quietly, his eyebrows raising in challenge. Hermione scowled but moved to stand in line.

“You’re both monsters—just so we’re clear.” Hermione continued to steam, her lips jutting out as she sulked. Bucky and Steve exchanged looks of amusement. “You owe me funnel cake and candy floss.” Hermione bartered, eyes widening with trace amounts of fear the closer she got to the start.

“Candy floss?” Steve asked in confusion.

“Big fluffy clouds of dentists’ nightmares.” Hermione elaborated, still pouting.

“Cotton candy.” Bucky realized. Hermione sniffed her nose up into the air.

“Regardless, you owe me treats.” Hermione said again as they were seated into the ride. Bucky sat directly behind her laughing as she grabbed Steve’s hand tightly. “Lots and lots of treats—maybe ice cream with chocolate.” Hermione continued, closing her eyes as the safety bar tucked her in.

“You’ll be fine, Hermione.” Bucky murmured softly into her ear.

“I better be, James Barnes, or so help me I will—” Hermione broke off her shrill diatribe when the ride lurched forward and caused her to whimper. Steve was already laughing in excitement beside her and Bucky couldn’t help but feel enamored with her little display of bravery. It was laughable, he thought, that this two-minute ride could scare any of them when they were all physically or magically capable of saving themselves in the event of an emergency; they all had had much, much worse.

Aside from the small peep Hermione uttered when the ride started, she was quiet the entire time. Bucky could hear Steve’s thrilled, delighted laughter beside her, the sound not stopping when they pulled into the station. When the bar lifted, Bucky leaned over where Hermione was still seated.

“You alright, darling?” Bucky began uneasily. She was pale, shaking, and pissed.

“Let’s do that again!” Steve declared excitedly.

“Never again.” She uttered hoarsely. Steve chuckled as he helped her out of her seat.

“You could ride with Bucky and I’ll ride behind you.” Steve offered, apparently ignorant to the connotation of his suggestion.

“You are on my list.” Hermione ground out as she stormed off shakily, disregarding Steve aside from a glare she aimed at them both. The force of it clenched something in Bucky’s stomach.

“So…treats?” Steve asked in a good humor despite the severity of Hermione’s expression. Bucky shook his head in amusement before ruffling Steve’s hair playfully.

“Well, seeing as you didn’t throw up this time, I suppose you earned it.” Bucky teased before following Hermione’s fuming form. Steve attempted to fix his mussed hair beside Bucky with a frown and a grumble. “Cotton candy or funnel cake?” Bucky lifted his voice to reach Hermione. She tensed, turned around and gave him devious little smile.

“You owe me so many treats.” Hermione threatened. “Starting with funnel cake.” Bucky gave a small smile at her declaration, not bothering to mention that he only had her money so anything he was buying was really her purchase. In the end, Bucky managed to distract her long enough to have Steve pay with his own money. One round of cotton candy, funnel cake, and ice cream later and Hermione’s ire seemed to wane. After Hermione had maniacally rammed Steve’s car in the bumper
car rink—vicious thing that she was—they finally went for a more substantial snack.

Bucky sat, guarding a coveted table as Steve and Hermione waited for a Nathan’s hot dog. Bucky couldn’t help observing the people who walked by—all different than the past that he remembered. The people of today were dressed different, moved different, talked different, and acted different but Bucky knew inside they were still the same as people in the ‘40’s; some were good, some were bad, most were indifferent.

He pulled his cap lower despite knowing that every single eye would slip past him until he chose to interact with an individual. He had opted to wait at the table while Steve and Hermione waited in line, content to give them space. Suddenly, Bucky’s senses began to tingle a familiar sensation. Groaning to himself, Bucky swept his eyes over the line and realized he did not see Steve nor Hermione in line—nor were they waiting for food. Bucky stood and began looking around, trusting what his innate senses were telling him. He had called the sense his ‘oh shit, Steve’ sense—developed from a childhood spent with a tiny kid with everything to prove—but Hermione was with him and surely would be keeping Steve in line. Still, it shouldn’t have been a surprise when he found them both entering a back alley. Bucky kept a measured walk until he turned the same corner, sound assailing him as if he turned on a TV. Bucky gaped in surprise when he spotted Steve fighting with multiple young men, Hermione standing protectively over a girl on the ground and swishing her wand tightly beside her leg in a way that largely kept her casting hidden. Bucky’s temper flared.

“Really?!” Bucky exclaimed as he waded into the fray, catching an assailant by his wrist and throwing him against a brick wall. “Out of my sight for two minutes—two minutes.” Bucky complained as Steve flashed him a guilty look.

“They deserved it!” Hermione said stonily, catching Bucky’s eyes when a random attacker dropped to the ground like a puppet without strings.

“They needed to learn some manners.” Steve agreed, not batting an eye as someone broke a bat over his arm before Steve knocked him out.

“Every fucking time…” Bucky ranted darkly as he crushed a knife along with the hand that wielded it.

“They were revolting and disgusting!” Hermione retorted, dropping a man as he emerged from a random door. Hermione gestured meaningfully at the young preteen cowering against the brick wall of the building behind her.

“Et tu, Hermione? You both have a habit of back alley brawling?” Bucky complained, noting with annoyance that more punks had emerged from the surrounding building.

“Hey! Technically Hermione started this!” Steve clarified pacing back to stand next to Bucky as a circle around them had cleared.

“Technically, they started it.” Hermione amended, seemingly unaffected by the current events.

“Careful, Bucky!” Steve called when someone lunged at Bucky with another knife. Hermione and Bucky both snorted at the hypocrisy, Bucky quickly dispatching the threat.

“What prompted them to start this…gang war?” Bucky questioned, taking a step closer to Steve as the assailants had formed a ‘u’ around Bucky and Steve. One man standing just before the others with his hand hovering close to what Bucky suspected was a gun.

“Hey look man, this is all a misunderstanding.” The man said, his eyes flickering with bad intent in
contrast with his seemingly easy smile. “We just want the girl and you can leave.” The girl whimpered.

“I don’t think there was a misunderstanding at all.” Hermione seemingly snarled, standing rigidly in front of the girl. Bucky had never seen her so wound up and aggressive.

“No—the misunderstanding is that you thought you had a choice.” The man said with a cocky grin. Quickly he raised his hand with the predicted gun, firing at Bucky who was closest to the man. Bucky raised his metal arm to block the bullet but it seemingly dissolved in the air before it reached him. Still, the presence of the gun had made the stakes infinitely more dangerous and made Bucky infinitely more bad tempered. “Bad idea.” Bucky warned threateningly, eyeing the shooter who was looking at his gun in confusion. Bucky stepped closer, grasped the barrel, and crushed it quickly before breaking the man’s jaw with a satisfying punch. The men behind the shooter attempted to flee but Bucky and Steve advanced on them.

“This is why we can’t have nice trips.” Bucky muttered angrily, knocking another one out. “I’d just like one trip where I don’t end up saving your ass from getting whooped.” Bucky growled.

“Well, we didn’t know it would end up like this when we followed the girl—we weren’t looking for trouble.” Steve continued less than contritely, throwing a loose brick at someone who had attempted to flee. Glass shattered as more men appeared in window frames with guns.

“No, trouble always seems to find you.” Bucky said darkly, eyes assessing the new shooters. Suddenly he wished he hadn’t crushed the gun, knowing he could have negated the threats already if he hadn’t. Hermione, who had seemingly held back on blatant displays of magic, stepped forward to aim at people in the windows who began to shoot in their direction. Bucky and Steve made quick work of knocking out the remaining stragglers on the ground level who had looked shocked at the magical display.

“What did you want us to do?” Hermione said between spells. “Leave her?” Hermione glanced down at the female who had taken refuge behind her legs. “Why were they even after you?” Hermione questioned quickly.

“They’re after my brother!” The young girl cried. Steve cursed at the sounds of guns firing but Hermione had seemingly taken care of all the gunmen and bullets. She closed her eyes briefly as the air seemed to settle around them.

“That’s everyone.” Hermione said as she opened her eyes.

“How can you tell?” Steve asked before Hermione gave him a significant look before tapping her head. Steve realized gave an ‘oh’ of realization.

“Accio guns!” Hermione spelled suddenly. Bucky blinked in surprise when a parade of weapons flew through the immediate area to descend on Hermione. Steve and Bucky doubled over to protect her from the barrage of arms, wincing slightly when they were pelted—that was going to bruise. “Sorry!” Hermione exclaimed. “I didn’t realize there would be so many! Bloody lack of American gun control.” Hermione winced in sympathy. “I’ll take care of the bruises at home.”

“What—are you?” The girl questioned, looking shocked and awed by Hermione’s display. Hermione shared a look of surprise with Bucky and Steve, seemingly forgetting the whole reason of their brawl. Hermione did not answer the girl, instead shooting her with a red spell that knocked her unconscious.

A distant blare of police sirens pierced the sudden silence and caused Bucky’s heart to lurch.
“Now what?” Bucky asked anxiously. Steve looked grim as he watched Hermione float all the bodies against a brick wall—their hands in restraints.

“Well I’ll just explain—” Steve began, dragging his hand through his hair.

“Explain that a magical witch and ex assassin interfered in a gang war—” Bucky interrupted with irritation, eyes darting towards the sounds of the sirens and calculating their distance.

“No. I’ll just say that Captain Amer—” Steve interrupted looking unjustifiably frustrated with Bucky as if he had started the fight.

“Captain America isn’t the police and he doesn’t have SHIELD’s jurisdiction—” Bucky reminded his friend crossly.

“My name still has weight—” Steve defended with a frown, crossing his arms across his chest.

“What about the memories of these assholes?” Bucky gestured to the bodies before them, his voice escalating. “I bet they’ll be talking about the crazy shit they saw—”

“Boys.” Hermione interjected beside them as sirens continued to blare around them. Bucky disregarded her as his temper reigned unchecked.

“And they’ll certainly remember my face; it was plastered all over every news source—” Bucky reminded Steve angrily.

“So, you just would’ve let this innocent girl get jumped—” Steve asked with disbelief.

“I’m saying you need to operate with more caution—” Bucky negated the claim, his shoulders beginning to hunch around himself protectively.

“Boys!” Hermione attempted over the sound of sirens again, but Bucky continued to ignore her, still riled up in his anger.

“You always do this, Steve! I can’t take you anywhere—” Bucky was interrupted when Hermione grabbed his wrist, pulling him through a vortex to arrive safely in the quiet of her living room. Bucky shared a surprised look with Steve before they both turned to Hermione.

“The people in the alley?” Steve asked after a momentary pause. Hermione turned her nose up with a sniff.

“I changed their memory so they won’t realize we were ever there.” Hermione said primly.

“What did they think happened?” Steve questioned in surprise.

“I’m not sure; I cut the connection in a way that will rebuild memories based on what seems right.” Hermione answered speculatively, mouth tweaking to the side in thought.

“Have you done this before?” Steve wondered suspiciously. Hermione’s countenance turned grim.

“Yeah…” Hermione admitted with an air of melancholy. It was enough to drain Bucky’s anger and adrenaline and he hung his head in sudden exhaustion.

“We didn’t even get Nathan’s hot dogs…” Bucky groused as he dropped into the nearby sofa. Hermione shrugged unrepentant though her posture still seemed to hunch into herself. Bucky regarded her. He supposed her actions were that surprising, all things considered. It seemed maybe Hermione’s nature was more like Steve’s than Bucky realized. Hermione had, after all, offered to
help Steve without knowing anything about him. She then followed that up by helping Bucky when she only knew the atrocities he had committed. Bucky considered the practicality of getting Steve and Hermione those child leashes he had seen at Coney Island. He sighed, determining the leashes would no work, before laying back against the sofa as the adrenaline wore off further leaving him boneless and clammy. This was his first fight since he had left Hydra and he was still slightly shaking. He covered his face with his hand, flinching slightly when he realized Hermione had stepped forward to grab it.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking—” Hermione began contritely.

“Clearly.” Bucky interrupted in a deadpan tone.

“—about how this would affect you.” Hermione clarified. “Nor did I think it would be quite so cataclysmic.” Hermione explained. “I’m sorry.” Hermione apologized.

“I’m fine.” Bucky said quietly, uncovering his face to look at her properly. She was standing before her visibly worried, her eyebrows down turned as her forehead furrowed. Bucky took his free hand and brushed the wrinkle, willing it away along with her worries. “I’m fine, Hermione—I was just worried for you.” Bucky clarified. Hermione nodded, her eyes softening and Bucky encouraged her to sit beside him, leaving Bucky staring at stubborn Steve.

“I’m sorry you were drug in to it but I’m not sorry I helped.” Steve admitted. Bucky rolled his eyes, tossing a sofa cushion at his friend.

“Don’t worry, asshole, I’m used to you running off.” Bucky chastised. Steve smirked as he tossed back the sofa cushion. Bucky caught it and replaced it on the sofa, grunting when his bruise flexed awkwardly. Hermione jumped in alarm.

“The accio! I’m so sorry—I’ll get the bruise paste.” Hermione said standing up and rushing downstairs into her lab. Bucky and Steve exchanged an amused look before following her. They were surprised when boxes—presents—seemed to be floating around her and bumping her gently. “Oh, honestly!” Hermione complained to herself as she started flicking her wand at the presents. They seemed to float lower to the ground but hovered around her annoyingly. Bucky and Steve exchanged another glance.

“Hermione?” Steve called out. She jumped slightly and turned around.

“One minute.” Hermione said, spelling the presents once again so they came to rest on the floor.

“Are those…presents?” Bucky asked warily, a picture panting in his mind as to what the presents meant. Hermione looked slightly guilty as she nodded. Bucky sighed, pinching the space between his eyes. “It’s your birthday, today—isn’t it?” Bucky confirmed.

“Yes.” Hermione answered succinctly. Steve looked appalled.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Steve asked despairingly. Hermione gave a shy sort of shrug.

“It just didn’t come up.” Hermione said nonchalantly. Bucky and Steve shared a frown.

“We didn’t give you presents.” Steve apologized, looking down at where the magical presents were nudging her ankles.

“We went to Coney Island—that was a lot more fun than my recent birthdays and that’s why I’m going to my parents for dinner.” Hermione placated.
“Hermione, I wish you had told us—we’re your friends and your roommates.” Steve said, shifting uneasily. Hermione shrugged helplessly.

“Well let’s make the most of it.” Bucky said with a resigned air. “I baked cupcakes…so at the least we can sing you happy birthday.” Hermione smiled brightly.

“Bruise paste first.” Hermione said determinedly. After Hermione applied the bruise paste, healing them easily, they moved upstairs. Bucky presented Hermione with a single cupcake and she turned a toothpick into a candle.

“Now you have to make a wish.” Bucky instructed imperiously. Hermione rolled her eyes fondly but seemed to pause in concentration. A quick breath and the candle was out.

“These are really good.” Hermione uttered in delight. Steve hummed in agreement beside her.

“I would’ve made them even better had I known it was your birthday.” Bucky revealed with a frown. Hermione smiled indulgently.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve never really celebrated my birthday. It was during the school season so I never celebrated it at Hogwarts either.” Hermione admitted. Steve looked upset at that.

“What about your friends?” Bucky asked, recalling the presents that had badgered her in the basement. Hermione gave a tiny shrug again.

“They send me presents now, but honestly, we hardly are a group that celebrates each other’s birthdays.” Hermione clarified.

“Didn’t you just have a joint birthday for your friends?” Steve recalled, his eyes narrowing in accusation.

“I’m okay, boys. I’m happy to just have spent time with you—previous back-alley brawls or no.” Hermione said with a laugh. Bucky groaned at the memory.

“You’re both trouble.” Bucky determined, running his hands over his face in exaggerated frustration. Steve chuckled. When Bucky looked up, Steve was giving Bucky a complex look.

“I feel bad about not giving you a present.” Steve began, leading Bucky to recognize where the conversation was heading. “But I have something for you…” Steve trailed off. Hermione’s eyes lit up warmly, turning Steve’s unease into a smile. “I’ll be right back.” Steve declared, bounding to his room. Hermione and Bucky were left sitting at the kitchen island when an awkward silence surrounded them.

“How long has it been since we got here?” Bucky wondered aloud. Hermione glanced over at him, eyes glancing skywards.

“About four months.” Hermione acknowledged, eyes dropping to meet his. Bucky held them before turning away first.

“Can you believe it?” Bucky stood, grasping a cupcake liner in his hands from the island and picking at it to distract himself. “You’ve done so much for us—for me.” Bucky turned his attention back to Hermione. Her eyes were swirling with some unknown emotion and Bucky wished, not for the first time, that he could read her mind instead. “Who knows where I’d be without you; I owe you so much.” He eyed her, intaking her closed expression but her expressive eyes.

“You don’t owe me anything, Bucky.” Hermione whispered, her gaze still locked onto him. Bucky
felt the tension rise between them, something he had acknowledged occurred since even before he
told her to act natural. It was attraction and Bucky could feel it—could see it in her dilated eyes and
in the vein, that showed her fluttering pulse.

“I feel like there’s still so much I don’t know about you.” Bucky commented, dropping the cupcake
liner to move closer to her. She was still sitting on the stool and the normal height disparity between
them was even greater than normal. He could see her chest expanding with every breath, little puffs
of air that sped up the closer he encroached.

“You know me better than most.” Hermione whispered. Bucky let his hands grasp gently below her
chin, tilting her head up as if she hadn’t been enchanted with his actions already.

“I want to know everything about you.” Bucky revealed. Her breath caught at that—her eyes
widening slightly. “Close your eyes.” Bucky instructed.

“What are you doing?” She questioned as she took on a mien of confusion.

“Giving you your birthday present.” Bucky declared. “So, close your eyes.” Bucky instructed again.
Hermione’s eyes drooped down, even as her lips parted to ask why. Before she could ask, Bucky
bent over to meet her lips with his. It was daring, Bucky realized. It was unplanned in that he hadn’t
planned to do it that night but daydreamed about it constantly. Her lips parted willingly, as he met
hers, threatening the promise of more while still remaining somewhat chaste.

“Bu-Bucky.” Hermione moaned, her hands ghosting over the skin of his inside wrists. Her faint
touch teased his senses.

“Hermione.” Bucky groaned between a kiss, thumbs grazing the smoothness of her cheek. She
seemed to stiffen at her name and Bucky withdrew from the kiss with regret to pull back and inspect
her. She was flushed, her eyes widening before alighting with panic.

“You’re still—I’m not—I can’t—” She murmured in shock and Bucky retracted his hands, eyes
closing in frustration.

“Why not?” Bucky questioned, the feeling of her so right and reassuring and perfect that he
wondered if he was truly feeling ill from the loss.

“It’s not a good idea.” Hermione looked anguished as well, as though it truly pained her to reject
what had just occurred.

“Someone did something didn’t they? That’s why you’re holding back—what happened?” Bucky
asked, tired of her denying what she wanted without expressly saying why. She looked at him with
guarded eyes, though Bucky could still recognize the pain in her voice.

“I had a patient, Bucky. I healed his mind.” Hermione told him, head tilting to the side slightly as she
seemed lost in her memory. “I claimed his heart and we were happy.” She looked down at her empty
hands. “Eventually he didn’t need treatment and realized he didn’t need me…” Hermione admitted,
her eyes watering. She looked vulnerable and raw.

“Hermione.” Bucky began gently before struggling to think of what to say. His pause cost him as
Steve bounded back to the room eagerly, causing the two to jerk back in surprise.

“It took me a second to find this and you don’t have to hang it or anything and it’s certainly different
than the other work I’ve shown you before.” Steve babbled as he whipped a canvas around. “It’s
more of a contemporary art—but it’s how your magic feels.” Steve said as he displayed his piece
proudly.
“Oh, Steve! It’s charming!” Hermione said, her voice cracking as she stood up to hug Steve. Steve hugged her awkwardly back with his free arm, as he met Bucky’s gaze. “Thank you.” Hermione continued, obviously affected and Steve stared Bucky down in suspicion. Bucky gave him a helpless shrug. Hermione took a step back, holding the canvas and gazing into the picture. “Thank you both for celebrating with me—I had a wonderful time.” Hermione said, her cheeks were slightly damp, and she refused to tear her eyes from the picture. “I’m going to hang this in my room before I go meet my parents for dinner.” Hermione said to the painting. She whisked away leaving Steve and Bucky to watch her float away.

“Did I miss something?” Steve asked, turning to eye Bucky accusingly. Bucky sighed.

“Yeah, actually; I guess it was my turn to fuck up.” Bucky mumbled through the hand he brought up to cover his face. He only hoped that by the time she returned for bed time, she would still be willing to cuddle.

It wouldn’t do for any of them to be alone.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Apologies all! I had started a Christmas one-shot that I decided I wanted to keep for plot purposes for this story. Then the holidays happened and I didn’t get a chance to write and then I spent two-weeks in the Philippines and let’s just say I’ve been distracted. I don’t think I’ll be operating quite on the once a week update schedule but I’m hoping to still update regularly enough. Sorry for the wait and thanks for reading!
Hermione peered grimly over her mug of tea from her corner seat in her café. The weather had taken to periodic showers of cool end-of-September rain. Hermione was ashamed to admit she had already grown accustomed to the more varied weather of New York vice the rainy and foggy days that had often surrounded Hogwarts. Still, the weather today was akin to her mood—moody and foreboding. Since the sinful kiss with Bucky—whom she had always considered the more rational of her two roommates—Hermione had returned to avoiding both boys. Hermione had resolved to tell Steve that his healing was over, but the idea of adding to maelstrom of her emotions made her disinclined to see her resolution through. Besides, that resolution was really so she could begin healing Natasha but according to Steve Natasha was once again travelling the world chasing down Hydra leads—rendering her notion moot. Consequently, Steve was also shipping off to chase down who knows what to an unknown conclusion.

Which left Hermione alone with Bucky.

She was proper when she saw him, professional when she healed him, and concise when they spoke. But Merlin, she was unnecessarily frightened of her attraction of him. She caught herself staring at his lips, tracing the curve of his jaw with her eyes. When his eyes sought hers, her would peel away. The whole ordeal left her skirting around him like he was a bonfire—wanting to get as close as she could without being burnt. So she was out and about in the city again for various reasons she had created. She knew that he knew her excuses were fabricated and hastily constructed every time she disappeared out the door, but the only thing that followed her was his frown.

Hermione watched the umbrellas pop open as the sky opened up a deluge upon the prepared New York populace. Still, Hermione caught a glance of a familiar strawberry-blonde, their eyes catching as Hermione smiled warmly in reaction. Pepper smiled back as she headed towards the café, apparently intent to sit and talk over coffee as they had done previous earlier in the week from chance meetings.

"How are you doing, Hermione?" Pepper greeted as she set her coffee-something fancy and sweet-down and took a seat beside the witch. Hermione's smile lessened and she sighed softly.

"I'm doing alright. Yourself?" Hermione returned, choosing to keep her romantic struggles to herself.
"Fine. Busy as usual. The weather has me missing Malibu more then ever." Pepper admitted with a deprecating smile.

