### Sugar Baby Love

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**Sugar Baby Love**

by **roe87**

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**Summary**
There's a really hot male omega living in the apartment above Steve's, and Steve would like to get to know him but admittedly he's not the smoothest alpha on the block.

Then after an incident that leaves Bucky dodging the cops, Steve lets him crash on his couch and suddenly finds himself in a surprise room-mate situation.

Which is totally, totally fine. Steve can be a good room-mate and not let his enormous crush on Bucky get in the way. Right?

But Bucky is on the run from his past, and he doesn't stick around.

Steve gets his heart broken, and throws himself into working with the Avengers, building himself a family among his new team-mates.

Just as Steve's starting to get his life on track, Bucky comes crashing back in, bringing a surprise with him...

Notes

Just a few quick notes:

Story is loosely following the MCU and picks up six months after The Battle for New York (Avengers Assemble). The story won't be CA:TWS compliant, there isn't any Winter Soldier.

Fic title is the song by The Rubettes.

(Chapter 1 warning: slurs used as insult to a sex worker, and brief canon-typical violence.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Steve first met the omega at midnight, out on the fire escape. They kind of surprised each other; Steve suited up and in a rush to get to his bike outside, and the omega coming up the fire escape, dressed all in black and smelling so strongly of sex and pheromones that once his scent hit Steve's nose, it shocked him into stillness.

Steve hadn't come face to face with a male omega since coming out of the ice, and this one was certainly easy on the eye. Dark wavy hair down to his shoulders, bright blue eyes smudged with Kohl. His lips plump and pink, parted in surprise as he crouched on the railing, caught in his ascent. He looked feral, beautiful, and he smelled incredible.

Steve faltered, unsure what to say. He hadn't exactly announced to his neighbors that Captain America had taken up residence.

The omega extended his hand, and a switch-blade flicked out.

"Whoa," Steve said, holding his hands up. He tried to project calm. "No need for that, pal. I'm just trying to get downstairs."

"On my fire escape?" the guy scoffed.

His voice was husky, and it sent an involuntary shiver down Steve's spine.

"Um. Well, I live here," Steve admitted. "And I'm in kind of a rush."

"You live here?" The omega sounded sceptical, and was still pointing the knife at him.

"I'm Steve." He waved his fingers. "Steve Rogers. I'm in 4B. And I really gotta go, so if you wouldn't mind..."

The omega frowned lightly, and looked Steve up and down. He must've noticed the shield and the costume, as his eyes widened. "Oh," he said in surprise. "Shit, you're..." He quickly retracted his knife, slipped it back inside his jacket. "I'm sorry, I didn't know. I... I'm in 5B."

"Right above me." Steve smiled easily.

And that explained where the omega scent had been coming from these last three weeks.

"Just moved in, huh?"

"Um. Yeah." The omega moved to stand up, showing how tall and lean he was.

Steve probably had a few inches and maybe fifty pounds on him, but this omega wasn't a small guy.

"I'm Bucky," he said softly. "I didn't mean to... uh, you startled me, is all."

"I think we startled each other," Steve said. "Good to meet you, Bucky. I'm sorry, but I gotta go. There's a situation."

"Oh, sure thing." Bucky pressed himself back against the brick, giving Steve room to pass.

And yeah, Steve maybe could've vaulted down the two floors to the dumpster below, but brushing past a gorgeous omega was something even he couldn't resist.
Bucky tensed as Steve moved carefully past him, and Steve held his breath so he wasn't inhaling Bucky's scent up close.

When he was safely on the next set of steps down, Steve glanced over his shoulder and gave a quick salute. "Thanks. Have a good night, Bucky."

"You too," Bucky told him. "Stay safe, yeah?"

Steve paused, surprised at the tone in Bucky's voice, like he genuinely cared about Steve's well-being.

Steve smiled back at him. "Will do." Then he hurried down the steps as quietly as he could. When he reached the bottom Steve glanced up just in time to see a black clad leg and boot slipping into the window of apartment 5B.

It was kinda nice to think he'd talked to one of his neighbors, finally. And that said neighbor was so attractive.

Score one for being sociable, Steve commended himself. Then he got on his bike, and roared off onto the main street.

~

Over the next couple of weeks, Steve thought about his omega neighbor. Especially when his scent drifted down into Steve's apartment, because that was pretty distracting.

Steve hadn't been around many omegas since the serum and his enhanced sense of smell. Any of the omegas in the army would've likely taken suppressants at the time, and there'd always been plenty of pungent alpha musk to drown everything else out.

The scent of the omega upstairs, of Bucky, was fairly strong; like he was regularly in heat. Either that or the guy was getting laid a lot, because there were a lot of sexed up pheromones in the air.

Steve went out for a walk when it got particularly bad.

Maybe bad wasn't the word for it, but Steve hadn't had any sex at all since waking up, and it'd been a few months. Smelling such an intense omega scent on a regular basis was like sweet torture.

It was two whole weeks later when they next bumped into each other. Steve was coming back from his morning run. Bucky was checking his mail in the hallway when Steve came into the building.

"Oh, hey!" Steve said, sounding eager even to his ears. "Good morning!"

Bucky startled at first, seeming just as jumpy as last time, but visibly relaxed when he saw it was Steve.

Then his eyes drifted down, checking out Steve's body. Steve felt buoyed by that, and pleasantly surprised.

"Morning," Bucky eventually replied, looking up at Steve as he neared. In the daylight it was easy to
see how gorgeous Bucky was. Tall, lithe and physically fit, dressed in tight black clothes again, and with a light scarf around his neck, probably to cover his scent glands.

His face was pretty, but his jawline strong and defined, dusted with dark stubble. Steve wouldn't have dared say it to him, but he thought Bucky was a real pretty guy.

Pale blue eyes stared back at Steve with an indecipherable look, almost like he knew what Steve was thinking anyway.

Steve didn't know what to say, and he fumbled a bit. "Uh, how's it going? You moved in okay?"

Bucky nodded in reply, but didn't offer anything.

Steve nodded too, unsure if Bucky wanted to talk to him or not. "Well, um. If you ever need a hand with heavy lifting, or anything..." He gave an awkward little wave. "Just knock. I'd be happy to help."

Bucky raised an eyebrow, quizzical. "Heavy lifting?"

"Um. Like... furniture? Or..." Steve felt stupid. Surely the omega was already all moved in and didn't require his assistance. "I'm sure you got it covered, but... Well, if you need anything, you know where I am."

Bucky blinked at him, like he was trying to fathom Steve out. Then finally his lips twitched, curving up at the side. "I know where you are," he repeated.

"Yeah," Steve was relieved, "Um. Well, have a nice day!"

"You too, Steve."

Steve wanted to say more, to keep Bucky talking, but he made himself leave.

He was sure the omega didn't need an over enthusiastic and socially awkward alpha fawning over him.

So he went upstairs to his apartment, and at least he could breathe freely for a short while as Bucky was out.

After his shower, Steve got his tablet and did a little research into omegas, and the current state of their rights.

Back in Steve's time, omegas had a hard enough time as it was, but male omegas were pretty much unheard of, mostly because they were told to hide their status from everyone, or carry the stigma if they didn't hide it.

After checking through current news and LGBT sources, Steve was finding that omegas were still fighting every day for equal rights, but were becoming more visible. There were even celebrity omegas who were open about their status, and about being Intersex.

That was a new word to Steve, but he filed it into his vocabulary to remember, and was pleased that people were speaking up for omegas now. He thought he should talk to Pepper again about lending his support to more LGBT causes. He'd already donated money, which was something he could do easily and more privately, but he wanted to do more.
To be more visible, to help. If Captain America couldn't help the people who needed it, then what was the point?

Steve set his pad down and went to stare at the contents of his refrigerator. He loved the food and the choices he had in this future, but found it hard to get over the sheer guilt of having so much. There was so much choice that Steve didn't know what to eat.

Either way, he usually ended up eating alone.

~

Steve didn't see Bucky again for a while, as the omega kept to himself. Steve sometimes caught himself staring at his window, half expecting Bucky to be climbing up the fire escape like a sexy shadow, but Steve didn't see him.

Either Bucky was using the front door now, or Steve kept missing him.

One night Steve was home on his own, getting ready to watch some movie or other, he heard a bump on his ceiling and wouldn't have thought much of it, except it was followed by muted voices and more bumps.

Steve was instantly alert. One voice was Bucky's, and the other sounded like a male alpha.

Whatever the bumps were, it didn't sound friendly.

Steve grabbed his shield and slipped out his window onto the fire escape, in only his cotton t-shirt, sweats, and sneakers. He quickly climbed the steps, and peered in Bucky's window.

The blinds were mostly closed, and while Steve couldn't see clearly, he could definitely hear. Bucky was speaking, sounding frantic. "I don't have it," he said, voice thin with panic, then gasped as a sharp smack indicated he'd been struck.

"Stop lying, you fucking whore," the alpha voice spat.

Steve took a breath, held up his shield and leapt at the window, breaking through it easily.

"What the--!"

Steve followed the sound of the alpha's voice as he tucked and rolled into the room, glass flying all around him. He launched at the alpha, knocked him back with his shield.

The guy was stocky and well built, but against the vibranium shield he didn't stand a chance. He fell to the floor, out cold. Steve nudged him with his foot to check, then stepped away, scanning the room.

Bucky was knelt on the floor, eyes wide and frightened, a red mark across one cheek. He brought a hand up and silently pointed to the bathroom, just as Steve heard the creak of a footstep and the toilet flushing.

He nodded to Bucky, and on soft feet hurried to the door of the bathroom.

When it opened, a huge beta came out, and stared in confusion at the sight of his buddy out cold on
the floor.

Steve smacked the shield into his forehead, but this guy was a Goliath. He grunted and tried to swing back, which Steve ducked, and then swung his fist square into the beta's eye.

This time he went down, still flailing his fists, but with one more whack from the shield he checked out too.

Steve looked to Bucky. "Any more?" he mouthed.

Bucky shook his head, and brought a hand up to cradle his face.

Steve strode over to him, offered him a hand. "Are you alright?"

Bucky let Steve pull him up. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He was trying to hide his face, and Steve felt a protective surge come over him. "Should get some ice on that," he said. "Want me to call the cops? Who are these guys?"

Bucky looked up, eyes fearful. "No cops! They'll take me in too."

Steve frowned. "Why? These guys broke into your apartment."

"I let them in," Bucky said, sounding defeated. "And... it's a long story."

Steve exhaled quietly, and despite what common sense might have said, he went with his gut. "How about you come wait it out in my apartment until you figure out what you wanna do? They'll be out cold for a while yet."

Bucky's eyes shifted to the men littering the floor, fearful, and for a moment Steve thought he'd say no.

Bucky swallowed. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Steve breathed in, the scent of frightened omega filling his nose. He gently laid a hand on Bucky's shoulder to reassure him. "C'mon. Let's go. You want to grab anything important?"

"My bag..." Bucky looked around, pointed to a rucksack peeking out from under the couch.

Steve picked it up, handed it to Bucky before they climbed out the window one after the other, leaving Bucky's apartment and the scene of the fight -brief as it was- behind.

~

"The short alpha is Rumlow," Bucky said quietly. He took the bag of frozen peas Steve offered him and held it gingerly to his cheek. "The beta is Rollins. They're both real assholes."

"Yeah, I figured." Steve kept his voice low as well. He wanted to be able to hear if the two assholes in question came to upstairs. He sat on the couch with Bucky, keeping a whole cushion of space between them to be polite. "What did they want?"

Steve didn't want to pry, but he felt he should at least get some idea of why Bucky didn't want the
police involved.

Although, honestly, he could probably guess.

Bucky sighed, leaning back into the couch. "Rumlow is a pimp, one of the worst. I maybe palmed a few more notes than I should've done when we... um, parted ways. I gave most of it to Michelle, an omega that Rumlow had worked over pretty bad, and she wanted out. She's barely eighteen, she needed the help. After I gave her the money, I told her to get out of the city as soon as she could, and start over."

"And did she?"

"As far as I know, yeah." Bucky shifted, holding the peas to his face. "I told her it was safer not to keep in touch with me. I don't want to leave New York, not because of that creep. I don't know where she went, and it's safer for both of us to keep it that way."

Steve nodded. "I'm sorry, Bucky. And that's understandable." He glanced up at the ceiling. It was quiet, but it'd only been a few minutes. "What do you want to do about them? Seeing as they're here right now."

"I don't know." Bucky sounded tired, upset. "I just wish they'd leave me alone."

Steve considered, looking at the way Bucky held himself, shoulders hunched and tense. "If the cops picked them up, would they have reason to hold them other than this assault tonight? Do they have any outstanding arrests, or anything?"

Bucky shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised if they did. Few months back, Rumlow bragged about working over a john, said he sent the guy to hospital with stab wounds. He probably still has the same knife on him, because he's an idiot who thinks he's untouchable."

That decided it for Steve. "Okay. Will you let me make a call? I have people who could get here quick and make an arrest."

"But they'll take me in too," Bucky said, voice small.

"Not if they can't find you," Steve assured him. "Did you give your real name on the lease?"

Bucky huffed a small laugh. "No, it's not my apartment. I'm just watching it for a friend."

"Oh. Well, okay." Steve pulled out his SHIELD issued phone. "So if you hide out here, I'll get those two clowns brought in. Deal?"

Bucky chewed his lip.

"Surely it's better than looking over your shoulder for them all the time?"

Bucky let out a sigh, then closed his eyes. "All right. But please don't tell the cops about me."

"I promise I won't. You have my word." Steve dialled the number direct to SHIELD. "Yes, it's Steve Rogers," he told the agent who answered. "The apartment above mine is empty, and two guys tried a break and enter just now. I intervened, and I need them arrested, preferably as discreet as possible so as not to upset my neighbors. Especially the elderly lady downstairs."

"Yes, of course, Captain Rogers," the agent replied, "I'm calling our dispatch now and they should be with you within minutes."
"Thank you. Tell them they want apartment 5B, and I'll be waiting for them." Steve hung up, and went to pick up his shield. "I'm going back upstairs," he told Bucky. "Make sure these guys get arrested properly. You wait here, and don't answer the door to anyone."

"I won't," Bucky said, watching him warily.

Steve gave him a quick smile, then opened the window and went back onto the fire escape.

When Steve re-entered Bucky's -or whoever's- apartment through the gaping hole of the broken window, he saw the two guys who'd been after Bucky were still out cold on the floor.

That made things easier.

Steve used a couple of snap ties from his pocket to bind their hands, and lined them up side by side in the middle of the floor.

While he waited for the police, Steve took a look around. There were some clothes scattered about the place, mostly dark colours and something that a younger person might wear, so they were probably Bucky's.

A quick glance in the bedroom closet showed a vast quantity of suits and shirts, in a much larger size. Probably not something Bucky would wear, and some of them had the scent of an older male beta.

Steve screwed his nose a little from the smell, and closed the closet.

On a whim, he snatched up a trash bag from the kitchen and gathered the clothes that belonged to Bucky. They had his scent on some of them.

Steve tied the bag tight, then dropped it out onto the fire escape below, so it'd be outside his own apartment.

If anyone asked, he'd say it was his own or something. Luckily the fire escape was in the alley, so it only faced brick. No neighbors to watch what he was doing.

Steve waited on the cops, and tried to look casual about it.

When they arrived, with a SHIELD agent in tow, Steve gave them a quick statement about having heard what he'd presumed was an unlawful breaking and entering, and had intervened.

Which was mostly true anyway.

When asked if there had been anyone else involved other than the two men being led away dazed and in handcuffs, Steve lied and said he hadn't seen anyone.

No one, not the agent or the cops, doubted the word of Captain America.

~

When Steve got back into his apartment, subtly taking the trash bag of clothes in from the window,
he didn't see Bucky on the couch. The bag of peas was discarded on the coffee table.

Steve had half expected this, for Bucky to bolt. He tried not to feel disappointed. All that mattered was the omega was safe, and the bad guys were going to have to deal with the law as they deserved. Hopefully Steve had taken all evidence that Bucky was even there out of the picture, so it couldn't be traced back to him in any way.

Except, if Bucky wasn't here any more, Steve wasn't sure what he would do with the bag of clothes that belonged to him. He'd heard of omega's clothes being sold for money if they smelled good enough, which was awful, really. Absently Steve wondered if that sort of thing still happened in the future, before he banished the thought immediately and decided he'd just have to hang onto the clothes in case Bucky returned.

He'd double bag them, if need be, so he wouldn't be able to smell them.

*Triple* bag them, to be on the safe side.

Steve took the bag to his kitchen to do just that, and noticed the door to his bathroom was shut.

It hadn't been shut before he'd left.

Before investigating, Steve went over to the window in his apartment facing the street, and looked out to check if the cop car, or the black SHIELD car was gone yet.

He waited quietly until they had all pulled away, disappearing into traffic, then he listened for anything else, but nothing came from the apartment above.

Mrs Kowalski below him, however, clearly had her TV on pretty loud. That would work in Steve's favour. He toed off his shoes, and padded over to his bathroom.

"Bucky?" he said into the door seam. "They're all gone now."

Silence, and for a long moment Steve felt a bit stupid. Maybe Bucky really had left?

He didn't mean to, but Steve inhaled, trying to scent him out.

Yes, he was in there.

"Buck?" he tried again. "You okay?"

He heard a quiet, shaky inhale, just behind the door, and Steve frowned to himself. He didn't want Bucky to be scared of another big alpha waiting on him.

"I'm gonna go cook some dinner," Steve said softly. "Come out and have some when you want to, okay? You're safe here."

Then he made himself turn around and head to the kitchen. He didn't want Bucky to be scared of him.

Steve rummaged in his refrigerator, inspired for once. He pulled out pork chops, potatoes, vegetables and spices. He was going to make something that smelled so good, Bucky wouldn't be able to resist.
The One Where Bucky Stays Over

Bucky clutched his rucksack close and huddled in the bathroom of his hot alpha neighbor.

And not just any hot neighbor; Captain fricking America.

Bucky had done his best to avoid the alpha after their meeting on the balcony nearly a month back. He figured someone with close ties to government bodies, or whatever, wasn't someone Bucky should hang with too much, not with his juvie record and laundry list of petty crimes as an adult.

What would Captain America say about all that? He'd probably call the cops on Bucky in a second if he found out. Bucky couldn't believe he'd managed to dodge them tonight; he was lucky, considering.

Stupid Rumlow, blowing the gig he had here. Seriously, screw that guy.

First time in forever Bucky had a legitimate thing going, apartment sitting for an old client of his, and Rumlow had tracked him down.

Bucky was glad he'd been arrested. It was no more than he deserved. Hopefully both him and Rollins would be locked up tight for a few days at least.

Bucky stayed huddled against the cool tile, and tried to even out his breathing. He needed to stay calm and not have a meltdown right now. He had to go and deal with the alpha outside too.

Then he caught a scent of food filtering through the door; the enticing smells of a home cooked dinner. Even with the underlying scent of alpha, it was too good to pass up.

Bucky quietly made his exit from the bathroom, and rounded the corner to see the big blond Adonis that was Captain America cooking up several pans and fryers at once in his kitchen. Bucky watched him for a moment, marvelling at how big Steve was. He was clearly stronger than any regular alpha, yet he manoeuvred so carefully around the kitchen. He didn't bang pans, he didn't knock stuff over or make a noise. He had a quiet precision and awareness that was really very attractive.

Bucky swallowed, eyes raking over Steve's form in his everyday clothes (not his ridiculously tight clothes he wore for running, those had nearly made Bucky's eyes bug out when he'd seen him) and smelled his strong alpha scent dominating the room, mixed in with the cooking smells.

If Bucky didn't know any better, he'd say that judging from the scent he gave off, the alpha was feeling all buoyed and happy. Like he was home-making.

Interesting.

Bucky gathered his courage and stepped into the kitchen. "Hey."

Steve whirled around, smiling wide when he saw Bucky. "Hey! Hope you're hungry."

~

Steve was lonely, Bucky concluded, and wanted company. Why else would he be so welcoming to a
complete stranger of... questionable background like Bucky?

It wasn't actually that uncommon, a lot of alphas who lived alone craved the intimate company of an omega, or a beta. It never ceased to amaze Bucky how an alpha could seem all put together and organised at adulting, but get them home and they went all soft and clingy in an instant.

Case in point, Steve served him dinner, which they ate together mostly in companionable quiet. Then Steve offered to run to the store to get Bucky some Tylenol, and whatever else he wanted, as Steve didn't keep regular painkillers at home.

Of course he didn't. He was Captain America.

So, he went to the store, and came back with Tylenol, a couple magazines, some potato chips, a tub of ice cream, and a big bag of cookies. All the stuff that a doting alpha would get if his omega were home sick.

Except, Bucky wasn't Steve's omega.

He certainly noticed the vibes Steve was giving off. The big alpha was playing house, trying to take care of Bucky. And maybe he was just a genuinely good guy, but Bucky was still wary. He felt weird accepting all of this out of nowhere, and from a stranger.

He felt a little sad for Steve too. Like, his phone didn't ping with messages, which seemed odd considering he must know a lot of people, and he didn't seem to have any plans other than to sit down and watch a movie.

Bucky ended up taking over one side of the couch. He'd had some Tylenol to help the ache in his face from that backhander Rumlow had dealt out, and he was distracting himself from the whole situation with the amazing ice cream Steve had picked up.

Steve sat, thrumming with excitement, on the other end of the couch. Bucky could smell the eagerness on him.

"What do you want to watch?" Steve asked, flicking through his Netflix account. "I got no idea what's good."

"I don't mind," Bucky said automatically, because he was an omega; he'd been raised to not have an opinion when an alpha was in the room.

Then Steve's words sank in, and Bucky looked up at him. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"The movies?" Steve glanced at him, his expression blank. "Any suggestions?"

"I..." Bucky stopped himself from saying I don't mind again, and inhaled steadily. He asked instead, "What genre do you like?"

Steve took a long moment to answer, and seemed embarrassed over it. "I guess I like... something hopeful, or inspiring? I like the animated movies they made, that was pretty incredible."

Bucky frowned, sure he was missing something but unsure what exactly. "We can't be that far apart in age," he guessed, "we must've seen most of the same movies anyway. Okay, like, what's your favorite Disney?"

"Walt Disney? I saw Snow White, in the theater. And that one with all the music, Fantasia? That came out a few years later and I managed to see that. That was amazing. But I haven't... there's so
much to choose from now, I don't know where to start. Should I watch them chronologically, or just
pick at random?"

Bucky stared at him. "So... you only seen two Disney movies, and they're both the super old ones?"

Steve huffed a small laugh. "Yeah, I guess so."

"How come? Your family one of those who didn't believe in television or something?"

"Bucky, nobody had television when I grew up."

"Sure they did," Bucky said.

"No," Steve said with a smile. "I grew up in the twenties."

"Huh? Don't you mean the eighties?"

"No, I mean twenties. I hear televisions didn't become commonplace in homes until the late
seventies."

"Uh... wha?" Bucky managed. A creeping realisation was starting to dawn on him. "Get outta here,"
he tried feebly. "You're telling me you were there in the twenties?"

"Yes." Steve twirled the remote in his hand. "I can't even begin to..." He shook his head. "There's so
much food here, now. I don't know what to eat every day. Bananas taste different. And you can
order in pretty much any kind of food you want, but I feel like I take too long ordering it because I
don't know what I want, so..." He shrugged a shoulder. "I'm having a foundation set up, here in New
York, to help give good food to kids and families who need it. I thought that'd be nice, right? That
would be something good."

Bucky couldn't believe it.

No.

No way. Those bogus news stories weren't true? They hadn't actually found the real Captain
America in the ice and defrosted him like some TV dinner, and paraded him out to the press? That'd
been a propaganda story.

Hadn't it?

Bucky couldn't deal with this right now, so he cleared his throat and said, "Sleeping Beauty."

"What's that?"

"Sleeping Beauty," Bucky repeated, busying himself with his ice cream. "It's an oldie, but the
animation is kinda... it's like art nouveau or something, and the music is real nice. Tchaikovsky. It's
based on his ballet, so it's all pretty and flowing and stuff, and..."

He trailed off, his face burning. Bucky couldn't remember the last time he'd shared so much of his
own opinion to an alpha before. And not only that, Steve seemed to be listening intently. Bucky
cleared his throat again. "And the villain is like, the baddest bitch you'll ever see. She's the best."

When Bucky sneaked a glance at Steve, he was smiling warmly.

"Sounds great, Bucky. Are you sure you don't mind watching it? If you've already seen it?"
"Hell, no," Bucky insisted. "I love it."

"Well, great!" Steve searched for the movie, and selected Sleeping Beauty.

Steve watched mostly in quiet awe, which gave Bucky a chance to get his thoughts in order.

Was he seriously sitting here with some kind of vintage superhero? The original and first Avenger?

Was that why Steve was so different to the alphas Bucky was used to? Surely they'd had jerks back then as well, Bucky reasoned. Jerks were all over the place.

So... maybe Steve was just one of a kind? The history books in school had always seemed to think so, maybe they were right after all.

Steve seemed engaged with the movie, and Bucky hated to interrupt but he couldn't help his excitement at his favorite bits. Namely, anything Maleficent did. "Get ready for the most dramatic curse in recorded history, Steve," he said, as Maleficent crashed the royal ball. "She's about to fuck shit up."

Steve laughed quietly. "She looks like Loki."

Bucky stilled.

Right. That magical dude who'd trashed half of midtown six months ago, with The Avengers intervening, and all the press statements given afterwards by Iron Man and this dude they'd said was Captain America.

It'd been all over the news.

"Ah," Bucky said, seeing his error. "Um. Do you... wanna watch something else?"

"No, this is great," Steve said. "The colors are swell."

Bucky blew out a breath, and went back to his ice cream. "Okay. Cool."

They watched the whole movie, and Bucky enjoyed it. It'd been a long time since he'd shared any childhood favorites with anyone, and he was pleased Steve seemed into it.

By the end he was feeling pretty sleepy though. The day had caught up with him, and he was exhausted. He was kinda hoping Steve would let him crash on the couch, seeing as he was already halfway there.

Steve muted the TV. "Hey, Buck. Why don't you take my room? You can stay here, it's not a problem. You're welcome to stay."

"Thanks, Steve." Bucky curled into the cushions, pulling the comforter up to his neck. "Mind if I take your couch?"

"As long as you bring it back," Steve replied.

Bucky snorted. "Oh, my God."
"Wouldn't you be more comfortable in a bed?" Steve asked again.

"No offence or anything, but I think I'd sleep better out here." Bucky risked giving him a smile, hoping Steve wouldn't get upset.

This was always the most vulnerable time, when an alpha used any excuse to get him in their bed.

But Steve merely nodded. "Sure, that's fair. Let me get you another blanket." He got up, and when he passed by to drape a second blanket over Bucky's body, Bucky was already drifting off to sleep.

~

Steve supposed it was asking too much to have a night free of nightmares, especially when he had a guest.

He'd had a couple good nights, so why did it have to be tonight?

Dreams of battlefields and camping behind enemy lines with the Howlies came to him, familiar faces that to Steve were all alive not more than a few months ago.

Seventy years ago.

He dreamed of the Valkyrie, of ploughing it into the ice, and Peggy's voice breaking up on the radio.

Another voice was calling to him, woke him up. Steve struggled to wakefulness, didn't recognise where he was.

"Steve," the voice pleaded, "You're at home. You're okay. It was just a dream. Please, Steve, wake up. Steve?"

Steve looked up, saw a figure in the doorway, haloed by the light from the hall.

At first Steve didn't know who he was, then he caught the smell.

*Omega. Bucky.*

"Shit," Steve breathed, sitting on the edge of his bed and scrubbing a hand over his face. His heart was hammering. "Sorry, I..."

Bucky edged his way into the room. "It's okay. Nothing but a bad dream, okay?"

The soothing voice of the omega calmed Steve, but he felt so alone and lost in that moment that a sob broke out of his throat.

Bucky came to sit beside him on the bed. A warm hand touched Steve's shoulder, fingers skittish and unsure as they rubbed his shoulder blade.

"You wanna talk about it?" Bucky asked in a whisper.

"No," Steve sniffed, trying to tamp down his wayward emotions. "No, it's fine. I'll be fine."

"Steve..." Bucky exhaled quietly. "I figure I owe you a listening ear after you saved my ass today."
Steve smiled at that, touched. But he still shook his head. "You don't owe me anything, Bucky. It's fine. I'm gonna go for a run."

"Now?" Bucky sounded incredulous. "It's not even four AM."

"Best time for it," Steve joked. "Beat the morning rush."

Bucky stared at him like he'd lost his mind. "Why don't you just come watch another Disney with me like a normal person?"

"I..." Steve didn't really have a response, other than he wasn't a normal person.

Not any more.

"But you're sleeping?"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "I'll go back to sleep in a bit, trust me. Just come on."

Steve relented, unsure why. He was full of nervous energy, and usually he could only get rid of that with rigorous exercise.

But he went along with what Bucky told him, figured he'd slip out when Bucky had gone back to sleep.

They arranged themselves on the couch, Bucky laid out with his feet propped on Steve's thighs, like he was anchoring Steve there, and put on The Little Mermaid, with the sound low enough to not wake any neighbors.

Steve could hear it fine, and Bucky seemed to know all the words anyway. "This is my favorite," he yawned, as the music swelled and all the merfolks swam toward an underwater palace.

"Favorite what? Movie?"

"Yeah." Bucky snuggled down under the comforters, his warm body giving off a happy omega scent.

Steve couldn't help it, but he inhaled over and over again, enjoying that scent and the calming effect it had on him. He'd never experienced this type of interaction with an omega before. It seemed far too intimate, but Steve didn't have the resolve to turn from it either.

It was... nice. Comforting.

Steve waited until the end of the movie and Bucky was asleep again, snoring softly into the cushion with his dark hair all over his face, then he switched off the TV and quietly went to his room.

Steve wouldn't be going back to sleep, so he changed into his running gear. He'd pick up breakfast on the way back.
Bucky woke up, groggy and stiff from sleeping on a couch and getting disturbed during the night, but he was too concerned about Steve to fall asleep again.

He lifted his head, peered into the apartment but he couldn't see Steve in the living room area. Maybe he'd gone back to bed.

Bucky needed to relieve himself anyway, so he kicked off the blankets, stretched, and got to his feet.

Maybe he could bum a shower off Steve too. Bucky's morning wood was heavy and hard to ignore; mornings were usually his favorite time to give himself a little attention.

Bucky stumbled through the room, aiming for the hallway. He did a double take as he rounded the corner, saw Steve sitting at his kitchen table reading a paper, dressed in those tight running clothes again.

Sonnuva--

Bucky pulled his t-shirt down, hopefully covering his erection. "How long you been up?" he demanded, croaky and a bit embarrassed.

Steve turned slowly, which indicated he'd already known Bucky was there. He flashed him a brief, sweet smile; his eyes never straying from Bucky's face before turning back to his paper. "Not all that long," he said evenly.

Bucky knew that was a lie. He snorted, and wondered if Steve would turn to look at him again, and if Steve's eyes would stray lower to take in his state of undress.

But Steve kept his attention on his paper.

Huh.

Bucky wasn't sure how he felt about that. Relieved? Irritated?

He was too sleepy to process it.

"I'm going to make some breakfast, if you're hungry?" Steve said, "Feel free to use the bathroom."

"Uh..." Bucky floundered, unprepared for any of this.

Steve was far too nice to be real.

"Can I... use your shower?" he asked.

"Sure," Steve said easily, turning a page in his paper. "Use anything you want. There's clean towels on the side. Oh, and your clothes are all in that bag over there. I grabbed them last night."

"Huh?" Bucky looked to the side, saw a bulging trash-bag on the floor. Clothes would be useful. There had to be some clean ones in there. "Oh. Thanks," he said. "I kinda forgot about them."

"No problem."

Bucky swallowed, and moved away. He needed a bit of alone time, to prepare himself and wake up.

He picked up the bag, heavy with clothes, and took it to the bathroom with him. Once he'd locked himself inside, he breathed in and out a few times.
"Okay," he muttered to himself, opening the bag. "Oh-kay."

When he thought about the fact that Steve had picked up each item of clothing... Bucky didn't know whether to feel thankful or embarrassed.

He set aside clothes that were clean enough, and left anything that needed washing in the bag. He'd meant to do his laundry soon, but he didn't want to risk going down to the basement.

He'd have to think of something later.

The shower was amazing, and as much as Bucky wanted to spend all day in there, he tried to hurry up.

He felt a bit awkward being a guest. Although not awkward enough to miss his morning orgasm. He stroked himself off in the shower, muffling any noise he made, and was coming within a couple minutes.

The first one was always easy. As much as he wanted --*needed*-- at least two more, he knew he should get out of there.

He washed away the slick from between his legs, and gave his hair a quick shampoo. He made himself think non-sexy thoughts. Like, shampoo. And shower gel. His eyes catalogued the products Steve had, inhaled the scents.

His mind wandered instantly, picturing the alpha taking a shower.

Okay, no, Bucky couldn't think about that right now. If he got too turned on Steve would surely smell it on him.

Just... focus.

Bucky rinsed himself clean, and got out of the shower. He towelled dry, borrowed a comb to run through his hair, then used one of the bands from around his wrist to tie it back in a knot.

He couldn't be bothered shaving, but he did borrow Steve's deodorant. It smelled fresh, without much perfume. No doubt it had some scent masking attributes like most antiperspirants had.

That would be useful.

Bucky pulled on a cotton t-shirt, and a clean set of underwear and jeans. Now he was ready, but he dawdled there for a long moment, feeling a need to fuss and fidget.

Apparently he cared about what Steve would think of his appearance.

He met his own eyes in the mirror, with dark circles under them, and the bruise over his cheek now a nice shade of purple. Bucky stared at his reflection, such as it was, and bit his lip nervously.
Bucky took his sweet time in the bathroom. Not that Steve minded, but he started cooking breakfast to give himself something to do.

He'd picked up fresh ingredients on the way back from his run; bacon, sausages, eggs, and a selection of bagels that he'd stashed in the oven to stay warm.

Steve may not have been the best cook, but he managed to fry things okay. He was just starting to plate up all the cooked food, when he felt a presence and turned to see Bucky edge his way into the kitchen.

"Hey!" Steve said eagerly, unable to contain himself. "Come take a seat."

Bucky padded in on bare feet, freshly washed and dressed, with his long hair tied back. He looked softer like this, and so gorgeous. His scent was giving off a sated, satisfied smell, which immediately sent Steve's mind to places it shouldn't be going.

He cleared his throat. "I hope you're hungry?"

Bucky sat down, gave a small smile. "Yeah, I am. Thanks."

Steve set the plates of breakfast on the table, and went to get the bagels from the oven. He arranged them onto a plate and set them down too, along with the ketchup.

Bucky was already eating when Steve sat. He picked up a fork, but before starting he said, "I'm real sorry I woke you up last night."

Bucky paused for a moment, in the middle of chewing. When he managed to swallow, he said, "It's your apartment, Steve. I'm just a bum on your couch."

Steve huffed a laugh, surprised at Bucky's wry humor. "Well. I'm sorry for disturbing you all the same."

"I used to sleep walk," Bucky said, nonplussed. He cut up bacon and shoved it in his mouth.

"Yeah? What's that like?"

Bucky shrugged. "I don't know, Steve, I was asleep. But there's a couple of times I remember waking up all like, the hell am I doing out of bed?" He smiled, shaking his head. "So, whatever, y'know. Stuff happens."

"Yeah," Steve agreed, watching Bucky tuck into his food. The bruise on his cheek a sharp reminder of last night. "Guess it does."

Despite Steve's initial awkwardness, Bucky's easy company helped him settle and regain his appetite. He managed to eat all his breakfast.

Well, second breakfast. Steve needed the calories.
Bucky had a healthy appetite too, and between them they finished off everything on the table. Steve poured out fresh orange juice, and brewed coffee.

Bucky asked if Steve planned on doing laundry in the basement any time soon.

"I got a washer dryer," Steve pointed to his machine, "if you want to use it."

Bucky stared at it under the counter, then at Steve. "It _dries_ too?"

"Yeah." Steve smiled, pleased he wasn't the only one amazed by that. "Comes out hot and clean, but you gotta hang the clothes for a bit to let them cool down."

"Neat." Bucky was back to eyeing the machine. "Bet that cost some."

"Feels like everything does now," Steve admitted. "I'm still getting used to the prices."

Bucky looked at him, but didn't say anything. He offered Steve a small smile, tentative, and Steve found himself returning it in earnest.

After breakfast, and Bucky insisted on helping clear up, Steve showed him how to use the washer dryer. Bucky loaded in his clothes from the trash bag, and put a load on.

"Takes about an hour total," Steve told him.

"Okay," Bucky said, shifting from foot to foot.

"I'm... I'm gonna take a shower," Steve told him. "You wanna watch TV or something, go right ahead."

Bucky nodded. "Thanks, Steve."

They went their separate ways for now, and Steve tried his best not to let his mind wander as he showered, not to think about the omega having been in here before.

His scent was everywhere though, and it was getting harder to ignore. Steve washed quickly, towelled off and cautiously stepped out onto the hall, wrapped in his towel.

He heard the TV on, and Bucky was nowhere in sight so he had to be on the couch. Steve went to his room, and dressed. He wasn't sure if he'd be going out again; he wanted to stay in with Bucky.

Instead of his sweats, Steve pulled on a soft pair of jeans, and a clean white t-shirt. It was casual enough to not look obvious that he was making an effort.

Maybe?

Steve wasn't sure.

He headed back to the living area, found Bucky wrapped in a thick hoodie, and curled in the couch corner with the comforter.

"Are you cold?" Steve asked, concerned.

Bucky looked up at him, blinking before he managed to reply. "I... no? I'm fine."
"I can put the space heater on?"

"I'm fine, Steve, really." Bucky smiled at him. "I just like being in layers."

"Oh. Well, if you're sure?" Steve walked around the couch and sat at the other end. "I'm always hot, so it's hard for me to tell."

"Yeah, I bet," Bucky said quietly.

Steve felt his face flush, but he didn't know how to take that so... He said nothing.

"What we watching?"

"Friends."

"Okay."

It was a comedy show, Steve could tell that much.

Bucky's phone beeped, alerting him to a message. As he got it out and looked at the screen, Steve couldn't help notice it seemed like an old model. It wasn't one of the touch screen phones.

Bucky sighed lightly, and typed a reply. "I'm, uh. Just asking around for a place to crash. I'll try to get out of your way by this evening."

Steve's chest felt tight with nerves, but he tried to remain calm. "You got a place to crash." He gestured at the couch. "As long as you need it."

Bucky stopped typing and stared at him like he'd grown a second head.

"What?" Steve squirmed slightly. "We're neighbors, right? Help each other out."

Bucky blinked slowly, his pale blue eyes staring at Steve like they could see right through him.

"It's your call," Steve added, "but the couch is here if you need it."

Bucky bit his lip, looked back down at his phone. "Maybe... Maybe one more night?"

"Yeah," Steve said, "Yeah, of course. Whatever you need." He had to stop himself from grinning. "No problem at all."

~

Bucky stayed another night, much to Steve's delight. They ordered in Thai, because it was on Steve's list of food he had to try. Bucky did the ordering, and Steve insisted on paying. He was just so thankful to have someone to do this with, all this... Future living stuff.

Bucky unpacked the cartons of food onto the coffee table, explaining each dish to Steve. They lounged on the couch with their food, and watched more Disney movies.

Steve did ask Bucky if he wanted to watch something different, but Bucky insisted he was cool with Disney. They watched Beauty & the Beast, The Lion King, and Fantasia 2000, all with Bucky either
offering his comments on the movies and various pop culture references, or humming along to the songs.

Steve couldn't remember ever feeling this content. It was the most perfect evening.

Then at half ten, Bucky's phone beeped. When he read the message, he cursed under his breath.

"Everything okay?" Steve asked.

They were in the middle of finishing off Bucky's ice cream from the night before.

Bucky huffed in response. "My cover for tonight bailed. I gotta go into work, or I can kiss my job goodbye."

"Oh." Steve couldn't mask his disappointment. "It's kinda late?"

"Yeah, it's the late shift." Bucky threw the comforter off and got up. "I better get changed."

Steve watched him go, and waited anxiously on the couch. He wondered if Bucky would try to go down the fire escape on his way out. He also wondered if those thugs from last night were out of jail and waiting for him.

Steve didn't know, and cursed his own stupidity, but he resolved to find out what had happened to them tomorrow. In the meantime, he was going to see to it that Bucky was safe.

By the time Bucky came back, dressed in tight black clothes and with his hair loose, Steve had pulled on a jacket and his boots.

"Need a ride?" He offered, indicating the spare helmet on the counter.

Bucky looked at the helmet, then at Steve. "Um. Wouldn't you rather stay in?"

Steve shrugged. "I could do with some night air. Where to?"

Bucky exhaled quietly. "Queens. You sure about this, Steve?"

"Absolutely."

"Well... Okay, then. But you should wear a helmet too, unless you want people seeing Captain America pull up outside a-" he used his fingers for air quotes, "massage parlor."

Steve nodded in understanding. He had grown up in Brooklyn after all, and when he'd first met Bucky sneaking about at night and reeking of pheromones, he'd had an inkling about what sort of work he did.

"I can wear a helmet," Steve agreed. "Tell me the address and we can go whenever you're ready."

Steve hadn't had a passenger ride behind him for while, not since he'd woken up from the ice. It was good feeling Bucky's solid weight behind him, holding onto his waist.

It was also sweet torture with Bucky's crotch pressed up into the curve of his ass, but Steve figured he'd have to bear it. He had insisted on the ride, after all.
He drove them into Queens, keeping a close watch on his mirrors and the streets around them, but it didn't seem like they were being followed. He dropped Bucky off at the address he'd given, between Flushing and Whitestone. The block was a run down row of shop fronts, and Steve parked on the corner like Bucky had told him to.

Bucky dismounted the bike and pulled the helmet off, shaking out his hair. Steve lifted his visor, not so subtly taking in the scent of Bucky, warm from the ride with his pulse racing.

He wasn't scared, Steve thought, scenting him, but he wasn't relaxed either. Apprehensive, maybe.

Bucky went to hand the helmet to Steve, but Steve shook his head. "Hold onto it. I'll pick you up later."

"But... but it'll be late."

"So, I'll take a nap. What time?"

"Um. Four?"

"Perfect. I'll be outside, okay? Stay safe."

"Uh, yeah. You too." Bucky turned onto the side-walk, cradling the helmet under his arm. He glanced back at Steve as he headed toward the yellow lit sign that said *Dream Beauty Spa.*

Steve waited until he'd safely gone in, and then reluctantly revved his bike and left.

He had almost five hours to kill, and rather than go home to sleep, Steve headed out to a gym he used in Redhook instead.

~

Bucky turned a few heads at work when he first got in; Steve's scent lingered on him, and he was carrying a bike helmet when they all knew he didn't own a bike. In the dressing room, the other omegas grilled him over it.

"Boy got himself a new daddy," Cassandra teased. "What's he like?"

"Is he hot?" Sudjai asked.

"How old?" Ash demanded.

Bucky felt his cheeks flush, and tried to brush it off. "He's just a friend," he said, to a chorus of snorts and *mm-hmm*’s.

"Boy," Cassandra said, "if that alpha looks as good as he smells, tell him to come in here. I'll treat him good."

A jealous spike stabbed through Bucky, but he smiled sweetly. "Find your own, Cass." He shrugged off his jacket, hung it up on the coat pegs and stashed the helmet up top. "Hey, anyone got concealer I can borrow?"

"Oh, hell no," Sudjai muttered, before Cassandra butted in.
"Don't tell me he hitting you already, Jamie?"

"No," Bucky said sharply. Here he was known as Jamie, and they knew he'd run from a bad pimp not eight months ago. "It wasn't him. I got jumped, and this new guy stepped in."

Sudjai and Ash weren't buying it, but Cassandra handed over her make-up bag. "As long as you watch yourself, honey. Don't let anyone push you around again, you hear me?"

"You got it," Bucky said. He only wished it were that simple.

After a long night working, massaging all sorts of bodies alpha and beta alike, and jerking them off at the end, Bucky was more than ready to leave.

He didn't usually shower at work, even though their dressing room did have one. It was cramped and mouldy, and the water was never consistent. But tonight Bucky crammed himself in the shower stall and washed himself down, using as much shower gel as possible to get all the different scents off him.

He was doing it for Steve.

Cassandra and Sudjai watched with amusement, changing into their sweats and snickering at him.

Bucky tried to ignore their knowing looks as he towelled himself dry, and got dressed.

"Sugar daddy picking you up, Jamie boy?" Cassandra asked.

Bucky pulled a face to himself as he wrestled into his shirt. "Maybe."

"Ooh!" They cooed together.

Bucky just kept getting dressed, and checked his phone. 03:55. Steve should be here any minute.

He planned to slip out and go wait on the street, but as the rumble of a motorbike pulled up close, Cassandra and Sudjai were already rushing to the window to see.

Bucky smiled, his face heating up. "See ya," he said, then grabbed his stuff and rushed out of there.

He went downstairs, opened the heavy side door and yanked it shut after himself once he was outside. Bucky figured if he pulled on the helmet now, Steve wouldn't see how pink his face undoubtedly was.

He put the helmet on, and walked over. Steve waited on his bike at the curb, engine purring away, like some daydream come to life. He watched Bucky approach, his visor up, and Bucky could tell that Steve was smiling just from the way his eyes looked, all bright and happy.

"Hey. Good morning."

"Hey," Bucky replied, voice a little muffled in the helmet.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah." Bucky was very much looking forward to straddling that bike and pressing up close to Steve again.
As he mounted, he heard a wolf whistle from up high, which had to be Cassandra. He waved up at her, feeling even more embarrassed, then he clung to Steve as he revved the engine.

He held tight to Steve all the way back to Brooklyn, and maybe if he entertained the fantasy that Steve was his dream daddy, well. No one else had to know.

Bucky was allowed a weak moment now and again.

Steve parked his bike, and they dismounted. He seemed to be on high alert, Bucky noticed, checking out their surroundings and making sure Bucky got into the building first.

He'd gone all protective alpha.

But he hadn't yet mentioned how Bucky must still have other guy's scents clinging to him and his clothes.

They were quiet going up the stairs, and Bucky was wary about being jumped again. For all he knew Rumlow was out of jail and waiting for him around every corner.

But no one was there, and they made it back into Steve's clean and musky-smelling apartment safe and sound.

It wasn't that it was a bad musky smell, not at all. Steve's scent was fresh and healthy, in peak condition for any alpha. It was just, this was his home, so Steve's scent was all over it. Walking into the apartment was like being enveloped in a warm alpha hug, Bucky thought.

And clearly he needed to get some sleep, if he was thinking dopey thoughts like that.

Steve dropped his keys on the counter, and shed his jacket. "Hungry?"

"Uh... a little, yeah. Are you?"

"It's usually a safe bet that I'm hungry." Steve smiled at him. "High metabolism. There's plenty of food--"

Bucky went to block Steve's way to the kitchen. "Let me make something? It's the least I can do."

Steve hung back. "Are you sure? You've just got off work."

Bucky felt his face flush. Goddammit, he was lighting up like a Christmas tree tonight. "I'm fine. I can grill sandwiches in five minutes, easy. Go sit down."

Steve smiled, his blue eyes bright, and did as Bucky told him, sitting at the kitchen table.

Bucky took a breath, and went to rummage for ingredients.

"Work all right?" Steve asked.

"Uh, sure. Wasn't bad." Bucky pulled out cheese, ham, then went to turn on the oven. "Did you sleep much?"

"Um. Not really," Steve said, sounding guilty.

Bucky glanced over at him, raised a brow. "Did you ride around all night waking up the neighborhood?"
Steve laughed quietly. "No, I went to the gym. Had a good work out."

Bucky made a face, not bothering to disguise how he felt about gyms. "Jeez, Steve. Aren't you tired?"

"I'll sleep soon," he said. "What about you?"

"Yeah, I'll pass out after some carbs, don't worry about that."

Bucky made them grilled ham and cheese sandwiches, which they ate on the couch together. Bucky could've really gone for a beer, but he wouldn't have felt comfortable drinking in Steve's home, so he made do with the filtered water instead.

He suggested they watch more reruns of Friends, because it was easy to follow even when sleepy.

After he'd wolfed down his sandwich, Bucky wondered if he should go take another shower before he fell asleep on Steve's couch, to properly get rid of any scents on him. But then he'd have wet hair, and Steve didn't appear to own a hair dryer.

Steve hadn't given any indication that he minded how Bucky smelled, but Bucky worried. Alphas usually got all territorial in their own homes about scent and stuff like that.

Or maybe that was just the alphas Bucky had known?

He must've dozed off before he came to a decision, as next thing he knew he was waking up to find himself snuggled into the couch, a comforter laid over him and the drapes pulled tight to keep out most of the daylight.

The TV was off, and Steve was nowhere in sight. Bucky hoped the guy was getting some rest at last.

Then he closed his eyes again and went back to sleep, dreaming of loud, rumbling motorbikes, and a hot male body between his legs.
Not four hours after he'd gone to sleep, Steve woke to thumps and bumps coming from upstairs. He leapt up and pulled on a pair of shorts before hurrying out into the apartment.

By the sounds of it, whoever was up there wasn't worried about going undetected, which was a good sign.

Steve crossed the living room, glancing over to Bucky who was sprawled on the couch, but stirring from the noise. He was safe, and Steve would deal with anything that came along.

He quietly slid open the window and poked his head out to check upstairs.

As he'd suspected; workmen were repairing the damage he'd caused the other night, hammering out the broken window pane in the crisp morning air.

Steve felt bad, and as he closed his window again to drown out some of the banging, he realised this was going to be the noisiest part of the apartment while they worked.

The hammering got louder, and Bucky sat up in alarm. "Steve?" he said groggily. "What's going on?"

"Hey, Buck. It's okay, they're just fixing the window upstairs." Steve walked over to the couch, and he felt a little awkward being half naked but hoped Bucky wasn't awake enough to notice.

From the way Bucky's eyes widened as he stared at Steve's bare chest, perhaps he did notice.

Steve shifted, rubbed a hand on the back of his neck. "Look, you need to sleep, why don't you take my room? Just while they're working?"

"Wha...?" Bucky dragged his eyes back up to Steve's face. "What about you?"

"I don't need as much sleep because of the serum," Steve explained. Which was mostly true. He'd need a nap later, but he'd be fine. He'd slept on shifts all through the war.

"Uh..." Bucky huffed, rubbing at his eye. "But... what--" A yawn interrupted whatever he was trying to say.

"C'mon, let's get you up," Steve urged, gently touching Bucky's shoulders to encourage him to move.

Bucky went along easily, still half asleep. Steve guided him up to standing, the comforter wrapped around him, and then walked him down the hall to the bedroom.

"Get some rest," Steve told him, guiding Bucky to the bed. "I'll shut the door so it'll be quieter."

"Why don't you sleep too?" Bucky mumbled, already burrowing into the covers. "Bed's big enough."

Steve hovered there, looking down at the omega curled up in his bed.
It was a big bed, but...

No.

"I'm good," Steve said tightly. "Go back to sleep."

Bucky mumbled something, but turned on his side and appeared to fall asleep right away. Steve watched him for a moment, his pulse starting to thrum with excitement. Not just arousal --although, damn, if this wasn't the very definition of temptation-- no, but a simple, honest excitement over seeing the omega safe in his bed and instantly going to sleep. Seeing how relaxed Bucky was made Steve feel a lot of intense feelings at once, and...

Shit, he should leave.

He quietly padded out the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Resting his forehead against the wall, Steve inhaled air that wasn't thick with sleepy omega scent.

This wasn't exactly an easy situation, he told himself. Any alpha would struggle with his morals right now. He wasn't a bad person for being very attracted to Bucky, but that didn't mean he was entitled to him or anything.

Steve had to be better than his biology. No matter how much he wanted to go back in that room, bury his nose in Bucky's neck and just breathe in his scent, Steve would be steadfast.

Having a friend and doing the right thing was more important than his primal urges.

So he took another deep breath, and turned to head toward the kitchen.

And realised he was still only wearing his shorts, while all his clothes were in the bedroom where Bucky was.

Oh.

Nice going, Steve.

~

Bucky had some real sex-charged dreams sleeping in an alpha's bed. He woke up horny and hard, with the insides of his thighs sticky with slick. His body was hot and primed for sex, but he was all alone.

"Fuck," Bucky muttered into the pillow. "Fucking... fuck."

He forced himself to get up before he made a mess of the sheets. His shorts were damp with slick, and he'd have to wash them. His scent was probably all over this room too. Bucky turned down the bed covers, and opened the window to let fresh air in.

Well, city air, anyway.

Then he crept to the door and listened. The banging from upstairs had stopped, finally, and Bucky couldn't hear anything in the apartment.
If Steve was there, he was being real quiet.

Bucky took a breath, and swept out into the hall. It was only a quick dash to the bathroom, and the door was already open, showing it to be empty.

Bucky shut himself inside, locking the door. Now he could sort himself out before he had to face the alpha.

And maybe jerk off in the shower again, he thought guiltily.

When he'd had his customary long hot shower and orgasm, Bucky felt refreshed and sated. He borrowed Steve's razor to shave with, and rubbed an unscented aftershave onto his face after. He tied back his damp hair, and looked through the pile of clean clothes that'd been folded and left for him on the hamper.

Steve must've done that, Bucky thought. He was a little surprised at how domestic Steve was, how naturally it seemed to come to him.

He'd make somebody a good alpha one day.

Bucky avoided looking at his reflection, at the purple bruise still on his face.

Someone that wasn't him, he thought, as he got dressed. Because Steve deserved to settle with someone who wasn't a complete screw up.

Things got weirder when Bucky braved going out into the apartment, and found Steve sitting on the couch with his tablet. He was wearing one of Bucky's t-shirts stretched tight across his chest, and no pants; only his boxer shorts.

Bucky didn't mean to stare, but.

Yeah. He stared.

"Oh, hey." Steve smiled brightly when he saw him standing there. "You get enough sleep?"

Bucky opened his mouth to answer, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from Steve's chest, his defined pecs bulging out from the thin fabric. Bucky had a vague memory of seeing it bare too, when he'd been woken up earlier.

Steve set his tablet aside, and got off the couch. "I, uh. I borrowed your shirt," he said shyly. "I'm just gonna go get some pants from my room."

"Right," Bucky managed, forcing himself to look somewhere else. Anywhere but Steve and his incredible body.

"I'll be right back," Steve said, before loping off down the hall.

Bucky couldn't help it, but he turned his head to watch Steve go. He had such a trim waist and a pert butt, Bucky's mind immediately shot to how good it'd feel to wrap himself around Steve's body and feel all those hard muscles. Bucky swallowed, willing himself not to flush.
He was in some real trouble here.

When Steve came back, fully dressed this time, he was wearing one of his own shirts. Not that it made much difference, it was stretched tight across his chest much the same as Bucky's shirt had been.

Seriously, Steve.

"You hungry?" Steve asked with a smile, headed to the kitchen. "There's food that's gotta be eaten today, and I was going to get more groceries later."

"Um. Yeah, okay." Bucky was starving. "Can I help?"

"I'm good," Steve assured him, getting out the pans and cooking oil. "Help yourself to coffee though."

"Oh, with pleasure." Bucky poured himself a huge cup of coffee, and went to sit at the table. This way he got to watch Steve, and do that secret thing where he pretended just for a bit that Steve was his alpha, and this was their home.

*Yeah, dream on.*

"So... what was going on upstairs?" he asked, sipping his coffee.

"Fixing the window that I broke," Steve said, opening the refrigerator. "They finished up a while ago."

"Oh, okay." Bucky winced when he thought of Clive, the middle-aged beta whom the apartment belonged to. He wouldn't be back for another few weeks. Bucky should head up there maybe, check things were in order.

He really didn't want to, though, the memory of being ambushed too fresh in his mind.

"Oh, and I have some good news," Steve said, cracking eggs into a bowl.

"Yeah?"

"Those two who broke in," Steve said. "Rumlow and Rollins. They've been sent to Rikers on remand, pending trial."

Bucky sat up straighter. "Really?"

"Yeah, and it looks like they won't be going anywhere. Their prints came up in several outstanding cases. Drugs, theft, assault, and even a murder charge. There's some pretty solid evidence against them."

Bucky bit his lip, stress coursing through him just thinking about it all. This sounded like good news, and Bucky just wanted to be free of that part of his life for good. He didn't want to get dragged back into Rumlow's mess, and he'd have to keep his head down if he wanted to avoid getting caught.

No doubt Rumlow would bring his name up, flag him to the cops any chance he got.

Bucky would need to change his name, and get away from here soon.
Steve had gone quiet, and when Bucky looked up he was watching him, concern showing on his face.

"It'll be okay," Steve told him. "They're locked up tight, and no one else knows you were there."

Bucky nodded, but he couldn't shake the worry that'd seeped into him. "Yeah. Thanks for letting me know. Thank you for... y'know. Everything."

Steve turned back to his frying pan, shuffled it on the hob. "It's nothing, Bucky. We're neighbors. Neighbors look out for each other."

Bucky smiled at that. He didn't have the heart to tell Steve that wasn't how things worked; he barely spoke to his neighbors no matter where he lived.

"You sure saved my ass," Bucky said. "And I'll be out of your hair soon. Promise."

Steve glanced at him, something unreadable on his face.

"No need to hurry. I've kinda missed having a room-mate."

Bucky smiled once more for Steve's benefit, but he didn't think a room-mate was what Steve was angling for here.

~

"Have you had Mexican food yet?" Bucky asked after lunch was over.

"Yeah, I think so." Steve was writing out a quick grocery list.

"You think so?" Bucky snorted. "If you can't remember then it can't have been all that good."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Steve slid the list across the table. "Want anything in particular from the store?"

"Well... if you get the ingredients I can make enchiladas?"

"Okay," Steve agreed. "Put it on the list." He watched Bucky scribble things down on the pad. "Are you working tonight?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll have to check."

"Want a lift in?" Steve offered.

"It's probably late," Bucky said, eyes down on the grocery list.

He seemed a little uncomfortable, but Steve didn't like the thought of him travelling alone.

"I have errands to run," Steve said, which was kind of true. The gym wasn't an errand, but...

"I can make my way in," Bucky said, "besides I think your bike is too noisy for the neighborhood. Someone could complain and the spa won't want that sort of attention."

"Oh. I can park around the block if that helps?"
"Um... maybe. So do you want chicken or beef enchiladas? Or both?"

Steve allowed him the change of subject for now. He needed to remind himself that Bucky wasn't his, and if the omega really wanted to go out on his own, Steve should mind his own business.

List done, Steve went to fetch groceries, while Bucky stayed home and did laundry for them both. Which was nice, because that was not one of Steve's favorite chores to do.

When he got back it was mid afternoon, and Bucky helped him unpack the food and get everything for their dinner ready on the counter. He explained what he was doing as he made a start on the prep.

Steve watched with interest. Bucky cooked chicken strips and shredded beef with chopped vegetables, spices and sauce. He rolled them up in tortillas, and laid them all side by side in a dish. Then he spooned tomato sauce over the top, with some grated cheese, before putting the dish in the oven.

"The sour cream goes on top when they come out, and in the meantime we can do the side salads," he said, directing Steve to start mixing the beans and chopped tomatoes. They made a fresh guacamole too, from avocados that Steve had painstakingly selected one by one from his local bodega.

"I always wanna say, holy guacamole!" Bucky commented with some kind of accent, as he added chopped chilli to the mix.

"Okay?" Steve wasn't sure he understood.

"Michelangelo?" Bucky side-eyed him. "The Turtles?"

Steve shrugged. "Sorry."

"Man, you're my age," Bucky shook his head, "but you didn't grow up with the same stuff. It's so weird."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Um... sorry?"

Bucky laughed, elbowing Steve in the side. "What are you apologising for? It doesn't matter. I just keep forgetting, is all."

Steve smiled, pleased Bucky wasn't one to make fun of him. Bucky had probably shown Steve more pop culture in the last two days than anyone else had done since he'd woken up.

"Any movie suggestions for today?" he asked.

"Well," Bucky stirred the guacamole, "we could watch more Disney, as there's loads. And I got some suggestions for live action too, if you want. Depends what you're in the mood for?"

"Anything is fine," Steve assured him.

They ate dinner at the table because it was a bit messy, but really, really good. Steve would remember this Mexican dinner for sure.

He insisted on clearing up after, as Bucky had made it all. He sent Bucky off to pick a movie, and by the time Steve joined him on the couch, Bucky had made a short list.
He grinned up at Steve, his hair untied now and loose around his face. "I think you'll like these."

Steve was stunned for a moment by how gorgeous Bucky looked when he smiled, but he tried to hide it and smiled back.

"I'm sure I will."

After they watched Mulan --which Steve really enjoyed-- Bucky introduced him to what he called early animatronics from the nineties. They watched a movie called Jurassic Park, then Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Steve had already met and fought with alien-looking creatures since waking up from the ice, and he didn't know if the thought of humans wearing rubber suits with mechanical heads to look like creatures was any weirder.

Then he thought of Tony Stark in his Iron Man suit, and he couldn't help chuckling to himself.

Bucky's phone beeped and he mentioned about going into work in an hour, which would only be nine PM.

Steve was feeling a little tired at that point, as he'd hadn't slept much, but he offered to drive Bucky in.

"I'll be fine, Steve. Walking to the train will be good. I gotta belch out all that food."

Steve laughed at that, and decided he should let Bucky do his thing.

"Want a lift home? What time do you finish?"

"It'll be about two," Bucky said. "If you want? But you gotta park around the corner, Steve."

"Okay, no problem. You want to put your number in my phone?"

"Sure." Bucky accepted Steve's smartphone and entered in his details. "Here ya go."

Steve smiled, pleased. "Guess I'll see you at two, then."

"Sure thing. You gonna get some sleep now?"

"I'll probably take a nap, yeah."

Bucky rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. "No driving unless you've slept, man. I mean it."

"Okay, Buck. I'll sleep. Have a good night."

~

"Where's your road warrior, hon?" Cassandra probed as soon as Bucky got in the dressing room.

Bucky smiled sweetly at her. "Not here."
"He picking you up later?"

Unfortunately Bucky's face decided to answer for him by flushing hard. "Maybe."

Cassandra laughed heartily. "You're cute when you blush."

"Yeah, yeah." Bucky hurried to get changed so he could go start work. If he hung around and gossiped about Steve, he was only going to make things more complicated for himself in the long run.

~

At ten minutes to two, Steve parked his bike around the block from Bucky's spa. He took off his helmet and pulled on a ball cap, which he figured was better than nothing as a disguise.

He locked the helmets onto the bike, and walked briskly down the street past late night convenience stores and take-outs, and stores that were boarded up, until he got to the spa.

Steve waited around by the closed drug store next to it, so as not to be too obvious. He got out his phone and pretended to read his messages while subtly checking out the street around him. There was a late night bar another block down, and people walked to and from its open doors making a fair bit of noise. Cars drove by, some fast and others definitely cruising.

Then the glass front to the spa opened. Steve tensed, alert, but it wasn't Bucky. It was a man, a beta by the smell of him, and he walked by quickly with his head down.

Steve checked his phone. 01:59

It'd only been a few hours, but he was excited to see Bucky again.

When the black-painted side door opened and Bucky came out, Steve grinned wide.

"Hey," he said.

Bucky did a double take, clearly not expecting him to be waiting there. "Oh! You're... You're here."

"Yep. You ready to go?"

"Uh, yeah." Bucky nodded, looking down at the ground. His hair was loose, and he'd pulled the hood from his hoodie up. They fell into step and walked side by side down the street.

Steve wanted to ask how Bucky's night had been, but he was second guessing himself. Bucky seemed quieter than usual, and maybe he didn't want Steve asking about his night anyway.

Steve didn't know what to say.

"Did you sleep?" Bucky asked, breaking the silence between them.

Steve was relieved. "I did, yeah. Had a freaky dream about angry dinosaurs, so thanks for that."

Bucky laughed, breath puffing out of him in the cold night air, and they were back to joking and talking about movies.
Steve unlocked the helmets on the bike, and when they mounted he relished the feel of Bucky sitting behind him, hugging his waist. Steve breathed in Bucky's scent before he pulled his visor down and drove them home.
Bucky seemed pretty tired, and after a quick snack he curled up on the couch to sleep. Steve turned down the lights and took his tablet into his bedroom. He kinda wished Bucky would sleep in his bed, but that would definitely be blurring the lines of friendship.

Never mind that his bed already smelled of Bucky and his strong omega scent. Steve found that breathing it in was comforting, almost like Bucky was here with him.

He traded a few pleasantries with Clint and Natasha in a group chat via a secure messenger service Nat had set up for him, and asked them how they were. Not that they really gave him much information. They'd both gone kinda quiet after the battle for New York, and they weren't the only ones.

Still, it was all right. Steve had a friend now. And he hadn't told anyone about Bucky yet. Maybe he'd tell Peggy next time he visited her.

If she had a lucid moment, of course.

Steve said goodnight to Nat and Clint, and put his tablet away. He got under his covers, breathing in the scent Bucky had left on them, and closed his eyes.

He slept a couple hours, until his phone chimed for attention.

It was a message from Fury, calling him in for a mission.

Steve almost felt like saying no, but instead he breathed in steadily, and got out of bed. He dressed in his new suit --the stealth suit, they'd called it-- and picked up his shield.

He wrote a quick note for Bucky and left it on the kitchen table. Just in case he was still gone when Bucky woke up.

Then he slipped out the window and down the fire escape.

"Now you're both here," Fury said once Steve had joined him and Natasha in his Manhattan SHIELD office, "let's get down to business."

Steve barely repressed a smile at the memory of Bucky singing 'to defeat the Huns' totally out of key when they'd watched Mulan.

"I have a mission for you," Fury went on, handing them each a slim paper folder. "Should be a cake walk. Agent Romanov can show you the ropes."

Steve raised his eyebrow at that, but he didn't say anything. No doubt Natasha had things to bring him up to speed on with how future intelligence worked, but Steve was hardly a novice and he hated being treated like one. Like he was back to square one all over again.

Still, he wasn't about to complain. He'd wanted to protect people from threats, so here he was.
The parameters of doing so had changed some, that was all.

When they had their orders from Fury, he and Natasha headed to the elevator.

Natasha turned a knowing smile on him the second they were alone. "Who's the omega?"

Steve schooled his features, concentrated on pulling his Captain America helmet back on. "Who?"

"The scent on you," Natasha clarified, clearly not shy about asking.

Steve smiled wryly. "Y'know, way I was raised, you didn't ask people those kinds of questions."

Natasha smiled back, sharp green eyes studying him. "Times have changed, Rogers."

"I'll bear that in mind," Steve told her as the elevator slowed its ascent. They'd reached the roof to await their ride.

"Keeping it to yourself?" Natasha pried.

"Yep," he said, popping the P.

~

The mission was hardly a cake walk, but it wasn't the most difficult one Steve had been on. An intel gathering run; just Steve, Natasha, and two SHIELD snipers stationed outside in case they needed cover.

The place they were infiltrating in New Hampshire looked like a run down factory to Steve, but once they got inside there was evidence of it being used recently, with three armed guards patrolling the area.

Their orders were to take prisoners if there were any, and retrieve any equipment they found. So they knocked out the guards and tied them up, and searched the place top to bottom but didn't find anything else of note.

The whole operation left Steve with an uneasy feeling, like SHIELD was holding something back from him.

When they boarded the quinjet headed back to New York City, Steve checked his phone. He didn't have any messages, and he had to quash down his disappointment.

It wasn't even nine in the morning yet, and Bucky was probably still asleep.

When they got back to the SHIELD office in Manhattan, they had a swift debrief with Fury, and then they were free to go.

Steve elected to shower and change in the facilities on site, rather than ride his bike home wearing the suit in broad daylight. After showering, he changed into his streetwear, slipped his shield into a thin black cover before strapping it to his back, and headed to the elevators.

Natasha appeared out of nowhere, getting into the elevator with him.
She was in streetwear too, although definitely with better taste than Steve's clothes.

"Good mission," she said, when the elevator doors had slid closed.

"Was it?" Steve replied. He thought it'd been a waste of time.

"Not every mission will have fireworks, Rogers," she said calmly. "Fury is seeing how well we work together."

Steve looked at her, assessing. "Oh? The battle for New York wasn't enough?"

She smiled, enigmatic. "We'll get there. Fancy joining me for a sparring session soon? We could work on your hand to hand."

Steve stared at her, trying to figure out if she was sincere.

"Okay," he agreed cautiously. "Here, or...?"

"I have a place I use." She pulled out a pair of oversized sunglasses, slipping them on before the elevator doors pinged open. "I'll text you."

"All right."

"And say hi to your omega for me," she said before strutting away, heeled boots clipping over the floor.

Steve breathed in, and followed after her. He was about to say something in reply, when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

Heart-rate picking up, Steve stopped to check his phone.

It was Bucky.

*When you due back, Cap?*

Steve checked the time, and typed a reply.

*Should be with you 11:15*

He headed to the garage, where his bike was parked, watching his screen for the reply.

*Want some pancakes? :)*

Steve smiled, and wrote back, *Yes! :)*

~

When Steve got home and let himself in, wonderful smells greeted him; rich, syrupy pancakes, and a freshly washed, satisfied omega.

Steve smiled happily. He shut the door and left his shield propped against the wall. "Hey. Smells great," he said, strolling into the kitchen.
Bucky was there with his hair tied up, in a blue tank and tight black sweats. He grinned at Steve when he saw him. "Hey, Cap. Is the world safe again?"

Steve snorted, and pulled up a chair. "As far as I know."

"Well, great! Let's celebrate with pancakes."

Bucky had made a few already, and gave the first stacked plate to Steve. On the table was maple syrup, whipped cream, and freshly sliced strawberries and bananas.

Steve tucked in, grateful for the food and the company.

"So, hey," Bucky said. "I wanted to ask you... Do you know if they sorted it out with the aliens? I mean, they kinda came and went so quickly, caused all that damage. No one really told us regular schmucks why or how."

Steve swallowed his mouthful, and took a sip of orange juice before answering. "Well, from what I understand, and bear in mind I feel like a regular schmuck in all this too, Loki from Asgard got a bunch of aliens to come invade earth for him, which we stopped. Then his brother, Thor, took him back to Asgard, where he'll await trial for his crimes."


"Your guess is as good as mine," Steve said truthfully. "We're still playing catch up."

"Shit, dude." Bucky plated up his pancakes, and came to join Steve at the table. "I wasn't in midtown when it happened, but I could hear it from where I was. And you could see 'em all in the sky too, coming down that wormhole. I figured, this is it, this is the world changing event that will... shit, I dunno, will make us all unite, make us better human beings, right? But, no, everything goes back to how it was. People still act like jerks, and nothing really changes."

Steve grinned wryly. "Yeah. I guess that some things are too big for folks to take in. They can't think about it too much or they won't be able carry on. That's what it was like with the depression, and then the war. You just... you just keep keeping on, no matter what."

Bucky looked up at Steve, mid-chew. He blinked at him, and Steve smiled at him.

Bucky swallowed hard, then looked down at his plate. "Yeah, point. I'm sorry, Steve, I didn't mean anything by it. I was just thinking out loud."

"Not at all," Steve assured him. "I understand completely."

Bucky nodded, poked at his pancake with his fork. "Well, if any more alien shit happens, you give me the heads up, okay? Give me time to go hide under the duvet."

"Sure, Buck." Steve smiled fondly. "You'll be the first to know."

~

After their pancake brunch, Steve helped Bucky clear away their plates, then said he was going to take a nap.
Bucky felt weird at first, just hanging out in Steve's apartment while the guy went to sleep, but Steve seemed to like having him there.

Trying to look for another place was going to be hard after being spoiled like this, Bucky thought.

With Steve in his bedroom, Bucky settled back on the couch with the TV on mute. He didn’t care about having sound; being a good house guest was more important.

Steve had said Bucky could use his tablet too, so he was idly playing games with the sound off for a while, or surfing the net. Bucky didn’t have a smartphone, and unless he borrowed someone else’s phone he never had his own internet access. So all this was a novelty.

It hadn’t even been two hours when Bucky heard the muffled cries and shouts coming from Steve's room.

"Shit," he muttered, abandoning his makeshift camp and hurrying down the hall. He hovered by Steve's door, which was open a crack, worrying over what to do. Someone having bad dreams made him anxious, and Bucky decided to intervene.

He nudged open the door, and peered into the gloom. "Steve?" he said, hoping he'd wake up. "Steve. It's a dream."

Heavy breaths rasped in the room, though the cries had stopped. He must've woken up. Bucky couldn't see, as Steve was facing away from him.

He edged in a little more. "You okay?"

A sharp intake of breath, then Steve said, "Yeah, it's... it's nothing."

Bucky hesitated. "You sure?"

"Yeah, sure." Steve's cheer sounded forced, just like last time. "I'm fine."

No, you're not, Bucky thought. The scent of panic was still sharp in the air, and it spiked some dormant need in Bucky to soothe, to comfort the alpha.

He exhaled quietly. "Can I come in?"

"Uh... sure."

Steve still had his back to him, lying rigid in his bed. His bare shoulders seemed tense.

Bucky stepped into the room and pushed the door closed behind him. He padded over to the bed, eyes flicking over Steve's form under the covers. He wondered if Steve was naked under there... but now was not the time for idle thoughts, and Bucky made himself focus.

"Can I sit?"

"Sure," Steve said quietly.

Bucky sat on the edge of the bed, one leg tucked up underneath. He glanced at Steve, or rather, Steve's back, then looked down at the bed sheets.

"You know... a problem shared is a problem halved."

Steve huffed lightly, but he didn't take the bait. "It's all right, Buck. Just a bad dream."
Bucky nearly rolled his eyes. Why were alphas always so reluctant to accept help?

"Wanna talk about it?" he tried again. "We all have bad dreams sometimes. Even big ol' alphas like you."

Steve's shoulders shook as he chuckled, which Bucky counted as a small win. He shifted a little, curled one huge arm round his pillow. "Yeah, I know. But it's nothing, don't worry."

Bucky watched Steve closely, on the verge of arguing the point, or asking if Steve was seeing a shrink about these issues. Surely he'd qualify as a veteran, whether he was still active or not. Alphas found it hard enough to ask for help, so he couldn't imagine what Steve must be holding onto to give him nightmares like that so frequently.

Dude had been through a war.

Bucky chewed his lip in thought. His own anxiety had spiked, worried about the alpha's well-being. Bucky knew what would calm him, but he didn't think cuddling up to Steve right now would be the best idea for either of them.

Maybe he could offer him a shoulder massage instead?

Bucky glanced over to Steve's naked back, pictured straddling his slim waist and rubbing his hands all over his skin.

Bucky quickly looked away, his face heating up.

Okay, a solid no to that idea. That was clearly a slippery slope he couldn't afford to tread on right now.

Bucky breathed in through his mouth, trying to ignore the scent of alpha all around him, and shifted to lay down on the bed. It was plenty big enough, and he kept to the edge, away from Steve, as he laid his head on the spare pillow.

"Want to hear about my dream?" he asked softly.

Steve had tensed up again, but at Bucky's question he breathed out and seemed to relax the tiniest bit.

"Yeah?"

"I'm in a house," Bucky told him, "with lots of rooms. There's people too, and sometimes they're, um, scary people...

He paused short of saying, people like Rumlow.

"And, uh, sometimes there's no people," he went on, "and the dream is just me in all these rooms, and I'm trying to get out but there's no door. The windows won't open either. I spend the whole dream running around the place and I can't get out. Always the same."

In the silence that followed Bucky's confession, Steve shifted onto his back.

"You have that dream a lot?" he asked finally, staring up at the ceiling.

"Yeah," Bucky said, then huffed a laugh. "Pretty dumb, ain't it? But you know what, I looked it up on the internet. You can type in what you dream about, and it tells you the meanings behind it. If you believe that sorta stuff."
"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, just Google it," Bucky said, sliding his hands underneath the pillow to get comfortable. "Once I knew what it meant, it felt less scary because I knew what it was all about, right? The website said, we dream about the stuff we don't deal with when we're awake."

Steve huffed, and when Bucky tilted his face up to look at him, he saw Steve was smiling.

"That sounds about right, I guess," Steve admitted.

"Yeah. And I read that dreaming about a house or a home with rooms represents yourself, and all the rooms mean different things. Like, a basement represents one thing, while a bathroom is something else. So, yeah. It was pretty interesting." Bucky waited a beat, and when it looked like Steve wasn't going to offer him anything, he tried again. "You wanna tell me yours now?"

"Uh. Maybe not today, Buck," Steve murmured. "Mine are... mine are more about stuff I saw happen, and... Well, a lot happened, and... Yeah, it's fine. I'll deal with it."

Bucky felt a stab at disappointment that Steve wouldn't open up to him, but he understood. Alphas never liked to think they were human and vulnerable like everyone else. Bucky couldn't change Steve's biology, not overnight anyway.

He surprised himself when he said, "A lot of people talk to therapists now. Especially vets. You do realise you're a vet, Steve? You wouldn't be the first person to go talk to someone, a professional, and get it off your chest. Oh, and," he added as an afterthought, "apparently the best therapists are betas. Just what I heard."

"Thanks, Buck," Steve replied, though he sounded a little flat. "I'll be okay. I'm gonna go for a run, actually."

Bucky did roll his eyes this time. "You and your running. Okay, sure, go pound the side-walk into submission."

"I will." Steve turned a smile on him, and Bucky got distracted by seeing Steve smile. He grinned back at him, and felt the air charge with a new scent from Steve; the panic was gone now, but a spike of something warm met Bucky's nostrils. Fondness, maybe? Contentment?

Had he really made Steve feel better?

His face flushed hot, and before his own hormones could take over and answer for him, Bucky joked, "So, what're you waiting for?"

Steve turned a little pink in the cheeks himself as he answered. "Because I'm naked under here."

"Oh." Bucky flushed hard, and scrambled to get up. "Sorry. I'll, uh. Get out of your hair."

He stood, and hurried over to the door. As he yanked it open, Steve said, "Hey, Buck?"

"Yeah?" Bucky turned to see Steve leaning up on his elbow with the covers around his waist, his chest bare.

Steve smiled, brief but genuine. "Thanks."

Bucky froze for a long moment, before he nodded once. "No sweat."

Then he hurried out the bedroom, closing the door behind him.
Bucky inhaled deeply, trying to clear his head now there wasn't a strong alpha scent clogging up his senses.

Get a grip, Barnes, he told himself. Get a damn grip.

Bucky's resolve lasted up until Steve came out dressed in his tight running gear, strapping on a digital wristwatch and flashing Bucky a shy smile.

"I'll be back in a bit," he said, striding to the door. "Do you need me to get you anything?"

Bucky hadn't realised his mouth had dropped open until he went to speak. "Uh... uh, no? I don't... unless there's ice cream?"

"I'm pretty certain there's ice cream," Steve said with a grin. "What flavor?"

"Surprise me," Bucky replied. "Wait, I'll give you cash for it!"

"No need." Steve waved as he went out the door.

Bucky flopped back against the couch, and exhaled heavily. Damn Steve and his Under Armour. Seriously, that lycra looked painted on. Bucky felt hot and restless in Steve's wake, with the creeping bloom of arousal spreading through his body.

"Damn it," he muttered.

Eventually he gave into the need to do something, and got up to make some food. Maybe if he filled the apartment with cooking smells instead, it would help distract him.
Steve ran. And not as hard and fast as he wanted to, but it was just good to get outside and move. Once he got into Prospect Park he ran a little harder, mindful of all the civilians about.

This was why he usually ran in the early morning.

Still, Steve found he didn't mind so much, and when he got into hour three of being outside in the fresh air, he also found he wanted to get home.