"I've never been there but I've heard it's lovely." Hermione returned, allowing a day dream of blue skies and ocean breezes to caress her mind. She had promised Sam a beach trip in the winter…

"I'd invite you there but Stark mansion was blown up." Pepper said with an air of nonchalance. Hermione broke from her day dream in two phases—the first at Pepper's nonchalance, the second at the name.

"Sorry—what?" Hermione asked after a moment. Pepper gave her a confused look over the top of her coffee cup.

"Stark Mansion was blown up last year? It was all over the news." Pepper continued with the air of expecting someone to know something common knowledge.

"I recall…" Hermione began slowly. "But that begs the questions as to why that is relevant to you?" Hermione trailed off in confusion. Pepper blinked as sudden realization seemed to pass over her.

"Oh my god!" Pepper exclaimed. "You don't know! I never told you!" Pepper continued. Pepper hadn't revealed many specific details over their past few coffee dates; mostly they had bonded over sci-fi books and fantasy lore. Hermione resisted the pull of her lips that threatened to turn her face into an annoyed moue.

"Pepper, an explanation, if you will." Hermione said with a soft constrained voice.

"I'm head of Stark industries." Pepper said. Hermione was gaping, she knew, but Pepper wasn't finished. "I'm also dating Tony Stark and I was living with him when his mansion was attacked." Hermione sputtered as various reactions cycled through her head. In between her worry over her new friend Pepper—was she also seeking therapy?—Hermione wondered if Pepper was a plant from Stark, another way for the curious man to find the mysterious Dr. Penny.

"Pepper…” Hermione began, wondering how to phrase everything correctly. "First of all, are you okay? Was the therapy request for you?" Hermione decided to open with genuine concern and decided the question was correct when Pepper's eyes softened.

"No…no the request was for Tony." Pepper revealed. Hermione patted her arm softly, equally sympathetic and concerned.

"Does Stark know about me?" Hermione asked tentatively causing Pepper to look up in surprise.

"I've mentioned I made a friend over here and I passed him the card you gave me—he actually called the person but I don't think he made any appointments." Pepper said. The word friend surprised Hermione—they had only met up a few times over coffee and each time had been a coincidence. Her surprise must have shown. "I hope you don't mind." Pepper said shyly. "I don't actually have many female friends but for some reason it feels very natural with you." Hermione softened again. It was easy to imagine an ambitious, intelligent, and beautiful Pepper scaring off women unintentionally.

"I'd be honored to be your friend." Hermione said back, garnering her new friend's smile.

"I'd like to invite you over to Stark Towers some time; I live there now when I'm not away on travel. Tony's been off on…work travel…so the Tower has been fairly empty." Pepper's gracious invitation sent a rock dropping in Hermione's stomach as she dreaded to imagine going to the lair of the man who had been trying so hard to butt into Steve's life. Suddenly, Hermione's imagination took another turn. Recalling that Steve was supposed be in Croatia, Hermione anticipated Stark to also be away—
which meant that Hermione could be exactly where Stark wanted her without him even knowing. Feeling devious, and reckless, and amused, Hermione smirked up at Pepper.

"I'm available tonight if that isn't too forward?" Hermione offered. Pepper lit up again, offering to call a driver named Happy.

-Stark's tower was ostentatious in a way that Hermione found unappealing. Unlike the antiquated rich snobbery of wizarding elites, everything was very modern and very sci-fi—complete with JARVIS. Hermione shrieked when the voice greeted her, grasping her wand subtly and lining her back against the wall. Pepper had jumped in surprise.

"Ms. Granger, it appears your heart rate is elevated with adrenaline." JARVIS spoke from seemingly everywhere, omnipresent. Steve had mentioned the AI, Hermione recalled, but she had not been ready for this level of intrusion.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione! I didn't even think to warn you!" Pepper apologized sincerely. Hermione took several deep breaths, adjusting her posture and ensuring her wand was hidden.

"Yes, well…I don't suppose you see—or hear—that every day." Hermione said with a smile more akin to a grimace. Pepper's eyebrows were still furrowed.

"Yes, Ms. Granger. I am one of a kind, designed by Mr. Stark himself." JARVIS spoke with a monotone that somehow still conveyed his pride. "Your heart rate is returning to normal." JARVIS commented. Hermione glared at the ceiling.

"Please refrain from scanning my person." Hermione asked scathingly. Pepper looked apologetic again.

"Of course, Ms. Granger." JARVIS agreed. Pepper cleared her throat beside her.

"That's enough for now, JARVIS. We'll be in the living room for the evening after I give Hermione a brief tour." Pepper dismissed the AI as she began guiding Hermione around the skyscraper.

"Of course, Ms. Potts. Please let me know if you require any food or anything otherwise." JARVIS echoed around them as they moved, following like a disembodied voice. It helped Hermione to think of the AI as if he was a house elf instead.

The tour was exceedingly brief, much to Hermione's relief. Her mischievousness had worn off at the extent of technological prowess that was stacked in the tall tower. She, herself, felt slightly overwhelmed from the modernity and she wondered how an old soul like Steve could stand the place. True to Pepper's word, JARVIS left them alone in the living room, where they proceeded to watch Dr. Who beneath a delightfully soft and fuzzy TARDIS blanket. Slowly, between their tenth doctor marathon and the Chinese food Happy was happy to procure, Hermione found that she really enjoyed Pepper's company. It was nice, she realized, to have someone—a Muggle—to enjoy the pop culture that Harry and Ginny and the rest couldn't quite grasp.

"Was it daunting to start dating Stark?" Hermione asked as they snuggled under the blanket, gossiping as comfortably as if Hermione was talking with Ginny.

"I didn't know if he was serious and he was such a playboy for so long," Pepper complained. "And there was already so much hatred with my advancement in the company…" Pepper smiled bitterly and Hermione sympathized, imagining Pepper's struggle with the media. "But it felt right and everything had just been…building. I figured, with all the life and death and danger going on around
us—would it matter if I tried something as reckless as a relationship with Tony Stark?" Pepper giggled softly. "He's still a flirt, hardheaded, stubborn, and intent to do what he things is best—even when it's sometimes wrong—but I'm happy I took the chance with him." Hermione looked up at the ceiling in contemplation. "What about you, Hermione?" Pepper returned back. "Any love interests?"

"Unfortunately." Hermione admitted, pulling up the blanket to hide her grimace beneath it.

"Why do you say that?" Pepper asked as she glanced over Hermione's face. Hermione puffed her cheeks in a pout, still hiding everything but her eyes beneath the protective cover.

"He's a patient." Hermione allowed, censoring the fact that she really wanted two patients at the same time.

"Oh." Pepper said softly.

"I certainly don't want to take advantage of him and I'm concerned his feelings would only be manifesting due to the positive connotation of my treatment." Hermione continued. "I'll be finished healing him in October but I sincerely believe his feelings will fade after I'm done working with him."

"Wow." Pepper said as she paused to collect her thoughts. "Well, as someone who had something of an 'inappropriate work place relationship' I'd support you doing what you want despite the criticisms that people would have." Pepper continued. "But I will also say that if it's not right—you don't have to force it. If the timing doesn't work or the feeling doesn't work you don't have to date him because he feels you should or you feel you should." Pepper seemed to be speaking from experience and Hermione listened eagerly to her words. "People get in the way of your goals—relationships can get in the way of your ambition. Sometimes you feel you can compromise your wants—but sometimes it's just not even worth it. The point is that you don't have to keep forcing it to work if it doesn't work but you should pursue what makes you happy." Hermione choked back the welling of emotions with some difficulty, touched by the impassioned speech Pepper had given her. Yet in the back of her mind, she realized she wanted everything to work out—that she wanted it to be the correct time.

"Thank you, Pepper...that means so much to me." Hermione said with deep emotion. She was going to continue extrapolating her feelings when JARVIS's voice cut clearly through the quiet.

"Ms. Potts, Mr. Stark is in bound with an estimated time of arrival in 10 minutes." JARVIS rang out from nowhere and seemingly everywhere. Hermione couldn't help her tensing of muscles at the surprise. Once she registered the words she stood up in surprise. She made a big show of looking at the time before gathering her jacket from the couch.

"Oh my goodness! It's that time already? I'm so sorry, Pepper, but I need to head out—I made plans this evening and I fear I might be running late." Hermione apologized sincerely, hoping she didn't come off as false because she was definitely lying. She had no interests in actually meeting Stark tonight, especially when Steve was likely to be confused by her presence.

"So soon? Tony will be back soon with most of the Avengers if you'd like to meet them." Pepper said as she scrambled to walk her out.

"Oh no! I would love to but I'm already late! I really must hurry!" Hermione said again, walking fast as Pepper continued after her.

"Let me call Happy, he can take you to wherever you need to go." Pepper offered as she kept with Hermione's eager pace.
"The restaurant is barely a block away! I'll just go out the front." Hermione stopped for a second in front of the elevator they had used. "There is a regular entrance, isn't there?" Hermione asked as she recalled entering through the garage. Pepper looked amused briefly, before shifting Hermione to another elevator she hadn't noticed.

"This one will take you down to the office level and then you can take any of the other elevators to the ground level." Pepper advised. Hermione nodded. The elevator dinged and opened the doors and Hermione glanced at Pepper again. Impulsively, she hugged the taller girl.

"Thank you for a wonderful time and wonderful advice. Please feel free to message me when your free." Hermione offered having already exchanged numbers earlier.

"Come back again soon." Pepper said with a smile. "And good luck with your love interest—keep me updated!" Pepper added with a smirk as the elevator doors closed before Hermione.

"Pepper!" Hermione exclaimed at the cheeky remark but all she caught was her laughter before the elevator closed and began descending. When the doors opened again, Hermione stepped out and was surprised to see someone waiting for the elevator she had just exited. The stranger tensed as did Hermione and instantly Hermione knew he was holding some kind of weapon. Hermione felt the ridges of her own wand palmed against her side. Dimly she realized he was holding a slurpee.

"The girl from the café." The man said with a forced casualness. "What are you doing here?" Hermione had recognized him and in the silence of the room was able to make out the strange tone of his mind.

"Pepper invited me. Did you enjoy the food?" Hermione asked, deliberately relaxing her posture despite holding her wand easily, still. The man did the same.

"I did actually. Specifically got what you did, actually." The man said with a light tone. His face had a smile that made him seem welcoming and familiar. Still, Hermione was listening to his mental wavelength, a sad, slow tune that's seemed mended but not completely fixed. She wondered if he had mended the trauma himself.

"Excellent. If you're there for breakfast, they have a fantastic quiche." Hermione answered in a daze. "My apologies, but I'm running late…Pepper said any of these elevators would lead to the front lobby?" The man nodded.

"Here, let me walk you out." The man said as he hit the down button.

"Oh no! That's quite alright. I'll manage by myself. Pepper offered the same thing but I don't want to be a bother." Hermione attempted to dissuade the man but he met her imploring stare with a sunny smile.

"Nonsense! It's not a bother at all." The man smiled wider as he shepherded her into the elevator.

"Hermione." She answered concisely. Another moment of silence descended where Hermione attempted to discern why his mental waves were louder than most humans. She was eying the man, registering that he appeared to have black powder residue over his…battle suit?

"Where did you meet Pepper?" Clint asked and Hermione blinked as she registered his question and tore her eyes from inspecting his outfit.

"In the same café where you and I ran into each other." Hermione answered with an amused chuckle. "I didn't realize it was so popular." Clint seemed to echo her amused chuckle as the elevator
dinged to indicate their arrival. Hermione sighed internally with relief as she stepped out of the elevator. "Well, thank you for seeing me out." Hermione rambled as Clint continued to escort her. He nodded at the front lobby security guard as they approached the front doors. Hermione did the same before looking out in dismay at the continuing rainstorm.

"Why didn't you use Happy?" Clint asked as he stared out into the rain.

"It's only a block away." Hermione lied with some annoyance. If Clint would leave she could just disapparate, but he walked with her outside where the nearly October weather had brought the hint of a cold chill. Hermione sighed as she wrapped her pea coat around her more securely. "Well, I better be off. Perhaps I'll see you again." Hermione said offhandedly as she waded out into the cool night rain. She felt Clint's eyes follow her form and wondered whether there was some elaborate plan leading her to meet all these Stark associates or if the occurrence was just her strange luck.

The cool rain was beginning to soak through her coat and had begun to chill her to her bone. Yet as she recalled the conversation with Pepper, she felt buoyed by her new friend and inspired into a series of new personal resolutions. She felt empowered and determined with each step she took towards home. She turned the corner of the block, feeling Clint's eyes slide off of her as she left his view. Simultaneously, she began casting charms to shift people's focus off her as she dipped into an alley and disapparated into the night air.

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Bucky was going cabin crazy, he realized. He glared at the text message with disdain as he reread Hermione's intent to be out for several hours at a friend's house. He wondered who the friend was and whether Hermione was more entertained than he was because Bucky had been staring up at the ceiling as if it could project what Hermione was doing without him for at least two hours.

It had been nearly four months since Bucky was dragged out of his mental hell to heal at Hermione's home. It had been three months since he was cognitive enough to even realize she was healing him. It had barely been three weeks since she had removed his triggers. Despite the short amount of time, Bucky was sure that he loved her—probably had from the minute he opened his eyes. It was unnerving to realize his feelings for a series of reasons—his age, his health, his history—but most frightening of his reasons was that he had never fallen in love before. Bucky had been loved before and had loved in small ways back but what he felt for Hermione was something more—something that encompassed him in a way no other had before. It had the endurance of his love for Steve with a passion that had never clicked with all the girls he had previously dated. He loved, admired, and respected Hermione. Despite that all and perhaps because of it, for one weak moment he had pursued those feelings by kissing her and the results had been disastrous.

While he wasn't kicked to the metaphorical doghouse—she was, at least, sleeping with them still—Bucky still felt like they had regressed to the time period when Bucky and Steve had hit on her for each other. Conveniently for Steve, he was largely ignorant to the sudden chill Hermione emitted because Steve was occupied with several important Hydra hunting missions—which left Hermione and Bucky alone with their tension. He supposed he should be grateful she was still acknowledging him outside of his healings but her thinly veiled reasons for getting out of the house left him reeling. When she wasn't out of the house, she was staring. She had developed a new tendency of looking at him like he was a hunter luring a bunny from its den with a carrot—wanting but hesitant to trust.

Bucky was happy that she hadn't shied away from the shared bed, was happy that she was at least still acknowledging him outside of treatment and looking at him with eyes that belayed her want
—but fuck; he couldn't even read without wishing she was in his arms, reading together as they had done so many times before he fucked up. Instead of reading, or Pinterest-ing, or knitting, or baking,
Bucky was just staring into nothingness. Sometimes he would stare out the glass stained windows, eager to follow Hermione or explore more of New York or go somewhere besides the stifling house filled with every place Hermione had been but no longer was.

Unfortunately for Bucky, he was hesitant to exit the house without Hermione's protective spell coating him from Hydra's gaze. He was equally concerned to go out without Steve or Hermione there just in case. The door creaked open and Bucky was ashamed to admit he leapt up at the sound, disappointed when he realized it was Steve and he was dripping wet.

"Hey, Buck!" Steve greeted easily as he began stripping his layers. "Where's Hermione? I was hoping she could give me a quick dry." Steve said as he attempted to minimize the sopping pools of water appearing at his feet.

"Out." Bucky said crossly with a frown. Bucky grabbed a towel from the linen closet and tossed it at Steve roughly. Steve gave him a look before stripping off more layers and towel drying before heading to the laundry room. Bucky trailed after him, frowning at the wet footsteps.

"Out, huh?" Steve asked as he began washing his clothes before heading back to the room to presumably change. Bucky followed.

"With a friend." Bucky clarified. "Apparently." Bucky added under his breath. Steve gave him another look as he pulled on pants and a t-shirt.

"There something you want to tell me?" Steve asked bluntly as he towel dried his hair. Bucky felt his jaw jut out stubbornly.

"She's been avoiding me because of the kiss." Bucky admitted sullenly. Steve nodded with understanding.

"She'll get over it…she did with me." Steve advised. Bucky frowned deeper.

"Don't pout." Steve commanded, turning to sit on his never-used bed. He tapped his finger on the bed in contemplation. "If she needs space, why don't you go out?" Steve asked and Bucky dropped on the bed to put his head in his hands.

"I don't want to leave without Hermione's spell ensuring that Hydra or anyone else won't find me." Bucky admitted.

"Oh, Bucky." Steve said sadly, laying a comforting hand on Bucky's back.

"I don't want to go out without you or her—just in case." Bucky added even softer.

"We need to talk to Hermione about this." Steve determined. "She needs to know how you feel." Steve continued despite the growing horror Bucky felt. "At the least how you feel about going out." Steve amended as if sensing Bucky's dread. They heard a noise coming from the main room. "Come on, that's probably Hermione now." Steve said as he pulled Bucky up and began guiding him back to the atrium. It was Hermione, but she was surprisingly soaking wet.

"Hermione!" Bucky exclaimed catching her eyes as they turned to meet his. They were alight with something fierce and determined. "You're soaking wet." Bucky mumbled in confusion. Weather normally didn't impact her when she could travel without ever being affected. Or she could've dried herself with a spell.
"Bucky." Hermione seemed to gasp before turning to look at Steve. Steve had moved closer with the towel that he had been using to dry his hair. "Steve." She acknowledged.

"Hermione, dry yourself or something." Steve pleaded as he began attempted to towel dry her hair. She whisked her wand to dry herself in a quick motion, leaving only her hair soaking as per usual when she dried herself. Steve attempted to dry her hair as Hermione attempted to push his hands away. Steve frowned.

"I need to talk to you two." Hermione said confidently. Surprised, Steve stepped back to stand next to Bucky. They shared a look. "Steve, you're done with healing." Hermione stated succinctly. Bucky watched as his friend gaped in surprise.

"What?" Steve asked softly.

"You've been able to be released from my care for some time now but I didn't want to let you go until Bucky was closer to his treatment being completed." Hermione elaborated. Bucky perked up at his name, meeting her eyes as she stared into them unabashed.

"Bucky." Hermione spoke, eyes softening briefly before becoming neutral again. "I'm going to be finished healing you this October." Bucky stared at Hermione like she hadn't spoken a language he understood. He rolled every word over in his head and felt flabbergasted by the sentence. He sat on the couch behind him roughly, joined by Steve who shared the same blank look as they gazed back at Hermione.

"What does that mean?" Bucky asked quietly into the room. His heart was beginning to beat fast as emotions ran across his mind. He felt a pull of anxiety at the unknown as his mind began creating various scenarios that all stemmed from them leaving her house. Hermione transfigured the coffee table into another chair that she used to sit in front of them.

"That means that you two can leave whenever you want." Hermione answered. "I'll give you the all clear to be out and making your way into the world." Steve coughed beside Bucky, breaking the tunneling vision that had seemed to invade his senses.

"When do you want us out?" Steve asked. Bucky turned to look at him in surprise. Steve looked deeply troubled, his brow furrowed and his eyes serious as he spoke the question Bucky had been dreading. Bucky turned to face Hermione, surprised when her face appeared to soften.

"I'm not kicking you out." Hermione spoke softly, peering up at them beneath her eyelashes. "I'd like you to stay as long as you'd like to stay." Hermione admitted and Bucky felt Steve take the same breath of relief that Bucky had beside him. "You don't have to give me any answers now, but I just wanted you both to be updated on the state of…things…" Hermione trailed off ambiguously, her eyes ducking away to peer anywhere but at them. There was the feeling of want that she was projecting again, the feeling that she was holding back from saying everything she wanted to say, but Bucky held back from pushing. Next to him, Steve cleared his throat again.

"There's something else." Steve announced. Hermione tore her eyes off the wall to look at Steve. "Bucky won't leave the house without a spell to keep Hydra from finding him." Instantly, Hermione's eyes lit with embarrassment and shame.

"Oh! I hadn't even realized." Hermione admitted, a hang covering her mouth in shock. "Of course you need me to set up that spell. I'll need to create something for you to wear so you won't always need to rely on me—some sort of talisman with a rune…" Hermione trailed off as she looked to be speculating on the design before she snapped back to attention, meeting Bucky's eyes as he peered at her through a curtain of his hair. "Is that why you haven't been leaving?" She asked, her voice
infinitely compassionate and still tinged with the shame of her failure. Bucky nodded tersely and Hermione's lips pursed. She sighed. "I'm so sorry. I hadn't even thought about it."

"I don't want to go anywhere without you and Steve there, just in case." Bucky ventured. "At least for a little while." Hermione opened her mouth to say something but Bucky held up his hands. "I know logically that I won't be triggered…but still." Hermione closed her mouth and nodded.

"Is there anywhere you'd like to go?" Hermione asked. Bucky didn't say anything, instead choking back his initial reaction to say 'everywhere'. "It's apple season..." Hermione trailed off. "If you're free, would you like to go pick apples upstate?" Hermione offered hesitantly. Bucky glanced at Steve, they had been apple picking once at Bucky's uncle's farm and it had been a pleasant memory despite Steve nearly dying from a broken neck when he fell off a ladder. Bucky released a breath, feeling the adrenaline of his near-panic receding as he found himself feeling infinitely more relieved.

"Yeah...yeah I think we would like that." Bucky confirmed.

Apple picking didn't occur until the next weekend in October. The leaves were on the cusp of changing, a few of the trees had already begun to shift colors. Hermione had offered to drive which had amused both Bucky and Steve given her ability to fast travel magically.

"Somethings need to be done the muggle way to truly appreciate the experience." Hermione said with a sniff of pretention.

Bucky gave Steve the front seat, sitting behind Hermione who had her chair up enough that he had a semblance of foot room behind her. While the city was disgusting, it did not take long before they were gliding through upstate New York and enjoying the peaceful roads and hints at fall foliage. erhermiHermiHer

"I haven't picked apples in a long time." Hermione revealed. "Not since my parents first moved to New York."

"Steve and I picked apples at my Uncle's farm back when he was skinny." Bucky recalled. "Steve was at the top of the ladder and the wind about picked him up and carried him away." Bucky teased.

"Hey!" Steve complained. "That was one time." Steve muttered petulantly. Bucky looked around as they pulled into the dirt driveway of the Orchard. It was crowded as the weather was sunny and temperate, Hermione sufficed in a warm looking sweater. Bucky tugged the ball cap on his head, even as Hermione's spell washed over them. She hadn't yet figured out how she could let him use the spell by himself.

They stepped out of the car and Bucky closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He couldn't remember the last time he had smelt such clean, crisp air. There was a sweetness he attributed to the trees as he let the sun soak into his skin. When he opened his eyes, Hermione was eying him with amusement, eyes crinkling in the corner in delight.

"Come on." Hermione ordered, grabbing both men by the arms and sandwiching herself between them despite taking the lead. Bucky and Steve slowed their steps to accommodate her smaller stride. Wading through the market of ready-to-purchase items, Hermione grabbed a half-peck bag for each of them.