He missed Bucky, and he wanted to go home.

Steve felt almost swept away by that realisation. It was scary how much he wanted-- no, needed to see the omega again after mere hours apart.

He checked his phone but there were no messages from Bucky. Steve worried over that, even though he told himself that it was perfectly normal, that there was no reason for Bucky to be messaging him anyway.

Steve changed direction, heading out of the park and back toward Brooklyn Heights. When he got near his street he stopped at his second favorite bodega, because this one had a better selection of freezer food. He chose tubs of ice cream that sounded interesting from reading their labels; peanut butter and chocolate swirl, strawberry cheesecake, coconut cream, and pistachio flavor.

When he dumped the four tubs onto the counter, the woman at the cash register, an elderly omega, looked at his purchases then smiled at him over the rim of her glasses.

"Your wife got a craving?" she teased.

Steve blinked in surprise, before reflexively brushing it off and smiling blandly in return. "Just a fan of dessert," he said, not offering more information than that.

He paid with his card and took the paper bag full of ice cream tubs, cradling it carefully.

"You have a good day," the omega told him.

Steve nodded to her. "And you, ma'am."

As he walked down the street he wondered if he should relay the encounter to Bucky, but honestly he wasn't sure how it would be received. He'd had run-ins with male omegas in the past who didn't appreciate any insinuation that they weren't regular guys.

And female alphas too, for that matter.

Steve figured it was best he kept it to himself.

Besides, he felt his cheeks burn at the thought of Bucky being his spouse, so...

Yeah. Best left alone.

When he pushed in the door with his bag, the apartment was full of the rich aroma of cooking. Bucky was in the kitchen, still barefoot and in his sweats, with his hair tied up.
Steve didn't mean to stare, but it was like that house-spouse fantasy had come to life right in front of him, and it was really very distracting. "Uh. Hey," he managed.

Bucky was laying pasta sheets in a dish with ground beef, then brushing them over with egg whites from a bowl. "Hey." He grinned fondly. "Shit, Steve, how much ice cream did you get?"

Steve felt a bit embarrassed but he covered it up with a fib. "I just couldn't decide! And there's all these new flavors. Anyway, there's plenty of dessert if you want it later." He took the bag over to the ice box and began unpacking. "That lasagne smells incredible."

"There's one in the oven," Bucky said. "Be ready in about ten minutes. I made two in case you wanted one all to yourself for seconds."

Steve laughed lightly, and closed the ice box. "Well, if you're offering I won't say no." He tried looking Bucky in the eye, but couldn't quite manage it.

"I'm just going to take a quick shower."

"Sure," Bucky said easily. "You want a salad with this? I was going to make a salad."

"Yeah, that sounds great."

And with that, Steve retreated from the kitchen.

He wasn't sure how to deal with this situation any more, how to deal with the longing he felt whenever he was near Bucky.

Should he tell the omega? How would he even broach that topic? Should he buy flowers, or would Bucky hate that kind of stuff?

Steve wished he knew.

~

They ate the first lasagne together at the table, with the salad Bucky had whipped up. Steve seemed quiet, so Bucky steered them onto safe conversation topics like movies, specifically which ones he wanted to watch next. "Any suggestions?" Bucky asked.

"I liked the animatronics," Steve told him, "but I don't mind."

"Yeah, those movies were cool," Bucky agreed, "but the thing is, I think we seen the best ones with animatronics already... Unless you want to move onto the horror genre?"

They shared a look, and Bucky deduced Steve was a man after his own heart; once you'd seen enough shit in real life, horror movies kind of lost their appeal.

"We don't have to watch horror," Bucky amended quickly. "Or... wait, I know! Let's watch Pixar. It was when Disney started working with this computer animation company. It's changed a lot since it started but there's some real good ones, and they look cool."

"That sounds good." Steve smiled warmly, and Bucky felt pleased.
They cleared dinner away afterwards, and Bucky took the second lasagne out of the oven and left it on the counter to cool. He brewed coffee, and they went to settle on the couch.

Bucky brought up the Disney Pixar choices he thought would be suitable. He vetoed Up and Frozen right away. Anything else was fine.

Steve kept saying he didn't mind which movie they watched, but Bucky was determined that Steve make a choice. It felt unusual for an alpha to keep deferring to him for decisions. In the end, he gave Steve a run down of each movie that he'd already seen, and urged Steve to choose.

He went with Finding Nemo, which Bucky suddenly worried would be too sad in parts, but Steve seemed to be really into it once it started. He even had proper belly laughs at some of the jokes, which Bucky was pleasantly surprised about.

When Steve laughed he laughed loud and hard, with his head thrown back and slapping his hand on his thigh.

And the cutest part was, sometimes Steve would start chuckling to himself long after the joke had been and gone, because he was still finding it funny.

Bucky found himself laughing more too, delighted at how much of a dork Steve was.

By eight PM, Steve let out a stealthy yawn.


"I'm not sleepy," Steve insisted, and had Bucky not caught him yawning he might have believed him.

"Go lie down and count sheep," Bucky said. "You'd be surprised how well it works."

Steve laughed at that. "I don't need sheep, Buck."

Bucky shook his head. "You're hopeless. I've never known anyone so reluctant to get into bed. If I had a bed like yours, I'd never want to leave it."

Steve's eyes flicked to him. The look on his face was blank, like he was confused.

Bucky was about to take his words back – because, fuck, he was only just hearing how that'd sounded coming out his mouth-- when Steve spoke first. "You can sleep in the bed if you want, Bucky. I said I'd take the couch."

"What? Steve, no," Bucky waved him off, "that's not what I meant. Okay, let's... Let's just watch something else. Any requests?" Bucky was busy pointing the remote at the screen, but when he looked back to Steve, he caught the alpha looking at him.

Steve quickly averted his gaze. "Uh, whatever you like, Buck. You choose."

Bucky stilled, acutely aware of the tension simmering between them. That in itself wasn't new, but Bucky realised something; he knew now with an absolute certainty that Steve was a real gentleman, and being a gentleman he'd never just take what he wanted.

And while that had been okay before, suddenly Bucky was wondering what it'd be like if he made the first move.
That'd be totally reckless, he told himself, looking at the TV screen. Just pick a movie and don't do anything rash.

Bucky bit his lip, fighting against the wave of want rising inside him.

But what if he did?

What if just this once he got to choose?

He shifted in his seat and, almost like he was watching himself do it, Bucky leaned over. Slowly, so as not to startle Steve, he pressed himself against the alpha's side. "What do you say we both take the bed?" he whispered close to Steve's ear.

Steve didn't move a muscle, but Bucky smelled the arousal bloom under his skin.

Because he didn't want to pressure Steve, Bucky offered him an out. "If you want to, come in the bedroom." He rose from the couch, a touch too nervous to look Steve in the eye. "And if you don't, no problem, and we'll never mention it again."

He left Steve on the couch, and headed for the bedroom.

Once inside, Bucky let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

"Holy shit," he mouthed silently.

He paced for a moment in panic, then pulled himself together and switched on the lamp at Steve's bedside. The bed was made; apparently Steve was tidy like that. Bucky looked at the small clock on the dresser, but he couldn't remember what time he'd come in. A minute ago? Two minutes ago?

How long should he wait?

Bucky paced and fidgeted for nearly five whole minutes, at which point he felt stupid, and certain that Steve didn't want him after all. He moved to leave the room, when a large figure appeared in the doorway.

Bucky nearly squeaked in surprise, but managed to hold it in. "Steve. Jeez... So, is this a yes, or...?"

Steve came into the room, a very serious expression on his face. "Bucky. You don't... You don't have to do this. You don't owe me anything."

Bucky blinked back at him.

Seriously, this guy.

"I know that, Steve," he said, calm as he could. "I want to do this."

Steve kept looking at him, like Bucky was some puzzle he couldn't work out.

Bucky felt nervous again. "Um. Do you want to? I mean, you don't have to, I just... I thought... if we both wanted to?"

Steve stepped closer, crowded into Bucky's space.

"Oh! Well, hey there." Bucky brought his hands up to hold Steve's waist. "It's about time."
Steve reached out to gently touch Bucky's face, stroked the pad of his thumb across his cheek. "Bucky, are you... are you sure about this?"

"Steve, just kiss me already." Bucky tugged him close, crashed their lips together and kissed him.

He thought Steve would resist, but it must've been the trigger he'd needed as suddenly the alpha was taking over and deepening the kiss. Steve's hands held and angled Bucky's face so he could kiss him how he wanted. Bucky moaned with it, let Steve shove his tongue in his mouth.

Steve smelled so good up close, and he was a firm but considerate kisser; a real gentle giant. Bucky felt safe with Steve, and he wanted more. He moved his hands from Steve's waist, slid them down to his ass and got himself a good handful. Steve grunted in surprise, and bucked his hips into him.

Then he moved his hands too, encircled Bucky in his arms and lifted him just enough that his feet were swept from the floor.

Bucky liked feeling all squished up against Steve, and his body responded with a wave of heat under his skin, lighting him on fire. Bucky whined into the kiss as Steve carried him over to the bed.

Steve laid him down carefully, coming down with him and kissing him deep. Bucky opened his legs to wrap around Steve's slim waist, his hands around his back to hold on. Steve rocked into him as they made out. Bucky felt the hard line of Steve's erection pressing into his own, rubbing against him, but Steve was angling for lower, right below Bucky's hard-on like he knew instinctively what Bucky had there, the secret little hole that alphas wanted so bad.

Steve pressed himself right up to it, and Bucky couldn't help but whimper. A fresh wave of slick slipped out of him, his body desperate for alpha cock. Steve broke the kiss to bury his face in the crook of Bucky's neck, inhaled deeply. "Jesus, Buck," he panted, "you smell so good."

He kept grinding into Bucky, and right now Bucky was cursing the layers of clothes between them, desperate to feel Steve's skin.

"Steve," he pleaded, "get your clothes off already."

Steve necked at him some more, with a nip of teeth on Bucky's skin, then he obediently leaned up to yank his top off and throw it aside.

"Can I...?" His fingers touched the hem of Bucky's tank.

Bucky was in such a rush to get naked, he pulled off his own top. He laid back down and lifted his hips for Steve to help with the rest. Steve tugged at the waistband and pulled his pants away, peeling the legs off one by one, and then his underwear. Bucky couldn't help it, he spread his legs wide as soon as he was naked. Reaching a hand down his body, he took a hold of his cock and pumped it slowly, watching Steve's face.

Bucky was willing to bet his was nothing in size compared to the alpha, but he could put on a show all right. Steve watched, eyes wide as saucers, and Bucky grinned back at him.

"You ever been with someone like me?" he asked, his hand slipping lower. He rubbed his fingers over the shaved and smooth skin between his legs.

Steve shook his head a little, still watching. "No, but I, uh. I'm bi, and I've been with... I mean, I've had sexual partners before, just not..."

"Not both sets of equipment at once?" Bucky guessed. "It's okay, works pretty much the same as
everyone else, just double the fun." He stroked between his legs, then bent his fingers, curled them in to breach his entrance, wet with slick. Bucky got enough slick to coat his fingers, legs wide open so Steve could see it all, then he brought his hand back up to his cock. He spread the wetness over the sensitive skin pulled tight and erect, and closed his fist around it. Bucky pumped at his cock, gasping in pleasure; he was so close to the edge already.

Deliriously he wondered how many orgasms he was going to get tonight. More than one would be amazing, he needed to come so bad. And an alpha's cock--

_God._ He wanted it, and he wanted it from Steve.

Bucky writhed back on the bed, groaned hard and kept pumping his cock. Steve watched him, and Bucky figured showing him what to do couldn't hurt. He was so close anyway, so he reached his other hand down, stuck two fingers inside himself, sliding in easily, and hooked them up to nail his g-spot. Bucky rubbed fast and jacked himself in earnest with both hands. He panted in short, shallow breaths, and oh, here it came. That tidal wave of pleasure rushed in, swept through his body.

In seconds he was coming, his cunt clenching on his fingers and loosing more slick. His cock twitched and throbbed through the orgasm.

He didn't spill the same as alphas did, but he could come multiple times. Bucky hoped Steve would want to help him out with that.

"Ohh, fuck, that's good." He gasped in air, breathing hard. "You wanna join this party, Steve?"

Steve licked his lips, and moved forward on his knees. "What do you want me to do?"

"Anything feels good, trust me," Bucky assured him. "You wanna play with me? Get me ready for your cock?"

Steve nodded in answer, all flushed in the face but moving swiftly at Bucky's command. He leaned down, his body going flat on the bed so he could get in between Bucky's legs.

Bucky lay there, watched in anticipation as Steve ran his tongue along Bucky's thigh. Bucky shivered, his body still thrumming post orgasm. Steve buried his nose to the soft skin of Bucky's inner thigh, breathed in and closed his eyes.

He seemed to like it, grunting happily as he breathed out. "You smell so good," he murmured, mouthing wetly down Bucky's leg.

Bucky couldn't help squirming a little, desperate for more contact the closer Steve got to where he wanted him most. Steve pulled back a little to look down at Bucky, like he didn't know where to touch first.

Bucky was used to that first time hesitation. "You wanna lick me?" he urged. "Or touch me? Anywhere is good."

Steve's breathing got heavy, panting. "Yeah," he managed, and went to move. "Can I...?" His finger traced the crease on Bucky's skin where his thigh met the curve of his cunt.

Bucky figured the alpha would want that first, so he hooked a hand behind one knee and pulled his leg up. "Yeah, do it." He reached for his cock with his other hand, just holding it up out of the way as Steve bent down there and licked his tongue right up the slit of his cunt. It clenched and throbbed with want, all the blood in Bucky's body pumping down there eagerly. Bucky slowly circled his thumb over the head of his cock, as he laid back and pushed his hips up at Steve's face.
"C'mon, Captain," he teased, "that all you got?"

Steve growled lightly, and used his big hands to hold Bucky under his ass and lift his hips up. Then he buried his face in there and licked and sucked on Bucky's cunt, making him whimper in pleasure.

"Oh," Bucky gasped, feeling himself clenching over and over in excitement, "that's... oh, yeah. Fuck."

Steve drove his tongue in deep, like he'd done when he'd kissed Bucky's mouth. Bucky moaned his approval, loved the feel of Steve holding him just where he wanted him while he assaulted Bucky with his mouth. Steve ate him out all sloppy and wet, and it was so good that Bucky started jacking his cock again. He was close, and so excited to come on Steve's tongue.

When Steve pulled back without warning, he was breathing heavily. His fingers replaced his mouth, two sliding straight inside Bucky.

"Oh, fuck, Steve..." Bucky's breath hitched, and he pushed down on those fingers. A whine escaped him when he felt the pads of Steve's fingers start to circle inside him, his cunt clenching around them, desperate for a knot to hold onto. Bucky groaned, "Steve..."

"What do you want, Buck?"

"Like, ten orgasms to start with," Bucky huffed. He let go of his knee, his leg resting on Steve's shoulder so his hand was free. "Here." He took hold of Steve's wrist, guiding his fingers a little higher. "Hook them a bit," he instructed, then moaned in approval when they found his g-spot. "You feel that little ridge? Just keep on rubbing that, okay?"

"Okay," Steve said, moving his fingers.

Bucky arched his back in pleasure. "Yeah, right there. Keep going." He jacked himself faster, intent on coming.

"Buck?" Steve asked. "Can I touch your dick too?"

Bucky raised his head, met Steve's eyes. "Um, yeah. Yeah." He removed his hand, figured Steve would use his hand on him too, but drew in a breath of surprise as Steve lowered his head, used his free hand to steady the base of Bucky's cock, then closed his mouth over the head.

"Oh," Bucky breathed, his chest starting to heave, "that's, um. Yeah. Oh..." His hands fist the sheets as Steve began sucking on his cock.

Bucky couldn't remember the last time someone had done this to him, which was too bad because it felt really, really good.

Like, going all tense with pleasure good.

Steve started out slow, moving his mouth down Bucky's shaft at a torturous pace, and back up to the tip. He moved his fingers inside Bucky too, sort of circling them around his g-spot and changing the pressure, light one moment, and pressing harder the next.

Bucky let out a shaky breath. He couldn't quite believe this happening, like suddenly here he was flat on his back with Captain America between his legs, giving him head like a pro. Bucky rocked his hips, pushing his cock into Steve's hot mouth, then pushing down on Steve's fingers. He could feel how wet he was now, the slick running out of him. "Feels so good," he murmured, closing his eyes. "Speed it up a little, Steve, I wanna come."
Steve licked up to the top of Bucky's cock, his lips brushing the tip as he said, "Hold my hair?"

"Oh, fuck, yes." Bucky brought both hands up to Steve's head, threading his fingers through his short blond hair as Steve smiled at him.

Bucky stared, totally mesmerized as Steve opened his mouth again, and took Bucky's length in slowly. Bucky let out a huff, his fingers gripping onto Steve's hair and tugging lightly.

"Yeah, swallow me down, baby," he murmured. "Just like that."

Steve moved his mouth up and down Bucky's shaft, getting a good suction going. His fingers moved too, started rubbing on Bucky's g-spot hard and fast.

Bucky's lips parted on a gasp, and all he could do was lay back and hold onto Steve's hair as he sucked him off.

"Oh, oh," Bucky huffed in pleasure, "yes, that's it. Oh, God."

The exquisite, familiar burn spread out from those dual pleasure points, kick-starting Bucky's orgasm. It rocked through his body hard, more intense because the alpha was pleasuring him, and Bucky gave himself over to it. He gasped, cried out, and felt a new wave of slick ooze out of him. "Uh, oh, God," he gasped, riding out the pleasure. His fingers pulled on Steve's hair until he came down enough to realise.

"Shit, sorry." Bucky let go Steve's hair, letting his arms flop to either side on the bed. "Fuck, Steve." He heaved in breaths like he'd run a marathon. "Fuck, that was awesome."

Steve was still pleasuring him, and Bucky's body twitched at the over stimulation. "Hey, Steve." Bucky had to push at his shoulder to get Steve to release his cock, which he did with a wet pop. "The dick needs a little break, okay?"

"Oh. Sorry." Steve began to remove his fingers too, but Bucky took hold of Steve's wrist and pushed them back in.

"That one, however," Bucky grinned at him, "can go all night."

"Oh." Steve returned his smile, his blue eyes bright and his mouth shiny with spit and slick. "All night, huh?"

"Well, close enough," Bucky laughed. "I'll probably come twenty times on your cock if you fuck me with it."

The smile slid off Steve's face as he took on a new awe-struck expression. "Damn, Buck," he husked. "I really want to do that with you."

"Mm, I want that too." Bucky kept his hand on Steve's wrist, encouraging him to use his fingers. "Open me up more, baby. Get me begging for your cock."

"Fuck," Steve hissed, and did as Bucky said.

Bucky was losing so much slick now, every movement of Steve's hand made soft, wet sounds. "Fuck," Steve gritted out, three fingers deep inside Bucky's cunt, "you're kinda small."

"You gonna stretch me out with your cock?" Bucky murmured. "Bet you got a real nice cock, Steve."
"Um. It's kinda big," Steve sounded unsure. "If it hurts, you have to tell me."

"I'll scream for you," Bucky teased. He pushed at Steve's hand now, impatient. "Show me what you got? Please, I want it."

"Uh, okay, Bucky." Steve stood to remove his pants, bending to push them down his legs. When he stood back up, his erection bouncing free, Bucky's eyes went wide.

"Oh," he said, a touch intimidated by the size of Steve's beautiful fat cock. "Well... you weren't kidding."

Steve looked shy about it. "If you want to do something else, I won't mind."

Bucky shot him an incredulous look. "Um, I'll mind. You better bring that beauty over here, Steve. Right fucking now."

That got Steve smiling again.

Bucky shifted up on the bed, kicking back the covers. "C'mere." He patted the bed beside him, laying on his side. Steve came to join him, laid on his side to face him. Bucky grinned. "Hey."

"Hey," Steve replied softly. He reached out to tuck a curl of hair behind Bucky's ear. "You're so gorgeous."

Bucky couldn't stop the blush taking over his face, so he leaned in to press his lips against Steve's in a kiss.

Steve kissed back eagerly, and it was so goddamn nice that Bucky didn't realise they spent several minutes just making out and touching. Steve's skin was smooth and soft, and Bucky stroked his hands over the alpha's huge shoulders and his sculpted chest.

It was Steve who moved things along. He slid a thigh between Bucky's legs, turning them slightly so he was almost laying atop him.

Bucky rocking into Steve's firm thigh. "You gonna fuck me now, baby?"

"Yeah," Steve said hoarsely. "Uh, wait, I gotta get a condom."

"I'm clean," Bucky told him. "I only do safe sex, but... as it's you... I mean, I figured, if we're both clean, you could fuck me bare. If you want to?"

Steve stared at him for a moment. "Uh... I... well, yeah, but what about... the other stuff?"

"I'm on a contraceptive," Bucky said. "So, y'know, if you want to fuck me without a condom, you can."

"I... really?" Steve flushed, and then nodded vigorously. "Yeah, okay. Yeah."

Bucky grinned. This was going to feel so much better. "Maybe go slow to start, okay, big guy?"

"Okay, Buck." Steve moved on top of Bucky, caging him in with his arms and his enormously broad chest.

Bucky opened his legs to allow Steve close, and let out a soft gasp when he felt Steve's hard cock brush against his sensitive skin. Steve moved his hips, lining up his cock and sliding it up against Bucky's entrance. The head slid vainly against his skin, slippery with slick, until finally it nudged
against the hole it sought. Bucky tilted his hips up as Steve pushed in.

The first breach was sharp, sliding in all too quickly from the slick. That was just the head, and as Steve rocked his hips forward, the rest of his cock slid inside. Bucky gasped wordlessly, clinging to Steve's shoulders to anchor himself. Steve took him slowly, but he kept pushing inside until he'd sheathed himself fully, gasping raggedly at Bucky's neck.

"Fuck," Bucky murmured.

He felt so full, Steve's thick cock stuffed inside him, stretching him out so good. He wrapped his legs around Steve's waist, clinging on.

"This okay?" Steve husked in Bucky's ear. He shifted just the tiniest bit, his cock stroking Bucky's insides and fuck, yeah, Bucky liked that a lot.

All he managed was a whimpered, "Yes," which was a little embarrassing but Steve seemed to like it. He growled near Bucky's ear and started slowly rocking his hips, fucking into Bucky in short, shallow thrusts.

Steve's cock was so large that every drag rubbed right over Bucky's g-spot perfectly. Bucky groaned happily, and hung onto Steve for what promised to be one helluva ride.

Steve fucked him slow, so slow it was almost unbearable, but his cock was pressing on Bucky's sweet spot inside him, and Steve was sucking on Bucky's neck just right. Bucky's third orgasm surprised him, creeping up and shuddering through him so thoroughly that he cried out.

Steve kept his thrusts slow, raising his head to look down at Bucky. "How many times you gonna come for me?"

He was smirking, and Bucky would've snarked back a reply, but his brain wasn't back online yet. "M-more," he pleaded.

He was so wet now, Steve moved easily inside him, each thrust nothing but slick pleasure.

"I'll give you more," Steve promised. "Just hold on."

"Yes." Bucky's hands squeezed on Steve's muscled arms. "Fuck me, please... Fuck me."

"I got you, sweetheart," Steve told him, pressing his lips to Bucky's throat. "I got you."
Steve slow fucked Bucky to his fourth orgasm, sucking on his neck and scenting him which made things far more intimate than Bucky had been prepared for.

He probably should've known Steve would be a romantic. Bucky was too fucked out to think clearly, but he had an inkling he was getting in way over his head here.

"Knot me," he demanded, blissed out and still horny for more. "Steve. Knot me."

"I'd love to," Steve replied, all smug and glowing. Damn, how did he stay so put together during sex? That wasn't fair at all.

"C'mon," Bucky urged him, "I wanna see you come."

"You'll see it," Steve murmured. "I'm close."

"Mmm, good." Bucky watched Steve and his glorious muscles flex as he moved to sit back on his knees. His big hands took hold of Bucky's legs behind the knees, pushed them up so Bucky's pelvis was angled just how he wanted it. Steve began to thrust, deep and fast. The angle was just-- Oh, it was *perfect*. Steve's cock felt so good driving in and out of him, sloppy and wet with his slick.

Bucky groaned, watching Steve above him under hooded eyes.

"You like that?" Steve asked him, barely out of breath.

Bucky huffed, and was determined to see Steve get as wrecked as him. "Go a little faster, Stevie. C'mon and really fuck me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, do it."

Steve picked up the pace, each smooth thrust slamming in hard. Bucky's still hard and sensitive cock bounced with the movement, and he wasn't ashamed that he made a lot of noise, groaning and crying out. Steve's cock was huge and it dragged right over his g-spot with every thrust.

Something was building in Bucky, not the regular pre-burn of orgasm, but something sharper and more intense. He realised what it was a moment too late, and gasped, "Oh, fuuuck," as the most intense feeling shook him to his core. His cunt clenched and released, and let loose a jet of ejaculate into the air.

Bucky groaned, loud and guttural. After it's arch into the air between them, the liquid splashed back down onto Bucky's stomach.

Steve paused his thrusts, staring in awe. "That was... that was amazing. Can you do that again?"

Surprised, Bucky looked at him. Steve did genuinely seem into it, so Bucky nodded in reply. "M-maybe one more. Keep going..."

Steve got straight back into it, slamming his cock into Bucky's cunt over and over, angled just right.
Bucky's body was singing from all the orgasms, close to being over stimulated, which was just how he liked it. He hadn't been so thoroughly fucked in forever.

Steve kept thrusting, and that sweet spot inside him started to burn and tingle. Oh, he thought, here it comes.

This time he didn't feel so shocked from its assault, and knew that Steve wanted to see it. Bucky's body shook and trembled as he clenched down, released, and shot another stream of come into the air, felt it splash down over his stomach as he shouted in pleasure.

"Fuck, that's hot," Steve gritted out, increasing his thrusts. "I- I'm close."

He smacked his cock into Bucky, the base of it starting to swell with his knot.

Bucky whined for it eagerly. Steve's pace faltered as he started to come, and he pushed his cock in deep, gasping loudly. Bucky felt the knot swell inside him and he whimpered, reached his hands up for Steve.

The alpha let go of Bucky's legs and moved in on top of him, pressing close. Bucky wrapped himself around Steve while Steve pressed his knot as deep as it would go. Bucky cried out, but his body was already responding, his cunt clenching and locking down on Steve's cock. They were knotted up tight together, and Steve pressed a kiss to Bucky's mouth.

Bucky let Steve kiss him, as he felt the knot inside him swell and move. Bucky's body moved with it, milking Steve's cock of its release as he came.

Steve broke the kiss and gasped against Bucky's neck, buried his face there as he gasped, "God... you're so tight."

Bucky cradled the big alpha against him. "Feel good?"

"Yeah," he husked. "God, Bucky, you feel amazing."

"Mmm." Bucky smiled, turning his head to give Steve more room to kiss his neck.

He didn't usually like alphas heavy breathing all over his scent glands like that, but with Steve it was nice. The guy was big but he was careful, considerate.

Which was good, otherwise he'd have crushed Bucky with his weight already.

Steve held himself up on his arms, taking his own weight. He rocked his hips gently, moving his knot inside Bucky, and Bucky moaned softly in response. He was so stuffed full of Steve right now, he could feel every movement.

"Love your big knot," he murmured, eyes drifting shut.

At the back of his mind he knew he should probably stop talking, but Bucky couldn't help it, he'd always been a talker in bed.

"Think it loves you too," Steve murmured back at him.

And oh, shit, Bucky thought, he really should stop talking.

"Uh... Steve, get me on top."

The best distraction from talk was action.
"Now?" Steve questioned.

"Yes, now. Roll us over."

Steve held Bucky close and rolled them in the bed, so Bucky was on top and straddling Steve. The huge knot inside him tugged on his insides when he moved, and Bucky hitched a breath. Carefully, he settled over Steve and spread his knees, sinking lower so it was more comfortable. His cunt was clenching down hard, unwilling to release Steve's cock so soon.

Bucky rested his hands on Steve's chest, settling in. "Okay?" he asked.

Steve groaned in reply, his hands reaching up to hold Bucky's hips. "Yeah, this is good." He closed his eyes and breathed in deep, his chest expanding.

Bucky slid his fingertips over Steve's skin, brushed over his pink nipples. Steve huffed in surprise, looking up at Bucky under dark eyelashes.

Seriously, Steve had really nice eyelashes.

Bucky moved his hands back over Steve's nipples, his touch light and teasing, causing Steve to shiver a little.

"You like that?" Bucky grinned lazily.

"Bit sensitive..."

"Oh yeah?" Bucky circled his hands around Steve's pecs, massaging the hard planes of muscle. "Want me to touch 'em some more?"

He waited until Steve gave him permission, a soft, "Okay," then he tweaked both Steve's nipples with his thumbs and forefingers, making him gasp in surprise.

"You like it?" Bucky rubbed at Steve's nipples gently, then pinched them again. "They've gone all hard for me," he pointed out, and stopped short of saying, guess they love me too.

Bucky bit his lip, and concentrated on massaging Steve's chest and shoulders instead.

They'd be knotted for a while yet, and a gentle massage was often the quickest way to get an alpha to go to sleep.

Of course, Steve wasn't like other alphas. As soon as his knot finally started to subside, he began rocking his hips.

Bucky stilled on top of him. He was impaled on Steve's cock and unable to move, and his thighs were beginning to tremble from holding himself up so long. Steve rocked his hips some more, nudging his cock deep inside Bucky and dragging over his g-spot. Bucky opened his mouth but all that came out was a gasp.

He couldn't quite believe Steve was ready to go again so soon, and he wasn't sure what to do. His thigh muscles burned and as soon as he was able to, Bucky slowly lifted himself up.

Steve moved too, his hands cupping the meat of Bucky's ass and holding most of his weight. Bucky reached out to grasp at the wall as he leaned over Steve, reliving the ache in his thighs.
Steve lifted him a bit higher, and at first Bucky's body didn't want to let go of Steve's cock, but then slowly it slipped free with a wet pop.

"Uh," Bucky gasped.

"Can I fuck you again?" Steve pleaded, and Bucky nodded in reply.

"Do it," he breathed.

Steve pushed back in straight away, pushed in so deep Bucky cried out, his palms flat on the wall to hold himself up. Steve held Bucky's ass in place and piston ed his hips, slamming his cock into Bucky's cunt again and again.

Bucky couldn't even speak, all he could do was brace himself as Steve fucked him. Everything felt different at this angle, Steve's cock felt huge inside him, and it rubbed on his g-spot with every drag. The over stimulated gland was only too eager to comply, and Bucky felt the burning tingle flare quick.

"Ahh!" His eyes screwed shut as the orgasm ripped through him. His cunt clenched and released, and he ejaculated all over Steve's abs.

"Uh, fuck," he gasped, as his hand slipped and his head tipped forward, banging lightly into the wall. "Ow..."

"You okay?" Steve paused to check on him.

"Steve, don't stop!"

"But you banged your head?"

"I'll live," Bucky declared, all glowing and invincible post orgasm. "Don't stop!"

"Okay. Just..." Steve reached a hand around Bucky's back, supporting him as he moved and flipped them. Bucky huffed as his back hit the mattress, Steve on top of him and still inside him.

"Let's do it this way so you don't injure yourself." Steve smiled at him as he leaned in, and Bucky didn't argue, he just hooked his legs around Steve's hips and pressed the heel of his foot into Steve's ass to urge him on.

Steve pumped his hips, fucking Bucky with deep powerful thrusts. Bucky clung on tight, moans pouring from his mouth. The alpha huffed and grunted close to his ear, heating Bucky's skin with his breath.

Bucky felt so claimed by Steve, speared on such a perfect cock, it was like his body was all too eager to come. The burn spread through him, lighting him up. Bucky's legs opened wider as he tensed, straining up to meet Steve's thrusts.

"Uh, oh, God," he groaned, coming hard again. "Uh!" He shot his load between them, making them both wet. "Oh, God!"

"Love watching you come," Steve husked, still pounding into him. "Wanna knot you again."

Bucky whimpered eagerly. Yes, God, he wanted that fat knot back in him. "Knot me," he groaned. Steve sped up. "You're so... oh," he groaned, mouth hanging open as his pace faltered. "Fuck..."
Bucky felt the knot swell, filling him up as Steve pushed deep inside him. Bucky gasped, and his body clenched down greedily on Steve's cock, clamping the knot securely inside him.

Bucky gazed up at Steve, at the expression on his face as he came. He looked so blissed out, his long eyelashes sweeping down as he closed his eyes, and his blond bangs flopping messily over his forehead.

He was so beautiful, Bucky thought, so incredibly beautiful in this moment.

And, he realised, this meant he was in a lot of trouble.

~

Bucky didn't mean to fall asleep after, but he was so thoroughly fucked out that staying awake wasn't even an option.

He woke up blearily some time later with Steve spooning him, and he felt so cosy and safe that he didn't want to move at all.

Except, he really had to pee, and also check his rota.

Bucky had no idea if he was on for tonight or not, his shifts changed and swapped so much.

He grunted quietly, and tried to move out from under Steve's tree trunk of an arm.

As soon as he disturbed him Steve jerked awake, startling Bucky in the process. "It's okay, relax," Bucky croaked out. "I'm just going to the bathroom."

"Sorry." Steve sheepishly retracted his arm. "What time is it?"

"Um..." Bucky looked for a clock in Steve's room, ended up squinting at the tiny digital one he saw. "Half ten."

Shit.

He got to his feet, a little wobbly at first, then padded across the room.

If he was on a shift tonight, he was going to be late.

Bucky went to the bathroom first to relieve himself, then he got in the shower to quickly rinse his body clean. There was dried come and slick all over his skin, and he used shower gel to wash it all off.

As he towelled dry afterwards, he caught a glance of himself in the mirror. His eyes widened when he saw the purple bruises on his neck.

Jeez, Steve. Bucky sighed irritably. Those love bites would be such a pain in the ass to cover up at work.

Speaking of which... He left his towel hanging in the bathroom and tip-toed naked to the living area. His phone was on the coffee table, and Bucky picked it up and opened his rota.
He wasn't sure if he was relieved or not when he saw he wasn't scheduled to work tonight. He must've swapped with someone.

There was a text from Sudjai that'd been sent about an hour ago, looking for a late shift cover tonight. Bucky thought he should reply to that, and get the hell out of Steve's apartment for a few hours, put some space between them.

He sighed, and looked up as he thought it over. His eyes strayed to the kitchen counter where the untouched lasagne sat in its dish.

Bucky pictured Steve eating that lasagne all on his own, and it made him feel kind of bad.

He was definitely too dopey from an overload of hormones right now if he was feeling bad for Steve again. The man was a grown-ass alpha, he could take care of himself.

But maybe just for tonight, Bucky thought...

He'd stay with Steve.

Then he'd really have to nip this in the bud before things got out of hand.

He quickly sent a text out to all of his contacts that he trusted. Hey, I'm still looking for a place to crash. Anyone need a room-mate?

Then he turned his phone off, left it on the coffee table, and headed back to Steve's room.

Chapter End Notes

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Edit to add:

Here is a post on my tumblr on some backstory for the worldbuilding, and Bucky as an intersex character.
Steve laid in bed, waiting for Bucky to get back. After he heard the toilet flush in the bathroom, the shower turned on.

Steve supposed it was easy for people to simply jump in a hot shower whenever they fancied it; the future sure had nice showers.

He didn't feel in any hurry to have one himself. His room was so full of happy, sated omega scent that Steve wished he could bottle it up and carry it with him all the time.

Or, well... Having Bucky with him all the time would be better, of course. Not that Steve would expect that from him, but...

Maybe his thoughts were a little sappy right now.

When Bucky finally got out of the bathroom he didn't come straight back to the bedroom. Steve heard him walk quietly to the living room, and start pressing the heavy buttons on his old model phone.

Sometimes Steve hated having his enhanced hearing. He didn't mean to listen in, but he started to feel anxious that Bucky wasn't back in bed with him. The rational part of his brain tried to reason it was normal for people to check their phones. Everyone seemed glued to them in a way Steve just didn't understand.

Maybe Bucky had messages to reply to? That was all.

But why was he doing it in another room? Who were the messages from?

Steve turned onto his other side, so he wouldn't be staring at Bucky the moment he came back in the room.

Assuming he did come back.

Steve frowned to himself, tried not to listen, tried to ignore the press of buttons as Bucky must've been typing out a text.

Bucky did come back eventually, quietly slipping into the room. Steve held his breath as the bed dipped, and Bucky got in. He had to quell the urge to roll over and tackle the omega; he was just so happy Bucky was back in bed with him.

Steve inhaled steadily as Bucky shifted to lie down beside him, pulling the covers up.

"You asleep?" Bucky whispered.

"No," Steve whispered back, making Bucky huff a laugh.

"Damn, Steve. I can't believe you're not passed out."

Steve rolled onto his back and smiled cautiously. "Is that good or bad?"

"Well, it's not bad..." Bucky grinned, leaning up on his elbow. "I just thought you'd want to sleep
more."

Steve grinned back. "I can sleep later?"

"What, you got plans in the meantime?" he teased.

"I got one or two ideas..."

"You do, huh?"

Bucky's scent spiked, his heat simmering just below the surface of his skin. Steve could smell it; not a full blown heat --and if Bucky was on suppressants then that would explain the subdued scent-- but it was there. Steve's enhanced sense of smell picked it out easily, and it set off his own arousal in answer.

Steve moved onto his side, facing Bucky. "Yeah, I thought we might... stay in bed?"

He reached out, trailed a finger over Bucky's shoulder and onto his chest. Bucky's eyes tracked the movement, then he shifted to lay on his back, dark hair fanned out on the pillow. He looked to Steve, lifted his chin in invitation. "C'mon and show me what you had in mind then, Captain."

A smile took over Steve's face, and he moved to cover Bucky's body with his own.

"With pleasure," he murmured, bending to press a kiss to Bucky's neck, at the scent glands pumping out sweet smelling pheromones. Steve inhaled the omega's scent, eyes drifting closed in sheer bliss.

He wished he could stay in this perfect moment with Bucky for the rest of his days.

~

Bucky was awake after seven AM, and although he was anxious to move he made himself lay still and doze some more.

Steve was spooning him again anyway, so the not moving thing was actually the easier option.

At nearly eight AM Bucky couldn't stay still a moment longer, and he started squirming away from that hot embrace, even though it felt warm and safe... he knew he couldn't stay there all day.

Not if he wanted to keep a level head about all this.

"I'm gonna take a shower," he announced, forcing himself up and out of bed.

_And then we really need to talk._

"Okay," Steve replied softly. He smiled at Bucky sleepily, and Bucky smiled back on reflex because he couldn't help it.

Then he made himself turn around and walk to the bathroom.

Under the warm spray, he washed away all the alpha scent and evidence of sex from his skin. He washed his hair twice, because he needed a clear head without any smells clinging to him and getting him all distracted.
This was going to be hard enough without still being caught up in Steve's intoxicating post-sex scent, because damn Steve smelled good.

Bucky huffed, and used the strongest scented shower gel to wash himself for the third time.

When he rinsed clean and towelled off, Bucky picked out a clean t-shirt and a pair of shorts from the pile that was still on the hamper.

This was the pile of clothes Steve had done for him the other day. He tried not to think about neat it was, how Steve had even folded each pair of shorts, showing such care with Bucky's clothes.

Bucky shook his head, and breathed in steadily.

Okay. First things first, clear the apartment of scent. Then maybe they could both think clearly and behave like rational adults.

He tied back his damp hair, and made sure he put on a fresh application of the scent neutralizing deodorant. Then he headed back to the bedroom.

Steve was still lounging in bed, which was kind of a shame; the first time the guy seemed cosy and relaxed in his bed, and Bucky was going to disturb him.

"Uh... Steve, where do you keep your clean bed sheets?" he asked.

Steve pointed over at the closet. "Top left. Why?"