"Ah, Hermione—don't you think this might be too many apples?" Bucky asked tentatively, trying to recall how many apples they had picked years ago. Hermione shrugged defensively, face turning into
"You can use them to cook, I'm sure." Hermione said before leading them behind the building to where the orchard began. They paused at the top of the hill eyeing the rows of trees that stretched into the distance. Hermione brightened at the sight, sighing happily as Bucky gazed at her with a soft smile. He was happy that she was excited and he was pleased that she was relaxing around him once again. It was all a pleasant distraction from the concern that lingered in the back of his mind at the approaching completion of his healing. He disregarded the thought to follow Hermione as she eagerly rushed through the rows of trees.

Despite the other people picking apples, Hermione had managed to seclude them in a row of apples all to themselves. While Bucky and Steve picked their apples with reckless abandon, Hermione was meticulous in choosing hers—inspecting the apples for imperfections or bruising and sniffing them to ensure their sweet scent. Bucky turned around to find her staring longingly at an apple halfway up the tree and completely out of any of their reach.

"That the apple of your eye?" Bucky joked, approaching her as she did not waver in concentration.

"I feel like it is the perfect apple but I want to check it before I pluck it." Hermione determined, her eyebrows furrowed in unnecessary seriousness that amused Bucky.

"Can't you just spell it down?" Steve asked as he approached the two. Hermione glanced at him in horror.

"I need to check it first." Hermione defended. Steve looked as amused as Bucky felt.

"Can't you spell yourself up?" Bucky asked, not really knowing the limits of her power. She looked at him in exasperation.

"I can't fly, Bucky—even if I wanted to—which I don't." Hermione declared adamantly.

"Well then, I'll give you a boost." Bucky offered, setting his apples down to cup his hands. Hermione looked at him in blatant disbelief.

"I'm not getting on top of you for a boost." Hermione objected with a sputter.

"Do you want the apple?" Bucky asked bluntly, watching as Hermione warred with herself, mouth tweaking to the side in contemplation.

"You won't drop me?" Hermione reassured herself hesitantly as she took a step closer. Bucky rolled his eyes.

"This arm has literally stopped cars; I won't drop you. Steve will even stand behind you to spot you." Bucky said turning to Steve who nodded very seriously, despite the amusement Bucky could read in his eyes.

"I have determined it is perfect." Hermione declared a loud, holding the plucked apple gently and gasping as Bucky readjusted her into a bridal-style hold. One arm was thrown around his shoulders,
while the other still clutched her apple in front of her. Bucky met her eyes, smelling the sweet smell of the red delicious in her hands.

"Told you I wouldn't drop you." Bucky reaffirmed. Hermione nodded dumbly as Bucky eased her to the floor and picked up his bag. It was already full as was Steve. Hermione placed her apple on top of her bag—also apparently filled.

"Well, I suppose that's that." Hermione announced. They turned to walk back to the counter to pay, Hermione again sandwiched between them. She was clutching the bag of apples to her chest with both arms despite Bucky's offer to carry them. Still, she was standing so close to them that Bucky's hand continued to graze her side in a way that made tension rise in his energy and blood run through his veins. He shared a look with Steve who appeared to be feeling the same thing. A mirrored nod and they turned away. It was in a daze that they approached the counter, the woman talking pleasantly with Hermione.

"My! So many apples—planning to bake some pies?" The woman smiled easily. Hermione returned it.

"I suppose we got carried away." Hermione responded meekly. The woman chortled as she re-bagged the apples.

"Have you gone to a pumpkin patch yet? The fields are starting to get empty." The woman continued. Hermione perked up at the words.

"There's a pumpkin patch near here?" Hermione asked excitedly. The woman nodded.

"There's a hay ride on the other side of this building that takes you down to the pumpkin patch and petting zoo—you should see the line up just over there." The woman gestured to the opposite side of the market from where Hermione had parked her car. Hermione turned to Bucky and Steve, passing them the purchased apples before her eyes began to expand in wonder.

"Do we have time for a pumpkin patch?" Hermione proposed eagerly. Steve was looking down at her with amusement but Bucky was chuckling loud.

"Hermione, I have all the time in the world." Bucky reminded her. Hermione blushed and Steve echoed Bucky's chuckle.

"Let's put the apples in your trunk first." Steve suggested as they moved back to her vehicle. Hermione's smile was infectious as she placed the apples in the back and dragged them eagerly to a spot in line.

"Hagrid had the biggest pumpkins I had ever seen." Hermione revealed as they waited in line for the hay ride. "They grew in a patch right beside his home."

"One time Steve forgot a pumpkin and ended up just using a squash." Bucky said with a smirk. Steve shook his head with a good natured smile.

"Why is it that you have all the stories of my embarrassing moments?" Steve asked with mild disgruntlement.

"I was always there, getting the first-hand view." Bucky teased again.

"Why can't I remember any of your embarrassing moments?" Steve asked rhetorically, glancing at the sky for answers. Bucky shoved him with his shoulder.
"I didn't have embarrassing moments, Stevie—that was all you." Bucky retorted, stepping forward as the line moved. Hermione was watching their byplay with amusement.

"No…I seem to remember that all your embarrassing moments were far more intimate so I wasn't there." Steve insinuated. The implication caused Bucky to blush as he turned to glance at Hermione. Hermione had raised her eyebrow in a questioning manner that caused Bucky to blush further. Steve mirrored his expression. "I mean—that's not—"Steve stuttered but Hermione shoved him along dismissively.

"Into the hay ride." Hermione said tersely as she shepherded both of them up. Bucky reached back a hand to assist Hermione up the ladder and she smiled up at him appreciatively. Steve led them to the back where Hermione once again sat between them. Bucky wondered what the image they made would look like—small Hermione between two muscular super soldiers. It was irrelevant because Hermione's spell still caused eyes to pass over them until they interacted first.

The ride was pulled by a tractor, jerking a bit as it tugged along. It passed through the woods, the shadows immediately chilling the air and Hermione grabbed Bucky's and Steve's arm to snuggle into their warmth. They emerged into an open and sunny pumpkin patch complete with a hay playground and petting zoo. Hermione was nearly bouncing eagerly when she spotted the goats. They descended the ladder before going out into the fields to search for pumpkins.

As Bucky had anticipated, Hermione was just as choosy with pumpkins as she had been with the apples. She disappeared into the field to begin a thorough inspection of the crops. Bucky found his pumpkin easily—a good medium sized oval of a pumpkin that looked perfect for carving. Bucky found Steve carrying a behemoth of a pumpkin back towards the purchasing booth. Bucky gaped at the colossal pumpkin. It was slightly crooked and exceeding large and Steve struggled to hold it due to the shape.

"Really?" Bucky asked in disbelief as Steve happily carried his pumpkin.

"It called to me." Steve announced, the size of his pumpkin causing him to move awkwardly. He went to purchase the pumpkin himself, Bucky following him. Steve plopped it onto the checkout kiosk, causing the wood frame to bend.

"That's a prizewinner." The cashier, a young man, noticed. Steve smiled easily, leaning against his pumpkin with obvious pride.

"Well thank you!" Steve said in delight. "It certainly catches the eye—"

"No…” the cashier continued. "I mean the type of pumpkin is a prizewinner; that pumpkin must be over 200 pounds!" The man exclaimed. Bucky snickered behind his hand easily carrying his appropriately sized pumpkin with one arm. "That pumpkin will be $100.00." The man added meekly. Steve frowned at the price, causing Bucky to laugh.

"Pay up, Stevie!" Bucky laughed. "Before Hermione attempts to pay for it."

"Before Hermione attempts to pay for what?" Hermione asked as she slid in between the two. Bucky jumped slightly at her quiet entrance.

"Merlin's pants, Steve! That pumpkin is gigantic! It could give Hagrid's a run for his money." Hermione commented, setting down her perfectly round, small pumpkin beside it. "I will take all three, please." Hermione interrupted. Steve jumped up at the declaration.

"Let me get a different pumpkin—this one is ridiculous." Steve admitted, picking up the pumpkin
with an ease that caused the cashier to marvel.

"Don't be ridiculous, Steve—you're committed." Hermione smiled. She was already passing the credit card to the cashier who was gaping still at Steve. Steve was frowning, no doubt embarrassed to have made Hermione purchase something so unnecessary. They walked away from the booth, Hermione humming happily with her pumpkin.

"You didn't have to do that, Hermione." Steve apologized. Hermione shrugged.

"It wasn't a problem at all. Now, let's step behind the hay bale so I can shrink these." Hermione offered, pulling the two off to the side to subtly shrink the pumpkins and deposit them in her bag. "I want to go to the petting zoo!" Hermione announced when she was finished, grabbing Bucky and Steve's arms and leading them off to where a mini-goat playground had been set up. Bucky laughed as Hermione made for the tiny goats and little lambs. Meanwhile, a small Shetland pony had found interest in Bucky's clothing and was searching his pocket for sugar cubes.

"I don't have any of that, little horse." Bucky said with a small smile. He stroked the back of the horse slowly even as it continued to nose through his jacket.

"Ow!" Steve called out from over Bucky's shoulder. Hermione was holding a lamb as she also turned towards the noise. They walked over to where Steve was inspecting his hand. "That goat bit me!" Steve accused, pointing a finger at a normal sized goat that was making noises of irritation. Bucky laughed at his friend while Hermione was apparently checking over his pinched flesh. Bucky moved to the irritated goat, attempting to stroke it before it launched out with its teeth, finding purchase on Bucky's metal fingers and chomping down. Bucky laughed again as the goat sent him a furious look at the unyielding metal hand before stomping away.

"That's a mean goat." Bucky agreed. Steve was mock glaring at his friend while Hermione was rolling her eyes.

"Alright you two, it seems you can't handle the petting zoo. Let's head home." Hermione declared with a fond exasperation.

Despite the peaceful day, there was a kind of tension emerging in the vehicle on the return ride. It was something that seemed to permeate the air the closer they returned to Hermione's home. It felt like a sort of knowing that there was almost a different destination beyond the one that was rapidly approaching. It left Bucky feeling uneasy. When they brought in their apples and as Hermione resized the pumpkins, Bucky's feelings were confirmed.

"I'm finishing your healing next week." Hermione said clearly. Bucky and Steve both turned to face her. "You'll be all done with your healing." Hermione clarified. Bucky swallowed thickly. "You're welcome to stay here of course—as long as you'd like." Hermione continued in a rambling sort of way that belied her nervousness. "I actually…well, I wanted to have a Halloween party here with my friends and was hoping you would perhaps like to meet them?" Hermione asked, her voice inflecting her question as she trailed off. Bucky still felt uneasy around people—especially people who would really be able to see him. His unease must have shown. "They're all magical, all very capable of force and restraint." Hermione continued. "They all fought in the magical war with me." Bucky cleared his throat.

"That sounds…good." Bucky managed awkwardly. "We can discuss anything…else…after." Bucky finished. Hermione nodded, laying the apples on the table so that it still looked like there was far too many. Bucky could hardly concentrate, though, still reeling from the information that he had been expecting with a mutual sense of dread and excitement.
Later, as Hermione showered before bed, Bucky and Steve were milling about the room awaiting her, when Bucky could no longer contain his concerns.

"How does this end, Steve?" Bucky asked self-consciously, fiddling with Hermione's pictures and staring at the two boys—her best friends. What if what they had was similar? Was that how Bucky and Steve would end up?

"It never ends." Steve said with a soothing amount of confidence that always buoyed Bucky. "You and I are in it till the end of the line …and I think that applies to Hermione as well." Steve assured him. "Instead, you should be thinking about what you want to do when this phase of your life is over; you will be able to do whatever you want—go wherever you want. What will you do with that?" Steve's question lingered in Bucky's mind even as they all lay down to sleep. Freedom was a precious thing, something Bucky had long felt he had lost until Steve and Hermione dug it back up. Yet with all the places he had wanted to explore—places he had been for missions—he felt it would be wholly inadequate without Steve and Hermione at his side.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: For some reason, this was posted on FFN but not here! Sorry for the delay! But the new chapter should be coming soon.
Steve expected something more dramatic for the finale of Bucky’s healing. Though the conclusion of Steve’s healing had been equally quiet, Bucky had always been the focus of Hermione’s healing attention and purpose. Despite the expectation of some grand climax, Steve found himself attending Bucky’s last healing session and finding it entirely similar to any other previous session. In thirty minutes, Bucky was no longer Hermione’s patient and neither Bucky nor Hermione made comment of the fact. If anything, the conclusion was awkward. The three of them stood awkwardly, dawdled awkwardly, and waited awkwardly to address the ‘what comes next.’ What happened instead was that Hermione tucked her hair behind her ear ineffectually and reminded the two that they were welcome to stay at her house as long as they pleased, then disappeared into her lab downstairs, expressing her pride in them for completing a rigorous healing schedule.

Steve was inclined to believe Hermione’s sincerity if it wasn’t for that fact that she had disappeared into the depth of her basement every day after. At the end of the week, Steve was genuinely considering asking Hermione what was wrong because even Bucky’s mulish behavior was starting to grate. When Steve finally lightly inquired in bed one night--she was still sleeping wrapped up between the two military men every night--Hermione merely shrugged and said she was working on something big. Steve figured that she wouldn’t still be sleeping with them if she didn’t want to be—in fact, nobody had even broached the subject of why they kept sleeping together in fear that it would disrupt the dynamic. So Steve did not truly worry and instead attempted to reassure Bucky that Hermione was not on the outs with either of them and she was still happy to host them—even if he longed for the reassurance himself. Thankfully, it came exactly a week after Bucky was healed.

Steve and Bucky were eating dinner when Hermione emerged from the basement with tired eyes and pale skin. Steve glanced over her, fork still hovering in the air as he noticed her waxy complexion and limp hair. He stood angrily, blood rushing quickly through his veins, intent to reprimand her for her pushing her limits. Bucky looked thunderous beside Steve as they both approached her.

“You look awful!” Bucky scowled as he lifted her dry hair. Steve slapped Bucky’s shoulder in reprimand despite his own wish to inquire further on her discarded appearance. Hermione merely snorted at the comment, waving away the comment.
“Thanks, Bucky.” She muttered sarcastically, though the curve of her lip made it seem like she wasn’t offended and her eyes seemed a light with mischief.

“What have you been doing? You’ve clearly been exhausting yourself.” Steve added far more politely, though he could hear the bite in his tone. Surprisingly, she answered immediately, lifting something up that she had hidden behind her back.

“Baseball caps?” Bucky asked, sounding a combination of flabbergasted and frustrated.

“I know, I know—I’ve been working too hard. But it doesn’t matter because I’ve finished and here they are!” Hermione blew off their concerns as she waved the hats around. Her smile was ecstatic enough that Steve took the proffered generic black hat; Bucky was less deterred and grumbled as he snatched his own hat.

“Thank you?” Steve offered in confusion. Hermione was still radiating excitement, however, and Steve was expecting her to literally begin bouncing on her feet.

“It’s not just a hat; it is charmed! To hide and protect you! You needed a version that I didn’t have to cast!” Hermione explained as she took Bucky’s hat and arranged it on Bucky’s head. She wiped out a camera and took a picture of him. When she turned it around Steve and Bucky both leaned over to view the blurred image. They both pulled back to regard her, impressed.

“You finished this in a week?” Bucky asked in awe. Hermione seemed to quiet dramatically in the comment.

“You’ve been stuck in here because you didn’t have it—I hate that I hadn’t even realized it was a problem.” Hermione admitted, eyebrows upturning in concern. Steve watched Bucky swallow thickly, a mirroring of the sentiment that Steve felt from Hermione’s sincerity. When Bucky pulled her surprised form into a hug, Steve threw his arms around them both, smiling.

“You’re the best, Hermione.” Steve articulated, feeling Bucky nod on the other side of Hermione. Hermione giggled happily.

“Now that you both have protection—go! Explore! Adventure is out there!” Hermione announced with contagious enthusiasm. When they pulled back from the hug Bucky gave Steve a crooked smile. Steve nodded and together they left through the rarely used front door. Hermione promising to adventure with them the next time.

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Steve wouldn’t outright say he regretted Bucky’s forays into the outside world but as Steve inhaled the scent of pumpkin spice in the kitchen—again—he really considered voicing it aloud.

Their first trip had been a field trip exploring the neighborhoods and buildings of their past. Bucky’s old home had become an apartment complex with shops and stores underneath. Bucky had ventured into the local Starbucks and had promptly ordered whatever they recommended—a pumpkin spice latte. Steve had taken a sip and found it too sweet for his taste and a little bizarre in general. Bucky, however, had latched onto the taste and Steve was afraid that a monster had been created.

“What’s for dinner tonight?” Hermione said with a pleasant smile. She had begun working on more formative data about the non-magical magical resonance of their minds and the minds of others—many of the details going over Steve’s head but seemed to keep Hermione decently occupied.

“Pumpkin mac and cheese with Gruyere cheese and sage.” Bucky said with a smile. His hair was up in a bun that he favored for cooking while he donned a chef’s white apron as well. Steve groaned.
“More pumpkin, Buck?” Steve complained. Hermione and Bucky were both looking at him in amusement. “There was the pumpkin alfredo, the pumpkin curry, the pumpkin hummus, and the pumpkin soup. Don’t even get me started on the pumpkin flavored sweets!” Steve continued. Hermione and Bucky turned to each other, sharing an amused look before laughing at Steve’s expense.

“You know, Steve. My school had pumpkin juice? I’m sure there will be some at the party this weekend.” Hermione said with a warm laugh. Steve groaned again.

“Tell you what, Stevie, tonight we can carve the pumpkins so you can take care of your pumpkin rage.” Bucky smirked. Steve felt the incredibly urge to stick his tongue out at Bucky but refrained in favor of flashing him a dark look.

“I’m beginning to miss the times when you were a terrible cook!” Steve complained.

Despite feeling like he very well might gag at the smell of pumpkins, Steve helped clear the dining room table so Hermione could set up a pumpkin carving station. When Steve cracked open the top of his pumpkin and peered in, he began to realize his choice of pumpkin came with the monumental task of gutting the massive pumpkin. Steve did not get sick easily thanks to the serum, but his mind still felt like he should be gagging at the scent of more pumpkin. Bucky must have caught his look because he began laughing outright.

“Should have gotten a smaller pumpkin, Steve.” Bucky teased, his task of gutting the pumpkin significantly easier given the normal size of his pumpkin. Steve exhaled a sigh.

“Don’t listen to him, Steve!” Hermione chastised merrily. “Your pumpkin is very festive and I’m sure all my friends will appreciate it. It’s almost as big as Hagrid’s—almost.” Hermione conveyed. Feeling buoyed by Hermione’s good mood, Steve took to the task, slopping the seeds onto the table and ignoring the squelching sound.

“So who is coming to your party? Your best friends?” Steve inquired softly, watching Bucky perk up subtly in interest. Hermione had only spoken briefly about the party she was hosting that weekend and a little reconnaissance would do put Steve and Bucky’s mind at ease.

“Oh! Well, my close friends from Hogwarts and their significant others are invited. You’ve met Ginny and Harry and Ron, of course. You’ll also see Neville and his wife Hannah, George and his wife Angelina, and Luna and Rolf. Bill and Fleur couldn’t make it but Charlie will!” Hermione continued happily as she carved out shapes into the pumpkin.

“And Ron’s wives?” Bucky asked with faux nonchalance. Despite the attempt appearance of disinterest, the comment drew Hermione’s eyes, as well as Steve who eyed his friend in alarm. Bucky was faking intense focus on the carving of his pumpkin and kept his eyes affixed down. Even the quiet Crookshanks was regarding Bucky from his place on the table.

“Yes.” Hermione answered slowly as if she was surprised by the question. Steve imagined she was. “Parvati and Lavender will also be coming.” Hermione said, identifying the names of the spouses. Bucky nodded subtly. Sensing Bucky’s curiosity and being curious himself, Steve bravely continued the line of questioning.

“Is it common to have multiple wives or multiple spouses?” Steve asked with another failed attempted at feigned nonchalance. Hermione set down her tool to exhale and lean back into the seat in contemplation.

“It’s neither common nor uncommon. Ron and his wives are the only triad relationship in our friend
group.” Hermione clarified quietly. “It exists in the magical world and people don’t really give it a second thought but it doesn’t outnumber the monogamous relationships.” Hermione looked skyward as if she was weighing her own words, the air heavy with undertones. “I think a lot of it has to do with the nature of relationships.” Hermione reasoned. “What’s the chance of falling in love with one person and having that person love you back? What’s the change of it happening again at the same time? And what’s the chance of the everyone being fine with it?” Hermione questioned softly into her pumpkin.

Steve paused to consider the magical world—so different from his own unique world and so different from even his expectations of what a magical world should be. Steve’s mind flexed as he processed Hermione’s answer. He thought of more questions but voiced none aloud and before he realized it, Hermione and Bucky had finished their carvings and Steve’s pumpkin was turning out far worse than he expected.

“Steve…what…what is your pumpkin?” Hermione asked hesitantly. Steve felt his cheeks heat. He had been distracted and had carved the inside too thin, causing much of the detailed work he intended to be just be punctured holes. For as big as his canvas was, his attempt of a witch on a broom was certainly lacking.

“Nouveau-art, Steve?” Bucky teased as he peeked at Steve’s pumpkin.

“Ability on paper is different than pumpkins!” Steve defended heatedly. “Besides, it’s ‘art nouveau’.” Steve corrected. “What did you even make?” Steve questioned with playful bitterness. Hermione and Bucky both turned their pumpkins around so Steve could see. Hermione had made glasses and a lightning bolt and Bucky had made a cat—a very familiar and well carved cat.

“Wow, Bucky! That’s a great Crookshanks!” Hermione gushed and even Steve had to admit it was made with a distinct likeness. Crookshanks, who had been sitting on the table, seemed to inspect the pumpkin and deem it acceptable with a soft meow. Hermione laughed at the feline, picking him up to cuddle the smushed-face animal to her breast.

“I may not be able to draw on paper, but I’m pretty good with a knife.” Bucky bragged as he twirled said knife in his hand. Hermione walked over to Steve and patted him softly on the arm.

“Don’t worry, Steve. Your pumpkin is still impressive by size alone!” Hermione reassured him. She whipped out her wand and disappeared the mess they had made in the kitchen before floating the pumpkins over to a place in the atrium. She had already begun to decorate the house in preparation for the party but had yet to finish. It felt festive and exciting compared to the low appreciation for the holiday the Avengers seemed to hold. “In any case, Steve, these pumpkins are really just for us—I can hardly get trick or treaters when no one can find the house!” Hermione said with a good-natured laugh that cause Steve’s lips to twitch upward in humor. “Now let’s talk about costumes.” Hermione said with a sudden turn. She eyed Bucky and Steve where they stood, seemingly sizing them up for something. Her eyes were alarming in their alacrity. Steve turned to Bucky and met a mirrored look of faint alarm.

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Steve watched as Hermione puttered around the room, checking the decorations in her home for the third time.

“Hermione, everything looks great; you really don’t have to worry.” Steve attempted to soothe the frazzled female; he was unused to seeing her so stressed.

“I know. I know. I just, well, I just want to make sure everything is perfect.” Hermione admitted as
she smoothed the fabric of her blue and white dress. She looked lovely, dressed as Belle from Beauty and the Beast. “They’ve been asking to do Halloween here for years but I just always found myself busy.” Hermione trailed off.

“Darling, you’ll be fine.” Bucky said the rare pet name easily enough, though from his body language Steve could tell his was nervous—as was Steve. It was both of their first time interacting with the majority of Hermione’s friends, let alone more magical people. Bucky was especially a little jumpy—still convinced everyone would recognize him as a wanted criminal. Hermione had waved off his concern saying that all of her friends had been on the Ministry’s wanted listed at one point or another so it hardly seemed important.

“And you’ll both be fine as well.” Hermione stated as she walked over to Bucky. She reached up to adjust his hat into something jaunter for his mad hatter costume. “At this point I suppose the one that is least nervous is Steve.” Hermione commented ruefully. Steve bristled and frowned.

“Hey! I’m nervous, too; I’ve never met any other magicals—the other incidents notwithstanding.” Steve commented seriously. Bucky and Hermione affixed him with a look. Hermione’s look turned admiring, he thought with pleasure. She had chosen his snug outfit, suggesting a human torch costume—a character from a comic book he had once shown her with a tight fit suit. He had agreed to the costume when she convinced him they looked similar—though he would’ve agreed to any costume if it made her happy, he did not delude himself.

“Steve, you make friends with everyone; you’ll be fine.” Bucky said with a snort. Hermione patted Bucky’s chest soothingly.

“My friends will love both of you! Just…keep in mind they are a bit strange.” Hermione warned. “Magical people tend to be…eccentric.” She clarified further. No one had brought up the fact that Bucky and Steve had already met Ron and Harry—and Ginny for that matter. The previous meeting was pointedly ignored in favor of pretending this party was the first time they would be introduced to her friends. The clock chimed loudly in the room, echoing about as Hermione awkwardly shuffled again, the time of her party officially beginning. She adjusted the glowing pumpkins on their stand before jumping when she heard a noise. Steve moved closer to Bucky on instinct, a move Bucky reciprocated as Hermione moved towards the fire place she had opened for the occasion. A plume of green fire and smoke gave way to a petite witch with platinum blonde hair and a dreamy expression.

“Luna!” Hermione called delightfully. She embraced the other witch soundly, pulling back but still keeping a grasp on her forearms. “Where’s Rolf?” She enquired as she peered around the blonde as if she was hiding her partner.

“Oh, he’s off with chasing a very important species! It’s quite a surprise but you can read all about it in next month’s Quibbler. Not to fret though, he sent Poppy in his place.” Luna said, her voice as airy as her demeanor. In her arms appeared to be something that looked akin to a platypus. The creature looked around curiously, struggling to free itself from the deceptively tight grip Luna held it in. Whatever the creature was, it caused Hermione to pale—which instantly set Steve and Bucky into alert mode.

“Luna! You brought a niffler to the house!?” Hermione exclaimed as she pulled out her wand. “I need to set up wards!” Hermione cried as she turned around in a flutter of energy. She barely paused as she raced around the room casting spells. “Bucky, Steve, this is Luna and Poppy—apparently. Please don’t let it out of your sight—it’s a little thief!” Hermione called over her shoulder as she rushed off towards the bedrooms.

The silence in the room was stifling though the little blonde seemed impartial to the awkwardness. She peered up at them dazed as the held the struggling platypus. Her eyes widened briefly as if
seeing them for the first time. “Oh hello!” She said softly, prompting Steve and Bucky to lean in to hear her. “Ron and Harry have said so much about you! They can’t seem to agree I’m afraid, whether you two are secretly dating behind Hermione’s back.” The nonchalance of her statement had Steve and Bucky both surprised as they leaned back and began sputtering at the comment.

“Wha—what?! No!” Steve attempted to correct her but despite her softness her voice somehow seemed to pierce right through his words.

“It’s alright if you do, though you should really include Hermione—it is her house after all.” Luna said with a serene smile. Bucky blinking his eyes rapidly in shock beside Steve, equally incapable of wrapping his head around Hermione’s friend.

“Listen—Luna, was it?—Steve and I—” Bucky, too, was cut off as the witch continued on.

“Hermione wasn’t born into the magical world, you know, and she really struggled with many of the nuances and differences between her two homes. Just like you two, I imagine.” Steve turned to share a look of surprise with Bucky. “But if even Hermione was capable of opening her mind than you two should be a piece of Windingers!” Steve raised his eyes at the unfamiliar expression but he was already unsettled from the feeling of having a conversation without actually having a conversation.

“I see.” Steve commented, thought he wasn’t sure he really did and felt entirely too much like Luna saw everything.

Her beaming smile had him echoing it reluctantly though Bucky still seemed uneasy at Steve’s side.

“Yes, Hermione really had the hardest time as a muggleborn integrating into magic, though she has still kept her scientific mind. She didn’t agree with me when we first met but she always did protect me.” Bucky seemed irritated when Luna stopped, equally curious as to what that protection met. After a seemingly dramatic pause, Luna continued on as if she had never stopped speaking in the first place. “Some of the other students thought it would be fun to hide my shoes or books and clothing. Hermione found out about it and charmed my items to sting the hands of any one who tried to play that game.” Luna stated. Steve, who had many unfortunate experiences with bullying in his youth, turned to Bucky to confirm his suspicions. At the grim look, Steve also felt his visage darken.

“We’re they actually playing?” Steve attempted to ask gently. Luna stared at him blankly, lazy blinking eyes unaffected by the world surrounding her.

“I should hope so! It would be terribly rude to take things otherwise.” Luna said with a peaceful look. Steve and Bucky shared a side eye glance to each other but chose not to comment. “Hermione’s strong but she can’t heal herself. No one else alive has the same style of ability, but she can’t do it for herself. My great-aunt in law was her mentor and she was able to help Hermione filter the majority of the voices the entered her head…but she still faces all the problems herself. It seems terribly unfair that she should be able to heal everyone but no one can heal her.” Luna’s voice had taken on a sudden gravitas that seemed ill-matched with her expression.

“It does seem unfair.” Bucky echoed from beside the two, a sturdy determination in his voice that resonated with Steve.

“There is always a solution, though.” Luna said with a serene smile.

“Then why hasn’t she done it?” Bucky groused in confusion. Luna’s smile widened.

“You can’t force love,” Luna chastised, “you must allow it to grow, and take root.” She proclaimed.
“Love?” Steve asked in surprised disbelief.

“Oh yes! Love is always the answer, especially with something as sentimental as magic. You see, those Disney movies aren’t necessarily wrong.” Luna continued, eying Steve and Bucky in a manner that seemed significant. “I think you two might be the ones she has been waiting for.” Luna declared. Steve, not for the first time while talking with Luna, was sputtering again at her comment.

“Are you suggesting…” Bucky began before pausing with blatant frustration. “She’s not a princess in a tower and I have yet to see a Disney movie where the princess gets two princes.” Bucky summed up his annoyance.

“Well, Disney was a muggle, he couldn’t have gotten it all right.” Luna declared as if it was perfectly normal for two men and a witch to get together—which for her, perhaps it was. Luna’s smile broadened as the platypus finally escaped her arms disappearing quickly into Hermione’s home just as Hermione emerged from the basement.

“Alright Luna, I’ve warded the place, so hopefully losses will be minimal.” Hermione said with a tone that suggested she was used to—but not entirely appreciative—of all of Luna’s antics. “Where did he go?” Hermione asked in alarm when she realized that the being had already disappeared.

“Ah!” Bucky exclaimed as he jumped backwards, the platypus latched onto his metal arm. Hermione smothered a laugh at the sight but Steve outright laughed.

“Don’t worry, Bucky! He won’t hurt you!” Hermione said, her face caught somewhere between amusement and sympathy. “I think Poppy’s in love.” Hermione said with a snicker to Luna.

“She’s not the only one.” Luna said softly as she sent a look to Bucky and Steve. Steve gave Luna a stern look back before glancing at Hermione to gauge her reaction.

“What?” Hermione questioned as she eyed the three of them in suspicion.

“So, do I just let this…thing…stay on my arm?” Bucky redirected the conversation.

“It’s either that or he steals all the cutlery.” Hermione said with barely contained mirth. Luna maintaining her dazed smile, took Hermione’s arm and began to lead towards the kitchen.

“Hermione, I brought some radishes. We can set them up and bob for them.” Luna offered graciously. Behind her, Steve and Bucky followed.

“You know it’s usually apples?” Steve corrected softly in confusion. Hermione fixed him with a look of amused fondness.

“Shhh…radishes work just fine.” Hermione whispered with a smile.

Luna had already bobbed for several radishes—Hermione, Steve, and Bucky gracefully declining--when the next guests popped out of Hermione’s floo. One after the other, three people poured out in a flutter of ash. Steve, recognizing the red-haired man, immediately understood the two women beside him were his wives.

“Ron!” Hermione called, leaping at the man and enveloping him in a tight hug. She withdrew but leaned in close enough that Steve could barely hear her quiet warning. “Luna brought a niffler—mind your valuables.” Ron’s wives shared a look of exasperation before greeting Hermione.
“Hermione! We brought food!” The tan woman said, enlarging what appeared far too much food for the numbers Hermione had expected.

“Parvati! You’ve cooked so much!” Hermione chastised, though her voice was warm.

“She’s not the only one, Hermione.” The blonde woman said, revealing her hands to be filled with additional food items. “Molly even sent over some treacle tart.”

“Well, no one can resist Molly.” Hermione said with a knowing smile. “Here, let me help you put these on the kitchen table.” Hermione offered, grabbing a dish out of each of the women’s hands. “Ron, you remember Bucky and Steve?” Hermione said quickly over her shoulder before shuffling over towards her kitchen counter and leaving the three men by themselves. Ron was rigid from where he was standing, halfway into the room and halfway closer to the hearth. Bucky was equally ill-at-ease, standing in a deceptively calm way, though Steve could sense he was on guard. Steve, per usual, attempted to break the stand-off.

“Ron, good to see you again.” Steve offered, outstretching his hand. He was relieved when Ron took it with a sharp shake. “You remember Bucky?” Steve prompted, not surprised when Bucky did not offer a hand and instead nodded a single greeting. Ron mimicked the motion back.

“Right, yeah—congrats on the healing; I’ve heard the treatment is finished.” Ron replied easily enough, though his face was speculative. Steve could tell Bucky was angry that Ron knew some of their private details but Steve recognized Ron was important in Hermione’s life and hoped it indicated Steve and Bucky’s importance in Hermione’s life.

In the background, Steve could here Luna greeting the girls, seemingly waylaying the girls from joining their conversation. A loud meow interrupted his observation and he looked down to see Crookshanks threading peacefully through Bucky’s legs.

“He likes you?” Ron asked, looking impressed as he gestured to Crookshanks who sat before Bucky and began cleaning his paws. Bucky gave a terse nod. “Hm…bloody arsehole of a cat only likes Hermione.” Ron identified. He turned to face Steve. “What about you, mate?” Steve blinked in surprise, the conversation becoming far more relaxed than he had initially expected from the redhead.

“Crookshanks seems…indifferent? Like most cats?” Steve answered, having never realized that Crookshanks obviously favored Hermione and Bucky but didn’t seem to actively dislike Steve.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Believe it or not, that’s a better than most. That cat still hisses at me.” Ron complained petulantly. Crookshanks, seemingly understanding the conversation, stopped to glare at Ron before continuing to groom himself. Steve caught the grin on Bucky’s face before he hid it.

“So you have two wives?” Bucky asked bluntly. Steve glanced at him in horror but Ron seemed to look besotted at the question.

“Yeah. Got really lucky with those two.” He admitted with a soft smile. “Everything just worked out and I knew they were right for me.”

“So you have twice the kids?” Bucky prompted. Ron’s smile grew wider.

“Only three now—they’re all at mum’s for the evening but I’m hoping for more. Both Lav and Vati are willing. We all want a big family and mum o’course is right please about that.” Ron was beaming at the idea, leaning in to whisper. “She’s hoping for a Quidditch team.”

“How many are on a Quidditch team?” Steve wondered, imagining a football team.
“Seven.” Ron said quickly, causing Steve to exhale in imagine relief. His family had been unusually small for his time—for obvious reasons—but he still had balked at the families in the double digits. “Personally, I think we could manage one of your footie teams.” Ron added, stroking the stubble on his chin in thought.

“Eleven?!” Steve gaped, causing Bucky to laugh at his reaction; even Ron seemed amused.

“I’ve got two wives and twice the enthusiasm. I think we’ll manage, eh?” Ron waggled his eyebrows suggestively but Steve was still sputtering at the concept. “Well, lucky for you, Hermione doesn’t want an army.”

“Hermione doesn’t want what?” Hermione asked as she returned with Ron’s wives and Luna.

“Nothing!” Ron chimed, his wives wrapping themselves in his arms.

“What were you talking about?” The blonde asked, her voice simpering in a way that Ron seemed to like.

“Just my lovely ladies and how lucky I am to have you both.” Ron answered suavely. The women cooed at their husband. “Lavendar, Parvati, this is Steve and Bucky.” Ron introduced as he gestured to each person.

“Nice to meet you.” Parvati said, shaking Steve’s hand and nodding at Bucky who returned it.

“It’s nice to finally meet you!” Lavender added, her eyes taking on a predatory glaze as she stared at them. “Hermione has just been so dreadful as she’s hidden you both away.” Beside Steve, Hermione was rolling her eyes.

“It was by our own preference, ma’am.” Steve said politely but a bit protectively of Hermione. Lavender and Parvati turned to each other and giggled before the sound of the floo roared behind them. Steve watched as a familiar black-haired man stumbled out followed by his pregnant wife.

“Is that Harry just come through?” Ron said rhetorically. “I’ll be right back.” Ron told his wives before disappearing to greet his friend. Hermione smiled as she followed, the little blonde Luna trailing after.

“So you knew Hermione in school?” Bucky asked, apparently less threatened by Ron’s welcoming, giggly wives.

“We roomed with her.” Parvati answered. “Though she wasn’t the most pleasant roommate—though I suppose neither were we.” Parvati added with a self-deprecating frown. Beside her, Lavender looked unusually serious for what Steve had expected from the seemingly girlish and energetic female.

“Everyone here has been helped by Hermione, you know—that includes you two, as well. We all fought during the Hogwarts battle, but some were better fighters than others.” Lavender looked down briefly and silently Parvati grasped her friend’s hand. “Hermione blasted my attacker off me and quickly healed me as much as she could. She was so busy but she stopped for those critical minutes to stabilize me. Parvati found me after that and kept me alive until the end. The doctors told me that if Hermione or Parvati hadn’t healed me…I’d have died.” Steve watched as Parvati clenched her friend’s hand and felt a rush of empathy. “Eventually Hermione also healed my mind. Honestly, I was rather horrid to her in school but she still healed me anyway. When she healed my mind, Ron—who had been her ex-boyfriend for hardly any time at all—started coming around with her. Hermione seemed to encourage our rekindling, saying love and friendship helps heal and all that. For the three
of us, the least Hermione did for us was help us all get together.”

“Even if we aren’t close like her other friends, that will always mean something to us.” Parvati added. Steve felt his eyebrows rise in surprise, not expecting such loyalty and passion. He respected the two a little more.

“So then how did two become three? Do you two—you know--also…with each other?” Bucky asked bluntly, his apparent curiosity getting the better of his manners.

“Bucky!” Steve reprimanded, backhanding Bucky shoulder with a disappointing stare. Even so, the two giggling girls earned his rapt attention.

“Oh no! We’re just friends.” Parvati revealed with a smile.

“The best of friends!” Lavender said with a mirroring expression. What followed was a seamless blend of rapid sentences that Steve felt he was watching verbal volleys being passed back and forth.

“So we have no problem sharing-”

“-Couldn’t imagine it any other way-”

“-We’re very happy-“

“-And so is our Ron-“

“-It’s better this way-“

“-He definitely needs two people to look after him.“ They paused to glance fondly at their husband who was still greeting the Potters. As if sensing Steve unanswered questions, however, they continued on with their explanation.

“-Any group of three is considered a triad in the magical world-“

“-For classification purposes-“

“-True triads are more rare but not unheard of-“

“-But two people connected to one person—those triads are not uncommon.-“

“-They’re more common with twins-“

“-Two halves of the same whole-“

“-But that didn’t occur with my twin and I-“

“Could you imagine you and Padma?” Lavender interrupted with a side bar to Parvati.

“Merlin, no! She’s been terrible at sharing since we were young!” Parvati said, laughing freely at the idea.

“Don’t you get jealous?” Steve asked, the questions bursting from his lips despite his attempt to hide it behind propriety.

“Why would we get jealous?” Parvati asked, looking at Steve with a pitying type of amusement. Beside him, Steve could feel Bucky’s own enthrallment.
“Ron needs us—both of us.” Lavender added, her mien more patronizing. “When I dated him at Hogwarts, I was jealous with Ron’s friendship with other girls but after Parvati and I both realized we liked Ron, we realized that it wouldn’t be right to leave one another behind. The insecurity I felt when I thought I had to compete disappeared when I realized we could all be together; we could all be happy.”

“Any relationship is difficult, but we all love each other—even if Lavender and I are platonic.” Parvati smiled as the moved to stand with their arms locked in solidarity. Flabbergasted at such self-assured confidence, Steve failed to stop the words behind his teeth.

“What about…?” Steve trailed off, attempting to correct his abhorrent line of questioning.

“Sex?” Lavender asked before shrieking laughter with Parvati. “Oh sex is definitely better when shared.” Steve sputtered as he felt himself blush, embarrassed that they misunderstood his line of questioning.

“I meant children!” Steve clarified in alarm.

“Children don’t happen without sex, Steve—not even magically.” Lavender continued, prompting Parvati to giggle more. Beside him, Steve could hear Bucky chuckling under his breath. Steve turned to glare at him sharply and watched as Bucky quickly hid his smirk under an apathetic face.

“We both took Ron’s last name, so all our children will be Weasley. Some triads combine last names so all the children share. Lavender and I have already started our family, we have a boy and two girls and we’re hoping to add more.” Parvati answered, taking pity on Steve.

“So it just works?” Steve asked, attempting to wrap his head around such a foreign concept.

“As much as any other relationship. It’s nice, having another; it means I always have twice the support.” Lavender said with a shrug. “But Steve, I must wonder why the questions. Having considerations?” Lavender said, a shark-like grin affixing on her face to meet her suddenly impressively sharp eyes. Steve felt himself fluster, sweat pooling, as he attempted to thwart the rapid fairing of his brain cells as he considered Lavender’s insinuation.

“I—it’s very different than what I’ve known, I was just curious, but ah… I’m going to go that way and do that thing so thank you for answering my questions and uh…” Steve trailed off, wincing when the girls giggled again. They shared a knowing look before Parvati turned back around and eyed both Steve and Bucky.

“For your information, Steve, Bucky, we think Hermione needs two boys to keep in line.” Parvati offered sincerely. Steve felt himself heat up again and turned to glance at Bucky who looked similarly taken aback.

“Ah. Yes. Thanks. For that?” Steve returned awkwardly. Ron’s wives snickered in response.

“Alright Harpies! Let the men go free.” A voice called. Steve turned to see Harry’s wife—Ginny—returning with Luna in tow.

“The only harpy here is you”. Lavender returned with a saccharine smile.

“Ex-harpy, actually”. Ginny returned with a roll of her eyes. “Go on now—shoo.” Ginny said, motioning with her hands. Lavender gave her an exasperated look before taking off with Parvati to find their husband.

“Poppy! Rolf and I will be most disappointed if you steal someone’s arm; it’s considered the height
of all rudeness.” Luna chastised in her soft wispy tone. She finally relieved Bucky of his undesired hitchhiker, the platypus-like thing going back into the witch’s arms without much fuss beyond lusty eyes still enamored with Bucky’s arm.

“Alright you.” Ginny began, her voice authoritative that Steve unconsciously straightened up. Ginny was eying Bucky up and down. “I’ve been told you can dance, but have you learned all the modern ones?!” Before Bucky could respond, Ginny and Luna had taken a strong grasp of Bucky’s arms and began to lead him to the dance floor. Bucky tossed a pleading face back at Steve, but Steve was still angry that Bucky had laughed at him. Instead of helping Bucky, Steve gave him his most amused look. Bucky’s face hardened and promised retribution.

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Steve had to admit that Hermione’s friends were extremely welcoming. They all greeted Steve and Bucky before launching into how Hermione had helped them in their own way. Harry had even been far more cordial to Steve and Bucky declaring that since they were no longer patients, they encouraged to chase after Hermione. He then introduced him to a man in sensible sweater named Neville.

“It’s nice to see Hermione making new friends.” Neville commented as they watched Hermione filter around the room and various conversations. She had been periodically checking up on Steve and Bucky but they were both doing surprisingly well in the environment. “I’m sure everyone’s mentioned how they personally were healed by Hermione. For me, Hermione gave me back my family in addition to fixing my own mind. She saved my parents before her own at the cost of her own mental health.” Neville revealed.

“That’s just like her character.” Steve replied fondly. Neville shot him an amused half-smile.

“Despite the fact that no one had been capable of healing them for 22 years, she came in and just…” Neville trailed off, shaking his head. “She’ll always be special to us, even before she healed us. She saw me before I was a war hero or even competent. We all owe her like that in one way or another.” Neville placed a hand on Steve’s shoulder, his countenance somehow transforming from boyish and shy to a man that had fought in a terrible conflict. “I heard about your story, mate—went through quite the change. Me too, or so I’m told. Truth is, I was a bit of a bumbling fool—that’s what my gran always said—but then I grew up and Hannah says I’m quite fit now, says the group calls it ‘Longbottomed’ when you go through a change. It’s mighty flattering, really.” Neville mentioned as he returned his shy self before coughing and focusing. “But anyway, the point is that you won’t have to worry about anything like that with Hermione though because she sees people as they are.” Neville declared.

“I get that, I really do.” Steve said with a fond smile.

“Yeah, I suppose you do.” Neville said with an assessing nod of his head. “You’re an old soul just like all of us—just like Hermione. We all wear the scars of war.” Neville said seriously. A moment later he was smiling brightly, seriousness cast aside. “My wife Hannah’ll be coming on a little longer—I’ll introduce you when I get a chance.” Neville offered. Steve nodded in agreement.

Their conversation was interrupted when another redhead appeared followed by another redhead and another dark-haired woman. Hermione flew to the floor to greet them. Steve watched as Hermione squealed when one man hugged her so tightly she was lifted into the air before she was passed to the other man in similar greeting. When she was settled on the ground she was dragging the group over to introduce them.

“Steve, Bucky.” Steve turned to his side where Bucky was apparently free of his redheaded dance
partner. “This is Charlie Weasley. This is George Weasley and his wife Angelina.” Hermione said as she gestured to the respective people. George Weasley strode forward before bowing exaggeratedly.

“Hello, hello. You look like two fine chaps who enjoy a bit of good fun.” George said with a smile that seemed downright dangerous. Hermione was rolling his eyes beside him.