"Because I'm going to change your sheets," Bucky said, casually as he could, "while you go take a shower."

He opened the closet and searched for sheets, found a very neatly folded set of blue ones that looked brand new. He pulled them down, and picked out pillow cases too.

When he turned back to face Steve, the alpha was sitting up against his pillows, but wasn't making a move to get out of bed.

Alphas were as bad as omegas when it came to nesting in beds, Bucky thought, especially when they had scent all over them.

"C'mon, Steve," he urged, dumping the clean sheets on the foot of the bed. He walked over to the window and opened it wide, let the cool morning air in.

Then he turned back to look at Steve, hands on hips, and gave him his best no nonsense look. "Go take a shower."

This made Steve smile, and he looked so happy and beautiful right then that it made Bucky's heart thud and his throat dry up a little.

"Do I smell that bad?" Steve asked with amusement.

"No," Bucky croaked, then cleared his throat. "But you will later if you don't wash now. So, go on. Hop to it."

"Sir, yes, sir." Steve saluted with a grin, and got out of bed.

Bucky tried not to stare, but...
Yeah, he couldn't help himself. He stared. Steve's body was a work of art, a Greek statue made flesh.

And just like that, Bucky's mind flew to sex and knotting, and Steve's skin all sweaty and--

He held his breath, and made himself look away, look down at the bed and the messed up sheets instead. Which wasn't much better, but when Bucky looked up Steve was leaving the room.

Bucky craned his head to watch Steve's butt as he walked away, then he got on with stripping the bed down as quickly as possible. And tried not to breathe in their mingled scents, even though it smelled pretty damn good and made him want to nestle into the sheets like a babe in a pouch.

_Focus, Barnes._

Bucky bundled the dirty sheets together and took them straight to the machine. Once they were safely inside the washer dryer, he closed the door and sighed in relief.

That was the worst of the scent out of the way.

He set the load to wash, and went back to put clean sheets on Steve's bed.

And tried really hard not to think about staying just one more night. It couldn't hurt, right?

Wrong.

The longer he dragged this out, the more awkward it would get. Steve was a good guy who didn't deserve to be kept hanging, so the quicker Bucky talked to him about it all, the better.

~

Steve showered lazily, smiling to himself under the spray of water. He felt sated and excited all at once, which was a feeling he hadn't felt this acutely for a long time. Not since the war, not since...Peggy.

Steve's heart felt a little heavier whenever he thought about Peggy, about the life with her he'd missed out on.

He was pleased that Peggy had married and had a life after him, of course she'd deserved that. Steve hoped he could find the same.

Truthfully, it was all he'd ever wanted, to feel _important_ to someone. When no one had wanted him, Steve had placed all his hopes and ambitions with the army instead. They'd thought he was important, and his unit certainly had.

So had Peggy.

Now they were all gone, and the army wasn't the same, not for Steve. SHIELD wasn't ideal for him either; it was all covert ops and working undercover. Not exactly what Steve had had in mind. The alien invasion with Loki had at least seemed more clear cut, as awful and upsetting as it was.

Steve wasn't sure of his place in this world any more, hadn't felt like he'd fit in.
Not until he'd met Bucky, and welcomed the omega into his home.

Bucky had made it a home, and in the short time he'd been there he'd helped Steve feel like he was supposed to be here after all.

Steve smiled to himself again, giddy with excitement. He'd have to try and play it cool. Steve was under no illusion that Bucky was so much more worldly than him, and he probably seemed like a real clot in comparison.

Maybe he could Google how to woo a modern guy?

He could sure use the help.

Steve got out of the shower, towelled off and fixed his hair in the bathroom mirror. He fussed a bit more than usual, feeling nervous. He tried giving himself a pep talk.

*Come on, Rogers. Step up to the challenge.*

He breathed in, puffing out his chest as he looked at himself in the mirror. He noticed the small bruises on his neck, which were already fading to beige. They'd be gone soon, and Steve frowned at that.

He kinda hoped Bucky would make more later.

Next, he shaved carefully, then applied his aftershave and his deodorant. There wasn't much else for him to do, and he figured he couldn't hide out in the bathroom all morning.

Steve wrapped a dry towel around his hips, and slowly walked to his bedroom.

Bucky wasn't there, and Steve felt a little stab of disappointment. But the bed was made with clean sheets, and Steve could just make out the lingering smell of omega that hadn't been blown away by fresh air.

He went over to the window and closed it, because he'd rather have Bucky's scent in the room than anything else.

Then Steve got dressed, into sweats and a soft t-shirt. He wasn't sure what Bucky wanted to do today. Maybe go out for breakfast? Or stay in and snuggle on the couch?

Steve would be good with either.

When he went into the kitchen, Bucky was already making breakfast. He'd changed his clothes too, wearing sweats rolled up to the knees, and a tank top.

Steve's eyes roved over him hungrily as he approached. Even though Bucky had washed and put on clean clothes, Steve could still smell the heat under his skin. He smelled so good, and he looked even better standing in Steve's kitchen in bare feet and soft clothes, cooking breakfast.

Steve didn't think, he was so happy and overwhelmed that he moved to step in behind Bucky. He just wanted to be close to him.

But Bucky froze the moment he sensed Steve, and shot a look over his shoulder that seemed wary, his eyes wide.
Steve froze too, then cautiously stepped back.

He hadn't meant to startle Bucky, or invade his space. He thought...

Steve wasn't sure what he thought. A cold tendril of worry curled in his stomach.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "Uh, that... um, breakfast smells great."

Bucky was still tense, everything in his posture signalling defensive, just like when they'd met on the fire escape weeks ago.

Steve was so taken aback, he didn't know what to do.

"Uh, do you... can I help, or...?"

"It's fine," Bucky said, and began to relax, his shoulders easing down. "I'm nearly done."

"Okay." Steve nodded meekly.

Clearly he was in the way, so he headed over to the refrigerator and busied himself getting out fresh juice.

Maybe Steve had made some kind of faux pas? Or simply startled Bucky by mistake?

He really wasn't sure.

To be fair, Steve had never had a morning after with a guy before. Any encounters he'd had with men had been brief and fleeting, and not talked about after.

He should really get his phone and Google this. It was just... He'd thought things were different between guys now?

Or maybe some things never changed, he thought.

Steve set out the orange juice and placed two glasses on the table. The coffee was already brewing. He got out clean plates and cutlery, then after fumbling for a moment --and glancing at Bucky's back as he continued cooking-- Steve headed into the living area where he'd left his cell phone to charge.

He sat on the edge of the couch, which also smelled of Bucky now, and opened his phone.

Steve wanted to Google important questions about modern dating, but saw a text from Natasha so he opened that first.

*Want to set up that sparring session today? :)*

Steve frowned at the message. No, he didn't want to spar, he wanted to stay with Bucky.

He wrote back, *Sorry, today isn't good. Tomorrow?*

She didn't reply right away, so Steve opened Google, and with a quick glance over to the kitchen to make sure Bucky was occupied, he typed in the words *male omega*, and *woo*, then hit search.

The results were... not all that helpful. Dating sites were top of the list, and some questionable looking links that boasted omega porn.

No, no. That wasn't what he'd meant.
Steve went to the search bar again and typed in, *how to date an omega.*

This search brought up slightly better results. Steve skim-read, until one caught his eye and he clicked on *The Do's and Don'ts of Dating an Omega.*

The website it took him to had a list of Do's at the top of the page, but as soon as Steve read through them he realised that it was aimed at a male alpha dating a female omega.

That wasn't helpful either.

Was it?

Steve scrolled through the list again and read, *your omega will like it if you make decisions for her...*

Steve frowned.

No, this wasn't helpful at all.

He closed the browser window and stared at his home screen for a long moment.

*Now what?*

"Steve?" Bucky called out. "It's ready if you're hungry?"

Steve inhaled steadily, then pocketed his phone and stood up. "You bet," he replied, trying inject some cheer into his voice.

Maybe things would be better after breakfast.

They ate together at the table. Bucky had cooked a full breakfast with bacon, poached eggs, and French toast. Coffee and orange juice already on the table.

Steve was hungry, and he dug in. Bucky ate too, but not as much. He seemed tense, picking at his food.

Steve's appetite waned before he could finish his plate. He kept wondering what he'd done wrong, or if he was *not* doing something he should have done.

His attempts at small talk were met, but not with much enthusiasm. Bucky was definitely quiet this morning.

Steve didn't know what to say.

"You all done?" Bucky asked, rising from his chair.

Steve figured he was. His stomach felt small from nerves anyway, so he wouldn't be eating much right now.

"Yeah, it was great. Thank you."

Bucky nodded, and started to clear the table, taking the used plates to the sink. Steve wanted to help, but Bucky seemed tense and in a hurry about it, and Steve wondered if he'd only get in the way again. He sat in his chair at a loss, trying to think of something to say that would lighten the mood.
"I'm going out today," Bucky announced suddenly. He rinsed the dirty plates off at the sink. "Going to view a room with my friend."

Steve's stomach dropped, and he stared at Bucky's back in surprise.

"Oh? Okay... do you want a lift there?"

"No, I'll be fine," Bucky said. "Thanks, though."

Steve blinked, and a heavy feeling began to weigh on him. "Okay," he said, speaking with a calmness he didn't feel. "Anywhere nice?"

Bucky huffed lightly. "No, but it's affordable."

"Right." Steve nodded along. Bucky wanted to leave, that was only too clear now.

Well, what had Steve expected? A man needed his own space. Bucky wasn't going to just... move in with him now, was he?

Even if that was exactly what Steve had wanted.

Don't panic, he told himself, you could still ask to see him. Ask him out properly on a date... or however it's done.

"Let me know if you want any help with it," Steve said.

Bucky paused in his dish washing to look over his shoulder, an almost wary look on his face. "Uh... sure..."

He turned back to the sink and finished the washing up hurriedly.

A rising apprehension had spiked in his scent, and as soon as Steve smelled it he frowned to himself. Okay, whatever was going on, something was making Bucky nervous.

Steve decided to give him some space, to not be the kind of alpha who lurked. "I'll... just be on the couch," he said, then got up to go.

It's fine, he told himself. Bucky got jumpy sometimes, maybe he was just nervous this morning.

Steve headed back to the living area and turned the TV on. A bit of white noise, some daytime soap opera, was exactly what they needed right now.

He sat on one end of the couch, which would give plenty of room for Bucky if he decided to join him, and got out his phone.

Natasha had replied, agreeing to their sparring session tomorrow and said she'd pick him up eight AM at his place.

Steve wondered what he'd be doing at that time tomorrow morning, and felt thankful that he'd had the chance to lay in bed with Bucky today.

It was nearly nine AM now, and Steve wasn't sure if he should go for his morning run or not. Maybe he'd wait until Bucky had left, then he'd have to occupy himself anyway.

Steve checked through some news sites idly, and wished Bucky wasn't going out.
After he'd finished in the kitchen, Bucky headed straight to the bathroom. He didn't say anything, and Steve tried to look engrossed with his phone, and not at all like he was waiting for the omega to join him.

When Bucky reappeared, he was fully dressed in jeans, boots, and jacket, with a light scarf around his neck. His hair was loose now, and as he hovered near the couch, Steve couldn't help but look at him longingly.

"You're going now?"

"Yeah." Bucky wouldn't look at him directly, and was holding his bag in one hand. "Uh... Steve, we should... we should probably talk about last night."

Steve felt his body tense up, but forced himself to stay still, calm.

"Okay?"

"It's just, I... um. Look, this was all good, but... I know I should've said this before, but you know what it's like in the heat of the moment..." His voice hitched, and he cleared his throat before continuing. "I'm... I'm not really looking for anything, uh, you know, serious right now. It's just, I got a lot of stuff going on and... this isn't a great time for me."

Oh.

Steve felt disappointed, but honestly he'd half expected this.

"Okay," he said, projecting calm. "Bucky, it's okay. I understand."

Bucky looked up at him in surprise. "You... you do?"

"Yeah, sure. It's okay, just... do what you need to do. How about when you have some time, I can take you out for dinner?"

Bucky stared back at him like he'd grown a second head.

"Or coffee?" Steve amended quickly. "Is coffee better? Whatever you want."

Bucky was still staring at him, and his expression shifted from confusion to something darker. He glared at Steve, and his scent spiked with anger.

"I don't do dinner," he bit out, "I'm not that kind of person."

Shit, Steve thought.

He knew he'd fucked up. He wasn't sure how he'd done it, but he'd fucked up. He watched Bucky turn on his heel and stomp to the door, and he quickly got up to follow him.

"Bucky," he pleaded, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean... Please, Bucky."

"Just back off, Steve!" Bucky raised his voice, and Steve stilled.

He watched Bucky open the door and storm out, watched the door shut behind him. The scent Bucky left behind was full of panic.
Steve had no idea what he'd done to upset him so much, or make him afraid.

Unless...

Maybe Bucky didn't want to be with a man? Steve hadn't asked, he'd just assumed.

Maybe that was it?

Steve looked down at the floor and flared his nostrils, scenting the air around him. He couldn't work it out from the jumble of scents.

He really didn't understand what had just happened.
Bucky knocked and knocked on Cassandra's door, and when it opened a waft of thick marijuana smoke greeted his nostrils. He coughed, using his hand to wave the smoke back.

Cass stood there in leopard print leggings, a busty top, and a full face of make-up but no wig, her natural hair curly and short. She had a joint in her hand, and beckoned Bucky inside.

"You're early!" she accused, kicking the door shut after him.

Bucky heard thumps and shouts coming from the neighbors next door, which was either very enthusiastic sex or something not as pleasant.

He followed Cass into her shoe-box apartment to the tiny living room. The TV was on loud, and thankfully drowned out the sounds of the neighbors.

Bucky glanced at the TV as they sat on the couch. It was some reality show or other. "Caught you red-handed watching this garbage though."

Cass took a drag on the joint, and offered it to Bucky. "Smoke this and get off your high horse, boy," she managed to say while holding in a lungful of air.

Bucky shook his head, passing on the joint. "Nah, I'm good."

He already felt shaken after his confrontation with Steve that morning, he didn't need to feel jittery from smoking weed too.
Steve had sent a text not long after Bucky had left, saying, *I'm sorry for upsetting you, can we talk?*

The simple plea had only made Bucky more frustrated, and he couldn't reply. Instead he'd stewed silently for the whole hour long subway ride, and by the time he'd got off in the Bronx he just felt grouchy and fed up with himself.

He sighed, sinking back into the couch cushions.

"All right. Your loss." Cass kept the joint and kicked her feet up on the stained coffee table. "It's good shit."

"Yeah, Cass, I'm right here, I can smell it," he grumbled. "I'll probably get high just sitting next to you."

Cass laughed. "Well, in that case..." She set about rolling the next joint.

Bucky watched, frowning. "Uh... I thought we were gonna see that room your friend has?"

"It's not even midday," she pointed out. "Where's the fire?"

Bucky shrugged. He didn't want to say why he was in a rush. He was anxious to find somewhere else to stay, and preferably today.

After Cass had smoked joint number two, and they'd both watched a full episode of The Omegas of Beverly Hills, or whatever the fuck it was, Bucky didn't feel grouchy any more, he felt calm and relaxed.

Probably from all the second hand smoke.

He got his phone out and saw Steve had sent him another text.

*I'm sorry I messed up. Hope you're okay?*

Bucky stared at the message, words blurring a little. He set about typing a reply.

*I'm sorry for yelling at you, he wrote, I'm an asshole. Just ignore me.*

He sent the message, as that was about all he was capable of communicating right now.

If he talked about it any more, he'd let slip how much it hurt that he *couldn't be* that clean cut, wholesome person who got taken out to dinner by nice alphas; the sort of person who didn't have problems or a rap sheet, or any of the other shit that Bucky had just learned to accept as his life.

It was fine, he could deal.

What he could *not* deal with was an alpha like Steve who didn't shout at Bucky or try to intimidate him, who was only patient and giving and sweet, and who kept getting all those hopeful looks on his face that Bucky didn't know what to do with.

He was no good for Steve. Last night had been a huge mistake, and Bucky knew he was a jerk for instigating it.

The last four days hiding out at Steve's had been a nice reprieve from real life, but now it was time to get back to it. The fairy tale had to evaporate at some point.
Bucky put his phone on silent, and slipped it away in his pocket.

~

Eventually they left Cass's apartment, and went downstairs to find her car. Cass couldn't remember where she'd parked, and was giggling about it because she was still stoned.

"Maybe I should drive," Bucky offered. He didn't have a license or anything, but he didn't really want to let Cass drive right now.

"If we ever find your fucking car," he added.

Cass snorted, pulling her faux fur coat around her against the chill air. "Someone's in alpha withdrawal," she replied.

Bucky tensed, and self consciously adjusted the scarf around his neck. He'd sweltered in Cass's apartment because he was too embarrassed to take it off and expose the bite marks.

"No," he snapped back, which was probably a lie. He'd gone into heat with Steve, there was no denying that, and instead of staying with the alpha and being near him, Bucky had gone off on his own because he was scared.

But he couldn't admit that.

"I think you are," Cass sing-songed.

Bucky rolled his eyes. He was not going to get into it. "Look, Cassandra, let's just find your car, okay? Or get the subway, I don't care. I don't want to be walking around out here all fucking day, waiting for someone to mug us."

"Tetchy," she said. "Oh, wait, is this the street?" She wandered around the corner, and Bucky prayed they wouldn't run into any alphas on the prowl today. That was the absolute last thing he needed.

Miraculously, Cass spotted her car. When she tried to get in, Bucky asked to drive, and she gave him the keys.

"I gotta put my wig on," she said, getting in the passenger side.

"Fine." Bucky got in the driver side and sat. He didn't start the engine because Cass was using the mirror to check her hair, pulling a sleek golden-brown bob into place and combing the bangs.

Bucky pinched at the bridge of his nose, waiting it out.

"What's the matter?" Cass asked, side-eyeing him. "Didn't get much sleeeeeep?"

Bucky thumped his head back against the headrest. "I slept fine."

"Mm hmm. Y'know, I can smell alpha all over you, Jamie, boy. Can't wait to see what your neck looks like."

"Oh, my God," Bucky groaned, as Cass laughed to herself. "Can we please just go already?"
"Fine, be a grouch." She tilted the mirror back into place. "Head down to Queens."

Bucky turned the key and the old rust bucket rumbled to life.

"It's a half hour drive," Cass piped up, "plenty of time to tell me all about him. Was his knot huge?"

Bucky almost stalled the car. "Cass, shut up, would you? I gotta focus here." He carefully manoeuvred the car out of the parking space, barely avoiding scratching another car's bumper.

Once they'd safely pulled out into the street, Cass said, "Too distracted thinking about his knot?"

"No," Bucky lied.

Okay, yes, he totally was.

"Was he good?" Cass probed.

Bucky put his foot down and drove faster. "I don't want to talk about it."


"Yep," Bucky agreed. "That's right. No fun. Now put on the radio and let me concentrate. I don't know where the fuck I'm going."

"Keep your hair on, baby boy. I'll get a map." Cass got out her phone, not an old one like Bucky's but a smartphone with apps and internet.

Cass earned way more money than him so she could afford things, but she worked places other than the spa.

Bucky should probably start looking for more work too, it was just... He liked the spa because he only had to do hand jobs most times. He really needed more money though, if he wanted to stand on his own feet again.

He was just getting real sick of working so hard all the time.

"Okay," Cass said, "I'll give you directions. Dom's place is in Whitestone."

"Dom?" Bucky repeated.

"Dominic," Cass said. "He's a cool guy. You'll like him."

Bucky frowned to himself. He didn't want to like anyone. He'd rather just live alone for a while and not have anyone breathing down his neck or expecting things from him.

But obviously he couldn't afford that luxury.

"Oh, I meant to tell you," Cass said, "the old bitch mentioned there's a room going at that other spa she runs."

Bucky knew she meant the omega who owned the spa, who none of them were particularly fond of.

"I don't think I wanna risk that," he replied.

Crashing on the premises of an illegitimate business wouldn't help him much, especially if they got raided or anything.
"Well, then, hopefully you like Dom's room," Cass said. "What's that saying? Don't look a gift horse..."

Bucky hmmed in reply but he had a bad feeling about this.

When they got to Dom's place in Queens, Bucky was surprised that it was actually a house, not an apartment.

As soon as they stepped in the door, Bucky realised it was a brothel.

Dominic, an alpha, greeted them. He was good looking and charming, but clearly worked out and had a strong alpha scent. He wasn't as tall as Bucky, or Cassandra in her platforms, but Bucky felt wary all the same.

Alphas in their home environment could turn real domineering in a split second. Bucky had enough experience of that.

The house itself was clean and obviously well kept. Nothing about it would give it away as anything but a domestic home to most people, but Bucky read the signs. Two busty blonde omegas were in the living room, dressed in skimpy clothes and wearing high heels as they lounged on the couch.

No one else was in sight, but Bucky heard muffled sounds from upstairs over the chatter from the TV, and picked up on the mingled alpha and omega scents everywhere.

Bucky really didn't want to live in a brothel. He'd done it before and he'd never felt safe, not with alphas coming and going all the time, and a resident alpha pimp prowling around.

Dominic seemed an okay guy, and he definitely seemed interested in Bucky if the standing close enough to scent him was anything to go by, but Bucky only smiled blandly and said he'd think about it.

He didn't want the room. He didn't want to live with an alpha right now.

Especially if it wasn't Steve.

Fuck it.

As they left, with Dominic trying to get them to stay for a drink, Bucky hurried to Cass's car. She followed after, waving back at Dom as he lurked menacingly in his doorway.

Cass walked around the driver's side, shooting daggers at Bucky. "What the fuck," she hissed at him as they got inside and shut the doors.

"I'm sorry," Bucky mumbled as she started the car. "Can we just get out of here?"

Cass sighed, and drove them out onto the street. "Wanna get some lunch?"

Bucky couldn't afford lunch, and he was brimming with anxiety. "Would you drop me off at the spa? I'm gonna try pick up an extra shift."

Cass glanced at him as she drove, but thankfully didn't comment on his need to be somewhere familiar.
"Okay, honey, I'll drive you in. Why don't we get a sandwich from the deli? That old alpha likes me, I'm sure I can get us freebies."

Bucky smiled, but shook his head. "You don't need to do that, Cass."

"I don't give a shit," she declared, "I'll jerk him off for free subs any day."

"I'm not that hungry," Bucky insisted, which was mostly true. His stomach was all twisted up with nerves.

"Okay, fine. Spoil my fun."

"Sorry, I guess?"

Cass drove them over to the spa and parked around the block.

"I'm not on until six," Cass said, locking her car. "I'm gonna go meet a friend for coffee. Sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm good." Bucky gave her a quick hug. "Thanks though. I'll see you later."

"Sure, honey." She touched his cheek as she smiled at him. "Be safe, and eat some lunch. Do it for me."

"Okay. See you later." Bucky waved her off, watching her totter away in her platforms down the street. Cass was like a big sister, the friendliest omega at the spa.

The others, Bucky could take or leave.

He walked down the block, trying not to think about his limited options and how he kept shooting himself in the foot all the time.

When he went in the side door, the familiar smell of the spa and its scents calmed him a little. If he was anxious, he just wanted to be somewhere safe and familiar.

Bucky went upstairs, and when he got to the first floor he saw that most of the room's doors were shut. That meant client sessions were in progress.

He headed down the hall to the dressing room, and figured he'd text Duane, the manager, to ask about extra shifts today.

She'd be downstairs on the shop floor, where the manicures and pedicures were set up, providing a false front to the spa.

All the massages and extras took place upstairs.

Bucky wasn't allowed downstairs, because he drew too much attention as a male omega. People smelled him and assumed he was only there for one thing. It was like that everywhere he went.

Bucky found the dressing room empty, and he breathed a sigh of relief. This was what he needed right now, some peace and quiet.

He got out his phone and saw there were more texts from Steve.

*Shit.*
Bucky felt warm, so he went over to the window and opened it, then sat down on the small bench beside it. He set his bag down and read through his messages.

_You're not an asshole, Bucky. Whatever I did to upset you I'm really sorry. If you tell me what it was I promise not to do it again. Please?_

Seriously, this guy.

Bucky figured Steve didn't realise what the issue was. Bucky didn't belong with him; Steve was perfect, and Bucky was a mess.

He could just picture it in his mind, being Captain America's omega; charity balls, gala dinners, or... whatever it was these rich and famous people got up to.

That's what Iron Man was always doing, right? Socialite stuff in designer suits, drinking champagne, small talk with rich people. Bucky didn't know how much of that Steve did, but surely he did _some_. Didn't he say he was starting up an organisation to give food to poor people?

Where would Bucky fit into that? No one would ever expect to see a male omega on Steve's arm. Bucky was used to lurking out of sight, staying behind closed doors. Take the back door, never the front. Don't draw too much attention and don't expect too much.

That was his life, that was just how things were.

Steve's offer of going out to dinner had just set him off, that was all. The thought of them going to a restaurant or something, and dealing with the repercussions? Bucky couldn't handle that sort of pressure. The only times he'd been out to dinner was with his pimp, in greasy old diners, and while he was working.

Steve had no idea, and he'd be much better off finding himself someone _normal_.

Bucky stared at his phone. He didn't know what to say, didn't want to get into it. He tried to type back a reply, _it's not you it's me_, but that sounded trite so he deleted it.

What should he say? That they could have a secret relationship, but that was it? Steve would want more than that, and he deserved the whole package. A wife, or a husband, whatever floated his boat. And kids or a dog, a _home_.

Bucky huffed, and tried again. _I need space right now. I'm really not good at this stuff. I'm sorry._

He sent the message, and gazed out the window.

Fuck this shit, he thought. Why couldn't he have been a beta or something?

A car braking hard below the window caught his attention. Bucky leaned over to look, saw an unmarked car had parked illegally outside the spa. Men in suits got out, slamming doors shut and stomping up the the spa's front door.

_What the fuck?_

Panic shot through him. He grabbed his things and hurried to the door, poking his head out onto the landing. Downstairs he heard raised voices and the commanding timbre of an alpha barking orders.

_Cops._

They were getting fucking raided.
Bucky looked about in panic. He had to get out of here, and going up was the best route to escape.

He ran to the room where the fire escape was and barged inside.

"Hey!" The omega doing a back massage shouted at him, while some naked beta on the table glanced up.

"Cops," Bucky hissed, and went to the window. He pulled it up, hooked his bag onto his back, and looked outside.

It was clear, just the street, parked cars, and the block opposite.

"What?" The omega said, still standing there half dressed. "Where?"

"Downstairs," Bucky told her, before slipping through the window.

He couldn't hang around. He couldn't afford to get arrested again, not with his record.

Bucky climbed up the fire escape, two floors up to the roof. It was flat, quiet and dusty.

He wished he could hide up here, but he had to get clear of the block, and fast. He bent his knees and crept low, hurried to the side of the building. The street was quiet down below, which was a good sign; just regular traffic noises.

Bucky peered over the edge, but no one was about.

Good.

He checked the bricks at the edge with his hands, made sure none were loose, and when satisfied he crept back the way he'd come. His pulse was loud in his ears, and his heart had lodged itself into his throat.

He pushed down his panic, forced himself to take his time.

Just because he'd already scoped out this escape route, didn't mean he should rush it now. The building next to them was similar in height, and Bucky knew he could make it.

He just had to focus.

He clipped his backpack into place, securing it across his chest. His phone was zipped into his pocket, and he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

And another.

Okay, *now*.

He ran to the edge, eyes fixed on his take off point. He could make it, he was going to make it.

Bucky pushed off at the ledge, and jumped the gap. The alley below was a blur.

He came down again, and rolled his body so the momentum would propel him over the edge.

The gravelly concrete knocked the air out of him as he landed roughly. Bucky lay safely on the other roof for a moment, breathing hard.

He'd done it.
Halfway there.

"Get up, get up," he murmured.

He had to drag himself to his feet, brush some of the dust off. Now he just had to get down the residential fire escape.

He kept low, and headed over to the far side where the fire escape was.

When he peered over the edge this time, he started with surprise at someone smoking a cigarette one floor down.

Bucky ducked back and sat on the roof, waiting it out.

"Come on," he mouthed silently, panic spiking. If he didn't get the hell out of here soon, he'd leave a scent trail.

Hopefully no one would come up here looking for him; there'd be plenty of people in the spa distracting them.

Bucky peered over the edge again, willing the smoker to get the fuck inside.

Within seconds they did, and Bucky thanked whatever God was watching over him.

He hopped down onto the fire escape, took a deep breath, and walked down as casually as he could manage.

"It's cool," he murmured under his breath, "you can do this, don't panic..."

He went down two floors before someone opened their window.

"Hey," said a young beta, "what're you doing?"

"It's nothing, pal," Bucky said easily, "girlfriend locked me out. I'm gonna go buy her some flowers or some shit so she forgives me."

He didn't stop walking, and the beta didn't seem inclined to question him further.

Bucky picked up his pace a little. One more floor and he was home free.

There was an unmarked car parked by the building Bucky had run from; right at the back door to the spa.

No one was in it, and Bucky had to assume the cops had gone in that door as well, to stop anyone getting out.

He jumped down from the fire escape, landing on the ground with a thud.

Home free.

He headed away from the car, walked as casually as he could down the street. Just around the corner until he could get on the main street. The was a whole building between him and the cops now.

Bucky poked his head around to check before he turned the corner, but he couldn't see what was going on down the main street at the spa.
He just had to get away from the block. He turned the opposite way and walked, thankfully falling in between pedestrians and breathing hard in relief.

He kept expecting to feel a heavy hand land on his shoulder, for some cop to arrest him...

But it didn't happen.

Today was his lucky day, and every step he took was another step to freedom.

Bucky walked, until he got to the subway and only then paused to send Cass a warning text.

*Cops. Raid. Don't go into spa.*

Then he ducked into the subway and didn't look back.

Chapter End Notes

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Warnings in full, contain spoilers for chapter:

Bucky's friend Cassandra smokes a couple of joints in his presence. Bucky does not smoke directly.

Bucky's place of work is raided by cops, which he manages to avoid by going up to the roof and going on the run.

(With his little backpack clips on.)

He has no direct interaction with the cops in this chapter.

~
I need space right now. I'm really not good at this stuff. I'm sorry.

Steve stared at the text message, a sinking feeling in his gut.

Did Bucky mean he needed space for today, or did he mean he needed space permanently?

Steve inhaled shakily, and tapped out a reply. He needed to know.

I don't know what I did to upset you, can you please call me back so we can talk?

He sent the message, and stared at his screen waiting for a reply.

Steve got up and paced the room. He wanted to go find Bucky and straighten this all out.

Nearly ten minutes and no reply.

Steve swiped his screen and tapped on Bucky's name to call him, putting the phone to his ear.

It rang, but Bucky didn't pick up.

There was no voicemail option, the line just clicked off.

Steve tried again.

And again.

But still no answer.

"Dammit, Bucky," Steve cursed, tossing his phone to the couch. He marched to his bedroom to get his jacket and boots.

Steve rode his bike to Queens, pulse racing in his ears. His usual ability to stay calm and focused was slipping away, and he didn't like that feeling at all. He even ran a red light as he wove through traffic in a rush to get to the block where Bucky worked.

Steve parked around the corner from the spa, and pulled off his helmet. He had a ball cap and sunglasses in his jacket pocket, and he put both on.

He figured at some point, Bucky had to come to the spa. Steve would just wait for him, ask if they could talk.

This had to be some silly misunderstanding.

Except when Steve got closer, he realised there was something very wrong.
A black, unmarked van was parked outside the spa, with plain clothed detectives and uniformed police officers standing on the pavement and going in and out the door.

Steve froze, his eyes calculating the scene.

The cops had shut down the spa, that much was clear. They’d probably detained anyone they found, and would use that black van to transport them to the precinct.

The spa was an illegal business, Steve knew that, but if the cops had Bucky in there he was going to rip that van apart with his bare hands.

Steve set his jaw and made to step forward, the van in his sights.

A low whistle from behind caught his attention and he turned, hoping to see Bucky...

It wasn't Bucky.

Steve's heart sank, but the person beckoning to him from a doorway, a black woman in a fur coat, caught Steve's attention.

Maybe Bucky was with her?

Taking a quick look at the van again, Steve flared his nostrils in frustration before turning around and walking over to the woman.

She stood two doors up, in the entryway of a run down deli and holding a half eaten sub in her hand.

As Steve got closer he smelled her omega scent. He didn't recognise her, but she nodded at him like she knew who he was. Steve tensed a little, and if Bucky wasn't with her then he was going to run right back to that van and look for him.

"Hey, handsome," she greeted with a smile. "I wouldn't go down that way, the spa is, shall we say, closed for business. But I'm available."

"Uh, I was looking for my friend," Steve said. "They didn't arrest him did they?"

"No, honey, Jamie got away. Don't worry about him."

Steve frowned in confusion. "Uh, my friend is Bucky. Did he get away too?"

The woman raised her eyebrows slowly, like she thought Steve was a bit dense. "He gave you another name, huh? Well, we do that sometimes. Male omega, dark hair to here?" She touched a hand to her shoulder.

"Uh... yes? That sounds like Bucky."

"You drove him into work a few times on your loud, sexy motorbike?" She indicated up the street. "I heard you come in just now."

"I... yeah." Steve swallowed.

"Jamie?"

Was Bucky not his real name?

The woman looked at him closely, then reached out to touch his shoulder. "Come have a coffee with
me, handsome. Look like you could use it."

She led him inside the deli, past the counter and its sparse customers to a little table at the back. It was cold inside, Steve felt the chill but he didn't shiver.

The woman called for coffee across the counter, where an old male beta nodded in reply.

"Take a load off," she told Steve as she sat down on one of the chairs, waiting for him to sit opposite her. "I'm Cassandra. You can call me Cass."

"I'm Steve," he replied. "I'm sorry to be rude, but do you know where my friend is? I'm worried about him."

"No problem. And he's fine." Cassandra waved a well-manicured hand, and set her sandwich on the table. "He didn't tell me where he went, but he sent me a message..." She pulled a phone from her pocket and tapped on the screen.

Steve waited on the edge of his seat, tensing when they were interrupted by the beta bringing over their coffees.

"Here ya go, Cass," he gruffed, setting down two paper cups of black coffee, along with a small cup of milk.

"Thanks, sugar." Cassandra flashed a smile in his direction. "I'll talk to you in a bit, okay? I'm just in the middle of something."

"Yeah, yeah," the beta said, glancing once at Steve before turning to go. "I know how it is."

Cassandra rolled her eyes, then looked to Steve. "It ain't the Ritz, but we're safe in here."

Steve nodded, waiting while she found what she was looking for on her phone.

"Here," she said, voice low, "after Jamie told me not to come in today, I asked him where he was and if he was okay. He said he was fine."

She turned the screen to show Steve, and he read the brief message that Bucky had supposedly sent to her.

*I'm okay. Gonna lay low for a bit. Take care you."

"I was only up the block," Cassandra went on. "Glad I missed that shit show, I can tell you that. Came straight down here to check it out, from a respectable distance, of course."

"Cassandra--"

"Call me Cass, hon."

"Cass. Would you mind..." Steve flushed, but he had to ask. He took a deep breath. "Please. Can you call him for me? I'm really worried."

Cass held her phone close and gave Steve a considering look. She looked like Natasha, Steve thought, the guarded but cool way she gave him the once over.

"He seemed pretty grouchy earlier," she said, and Steve heard the accusation in her voice.

"Yes," Steve replied, "he was. I don't know why."
Cass watched him, and for a moment Steve thought she would say no, but she sighed lightly and started tapping out a message.

"I wouldn't do this for just anyone," she said pointedly. After she'd sent her message she set her phone down, picked up her coffee and fixed Steve with a look. "What kind of set up did you two have anyway?"

"Set up?"

Cass raised her eyebrows, clearly not believing him. "You're his new sugar daddy, right?"

"What?" Steve stared at her in shock. "No. That's not... No. Bucky is my neighbor, I just... we just... I..."

Steve's face felt hot. He hoped he wasn't blushing.

From the grin that spread across Cass's face, Steve feared she could read him like a book.

"Ohhh." She chuckled in delight. "Oh, I see how it is. You two got personal."

Steve wasn't sure what to say. He'd never felt more awkward in his life.

"Look, I just... I just want to know he's okay. He was pretty upset when he left, and now this thing with the spa. I'm really worried."

"Okay, big guy." Cass checked her phone. "He hasn't replied yet."

"Can you call him? Please?"

She looked at him, brown eyes assessing him once more. Steve met her gaze, praying she'd help him. He didn't know what else to do.

Cass exhaled sharply. "Okay, okay." She tapped her phone, then got up from her chair. "You wait here, hot shot."

Steve watched her walk through the deli, heels clipping over the floor. She'd taken her purse with her, so Steve watched closely in case she bolted.

But she stood just outside, in front of the glass window. She tucked her phone under her bobbed hair and held still, presumably waiting as she called Bucky.

Steve watched with bated breath, but after a few seconds Cass brought the phone down and tapped the screen again.

She set the phone at her ear and waited.

Steve felt disappointment set in. Not only was Bucky not answering his calls, but he wasn't answering his friend's either.

Cass appeared to try a third time before she gave up, and came back inside the deli.

"He ain't picking up, honey," she said, sitting down. "I can let him know you asked after him. Better give him a day or two to cool off."

"But he can't just--" Steve stopped himself.
He didn't want to share his personal problems with a stranger. He already felt ashamed and rejected, and he didn't need pity on top of that.

"Thank you for trying," he forced himself to say. "So you think... he'll come back?"

Cass shrugged. "Last he told me, said he had a sweet apartment all to himself. That's all I know, sugar."

"Oh." Steve realised she meant the apartment Bucky had been sitting, before those thugs had broken in.

Bucky hadn't seemed keen to go back in there, but maybe now he would? And Steve could apologise for whatever it was he'd done.

"Yeah, you're right," Steve said decidedly. "He can go back to his apartment. If you speak to him, please tell him if he needs anything he knows where I am."

Cass nodded slowly. "I can do that."

"Thank you. Um. Are you okay?" Steve asked, suddenly remembering his manners. "You just lost your job? Will be you all right?"

"Ain't you something." Cass seemed amused. "I'm all set, sugar. But," she leaned in over the table, "if you want some company..."

"Oh." Steve sat up straight in surprise. "No, I didn't mean... that is, thank you, but no thank you. I just want to find Bucky."

"You mean Jamie?" she teased.

Steve felt foolish. "If that's his name, then sure. I just want to know he's okay."

"He's a tough kid," Cass smiled, "he'll be fine. I'm sure he'll come back once he's cooled off. Probably hormones. You know how it is."

"Um. Okay?" Steve didn't really understand, but often heard people make comments about omegas and their out of control hormones. "Can I give you my number just in case?"

"Sure. Why not?" Cass tapped on her phone then offered it to Steve, so he could enter in his details.

"Thanks again." Steve gave her back her phone, got his wallet out and left a ten on the table for the coffee, which should more than cover the tab. "I'd better go. See you."

"Bye, handsome," she said as he got up. "And don't worry so much. White skin wrinkles easy, you know."

Steve blinked in surprise, then smiled. "Right. Thanks." He gave a little wave goodbye, feeling awkward. He ducked his head down and slipped out of the deli, feeling like everyone's eyes were on him.

Out on the street Steve looked toward the spa, and saw that the police van was now gone.
Steve went to his gym in Red Hook, because there was a quiet back room they let him use where he wouldn't get so many people gawking at him when he worked out.

He beat the stuffing out of a punching bag, working through his frustration. Then he strung up a new bag and did it all over again.

Why was Bucky avoiding him?

Steve couldn't figure it out. Last night had been incredible, the most amazing sex Steve had ever had, and Bucky had been the one to initiate it.

Had Bucky only wanted a one time thing? Was that why he'd said he needed space?

That had to be it. He'd probably sensed Steve's over eagerness that morning, and it had annoyed him.

Well, more than annoyed. Bucky's scent had been so fearful, like he was afraid of Steve. Maybe he'd thought Steve wouldn't take rejection well.