“George Fabian Weasley! So help me if you use any tricks without permission!” Hermione chastised shrilly. “Do not take anything from him!” Hermione advised with narrowed eyes. Steve shared a look with Bucky before nodding. Again, however, Hermione quickly departed them to check on Poppy, who seemed to have snuck away from Luna’s watch.

“She’s right scary, that one.” George admitted with a wink before heading off to greet his younger brother, his wife in tow.

“I’m Charlie.” The oldest redhead introduced himself again. He shook both Steve and Bucky’s hand with a firm grip. “I’m the one who works with dragons.”

“Really, fire-breathing dragons?” Bucky asked with raised eyebrows. Charlie flashed him a grin.

“Sometimes less fire and more acid, but generally yes, fire.” Charlie responded, earning Steve and Bucky’s admiration. “Actually, our sanctuary for dragons is in Romania…actually the place you raided with the Avengers was right next to the reserve.” Charlie revealed. “So it’s an honor to meet you.”

“We were close to dragons and we didn’t even notice?” Steve asked in surprise. Charlie chuckled.

“Dragons are heavily warded in so you can’t detect them and they don’t escape. But we heard about your exploits the next day in town. Shame I missed the excitement.” Charlie said with a frown. Bucky snorted beside him.

“Man spends all day with dragons but things people are the excitement?” Bucky asked sarcastically. Charlie laughed aloud.

“You two seem alright. Here, let me introduce you to some harder stuff than the butterbeer and pumpkin juice.” Charlie offered as he led them to an isolated table. He pulled out a tumbler of something on the table. “Let me introduce you to a real magical drink—firewhiskey.” Charlie said as he poured the amber liquid. Steve lifted the drink so he could look at the reflection of light through it.

“This isn’t a trick is it?” Steve asked, watching as Bucky mimicked the inspection.

“No, no, that would be George’s profession—literally; he’s a novelty joke inventor and store owner. That aside, we have a saying “Never tickle a sleeping dragon.” Charlie began, “If you think Hermione is scared now, you should see her when she’s right braised off.” Charlie said with a visible shudder. Steve glanced at Bucky who shrugged his shoulders at Steve. With determination, Steve slung the drink back, marveling as the fiery liquid trailed down his throat, numbing him in some ways but making him feel courageous in others; it felt like nothing Steve had ever consumed before.

“Can I ask you a question?” Steve asked suddenly, perking the attention of Bucky and Charlie at his side. “What’s the deal with her past patient?” Bucky looked surprised that Steve had dared ask the question that had been lingering on both of their minds.

“Ah Malfoy…” Charlie murmured, holding his glass in one hand and scratch his neck with the other.

“Wait--the death eater who’s house she was tortured at?” Bucky asked with narrowed eyes. Charlie laughed at the question.
“Yeah, actually.” Charlie answered amused, causing Steve and Bucky’s ire to grow. Charlie, however, disregarded their discontent as he looked up into space in recollection. “They were enemies when they were younger—the opposite in nearly everything. He was one of the most damaged after the war because old Voldemort was staying in his house. Underaged Malfoy was forced to take the mark and do some fairly rotten things. Hermione healed him after the war, removed the mark mentally and healed all the damage. She says it takes less time healing magics—magic craves magic to a degree. Yet where she only needed a few months with any of us, she needed longer with Malfoy.” Charlie regaled. “Of course, then we found out that it was less that we were so much easier to heal and more that she was taking on too much at a time. Having relationships with people does help the healing and Hermione latched on to him because Malfoy was helping her heal as well. A year after they started their sessions, he was finally healed. Hermione still hadn’t been out much publicly—magically people are still louder than muggles in her mind—so none of us really understood she was with him. By the time we all realized, he had broken up with her and she was worse than before she started. She closed herself off—made herself mad from lack of sleep. Dreamless sleep—the potion—she took too much, grew accustomed to it, built up a tolerance and got addicted. She was pretty much in a walking coma before Crookshanks floo’d to Harry’s—still can’t figure out how, but that damn cat is mad clever. In any case, Harry’s the one who found her so of course he took it the hardest; that’s why he’s so protective.” Charlie finished with a serious mien.

“Should you be telling me all this?” Steve asked feeling uncomfortably guilty for asking and not expecting such a thorough answer. Bucky was shifting slightly beside him, the only indicator he was taken aback by Hermione’s history.

“Ah. I’m basically her older brother—oversharing for the benefit of my little sister is kind of my job.” Charlie said with a good-natured smirk. “Little sisters are far scarier than dragons, I do have to admit.” Charlie said with a wink. Charlie finished the rest of his firewhiskey. “Just some context into everyone’s actions.” Charlie added before spotting the girl in question. “Hermione!” Charlie shouted. “I demand a dance! Two—Bill demanded I have one in his stead.” Charlie said as he left the two soldiers towards where the informal dance floor had been created.

“Charlie, I swear if you prance like a hippogriff, I will douse you in pumpkin juice.” Hermione threatened loudly, though she looked delighted as Charlie approached.

“I made a new one, it’s called the manticore!” Charlie said mischievously, sweeping Hermione onto the dance floor with a delighted scream. George and his wife Angelina all began to pounce around in a way that made Steve’s moves look professional. Luna, lacking a partner, strolled up to Bucky and dragged him to the dance floor before Steve had even a chance to protest. Steve sighed and poured himself another firewhiskey.

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Later into the night, when people had all been greeted, when large groups of conversations had formed and deformed, when the firewhiskey had been broken into and everyone had eaten too much food—and too any pumpkin desserts—Steve found himself alone on the side of the room. Ginny, Steve remembered her name, approached calmly enough in the corner of his eye but Steve still remembered her threat from when she had brought home drunk Hermione; he still remembered easy-going redheaded woman were dangerous and Charlie’s caution about younger sister. Steve still had on eye watching Hermione dance far more easily with Bucky than the previous turns she had wrangled out of Steve. Bucky was smiling as he passed Hermione to Luna who seemed to dance more like a marionette than an actual person. Ginny stopped beside him, regarding the dancing group as she sipped on sparkling pumpkin juice and rested a hand on her bump.

“Hermione’s happy.” Ginny commented and Steve watched as Bucky lifted Hermione gracefully in
the air as she laughed. Luna seemed to still be a mess of disconnected limbs moving completely off beat to the music; even Steve could dance better. Ginny eyed Steve from the side of her eye and Steve returned the glance. “I suppose we have you two to thank.” Steve nodded in appreciation.

“I’m glad that Hermione is doing well.” Steve ventured awkwardly. Ginny turned to face him fully, her emotions guarded, arms crossed in a way that she could dangle her cup before her elegantly.

“I know that Hermione has told you about the war, but I can tell she’s still be holding out.” Ginny said softly. Steve felt a chill go down his spine and forced himself to turn slowly to face Ginny directly. He licked his lip when they felt dry and wondered if he could procure more of their magical drink.

“How do you mean?” Steve said with casualness that he knew she saw through. Ginny merely raised an eye as she peered at him from above the lid of her cup. She took a sip.

“I like you two—you and Bucky.” Ginny began. “You might not be magical but you certainly are extraordinary—but more than that you’re compassionate fighters. I see Bucky and I think that he’s the sort who would do anything for the people he cares about, even if it meant hurting them or hurting himself. But you?” Ginny took the time to gesture at his chest with her cup. “I think you’d force everything to be as it should—you have that kind of steely determination and grit to stand by what you think is right.”

“Thank you.” Steve said taken aback by her assessment. She waved him off with a hand.

“It’s not about you or Bucky, Steve.” Ginny said dismissively. “I’m doing this for Hermione’s benefit which just so happens to coincide with yours.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked with narrowed eyes. Ginny met his with a piercing look.

“Hermione is like you and Bucky combined—willing to change systematic oppression even if it costs her a leg or her family to do it—even if she breaks a few rules along the way. If she finds a just cause—she’s going to go for it. You and Bucky? I think combined you might actually match her.” Ginny clarified. Steve waited for Ginny to elaborate, still not quite grasping what she was saying. She sighed. “You want Bucky, Hermione, and you to all be happy—don’t you?” She asked.

“I do.” Steve agreed easily.

“So just be happy—all of you.” She recommended gesturing with her cup in a wide-sweeping arc. Steve stared at her blankly.

“What do you mean?” Steve questioned.

“It won’t be easy,” Ginny continued disregarding his confusion. “You still have to break down Hermione’s walls and Bucky looks like he’s skittish enough to bolt if he thinks it’s best for everyone but if you determine it to be so, I think they’d all fall in line.” She was staring at him meaningfully but Steve could only gape.

“So just…be happy?” He repeated disbelieving.

“Yup.” Ginny agreed.

“All of us?” Steve clarified.

“Correct.” Ginny seemed so straightforward, so matter of fact that Steve was flabbergasted. “All of you— together.” Ginny reiterated nodding to where her brother Ron and his wives were standing.
“Worked for my brother and he has the emotional range of a dead lizard. I think the three of you can manage it just fine.” Ginny lifted both brows expectantly as she took a sip and walked away, leaving Steve still standing in shock and consideration.

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The night did not end until the early morning when a loud boom had echoed the house.

“George!” Hermione screamed as the collective party moved to the roof. Above them large fire works exploded and formed shapes of dragons in the sky. They fizzled out when they struck an invisible dome over the roof.

“Your wards are amazing!” George declared, shooting another firework into the sky that looked like a lightening bolt and glasses. Hermione rolled her eyes, allowing the impromptu display only because it seemed to stay within her contained area. Couples around them conjured blankets on the roof, leaning back to eye the splendor above them in the middle of New York City. Following their example, Hermione conjured a blanket and pulled Bucky and Steve to the floor, lying backwards to gaze upwards. Steve wrapped himself around Hermione to protect her from the cool October air as Bucky did the same on her opposite side. From his position, Steve eyed Ron and his wives, lovingly cuddling as they were illuminated by the flashing fireworks. The sight felt like mental photographs were being taken in his mind.

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After the fireworks, the party disappeared into the floo. A sleepy Hermione stood flanked by Steve and Bucky as she said her goodbyes. Steve accepted hand shakes and a hug from Luna as people departed. Ginny looked smug as she caught Steve’s eye before flashing them towards Hermione pointedly. When all the guests dispersed, Hermione returned the furniture as it had been rearranged and disappeared the debris that had been left over. With a swish of her wand, her house was back in pre-festivity order. Sleepily, Hermione collapsed onto the couch, wrapped in the blanket she had conjured and asleep before Bucky or Steve could persuade her to return to her room. Bucky snorted softly before hefting Hermione’s dead weight into his arms. Steve watched as his best friend looked down at her, besotted.

“Let’s go to bed, Stevie.” Bucky said softly, turning to walk back to her room slowly and steadily as not to disturb her.

“Pretty interesting friends she has.” Steve commented offhand. Bucky nodded.

“Seem like good people.” Bucky added. “Despite some of their quirky ways.” Bucky added with an upturned twist of his lips.

“Interesting things they said…about her history.” Steve continued, watching as Bucky’s face seemed to silently snarl. Hermione made a soft noise and Bucky relaxed instantly. Steve sighed, coming to a stop that Bucky echoed. Steve ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

“Bucky, I love Hermione.” Steve declared, placing a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and eyeing his friend for a reaction. Bucky swallowed quickly before his face turned blank.

“I know. Of course you do. Here, you can carry her.” Bucky offered neutrally. Steve pulled his hand off his shoulder to pace quietly.

“I know you love her too.” Steve ventured. Steve turned to gauge his friend again but Bucky’s poker face was a hell of a lot better than Steve’s. “We could—I think—“ Steve sighed as he tried to correct
his phrasing. “I think all three of us could be happy.”

“I think the two of you could be happy.” Bucky determined, his face still composed and neutral.

“I don’t think Hermione would be happy and I know that I wouldn’t be happy, knowing where you belonged—with her, with us.” Bucky favored him with a long evaluating stare.

“What makes you think she even wants us.” Bucky questioned, eyes alighting with hesitation and fear.

“What makes you think she doesn’t?” Steve returned quickly. Bucky turned to look down at Hermione’s sleeping mine.

“She seems to have been brushing off our affections.” Bucky pointed out. Steve exhaled.

“We just need to show her we’re serious—now that we aren’t her patients” Steve continued.

“How do you propose that?” Bucky asked, seemingly warming up to the idea.

“Two-front warfare.” Steve suggested, feeling confident and awakened in a way he had not been before. Bucky gave him a measuring look, his eyes guarded in the way that they had been since his freeze. Steve felt himself relax when Bucky’s eyes seemed to brighten, his confidence seeming to echo Steve’s.

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Bucky said with a smirk, something significant passing between them despite the sarcasm. They laid in bed that night with a certain sort of transcendence echoing within them, a feeling of righteousness and correctness. If they slept holding Hermione just a little tighter, just a little more reverently and contentedly, well—who was Steve to judge?

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Jiminy Cricket! Sorry for the long wait! I’ve had the meat of this chapter written for sooooo long but needed to refine the character interactions. Then I was avoiding anything Marvel related because Infinity Wars came out and we all know how that went! In any case, thank you for all the follows and reviews! You’re all wonderful! We’ve made it this far, now it’s time to have fun!
Steve had never been jealous of Bucky’s ability to charm ladies—the concept just seemed innate to his character. Bucky and girls. Girls and Bucky. Despite Bucky’s attempts to impart his knowledge to Steve, dames and dancing just never really connected with Steve’s ambition. Steve listened. Steve observed; but it was always out of a separate kind of curiosity and fascination. Now as he attempted to recall everything he had ever learned from his previously playboy pal, he rued not taking the lessons closer to heart.

“Steve, I don’t know what makes you think I know the answers.” Bucky chastised. Steve had convinced Bucky to spar with him lightly on the roof as Hermione slept in downstairs. They had been loath to wake her as she hardly ever slept in and they had wanted to talk without her overhearing.

“Bucky, you always had a way with women—instinctively.” Steve recalled, blocking a punch with his forearms and following up with a kick.

“That was literally seventy years ago; the times have change and the women have changed.” Bucky countered as he blocked Steve’s kick with his metal arm, returning a swing with his right hand.

“Bucky.” Steve stopped, standing out of his fighting stance to concentrate on Bucky. “You told me you would always have ‘it’ and I choose to believe that.” Steve said, recalling a conversation they had ages ago with a smile. Bucky exhaled a breath in a quiet laugh before meeting Steve’s smile.

“You know, now that I think about it…didn’t I overhear something about your lackluster kissing skills? Maybe we should trust my experience mor—” Bucky was interrupted by Steve’s assault, moving quicker than light sparing and into something more comprehensive and challenging. By the end of the sequence of blows, they were both panting heavily and had removed their long sleeve shirts despite the cool early November air.

“In all honesty, Steve, that’s not me anymore. Those dames might have flocked to me but I didn’t have to do anything. Don’t you think we’d already be dating Hermione properly if I knew how to make it happen?” Bucky asked with a sad smile. “I’m out of my depth.”

Steve contemplated his friend before nodding. “You’re not wrong.” Steve said with a sigh of agitation. He ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “Besides, she already is attracted to us; she’s just gun-shy.”
“Well, you were more gun-shy then I ever was—what would make you follow through?” Bucky asked as he drank from his water bottle.

“I couldn’t bare not trying something more. Hermione just inspires me to want.” Steve admitted as he looked at his clenched fists. “How do we be so attractive that she lets herself do what she wants?” Steve questioned rhetorically. Bucky nodded along.

“Too fast and she pulls back. Too slow and we’ll be chasing her until we’re 150.” Bucky commiserated. Steve’s lips twitched at the age.

“Just keep your eyes open and I’m sure we’ll figure it out. We’re unstoppable when we work together—especially now that she doesn’t need to feel torn between us.“ Steve said optimistically, slapping Bucky on his bare shoulder. “Now let’s go back inside.” Steve directed. He walked over to where he had discarded his shirt, tossing Bucky the shirt he also had discarded and watching his friend toss it over his shoulder.

Bucky led down the stairs emerging into the atrium where the smell of cinnamon wafted over. In the kitchen, Hermione was wide awake and cooking.

“There goes wooing her with breakfast in bed.” Bucky muttered under his breath. Steve shrugged in muted agreement.

“Oh, there you two are! I was having a bit of a lay i—” Hermione turned around from the stove to face them, cutting off when she faced them fully. Steve soaked in the sight of her: eyes widening, jaw dropping, and hands clutching what looked to be a bag of icing. Her grip must have tightened unintentionally as the icing squirted wildly out into the air. Hermione cursed breathlessly before focusing her attention on the fallen debris, clearing it up with a swoop of her wand. “Ah ha, silly me! So clumsy! Oh no! Dropped icing on my clothes! Better change them now!” Hermione rambled off quickly before laughing nervously. Steve recalled a similar reaction when she had fixed his bullet wounds so many weeks ago. Eyebrows crinkling in confusion, Steve turned to Bucky who had narrowed his eyes speculatively at where Hermione had retreated into the hall.

“What was that about?” Steve asked, eyebrows furrowing as he took a sip of his water. Bucky looked at Steve, his eyes seemingly devouring him and leaving him somewhat self-conscious. Steve resisted the urge to cover his bare chest. Bucky retracted his stare to look down at his own body, turning over his arm and his hand silently. With one final glance at the bedrooms, Bucky slowly began to smile.

“Steve.” Bucky called with a grin.

“Yeah, Buck?” Steve said, looking at his friend who was wearing a fearsome look of determination.

“I know what we’re going to do.” Bucky announced, meeting Steve’s eyes across the counter as he snatched his water and took a sip.

“What’s that?” Steve continued cautiously. Bucky’s eyes glanced at Steve’s bare chest again and this time Steve could not resist covering his chest protectively. Bucky rolled his eyes at the action.

“None of that Steve.” Bucky chastised as he forced Steve’s arms down. “In fact, no shirts at all seems like a good place to start if we’re going to seduce her.”

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Hermione retreated to her room, shutting the door and leaning against it. Her heart was thrumming as she blew a lock of her hair out of her face. She crumpled to the floor scrubbing at her face with her
hands. It had been so long since she had gotten a good look at either Bucky or Steve without a t-shirt; Bucky preferring to nearly always cover where his metal arm met the flesh of his chest and Steve still had the manners of a geriatric—keeping his shirt firmly on at all times. In fact, the last time she had seen Steve shirtless—drunk excursion not included—was when she was treating his bullet wounds. The last time she had seen Bucky without his shirt was when he was still bathing with her.

Hermione felt the blush rise on her face as she thought about when she used to wash Bucky. She had always been clinically detached when she had bathed him but now, she could appreciate the memories with a much more candid outlook; super soldiers were unnecessarily attractive. Hermione groaned, covering her face with her sleeve and pulling back disgruntled when she realized she had exploded her cinnamon roll icing on it. Cleansing her shirt with her wand she opted to change into another sweater anyway. Taking a deep breath, she decided she couldn’t hide out in her room any longer.

Hermione walked back into the kitchen passing the guest bathroom and hearing the shower. She assumed Steve or Bucky was showering and hoped she had time to finish icing the cinnamon rolls. Hermione frowned at the pan, half iced with one roll already missing.

“Hope you don’t mind I already grabbed one.” Bucky announced, causing Hermione to jump in surprise; she hadn’t seen Bucky in the corner polishing off said roll—still entirely shirtless. Hermione’s eyes drifted unwillingly to where his lips licked the icing off his fingers before shifting to where the metal of his arm merged with his flesh. Her eyes snapped to his. “You don’t mind if I take another?” Bucky asked as he strolled closer to her, each step causing Hermione to categorize the muscle the movement utilized. She swallowed before forcing her eyes up to his face. There was something predatory and far too enticing in his gait.

“N-not at all. I just need to finish icing the rest.” Hermione explained breathlessly. As Bucky reached her, Hermione could not resist glancing more intimately at his body, her breath hitching as he crowded her space. He trapped her against the counter between his arms. Hermione couldn’t help the flop of her stomach as his arms encircled around her waist, the lip of the counter digging into her hip.

“Thanks.” Bucky said with a small smirk, retracting one arm to reveal his true intention—another roll that he brought immediately up to his mouth to hide his smile. Hermione felt the energy under her skin from his presence as he met her eyes, eating his breakfast with a cheeky grin. Hermione’s eyes shifted along his body again before pausing to inspect the metal again—she had never gotten a particularly close look.

“You can look—if you want.” Bucky offered after a moment. Hermione found it a true testament to his healing that he would so easily offer up the still sensitive subject. When she made no move to inspect the prosthetic, Bucky grasped her hand, maintaining eye contact as he placed her hand on his chest and covered it with his own. He let hers go as she trailed her fingers down the ugly scar.

“Does it hurt?” Hermione asked eyes flickering up to meet his. She knew from experience that some scars held phantom pains.

“I’ve gotten used to it.” Bucky confirmed, eyes dark with emotion. Hermione flinched her hand away but Bucky caught it quickly, easing the tenseness in her fingers so she slowly caressed the skin again. “The skin can get taut where it merges, but it’s not too bad—just noticeable.” Bucky elaborated. Hermione swallowed thickly.
“How much sensation do you have there?” Hermione asked, her fingers ghosting over the rim of the metal. Bucky seemed to step into her touch, half of her fingers gracing the cool metal, the other two resting on the warmth of his chest as she braced her hand against him.

“Not enough.” Bucky admitted. He brought both of his hands up to tilt the bottom of her chin up, forcing her eyes to meet his. “Not nearly enough.” Buck amended, his metal fingers tracing delicately across her cheek and down her jawline. Hermione felt her eyelids droop, the feeling of his touch entrancing. She had admittedly missed the intimacy of this type of touch, the comfort of cuddling in bed not nearly as titillating as the barely-there whispers of Bucky’s touch.

Hermione could smell the sweetness of the dessert breakfast lingering in the air, cinnamon clowing pungently around her. The edge of the counter was pushing harshly into her back as she lifted subtly on her toes to try and shift the position. Bucky’s flesh hand had migrated to the back of her head as the metal one had trailed heated paths down her side to grip her at her waist. When the grip tightened, her eyes flew open in pleasure; Bucky had unintentionally found an erogenous zone. Her right hand had been tracing the line of Bucky’s scar when she leant back intending to brace herself with her other hand against the counter. She gasped, posture straightening when she accidently placed her left hand directly into the sticky buns. She garbled a laugh as she inspected the stickiness of her hand, tension and focus fizzling as she reached for a napkin on the counter to wipe her hand. She paused when Bucky snatched her wrist, her eyes flying to where his heated pools were boring into her soul.

“Don’t waste good icing.” Bucky said softly, his eyes alight with mischief as he pulled her hand gently towards his mouth, kissing her wrist before drawing a finger into his mouth.

“Bucky!” Hermione reprimanded her voice high-pitched in her surprise. She nearly bit her tongue as she attempted to ignore the clench below her navel that Bucky’s tongue inspired. Bucky let go of her with a smirk before reaching behind her to grab another—not ruined—cinnamon roll.

“Thanks for breakfast, darling.” Bucky thanked her with a wink. Hermione watched him leave, her jaw dropped and mouth dry. She turned to support herself against the cabinets, cursing her quivering thighs and loudly beating heart.