Steve jabbed at the punch bag.

Bucky was wrong, Steve had faced rejection before. He'd faced it all his life. So much in fact that he'd stopped bothering to get his hopes up long ago.

Even when he'd met Peggy, Steve had played it cautiously, convinced she would lose interest in him sooner or later.

Steve stilled, the bag spinning in front of him until he caught it in his hands. He breathed hard, stared at the bag unseeing.

Looked like Peggy was still the only person in Steve's life who hadn't lost interest in him. And he'd gone and left her, hadn't he. He'd left her in 1945, and here he was on his own again.

Steve turned away from the bag, and began unwrapping his hands. He headed to the showers and checked his phone the first chance he got.

Still no word from Bucky.

Steve hoped he'd hear back from him by the end of the day.

~

Steve got home that evening to a dark, empty apartment.

He switched on the lights, placed his take-out on the kitchen table, and tried not to feel crushed.

He sat on his couch and tapped out a message to Cassandra.
Hey, it's Steve. Did you hear back from Bucky?

He was about to set his phone down when he added a quick amendment, I mean, Jamie.

Then he sat back and waited.

A few minutes passed before Cass replied. Hey, handsome! Yeah, he's fine.

Steve stared at the message. Was that it? He needed more than that.

He wrote back, Is he going to call me?
Cassandra's reply was quick. I'm not sure, hon. He told me to quit bugging him :( I told you he was grouchy!

Steve inhaled deeply, and tapped out a final reply.

Okay, thanks.

Then he set his phone aside and looked down at his hands in thought.

Bucky wasn't calling back by his own choice, that much was clear.

Now Steve just had to accept it.

He ate on his own, and chose a nature documentary to watch. Which was fine until it wasn't; watching a mother blue whale try to protect her calf from a pod of killer whales got to be too much for Steve, so he switched channels to find something else.

That show Friends was on.

Steve didn't feel like watching it without Bucky, so he switched channels again.

He found a documentary about ancient Egyptian pyramids, so he stuck with that and let the presenter's flat monotone wash over him.

Steve didn't know what to do with himself.

By eleven PM with no sign of Bucky, Steve opened the window and climbed outside onto the fire escape. He checked the alley below but no one was around, just distant noises from the street filtering up.

Steve climbed to the next floor, but the apartment above was dark and quiet.

And more tellingly, no scent.

He peered in at the window anyway, but nobody was in there. Disappointed, Steve climbed back down and into his own apartment.

He still didn't know what to do. He felt restless, but he didn't want to leave in case Bucky returned.

Steve parked himself on the couch again, half expecting to hear a tap at the window, or for his buzzer to go.
At one AM, Steve left the lights on and went to his bedroom. He'd been avoiding this, knowing Bucky's scent still lingered here. It'd been teasing him since he got home, almost like Bucky was there with him.

But he wasn't, and the faint scent of the omega was just as frustrating as it was comforting.

Steve undressed and got into bed, sliding between the clean sheets Bucky had put on that morning.

Had he known then that he wanted to leave? Had he planned it?

Bucky sure had been eager to clear the room of scent, Steve had noticed but assumed it was because Bucky was so clean and tidy.

Steve laid on his side and pulled a pillow close to his chest. His phone was on the nightstand beside him, so he would hear any message that came through. Steve stared at it for a long time, willing it to make a sound.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling instead, but the damn phone remained silent.

Eventually daylight crept in through the drapes as morning arrived. Steve had barely slept a wink. The numbness he'd felt most of yesterday gave way to anger, but he tried to quash it.

Feeling angry never helped, unless he channelled it somewhere useful.

Natasha was picking him up soon, so hopefully Steve could focus on something other than Bucky.

~

Natasha must've sensed his mood, as she kept small talk to a minimum. After that one invasive question about his omega, and Steve shutting her down firmly, she didn't mention it again.

They sparred in a private, empty gym downtown. Steve didn't know if it was SHIELD owned or not, and right then he didn't much care.

It felt good to spar with Natasha. She didn't give him any quarter, and he had to think on his feet in order not to get shocked by any of her Widow's bites. He'd commented how it was a little unfair she was suited up and armed, yet he was without his shield.

Natasha merely replied, "Not all fights will be fair, Rogers."

He nodded in agreement.

Never a truer statement made, he supposed.

They sparred for a few hours before breaking for lunch. Natasha ordered in fresh sandwiches; four for Steve, one for her.

"I don't need quite that many," he informed her, starting on his first one.

She shrugged, peeling the paper off her chicken wrap. "Fury will probably call us in this week," she
mentioned.

Steve swallowed his mouthful. "Oh? Why's that?"

"He has something up his sleeve," Natasha answered cryptically.

She was smiling, but Steve couldn't decipher what she meant.

"Nat, if you know what it is, tell me."

She raised an eyebrow at his tone. "It's a job offer, and it'll mean the two of us working together more often. Think you can handle that?"

Steve nodded. "Guess we'll wait and see what he says."

~

Fury did indeed make an offer at the end of the week.

Steve had spent a fretful three days and nights worrying about Bucky, who still hadn't replied to him or called him back.

Which was fine, Bucky was an adult and he could do what he wanted. But that didn't stop Steve from feeling angry about being ditched without explanation.

So when he sat in Fury's Manhattan office with Natasha, Steve admittedly wasn't giving the meeting his full attention.

"I'm headed back to D.C.," Fury told them, then looked directly at Steve. "I have an elite strike team that needs strong leadership. Thought you might be interested."

Steve nodded absently. "Send me your proposal and I'll think it over."

This got a reaction from Fury, a minute eyebrow raise.

"Okay," he said evenly, "but I'd strongly suggest making the move. This could prove a very useful stepping stone for you, Captain."

Steve nodded, not really taking it in.

Not until Fury added, "Agent Romanov will be working with you. Agent Barton also."

Steve turned a questioning look to Natasha. "Clint will work with us?"

She tilted her head. "Now and again. He's a sniper."

"Right."

It would be good to work with both Clint and Natasha together, Steve thought. Natasha seemed warmer when Clint was around. On her own, Steve was still learning how to read her.
They wrapped up the meeting, and Steve did take it under consideration.

It took another week for it to properly sink in. Natasha had gone to D.C. already, and Steve's assignments suddenly dried up, which must've been Fury's doing.

Steve was left kicking about in New York --the modern New York-- on his own, with nothing to do and no one to talk to.

Bucky hadn't replied, he hadn't come back to the apartment either.

Steve read over the proposal again, and finally made the decision to call Fury.

"Yes, Captain?" The director's voice asked smoothly.

"I'd like to accept your offer," Steve told him. "I'll see you in D.C."

Chapter End Notes

~

There is a rebloggable post on tumblr for this fic.
Sixteen months later

Steve was doing okay, all things considered.

SHIELD was... well, it was a mess, and his relocation to D.C. had proven to be a waste of his time, but he'd stopped Pierce, and taken down most of his corrupt organisation with the help of Nat, Sam, and Maria.

Fury was alive but in hiding, and now Steve was back in New York again.

Nat had insisted they grab burgers in her favorite diner to celebrate Maria's acceptance into Stark Industries.

And really it was a celebration for all of them; the beginning of something new. Steve had reconnected with Stark and the other Avengers. They'd talked things over, and had agreed to work together for the time being, based in Stark Tower.

It was the safest place for all of them to be right now.

And now he had Sam too, Steve felt like his life was finally taking on some meaning again.
"I'd like to make a toast," Sam announced, lifting his glass of soda.

Steve lifted his own glass, smiling easily at Sam.

"To Maria," Sam said, clinking his glass against hers. "Congrats on the new job."

"And to joining the team," Natasha added, offering her glass.

They shared in the toast, smiling at each other across the small table.

"Here's to less Nazis." Steve raised his glass again, and the others raised theirs.

"I'll drink to that," Sam agreed.

After the toast they got back to their burgers and fries, catching up with small talk.

A few minutes later Natasha's phone pinged, and Steve looked up just in time to see her roll her eyes and put down her curly fries.

"Message from Stark. Apparently there's a very delicate matter happening back at the tower that needs all of our attention."

Sam grunted, as Steve shared a look with Maria.

"Any ideas?" Steve asked.

Maria shrugged. "Beats me. He was happily tinkering away in the lab with Banner last I saw."

"Is he serious?" Sam asked. "I'm halfway through my burger here."

"He just sent another text," Natasha said, checking her phone. "It's a series of exclamation points. Guess we'd better go."

"Man..." Sam wiped his mouth on a napkin but wrapped up his burger to go.

Steve wrapped his burger too. They'd just have to eat on the short walk back.

They headed back to the tower together, which had been Steve's and Sam's makeshift home since they'd left D.C. two weeks ago.

The public reception was around the other side of the building, but they'd quickly got into the habit of using the service entrance around back.

There were paparazzi waiting on the sidewalk even here, camera flashes going off anytime someone came or went.

"I hate that these guys wait around to take pictures of us," Steve said quietly, stepping up to the body scanner inside the atrium, which was run by JARVIS. He also greeted the personal security staff each by name as he waited to be scanned.

"I know, man," Sam agreed, stepping to the second scanner. "Downside of being in Captain America's entourage. Hey, next time I'll fly us from out the roof, how does that sound?"
Steve grinned, as the voice of JARVIS greeted them.

"Welcome Captain Rogers, Mister Wilson. You are clear to enter."

"Thanks, Jarvis." Steve walked on toward the elevators, Sam falling into step beside him.

"Should we wait for Nat and Maria?" Sam asked, glancing back to the entrance.

Steve pushed the button for the elevator that served the top part of the tower only; what Tony was now calling Avengers Tower.

"Ten bucks says they're already up there," Steve said.

"Oh, no, don't make me bet against them!" Sam laughed. He held out his hand anyway, waited for Steve to shake on it.

Steve clasped his hand and grinned.

He enjoyed this closeness with Sam, all the little extra touches. Sam was a beta and as soon as they'd met, Steve knew he'd wanted to be friends with him.

Sam was loyal, witty, kind, and not to mention incredibly good-looking and confident. It was impossible not to instantly like Sam. Steve loved being near him, was thrilled to finally have a close friend.

The elevator went up, and JARVIS welcomed them to the lab floor with a reminder, "Mister Stark is waiting for you."

"Here we go," Sam said to Steve as they stepped out of the elevator. "Can't even get a full lunch break now."

"Yeah, the perks need some revising," Steve quipped back.

"What are you two smiling about?" Maria asked, appearing before them.

"Damn," Sam murmured. "How'd you get up here so fast?"

"If we told you that," Nat said, sliding into step beside them, "we'd have to kill you."

Steve held his hand out to Sam, waggling his fingers. Sam sighed and handed over a ten.

"Remind me never to bet with you again," he said.

They walked across the open-plan floor of gleaming tiles, toward the seating area at the side of the lab.

Tony was resting on a leather seat, hands behind his head and a shit-eating grin on his face. Clint was sitting close by, slurping noisily on a smoothie.

"Oh, look! The A-Team have returned," Tony said. "Why didn't I get an invite to lunch, Rogers? My feelings are hurt."

"Tony," Steve greeted.

"So where is this delicate matter," Natasha cut in. "Don't tell us you interrupted our celebration when you'd turned down my invitation to join us in the first place."
"I did?" Tony raised his eyebrows in question.

"Mm-hm," Natasha stared back at him calmly, "you did. You said you'd rather eat leftovers here and stay in your lab."

"Oh?" Tony frowned in thought, although he seemed to be playing with her.

Tony was a somewhat antagonistic alpha, whereas Natasha was a cool-as-ice beta.

Clint, another beta, stopped slurping his drink in order to back up Nat. "That does sound like something you'd say, Tony."

During the exchange, Steve's eyes flicked over to Bruce; the beta was over in the lab's open space, wearing his white lab coat.

What was more peculiar, was the baby stroller parked at the side.

Bruce paused what he was doing, holding a Q-tip, by the looks of it, and looked at Steve pensively.

"Is that a baby?" Sam asked, clearly spotting the stroller too.

"Funny story," Tony said, getting to his feet. Everyone looked at him for explanation.

"Are you having a baby shower?" Nat interrupted. "I didn't bring you anything."

"If you made a new robot and are holding a shower for it," Maria said, "I swear to god, I'll quit right now."

Clint snorted with laughter, then clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shh!" Bruce hushed them quietly.

"Is this why you called us in?" Steve stepped over to the stroller cautiously.

Sure enough, there was a real baby inside, all tucked up in blankets and fast asleep. The colors of the blankets and clothes were white and pale yellow, so Steve had no idea if it was a boy or a girl.

The stroller looked modern but had certainly seen better days. It was actually a jolt to Steve to see such a worn looking piece of equipment inside the sleek and expensive cornucopia of Stark Tower, and something about that made him a little sad.

Who was this baby in the hand-me-down stroller?

"So, anyway," Tony said, brandishing a piece of note paper in his hand. "As I was saying, turns out that the stork dropped off someone's baby at the tower today, and by stork I mean omega, and by someone I mean Cap."

"What?" Steve looked at Tony in confusion.

"Here." Tony held out the paper, showing a hand-written note. "We already read it and had the stroller scanned, dusted for prints and everything. Can't be too careful."

"What?" Steve said again, taking the note from Tony.

He glanced down at it, mouth opening in surprise.
Dear Steve, here is our baby--

He skimmed down to the bottom, to the name signed Bucky.

"Oh," Steve breathed out in a rush, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut.

Bucky.

But...

Steve quickly did the math in his head, then looked back to the baby.

Sixteen months ago.

"I... are you sure?"

Tony went to open his mouth, but Bruce stepped in. "Steve, if you'd like, I can do a quick swab and check your DNA against the baby's." He held up a Q-tip in his hand. "I've already swabbed the baby's mouth and have the DNA in my computer. It's the only way to be sure."

Steve looked in question to Sam and Nat standing beside him. Nat nodded once, while Sam shrugged and said, "Be better to know, Steve. This could be a prank or something."

"And what a prank!" Tony said in amusement, before Bruce shushed him.

Tony held his hands up and mimed zipping his lips.

Bruce waved the Q-tip with an apologetic look on his face, so Steve obligingly opened his mouth.

A quick swab, then Bruce carried the Q-tip back into his lab.

Steve couldn't believe this was real. He looked back at the note, taking it in entirely for the first time.

Dear Steve, this is our baby, Lara. She's six months old, all her stuff is in the diaper bag. I can't handle this now and I don't know where else to turn. Please take care of her. I hope one day you can both forgive me.

Bucky.

P.S. This baby is freakishly strong and I'm blaming you for that.

Steve stared at the words.

Was he really a father? Why hadn't Bucky told him? Steve would've helped, he would've wanted to be involved.

Dammit, Bucky.

Steve had tried calling and calling him until the number he had for Bucky went out of service. After that, he'd given up all hope of ever seeing him again.

"So, doc?" Tony broke the silence. "Match?"

"Um..." Bruce was checking images of graphs on his tablet. "Yeah, perfect match. Congratulations?"

"Oh, man," Sam murmured.
"All right!" Clint punched his fist in the air. "You're a daddy, Cap!"

"Now we have to have a baby shower," Tony said. "I'm already designing a crib that replicates a womb. I hear it cuts down on them screaming the place down. Thank God, or rather, thank me that I already sound-proofed all your apartments."

"I'm the one who told you about womb cribs, Tony," Clint put in. "That was my idea."

"What the hell is a womb crib?" Sam muttered.

"What's the baby's name?" Nat asked.

Steve felt very far away from everything, like he was watching the scene unfold in front of him. He had to forcibly make himself focus.

"Uh..." He glanced back at the note Bucky had written. "Lara."

Natasha smiled at him, but it was one of her I'm enjoying being amused at your expense smiles.

Steve took a breath, and made to step over to the stroller, to get a closer look.

Tony got in the way, with his tablet out. "So, we ran the prints that were on the stroller. This your omega?" He turned the screen to show what looked like a police mug shot of a much younger and very scowly-looking Bucky.

The name read James B. Barnes.

Steve's eyes raked over the image.

"Honestly, Cap, I was surprised," Tony chattered on. "Didn't peg you for guys, but--"

"Tony," Steve said firmly, using his alpha voice. "That's enough. I appreciate that you're looking out for threats here, but that's enough. We've established there's no immediate threat, and you are not to go looking into my personal business without talking to me first. Are we clear?"

Tony backed down, as he tended to do. Sam stepped close to Steve, his presence and his beta scent a calming influence on all the alpha pheromones in the air.

"Let's deal with one thing at a time," Sam said. "Babies need a lot of stuff. We should make a list and do some shopping before the major stores close for the day."

"Already done and ordered!" Clint called out. "Thank me later."

A noise from the stroller had Steve and everyone looking over. A burble.

"Oops," Clint said, as Bruce glared at him. "Sorry?"

"May I suggest taking the baby down to the lounge?" Bruce said. "I still have work I need to do, preferably in peace and quiet."

"Excellent idea," Tony agreed. "Off you go, Cap. Baby's first adventure, good luck, and have a wonderful life changing diapers."

Steve stared into the stroller, and the tiny pink baby stared back at him with huge blue eyes.

"Um. What do I do?"
The baby promptly opened her little pink mouth and let loose a high-pitched wail, her small face screwing up as she began to scream.

"Uh... guys?" Steve panicked, staring down at the baby --his baby-- as she screamed at deafening volume.

He looked up to see his team-mates splintering. Bruce headed back into the lab, hands pointedly covering his ears, with Tony and Maria hurrying behind him.

Steve frowned at their retreating backs, but he still had Sam, Nat, and Clint.

Although Natasha was quickly inserting small plugs into her ears and getting out her phone. "Smile for the camera," she told him, as Steve turned his frown to her.

"What are you... Natasha, don't film this."

"You'll thank me when she's all grown up and you didn't make any home movies," she replied, grinning devilishly.

Beside him, Sam tried to hide a laugh.

The baby screamed harder.

"What do we do?" Steve pleaded, worried that the baby needed something. "One of you needs to do something, now."

"Stand back!" Clint announced as he stood up, popping out his hearing aids and pocketing them.

"Oh no," Sam murmured. "We're all in trouble if you're the lead on this, Barton."

"Pssh." Clint waved a hand. "I'm great with kids. Watch." He took hold of the stroller, kicked off the brake and pointed it away from the lab. "Shall we go for a wittle walk?" he shouted into the stroller as he pushed it away.

Steve had no choice but the follow, with Sam and Natasha beside him. "Clint, how is shouting at her going to make it any better?"

But Clint wasn't looking at him so couldn't read his lips. Steve sighed loudly, and followed Clint as he pushed the stroller toward the stairs. Steve went in front and took hold of the other end, and together they carried the stroller down into the lounge.

"Here we go," Clint said as they set it gently on the floor.

Steve stood back and watched as Clint maneuvered the stroller over to the plush seating area so he could sit down. He kept a hand on the stroller's handle and began rocking it back and forth.

The baby screamed on.

"Now what?" Steve asked, staring down at the screaming infant, her little fists raising and clenching in the air.

She was so tiny. Steve couldn't get over it.

Beside him, Sam set down a large bag that had teddy bears printed over it, which had to be the diaper bag. "Maybe she's hungry?" he suggested. "I'll see if there's a bottle or something made up."
Steve's head was swimming. How would he feed this child? He had no idea what he was doing.

"Would Jarvis know?" Steve asked, looking to Natasha.

She was still filming the proceedings, much to Steve's ire, and glanced up at him with a shrug. "Ask?"

"Uh, Jarvis?" Steve looked up at the ceiling hopefully.

"Yes, Captain Rogers?" the AI replied.

"Uh... do you know why the baby is crying?"

"I am afraid not, Captain," Jarvis replied calmly. "Mister Stark already performed a scan earlier, and I detected no abnormalities in her body."

Steve's mouth dropped open. "He scanned my baby?"

"Yes, sir," Jarvis replied, either not picking up on Steve's shock or choosing to ignore it. "We decided it would be useful in lieu of any medical information to hand."

"Right..." Steve sighed, rubbed his hands over his face.

Meanwhile Baby Lara screamed on, despite Clint rocking her stroller and attempting to sing a lullaby.

"Any other suggestions, Jarvis?" Steve asked.

"I can bring up a list of likely causes for a baby's crying." Jarvis lit up a screen on the far wall, different tabs opening with How To pages of caring for babies.

Okay, Steve could work with that. A process of elimination.

"She probably wants to be picked up," Clint said loudly, though he didn't make a move to do so.

"I found a bottle," Sam fished a bottle from the diaper bag. "We don't know how long it's been there though, and it's cold. Would you prefer if I made up a new one? They like it warm."

"Uh... you mean, milk?" Steve asked, cautiously eyeing the bottle in Sam's hand.

"I dunno, Steve," Sam replied dryly, "but there's a can of powdered formula in the bag, and that's the only milk I can make for you."

Clint and Natasha both snorted a laugh. Steve felt his face redden. "Uh, yes that's... Thanks, Sam. You go make a new bottle, I'd feel better knowing it's fresh."

"Sure thing." Sam gathered up the bottle and a can of formula. "I guess the bar will do. I'll just be over there." He walked toward the bar area, and Steve sighed in relief.

Okay, one probable issue taken care of. What else?

"Clint," he directed, "maybe you should pick her up."

"Why don't you, Cap? She's your bundle of joy."

Steve felt like his reluctance showed clearly on his face, but he didn't want to back down in front of
his team.

Even if he was terrified.

"C'mon, it's not that hard," Clint insisted.

"I only got handed a couple babies on my USO tour," Steve admitted. "I've never picked one up. How do you do it?"

" Seriously?"

"Clint, I spent most of my life before the serum nearly dying from pneumonia," Steve said flatly, "no one in their right mind wanted me near their children."

"Well, now you can make up for lost time," Natasha put in.

Steve snorted, but he supposed she was right. "I still don't know what I'm doing!" He threw his hands out in frustration. "Is one of you gonna show me what to do, or do I have to ask Jarvis?"

"Okay, Cap, keep your shirt on." Clint got to his feet, and started stretching his arms like he was getting ready to lift some weights.

Baby Lara was still screaming.

"What are you doing?" Steve demanded.

"What?" Clint looked over, confused. Steve repeated his question so Clint could read his lips. "Oh. I'm stretching? The note said your baby was freakishly strong. Excuse me for not wanting to pull a muscle at my age."

Natasha chuckled while Steve put his hands on his hips impatiently. His enhanced hearing was making the baby's screams really tough to bear.

He'd have to locate some ear protection next chance he got.

After Clint had finally stretched enough, he bent over the stroller. "Okay!" He announced, hands snaking around the baby. "Who's ready to come outta there?"

"Why are you talking like that?" Steve asked.

"That's his baby voice," Natasha said quietly.

Steve pulled a face. "Are baby voices a requirement?"

"Studies show that babies react to animated voices and facial expressions," Jarvis offered.

"Great," Steve said, watching Clint carefully lift the baby from the stroller, one hand supporting the back of her head.

"Here we go!" he said in a goofy voice, right into her face.

Steve frowned, unsure how much of the over-acting was necessary.

But once Clint had lifted her up and held her against his shoulder, her screams died down.

"Thank god," Steve sighed in relief, then blanched as Clint came at him with the baby. "Wait, no!
"I'm not--"

"It's okay," Clint soothed, still talking in his baby voice. "Daddy and baby's first hug!"

He handed her over, and Steve had no choice but to take her, terrified he'd squash her in his huge hands.

She was surprisingly heavy for her size.

Steve held her carefully against his chest, and Clint helped him arrange his hands so one was supporting her back, and the other under her ass.

"There we go," he said. "Not so hard is it?"

Baby Lara had stopped crying, seemed to be looking around curiously instead.

Steve bent his head and looked at her, at her pink round cheeks, and her big blue eyes. She had wisps of fine blonde hair sticking up every-which-way in loops and licks.

She wasn't so bad, he thought in relief.

Now that she was quiet.

Steve inhaled, scenting the air. He wondered if she'd smell like Bucky, if the scent of the omega would be on their baby.

A scent Steve hadn't expected hit his nose, his enhanced sense of smell picking it up before anything else.

He huffed in surprise, his eyes widening. "Uh... what's that smell?"

"Huh? Smell?" Clint bent his head, sniffed near the baby's rear end. He drew back in alarm. "Whoa! Yeah, she did a doodle."

"A doodle? What the hell is..." Steve stopped himself. "No, don't tell me. I don't wanna know."

"You're gonna know, pal," Clint said, "because you're gonna change her."

Steve's heart sank. "Can I hire a baby-sitter? I can do that, right?"

"I think you mean a nanny," Sam told him, coming over with a fresh bottle of milk in his hand. "And come on, Steve. We just took down the whole of SHIELD and Hydra combined. Changing a diaper won't be that hard."

Natasha laughed quietly. "I am so filming this."

They rooted through the diaper bag and pulled out everything inside.

There were a few toys, rattles, some changes of clothes, and --thank God-- fresh diapers and a changing mat of padded, wipe-clean plastic.

There were also bags of wet wipes and cotton wool balls, that caused Sam and Clint to bicker over which method was best.
"Wet wipes are fine," Clint insisted, "they're literally made for babies."

"Dude, I'm telling you it's better to use the cotton with warm water," Sam argued.

"Guys, please can we just start?" Steve shifted awkwardly as Lara started fussing against him. "She's gonna cry again."

"Okay, come on," Sam said, moving aside. "Lay her down on the couch and we'll just... kneel on the floor, I guess."

Clint grunted, and got to his knees. "Should've stretched more," he muttered.

Steve moved in and laid the baby onto the mat, with Sam helping.

Natasha was leaning over the back of the couch with her phone trained on them like they were animals in the zoo. As Steve and Sam got in to kneel side-by-side with Clint, she laughed heartily.

"You guys look like the three kings kneeling before the baby."

"You aren't helping, Nat," Steve snapped.

"I'm documenting all your first experiences," she replied calmly. "You'll thank me later."

Steve sighed tersely. "So. What do we do now?"

"Diaper off first?" Sam suggested.

"Right." Steve investigated the diaper, as Lara lay on her back and chewed the tiny rattle Clint offered to her.

She made some content gurgling noises, and thankfully didn't start crying.

Sam pointed out the taped sides to Steve and they pulled a tab of tape each. Then Steve gingerly pulled open the diaper.

The smell hit his nostrils instantly, and he rocked back on his heels before he gagged. Sam and Clint both did the same, making grunts of distaste.

"Ew." Sam covered his mouth with his hand, eyes widening when he looked to the diaper. "Is it just me, or is that a lot of shit?"

"No, they all make that much," Clint wheezed, fanning a hand in front of his face. "But I haven't smelled one this pungent before."

"Is that bad?" Steve asked.

"Er, pass."

"If you save a sample for Mister Stark, sirs," Jarvis piped up, "he will be able to analyse it for you."

Steve shared a look with his team-mates, and they all smiled slowly.

Natasha said, "Definitely do that. Leave it in a gift box for him but don't say what it is."

"Okay, we can prank him later," Steve said decidedly. "Let's clean this up before the smell burns through my nose permanently."
"I agree." Sam leaned in to assess the situation. "If you pull the diaper out and like, roll it up as you go..."

"Why do I have to do that?" Steve touched the edge of the diaper, made a mental note to get some clinical gloves for next time.

"She's your baby, Cap," Sam reminded him. "I'll hold her legs."

Sam tried to grab a hold of the baby's chubby little feet as they kicked in the air.

"Wait a minute," Steve said, "she's a girl, are we supposed to do it this way?"

"Yes," Nat and Clint said in unison.

"Steve, how else would you change her diapers?" Sam managed to hold onto Lara's feet and lift her off the diaper. "Quick, pull it out!"

Steve pulled the diaper away, trying to roll it and cover up the mess inside.

"Oh, man, it's all up her back," Sam said in despair.

"Where do I put this?" Steve held the dirty diaper in his hand. "Where's the trash can?"

"I don't know..."

"Shit."

"Steve, just put it on the floor," Clint told him. "It'll wipe clean."

"Uh... Okay." Steve placed the diaper on the floor, hoping it wouldn't unroll itself. He turned back to the situation at hand. "How is she covered in so much of it?"

"Well, it kinda squidges around in the diaper if you don't change them quick enough."

Steve sighed inwardly, and picked up the pack of wet wipes. "Okay. What now?"

"You wanna wipe it all away," Clint instructed, "but careful you don't wipe it into her noo-noo."

Steve looked up at Clint, as did Sam.

Clint looked back at them. "What? Would you rather I said vagina?"

Natasha snorted a laugh.

Steve shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Let's just... clean her up, I guess."

He pulled open the wet wipes, accidentally tearing the packet in half in his haste, the wipes all spilling out. He'd probably need to use them all anyway, so it hardly mattered.

He started to dab tentatively at Lara's poop-smereared skin with the wipes, and Sam did the same with some dry cotton balls.

As Steve held dirty wipes in both hands he looked around and realised they still didn't have a trash can. "Clint, go get us something to put these into."

"Right." Clint pulled himself up with a grunt and loped off toward the bar.
"And Clint, hurry up," Steve added. He looked back to Lara, saw she was looking at him as she held her rattle, little pink mouth drooling and turning up at the sides.

"Is she smiling?" Steve asked quietly. "Sam, look. I think she's smiling at me." He leaned in closer, smiling back at his baby. "Are you smiling?"

Something warm and wet splashed against Steve's chest. He glanced down in surprise, jerking back as he realised Lara had unleashed a stream of hot pee all over him.

Sam watched with his mouth open, but didn't move to help.

It was over in an instant, leaving Steve's shirt soaked through. Lara kicked her legs in the air with an excited squeal.

"So, how's your first diaper change going?" Natasha asked in amusement.

Steve glanced up, saw she was still filming him so he gave her a very unimpressed look.

"Just swell, thanks."

Chapter End Notes

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Hands up if you spotted all the 3 Men and a Baby movie references!

~
After the fastest shower on record and a change of clothes, Steve went to rejoin his team-mates in the communal lounge.

Natasha had disappeared, so it was just Sam and Clint.

Steve tried not to let nerves overwhelm him the closer he got to his baby.

It was all a lot to take in.

Clint was on the couch, cradling Baby Lara in his arms, now changed and back in her little onesie, as he held a bottle to let her feed.

Sam was rooting through the diaper bag, laying the contents onto the other end of the couch one by one.

"Anything else?" Clint was saying.

"No," Sam answered, as Steve approached. "That's the only one."

"What's that?" Steve asked.

Sam picked up a piece of paper, a pharmacy prescription by the look of it. "It just says for one thing. I Googled what it was, and I think it's an iron supplement for babies."

Steve frowned in thought. "And it's definitely written for her?"

Clint started snickering, while Sam's expression remained carefully neutral.

"Uh... well, the name on it is..." Sam cleared his throat. "Lara Croft."

Clint honked a laugh, and Steve glanced at him in confusion.

"Croft?" Steve repeated.

So, she didn't have Bucky's last name?

"Uh..." Sam bit his lip to keep from smiling. "Yeah?"
"What?" Steve looked between the pair of them. "Am I missing something?"

Clint started to laugh again, grinning down at the baby as he held her bottle. "Boy, oh boy," he muttered.

Steve looked to Sam, and waited.

"Um, well." Sam was clearly struggling to keep a straight face. "It's the name of a video game character."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked. "You mean a fictional person?"

"Yeah, yeah, that." Sam nodded. "Real popular in the Nineties."


Steve was starting to feel frustrated not knowing the reference, so he pulled out his phone and went to Google. "Lara Croft?"

"Yeah," Sam and Clint echoed.

Steve did an image search, eyes widening when he saw the results. "Oh," he murmured, looking at pictures of a statuesque woman in a somewhat revealing outfit, and holding guns.

He didn't understand. Bucky had never mentioned anything like this that Steve could recall.

"So... your omega, he's a gamer?" Sam asked, and when Steve gave him a confused look, he added, "Video games."

"I've no idea," Steve said honestly. "We watched movies, Disney ones. Not like..." He directed a frown at his phone screen, then locked it and shoved it back inside his pocket.

"I have a theory!" Clint piped up.

Both Steve and Sam looked at him warily.

"So, okay. It's Lara Croft, Tomb Raider, right?" Clint grinned wide, still holding the bottle for Lara. "But remember that porno?"

From the quick intake of breath from Sam, Steve guessed he knew whatever reference they were talking about.

"Porno?" Steve repeated, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Yeah," Clint said, "it was Lara Croft, Womb Raider. A pun, obviously."

Sam turned to the side, but not quick enough to hide his smirk.

Steve kept his face neutral, wondering how on Earth he'd ever bring up this topic again, and could he possibly rename his baby to avoid it altogether.

"Anyway," Steve said, breathing in deep. "The prescription says iron?"

"I'm going to text Bruce," Sam said, getting his phone out. "I don't like the idea of us not knowing what she needs. Especially if she eats like you, man."
Before Steve could reply, Clint interrupted. "Hey! The newest member of the team! Can I train her?"

Steve felt touched and terrified all at once. "Let's focus on one thing at a time," he said. "Clint, those things you ordered? When are they due?"

"Should be before the end of the working day, so another couple hours at most." "Okay." Steve nodded to himself. "Sam, you tell Bruce about the iron. And let's... go from there."

Sam came up to him, laid a hand on his shoulder. "Relax, Steve. It'll be okay. We'll help you."

"Yeah, don't worry, Cap," Clint agreed. "We got you."

~

Where did you go? Steve texted Nat.

She replied almost immediately with a photo of him, shirt drenched in pee and frowning at the camera. She'd added stickers to the photo, some love-hearts and a \textit{LOL}.

\textit{Hilarious}, Steve replied. \textit{I wanted to ask you a favor.}

She wrote back, \textit{Shoot.}

\textit{I'm worried about Bucky}, Steve wrote. \textit{Is there any way you can find out if he's okay? Discreetly, so he doesn't do anything stupid?}

Steve waited nervously for a reply, watching his phone screen.

\textit{I'm on it}, Nat replied.

\textit{Thank you}, he texted back.

She didn't reply again, so Steve pocketed his phone and took a deep breath.

He was worried about Bucky. What had happened? Was he going to disappear again? Didn't he want to see the baby?

\textit{Their} baby.

Questions buzzed around Steve's head, but he didn't get a chance to think them through. Clint needed to use the bathroom, so Steve had to actually go and hold his baby.

Sam was busy making bottles for later, and Steve still had absolutely zero idea what he doing.

His heart thudded as he held Lara carefully, and looked down at her tiny little face, and her tiny little hands that she waved in the air.

She'd gone quiet, and Steve didn't know if that was good or bad.

He was about to ask Sam, when Jarvis announced, "Captain Rogers, Doctor Banner has requested you and your infant see him in his lab."
Steve's back went ramrod straight, and he looked to Sam in question.

"It's probably about that prescription," Sam said, setting down the bottles and can of formula. He wiped his hands on a towel. "Want me to come with you?"

Steve nodded. "Shall we put her in the stroller? We don't know how long we'll be there."

Sam smiled wryly and went to get the stroller. "We can try, man."

As soon as Steve laid Lara down in the stroller, she fussed and waved her little arms like she didn't want to be set down.

"I think she's gonna cry," Sam muttered.

"No, she's fine," Steve said hopefully. He watched Lara's little face screw up, and he winced in anticipation of her making a noise. "Okay, okay," he relented, and went to pick her up again.

Then he hesitated. Steve had no idea if he was doing it right, whether he was picking her up too fast or too slow; he was so focused on being gentle and supporting her head, he could feel himself fumbling.

"That's it," Sam said, beside him. "You're doing fine. Get a good hold, and lift."

Steve lifted her up again, cradling her in his arms.

Lara's noises of frustration calmed, and she looked up at him with big blue eyes.

"There we go," Sam said gently.

Steve felt like a nervous wreck, but if he noticed Sam didn't comment on it. "Okay," Steve said, "so... I'll hold her for a bit, and you bring the stroller?"

"Sure. Let me fetch a bottle too."

Sam put a bottle and the prescription in a little pocket on the stroller, and they set off.

It was hardly far to go, just upstairs, but Steve was relieved to get there all the same.

Bruce was waiting for them in the lab. "Hey. How's it going?"

"Don't ask," Steve said, joining him inside the lab.

It was all open-plan, and Steve took a cursory glance around. The smoothie machine had recently been used, he noted, but Tony wasn't around.

Sam parked the stroller by the seating area, then came to join them. "I think Team Baby has done pretty well so far." He held out the prescription to Bruce, who looked it over with his glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

"Definitely no other prescriptions?" he asked.

"Not in her stuff that she came with," Sam said. "I looked through it all twice."

"Okay." Bruce looked up at Steve, then looked to the baby currently gurgling happily in his arms. "I was going to suggest we take a blood sample. I've already been running numbers on the probability that your offspring would have some version of your serum, Steve. Or, at the very least, a high
metabolism."

"Hence the iron prescription?" Sam asked.

Bruce shook his head. "I can't see how just iron would do much, to be honest. If her cells are regenerating at anything close to what Steve's do, she'd need a specific diet and feeding routine. Not unlike Steve's."

"Oh," Steve said, looking down at Lara. One tiny hand was clutching at his shirt, and he noticed the pull.

He didn't know what was normal strength for babies, though.

"So... is this going to hurt her?" he asked.

Bruce looked sympathetic. "Sorry. It's the only way to know."

"We just got her quiet," Sam pointed out.

"If she starts crying because she's hungry all the time, you'll soon know about it," Bruce said.

"Point taken."

"So...?" Bruce looked to Steve. "Shall we go ahead?"

"I guess we should," Steve said, though he felt a little dubious about giving away samples of his baby's blood. "This will strictly be for her benefit? The last thing I want is to find out her medical information fell into the wrong hands because we were compromised."

"I understand your concern," Bruce said calmly. "Jarvis can make temporary files and delete them if you want, and I can record on paper. You can keep the paper copies. If your baby could speak, we wouldn't need to do this, but at the moment we have to guess what she needs, and personally I'd rather be sure."

Steve nodded in agreement. "Okay, then. Thank you. How do we do this?"

"If you come and sit over here..." Bruce indicated a wheely chair by one of the desks. "I'll just set up, before we disturb her."

Steve went to sit, while Sam hovered at the edge of the lab, and texted on his phone. "Barton said he's going to wait for us downstairs."

Steve nodded, settling in the chair and holding Lara carefully.

"So, her name's Lara?" Bruce asked, getting vials and needles together in a small tray.

"Yeah," he said, trying not to sound terse about it, as he hadn't had any say in the naming.

"Interesting choice," Bruce commented, and Steve could've sworn he was being a smartass, but when he looked at Bruce he was concentrating on setting up a needle.

So, Steve redirected with, "How much blood are you taking?"

"I'll try take the smallest amount possible that I can work with," Bruce assured him. "Hopefully it won't need to be a regular thing. We'll check her weight, and if you can bring me samples of her urine and feces over four days, I'll analyse those too."
Sam smothered a laugh. "I don't envy you that task, man."

"I've dealt with worse, believe me," Bruce said. "And if it's all healthy, then we don't need to worry." He smiled, and brought the small tray of vials and a syringe over to Steve. "You probably need to take her arm out," he said, snapping on a pair of plastic gloves.

"Oh." Steve wasn't sure how he'd do all that and hold her at the same time, but luckily Sam came in to help. He unbuttoned her onesie and gently took her little chubby arm out of it.

Lara wriggled and burbled at them. Steve smiled at her, and felt bad that the first thing he had to do with his kid was get her a blood test.

"Okay, can you maybe hold her hand?" Bruce asked, holding a small rubber band and slipping it around her upper arm. "I'll try be quick."

The process went smoothly as Bruce swabbed the skin first, but as soon as the needle went in, Lara's face screwed up and she began huffing in distress.

"Almost done," Bruce said gently, drawing blood from her arm.

"You're doing so good," Sam told Lara, holding eye contact and smiling at her.

Steve felt himself go pale, and his heart was rattling with nerves.

Why was this so stressful?

She was going to be alright, so why was Steve worrying?