“I heard there were cinnamon rolls!” Steve’s voice called excitedly as he rounded the corner. Hermione turned abruptly to face him, blushing wildly at the sight of his glistening chest—wearing just his jogging pants and still no shirt.

“You’re wet!” Hermione exclaimed as she followed one particular bead of water dripping a path down the panel of his abs. She swallowed thickly at the sight of the v-cut of his abs. She attempted to ignore the distinct fluttering somewhere between her stomach and her throat.

“I just showered.” Steve clarified, wiping his chest lazily with the towel she just noticed in his hands. He was walking towards her determinedly, his all-American smile doing nothing to slow down the racing of her heart.

“Aren’t you chilly?” Hermione asked even though she herself felt unnaturally hot.

“Nah.” Steve drawled with a boyish playfulness. “I’m still pretty warm from Bucky and I sparring. I can stand to air dry a little.” He had stepped close to her, enough that she felt trapped against the counter again.

“Ah…right…carry on, then.” Hermione authorized awkwardly. Steve flashed her an amused smile.

“Mind if I grab some breakfast?” Steve inquired, eyes indicating to the pan behind her. Hermione
flushed feeling stupid as she stepped quickly to the side to allow Steve access.

“Just mind the hand print.” Hermione said with a wince. Steve chuckled lowly before grabbing a bun.

“Thanks for breakfast.” Steve said, saluting her with the pastry and walking away with a swagger that drew attention to the wide breadth of his shoulders and cut of his waist—muscles flexing with each step.

Merlin, these super soldiers were giving her arrhythmia.

She managed to somehow last the week, fleeing her house for a reprieve from the two hottest beings that had ever been in her presence.

She wondered what the hell was going on. Ever since the party, the house had become flooded with sexual tension. Hermione wondered if it was just her imagination or if the two were actively wearing out her heart from the increase in adrenaline. Everywhere they went in the house, they were suddenly shirtless. If Hermione hadn’t admired their forms before in clothing—and oh, how she did—she certainly couldn’t ignore the beckoning of their naked chests. Despite the coolness that had descended with the autumn breezes, both super soldiers were claiming to be hot and declining her offers to turn up the heat in the house. They had yet to discuss the elephant in the room—their relationship and where that all stood—and instead it had been replaced with searing looks and her own sexual frustration.

Hermione braced herself when she felt the cold chill of the autumn air brush her face. While she had hoped that the brisk walk outside would cool her mind, instead she recalled Bucky and Steve and how they had both started going to bed in just their boxers—their boxers! Hermione thought it somewhat ironic that Steve had originally been the one flabbergasted by her state of undress and now Hermione was the one who was flushing every time they went to bed. She was also sleeping less as she spent an inordinate amount of time memorizing the feel of them both huddled intimately against her. She had woken every morning grinding against one or the other’s prominent figures, hands exploring, and just in general causing everyone to need a good, brisk, cold morning shower. She wondered if Bucky and Steve were purposely contributing to them all silently suffering equally but no one had brought the issue up verbally.

Hermione pushed open the door to the café, ordering her drink and a light meal. The longer she stayed out the more balanced she was hoping to be as she was far too distracted to even work properly on her research. That was why she was happy to see Natasha ordering at the counter. She flagged Natasha over perhaps a little too eagerly but Natasha seemed more amused than anything.

“What are you doing here, Nat?” Hermione greeted her with a smile. Nat sat down across from her allowing privacy spells to surround them.

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of you while I was in town.” Natasha reprimanded. “You haven’t answered any of my phone calls.” Hermione frowned.

“I don’t have your number and I don’t answer random lines.” Hermione responded amused. Something clicked in her head a second later. “Did you track my phone here?” Hermione accused. Natasha’s face gave nothing away but Hermione could read her regardless. “Natasha.” She groaned, “You can’t just go stalking people when they don’t return your phone calls—you could’ve texted.”

“My numbers are always a proxy or from a burner phone, so you can’t exactly return a call.” Natasha reminded her. Hermione rolled her eyes.
“Well, I’ll start answering random phone numbers, I suppose, if you stop stalking me. So, if you were seeking me out, I take it there is a lull in your busy schedule? You have time for some healing?” Hermione asked.

“Bingo.” Nat said, eyes cast to the side in a brief moment of insecurity.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think I’ll be able to start today.” Hermione said with a wince. “I’m a bit turbulent at the moment.” Natasha looked at her curiously. “The boys have been…well, they’ve been distracting to say the least.” Hermione explained.


“It’s bloody distracting. Bucky is constantly drawing attention to his mouth—which I’m, of course, obsessed with and Steve is constantly baring his glorious upper body. The man has a heart of gold and the shoulder-to-waist ratio of a bloody Dorito.” Hermione complained irritated. Natasha nodded along.

“Can’t speak for Barnes, but Rogers is 200 lbs of twisted steel and sex appeal.” Natasha commented.

“Amen!” Hermione agreed with a salute of her drink.

“I’ve actually seen women run into inanimate objects while gazing at Steve—several men, too.” Natasha added with a smile.

“I can believe it.” Hermione laughed, shaking her head in amusement. “I just—I don’t know if they’re doing it on purpose but their just so achingly attractive and now, they’re suddenly flaunting it—like, I get it you’re both fit!” Hermione groused. Hermione gave a commiserating look before sighing. “In any case, what is your schedule for the upcoming months? I’m primarily in research mode now so I should be available for whenever you are available.” Hermione offered. Natasha however frowned.

“I’m not really sure what my schedule is—everything is very much when I know, I go.” Natasha described. “In between searches for Loki’s scepter and hydra strongholds, I’ve been working on a bit of a private project.” Natasha paused but Hermione nodded encouragingly. “I’m tracking down leads to find my parents.” Natasha admitted quietly. Hermione’s heart reached out, far too familiar with the feeling.

“I understand how that feels.” Hermione smiled bittersweet. “How has the search gone?”

“Poorly.” Natasha frowned. “The KGB—the Red Room—had no interest in any of us ever leaving or looking for any other tie that would taint our loyalty.”

“Come over.” Hermione offered suddenly. Natasha gave her a questioning look. “Come to my house—you’ll need access anyway if I treat you there. But I have a spell—a charm really—that can help you find your parents; I used it myself to find my parents.” Hermione revealed. Natasha nodded with subdued eagerness but they hurried their meal before walking back to her home. Hermione sent a quick message to Steve, seeing the text message was received and read before she worked Natasha past the wards.


“I tried. Although the circle of people in the know seems to grow every day.” Hermione said with
little malice or concern. They entered the house through the garage door, noting Steve’s motorcycle was parked and assuming they were both at home. “Steve? Bucky? I’m home!” Hermione called, leading Natasha into the main floor. They stopped when they spotted Steve and Bucky both seemingly posed nonchalantly on the couch—once again shirtless. Hermione had never seen Steve slouch so much as he reclined on the couch but something about the angle made his abs particularly pronounced.

“All out of shirts, Rogers?” Natasha called as she strolled up to the couch before crossing her arms.

“Nat? What are you doing here?!” Steve squeaked, covering his chest awkwardly before attempting to relax and act natural. Bucky had faded to the back, uneasy around any new person—even those trusted enough to enter Hermione’s home.

“I invited her—I left a message on your phone that said you read it.” Hermione frowned as she appeared behind Natasha. She caught Steve’s wince.

“I got distracted after I opened the message and didn’t actually read it.” Steve admitted, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment before clearing his throat. “Natasha, this is Bucky Barnes—my friend.” Steve introduced as he awkwardly.

“Hello.” Bucky greeted gruffly and uneasy. He stood, arms crossed, scanning the room. Hermione felt bad that she had caught him unaware; he was also shirtless and she knew he felt uncomfortable about his metal arm.

“And this is Natasha Romanoff; she’ll be my patient soon.” Hermione added as Natasha offered her hand. Her eyes were still assessing Bucky in a way that Hermione recognized would make anyone feel cagey.

“Nice to meet you.” Bucky replied softly. Steve was looking between them with only the slightest of worried expressions that Hermione echoed.

“We’ve actually met before.” Natasha was smiling but to Hermione, her smile seemed to had taken a dangerous undertone.

“Ah.” Bucky uttered and Hermione recalled their previous meeting had been less than pleasant. Hermione held her breath.

“You shot me. Twice.” Natasha deadpanned. Hermione let out a garbled breath as Bucky grimaced.

“Ah, sorry about that. Nothing personal.” Bucky apologized quickly. Hermione wondered if she would have to mediate the conversation.

“Hmm…I suppose I did try to choke you…” Natasha conceded, still smirking though the intensity had faded around her. Hermione exchanged a relieved look with Steve who had also looked ready to jump in.

“Yeah…I think I can remember that, actually.” Bucky winced, rubbing his hand through his hair.

“Square?” Romanoff offered, extending her hand and Hermione could feel Bucky’s relief.

“Square.” Bucky confirmed. Hermione smiled at the sight. Remembering what she knew about Natasha, she supposed they came from a similar standpoint and could understand each other fairly sympathetically.

“So, that aside I do have to ask.” Natasha began with an air of mischief. “You’re the only one who
Steve knew Bucky in the past so he had to wonder: had Steve *always* been so reckless? At the question, Bucky seemed to completely be at ease, smiling cockily in a way Hermione adored.

“Absolutely. I don’t think he even knows how to behave. Even when he was a tiny runt.” Bucky complained.

“Hey!” Steve protested. “I don’t know if reckless is the correct word…” Steve muttered self-consciously.

“You jumped on a dummy grenade during boot camp instead of, I don’t know…ducking for cover.” Bucky revealed. Hermione looked over at Steve accusingly.

“I didn’t exactly think there was enough time for the others to get away…” Steve flinched away from Hermione’s piercing gaze.

“So, you were always like this.” Natasha identified. “Did he jump out of planes without parachutes, too?” The comment tricked a laugh out of Bucky.

“Nah, never jumped out of a plane without a parachute. But he did parachute behind enemy lines during, but that’s a different story.” Bucky dismissed. Steve was shifting awkwardly at the side.

“Wait, I’m sorry—can we go back to the jumping out of planes without a chute part?” Hermione interjected. Steve winced.

“To be fair, it was a low flying jet over water.” Steve defended meekly.

“It was over 100 meters up, Steve.” Natasha corrected with a raised eyebrow. Hermione and Bucky both sputtered at the information.

“Steve!” Bucky chastised after a moment. “That’s got to be a new record of stupid—even for you.”

“Well it’s certainly a record given that the highest high dive record is 60 meters.” Hermione narrowed her eyes to glare at Steve, crossing her arms menacingly.

“Technically, you also jumped off a dragon into water—so it’s comparable.” Steve defended. Natasha looked at Hermione seemingly impressed.

“It was hardly more than 15 meters.” Hermione defended with a blush.

“I think you are both reckless—like the alley fight.” Bucky said with a shake of the head. Steve and Hermione turned to him indignantly.

“You were there too!” Steve added. Bucky gave an indelicate shrug.

“Yeah, well, I never said I wasn’t recklessly following the both of you.” Bucky clarified.

“I think we can all agree that this isn’t a meeting for the conservative, stay-at-home crochet society.” Natasha placated, earning a wince from all three as they reflected their histories.

“Like attracts like.” Hermione supposed. “Speaking of like, there was a reason Natasha and I were here.” Hermione remembered. “Come along, Natasha, I’ll show you the downstairs.”

Steve entered the Avenger section of the building porting baked goods—specifically, Bucky’s baked
goods. He placed the containers on the kitchen table, knowing that most of the Avengers passed by at some point during the day. True to his expectation, Sam was already there.

“Morning, Cap.” Sam greeted from behind a coffee mug. “What do you got there?” He asked curiously, peering into the containers. “Steve…did you bring…homemade cupcakes?” Sam asked with an amused smile.

“Penny is complaining that a certain someone is baking too much food. She hates that so much is going to waste so she has demanded that I share a large portion of someone’s new found love of baking.” Steve informed his friend as he revealed another bag of baked cookies and placed it on the counter. “You unleashed him onto Pinterest—you did this, Sam.” Steve accused. Sam raised his hands in placation before grabbing a cookie and taking a bite.

“You know, these are pretty good.” Sam acknowledged with a tilt of the head. Steve scoffed.

“He’s still pants at grilling.” Steve muttered.

“Pants?” Sam repeated, eyebrow raised. Steve blushed self-consciously.

“Is it awkward? Penny says it all the time.” Steve cowed, knowing that Hermione’s British-isms did not seem to fit coming from Captain America’s mouth—didn’t make him want to imitate her any less, though.

“I prefer skirts, myself.” Tony interjected, waggling his eyebrows suggestively as he entered the room. Steve exchanged a look of exasperation with Sam.

“We know, Stark.” Steve deadpanned.

“Ooh cupcakes!” Tony noticed, grabbing one of the sweet treats eagerly. “Should we start bringing orange slices and capri suns next time we fight the bad guys?” He teased.

“Hey, be nice or you’ll get your cupcake privileges revoked.” Sam jumped to Steve’s defense. Steve nodded in agreement.

“Did Dr. Penny bake them with love and a frilly pink apron?” Tony imagined hopefully. Steve attempted to smother his laughter at the idea of Bucky wearing the apron. When he met Sam’s look, they both chuckled apparently imagining the same thing.

“Neither Penny nor the person who actually made these would be caught wearing a frilly pink apron, Tony.” Natasha said as she entered the kitchen, Clint trailing behind. She grabbed one of the cupcakes. “It’s not either of their styles.” Natasha added, not trying at all to tamper down her smug smile as she took a bite of the cupcake. She turned towards Tony, eyebrows raised in a silent challenge. Tony’s full attention had turned to focus on Natasha, analyzing her words.


“Sir, given the current information we have on the subject, I can neither confirm nor deny that I have —” Jarvis chimed from above.

“Rhetorical, Jarvis.” Tony chastised.

“Yes, sir.” Jarvis responded. Clint chuckled at the exchange.
“Don’t worry, Tony; I haven’t met her yet, either. Though I’ve been formally told to stand down.” Clint confessed, hands thrown up in a conciliatory manner.

“By who?” Tony exclaimed appalled, glancing at Steve.

“By me!” Natasha interjected merrily.

“Wait! When I told you all to leave her alone you didn’t listen but Nat says it and you quit?” Steve complained offended. Clint, Natasha, and Tony stared at him blandly.

“Romanoff, here, understands true caution so I’m inclined to believe her when she says to leave something along—not that that guarantees that I’ll listen.” Tony explained. “But you, Rogers? I’m still concerned you might have had pet bears.” Tony defended succinctly.

“It was a high school mascot and it wasn’t a real bear—it was a joke; I was being funny.” Steve threw his hands up in irritation.

“Debatable, Cap. You need to brush up on your modern humor.” Tony advised. Steve frowned.

“I think the problem was context and delivery.” Steve muttered to Sam under his breath.

“Back to the point!” Tony loudly refocused. “Why have I still not met her?! Your poor teammate/coworker/world hero and international inspiration has never met either of your mysterious roommates. And what did you say the guy’s name was?” Tony rambled quickly.

“I didn’t.” Steve declared. Tony scowled.

“You never let me have any fun.” Tony huffed.

“You should be thankful that you haven’t met yet—she’s less than pleased about being followed.” Natasha warned with a look.

“Well I’m less than pleased about being denied.” Tony snarked. Steve bristled.

“Watch it, Stark.” Steve added to the warning. Tony rolled his eyes unaffected.

“Don’t get mad at just me—this was a three-way competition.” Tony defended before surveying the room. “Alright, I’ll stop investigating your mysterious roommates if you bring them to Thanksgiving dinner.”

“What?” Steve asked flabbergasted.

“Who are we inviting to Thanksgiving?” Bruce asked as he entered the room. “Oh, cupcakes!” Bruce noticed, picking one up and peeling back the liner as he turned to face Tony.

“I was telling Cap, here, that I will stop chasing after him and his roommates if he brings them to Thanksgiving dinner.” Tony explained. “Pepper wanted to have a nice dinner and she has a friend she was planning on inviting so we’ll be on our best behavior anyway.”

“What?” Steve asked flabbergasted.

“Who are we inviting to Thanksgiving?” Bruce asked as he entered the room. “Oh, cupcakes!” Bruce noticed, picking one up and peeling back the liner as he turned to face Tony.

“I was telling Cap, here, that I will stop chasing after him and his roommates if he brings them to Thanksgiving dinner.” Tony explained. “Pepper wanted to have a nice dinner and she has a friend she was planning on inviting so we’ll be on our best behavior anyway.”

“Tony,” Bruce sighed. “I don’t really think it’d be a wise idea to involve civilians in our matters.” Bruce groused as he began to rub the bridge of his nose. “We’re all a little dangerous…some more so than others…and we’d just bring her into more danger. She’s hidden. Let her stay hidden.” Bruce fretted.

“You ask, I’ll back off.” Tony said to Steve, ignoring Bruce completely.
“That sounds like blackmail.” Steve replied with narrowed eyes. Tony shrugged nonchalantly.

“That sounds like a compromise.” Tony effused, wagging a finger in his direction. Steve frowned.

“Fine. I’ll ask but not because you told me to.” Steve conceded. He figured that Hermione had already agreed to meet the Avengers—though Bucky was another story. Maybe they’d decline, Steve thought hopefully.

“I don’t know, Tony…” Bruce wavered disconcertedly.

“Nonsense, Bruce. It’ll be fine! We’ll be perfect hosts.” Tony asserted. Steve snorted at the thought before leaving to go to the training arena, Sam following.

“You think Penny and Toto will show up?” Sam asked as they were walking down the unnecessarily long hallways. Steve rubbed the back of his hair uneasily.

“I don’t think ‘Toto’ will be too pleased about it but Penny said she wanted to meet people anyway.” Steve said, tripping over the nickname for Bucky. They really needed a better code name.

“So now that you’re done with healing, have you swept Penny off her feet yet?” Sam asked with a smirk. Steve tossed an exasperated look over his shoulder at his friend.

“I gotta hand it to you Sam; you’re persistent.” Steve commended reluctantly. He entered the code to access the arena and allowed Sam to go first.

“I love a good romance.” Sam admitted with a casual shrug.

“Me too!” Natasha chimed, appearing from around training equipment they kept in the room. “If you recall, I had plenty of suggestions for Steve before SHIELD collapsed; I was your number one supporter!” Natasha added. Steve sighed, not even surprised to see she had somehow beat them to the room. He locked eyes with Sam who seemed to be following his lead—not knowing that Natasha probably already knew their intentions.

“Well, wasted efforts aside… Bucky and I have decided we’re going to both try and date her.” Steve admitted aloud for the first time. Sam’s eyebrows rose in surprise but Natasha was smiling smugly.

“Not competitively?” Sam clarified. Steve coughed.

“No…at the same time…together.” Steve finished uneasily.

“Wow.” Sam murmured appraisingly. “Good on you. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

“You’d be surprised.” Natasha snickered. Steve gave her a look.

“Yeah, well…Penny is still skittish.” Steve revealed. He glanced at Nat, ignoring her irritating leer before turning to Sam. “Say, Sam. You’re a modern guy…any advice on what we should do?” Steve dared to ask. Sam physically recoiled at the question before recovering some poise. Natasha’s smile grew as Steve continued to ignore it.

“Well what have you been doing? I thought Penny has always been pretty damn attracted to you both?” Sam ventured.

“Oh, I know this!” Nat jutted in. “They’re working the thirst trap angle!”

“Thirst trap?” Steve inquired, unfamiliar with the term. Sam was looking at the two of them in confusion.
“Thirst trap as in scientifically maximizing the most appealing angle of you—so much that you can’t help but illicit a response from the person who sees it?” Sam clarified. Natasha tittered as she nodded and Steve resisted the urge to blush and drop the conversation.

“I went there the other day and they were walking around shirtless. They were one dropped item away from the ‘bend and snap’.” Natasha revealed to Sam who was blinking incredulously. Steve covered his face with his hand. “Penny said they’ve been sleeping in boxers and have been flooding the house with testosterone, sexual tension, et cetera.” Natasha waved her hand dismissively.

“Wait, what?” Steve asked, Hermione’s inner workings an insight he had desperately wished for.

“Et cetera?” Sam repeated, ignoring Steve’s interjection.

“Penny said they’ve been walking out the shower shirtless, water still dripping. She’s insisted that the kitchen items have been rearranged so they’re constantly showing off their muscles.” Natasha gossiped. “She said she’s almost asked ‘which way to the beach’ just to see if they’d flex.”

“She’s noticing?” Steve interrupted. Sam and Natasha glanced at Steve before they turned to each other and continued to gossip. Steve resolutely continued to listen intently.

“So, they’re thirst trapping hard.” Sam analyzed. “Alright, alright.” Sam seemed to approve. “Is it working?”

“Well Penny certainly noticed.” Natasha finally answered Steve’s question. “She said she’s constantly drawn to their chests muscles—which of course she should be obsessed with. She still isn’t one hundred percent sure they’re doing it on purpose, though—just thinks she’s getting her own private showing.” Natasha summed, giving Steve a knowing smirk. Sam had steepled his fingers in contemplation.

“It’s good that Hermione’s noticed—she struck me as someone who might be willfully oblivious when convenient.” Sam identified. Steve agreed with the assessment. “Still, now that you’ve caught her attention, I think you need the next key detail.”

“What’s that?” Steve asked intrigued.

“Her agreement.” Sam deadpanned. “You need to expressly state both of you want to date her.” Sam advised.

“He’s right, Steve; communication is key.” Natasha nodded in agreement.

“How do you know we haven’t already done that?” Steve asked petulantly. Sam and Natasha both rolled their eyes.

“You would be much less tense, I think.” Sam proposed. He glanced over Steve before sharing a look with Nat that had Steve bristling. “Much less tense.” Sam reiterated.

AfterAvenger practice, where Steve was sufficiently distracted, he was forced to confront the truth of Sam’s words. They had yet to explicitly say their intentions for a triad or whatever the magical term was. Out of courtesy to Bucky, he informed him of his intention to bring up the subject before bed. Unfortunately, Hermione’s work that day made it so the conversation ended up happening literally before bed. Steve figured the opportunity to converse had approached when he caught Hermione ogling Bucky’s half-dressed form. When Steve similarly removed his shirt and pants, he had the pleasure of watching Hermione’s less than covert attempts at checking him out. When her eyes flicked up and met his unintentionally, she blushed and averted them to the floor. She scooted into the middle of the bed silently.
“Hermione.” Steve murmured as he slid into the bed beside her, lying up on his side enough to peer at her from above.

“Steve.” Hermione acknowledged, bringing the blanket up to her face in an attempt to hide from his scrutiny.

“What are your Thanksgiving plans?” Steve asked, eying her searchingly.

“Well, it’s not really a British thing so my parents and I don’t usually celebrate it. Why do you ask?” Hermione said, sitting up in bed and leaning against the headboard to meet his eyes equally.

“Tony…invited you.” Steve revealed. “He invited both of you.” Steve elaborated, catching Bucky’s eye. Bucky frowned in response and sat up on his side like Steve to look at them both. “It’ll be small—just the Avengers and Pepper’s friend.” Hermione seemed to chuckle at Steve’s statement.

“Pepper mentioned having a Thanksgiving dinner—she probably meant me.” Hermione declared. She glanced over at Bucky.

“I don’t mind meeting them—I already know most of them there. Pepper wanted me to meet everyone and I already said I was interested too.” Hermione explained. “But of course, I wouldn’t want to leave either of you alone on the holiday.” Steve glanced over at Bucky who looked darkly off into the empty space of the room in contemplation.

“We don’t have to go if you don’t want to, Buck.” Steve offered. Bucky shook his head.

“Nah, I’m healed, right? Even if I wasn’t, the Avengers tower would probably be the safest place to be, right?” Bucky said offering a hesitant smile. Hermione was beaming at him and Steve felt the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. “I got to start moving forward somehow.” Bucky added.

“So, it’s settled—Thanksgiving with your friends!” Hermione smiled pleasantly. She pulled out her wand to turn off the lights like every night.

“Uh, Hermione.” Steve called again, causing Hermione to lower her wand arm and focus her attention on him. Steve sat up higher in the bed, glancing at Bucky before moving boldly forward.

“We’d like to continue staying here and we both want you to know that we want you both of us…that is the two of us and you…mean—all three of us. It didn’t seem like it was impossible…” Steve nearly bit his tongue as he spit the words out quickly.

Hermione’s eyebrows furrowed as she rubbed the back of her neck.

“Well, yes…it is possible.” Hermione confirmed in a small voice. Bucky sat up higher on her other side.

“Is that okay?” Bucky asked equally quiet. “You don’t need to date us if you don’t want.” Hermione shook her head negative.

“That’s not it at all! I adore both of you, obviously…” Hermione trailed off.

“But you don’t view us romantically? Just as friends?” Bucky articulated disappointed.

“No! No! I do! Merlin, I want both of you! I’ve been going crazy these past few days just at the sight of you! I’m just…hesitant.” Hermione admitted, burying her face in her knees. Bucky and Steve both reached out to reassure her.

“We can go as slow as you want, Hermione.” Steve proposed. “You can set the pace.” Hermione
peered up at Steve from beneath her curls. She looked to be seeking validation and Steve hoped whatever she saw in his face would reassure her. She turned to look at Bucky and seemed to nod to some sort of internal decision.

“Okay. I know we can’t guarantee tomorrow or the next day, but if your willing to try…I’m willing to try.” Hermione smiled softly. “But it’s been a while and I’m sure I’ll be awkward.” Hermione tacked on. Steve and Bucky were smiling wildly, however, leaning in at the same time to squash her in a hug between them. It sent her into laughter that had Steve and Bucky smiling further. Slowly they released her and sunk down in the bed, allowing her to finally turn off the lights.

In the quiet of the room, Steve sought to hold her hand, his blood still thrumming with the adrenaline of what ended up to be a fairly straightforward conversation. She gripped his hand in hers, squeezing tightly before lock their hands together sweetly.

“So you’ve been going crazy at the sight of us.” Bucky commented from the other side of the bed. The bed shifted and Steve could tell Bucky was up on his elbow again peering at Hermione. Hermione groaned as she covered her face.

“You’ve been doing it on purpose—I’m sure now! Showing off how fit you are! Like, I get it—you’re scientifically designed to be unmercifully attractive!” Hermione ranted.

“Unmercifully attractive, eh?” Bucky repeated, a hint of his friend’s cockiness returning to his voice. “You know I feel like this momentous occasion should be marked by something special.” Bucky continued.

“What do you mean?” Hermione inquired intrigued. Steve was also interested.

“I think we should seal it with a kiss.” Bucky suggested lightly. “If you want.” Bucky amended.

“We can…I can do kisses.” Hermione answered meekly. For all the talk of Bucky following Steve’s lead, Steve was distinctly surprised when Bucky surged forward first to claim Hermione’s lips. Despite Bucky’s previous reticence in pursuing Hermione, he apparently had gotten it out of his system as he kissed Hermione soundly enough to leave her breathless. Steve took notes.

“Are you done?” Steve asked them with a smirk, marveling at his continued lack of jealousy for his friend.

“Yea, your turn, Stevie.” Bucky prompted.

“Yes…yes…we can do this.” Hermione agreed with a pleased sigh. Not to be outdone by Bucky—and remembering Natasha’s advice from their own fake kiss—Steve leant over Hermione, keeping her trapped between his arms. His lips met hers eagerly and he was surprised he managed not to knock teeth. He felt as if a dam of his emotions had been released as he latched his lips to hers earnestly. Her hands had flown to the back of his head, drawing him closer as he kissed her harder between shallow breaths. Her body was hot against his as she grabbed at his upper arms, fingers digging into his shoulders as she pulled him closer still. Her body felt pliant in his arms—soft, full, and womanly. When they finally pulled away, he flopped on his back panting.

“Wow.” Hermione uttered.


“Too much?” Steve asked, allowing himself to be cocky from Hermione’s response.
“No! No I just was expecting something more…chaste?” Hermione explained. Bucky snorted.

“I’m telling you—Steve’s the one you got to look out for. The good guy Captain America is a front—he’s a punk at heart.” Bucky snickered.

“You’re just jealous, Buck.” Steve teased, feeling self-assured.

“As long as Hermione isn’t complaining—I’m content.” Bucky retorted. “Are you content, darling?”

“Yes…yes, I’m very content.” Hermione said still dazed.

“And now that we’re dating, kisses are free game?” Bucky clarified.

“Yes…yes we can do that.” Hermione confirmed.

“Good.” Bucky said.

“Good.” Steve reiterated. As they curled up to sleep Steve was happy to note they melded in a tangle of limbs. Steve felt lighter than he had felt in a while. Dimly, he recognized this was his first relationship and it was already nothing like he expected and somehow better than what he ever imagined. Despite the concern for Thanksgiving with the Avengers Steve was feeling exuberant. He looked forward to kissing Hermione more and more. After all, practice made perfect.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Wow. It’s been a while. Sorry for the delay—it’s always been my intention to finish this story and admittedly this chapter was a bit of a writer’s block. I also got pregnant and had a baby! So that’s fun! In any case, thank you so much for the reviews and PMs while I was struggling. I hope that the train keeps moving down the track. I’ve written a few scenes for the upcoming chapters and I’m hoping I’ll be able to update sooner rather than later. Thanks again for reading!
Thanks?Giving

Chapter Notes

A/N: I don't own either universe.

Thanks for all your comments, reviews, follows, and favorites! Please continue to do so!

If you have any headcanon/fluffs/plot bunnies you want to see—I want to see it, too!

Thanks for reading and please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re moping, Cap.” Tony said as they began their early morning attack on a Hydra stronghold.

“Not moping, Stark.” Steve denied, deflecting bullets towards the enemy soldiers. They had already made it past mines—mines that had definitely reminded Steve of Bucky and therefore Hermione.

“Definitely moping.” Clint agreed, shooting several of the enemy in Steve’s path so that he did not even break his stride as he ran.

“He’s just missing his roommates.” Nat clarified knowingly. Steve stifled his groan, channeling his anger into breaking down the doors of the building. Around him he heard the piercing whining of specialized Hydra guns as he was surrounded.

“Roommates or roommate? It’s only been a week.” Tony implied, dropping through the ceiling and sending debris down on the soldiers. Between Steve’s shield and Tony’s weapons, the rest fell to the ground soundly.

“Do we really need to do this right now?” Steve complained, not mentioning that it had been a very ill-timed week; Steve had only just kissed Hermione before he was on the quadcopter chasing down leads. After what seemed like such a long wait to finally start dating Hermione—a long wait since he had even been in any reciprocated relationship—Steve felt he was being swindled. Steve just wanted to be home with Hermione practicing his kissing skills with abandon. Steve shook off his memories of his kiss with Hermione to ensure the area was adequately secured.

“Clear.” Clint called from his headpiece. “Any yeah, Steve. We like having updates in your life; we’re living vicariously through you.” Steve sighed, searching around the room for all the pertinent data he could collect.

“I’m technically the oldest one here.” Steve pointed out.

“Calm down, Gramps. Everyone knows you’re the baby of the family and we got to look after you.” Tony claimed.

“None of you respect your elders.” Steve grumbled, causing Clint to laugh.

“We’ll be home soon, Rogers. Now stop moping and come check out this hidden room I found.
“Kitchen pantry.” Natasha’s voice rang through his ear.

“Aww…I wanted to find the hidden clue room.” Tony complained.

“Free to keep looking, Stark.” Natasha offered sweetly.

“I’ll leave that to Cap.” Tony smirked, whipping past Steve to inspect the room. “Last one there is a rotten egg!” Tony challenged.

“Guys, can I come out now?” Bruce called from inside the quadcopter. “Something about a clue room?” Significantly distracted from the previous conversation of Steve’s romantic designations, Steve confirmed the house was neutralized before meeting up with the others. They were crowded in a tiny room staring at various documents.

“What’s the status?” Steve asked as he approached. Clint was sitting on a table nearby legs, swinging as they dangled. The others seemed to be inspecting some maps and papers.

“Looks like we’re headed home.” Clint claimed. “None of them can figure out the next clue so we have time for a break and Friendsgiving.” Steve was a mix of relief and exasperation. Hydra was proving to be slippery and they were having trouble completely rotting all of the corruption out. But Steve missed Bucky and Hermione, his thoughts constantly straying back to the feel of Hermione’s lips against his own.

“Well let’s get everything going and leave and we can all be home by Thursday.” Steve commanded, a pep in his step as he allowed himself to think of home. He ignored the shared look between Natasha and Clint behind his back and their knowing grin.

Tony had called it moping, but Steve preferred to think he had left the majority of his heart in New York…probably eating popcorn on the couch and reading books. They loaded up the quadcopter with anything of interest before taking to the air and detonating the building. Once in the air, Steve sought to call Bucky and Hermione. He had only managed to talk to them briefly once while he was away, apologizing for cancelling Thanksgiving and letting them know he was missing them very, very much. It was unfair, Steve thought again, to get to kiss Hermione only once before having to fight Hydra. If he was more aggressive than usual against Hydra, no one had particularly mentioned it. The phone rang twice before Hermione answered it.

“Hello?” Hermione greeted warily; Steve’s number was a VPN and didn’t identify him properly. Steve knew the only reason she had answered was because he specified, he’d call from a seemingly random number.

“It’s Steve.” Steve responded, eying the other Avengers who were no doubt trying to eavesdrop and turning slightly around so he wasn’t looking at them, though did little for their ability to hear. “We’re heading home now. Thanksgiving—”

“It’s Friendsgiving.” Clint interjected, confirming Steve’s suspicions that they were curious.

“Friendsgiving was moved to Saturday if you can make it.” Steve informed her.

“I miss you, too.” Steve said softly. “See you soon.” Steve hung up turning around as the passengers in the quadcopter stared him down knowingly. Steve groaned. “Are we there yet?”
“Don’t worry, Cap. You’ll see Penny soon. And so will we!” Tony’s laugh made Steve uneasy but Hermione knew what she was getting into. At this point Steve just selfishly wanted to see her, nosy Avengers be damned.

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Bucky watched the light filter through the paneled window in Hermione’s room, casting a magical glow that highlighted the shades in her hair. She was still dozing peacefully but Bucky had been up for several minutes now just admiring her in the soft light of the day. Hermione was cuddled close against him, as he lay on his side propped up on one arm. Steve’s side was empty and had been since he had been reluctantly whisked away to chase Hydra down.

“We’re in this—all three of us—so don’t hold back and don’t let her hold back.” Steve had instructed prior to his departure and Bucky was eager to follow his command. In the time since Hermione had tentatively agreed to a relationship with them and Steve had been plucked from their happy trio, Bucky had done his best to show Hermione how much he was vested in her.

Though as much as Steve liked to remiss about the days when Bucky was a suave Casanova—charming the brasseries off ladies left and right—they both knew he always had the utmost respect when it came to interacting with ladies. Steve had even told him once that how a man treated the fairer sex was a big indicator to whether or not Steve thought that man could be his friend. That Bucky never took advantage of the dames he took out was a big aspect of their bond of friendship.

No, Bucky liked to make girls swoon, make them fevered, make them blush by only bare kisses on their knuckles and a patented heated look. Holding hands, arms over the shoulder—and sometimes the waist—Bucky was a man who kept his displays of affection largely clean.

Until Hermione. Kissing her was his new favorite past time. They were all so simple in affection—chaste, even, compared to Steve’s searing promise—but they were filled with an adoration that Bucky could never muster for any of his previous flings. He wanted to show her how much he wanted her; how much he appreciated her. So, he took to kissing her when ever he could and his days passed by counting each soft sigh and melted gaze that each kiss garnered.

It was a routine he appreciated. Watching Hermione’s breathing pattern begin to change, Bucky realized she was waking. He pushed her rebellious hair aside to reveal the slight of her neck. It was a sight he always enjoyed—the pale stretch of slender skin, taunting the hint of a scar from where the crazed witch Bellatrix had held her dagger. Bucky wrangled Hermione’s energetic and uncooperative hair behind her ear, holding it completely to the side when it proved too strong-willed to stand aside silently. Softly, delicately, he left barely there, open kisses on the hollow of her neck. She began to stir further as he continued his strange ritual—a kiss to her shoulder, neck, behind her ear, and her temple. He hoped she could feel how in awe of her he was; to taste the desire he held to go deeper—to feel his reverence in the only way he could understand how.

It was a barrier they had yet to cross.

Aside from the logistical problems, there was a necessity for a frank conversation that none of them currently desired to pursue. So instead, he wrapped his arms around her waist as she woke. Her eyes fluttered as he drew her in with sweet, slow kisses—their lips meeting and lingering with promise. He pulled back to admire the glossy, starry-eyed look she’d possessed. Her hair was mussed, her lips red, and cheeks flushed.

“Good morning.” She greeted in a dazed way. Bucky smirked softly to himself, admiring his work. His goal these days was to challenge himself and find how many ways he could draw forth that expression; to learn the way her body responded to his ministrations. Hermione, noticed the look and
instantly her eyes focused with wit. “Oh no need to look so pleased!” She pouted as she nudged him slightly. When he began to chuckle, she shoved him again, her cheeks a dusty pink.

“Come on, little witch, Stevie is inbound and would probably enjoy a greeting.” Bucky encouraged. Hermione seemed to perk up at the information and jumped out of bed to dress. Bucky was pleased too—happy that his friend was finally returning home. But he also recognized that Steve’s return heralded Thanksgiving…and Thanksgiving meant the Avengers.

Spending time with Hermione had done well to distract his thought from the imminent meeting, but Bucky still worried. With Sam and Natasha, Bucky had already made peace. Hermione’s friend Pepper had no direct reason to hate him, nor did the Hulk. But they all could hate him for what he had done—any records that still existed having been released to the world. But it was Stark who concerned him the most; Stark was the one who had reason to despise him.

Hermione broke Bucky’s train of thought by grasping him by the back of the head and leaving a sweet, heated kiss on his lips. She tasted of spearmint toothpaste.

“You’re fretting.” Hermione identified. Bucky smirked ruefully.

“Can you blame me?” Bucky asked in a self-depreciating manner. Hermione shook her head.

“No…no I understand.” Hermione said with a sad smile. Bucky took her expression in and recognized uncertainty warring behind her eyes. He sat up straighter on the bed, taking her hand to pull her into his lap. She gave an ‘oompf’ as she allowed herself to fall on his lap. He rewarded her with trailing kisses down her neck, stroking his hands down her side before gripping her hips firmly.

“What are you concerned about.” Bucky asked softly between his kisses. Hermione froze before giving a light laugh, pulling back to look at him.

“You caught me.” Hermione smiled guilty. Her expression turned glum as she leaned into him slightly. “I’m nervous about Steve’s returned.” Hermione admitted in a small voice. Bucky felt himself blink in surprise, grasping her tightly to belay the quiver in his stomach.

“You’re not…you don’t want him…” Bucky trailed off, wondering how to articulate his concern.

“No, no, no!” Hermione corrected, grasping his head to look into Bucky’s eyes. “I very much want Steve and want him back…I’m just…we’ve been off spending time with each other without him and…what if it doesn’t work? Or what if he doesn’t want to work? What if—” Bucky snorted and rolled his eyes before continuing his ministrations.

“Bucky!” Hermione complained. “I’m serious!” Bucky pulled back to regard her.

“You finally agreed to date him and you gave him a green light for kissing—something he’s been dying to do for a while now. He’s going to come back and make up for all the time he’s been away—that’s a promise.” Bucky told her sincerely. Her eyes were searching his before she nodded. He smiled freely before pulling her back into him.

“A-, Bucky,” Hermione managed a throaty mutter as her head lulled back as he lavished her neck again.

“Yeah,” Bucky murmured against her throat, fingers trailing up her sides distractingly.

“We need to get ready.” Hermione said with apparent concentration. Bucky’s hands froze as did his kisses, instead he exhaled deeply as he rested his forehead against her shoulder.
“Do we have to?” Bucky asked with faux petulance, “You just reminded me that Steve’s going to try and hog you.” Hermione laughed as she threaded her hands through Bucky’s hair absentmindedly.

“You told me you missed him!” Hermione snorted softly. Bucky felt himself melting into her ministrations.

“I just remembered he’s a putz!” Bucky complained. Hermione laughed leaning in to kiss his nose before yanking the sheets off of him.

“Yes, but he’s our putz.” Hermione smiled impishly as she dashed out of the room. Bucky had no other recourse but to chase after her and teach her a lesson—his favorite type of learning.

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Steve got home in record time. Despite his desire to have a two-minute Army shower to get him home faster, when he found the dirt behind his ears, he decided a clean first impression as he returned was probably better. Natasha and Clint had snickered at him as he left, but Steve barely noticed; his mind was already on Hermione. So narrowed was his train of thought that he scarcely remembered his drive home and even walking through the threshold. Instead his laser-focus quickly caught Hermione in his path. She froze as she spotted him. Steve watched as her breath hitched and her eyes widened in surprise. With a heighted sense, he could even see the way the vein in her neck pulsed quickly.

“God, I missed you.” Steve muttered, dropping his bag and crossing the length of the room in three strides. He did not hesitate to wrap his arms around her, pulling her lips to his so he could kiss her deeply. He had cornered her into the wall—probably rougher than he should’ve been, but she did no seem opposed. Instead, he assisted her as she wrapped her legs around his waist, maneuvering herself higher so she could gain leverage and fight with him for dominance. He felt her smiling against his lips and he realized he had accidently placed both hands under the firm of her backside. He pulled back to apologize but she was sighing happily.

“Someone’s enthusiastic.” Bucky’s voice called out from behind Steve’s back. “See, what did I tell ya?” Bucky’s teased knowingly, though Steve could tell it was directed towards Hermione. Steve glanced behind his back at his best friend, checking for jealous or anger or something—but there was nothing but wholehearted happiness and welcome.

“I’m making up for lost time.” Steve responded shamelessly. Bucky laughed and Steve glanced at Hermione who was hiding her face in Steve’s shoulder.

“You’re all just bloody know-it-alls.” Hermione declared, face emerging to glare at Bucky. Bucky shrugged unaffected.

“By all means, continue. I’m cooking tonight so I’ll let you kids continue.” Bucky offered good naturedly, pulling out various pots and pans.

Steve lowered Hermione to the ground reluctantly but she took his hand and led him away, red-faced, into the basement—Bucky’s laughter chasing them through the halls.

Hermione closed the door behind her quietly. The room was cast in a magical glow from the green fire as Hermione walked more sedately to the single couch. Now that Steve could think, he wondered about the comment Bucky had made—wondered about how they had felt in his absence.

“Did you miss me?” Steve asked playfully. Hermione about-faced immediately to look up at him, eyes full of emotion.
“Yes…yes, we—I did.” Hermione confirmed. She shoved him delicately back to sit on the couch before straddling him decidedly. Steve pulled her desperately against his body, breath catching as she ground against him.

“I missed you, too.” Steve whispered between kisses, marveling at the mewling sound she made when he pulled back on her hair slightly harder than he meant to access her neck. “So fucking much.” Steve reiterated, grinding back against her as she whimpered. Steve was too excited to be unsure, too enthralled to be hesitant. His memories of kissing women were few and far between and certainly this was the first time he had so much stock in it.

When it was time for dinner, they went upstairs quietly. Hermione’s face was a brilliant red as she carefully avoided Steve and Bucky’s eyes, her lips pursed to prevent the smile that threatened to spill. Steve knew he had a dopey grin on his face—one that Bucky immediately called him on before patting Steve soundly on the back.

“It’s about time, am I right?” Bucky asked with a laugh. Steve ‘hmmd’ contentedly.

Despite the time Bucky graciously allowed Steve to spend alone with Hermione, Steve was missing his best friend. It was with great happiness that they all clambered into the makeshift bed Hermione had constructed in front of the TV to watch the next movie in their Disney saga—Frozen.

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“So Friendsgiving is Thanksgiving for friends.” Hermione reasoned.

“Apparently.” Steve shrugged as buttoned up his shirt. “It’s a good thing we moved it to Saturday. Stark said Pepper had a meeting in Paris.”

“Prague.” Hermione corrected automatically as she looked in her mirror. Hermione paused and giggled mischievously. Steve spared a glance at her and she met his eyes in the mirror. “Imagine what Tony will say when he realizes I’m also Pepper’s friend.” Hermione said with a grin. Steve answered her back with an equal smile.

“He’ll probably be frustrated.” Steve predicted. “He wanted to meet you more than anyone else.” Steve held up two different sweater vests to his chest in contemplation.

“No, Steve. No sweater vests.” Bucky commented as he had entered the room.

“Aw, come on, Buck. It’s nice.” Steve whined, eyeing the argyle in pleasure.

“It’s outdated!” Bucky complained. Steve could admit that the slim pants and ribbed V-neck sweater looked very modern on Bucky.

“You’re outdated.” Steve fired back petulantly.

“True…but irrelevant.” Bucky smirked back at Steve.

“I think he looks handsome.” Hermione determined as she peered out from inside her bathroom.

“Thank you!” Steve responded, gesturing with his hands towards Hermione while staring meaningfully at Bucky.

“What about me?” Bucky pouted, arms out as he did a small turn.

“Oh yes, Bucky, you look very dapper!” Hermione said appreciatively.
“Yeah, yeah, eat your heart out, sweetheart.” Bucky snorted.

“What a ridiculous thing to say. If I eat my heart out, does that just leave the sweet?” Hermione asked rhetorically, head cocking to the side in playful confusion.

“Alright wise guy.” Bucky conceded jokingly. “Yeah I guess that just leaves the sweets and you’re my favorite desserts.” Bucky simpered sweetly, leaning forward to kiss Hermione on the nose.

“You two are so sweet I think I need to brush my teeth again.” Steve exaggerated. Picking up the argyle pattern he put on the outfit definitely staring at Bucky who smirked. “Alright, let’s hurry it up or we’ll be late.” Steve suggested.

“We’re just waiting on Hermione.” Bucky pointed out.