"Okay," Bruce said, extracting the needle. "Well done." He quickly placed a pad of cotton over her arm, and then moved away, taking his tray with him.

Steve breathed out in relief. Lara opened her mouth and started crying, her cheeks turning pink.

Steve felt bad. He had no way of telling her that they were only trying to help.

Bruce came back with some surgical tape, securing the gauze pad to her arm.

"Steve, it would really help if I could have a recent blood sample from you," Bruce said. "A pin prick should do it."

Steve was dubious about giving away his blood too, after so many people had tried to replicate the serum, but Bruce had done tests with Steve nearly two years ago, purely to design him a diet that would keep him healthy, and so he wouldn't feel hungry all the time. It had worked, and he trusted Bruce.

He reminded himself he was doing this for Lara.

"Okay," he agreed.

Bruce brought over a small instrument, and Steve put his index finger into it. It pricked his skin, taking a blood sample, and then Bruce was done. Steve didn't even need a gauze pad.

"Would you be more comfortable in the lounge?" Bruce asked, having to raise his voice over Lara's screaming. "I'll run the analysis with Jarvis and bring the results right over."

"Sure. Thanks, Bruce." Steve got to his feet, holding Lara and wishing he had some ear defenders.
He went to the stroller, and Sam helped him get her tucked up again inside.

Lara kept screaming.

"Oh, well," Sam said, as they wheeled her off. "The peace was nice while it lasted. Let's go find Barton."

~

When they got back to the lounge, it'd been cleared of the baby changing stuff from earlier, and Clint was sitting on the couch eating a sandwich.

He must've had his hearing aids back in, as he looked up when they approached.

Lara was still crying, getting red in the face.

"What happened?" Clint asked.

"Blood test," Steve explained, parking the stroller. "Bruce is running it now."

"Aw, no, blood test." Clint shoved the last bit of sandwich in his mouth, and wiped his hands on his pants. "Lemme show you a trick to stop them crying."

Steve watched him reach in to pick up his baby, and he wanted to scold Clint for not washing his hands first but, honestly, at this point Steve had a headache and he just wanted Lara to stop crying.

Clint scooped her up and cradled her, then he did a half-squat and raised up quickly, bouncing Lara in his arms. "Jell-O on a plate! Jell-O on a plate!" he sang, loud and off-key. "Wibble, wobble, wibble wobble! Jell-O on a plate!"

Sam raised an eyebrow, watching as Clint did another half-squat, and bounced up again. "What are you doing?"

"Just watch!" Clint said, and continued singing. Lara carried on screaming at ear-splitting volume.

Steve rubbed a hand over his face. "Should we feed her again?"

"Maybe wait to see what Bruce says?" Sam said.

"Oh, yeah." Steve felt at a loss, yet again.

He didn't know what he would've done if he'd been on his own. Probably gone out of his mind with worry.

Clint did his weird squat-bounce a few more times, singing and smiling down at Lara in his arms.

Miraculously, within two minutes, she ceased crying, blinking up at Clint, her face still red and tears tracking her cheeks.

Steve felt bad for upsetting her, and was relieved she'd stopped screaming.

Sam, who'd gone over to the bar to make coffee, came back with a tray of cups. "Gotta hand it to
"Gotta bounce from your knees," Clint informed them, still bouncing and keeping eye contact with Lara. "Isn't that right? And now you're gonna be a good bubba-boo and go back to your daddy!"

Steve was about to say no, but he figured he couldn't really shy away from his own baby. So when Clint transferred Lara over to him, Steve held her carefully in his arms.

"By the way," Clint said as he backed away, "her diaper is full."

"What?" Steve couldn't believe it. "She only had a change half an hour ago. How do you know?"

"You can feel the weight of it," Clint said, picking up the diaper bag. "It might just be a number one. But we should probably change her, or she'll cry again when she realises her ass is wet."

Steve groaned inwardly. "How often do they do this?"

When both Clint and Sam shrugged, Steve said, "Jarvis, how often do babies need changing?"

"A six-month-old will need changing multiple times a day," the AI replied, "passing urine five to six times a day, and stools typically after each feed."

Steve tried to process that. "After each feed? Wait, how often does she feed?"

"Breastfed or formula-fed babies may need feeding up to every two hours," Jarvis informed him, "possibly less with moving onto solid foods."

Steve shared a look with Sam. "How do people do this every two hours?"

"C'mon, Cap," Clint teased, "stop stalling." He laid the baby-change mat on the couch. "Let's get this show on the road."

Steve took a fortifying breath, and took Lara over to the couch. "Jarvis," he said, as an afterthought, "please ask Bruce to look into a solid food diet for Lara."

"Of course, Captain Rogers," Jarvis replied.

"Thanks," Steve said, and looked at his baby as he laid her down. She wriggled and squirmed, and let off a high-pitched squeal of delight.

"Okay, change number two." Steve looked into Lara's blue eyes and murmured, "Please don't pee on me this time?"

She gave him a gummy smile in response.

~

After the diaper change, which thankfully went better than the last one, Steve cried off to go use the bathroom.

Sam took Lara, and she made burble noises while waving her arms.
"I got her," Sam assured him.

Steve nodded in thanks, and hurried off to the bathroom.

He didn't use the nearest one, and there were plenty nearby. He went down one level where he knew it was usually quiet, and used the bathroom there. It was all sleek minimalist, with faucets that had no handles, the user just waved their hands under them and they turned on automatically.

When he was all done, Steve didn't hurry back. He stood at the large sink in front of the mirror, and stared down at the plug hole.

He was worried about Bucky, and he couldn't shake the concern that something bad had happened.

And he couldn't exactly go and look for him, or go with Natasha to look for him, not when he had a child to take care of.

He had to trust that she would find Bucky on her own. Steve knew she was more than capable, but not doing anything to help her was making him anxious.

"Jarvis?" he said quietly, unsure if the AI would hear him in the bathroom.

"Yes, Captain Rogers?" Jarvis replied, and Steve smiled to himself.

"Can you play me the security footage from earlier? With... with Lara? When they came here?"

"Yes, Captain Rogers," Jarvis said, as the mirror in front of Steve changed to show four screens; four different angles of security footage of the main entrance for the tower.

Steve scanned the screens, spotting Bucky immediately among all the visitors and security personnel. He stood out in his dark clothes and a ball cap pulled low over his face, pushing Lara's stroller. He must've tucked his hair under the cap too, or had had it cut, Steve couldn't tell.

He watched as Bucky came into the atrium, stopping at the first security checkpoint, and seemingly searching his pockets for something.

Then Bucky spoke to the security guard for a moment, before turning around and walking out.

The guard watched calmly, and when Bucky took off out the door, the guard spoke into his radio.

And that was it. Steve watched as the security team gathered around the stroller, probably to check it wasn't an IED or something worse, and a couple of them went out the door to follow Bucky.

Steve breathed in shakily. "And he didn't come back?"

"No, Captain," Jarvis replied. "Mister Stark's team searched the immediate area and waited, but no reappearance. They alerted Mister Stark right away, and he took control of the situation upon discovering the note addressed to you."

Steve raised his eyebrows a little, mildly surprised. Tony had jumped on this fast. "I guess I should thank Tony," he said to himself. "Jarvis, can you... replay and enlarge?"

The footage replayed, and Steve watched as it zoomed in on Bucky.

He seemed wary, Steve thought, and was purposely keeping his head down. He still had long hair; with the enlarged image, Steve saw it was tucked under his cap with a few long strands escaping.
Not that it mattered, just...

Steve stared at the image of Bucky on-screen, feeling a tightness in his chest.

He had to look away.

"Thank you, Jarvis, that's... enough."

The security footage disappeared, and the mirror reappeared.

"Can you help Natasha locate him?"

"Ms Romanov has already enlisted my assistance, Captain," Jarvis informed him.

"Oh. Okay." Steve felt a little better at that. Natasha and Jarvis should be formidable team; they'd find Bucky. "Thanks, Jarvis," he said.

"My pleasure, Captain. A package has arrived downstairs for Mister Barton. It will be with you in the lounge shortly."

"Thanks."

That would be the baby stuff, Steve thought. He left the bathroom and headed back upstairs.

When Steve got back to the lounge, Tony was there. He, Sam, and Clint were standing over the couch, with a new baby cot placed on its seats.

As Steve approached, he realised Lara was already inside it. The other men stood back to let Steve peer over, and he saw that she was actually falling asleep.

"It's a miracle," Sam whispered.

"Well, I did design it," Tony said, "so I don't know why you're surprised."

"What is it?" Steve asked quietly. His eyes catalogued the cot. It was a mix of materials, metal, and plastic; a round cocoon that housed a small hammock inside.

Lara appeared to fit snugly, and was snuffling lightly as her eyes closed.

"Womb crib," Clint said, going to sit at the other end of the couch. "Which means peace for us."

"Yeah, pretty much," Tony said to Steve. "I was just explaining to the dynamic bird duo, this ergonomic hammock replicates the shape of a womb, so Junior here feels snug as a bug. The outer casing is reinforced, and regulates temperature so she won't overheat or get cold. Oh, and I've built in an electronic heartbeat that pulses gently. Here..." He pointed out a side-mounted control panel with a few buttons. "There's different settings, also vibration and rocking, but for now it's just got the heartbeat going. I programmed a regular human heart from an omega, but we can always reprogram it later, if... if you want to."

Tony scratched at his beard as he took a step back, flashing an awkward smile.

Steve didn't know what to say. He was really impressed. "Did you make this in two hours?"

"Yeah, it's just a prototype." Tony waved a hand dismissively. "I'll make a better one later."
"This one is pretty cool," Clint pointed out. "She's gone right to sleep."

"It's... I don't know what to say, Tony," Steve said honestly. "Thank you."

"My ears say thank you, too," Sam agreed. "Good job, man."

Tony beamed under the praise, but tried to hide it with a shrug. "Let me know how you get on with it."

Steve nodded, still watching Lara fall asleep and marvelling at the shape of the cot.

A womb shape. Like how she would've been inside... inside Bucky, growing into a baby.

Steve swallowed hard.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder, squeezing once. He looked to the side and saw Tony standing close.

"She's in good hands, Cap," Tony said, then patted him a couple times before he clearly decided that was enough human interaction, and quickly walking away.

Steve swallowed again, unsure what to say. This was more than overwhelming, it was a roller-coaster.

And now that Lara was asleep, Steve was worried that his teammates would start to ask him questions.

"Banner!" Tony's voice exclaimed behind them. "Lab later? I'll order in. What do you want? Thai?"

"Yeah, that sounds good. Just gimme a second, Tony," Bruce's calm voice answered.

"See you up there," Tony told him as he left.

"Hey, man," Clint greeted Bruce as he joined them.

"Hey," Bruce said, then bent to examine the crib. "This is neat." He adjusted his glasses on his nose as he looked it over. "I've read great things about these."

"Tony made this one," Sam said.

"Yes, we consulted on the heartbeat function," Bruce said, straightening up. "Seems to be working." He smiled kindly and turned to Steve.

Steve noticed the papers Bruce was holding. Bruce saw him looking, and indicated with his free hand. "Why don't we go over to the bar for a minute? If you guys watch the baby?" He directed to Sam and Clint.

"Sure," Sam said. "We're waiting on the delivery Clint ordered anyway."

Steve followed Bruce across the lounge where they had some privacy.

Bruce laid the papers out in front of Steve on the marble surface of the bar.

"This looks like a lot of paper, I know, but it's only the quickest results I could do right now, so it's not that much."
Steve looked them over as Bruce pointed to some numbers.

"Here is Lara's results for basic bloodline tests. See, iron and vitamin levels, these are all quite low. I've circled hers in red, and written what the normal range for a baby her age should be in blue. So, first off, I've made an ingredient list for a formula that will give her a boost of these, and some protein. But I'm still running tests against your blood to see if she has some version of the serum, which would affect metabolism, and I'm also checking her hormone levels because there's a chance she could have unusual results if, um... Her omega is intersex, correct?"

Steve was staring at the numbers, trying to take it all in. "Yes. He is. Wait, what does that mean?"

"Some intersex people have hormone disorders," Bruce explained. "There could be a number of variations, and to be honest I don't know if Lara would have any of the same traits passed down or not, or if it's even detectable this early on for her. Without any other information, I can only go from my own tests and do some close monitoring to see what her results are like, just to make sure she's doing okay. But with one intersex parent and one super-soldier? I'm betting she has some unusual results and is going to need some help, even if it's just diet and vitamins at this stage."

"Oh... right." Steve's throat felt dry. Was he a bad parent already? It sure felt like it. "What can I do?"

"I've got a list of supplements," Bruce picked out one of the papers, "which are pretty harmless to start off on, and Tony has some of these in the kitchens already. It'll help with getting her vitamin levels back up in a normal range. So you just add them to the formula when you make her bottles, or her soft food, and there's a specific brand I think we should try first. Shall we go check what Clint ordered?"

"Okay. Sure." Steve nodded. He could manage that.

~

Sam Wilson was having A Day.

And now that the box of baby supplies had arrived, he and Clint began unpacking it while Steve talked to Bruce over at the bar.

The first item Sam pulled out, a pack of diapers, was just wrong.

"Clint," Sam sighed, "these are for toddlers."

Clint, on his knees by the large open box, looked up at him in confusion. "What?"

Sam thrust the pack of diapers at him, and Clint read the label.

"Wait, this says from one year," Clint said, "and she's pretty big, so I thought that would work."

"One-to-two years," Sam corrected, as he watched Clint tear open the packet.

Then Steve and Bruce joined them.

"Hey," Bruce said. "I just want to check what baby food you got, because I've got a preliminary diet plan for Lara."
"Yeah, you might wanna check what Barton ordered," Sam muttered in reply.

Clint had opened up a diaper in his hands to inspect the size.

It was enormous, far too big for a newborn.

"Uh... Huh." Clint threw the diaper aside and read the packet again. "Well, look. It says ultra-absorbent. The more absorbent the better."

"If that's all you got, we need to reorder diapers," Sam said. "There was only a couple left in that diaper bag."

"Okay, fine," Clint relented. "Order more diapers if you insist."

Bruce cleared his throat. "Anyway. I'll just check what food you have before I add to the... reorder."
He bent down and began rooting through the box, with Clint leaning in and trying to help.

Sam looked to Steve, checking to see if he was all right.

Still closed off and quite possibly freaking out, Sam guessed from the look on his face, and the stiff posture. The alpha hovered awkwardly like he'd rather be anywhere but here.

Sam turned to him and said quietly, "Steve, I'm betting you could use a snack, and I'm starting to feel hungry myself. Why don't you go make us some shakes while we sort this order out?"

Steve looked at him, relief clearly showing on his face. He still asked, "You sure?"

"Yeah, let's have a protein hit," Sam told him. "Tide us over until dinner. Lara's sound asleep, so we may as well use the time wisely."

"Yeah, okay," Steve said. "Bruce, you want a protein shake?"

"Sure," Bruce said. "I'll order the food we need for her, okay? And by tomorrow I should have more information on the results, so we can set up a regular food order after that."

"Okay." Steve nodded jerkily. "Great."

He always seemed uncomfortable talking about food and ordering in, Sam had noticed. Likely because of the period he'd grown up in.

That's why Sam took it upon himself to remind Steve to eat as often as possible. Tonight called for a special kind of take-out, he thought. They could all do with the treat.

Steve headed off to the kitchens, while Sam stayed with Bruce, Clint, and the baby, determined to ensure that their next order actually had useful items on it.

Bruce was taking out cans and packets of baby food from the box, checking the labels and then separating them out on the floor into two piles.

"Jarvis," he said, "we need a new order, and quite a lot of return items."

"Diapers," Sam cut in. "Diapers for six-month-old babies. If they got the ones that just pull up, even better."

"Of course, sirs," Jarvis replied.
Bruce read out the food and formula he wanted, and also ordered a blender.

"I think it'd be wise to keep food prep for the baby separate from any of ours," Bruce informed them, looking specifically at Clint over the rim of his glasses. "Nothing that isn't on her list."

"Why are you looking at me?" Clint said in amusement. "It's not like I'm going to feed pizza to a baby, or something."

Bruce opened his mouth to respond, then clearly decided not to get into it. "Strictly food from her list," he said again, then went back to naming brands for Jarvis to add to the order. "Okay, I think we're done. We have food, vitamins, a blender, more diapers. What about clothes?"

"Got some here..." Clint leaned into the box and rummaged around. He pulled out a bunch of tiny baby onesies and little tops, most of which had the red, white, and blue branding of the Captain America shield in various patterns.

Sam couldn't help it, a laugh just broke out of him.

He had a feeling Steve wouldn't be impressed.

Clint seemed pretty amused by it, and even Bruce struggled to keep a straight face.

"Uh, okay," Bruce said carefully. "Jarvis, better add some plain design, or, uh... more neutral-style baby clothes, age from six months to one year. Babygrows and tops, socks, maybe some blankets."

"Certainly, Doctor Banner," Jarvis said.

"You guys are no fun," Clint complained, holding up one of the tops. "Look! It's got a little shield on it!

Sam tried not to laugh. "If we're done here, I'm gonna go help Steve. Barton, you cool watching the baby a minute?"

Clint shrugged. "Well, yeah, she's only sleeping. Hey, bring me a bag of chips too?"

"Okay, sure."

Sam left them to it. He wanted to try talk to Steve without anyone else around, and with a baby now that was going to be hard.

He found Steve in the kitchen down the hall. It wasn't their main kitchen, but it was still bigger than any kitchen Sam had ever used, and always fully stocked.

One of those perks he quietly appreciated living in the tower.

Steve was at the island in the center, pouring a freshly made shake into cups.

"You okay?" Sam asked, stepping up to the island and leaning against it.

Steve nodded, eyes not quite meeting Sam's as he carried on pouring the shakes. "Yeah."

Sam nodded too, and quietly started clearing away some of the ingredients Steve had out.

There weren't many left out, because Steve was tidy like that.

Sam didn't rush. He put some things away in the cupboards and the dishwasher.
The thing about talking to Steve was, you could be direct, but you had to ease him into it, or he'd just go all stoic and clam up.

"It's lucky having Bruce on site," Sam mentioned, picking one of the fresh blueberries from a dish.

Blueberries were his favorite.

Steve didn't respond immediately, but he did offer a quiet, "Yeah."

"I take it that this was all a surprise?" Sam asked. "The baby, I mean."

Steve stared into the contents of the blender. Sam was a little worried about how often he was spacing out today.

"I had no idea," Steve breathed, barely a whisper. "I... I left New York, and there's no way he would've been able to find me in D.C."

"No phone number?" Sam had to ask.

Steve's face changed, that wall coming up again. His jaw clenched a little as he grabbed the blender and made to pour the final shake.

"I called him. I called until the number went out of service. I even called his friend, but she kept saying she hadn't seen him. My number didn't change. In the end, I gave up."

Steve took the blender over to the sink, and while many alphas Sam knew would've banged utensils around passive-aggressively, Steve washed up with care and barely made a sound.

"Is it possible he lost his phone, Steve? People do dumb things all the time without meaning to."

Steve carried on washing up. "I don't know," he said shortly.

Which was about as snappy as Sam had ever heard him get, so he took it as a sign to back off for now.

"Okay," he said gently. "Look, I know this probably seems like a lot to take in, so if you maybe want to take the evening off or something, I'm happy to baby-sit. I'm sure Barton will help me." Sam exhaled a soft huff. "Or try to..."

Steve set the last piece of washing in the drainer, and wiped his hands on a towel.

"It's okay, Sam. No time like the present to learn how to take care of a baby." He picked up two of the shakes, glancing at Sam over his shoulder before he left the room.

"I'm fine."
Chapter Warnings in full:
Baby Lara has a blood test done by Bruce, brief description of needle and blood drawn, which makes her cry, but is over quickly.
Baby food/formula discussions.

Thank you for reading!

Coming up next:
Sam and Natasha are on a mission...

This is a really useful infographic about Intersex folks.
Chapter Summary

Sam and Nat to the rescue.

Chapter Notes

Huge thank you to Nurse Darry and to Crimebird for making this readable!

~ ~
Steve could try to kid himself that he was fine, but Sam wasn't buying it.

It'd been five days since they'd all been surprised by Baby Lara's arrival, and had tried to settle into a routine. Five days and nights of figuring out how to take care of a baby.

Didn't sound like a lot of time, but it felt longer with a baby demanding attention.
They were lucky; thanks to Bruce and his tests, and Tony and his inventions, Lara now had a good diet plan in place, and all the mod cons to entertain her and rock her to sleep, or detect when she was awake. That sure helped a lot.

She still cried, but she was a baby. That's what babies did.

She probably would've cried more without it all, especially without the baby-sized super-soldier diet.

And that was one major reason Sam was willing to bet that Steve's omega hadn't been able to handle caring for her if she'd been hungry all the time on regular food.

Steve hadn't given much away, despite some gentle prodding from Sam. He'd been tight-lipped on the subject so far, so Sam didn't know anything.

He'd just have to keep trying. They'd all been busy taking care of Lara and dividing the chores. Steve and Clint had fallen into a routine of night-time babysitting duties, and the longest time Lara spent asleep was from around midnight to five AM, when Steve would feed her again.

Come eight AM, Sam would take over to let Steve get some rest, and Clint too if he was still awake.

Lara didn't seem to sleep as long as regular babies, Sam noted. She took naps, but not for very long.

After her nine AM feed, Sam would take her over to Bruce's lab for an hour or so, while he checked her weight and vitals with Jarvis and made notes of how she was doing.

Tony would rock up late morning with some new invention, a toy or some newly designed baby apparatus. Pepper was with him one time to meet Baby Lara, and had a file with her that she said contained the names of specially chosen nannies, vetted by Stark Industries, complete with background checks, should Steve want the extra help.

Steve had said he'd look through the list, maybe even meet one or two candidates, but he didn't seem in a hurry about it yet. He even seemed a bit over-protective of Lara, Sam thought.

Steve would resurface at midday, after barely four hours sleep, and get her lunch feed together.

Lara was on a mix of milk-based formula and baby food, with added vitamins and supplements, as instructed by Bruce.

She ate a lot, every couple of hours. She also pooped a lot, and everything took up so much time, Sam wondered if Steve had any plans to hire a nanny, pick up his shield and go fight bad guys, or if he really just wanted to stay at the tower and change diapers every day.

Sam watched Steve on the couch, cradling Baby Lara as she burbled and did that thing where she tried to stick her fingers up his nose.

Steve was smiling at her, moving her tiny hand away, but she kept right on trying to grab his nose.

Sam cleared up the lunch mess, and took his time with it. He'd make them coffee next.

Quietly he got out his phone and sent a text to Natasha.

Any word? Please give me a reason to get out of the tower, or I'll get cabin fever.

Getting close, she replied. Might have something for you later. How's Rogers Junior?

Sam smiled and wrote back, They're both fine. Steve could use way more sleep tho.
Nothing new there, Natasha replied. *Try.*

*Ok,* Sam wrote.

He hoped Natasha could find Steve's omega. Likely not knowing what had happened to him was contributing to Steve's not sleeping and his emotional shut down.

Sam made their coffee and took it over to the couch.

The TV was on, playing some squeaky-voiced, animated kid's show. They were in Steve's apartment, where most of the baby stuff had accumulated, like the padded play mat on the floor and some of the toys.

Steve seemed content holding Lara, and she seemed content trying to slap him on the chin with her chubby little hand.

Sam had to smile. For a six-month-old, her slaps had some strength behind them.

"You want a break?" Sam offered, as he sat down.

"I'm good," Steve said quietly. He was gazing down at his baby with a soft smile, and Sam kind of wished he could take a photo because this was definitely a Kodak moment.

They really needed Natasha back, she was the photo opportunist in the group.

"Barton sent me a text," Sam said, "he's going out to a diner soon. You want to go?"

Steve's smile faded a little, almost like he was nervous at the thought of going out, and he shook his head. "Maybe another time."

"Be good for Lara to get some fresh air," Sam tried.

"I took her out on the balcony yesterday," Steve told him. "We sat in the sun, got some New York air."

"A park, then," Sam amended, sipping at his coffee. "Slightly better air."

"Maybe later in the week," Steve said, and got up off the couch to take Lara over to the play mat.

And that was the end of that conversation, Sam noted wryly.

He watched Steve place Lara carefully on her belly, then lay down next to her. She wasn't crawling yet, but she seemed happy to lie and sort of jiggle in place for a while, slapping her hands on the squeaky parts of the mat and letting out noises of delight.

Meanwhile, Sam replied to Clint's text and told him that Steve was opting to stay in today.

Again.

Clint replied with a string of thumbs down emojis and a sighing face.

*Ikr,* Sam replied. *Bring me back some curly fries?*

Clint sent back a thumbs up, and Sam put away his phone.

Considering this was only the first week, Sam was willing to cut Steve a little slack as he got used to
being a daddy. But after that, he really had to get Operation Stop Steve Moping off the ground.

Natasha's next message came at seven-thirty that evening, and simply said, *Got him.*

To reply, Sam excused himself from Steve's lounge, where Steve and Clint were entertaining Lara.

Before he could type out a message and ask what exactly did she mean (Got him, like, in a choke hold? While texting casually with the other hand? Quite possible, for Natasha) she sent another message with an address, and asked him to bring an espresso.

Maybe not a choke hold then, Sam thought, maybe just a sighting.

He replied in the affirmative, then went to give the Baby Rogers playgroup team some excuse about meeting up with his cousin for dinner.

Something so boring that no one would question it.

Steve wished him a good time, hardly taking his attention off his baby, but Clint gave him a side-eye and a subtle thumbs up.

Sam gave a subtle nod in return, said, "Later," and headed out.

He grabbed his jacket and pressed the button for the elevator, all the while wondering if getting his wings and flying out to the location would be a little dramatic, but save time nonetheless.

In the end, Sam checked traffic notifications on his phone, and opted for a cab.

He didn't even use one of Stark's cars, wanting to keep it private.

Natasha had given him an address near the lower east side, and Sam told his driver to drop him off a half-block away.

It was dark, the street lights weren't great so it was gloomy and ill-lit. Sam made his way down the street, keeping an eye on his surroundings.

He'd already texted Natasha when he'd arrived, and she'd replied, *maroon Audi, opposite Lydia hotel.*

Sam spotted the Lydia, a rundown dive hotel, and looked across the street for a maroon car.

It was parked up, windows tinted so he couldn't see inside. Sam casually made his way over, and stood at the passenger side.

The door unlocked with a click, and Sam bent down to look inside before getting in.

Natasha was sitting in the driver’s seat, dressed in dark clothes and with a blonde bob of hair.

Sam almost did a double-take, but then she glanced at him and smiled.

"Come on, Sam. You're letting in the cold."

Sam got in with a grin and shut the door. He pulled the small thermos from his jacket and handed it over.
Natasha took it gratefully, unscrewing the lid to inhale the aroma of coffee.

"Thanks," she said. "I've been here three hours already."

"Damn," Sam muttered, and got himself comfortable in the seat. The heater was going, so it was nice and toasty. He looked across the street to the hotel.

"So... He in there?"

"Should be," Natasha said, sipping the coffee. "Got a tracker on him yesterday, but it's on his jacket."

"So, his jacket is definitely in there." Sam smiled wryly. "Tracker, huh?"

Nat shrugged a shoulder, eyes on the hotel. "Kept giving me the slip, and I got impatient."

Sam wasn't really sure about these methods, but he knew Steve was getting impatient back at the tower too.

"You talk to him?"

"No, just followed," she said. "He spotted me once more after I bumped into him on the street to place the tracker. He's jumpy, and hyper-aware."

Maybe that was why she was sporting the new hair, Sam thought.

"Okay. So, you brought me in to try talk to him?"

She nodded. "I think that's the next step. He keeps moving around, sometimes with an older alpha, sometimes a beta, and this is the only location they've come back to more than once."

"Right." Sam watched the hotel too. There weren't many people on the street, just a couple young, shifty-looking guys hanging out by the entrance to the hotel. Maybe just kids hanging out, maybe dealers selling drugs.

"And assuming he's in there, it's been three hours since he moved?"

"Yeah."

"What's the play?"

"Three nights ago he left this hotel after nine," Nat said, "I followed him to Hell's Kitchen. He went in a building for a couple hours, then came back here. That's the only time he's travelled alone. The other times he gets picked up by a car."

"And you think he'll go alone tonight?"

"That's my hunch."

"Okay." Sam frowned to himself. "Do you know what the building was?"

"It's next to a cafe," Nat said. "It's a drop-in center for omegas. I checked their schedule."

"And what's the schedule for tonight?"

"Aside from their free clinic for sexual health, they run support groups."
"Mm. Not sure that's the best time to be surprising someone face-to-face," Sam hedged.

"I'd suggest doing it en route," Nat said. "Or we can go up to the door now, but that alpha is going to answer, and he does not look particularly friendly."

Okay, no. Sam didn't want to be confronting any strange alphas without knowing the situation first. They could be putting the omega in danger if they did that.

"Better get him on his own, then," Sam sighed.

So, they waited, and caught up with each other's news.

Nat asked how Steve was doing.

"Anxious," Sam said. "Tired, sad. In need of a hug. I could go on."

"He's been like that for a while," Natasha replied, turning the thermos around in her hands. "I thought he enjoyed moping, but maybe it had more to do with this situation than he let on."

"He never said anything?"

"Not to me," she said. "He smelled of omega one time, and seemed in a better mood generally, but after that he sort of... shut down, and I never caught the omega scent again. He just didn't want to talk about it."

Sam nodded. Yeah, that was Steve all right. Liked to keep personal things to himself. Sam wasn't sure if that was a product of his upbringing, or just how he was.

Maybe a bit of both.

"He doing better with Junior?" Nat asked. "He seemed pretty shocked to see her."

"Yeah, he sure was," Sam agreed. "Actually, yeah, they're doing okay. Steve likes routine, and so do babies. So, once they've got that down, I'm sure he'll be fine."

"Clint sent me a photo."

"Oh?"

She showed him her phone, screen displaying a close-up of Steve holding Lara in his huge arms. They were smiling at each other.

It was a good photo.

"Nice," Sam said. He didn't know Barton was taking photos. Good to know.

"I'll send it to you," Nat said. "It's cute. It could be a postcard."

Sam huffed a laugh. "Barton kept you up to date then? With what's been happening and all?"

"Aside from photos? He said the conclusion so far, is Bruce thinks the baby has Steve's serum, so she eats a lot."

"Uh, yeah, that's accurate, " Sam said. "Bruce did all these tests and so far it seems like she has some
version of the serum. She's strong. Like, she broke some toys, and tore a few clothes. That's pretty strong for an infant."

"Super baby," Nat said fondly.

"Seems so, yeah. Or maybe in a few years, anyway."

"Clint wants to train her."

"So I've heard," Sam chuckled.

"He'd be good at it," Nat said. "He's very patient."

"I'm sure he is. Maybe give Steve a while to get used to the idea first. I don't think he has space in his head for that far into the future right now."

Natasha hmmed, and nodded.

They sat in silence for a while. Sam's phone pinged with the photo message from Nat, and he looked at the photo on-screen.

"The Internet would go nuts for this," Sam chuckled. "Captain America holding a baby. Hey, did you see that old photo Jarvis found? Steve on his USO tour holding a baby? It's pretty grainy, but it's real funny."

"I saw." Nat smiled in amusement. "His costume was something else."

"Yes," Sam agreed. Yes, it was. Honest-to-god skin-tight nylon or something, with those little wings on the cowl.

Poor Steve, seriously.

Sam exhaled slowly while looking out the window. He drummed his fingers on his leg, and checked the time. He'd only been in the car forty-five minutes.

"How long are we waiting?"

"I was going to give it till ten," Nat said. "Plan B, I draw him out, and we talk to him here."

"That could be tense," Sam said. "I mean, if we want him to talk, then less tense would be good."

"I could set off the fire alarm in the hotel," Nat said, "then everyone would have to come out. I'll distract the alpha and the beta, while you talk to him."

"I guess..." Sam hoped they wouldn't have to do that. It was hopeless trying to talk to omegas if they had anyone breathing down their neck.

For all they knew, the omega had an alpha and didn't want any interruptions.

But Steve deserved to know.

Not to mention all the potential medical issues Baby Lara could have that they didn't know about yet. Steve had vetoed hacking into the omega's medical files, saying he'd rather talk first.

If they waited too long, it could put Lara at risk.
Twenty minutes later, after Sam's ass had truly gone to sleep, Nat's phone pinged quietly and she checked it, just as someone came out of the hotel entrance and started off down the street.

"That's him," Nat said, starting the engine. She buckled up, as did Sam.

"Think he'll take the train?"

"Yeah," she said, easing the car out and driving. "It's a block away."

They tailed the omega down the street until he got to the station.

"Want me to go after him?" Sam asked.

"No, let's meet him there," Nat said, driving to the end of the street and taking a left turn.

Nat drove them to Hell's Kitchen. It was a short ride, and the tracker on Nat's phone indicated the omega was still on the train.

She parked them as close to the omega center she could get, a few cars down.

"Wait," Sam said, as she cut the engine, "did you want to talk to him before his group?"

Natasha looked at him. "You really want to wait another two hours?"

"Not really," Sam said honestly, "but I don't feel like leaping on someone as they're going into a group either. What group is it anyway?"

Nat looked down, then back up at Sam. "Post-partum depression."

Sam whistled lowly. "Yeah, I'm not sure I want to stop him going to that kind of group. We might scare him away, which could be cutting him off from support he needs right now."

Nat watched him a moment, then nodded once. "There's a Chinese restaurant across the street?"

"Guess we're eating Chinese then." Sam smiled.

They waited for the omega to show first. Nat's phone beeped to alert them when he'd exited the train, and walked down the street toward the drop-in center. He passed right by them.

Sam watched him through the tinted windows, a white kid in skinny jeans and a jacket, with a hood pulled up and shaggy dark hair obscuring his face.

Sam said quietly, "There's our guy."

"Yep," Nat confirmed.

They watched him go into the building, waiting a few more minutes before getting out and going across the street.

"May as well order what we want," Nat said, opening the door. "We got time."

They ordered food to eat in, grabbing a table near to the window. Sam had sweet and sour chicken with noodles, egg fried rice, and lots of seaweed. Nat had dim sum, egg rolls, and stole some of Sam's rice.

They ate slowly, knowing they had at least two hours to kill. Nat checked her phone for the tracker
at regular intervals, while Sam went on Google to read up on the omega center, and what it did.

It was a free health clinic, and also hosted various support groups running in the evenings. The new parent's group was tomorrow. The post-partum group was on tonight.

Sam read through the weekly schedule, frowning in thought.

"You said he was here three nights ago?" Sam asked quietly.

"Yeah, Tuesday," Nat confirmed.

The schedule listed for Tuesday's group was support for domestic abuse survivors.

Sam exhaled and set down his chopsticks.

This situation seemed way more complicated than he'd first thought.

And he was really glad they hadn't jumped on the omega before he'd gone in to his group tonight.

Group support was important; if something happened to distract a person from going to their group, it could throw them off kilter, and Sam never wanted to do that if he could help it.

And two groups in one week was pretty intense for anybody.

Maybe he hadn't been able to go before, Sam thought, because of looking after the baby. Trying to do everything as a single parent had to be difficult.

Sam picked up his tea, took a sip. "Have you told Steve any of this?"

Nat shook her head, eating expertly with her chopsticks. "Didn't feel like my place."

Sam nodded. He didn't want to go around broadcasting what groups someone went to either. That was their business, and theirs to tell.

"Have you told him you found him?"

"No," Nat said. "We've been texting. He knows I'm close. I said to give it a couple more days and then I'll report in." She picked up her cup of jasmine tea, considering. "I think he knows I'm lying, or buying time."

"Possible," Sam agreed. "After everything we just went through with SHIELD, I wouldn't be surprised if he's suspicious."

Nat shrugged a shoulder. "I don't take it personally. I thought he'd be chasing my heels and wanting to do everything himself, but instead he's just sitting back. It's not like him."

Sam nodded at that. "Yeah. But I'm pretty sure once this initial shock has worn off he'll be back to normal. Although," he smiled, "I think a different kind of normal would be good for Steve. Shake up his routine, have a life that doesn't revolve solely around work."

"You mean trade in his shield for diapers?" Nat raised an eyebrow, and smiled. "I can't see it happening."

"Maybe not full-time," Sam said, "but he's really taken to just hanging out with Lara. I think it'll be a good change for him. A new beginning."
"I agree with you, but I bet you twenty dollars that he won't put down the shield yet." Nat picked up her chopsticks again. "While we're on the subject, Tony and I are tracking down some rogue Hydra cells. Nothing much to speak of, but we won't ignore them either. When we go bust them, you want in?"

Sam nodded. "I'm in. And I'll talk to Steve too, see if he'll think about hiring one of those nannies Pepper recommended. Because four hours sleep a night is not enough to function properly, even for Steve. Especially if missions come up."

"A nanny could work." Nat picked up part of an egg roll with her chopsticks and dipped it in soy sauce. "I think we should find out whether the omega wants to co-parent this child or not. And if he's trustworthy. Because if he does want to, and it goes well, it's one more pair of hands to take care of her. And, it's her omega."

Sam nodded. "That's what I'm thinking too. I don't know whether he just got overwhelmed as a single parent, or has no interest in raising her, but it'll be good to know either way."

"Yeah, it would." Nat checked her phone. "He's still in there. Another hour to go. I think we should wait in the car in a half hour."

"No problem."

They finished their food slowly, and made use of the facilities before heading back to the car.

Sam got inside and sat back in the cool leather seat, sighing happily. "I am so full."

Nat laughed, shook her head. "Lucky we got twenty-five minutes for you to digest your food then."

"Yeah. Give me a heads up when he moves."

"Will do." Natasha settled back in her seat, hands in her lap. She was quiet a moment, then said, "I remember when we first noticed Steve's stomach rumble a lot, and then Bruce worked with him to set up a diet plan. Has he done the same with Lara?"

Sam exhaled a laugh. "Poor Steve, man. He sure can eat. Yeah, I guess it's similar for Lara. She needs to eat a lot. We use formula and soft food for a baby, of course, then we just have to add the never ending list of supplements Bruce suggested, mix it in a blender, and try get her to eat it all. Takes forever, by the way. Babies eat slowly, but that's the way it goes."

Nat smiled. "You have siblings?"

"Yeah, and cousins. Lots of cousins."

"Young ones?"

"At the moment," Sam frowned in thought, "I think the youngest is seven. I don't see them as much now, especially when I was in D.C. And the ones I'm closest to are all in their twenties."

"Where are they?" Natasha asked.

"Mostly Harlem. Couple in New Jersey."

"Maybe you should invite them to the tower," Nat said. "Introduce them to Steve and the baby."

Sam looked at her, not getting her meaning. "Yeah?"
She nodded. "Might bring him out of his shell, being around other kids and their parents. Either that, or we can send him to an omega and baby group."

Sam laughed. "Yeah, I don't think that'll fly. Maybe we could start with a nice, low key trip to the park."

"Park is good."

Nat's phone beeped, and she checked it.

"He's moving," she confirmed. "He'll likely come this way for the train. You talk to him, I'll circle around in case he runs."

"Got it."

 Barely a moment later, the omega walked past at a brisk pace.

Sam got out of the car, pushing the door closed behind him and following quickly.

"Hey, man," he said, trying not to raise his voice too much, "sorry to interrupt..."

The omega spun around, looking at Sam with wide eyes then glancing left to right, clearly checking his escape routes.

Sam held his hands out palms up, and waited a couple paces away.

If a stranger approached him on the street at night, he'd be apprehensive too.

"Hey, I'm Sam," he said, "I'm–"

The omega extended a hand and flicked out a switchblade.

"Whoa, easy," Sam said, keeping his voice calm. "I'm a friend of Steve's. Steve Rogers?"

The omega's wide-eyed expression changed to a frown of confusion, and his hand pointing the knife sagged. "What do you want?"

Sam still had his hands up, and he noticed Natasha approach the omega from behind, but hang back between two parked cars.

"I'm Steve's friend. I've been helping take care of your baby. I can show you a photo to prove it?" Sam offered. "Got it on my phone here, him and Lara."

That must've been the magic word, Sam thought, watching the omega's face crumple.

"Is she alright?" he asked, voice hitching.

"She's fine," Sam said gently. "Want to see? I'll just get my phone out, you can see the photo." He reached slowly into his pocket, getting out his phone. "If you ditch the knife, I'll let you see. That fair?"

"Oh... yeah." He pocketed the knife, then stepped closer, eyes fixed on Sam's phone as he brought up the picture of Steve holding Lara.

Sam watched him stare at the picture, noting that his eyes were glassy, with dark circles under them.
Someone else who needed more sleep, Sam decided.

"You're James, right?" Sam said, keeping his voice gentle and even. "I'm Sam, and like I said, I'm a friend of Steve's. We're worried about you, and I just came to talk."

The omega, James, looked up and briefly met his eyes. He looked wary, like he would bolt any second.

When he didn't respond, Sam tried again. "How are you doing? It's hard work caring for baby, right?"

James didn't answer his questions, but he swallowed hard and asked, "Is she okay?"

"Yes, she's doing just fine," Sam told him. "She's great. She's a real happy baby."

The frown returned, like this wasn't what he'd expected to hear. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, man. And we got a real great doctor been looking after her—" Sam looked over the omega's shoulder to see Natasha.

The omega noticed too, looking behind him and starting in surprise.

"This is Natasha," Sam explained, holding up one hand to indicate to Nat it was okay. "Also a friend of Steve's. We're only here because we're worried about you. Steve is worried about you too."

James turned back to Sam, shaking his head again. "I can't talk right now. If I miss my train, I'll be late and..."

His voice wobbled, Sam noted, and there was alpha scent on him. It was faint, but it was there. Strong alpha male.

Maybe James had a curfew or something, and was worried about getting back to his alpha.

"It's okay," Sam said calmly, guessing this encounter was a lost cause. "How about tomorrow? We could talk then? Any time you want."

"I- I dunno..."

"What if I take Lara to the park? Central isn't that far from here, just a few blocks over. I'll bring her to the park and you can see how she's doing."

The omega shifted nervously. "Uh, would Steve be there?"

"He doesn't have to be," Natasha said, coming around to stand beside Sam, facing the omega. "Just me and Sam, and your baby."

The omega looked between them, like he didn't believe what they were saying.

"Name a time and we'll be there," Sam offered. "Just talk to us for a bit, see Lara, and then see how you feel. No pressure, okay?"

"Uh... yeah, okay." He glanced at Sam briefly, eyes still glassy with unshed tears. "When?"

"How's late morning?" Sam asked. "Ten? Eleven? There's a big carousel, you know it? At this end of Central Park. We can meet you there."
"Okay," he said in a rush, "uh, eleven."

Then he turned and hurried away.

Sam glanced at Natasha, who gave him a resigned look.

"It's a start," she said. "If he doesn't show tomorrow, we'll have to try a different approach."
At ten-thirty the next morning, Happy dropped them off at 5th avenue and 65th street, at the entrance to the park.

"Thanks, Happy." Nat unbuckled her seatbelt and slipped on a pair of designer sunglasses. "Go get a coffee, I'll text you when we're ready to go."

"No problem, Ms Romanov." Happy got out and went round to the trunk for the stroller.

Sam was in charge of Lara, and he unbuckled the baby carrier she was nestled in, grabbed it by the handle and lifted her out of the SUV.

It was a sunny morning, but with a crisp wind. Lara was wrapped up warm, with a baby blanket over her, and wearing a little hat.

The hat had red and white stripes, with blue and white star bobbles on the top, to resemble Cap's shield.

Clint had insisted on it when he'd helped Sam get Lara ready earlier.

Happy set up the stroller, a new one that'd only arrived two days ago.

Sam set the carrier on the stroller's frame, and it clicked into place easily. Instant stroller.

And it was high up too, so Lara was looking right at him.

Sam put on his own sunglasses, and Natasha came to stand beside him.

"Have fun on the carousel!" Happy waved them off.

"We'll try," Natasha said, and gave Sam a half smile.

They walked down the path, headed toward the carousel.

"I feel bad doing this behind Steve's back," Sam said, voicing his unease.

Steve was sound asleep back at the tower, having his usual four hour nap.

If they weren't back by noon when he woke up, Steve would no doubt worry.
Nat seemed unconcerned. "We're trying to help. We had limited options. Anyway, maybe we can get him to join us later. Do him good to get outside."

"That's a point," Sam said, glancing down at Lara as he pushed her along. She waved her hands as she gazed around, blue eyes wide with wonder. "He'll be mad we took her without asking first, though."

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it," Nat told him, scanning the park. "Carousel in sight."

Sam looked up, seeing the vintage carousel in the distance. "Yeah, I can see it."

Nat gave him a sidelong smile, like she was humoring him.

"Oh. You weren't talking to me."

Nat's smile was enigmatic.

"Barton?" Sam guessed.

She nodded minutely. "Let's go find somewhere to sit."

"Sure. I see a coffee stand over there, and I could do with some coffee."

Nat spotted a free bench across from the carousel. Sam parked up the stroller, angling it so Lara could look at the brightly painted horses as they went round and round, music filling the air.

"I think she likes it," Sam chuckled, watching her mesmerized expression.

"Probably the bright colors," Nat said. "We got time, I'll go grab us a coffee."

"Thanks. Latte if they got it, no sugar."

"Because you're sweet enough?" Nat smiled over her shoulder as she walked away.

Sam grinned in response, turning to Lara to whisper, "Yes, I am."

He sat on the bench, close enough that Lara could still see him, and kept one arm draped on the stroller's handle.

He felt wary being outside with someone else's baby, like Steve would jump out from behind a bush any second and demand to know what was going on.

Sam had said as much to Clint this morning, who'd responded, "Think long-term, here. The kid's omega is important too."

Sam supposed he was right.

He looked around the park, at the people nearby watching the carousel, and at the family playing frisbee over on the green. He wondered where Barton was, if he was watching from a distance.

Nat came back with their coffees, handed one to Sam. "The guy at the stand said if you need a baby bottle warmed up, to come to him."

Sam huffed a laugh. "He probably meant for you to come to him, but good to know. I have a bottle for her, she'll probably want it before noon."
They sipped their coffee, and people watched. Lara burbled to herself, and Sam pushed gently at the stroller to rock it a little.

Tony hadn't made a stroller for her yet, but he had tried to convince Steve to let him build her a robotic walker instead.

Steve had so far vetoed that idea.

"Are we really going shopping after this?" Sam asked.

Nat nodded, flicking back her long red hair.

Back to her usual color.

"May as well," she said. "Ask Steve to join us."

"Good luck with that," Sam murmured, taking a sip of coffee.

"He secretly enjoys shopping," Nat replied. "He was doing okay by himself back in D.C. Picking some good outfits."

"Different for a kid though," Sam pointed out.

"Exactly. Shouldn't it be more fun?"

Sam chuckled again. "Guess we'll find out later."

It was almost eleven.

Sam was starting to worry that the omega wouldn't even show.

"Anything on his tracker?" he asked Nat.

She set her empty coffee cup aside. "It went dead before we got here. Could've fallen off and got crushed underfoot. It wasn't on that securely to begin with."

"Oh."

Well, that sucked.

They had no other choice but to wait then.

Sam sighed, and got to his feet to stretch.

"Why don't you pick up the baby," Nat suggested, still sitting on the bench and gazing around the park.

"Huh? Why?"

"Well," she said quietly, "if he has come here but he's hesitant to join us, it would be good to show off what we have."

"Oh, right." Sam stopped himself from looking around, to see if Nat had spotted the omega or if she
just had a hunch. He looked to Lara instead, and bent over the stroller. "You wanna come out for a bit? Have a hug with uncle Sam?"

Nat smirked quietly, but kept her attention on their surroundings.

Sam carefully lifted Lara out, and held her against his chest. She huffed and burbled, waving her arms. Luckily she was busy looking at all the activity in the park, so she wasn't making too much noise.

She felt warm, so Sam left her blanket in the stroller, and shifted her against him to get comfortable. "There we go," he said, holding on and bouncing a little from his knees, like Barton had shown them.

"Look at all this excitement," Sam said to her, angling so she could watch the carousel. "Look at the horsies. You want to ride on those?"

Lara made a sort of "Ahh!" noise, reaching out with one tiny hand.

"I think that's a yes," Sam laughed. "Maybe we can go a bit closer soon."

They waited, and waited, until Sam started to feel like this had all been a big waste of time. Which would mean he'd gone behind Steve's back for nothing.

Then Nat said quietly, "Incoming, two o'clock."

Sam was careful to position himself so it looked like he was just playing with the baby, but he angled his body so he could glance to the right, and he spotted the omega approaching their bench.

Sam was relieved, and knew he had to play this cool and careful.

He waited until the omega, James, got closer before he looked up, met his eyes and said, "Hey, there. You made it."

James only had eyes for the baby, that much was clear. The look on his face said it all.

Sam turned Lara a bit, so she could see the omega. "Who's this?" Sam said to her, trying to get her attention.

James stepped closer, reached out a hand to touch her but at the last moment withdrew. "I- didn't think you'd really bring her," he said shakily.

Sam noticed his eyes looked watery. "Why don't we sit down?" he suggested. "You want to hold her for a bit?"

Natasha got up from the bench. "Please, take my seat." She indicated for him to sit, seemingly polite, but Sam understood that she wanted to move into a defensive position, probably in case James bolted.

Nat stood back, so Sam took his cue, and sat down on the bench. "Come on, man. It's okay, just sit with us."

James took a deep breath, and sat close on the bench. He was still looking at the baby, couldn't seem to take his eyes off her.

"You want to hold her?" Sam asked again.
The omega nodded, lips pressed tightly together.

Sam carefully transferred Lara over, letting the omega hold her.

She let out a few noises, mostly curious, then latched a hand onto the omega's long hair as she gazed up at him.

"Hey, baby girl," he said softly, smiling for the first time. "Hey."

She burbled again, wriggling when he lifted her to rest on his shoulder, and hugged her. "I missed you so much, Lala."

He tucked his face close to her and inhaled, as she did the same at his neck, her little hands gripping his hair.

Babies liked to scent, Sam knew, especially with their primary caregiver.

Sam watched, and scented the air himself, but tried to be subtle about it. That alpha smell again, although it was fainter than last night.

He glanced up to Nat, who stood a little way off, watching them and also watching their surroundings, on the lookout.

Sam didn't think the omega had brought anyone with him though. He just seemed relieved to be with his baby.

Lara burbled again, and James lifted her down to sit on his lap. She wriggled excitedly, chubby little cheeks going round as she smiled.

"I forgot how heavy you are," the omega sighed.

"Oh," Sam said, reaching for the stroller's pouch. "We have something for that."

He pulled out the sling Tony had made, because holding Lara for any length of time was like holding up a set of weights.

"If I slip this around you, it'll take her weight," Sam explained, holding out the sling. "It's much easier to hold her. Want to try?"

James looked pretty tired himself, the dark circles under his eyes more prominent in the daylight.

"Yeah, okay."

Sam looped the sling around James's shoulder and under his arm, then helped him get Lara into it. Sam adjusted the strap so she was secure, and sat back. "That's better, right? And she can wriggle about now without you worrying she'll fall."

"Yeah." James looked impressed. "This is really useful. She's so damn heavy, and every time she moves I freak that she's gonna slip out of my grip or something."

"Yeah, that's understandable. She's safe in this, and it's not such a strain on who's holding her too."

Sam watched James cradle Lara and stroke his fingers over her cheek. He catalogued what he could, to remember for later. If he'd just glanced at James without knowing him, Sam might have said the guy was hungover or something. He was pale, too pale, and seemed sleepy; heavy-lidded and blinking slowly, like he'd only just woken up and needed a few hours more sleep.
His grip on the baby hadn't seemed that strong either.

Sam frowned thoughtfully. "So, how's it going? Are you okay?"

James shook his head. "Just tired."

"Want us to grab you a coffee?"

"No, I'm fine." James let Lara grip his finger with her tiny hand. He smiled down at her. "I thought I'd finally get some proper sleep, but I keep waking up panicking that I can't hear her crying, and then I can't sleep at all because I'm worrying if she's okay."

Sam was quiet a moment, watching them.

"So, um. James, if you want--"

"James?" The omega snorted. "Please don't call me that. My name is Bucky."

"Bucky? Okay," Sam amended. "Sorry. Bucky, then. You know, if you want to see Lara, I'm sure that can be arranged. You do want to see her, right?"

The omega looked sad, and didn't answer.

"We want you to see her," Sam tried. "I'm sure she wants to see you. Look how happy she is."

Lara was smiling and drooling a little.

"What do you want to do?" Sam asked him.

Bucky swallowed. "I want to see her," he said. "It's just... It's difficult right now. I have this work to do, but it should be finished soon. And I didn't have anyone else to look after her."

"Okay, man. Okay," Sam said gently. "That's cool. She's doing great; she has an entire team taking care of her right now. And any time you want to come see her, maybe talk to Steve, that's fine too."

"Is he angry?" Bucky fixed Sam with a look, his gaze piercing.

Sam was a little taken aback, catching the scent of anger brimming just under the omega's skin. He hadn't expected such a sharp turn.

"Well, no, I don't think so," he said honestly. "It's a little hard to gauge what Steve thinks sometimes. But he's worried about you. It'd be good if you two could talk."

"Yeah, right," the omega scoffed. "Tell him I've got a lot of hospital bills to pay off. I couldn't even get in touch with him until I saw on the news he'd moved into Stark Tower. Figured he could take a turn babysitting, because I'm sure as hell exhausted."

"Okay," Sam placated, keeping his voice calm. "Yeah, it must be exhausting. He's finding that out for himself, don't worry about that. Did you know Lara needs a complex diet? Did she have a doctor or anything?"

Bucky sighed. "Figures. I kept asking them about what to feed her, because she seemed so heavy after the first month. I swear she was only seven pounds when she was born, and everything seemed okay when I left with her. But she kept crying all the time, like really crying, and when I asked at the post natal place they didn't know anything, so they just put her on a waiting list for more doctors. She
never stopped crying, I didn't know what to do."

"I'm sorry, man," Sam said. "Must've been rough not knowing what was going on. Look, she's got a special diet all set up now. She needs a baby version of a bodybuilder's diet, and really frequently too."

Bucky looked at him, confused. "What do you mean, bodybuilder?"

"Well, not exactly," Sam said, "but it sure seems that way. Her cells regenerate faster than us regular folks, because she has some version of Steve's serum. Probably why she's so heavy and strong, too."

Bucky's face went blank, like he was in shock.

"For real?" he muttered, glancing down at Lara again. "So... it wasn't me? I thought it was me." He blinked and tears spilled down his cheeks.

"Hey, it's okay." Sam moved closer, set his hand gently on the omega's shoulder. "I'm sure you did everything you could."

"I thought it was me," he sobbed, hugging Lara close. "I thought she hated me. She never stopped crying, and it was all my fault."

"It's okay, it's okay," Sam repeated, rubbing his back. "I don't think it's that at all. I think you have a very special baby, who needs extra-special help, and she's got that now. She's got a great doctor, all the extra supplements she needs, and Steve, and loads more people to help take care of her. And you can be part of that too. No one wants to shut you out, here."

He was still crying, and Lara started fussing, clearly getting distressed that her omega was upset.

"It's okay," Sam repeated, talking to Lara now. "It's all good, little one."

"Shit," Bucky muttered, sniffing. "Stupid hormones... Can you...?" He made to pass Lara over, and forgot about the sling attached to him.

"Here, let me..." Sam helped with the sling, lifting it from Bucky and transferring it to himself, cradling Lara against him. He rocked her gently, murmuring softly, "It's okay, kid, it's okay."

Bucky wiped at his eyes with his sleeve, when Natasha stepped in, offering a small travel pack of tissues.

"Here," she said softly.

Bucky looked at her in surprise before taking the tissues. "Thanks," he sniffed. "I'm fine, it's just hormones."

"Happens to the best." Nat gave him a half smile.

Sam smiled too, still trying to settle Lara by rocking her gently. She was crying like she wasn't sure what she should be upset about, but he hoped she'd settle.

"What can we do to help?" Sam asked, having to be direct. Lara was going to need his full attention soon.

Bucky wiped his eyes dry, and blew his nose. "I got this job to do. After that, I... I'd like to see her." A fresh tear escaped, but he caught it with another tissue before it rolled down his face. "But I don't have any money left."
"I'm sure we can sort this all out," Sam assured him. "You're not on your own now, okay? You got a whole support system."

"We'll help you," Nat put in. "Even if you don't want to speak to Steve right now, Sam and I will help."

Sam didn't want to disagree with her in front of the omega, but he was dubious about making promises to keep Steve out of this. "It'll be okay," he reaffirmed. "Whatever it is, we'll sort it out, and the main thing is that Lara has the help she needs now. So that just leaves you, man."

"I'll be fine." Bucky dug in his pocket to check his phone. "I gotta go."

"You just got here," Nat pointed out. "Stay a little longer?"

"I can't, it's work." He glanced at Lara before getting to his feet.

He seemed to wobble as he stood, and Sam went to reach out in case he went down.

"You okay?" Sam asked.

Bucky looked dazed, but he shook his head. "Just headrush. I gotta go."

"Leave your number with me." Sam went to pull a card from his pocket that he'd written his number on earlier. "This is mine. It'll be a lot easier to stay in touch."

"And you can arrange to see your baby when you have more time," Nat suggested, catching Sam's eye.

"Uh… Alright." Bucky relented and took the card. He entered it in his phone, an old model, and sent a text. Sam felt it vibrate in his pocket. "Just… don't give it to Steve, okay? I need to psych myself up for that."

Sam nodded. "I promise I'll keep whatever you send me between us, unless I'm worried about your personal safety. So, please, for all our sakes, keep in touch."

"Okay." Bucky glanced back at Lara one last time before walking away.

On cue, Lara let rip a real scream, and Sam couldn't delay any longer.

"Hey, Nat, how about taking that coffee stand guy up on his offer of heating a bottle for us? It's in the stroller there."

"Sure." Nat stopped watching Bucky walk away, and went to fish out the bottle. "I'll just be a minute."

"Yeah, no problem. I'll try that bounce thing to calm her down." Sam got to his feet, cradling Lara in the sling and bent his knees to do the patented Barton bounce.

Nat strode over to the coffee stand with Lara's bottle, as Lara cried on.

Sam sighed, trying a few more bounces. "Well. That could've gone better," he said to Lara, "but it could've gone worse, so hopefully it's okay."

"It was awkward, that's what it was," said a voice behind him.

Sam turned to see Barton, in casual wear and sunglasses, one hand in his pocket and the other
holding an iced coffee.

"Barton," Sam greeted. "Care to stop this baby from getting even more upset?"

Clint took a noisy slurp from his drink. "You're doing okay. Bend your knees more when you bounce."

Sam huffed under his breath, and went back to bouncing Lara. "Come on, kid," he said. "Make uncle Sam look good here."

Clint laughed at that.

"You not going after him?" Sam asked.

Clint shook his head. "Nat said not to."

Sam wasn't sure about that either, but what could they do? They couldn't keep stalking the poor guy; they had to let him make his own choices.

Sam was just worried.

"I'm gonna text your omega later," Sam muttered to Lara. "Check he's okay. Don't you worry."

Lara cried until Nat came back with the bottle, and Clint stopped drinking his coffee and helped. He tested the bottle first on his wrist, then took Lara in the sling and offered the bottle to her.

Luckily she decided she'd rather eat than cry, and latched on immediately.

Clint looked smug, and Sam tried not to feel annoyed.

Nat finished off Clint's coffee.

"So," Sam said, folding his arms.

"So," Nat echoed.

They shared a look, and Sam tried to determine how she'd felt the meeting went, but Natasha was a hard read.

"I'm going to give him an hour," Sam said decidedly, "then I'll text him."

Nat nodded. "I think you should. He needs to feel like he has a friend in us, and he seemed to respond to you."

"Everyone loves Sam," Clint put in, which had Sam raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Thank you, Clint. I'm touched."

Clint waggled his eyebrows in reply, still feeding Lara with the bottle. Sam let out a laugh, grateful for the distraction.

Today had been tense, and it wasn't even noon.

"See if you can open and maintain a dialogue with him," Nat instructed. "I'll handle Steve."

Sam looked at her, again trying to read her reaction. "Are you going to tell him about... I dunno, how unwell the guy looks?"
Nat shook her head once. "We don't know anything yet, Sam, we'd only be guessing. And Steve would worry."

"Think it's drugs?" Clint asked. "You two were closer than me."

Sam frowned in thought. "I wasn't getting a drug vibe, and it wasn't on his scent either. I think it's because of the baby."

Nat frowned too, concern showing. "I think you're right."

"We're actually going shopping?" Clint exclaimed, after taking selfies of them all with Lara in front of the carousel, and pushing the stroller along to meet Happy at the car.

"We need a cover," Nat told him. "And it could be good to lure Rogers out of his hidey-hole."

Clint laughed heartily. "Oh, man. Okay, okay. But this kid will do a doodle soon, I am warning you."

"There are baby changing facilities at the store, I checked." Nat headed over to the SUV, where Happy was holding a door open for her. "Thank you, Happy," she said as she got inside.

"My pleasure, Ms Romanov." Happy grinned at her as he shut the door.

Sam glanced at Clint, as they'd been left with the stroller and the baby.

Clint clapped him on the back. "I'll take the tot, you take the stroller."

"Sure."

They unclipped the carrier from the frame, and Clint lifted Lara up, taking her into the backseat.

"Mister Barton," Happy greeted. "I didn't know you were joining us today."

"And miss going shopping?" Clint said sarcastically. "Never!"

Sam smiled to himself as he dismantled the stroller, and Happy came around to the trunk to help.

"Is Captain Rogers...?" Happy began.

Sam shrugged. "Man, I'm about as clued in as you right now. With any luck he may join us."

Sam got into the back with Clint, and buckled Lara in between them in her carrier.

"Has he even woken up yet?" Sam asked Clint quietly.

"It's eleven forty-five, so we're good for another fifteen minutes." Clint tapped the driver's headrest as Happy got into SUV. "Drive like your life depends on it."

Happy turned in his seat to fix Clint with a look. "Wait, does he not know you've got the baby?"

"Happy," Natasha cut in, "let's go."
"By the way," Clint said, walking beside Sam as he pushed Lara along in the stroller, "did you even ask that omega the burning question?"

"What burning question?" Sam replied, eyes on Natasha and Happy up ahead in the store. Happy was pushing a shopping cart around, and Natasha was filling it up with baby items she pulled off the racks.

"You know," Clint muttered.

"No?" Sam figured there were at least a dozen burning questions, none of which he'd had a chance to ask Bucky before he'd left.

"The name reference." Clint made a silly face at Lara, and gained a smile in return. "Lara Croft."

"Oh," Sam snorted, "yeah, that really was the burning question, Barton."

And now Sam thought about it, hadn't Bucky called her Lala, not Lara? Sam had been too concerned with everything else to notice at the time.

"I'll ask him," Clint said decidedly. "We'll get to the bottom of this mystery."

Sam sighed.

He was hungry, and he wanted to go eat lunch.

So far they'd gotten to the baby superstore, changed Lara's stinky diaper, then followed Natasha around as she browsed the departments like she had all the time in the world.

"Steve been in contact?"

"Yeah," Clint confirmed. "Nat talked to him while we did the diaper."

"He joining us?"

"Amazingly, yes. Then we'll get lunch." Clint raised his voice to call not so subtly, "Because I'm really hungry."

Nat and Happy ignored him, which made Sam smile.

"Have we got protein bars?" Sam asked.

"I don't know. You could have some of Lara's formula," Clint offered.

"No." Sam went to rummage in the stroller himself.

There had to be something to eat in there.

Clint busied himself making kissy faces at Lara, and she babbled away happily.

Sam was so intent on finding a snack, he wasn't paying attention when a couple of omegas stopped by the stroller to have a peek in at the baby.

"Oh, she's just adorable!" one of them said.
Sam glanced up to see two very attractive women, and he forgot all about his snack. He got to his feet as Barton was grinning and telling the omegas how good the baby was.

"Look how she's smiling!" one cooed. "How old is she?"

"Six months," Sam said, beating Clint to the punch. He put on his winning smile. "Happy as a clam."

"Six months? She must be eating well," the omega said. "She's a good size."

"Yeah, you better believe it," Clint chuckled.

"It's so nice to see more men with babies," the second omega said. "My cousin is gay too, and he used a surrogate."

Sam's eyebrows rose, and he glanced at Barton just as Barton glanced at him, then they both spoke at once.

"No, no, we--"

"We're not--"

"We're babysitting," Sam said firmly. "For a friend."

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry." The omega blushed. "I mean, I just assumed... you looked like you were together..."

The second omega tugged on her sleeve. "Come on, Emily. I think we've embarrassed these poor guys enough. I'm real sorry!"

"Uh... No problem," Barton said, as the two omegas hurried away.

He shared a look with Sam.

"Well, that was awkward."

"Yeah," Sam muttered, then turned to see that Natasha and Happy were watching close by with amused grins on their faces.

"Not one word," Sam warned.
Steve walked down 5th avenue to the address Nat had sent him. It was quicker than getting a cab during the busy lunch hour, and it was also good for Steve to let off some steam by marching down the street.

He'd already had a very clipped and angry phone conversation with Natasha for having taken Lara out without telling him first.

He found the baby emporium, and after tugging his cap down a little lower over his face, he walked through the automatic glass doors.

Steve looked around at the huge department store, lit in soft artificial lighting and displaying so many baby clothes, rack after rack. He glanced at a sign listing all the departments, and got out his phone.

He sent to Nat, Which dept are you in?

Then he waited for her reply.

A rack of tiny onesies caught his eye, as they had his red, white, and blue shield emblem printed on them.

Steve felt a mix of pride and embarrassment seeing that design on babywear. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about all of the modern marketing yet, but he supposed he'd started it by agreeing to dress up for those U.S.O. shows in the first place.

Steve exhaled heavily, and wandered through the store.

There were a lot of women pushing strollers around, or shopping alone. The scents of happy, mated omegas were thick in the air.

Steve tried not to breathe too deeply, ducked his face down, and attempted to look inconspicuous in between racks of baby socks and bibs.

When Nat replied with their exact location, Steve gratefully hurried away and took the stairs up one floor. He followed the signs that said Six months, and spotted Natasha in between aisles of baby dresses, with Happy and a large cart full of shopping next to her.

"Hey," Steve said, approaching them. He looked around for Lara, but couldn't see her.

"Good afternoon, Captain Rogers," Happy said, rather nervously and standing to attention.
Natasha spun around brandishing two small babygrows on hangers, holding them up for Steve to see. "I can't decide," she said, looking at him and giving an apologetic smile.

Steve presumed the surprise shopping trip was her way of trying to get him out of the tower, and he gave a cursory glance at the clothes. Then did a double-take when he realised the red and orange one was designed to look like the Iron Man suit, and the other was a red, white, and blue replica of his own suit. "Nat, no," he said, then looked around for his baby. "Where's Lara?"

Nat pointed across the floor. "With Sam and Clint, helping them pick up girls."

Steve frowned. "Helping them... what?"

Nat shrugged. "I don't think they've succeeded yet."

Happy looked nervous, so Steve turned around and went to go find out for himself.

As he walked away he heard Nat saying, "I think both these outfits are cute. Don't you, Happy?"

Steve sighed. He figured he'd be vetoing quite a few items in that cart before they left the store today.

He saw Sam and Clint up ahead in among racks of baby clothes, with Lara's stroller.

Clint was holding Lara, and Steve hung back a moment to watch what they were doing.

Sure enough, every time a woman wandered past them, both of them said hello and kind of angled themselves to best show off the baby.

Steve raised his eyebrows. Nat wasn't kidding.

One woman stopped to talk and leaned in to smile at Lara, who gurgled happily in response.

At least Lara was safe and happy.

Steve wondered what she thought about being in a big store like this, meeting strangers. Maybe she was enjoying it, judging from the cheerful, inquisitive noises she made.

When the woman eventually moved on, despite Clint trying to get her to keep talking, Steve stealthily snuck up behind them.

"What an adorable baby you have there," he said flatly.

It was worth it to see the looks on their faces when they turned to see him.

"Hey!" Clint grinned, recovering quickly. "Look who it is!"

Lara burbled loudly in his arms.

"Hey, man," Sam greeted, appearing a little guilty.

Steve gave them both a look. "Are you done?" he asked, and held out his hands. "My turn."

He reached to take Lara, and Clint transferred her over carefully.

"Hey, there," Steve said softly, holding Lara against his chest, and bumping her up a bit to get comfortable. "Hey, kid. Have you been on an adventure?"

She gazed up at him and patted one little fist on his chest while waving the other in the air.
"Laaah-aaahh!" she let out excitedly.

Steve grinned, amused at her sounds. He was surprised every day at the sounds she could make, testing out her vocal chords. She was even able to laugh at times. Steve was so relieved to hold her, he hugged her close and bent his head to tuck his face in at her neck.

His first inhale caught in his lungs.

_Bucky_.

That was Bucky's scent on her, he was sure of it.

Steve stilled in surprise, though Lara continued to wriggle and move against him. He had to snap out of it, push this shock aside and put Lara first.

He tamped down on his frustration and anger at the realisation his team-mates, his _friends_, had taken his baby, and potentially put her in danger.

What if Bucky had taken Lara back? Steve might have never seen her again. Hadn't they considered the dangers?

From now on, Steve would just have to make sure he didn't let her out of his sight.

And he'd be having words with his team. Strong words.

Steve adjusted Lara against him and cleared his throat pointedly. "So..." He moved to stand in the clear space between aisles as he held Lara. "Shall we go pick out some clothes?"

"You... want to pick out clothes?" Sam asked, dubious.

"Sure," Steve replied firmly. "I suspect Nat is picking out things that she knows will annoy me, so I better make my own choices while I can."

Clint smothered a laugh, and they followed along after him with the stroller.

Steve set his feelings aside, or tried to, and gazed about at the endless displays of baby clothes and accessories.

It was a little daunting, and maybe Clint and Sam sensed his growing panic, as they moved in closer and subtly gave off calming beta pheromones.

Steve breathed in their scent, hugged Lara close, and tried to keep it together.

"These look cute," Clint said calmly, drawing Steve's attention to rows of tiny dresses with frilly sleeves.

"Yeah, they're not bad," Sam said, equally calm.

They started picking some dresses off the racks and checking the sizes.

"What color do you like, Cap?" Clint asked, holding a pink one up against a peach one.

"Um..." Steve looked between the two, but he wasn't all that keen on those designs. They looked a little fussy, especially with frilly sleeves. Lara was a _baby_, she wasn't going to a social engagement. She should wear clothes that were soft and comfortable.
Steve's eyes drifted across the display, past the dresses, and over to some little tops instead, more simple in design but still in nice colors.

"Maybe those over there?"

"Sure," Clint agreed, "lead the way."

Steve managed to stay calm. Holding Lara helped, feeling her move and breathe against him was grounding. Steve held her close, let her reach out and touch the clothes too, especially if they were bright colors. She seemed to like those.

He had thought shopping for baby clothes would be boring, but surprisingly it was kind of fun to look at the outfits and imagine Lara wearing them, or see which ones she was drawn to, wriggling excitedly and waving her hands.
Some were just too adorable for words.

As they continued to look around --and Steve hadn't been kidding; he did need to pick out clothes or he knew he'd end up with the choices Nat had made-- Steve relaxed a little into the task.

She had babygrows already, but he picked a few more of those. As for outfits, his favorites were the tops; t-shirts or long sleeves with colors and prints on the front. He gravitated towards green the most, as he'd always liked green and its many shades.

Then Clint started suggesting color combinations, like tiny purple pants to go with the green tops.

Steve's artist eye got inspired for the first time in forever, and he really warmed to the task, as well as bickering with Clint over the choices.

Sam diligently pushed the stroller behind them, as it got filled with more and more items Steve chose.

Steve eventually put the baby sling on, so Lara would be more comfortable while he browsed.

"Think we should get one of those papoose things too?" Sam asked, peering around the aisles. "I can see some over there. She'd be upright then, and you'd have both hands free."

So they went over to the papoose section, and Steve tried on a couple with Clint and Sam holding Lara. A store assistant came over to help, going through the different styles and functions with them.

Steve tried not to think about the cost; these were expensive. He could afford it, but it made him feel guilty thinking of the hand-me-down stroller, and few clothes that Lara had shown up in a week ago, and how that'd likely been all Bucky could afford.

Had Bucky been all on his own raising a baby? Had he had to wander around a store like this by himself, picking clothes for a newborn?

Then again, the price tags here were pretty high. Steve couldn't see Bucky shopping here, and the clothes Lara had arrived in had been basic, and simple. He'd probably shopped for them somewhere cheaper.

The thought of Bucky struggling to buy anything for Lara made Steve's chest clench with guilt. He would've helped. He never would've let Bucky do all this on his own.
He exhaled heavily, and tried to put it out of his mind for now.
When he'd argued with Nat on the phone, she'd confirmed that she made contact with Bucky, that he was okay, but clearly not ready to talk yet.

Or, not to Steve. That much was obvious.

Nat said she'd keep in contact with him until he actually spoke to Steve himself, but she didn't have any idea how long that would be.

Steve tried not to feel hurt at that. It was another reminder that Bucky didn't want to see him.

Steve had made his peace with that, or at least he'd thought he had.

Having to wait and see if Bucky would speak to him all over again reopened old wounds, and Steve tried not to feel resentful.

Bucky had made his choice.

Lara, she was a different story. She was his baby. Caring for her, and holding her every day had been terrifying at first, but now Steve couldn't imagine living without her.

The close contact with another person, as tiny as she was, and taking care of her because she depended on him, filled a hole in Steve's heart that he hadn't realised was there. The rush of happiness he felt whenever she smiled at him or looked into his eyes and laughed warmed him to his core.

Steve loved her. He loved his daughter. He wanted to be a good parent. That was what mattered right now, and that's what he would focus on.

They all left the store together and went half a block down to a family friendly diner for lunch, carrying the shopping bags between them.

Natasha sat next to Steve and said quietly, "So. Maria and Tony have eyes on two rogue Hydra cells."

Steve stopped playing with Lara, who was strapped to his chest in her brand new papoose, and looked to Nat in question. "They have the locations?"

"Almost," Nat said, stirring creamer into her coffee. "We could be ready to go in as little as one week. You need to hire a nanny, Steve."

"I... Oh." Steve looked down at his baby, the thought of leaving her even for a moment wrenching at his insides.

He didn't want to leave Lara with someone else. But what if Hydra regrouped? And what if the world that Lara grew up in was threatened by Hydra again, because Steve had been selfish and wanted to stay home when he could've done something about it?

"Yeah, okay," he replied, knowing Nat was right. "I'll look over the list Pepper gave me."

Natasha smiled, and took a sip of her coffee.

"You could get a manny," Clint said, squeezing a packet of ketchup. "A hot one."
Steve gave him a reproachful look, and Sam side-eyed him.

"Whoever is the best suited for the job," Steve said.

"But they can be that, and hot, is all I'm saying," Clint squirted ketchup liberally onto his fries, some of it splattering on his shirt. "Aw, ketchup, no."

Natasha handed him a napkin.

After the meal and checking on Lara's diaper, they made their way back to the car with all the new baby purchases.

Happy and Clint loaded the bags into the trunk. Steve had Lara strapped to his chest in the papoose, and once he handed over the shopping bags he'd carried, he cradled Lara's back in one hand and tickled her with the other.

"Who's been a good girl today?"

She watched his fingers tickle her neck before breaking out in an excited laugh. Steve smiled back at her. She was so beautiful, and her blue eyes were so bright.

Her hair was a bit of a mess today, because of the little hat she'd worn. Steve moved his hand to stroke her head again, trying to tame the fine, blonde tufts.

"Look what they did to your hair," he tutted under his breath.

"Hey, it was cold earlier," Clint replied. "And that hat was stylish."

They finished loading in all the shopping, and closed up the trunk.

"We're going to a beer tasting," Nat said, standing close to Clint. "Want to come?"

"Uh..." Steve cradled Lara protectively. "I think I'll just take her back to the tower. Get her settled."

Nat nodded, and looked to Sam.

"Maybe next time," Sam told her with a smile.

"You guys have no stamina." Clint grinned at them as he slipped on a pair of aviators. "See you later, kids."

"Bye, Happy," Nat said, before they left the parking lot, headed for the street exit.

"You can go if you want, Sam," Steve said quietly.

Sam shook his head. "I'm cool, man. I'm due a long hot bath and a good rest after all that shopping."

Steve smiled, and with Sam and Happy's help he transferred Lara back into her carrier and strapped her in the backseat.

Steve got in the back with Lara, and Sam got in the front with Happy.

"Tower, then?" Happy asked, starting the engine.
"Tower," Steve confirmed, looking to Lara beside him. He reached over and held out his index finger, letting her grab onto it.

"Let's go home," he said quietly.

Back at the tower, Steve asked Sam to take Lara in her carrier, while he went to help Happy with the shopping.

"You sure?" Sam asked.

"I can carry more," Steve said, hooking multiple bags over his arms. "No offense."

Sam raised his eyebrows at that, and Steve tried to hide his smirk.

"Alright, then," Sam said wryly. He leaned over the carrier to say to Lara, "Your daddy is a smartass."

"I don't think you should say ass in front of my daughter," Steve teased.

They carried the bags to the elevator, Happy struggling with a couple, while Steve easily carried the rest.

Sam followed behind. "Steve, you swore at least three times trying to set up that high chair last night. She definitely heard all that."

Steve kept a straight face and said, "No, that doesn't count."

Sam huffed behind him. "Are we all going to fit in this elevator?"

Happy squeezed in first, and Steve stood back so Sam could get in. "Take Lara, I'll get the next one."

"Right. See you in a minute." Sam got inside and the doors closed.

Steve was left on his own in the garage, and took a deep breath in the silence. "You're okay," he said to himself. "You're doing fine."

Another breath. He clutched all the bags on his arms and waited for the elevator to come back.

Steve didn't understand why he felt so anxious; Lara was safe here in the tower. He would see her in barely a moment.

Yet being out of his sight, Steve felt a tightness grip his chest and lungs, like an impending asthma attack would have felt years ago, before he'd got the serum.

Steve tried to breathe evenly. His lungs worked fine now, so it had to be in his head.

Maybe he should talk to Bruce.

Bruce had been hinting about checking in with him, but Steve kept brushing it off. What could medicine do for him anyway? He'd read online about drugs for anxiety, even herbal ones, but they likely wouldn't work with his metabolism. So what was the point?

This was why Steve relied on exercise so much; it was the only way to burn off his anxious energy.
And he hadn't had a lot of time for exercise the last few days.

Steve drew in one deep breath, and another.

"You're fine, you're fine, you're fine," he muttered as he exhaled, and looked up to watch the elevator indicate which floor it was on.

It came back down soon enough, and the doors opened quietly.

Steve stepped inside, relieved, but tapped his foot anxiously as it took him up to his floor.

The elevator doors were thick, but Steve heard Lara fussing before they opened. His instincts went on high alert, and he honed in on Lara as he entered his floor.

"Hey," he said, shedding all the bags at once.

She was still in the carrier, which sat on the floor, and was making upset noises, rocking it as she kicked her legs.

"Feed is definitely due," Sam said. "You want to get her in the high chair and I'll make up some food?"

"Yeah, sounds good." Steve went to the carrier, got on his knees. "Hey, little one. Don't be upset. Let's get you out of there."

He lifted Lara out carefully, as she wriggled and fussed.

If they fed her quickly enough, hopefully she wouldn't cry too much.

Steve held Lara, and glanced over at Happy, unpacking and organizing all the shopping bags. "Happy, I can do those later."

"It's no problem, Captain Rogers," Happy said cheerily. "Would you like me to remove the tags and put them away in the nursery?"