“And you will continue to do so until I’m good and ready!” Hermione shouted from the bathroom. Bucky and Steve shared a look but wisely said nothing further on the subject.

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“Sir.”

“Yeah, JARVIS?” Tony asked as he attempted to pick at the stuffing Pepper had cooked while dodging Pepper’s reprimanding slap.

“Captain Rogers is in the elevator with two guests.” Tony grinned, ducking out of the kitchen quickly to rush to the elevator doors. His urgency caught Clint and Natasha’s attention who trailed after him more sedately.

When the doors to the elevator opened, Steve regarded Tony with a grimace; the other two in his party hiding slightly behind his form.

“Welcome back, Miss Granger.” JARVIS greeted to Tony’s confusion. Pepper’s uncharacteristic squeal of delight actually stunned Tony as he watched the red-head launch herself forward to draw the mousy looking woman out of the elevator and into the center of the landing. Tony’s eyes gave a perfunctory glance at the man who Steve had brought before they naturally were drawn back to the woman.

“Tony, this is my friend Hermione.” Pepper presented proudly, her arms locked with her companion. Tony’s mouth had dropped open, regarding the bushy-haired woman before him who had wide brown eyes blown open and dazed. Before Tony could say anything, Clint had stretched out his hand to her in greeting.

“Hermione, good to see you again.” He greeted. Hermione grasped his hand in a solid shake with a faint smile.

“Ved’ma.” Nat greeted warmly as she came over to Pepper’s companion. The fact that Nat was greeting her so warmly had Tony dumbfounded and he looked again at the seemingly average female around whom the Avengers had begun to crowd.

“You know each other already?” Pepper asked Natasha in surprise.

“We go way back.” Natasha answered mysteriously.

“Woah—I didn’t know that.” Clint added, his eyes narrowing slightly in thought.
“Hermione, you never told me you knew them and you had just missed them when you came over!” Pepper smiled pleasantly in surprise.

“Not all of them.” Tony interrupted irritably. “I thought you were bringing Dr. Penny!” Tony complained. Steve was looking at Tony with exasperation, Romanoff had her infuriating smirk, but it was Clint who actually prompted the clarification.

“No.” Clint said with sudden realization. “No way!” He continued. Tony turned to glare at him.

“What, Barton? Feel free to share with the class.” Tony prodded. Behind Tony—barely entered into the foyer—Rogers cleared his throat.

“These are my roommates, Hermione and Bucky.” Steve introduced as he awkwardly rubbed the back of his hair.

“You? You’re Dr. Penny?” Tony said openly gaping and pointing at the brunette. She frowned as she glanced at his outstretched finger.

“Yes, although to be clear: I’m not actually a doctor.” Penny—Hermione—said with a deeper frown and furrowed eyebrow.

“But your British!” Tony exclaimed. Hermione actually rolled her eyes, her irritation making her seem less dull—though Tony had been expecting them to bring a knockout and felt somewhat disappointed as a result.

“The two are not mutually exclusive, I’ll have you know.” Hermione replied, her tone dripping with acidity. Wisely dropping the topic, Tony turned to the man Steve had brought. The man was hunched over as if he was trying not to take up space but the man was muscular and comparable to Rogers’ size. If that didn’t make him suspicious enough, the metal arm certainly did. Tony glanced at the party around the room.

“Is anyone going to address the metal-armed elephant in the room?” Tony asked with a slight pause. “Just me? Of course.” Tony muttered. Hermione took a proprietary step out of Pepper’s hold and in front of Bucky, narrowing her eyes at Tony in a warning that somehow felt threatening despite her seemingly diminutive presence. “Easy, Glinda, easy.” He soothed with hands outstretched in peace. “You, too, Cap.” Tony added as Steve ruffled his feathers.

“I thought we established she was Oz.” Sam added as he emerged from the opening elevator door. “I got pie.” He alerted, lifting up the boxes behind. “Hey, Hermione!” Sam greeted her with a kiss to her cheek.

“Hi, Sam.” She greeted back with a smile. Tony pinched above his nose.

“I don’t actually think she was established as OZ and I don’t necessarily agree that he’s as harmless as Toto…If anything she should be Mary Poppins and he might be a Terminator.” Tony gestured with his hands. “Didn’t he attack SHIELD? Work for Hydra? Shoot Cap?” Tony questioned.

“He was hypnotized. He got better.” Hermione summed succinctly, crossing her hands over her chest and outright glaring at Tony. Bucky was crumpled in over himself and Hermione positioned herself further in front of him as if her petite size could hide his hulking figure. Steve stepping in front of his friend did more to direct Tony’s attention but it was Pepper slapping Tony on the back of the head that made his interest truly wane.

“Be nice.” Pepper hissed before turning a welcoming smile towards the guests. “Let’s just head to the table! The turkey is just finishing up now!” She said as she grabbed Hermione by the arm who in
turn grabbed Bucky who grabbed Steve who grabbed Sam.

“What about Totoro?” Clint suggested, following the human chain with Natasha by his side. Tony was left in the foyer alone.

“Should we worry about hydra assassins? No! Just welcome them happily into your home without question!” Tony muttered under his breath.

“Totoro is even less fearsome than Toto and has an additional syllable to boot.” Hermione disagreed, ignoring Tony as she shook her head. “Besides, he’s hardly your neighbor.” Hermione argued playfully.

“Let’s work on callsigns later.” Natasha suggested as Tony tapped his foot irritably before following the trail of people to the dining room with a resigned sigh. Seated around the dining room table, the conversation stilted as they prepared to eat.

“Alright, I’ll accept your roommate Hydra-assassin—” Tony broke the silence.


“Semantics. I accept your roommate and won’t even ask questions.” Tony added magnanimously. “But your outfit is not safe, Cap. Where did you get that sweater vest, Rogers? Steal it from a time capsule?” Tony laughed, eying the argyle pattern with distaste. Sam snickered in his seat while Bucky looked at Steve smugly. Steve was pouting slightly, Hermione eying him reassuringly.

“I think it looks dandy.” Clint said with a bright smile that had Natasha rolling her eyes. “What’s it made of?” He asked as he took a sip of his drink.

“Boyfriend material.” Steve retorted defensively. Clint, who had still been sipping his drink, had narrowly missed spitting his drink out at Natasha as he violently started choking on the liquid. Nat was pounding his back fiercely as he coughed. Tony looked at Steve’s shocked expression, like he hadn’t meant to say those particular words, and burst out laughing. He was laughing so hard that he missed the pink on Hermione’s cheeks, followed by her gasp of air and the sudden application of her palms to her forehead.

“Hey, everyone.” Bruce called softly as he entered the room, his eyes sweeping over the crowd. He was approaching hesitantly and unsure, caving in on himself as he was wont to do. Tony turned towards Hermione and Bucky, finally noticing that Hermione was pale and giving a grimacing smile. Bucky was whispering something in her ear and she was nodding slightly, patting where his hand rested on her leg soothingly.

“Dr. Banner, these are my roommates Hermione and Bucky.” Steve introduced, though his gaze was lingering past Bucky to where Hermione was still wincing in the eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Banner.” Hermione said pleasantly enough. Bruce looked as if he was ready to turn around and walk away, but Tony kicked out his empty seat for him to sit in.

“Take a seat, Bruce, so we can finally get started. Rhodey couldn’t make it.” Tony clarified. With great reluctance, Bruce finally sat down, and they said a quick grace before diving in to the copious amounts of food.

-Hermione was eavesdropping on the various conversations going on around her. Bucky—who had seemingly relaxed throughout dinner—and Steve had begun a bizarre game of escalation, each trying

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to convince Clint and Sam of increasingly absurd stories from the war. She was concerned they might actually believe that Howling Commandos faced off against Hydra-Nazi dinosaurs. Although given some of the things experienced collectively in the room, the situation could be theoretically plausible.

“Back in my day…” Steve trailed off with great pleasure and mirth before delving into whatever crazed story he had created. Down the table Pepper and Natasha were discussing meeting Hermione and realizing it was the same random little café that unintentionally connected them all. Tony and Bruce were speaking basically a foreign language filled with math and science that Hermione couldn’t follow. And Hermione? Hermione was sipping her drink laced with the calming draught she had expected to give to Bucky. Meanwhile, Bucky was actually doing fine and instead she had commandeered it to soothe her frayed nerves.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Tony asked with a grin, broaching her mental wandering as both he and Bruce stared at her.

Tony Stark was different than anyone Hermione had ever met. In some ways he reminded her of Cormac and she shuddered at the very thought. Sometimes when Tony was clever in a devious, mocking sort of funny, she was reminded of the twins at Hogwarts. But most of the time he was so utterly arrogant in an annoying but capable way that Hermione was forced to label it as confidence. It was utterly annoying; he was annoyingly competent.

And mentally wrecked.

Hermione resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose and shut her eyes tightly. His mind hurt. Aside from his tragic Batman-style background, he was traumatized from his experience abroad as well as his recent near-death experience. She had even heard the echo of trauma from Pepper’s near-death experience. It was no wonder that Pepper had wanted them to have professional help—they all needed it. She made a note to talk with Pepper about being a supportive partner because Merlin knew that Tony Stark had terrible PTSD.

Tony was staring at her still and Hermione managed to only close her eyes briefly and lick the front of her teeth in constrained irritation before forcing a polite smile.

“Just observing.” Hermione commented placidly. She was irritated by Tony’s prodding demeanor, her patience worn thin from the echo of mental pain the Avengers collectively held. She knew her irritation was slightly unfair, but something about his unique mental state pierced her weakened defenses eagerly.

“Oh-oh. You going to ask us how we feel?” Tony teased, although he honestly looked both concerned and hopeful that she would.

“No. You aren’t patients.” Hermione gave a wan smile. “Besides, I think I already have an inkling of how you feel.” Hermione admitted. Bruce, who had drawn into himself at her entrance into the conversation, was pushing potato around on his plate.

“You’d be surprised.” He spoke under his breath. Hermione had reason to believe he would be even more surprised to know that she did, in fact, know exactly how he felt: angry. Each and every single one of the Avengers had a strange resonance that made them far more piercing in wavelengths inside Hermione’s head. None of them were magical—though Clint’s reminded her vaguely of her friends’ mind—but all of them were still loud. Tony was especially loud but he was second to the quiet, shy, man who contained the angriest mind she had ever felt.

She could feel him the instant she reached the private section of the tower, asking Steve whether
anyone would be particularly aggressive. He hadn’t been able to clarify her question before she was 
inundated in the Avenger foyer. But all the while, she kept tabs on the rage and anger of the being 
barely contained within Dr. Banner.

The Avengers were truly like nothing she’d come across before. Trolls and Death Eaters—even 
werewolves, she had learned—were not nearly as angry as whatever disconnected personality had 
hidden itself in Dr. Banner’s mind. Even Dr. Banner the human was extraordinary; even if he wasn’t 
human, he did hold the angry green giant at bay. He seemed like such a sweet man—intellectual and 
so terribly burdened that she was reminded of Remus. And it upset her that even sharing a space with 
him was painful for her.

“It’s not always sadness that people feel…anger…I understand anger, as well.” Hermione admitted 
softly as she stared into her drink. She could feel his eyes assessing her in surprise before giving her a 
hesitant nod.

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After dinner, they moved into the living room to converse. It was big and gave her more space but it 
did little to stem her pain and curiosity. Dr. Banner took the opportunity to go check on experiments 
upstairs while Steve pulled Bucky and her to the side to ask how they—how she—was doing.

“Are you okay? We can leave.” Steve suggested, his eyebrows furrowing in concern. Hermione 
smiled at his sweetness, but she could feel even that was tinged with pain.

“You lot are not normal.” Hermione said with a resigned sigh.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, taken aback. Hermione shifted her eyes around and 
contemplated. She turned a dial on her bracelet, arranging it so a carved rune that had been off-center 
shifted correctly. She wasn’t sure how JARVIS worked but she suspected it would block his 
listening and watching abilities as he was still muggle technology.

“Dr. Banner and Stark—all of you really—have very piercing thoughts. Dr. Banner and Stark 
especially resonate loudly—and painfully in my head.” Hermione admitted. Bucky looked panicked, 
clasping his hands over Hermione’s eyes abruptly. Hermione gave a startled laugh. “Bucky covering 
my eyes doesn’t help! I don’t need to make eye contact.”

“What can I do?” Bucky asked urgently, uncovering her eyes reluctantly. He instead kept them 
cupping her face.

“We can leave; just say the word.” Steve added sincerely. Hermione patted both of them on the 
shoulder and gave them a small smile. “I’m fine for a little while longer and I don’t quite want to 
leave yet.” Hermione confessed. “What I hear, it’s a little like music and to some degree I can drown 
them out when I play your song loudly. It’s just so unusual to hear the non-magical so clearly…” 
Hermione trailed off. Abruptly she jumped back and shifted her bracelet as Tony came around the 
corner huffing. Bucky, Hermione, and Steve stared at him in surprise.

“JARVIS said there was a weird anomaly in this room.” Stark said suspiciously as he eyed 
Hermione. Hermione opened her eyes to look more innocent.

“How strange!” Hermione wondered aloud. “We’ll head back into the main area while you 
investigate and I can learn more about some American Thanksgiving traditions.” Hermione 
suggested, dragging the boys with her. Rolling her eyes when she caught the less than subtle look 
they shared over her head.
“Somehow, this seems worse than football.” Hermione remarked to Pepper from their view point in the corner of the training arena. With no American football scheduled for the day, the Avengers had suggested various ways to participate in “the spirit of the holiday.” With not enough players, they had one viable option.

“Well, at least it’s non-contact.” Pepper reasoned with a wince. They both watched as Natasha took down Sam in order to prevent him from catching the frisbee. “Well…it’s supposed to be in any case.” Pepper corrected.

“Maybe they should call this ‘Ultimate Extreme Frisbee’?” Hermione recommended as Pepper laughed. “At least Nat’s killing it.” Hermione acknowledged, gesturing with her chin at where Natasha had tripped up Steve and left the super-soldier sprawled on the floor.

“Aww, poor Steve—do you need your walker?” Natasha mocked, her voice reaching both Pepper and Hermione who laughed delightedly.

“Call life alert, Romanoff—he’s fallen and he can’t get up! We have a geriatric down!” Tony called from where he zoomed in the air. Hermione was unsure of the rules of ultimate frisbee, but she imagined airborne players were not the norm.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m not dead, yet.” Steve scowled as he dragged himself to his feet, patting his clothes slowly and glaring up at Tony. Pepper and Hermione had turned to look at each other before giggling in sync.

“Bring out your dead.” Hermione laughed.

Pepper, the twin to her muggle soul, was already in harmony to the reference. “She’s a witch! Burn her!” Pepper added, her voice modulated to match. Hermione laughed at the unintentional double-meaning. Bucky on the “field” was staring at her in question but Hermione’s smile was good-natured.

“Monty Python and the Holy Grail—I’ll add it to the list.” Hermione answered both of his silent questions. Clint launched the frisbee into the air again and the Avengers took off. Hermione thought she might like to play with her magical friends and considered trying to convert the magical world to a different magical game that stayed on the ground. Suddenly she winced as she felt the bloom of rage in the back of her skull.

“Bruce, come play! Bring out the jolly green giant so we can stop getting our ass kicked!” Tony said as he floated in the sky. Hermione turned to peer at Bruce as he sheltered in the door frame. He was a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. The rage in his mind was so palpable in Hermione’s mind that she resisted the urge to physically recoil as he drew near. She feared ever tapping into his head but at the same time she lingered with the utmost curiosity. She had been relieved when he had gone to check on his experiments, giving her enough time to recuperate her mental state.

“Uh, no thank you, Tony…I’ll just stay over here, thanks!” Bruce called, coming closer to where Hermione and Pepper were seated.

“Dr. Penny.” Bruce nodded respectfully. Pepper smiled genuinely but Hermione felt her own smile was marred with the ramifications of her power.

“Not a doctor, actually.” Hermione corrected meekly. Bruce looked surprised.
“Aren’t you a mental-health specialist?” Bruce asked. Hermione shrugged slightly.

“Yes, but perhaps not the manner you are accustomed.” Hermione explained hesitantly.

“Remind me never to fight against those two.” Tony said as he stepped out of his suit and glancing at where Bucky and Steve were laughing with each other. Pepper threw a towel at Tony, scrunching her nose up delicately at his sweat. Tony stuck his tongue out at Pepper, cause Hermione to grin at the sight. “What were we talking about?” Tony asked as he sipped on water and plopped himself on the seat nearby.

“Hermione’s occupation.” Pepper added helpfully, looking at Tony significantly. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Right, right. The mental health wizard.” Tony nodded. Hermione smiled widely, eyes jumping to Natasha’s as she came closer.


“You’d think you’d have to be a doctor with your kind of work.” Tony commented surprised.


“That’s right you’re the mind lady.” Clint said, joining the conversation after putting away his bow. “Can’t say I’m a big fan of the concept…I’m not really a fan of people mucking around in my head.” Clint admitted sheepishly. Hermione smiled at him patiently.

“It’s hardly mucking…I have a very good track record. I’m a trained professional even if I don’t have a doctorate.” Hermione elaborated.

“Loki got me only once with his stupid magic scepter, but I’m aiming for that to be the only time anyone brainwashes me.” Clint declared and perking Hermione’s interest. But she didn’t get a chance to inquire further.

“It’s different.” Bucky chimed up suddenly. “It’s not brainwashing in the sense that you think…it’s like cleaning out all the taint and filth that brainwashing left behind.” Bucky revealed before tilting his head down to hide in the strands of his hair.

“So…you interested in joining the Avengers?” Tony asked glibly through the silence of Bucky’s confession.

“Hardly.” Hermione said with a snort. “I’m far too busy. I’m not a super soldier, I hate flying, I can’t shoot a bow to save my life, and I’m awful at cardio and hand to hand combat.” Hermione listed.

“Can you turn into a hulk?” Tony asked, causing Bruce to frown.

“Most definitely not.” Hermione answered with a smile.

“Well, we still need a medical doctor.” Tony suggested with a waggle of his eyebrow. Pepper rolled her eyes before swatting at his shoulder.
“She just said she’s not a doctor.” Pepper chastised. Tony pouted.

“She treated Cap? He was shot! Sounds good enough for me!” Tony argued. Bruce was looking at her strangely again.

“Apprenticeships.” Hermione answered. “Very medieval, I know, and definitely not the standard formal education. Besides, requiring a doctor implies that you will be returning with injuries. Surely that is not the case?” Hermione questioned, eyebrows raising in challenge. Tony cleared his throat.

“Exactly! So if you can’t be a doctor you’re back to being a wizard, Oz.” Tony declared. Hermione laughed.

“Probably for the best.” Hermione conceded.

“So if you aren’t a traditional ‘How-does-that-make-you-feel-doc’ how do you do it?” Clint asked looking more interested as Natasha came to stand by his shoulder. Hermione paused at the question, unsure how informative she should be.

“It’s almost more spiritual, I suppose. It’s a guided tour of the mind to address the trauma.” Hermione offered apprehensively. She didn’t feel comfortable revealing her magic to the Avengers yet, but she felt describing her work as something so…intangible and imprecise made her cringe. Tony and Bruce seemed to feel the same way as she watched their faces wince at the term spiritual.

“So what? Like, Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing? Hijacking the hippocampus to clear traumatic memories?” Tony asked thoughtfully. Hermione shrugged.

“More-or-less.” Hermione answered, rubbing a hand against her arm uneasily. Steve and Bucky were eyeing her from behind their water bottles and were looking at her as if they were judging her feelings. She gave them a nod, signaling she was ready to start heading out. The topic was getting dicey and her brief respite from Dr. Banner’s mind was wearing down quickly.

“Well, I think we’ve done about all we can do in terms of holiday traditions.” Steve interrupted with an easy smile. Tony startled slightly, staring at Steve with unblinking eyes and Hermione could tell he was going to stall.

“Thanksgiving play!” Tony finally answered. Bucky and Hermione looked at him askance.

“You want to play pilgrims and Indians?” Bucky clarified skeptically.

“It’s a holiday tradition to put on a play.” Tony nodded determinedly. Beside him, Pepper stood up gracefully and rolled her eyes.

“We’re not school children, Tony. It’s already pretty late.” Pepper acknowledged as she glanced at her watch. “We don’t have time to acquire the costumes or memorize scripts.” Pepper added good naturedly. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

“Thanksgiving sleepover!” Tony suggested, trailing behind them.

“It was lovely to meet you all, thank you for inviting me to your home.” Hermione said politely. Sam gave her a hug, and Natasha grasped her arms meaningfully. Clint pulled her into a half-armed hug.

“We’re hugging types!” Clint said with a friendly smile. Hermione smiled as she returned the hug. Bruce shook her hand gently. “Nice meeting you.” He said softly. Despite the pounding in her head, Hermione gave him her most sincere smile.
“It was nice to meet you, too, Dr. Banner.” Hermione told him warmly, delighting at his countenance improved and the weight of his mind against hers lessened. She wondered, if the being within him and the man who held it merely needed more kindness in their lives.

Once they reached the foyer, Tony went for a hug but Pepper intercepted to steer her away.

“Don’t try.” Pepper warned Tony who visibly deflated, instead he took her hand determinedly. Hermione laughed.

“Well, Penny, I’d love to see you again.” Tony confessed with a cheeky grin. “In fact, we haven’t had a chance to discuss just how you’ve been evading our searches.” Hermione scowled at him.

“Good point. The next time we meet, I shall have to give you a proper thrashing for invading Steve’s, Bucky’s, and my privacy. Thank you for reminding me.” Hermione seethed suddenly. Tony grimaced before all but pushing her towards the elevators.

“Yeah, yeah. We’ll it’s been great seeing you. Keep in touch. Pip pip cheerio and all that rot!” Tony sassed. Hermione glared at him with narrowed eyes, peering at him from inside the elevator. In her irritation, she did little for the wave of magic that left her, finding purchase on Tony’s wrist.

“Ow! What the—what was that Jarvis?” Tony asked bewildered as he rubbed his wrist. The doors to the elevator were closing but Hermione could still hear JARVIS’s reply.

“Sir, there appears to have been an abnormal discharge of static—” The robotic voice chimed. Hermione’s self-satisfying smirk was interrupted by Bucky and Steve’s chuckle.

As they entered Hermione’s car, used for the purposes of seeming normal to any of the Avengers who wanted to look, Hermione glanced at Steve.

“I know I never pry about your work, Steve…but can you tell me a little more about Loki?” Hermione asked, turning to stare at Steve piercingly. Steve looked surprised but nodded.

“Sure, what do you want to know?” He asked.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: So sorry for the long wait! I stare at this fanfiction literally everyday attempting to piece away at it. But baby and life, yada yada—thanks for being patient and continuing to inspire me with reviews!

Thanks for all the well-wishing; my baby boy is 5 and a half months old and delightfully large (he’s in size 9-12 month clothing!).
The initial write of this chapter was deplorable and made Tony waaaaay too unlikeable. Hopefully I’ve eased it a little more so he’s not so hate-able. He’s just a guy trying to do his thing after all.

Thanks again for all your reviews and support!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!