Steve's guest room had become a baby room the last few days.

"Uh, yeah... If you don't mind?"

"Not at all." Happy unpacked a bag, finding a babygrow that resembled the Iron Man suit. "Oh. Um." He hid it quickly under a pile of other baby clothes. "Leave it with me!"

Steve smiled wryly. Natasha had clearly slipped a few purchases in without him noticing.

"Thank you, Happy. We'll be in the kitchen."

Steve was about to head to his kitchen, when he felt at Lara's diaper and paused. "Sam, I'll meet you in there. I think this diaper is wet."

"You need a hand?" Sam asked. "She already did a big doodle around noon, so..."

"I'm good," Steve assured him. "I don't think it's a doodle."

"She's saving that for you later." Sam chuckled. "Okay. I'll start her food then."

"Thanks."
Steve headed off to the nursery to get her changed.

Luckily for him, it was just a wet diaper, and no doodle.

Steve changed her quickly, wiped her down, and fanned her bottom with the new diaper as she waved her chubby little legs in the air and gurgled at him.

"That good, huh?" He grinned down at her, watching her wriggle and kick. "Get some air on your skin? I'll give you a nice bath after your food, how does that sound?"

Lara squealed in reply.

Steve went to put the new diaper on. These ones were easier as they were like pull up pants, with secured tape at the sides to make them fit snugly.

"There we go." He got her dressed again, wiped his own hands with wet wipes, and picked Lara up.

He took her into his kitchen, where Sam was getting her pre-made soft meal ready.

Lara shouted and made noises as Steve set her into the high chair, and adjusted the little table.

"There you go," Steve told her. "In your little chair. Let me go wash my hands real quick..."

He'd gotten in the habit of giving a running commentary of whatever he did, as he'd read online that babies like to hear soothing voices. So Steve spoke to her as much as he could, and she did seem to respond.

Sometimes all she wanted was for someone to lean in close and make eye contact while speaking to her. She'd go all quiet and calm, or start smiling and waving her hands happily.

Steve supposed she wanted to see a face, and smell a familiar scent.

He swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat, thinking of Bucky, and forced a smile on his face as he leaned in. "Are you going to eat your food for me?"

Lara reached out and smacked a hand on his cheek.

Steve winced, but remained smiling as she squealed and did it again. "Thanks, that's my face."

Lara tried to grab his nose next, giving him a gummy smile.

Sam came over with a bowl of food. "She loves your nose, man."

Steve laughed at that. "Let me try distract her with food." He took the bowl Sam gave him, and picked up the tiny spoon. "Open wide," he said, hoping Lara would eat.

The solid food was kind of a pain in the ass; every spoonful Steve fed her seemed to dribble back out her mouth. Feeding was a repetitive task; he'd get a spoonful in, Lara would spit back out, Steve would scoop up the food from her chin and try to get back in her mouth.

The whole process took at least an hour, sometimes two.

With every spoonful, Steve told himself the more solid food she had instead of formula, the less runny her doodles were.

"Come on, baby," he urged gently, waving the spoon in front of her mouth.
"Want a coffee?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, thanks."

Sam made them coffee, and hung around during the feed. Steve sensed Sam was going to say something and he had to brace himself for it.

He really wasn't in the mood to talk, he just wanted to focus on Lara, and maybe try get her down for a nap after feeding.

Sam inhaled and let it out steadily. His beta scent spiked, sending out calming pheromones. "Steve," he said, "I'm sorry about today. We were trying to help."

Steve concentrated on Lara, on the spoonful of food he was trying to get into her.

"Sam, I just... I don't want anyone taking her again like that. I was really worried."

"Understood," Sam said. "I wouldn't let anything happen to her."

"I know that, Sam, but she's my baby. No one takes her again. Not without asking me."

"You're right. And I'm sorry. We didn't have a lot of options..."

Steve looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Then it dawned on him.

"You used her to get to Bucky."

Sam nodded, a concerned frown in place. "We tried to talk to him before. Well, I tried to talk to him, and he pulled a knife on me."

Steve pressed his lips together, and looked away.

"Yeah, he does that."

"Seriously?" Sam sounded surprised.

Lara let out a noise, and Steve turned back to her. "Sorry, kid," he murmured, offering her a new spoonful. "There you go."

Sam went quiet, allowing Steve to concentrate on Lara.

Steve's mind buzzed with questions in the silence, all the questions he'd been trying hard not to think about or he'd worry himself into more sleepless nights thinking about Bucky.

He had to work up the courage to ask, "So, is he okay?"

Sam didn't answer right away, and Steve glanced at him. He couldn't decipher Sam's expression.

"He said he's okay," Sam said, carefully neutral. "He's tired, and grouchy. Not unusual for a new parent, I guess. And seems like he's been on his own with the baby."

Steve had to swallow down his first response to that, remind himself that Sam was only relaying information, not judging him.

"Did he say anything else?" Steve asked.
"Not much. He's working, and couldn't take care of Lara at the same time. He said when he's finished his work, he wants to see her."

Steve's heart skipped a beat.

_Oh._

That would mean... Bucky would have to see him, too? So they could discuss this... co-parenting thing?

That was what people did, right? Put their feelings aside, so the baby's needs came first?

Steve could do that. He was already doing that.

"Did he say he wants her back?" he asked quietly, watching Lara spit out her mouthful of food and smile at him. He gently spooned the food off her chubby chin.

"He didn't say much, Steve. He didn't stay long, and he didn't really give us anything. Maybe he's not sure himself."

Steve frowned at that, and exhaled in frustration.

When he inhaled in again, he got a lungful of beta scent, and it helped to calm him.

"Okay." He offered Lara the spoon again, focusing all his attention on her, and her smiling face. "So, what? He's going to get in touch with me when it suits him?"

"Yeah, I think so," Sam said, apology clear in his voice. "Give him time, Steve. I think he's had a rough ride, and he's trying to figure stuff out. Everyone does that in their own, individual way."

"Right," Steve muttered.

He was trying really hard not to feel angry. Bucky had ditched him, fine. But how could Bucky ditch Lara like he did? It couldn't have been that bad, could it?

Then Steve thought of all the help he had here; his team-mates around him all hours of the day and night, and Bruce with his expert medical advice, and Tony with his inventions that he made for Lara as gifts.

Maybe Steve would have struggled on his own too.

"Did he know about her metabolism?" he asked.

"No, he didn't," Sam said. "Seems none of the doctors did either. He said she cried a lot and he didn't know why. Must've been because she was hungry."

"Oh." Steve frowned sadly. "I wish I'd known. I would've helped."

"I know you would, man," Sam assured him. "Look, sometimes things happen the way they do. Best thing we can do now is focus on the present, and on the future. Lara's in good hands. I made sure to explain to him that she's all good right now, she's got support. And she's got her special diet all organised. That should take a lot of strain off. Maybe once that sinks in, he'll be in a better place to make contact with you, and you can go from there."

Steve nodded slowly. "Okay."
What else could he do?

If Bucky didn't want to see him or Lara, he couldn't exactly force him to.

"I just… I need to tell him, I'll need all Lara's paperwork, if he has that. Her medical files. Bruce said it would help."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Yeah, we didn't get onto that part. Let's give him a few days and then see where he's at, okay? We all know that Jarvis would be able to pull up Lara's files if there's any out there."

Steve knew that, but he didn't want to use that method. It felt too much like snooping, especially if the files held details about Bucky too.

"And if he doesn't get in touch?" Steve asked.

Sam shrugged a shoulder. "Then we try again? But, Steve, I don't think forcing communication will help right now. Sometimes you have to let people come to you in their own time, especially if they've had a lot of upheaval at once. Babies are a huge deal, it takes adjustment. Just give it time."

Steve frowned again, but nodded once. "Right." He offered Lara the spoon, watched her smack her hand onto the little table. She let out a yell of delight, and smacked it again. The high chair shook with the impact.

"Um… I think the nanny idea is good," Sam said, changing the subject. "Want me to go over the list with you later?"

Steve didn't really want someone he didn't know spending time with his baby, but if he had to go on missions, he couldn't expect his team-mates to babysit all the time.

"I guess so," he said, reluctantly. "They'd just be part time, right?"

"Sure," Sam said. "Maybe interviewing them and letting them take Lara for a couple hours would help you pick someone you like? And Lara likes, too."

"Yeah..." Steve had to put the spoon down and pry Lara's little fingers from the table, as she was pulling on it and Steve worried she'd yank it free.

It was only flimsy plastic.

"How is a nanny going to handle a baby with extra strength?" He allowed Lara to hold his finger instead, let her grip onto it. "She is strong, Sam. I haven't been around many babies, but the rate she keeps breaking stuff… If someone isn't watching her all the time she could hurt herself."

"Tony said he's got his apprentice working on some more reinforced baby stuff," Sam said. "Better add high chair to the list."

"Tony has an apprentice?" Steve hadn't known that. "Well, more reinforced equipment would be a start. Unless we can hire a supernanny, they'll need all the help they can get."
Chapter End Notes

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So, who should be the new nanny? As The Avengers will be getting busy soon...
The One With the Avengers Meeting and Nanny Interviews

*One week later.*

Steve was kind of stressed; this morning his and Lara's routine had been all changed around. She'd woken at three AM, crying and with a full diaper. Steve had given her a change and a feed, then tried to give her a bath to clean her up and hopefully get her relaxed enough to go back to sleep.

Except when he'd gotten her out of her bath and wrapped her in a towel, she'd pooped again as he picked her up.

So, another bath, by which time it was six in the morning, Clint wasn't around, he had some training session to go to or something. Steve admittedly hadn't paid attention when Clint had told him.

Sam came by at seven, and took over trying to coax Lara to sleep while Steve went to take his own nap.

He'd laid awake and stared at his ceiling, too keyed up to fall asleep.

Sam was close by in the apartment, in the living room, with Lara in her womb-crib. It was easily portable, so he would watch her while she napped.

Hopefully, she would nap.

Steve closed his eyes and with determination, tried to even his breaths and count sheep.

It felt like he'd barely blinked his eyes shut before he was jerking awake, alert and anxious. He looked at his alarm clock; nearly midday. He'd managed maybe three hours sleep.

He knew he probably needed about three hours more, but today was a busy day.

Steve got himself up and jumped in the shower, mentally running through his to-do list for the day. Check on Lara and Sam. Briefing with Maria and the team. Start interviewing nannies.

Steve sighed lightly.

He just wanted to go back to bed and lie under the duvet, where no responsibilities existed. Just for a bit. He'd thought his body and the serum would cope with looking after a baby. He'd managed on less sleep and for longer periods during the war. Steve thought he knew what being on high alert felt like, but apparently it wasn't the same as worrying about a baby, *his* baby.

Two weeks of high alert with no downtime, and Steve was starting to feel drained.

It was just... different. Worrying about Lara's wellbeing was constant, even when she was asleep, Steve worried. She made a noise, he worried. She didn't make a noise, he worried.

Even with the womb-crib monitoring her heartbeat, he worried.

If this was what being a new parent felt like, Steve was discovering a new-found respect for parents. He hadn't even bothered to shave the last few days, and he scratched at his beard stubble absently.

He supposed he was also finding it slightly more reasonable to see why Bucky had wanted a break from parenting, despite the way he'd gone about it by just dropping Lara off like that.
Steve had no idea what he would've done on his own and with limited funds. How long would he have lasted?

Bucky must have done all of it for six months, on his own.

Steve wished he'd been there to help. He wished Bucky were here now, but he knew that wasn't likely to happen any time soon. He got out the shower and toweled himself off. If he stopped moping and hurried up, he could go help with Lara's noon feed.

Sam was in the kitchen, with Lara already in her high-chair, when Steve joined them.

"Hey, man," Sam greeted, as Lara banged her little hands on the high-chair's table with a loud squeal. "Think she's happy to see you," Sam noted with a smile. He was mixing up Lara's food.

Steve smiled and pulled up a seat next to his baby. "What's all that noise, huh?" he said softly, moving his face close to hers.

"Aaahhh!" Lara replied, happy and excited, and making a grab for Steve's nose.

"Always with the nose," Steve said, and gently held her little hands in his, moving them back and forth while he made funny sounds for her.

Lara gave him a gummy smile, and when Steve wiggled her hands around again, she laughed.

"Oh, now she's in a good mood," Sam said, bringing her bowl of food over. "She was not happy when she woke up earlier."

Steve gave him a concerned look. "Sorry, Sam. We'll have to figure out a new schedule when I've chosen a nanny, I guess."

"Hey, it's fine." Sam waved a hand. "Don't worry about it for now, just make sure you like who you hire."

"I hope so," Steve said, picking up the little spoon and offering it to Lara. "Okay, kid. Let's see how much of this you'll eat for me."

Lara was more interested in trying to reach for Steve's face than the spoon.

"While you try to feed her," Sam said, "I'll make our lunch. You want a coffee too?"

"That sounds great," Steve said. "Thanks, Sam."

He managed to get the first spoonful into Lara's mouth, and amazingly she swallowed most of it.

"There you go," Steve said gently. He got another spoonful ready, and said to Sam, "Are you going to the briefing?"

"Yeah." Sam poured coffee, brought a mug over to Steve. "Maria knows we might be a bit behind today, so it's cool."

Steve huffed lightly. "Yeah, it all depends how quickly this one will eat..."
"We're late," Steve muttered, strapping on the papoose.

"I know," Sam said, holding Lara for him.

She was fussing, and she hadn't wanted to go into the stroller.

Steve finished adjusting the papoose, and held his hands out for Lara. "Okay."

Sam transferred her over, and she let off a few upset cries as Steve secured her in, facing him.

"Man, she is extra wriggly today," Sam noted.

"Yeah, I don't know what's gotten into her." Steve cupped Lara in a hug, and started bouncing her up and down a bit. "Hey, hey. Don't cry, it's okay. We're going for a walk!"

"We bringing the stroller or the diaper bag?" Sam asked.

"Stroller's already packed," Steve said. "And if she needs a nap it saves coming back here."

Sam gave a wry smile. "Guess we're taking the stroller then."

They got the elevator up to the designated Avengers floors, and took off at a half-jog through the halls to get to the briefing room. Steve held Lara, one hand supporting her head, while Sam pushed the stroller.

At least Lara seemed to enjoy the motion, and squealed happily as they jogged down the last hallway.

Happy was coming toward them, and quickly moved aside to make way.

"Uh, good afternoon," he said, pressing himself close to the wall as Steve and Sam ran past.

"Hey, Happy," Steve greeted, as Sam threw a quick salute.

"Main conference room!" Happy called after them.

"Thanks!" Steve shouted back.

They finally reached the conference room, just as Sam huffed, "Wait, wait. Why didn't we just video-call this one in?"

Steve paused at that, looked to Sam. "Um. Isn't that a little lazy?"

"Lazy?" Sam exclaimed, then gestured between the pair of them. "Steve, we just sprinted up here with a baby and a stroller. How is that any better?"

"Uh..." Steve felt embarrassed to admit it, but he felt like he'd been slacking off enough as it was. "I just... I should be in there," he said.

Sam nodded calmly, his breathing still a little heavy from their run. "I know, Steve. I know. And that's why a nanny is going to help a lot. Maybe get two."
Sam grinned, and Steve couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

Before he could answer, the door opened and Natasha stood there, beckoning them inside.

Steve went in first, head high even though he was a little embarrassed to be interrupting a meeting.

Steve had interrupted meetings before, just... not with a baby. It felt different, and he wasn't sure how to process the looks and smiles he was getting from around the table.

He glanced at his teammates, including a female beta he didn't recognise.

Thor was there too, having managed to get to a meeting on time, even though he didn't live on this planet.

"My friends!" Thor got up to greet them, striding over with a big grin on his face. "It is good to see you again! And this must be your baby I've heard so much about!"

Thor bent down to grin at Lara, and let her grab his finger.

Steve felt his face heat a little. Leave it to Thor to announce things loudly in a room full of people.

"Um. Yes," he said awkwardly. "This is Lara."

"Lara Croft," Clint chimed in. "Awesome name, by the way. You probably won't get the reference."

Steve sighed. "Yes, thank you, Clint."

The beta Steve didn't know got up next, and came over to shake their hands. "Hey. I'm Jessica Drew. It's great to meet you."

"Steve Rogers," Steve said, trying to shake her hand around Lara. "And likewise."

"Hey," Sam said, extending his hand and grinning wide for Jessica. "Sam Wilson."

"Saw you both on the news." Jessica smiled back as she shook Sam's hand. "Taking down Shield pretty quick there. Bet that ticked them off."

"Yes, a most impressive defeat!" Thor agreed.

"Uh..." Sam looked to Steve, just as Steve looked to Sam. "Well..."

"It was Hydra," Steve said, "but, yes. Shield too."

"Hey, I'm not judging." Jessica held up her hands jokingly. "You might've seen me on the news getting into trouble in San Francisco. That's where I'm based."

"San Francisco?" Steve asked. "Where that rogue scientist tried to release toxins into the water supply last month?"

"That's right," Jessica said. "I'm the one in the red and yellow suit making spider webs to catch bad guys. The news are making me out to be trouble, but honestly I'm not that bad."

"You're Spider-woman?" Sam asked in awe.

"That's me." Jessica looked a little bashful. "Please, call me Jess."

"Okay, now that the introductions are done," Maria called out, "let's all sit down and I'll bring you up
to speed."

Everyone hustled back to their seats.

Sam followed Jess and tried to move a spare chair in next to her.

"Budge up, Barton," he muttered.

Clint, lounging back and eating a bag of candy, pretended not to hear him. Nat, now sitting next to him, grabbed Clint's chair and pulled him to her, wheeling him across the floor, so that Sam could slide in between Clint and Jess.

Steve hung back, still intermittently bouncing Lara to keep her quiet. "Um. I'd better stay standing?" he said to Maria.

Maria gave a curt nod in reply, then turned back to her power-point. "On the screen you'll see the proposal of splitting up into smaller teams--"

Steve looked at the screen. Tony and Rhodesy were listed as Team Alpha One, which was kind of typical if Tony was involved, Steve thought.

Thor was in Team Alpha Two, all by himself. Nat and Clint were listed as Team Beta One. Jessica was listed Team Beta Two, along with the names Scott and Hope, which Steve didn't recognise.

He couldn't see his or Sam's names on the screen at all. Nor Bruce's.

"Each team will have their own missions," Maria went on, "and training schedules. Team-ups for missions will be on constant standby, as per threat level, and called Unity Team."

"Which team am I in?" Steve asked.

Maria gave him a no-nonsense look. "Once you've got yourself a babysitter, Captain, you and Sam will be Team Alpha Three, along with me. Doctor Banner will join Unity Team in emergencies only, and be on post in the tower otherwise."

Bruce shifted in his seat and gave an apologetic smile. "I'm working on a project that could potentially contain the Hulk, if needed. I'd feel a lot better going out in the field with a back-up plan in place."

"It is no trouble, Banner!" Thor declared. "I myself can appear anywhere on Midgard in but moments!" He frowned, glancing around the table, and added, "I don't know why you don't call for me more often, to be honest."

"Anyway," Tony interjected, "we're all here now, and we have a plan. We're getting schedules, missions, timetables, the works. And don't forget about the diaper division..."

Steve stiffened, assuming Tony meant him. Then Natasha explained, "Tony means the apprentice program."

"Apprentice?" Thor questioned.

"I have one of those!" Clint raised his hand holding the candy, sending a couple pieces flying behind him across the room. "Aw, jellybeans..."

"The plan is, you'll all take a turn with an apprentice," Maria said. "When schedules allow. For now, most of them are on floors fifteen and sixteen, studying hard. There will be training slots available
with the apprentices too."

Steve frowned to himself, and looked down at Lara cuddled close to his chest. She was chewing on her fist, making burbling noises.

This was the first Steve had heard about any apprentice scheme. Why did it feel like he was being left out all of a sudden?

~

"I don't have an apprentice," he said quietly to Sam when the meeting ended. Or rather, when Maria read off teams that had to stay for the mission briefing, and Steve was definitely not on the list.

"Steve, you have a baby," Sam pointed out.

"Yeah, but..." Steve tried not to pout. He knew it wasn't unreasonable to bench him while he had a baby to take care of.

He'd have to pick a nanny soon.

"You don't have an apprentice, do you?" he asked Sam.

Sam smiled wryly. "No, I have you."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Are you saying I'm an apprentice?"

Sam made a considering face, but Steve saw him trying not to smile. He elbowed Sam lightly. "Shut up," he told him.

Sam laughed, and Lara clearly enjoyed the happy sounds as she waved her arms and laughed herself.

"She can be your apprentice," Sam said. "Better call dibs before Barton does."

"No one is calling dibs on my daughter," Steve said. He wasn't joking either.

Tony strolled out of the briefing room, closely followed by Bruce. "There he is," Tony said. "Capsicle! Got time before your nannying begins? My apprentice has something for you. I mean, for her." He gestured to Lara. "Come on up to the lab. You too, Wilson."

"Tony, it better not be that walking robot again," Steve said. He wasn't in the mood to argue over safety for babies today.

"Nope. Even better!" Tony grinned and strode away.

"Uh, I've seen it," Bruce offered, "it's actually really good. Tony's apprentice wanted to meet you, too. She's nice."

"Okay," Steve relented. He lowered his face and said quietly to Lara, "Guess we're going to the lab. No doodles yet, okay, kid?"

Lara smiled back at him, and let out a little giggle like she was saying no promises.
They went with Tony and Bruce up to the lab, where a teenage girl in a lab coat sat at one of the benches.

She jumped up when they came in, standing to attention and smiling wide.

"Folks, this is my apprentice," Tony introduced with a grand flourish of his arm, "Riri Williams, codename Iron Heart."

Steve approached first, cradling Lara in one hand, and extending the other to shake. "Ms. Williams."

"Captain Rogers." She shook his hand firmly. "I can't believe I'm actually meeting you. We learned about you in school."

Steve smiled, a little shy, but when he glanced to Tony to see him pull a face, he enjoyed the exchange even more. "I hope you got some good history lessons and not just those PSAs they made me do," he joked.

"Oh, we watched those too," Riri said with a laugh. "They were pretty awesome. You were being sarcastic in them, right? No one else would believe me when I said no way you were being serious."

Steve gave her a knowing smile. She was definitely a nice kid. Tall for her age, but he guessed still quite young. "Are you in school now?" he asked.

"Oh no." She slipped her hands in her pockets and rocked back on her heels. "Graduated already and finally got accepted into MIT later this year."

"Congratulations," Steve said. "That's very impressive."

"Thanks. And Mister Stark let me on the Apprentice Avenger program too. Safe to say I am pretty happy right now."

Steve glanced to Tony briefly. "Yes, I'm sure you are."

Sam came in next to shake hands. "Congrats on MIT."

Riri shook his hand. "Thank you. I really wanted to meet the Falcon too. Saw you on YouTube kicking ass with Cap. The way you just caught him out of the sky. Damn."

"That's on YouTube?" Sam asked. "Wait, what? Falcon?"

"That's your internet name, apparently," Tony interrupted. "Not a bad name, I suppose. We'll patent it once you give the okay to the new wings design."

"What?" Sam said again. "New wings?"

"Yeah, I thought we'd throw a little red in there too." Tony leaned against a bench and waved a hand. "The all-over grey was a little boring."

Sam gave him a flat look. "It's Army issue."

Tony shrugged. Bruce cleared his throat gently, and said, "Riri wanted to show you what she made."
"Oh, yes," Tony agreed. "Demo time, apprentice."

Riri raised an eyebrow at him, like she wasn't used to taking orders, then looked back to Steve with a warm smile. "I hope you like it." Then she twirled around and hurried off to a corner of the lab.

Steve held Lara and waited expectantly. A soft buzz sounded as a small contraption appeared, making its way across the floor.

Riri followed, and appeared to be controlling it with a wristwatch.

Steve stared at the contraption, unsure as to its function at first. It was clearly made with reinforced materials, but it was all smoothed down and sleekly painted in bright, primary colors. In the center was a little seat, surrounded by circular reinforcements and dangly mobiles.

"It's a baby-walker," Sam guessed.

"It's motorized," Steve said, feeling somewhat ambushed. He'd specifically told Tony he didn't want robotic walking things for Lara. He'd seen how clumsy Dum-E could be.

"A baby-walker controlled by this." Riri indicated the watch on her wrist. "The walker itself can't be moved unless you adjust the setting to manual, and even then it's set to only move a few inches at a time if the baby pushes hard enough."

The walker stopped moving, and Riri bent down to touch the little seat. "There's suspension installed, so even if she's strong enough to get the walker moving, the suspension will keep her steady and rock her a little bit, sort of like a gentle rocking chair. It should distract her, along with all the toys on the dashboard area." She flicked one of the small plushies dangling down, and it pulsed softly with an orange glow and started playing a tinkly tune.

"All these sounds should make it clear where she is at all times," Riri continued, "but you also have control over the settings, so you can apply the brakes whenever you want. The suspension will still work, and rock her if she moves. Hopefully it'll be fun for her, and bring peace of mind for you."

She straightened up and smiled. "The structure is reinforced, and has a soft, plastic finish. Should be strong enough to keep her safe, but there's a small chance it could scratch if it bangs into heavy furniture. I can always do a repair if necessary."

Steve blinked, a little taken aback. "Uh... well, it sounds good. Thank you. You must've put a lot of thought into this."

Riri shrugged, but she was clearly pleased with the praise. "Did a little research, and taking into account extra strength for your baby, I just basically modified designs that are already on the market."

"Nonsense, it's a brilliant invention and you are a certified genius," Tony cut in. "And we're going to patent it as soon as the prototypes are ready and tested."

Riri rolled her eyes, and Steve raised an eyebrow. "You want my daughter to test drive a prototype?"

"Ignore him," Riri said, "I only made this for Lara. If it doesn't work, I'll figure out something else for her."

"I think it'll be very helpful," Bruce said, sitting close by in a chair. "If her version of the serum is close to yours, Steve, we could potentially be looking at accelerated motor functions and learning ability. She could start walking and talking early."
Sam whistled. "Yeah, and before you know it, she'll be off to college."

Steve felt alarmed. He was only just starting to get used to caring for a newborn, what would he do if she jumped ahead a few stages without warning?

Then again, he thought, if he potty trained her early, no more diapers.

The thought of that was sheer bliss.

"Let's see what she thinks!" Steve said decidedly. He lifted Lara gently from the papoose. "She's real squirmy today, maybe this walker will keep her more occupied."

Riri and Sam helped him get her fastened into the little seat on the walker. There was a harness too, and they strapped her in.

"This harness can be locked and unlocked from the controller," Riri said, taking off the wristwatch and handing it to Steve. "It's pretty easy, you can either use the touchscreen, or voice command."

"Wow. Neat." Steve looked it over, a sleek modern thing, then secured it on his wrist.

Lara was busy tugging on one of the mobiles, burbling to herself. Steve smiled, happy she was interested in it.

Riri handed him a laminated sheet of paper. "These are the commands," she said. "Figured if you saw them all written down, it'll help."

"Okay. Let's try." Steve read the sheet, and brought his wrist up to speak close to the watch.

"Harness, lock."

A small whir emitted from the little harness Lara wore. Steve nodded, impressed. "Brakes, on."

A clamping sound indicated the brakes.

"That is nice and simple," Steve said, looking to Riri. "I guess we'll see how she gets on with it."

"Yeah, no problem," Riri agreed. "If you get any trouble, just get Jarvis to give me a shout and I'll be right over."

"I certainly will." Steve shook her hand once more. "Thank you very much."

"You never thank me like that," Tony muttered.

Steve turned to him, offering his hand out and smiling pleasantly. "Tony, thank you very much."

Tony shook hands, with only a slightly forced smile. "You're welcome, Cap. Now, please go choose a nanny. Otherwise your Avenging team will miss out on all the fun."

~

"So, this is kinda cool," Sam mused, as they walked along behind Lara in her motorised baby-walker.
Steve had it on automatic as they headed to the elevator.

"Yeah, if it's all flat surfaces," Steve said quietly. "I was just worried because there's a lot of steps in the tower. Like, right over there." He gestured across the open space of the floor, where polished metal steps led down into the lounge.

"Okay, so either the person watching her has to be aware of that," Sam said, "or have the brakes on so she can't move around unsupervised."

"Yeah." Steve raised the wristwatch to say, "Slow. Now, stop," bringing the walker to an abrupt halt.

Lara laughed excitedly as she rocked gently in place, with the little toys on their mobiles jingling around her. She waved her hands and slapped some of them.

"She seems to enjoy it," Sam pointed out.

"Yeah, seems so," Steve agreed. "Anything that keeps her quiet, I guess."

Sam huffed a laugh. "You need a vacation, Steve." He reached over and pressed the button for the elevator. "Let's go meet these nannies."

The elevator came down, but when the doors opened, Jessica was inside.

She smiled when she saw them. "Oh! Hello again."

"Hello to you too," Sam said, enthusiasm clear in his voice.

Steve almost gave him side-eye, but instead he just smiled. "Heading out already?" he said to Jessica.

"Tony has a Quinjet taking me back in a couple hours," she said, and held up her smartphone. "I just wanted to be a real tourist and check out Manhattan first. Maybe get a bagel."

"Good idea," Steve agreed. "It's a nice day for it."

"Yeah," Sam said, sounding a little envious. "It's certainly a nice day for it."

Steve did look at him then. "Hey, you should show Jess round. Take her to that place with the bagels."

"Oh, could you?" Jess asked eagerly. "It'd be so much easier with a New York local."

"Sure, I can do that," Sam said, just as eager. Then he looked at Steve. "What about the nannies?"

Steve said, "I'll be fine with the nannies. Bring me back a bagel?"

Sam beamed a smile, then clapped him on the shoulder. "Well, alright then. Later, man."

"You're a lifesaver," Jess said, as Sam got into the elevator with her.

"Hey, my pleasure." Sam bent down a little and waved to Lara. "Be good for your daddy! I'll see you later."

"Bye bye!" Jess bent down and waved too. "She's just adorable."

The doors started to close, and Steve waved them off.
"Well, kiddo," he said to Lara, "looks like it's just you and me."

~

After getting out the elevator two floors down, Steve pushed the stroller while Lara zipped along in her walker, and he took them to the cosiest of the common rooms.

He was scheduled to meet the nannies in here. It made sense to be somewhere safe and comfortable for Lara. It was essentially an apartment, with a large open plan lounge and kitchen, a pool table, and a couple bathrooms.

There was a drop-down screen, and while the tower did have bigger screening rooms and rec areas, most of the team ended up here in their downtime. It was the unofficial hang-out space.

Steve asked Jarvis to play some kids' TV on the screen, but not too loud. Some of those shows had the most ear piercing voices, he thought.

He steered Lara's walker into the lounge and parked it facing the TV, brakes applied.

With her secure and busy rocking herself in place, Steve went to the nearest bathroom.

"Jarvis, would you watch Lara for a minute?" he said.

"Of course, Captain," Jarvis answered.

Steve went to the bathroom, washed his hands, then hurried back to the lounge. He was about to get out the diaper bag and see if Lara wanted a feed, then wondered if he should wait for the first nanny.

"Jarvis," he asked, "I'm expecting some interviewees shortly. Is the first one on time?"

"Your two o'clock is waiting, sir. Shall I send her down?"

"Yes, please," Steve said.

He set his hands on his hips, and watched Lara playing. "Here we go," he said to himself. "Time to make decisions."

~

Steve decided he did not enjoy interviewing nannies. He didn't hold anything against them personally, but he didn't know how to get across that this was his daughter, and she was precious to him. This wasn't an interview for a desk job, or an internship.

So far all the interviewees seemed a little on the young side. They were clearly very bright in their own ways, and pleasant enough, but Steve figured he'd better bring it up with Pepper. He'd had someone with a bit more experience in mind, especially if Lara would be spending a lot of time with them.
Steve had four potential candidates on the list for today, and he would speak to Pepper about them all tomorrow. He'd seen a girl named Kate, a boy named Miles, and then a boy named Peter. Steve went through his interview questions with them, let them play with Lara for a bit, and actually it was kind of funny watching Peter try to change Lara’s poopy diaper. That boy seemed a little on the nervous side when it came to babies.

Then Steve thanked them and sent them on their way. He wasn't sure any of them were the right fit, not for a full time position anyway.

Steve sighed when it got to four o'clock. "Last one for today, Jarvis?"

"Your final appointment is on her way, sir," Jarvis informed him.

Steve was about ready to give up, but when the next candidate walked in -another young beta- she gave a bright smile and introduced herself.

"Hello! I'm Kamala."

"Hi." Steve smiled back, and checked his clipboard briefly.

All visitors had special security passes hanging round their necks, but Steve was still diligent.

"Kamala...?"

"Kamala Khan," she confirmed. "Here to interview for the nanny position."

"Great. Why don't you come take a seat."

They sat on the big couch. Lara was back in her walker, nudging it around a few inches at a time on the carpeted floor.

"So, Kamala," Steve said, "I have here you live in Jersey City?"

"That's right." Kamala nodded, fiddling with the cuff of her oversized sweater. "I live with my family. I graduated highschool, then finished my most recent course in childcare just last week."

"And you're nineteen?"

"Yeah. I was planning to take a year or two out before college. I'd like to get some more practical experience."

"I see." Steve glanced at the notes he had for Kamala's resume. "Says here you were top of your class, and studying to be a pediatrician?"

"Yeah." Kamala tucked a long lock of hair behind her ear. "My dad has wanted me to be a doctor since, like, forever, but I don't know if that's exactly the role I want." She smiled warmly. "I do like helping kids though, so it'll be in the childcare field for sure."

Steve nodded and smiled back. "Well, great. And you'd be okay living here in Manhattan while you're working? You won't miss your family?"

Kamala shrugged a shoulder. "Probably will, but they'd still be pretty close. And I feel like being here would be a step in the right direction for me."

"Oh? How so?"

"Well, I think this role would be really nice because I'd get to see the same kid every day, and watch
her grow. We'd get to know each other, and I could use some of my techniques that I studied. Like flashcards for learning, or the bath and bedtime massage. Just little things like that."

"Massage?" Steve questioned. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know, after their bath," Kamala explained. "You use a baby lotion and just gently rub it on their skin in circular motions, it helps them fall asleep for bedtime."

Steve blinked in surprise. "Is that... a thing? I mean, does it work?"

Kamala nodded eagerly. "It usually works. Especially the more you do it in their routine. I'd be happy to show you."

"That would be great," Steve said, quietly impressed. "So, have you had much experience with babies?"

"Yeah, sure, and young kids." Kamala smiled brightly. "I got a big family, and I've been babysitting all my way through school."

"That's great," Steve said, realising that Kamala probably had more experience with babies than he did.

They chatted a little more, then Steve invited Kamala to play with Lara. "She's already been changed and fed by the previous candidates," he informed Kamala with a chuckle.

"Yeah, Peter mentioned the poopy diaper when he came back to the waiting room," Kamala laughed. "I don't think he's ever changed one before, poor guy."

"Guess not," Steve said, watching Kamala get onto hands and knees to be the same height as Lara in her walker.

"Hey, there," Kamala said to her, making eye contact and smiling. "This is a cool set up you have here. Wow, look at these dangly toys..."

Steve smiled as he watched. He had a good feeling about this.

"I'm going to make a coffee. Would you like one, Kamala?"

"Oh. Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes, absolutely. How do you take it?"

"Strong and sugary, please." Kamala grinned. "Like, at least three sugars. Or if you have any syrup, caramel."

Steve considered, and said, "I think there is syrup. Clint is addicted to it. I'll go check. You alright watching Lara for a minute?"

Kamala was already rattling a toy to keep Lara amused. "Yeah, we're cool."

Steve smiled, and felt a little bit of tension him leave as he walked away.

He had a good feeling about Kamala.
Sam had had a really wonderful afternoon with Jess, showing her around Manhattan and getting bagels, coffee, and taking photos.

Jess kept saying how she wanted to climb the buildings and check out the views, and Sam was pretty smitten.

They finished up with frozen yoghurt, and Sam walked her back to the Tower.

"Hey, want to trade numbers?" Jess suggested. "I want to see these amazing new wings you've been promised."

"Yes," Sam said eagerly, getting out his phone. "That would be great."

He handed his phone over, let her enter in her number.

"I'll text you," Sam said, sending a quick message as they entered the tower's atrium.

"Great." Jess smiled, and handed over her bag to security.

They each went through the body scanners, and then Jarvis greeted them.

"You know," Jess said, taking her bag back and sliding in close to Sam, "I can't fly exactly, but I do glide. I've got these wings on my costume. I'm coming back here in about a week for team training. If your new wings are ready, we gotta try flying over New York. Deal?"

Sam was a little tongue-tied. "Uh, yeah, I'm in," he agreed, more than happily. "Sounds pretty cool to me."

They walked to the elevators, and Sam pressed the button. He was about to ask Jess if she wanted to get dinner or something when she was next in New York, when he felt his phone buzz in his hand.

Sam turned the screen around, eyes widening when he saw the text was from none other than Steve's wayward omega, Bucky.

Can you talk?

"Aw, shit," Sam muttered. "Jess, I'm sorry, I gotta deal with this."

"Hey, no problem," Jess said. "I should run anyway, or this flight will leave without me."

"Oh... well, if it does, come find me and I'll make you dinner," Sam offered.

Jess smiled wide. "Thanks, Sam."

The elevator doors opened, and she got inside.

"See you soon!" She waved as the doors closed.

Sam raised his hand in goodbye, smiling until the doors shut, and then he sighed heavily.
"Your timing sucks, man," he muttered to his phone, quickly tapping out a reply.

Yes I can. Want me to call you?

Sam waited for a reply, and within twenty seconds he had one.

Okay.

So, Sam called Bucky's number, expecting the worst.

Bucky picked up, and it sounded like he was outside as Sam heard traffic noises.

"Hey," Sam greeted. "What's up? You okay?"

"How's Lara?" Bucky asked, ignoring Sam's question.

"Yeah, man, all good. Everything is fine, Lara is doing great." Sam waited a beat, then repeated his question. "Are you okay?"

"Uh..." Bucky cleared his throat. "You said... you have a doctor?"

Sam frowned. "Yeah," he confirmed. "We have an entire medical facility. What do you need?"

"Can I speak to the doctor?" Bucky asked.

Sam didn't like the sound of that. "Yeah, man. That's not a problem. Let me go find him now. Can you stay on the line?"

"Yeah," Bucky said.

He sounded tired.

Sam pressed the button for the elevator again, then realised it would be quicker if he spoke to Bruce directly.

"Jarvis," Sam looked up to the ceiling, "can you transfer my call to Doctor Banner? To his private phone?"

"Yes, Mister Wilson," Jarvis replied. "Shall I transfer the call now?"

"Wait, let me tell him," Sam said, bringing the phone back to his ear. "Okay, listen. I'm going to have you transferred to the doc's phone. He's cool, his name is Bruce. He will help you with whatever you want. And I'll be here too if you need me."

Bucky exhaled with a snort. "Relax, would you? I'm not dying."

Sam frowned again. "Okay, well, good. Gonna transfer you now." Sam lowered his phone to watch its screen. "Jarvis, can you transfer this call to Bruce?"

"Right away, sir."
Sam's screen blipped a moment, then the call from Bucky disappeared.

"What a wiseguy," Sam muttered to himself. The elevator opened again and he got inside. "Jarvis, take me to where Bruce is, thanks."

Sam went up in the elevator, feeling his stress levels rise too.

Luckily for him, Bruce was having his dinner when Sam found him, and he was alone.

He was talking on his phone when he let Sam into the apartment.

"Uh huh, yeah..." Bruce was saying, and directed Sam to go through to his living room.

Sam got the hint. Doctor-patient stuff, and all that.

Sam went into Bruce's living room, decorated in pale creams and blues, with minimalist furniture. He sat on a chair and idly flicked through his phone to keep his hands busy.

Jess had sent him messages already, God bless her. It was a nice distraction, and made Sam smile.

*Thanks for showing me around! See you soon, and hope all is ok! :)*

She had attached some shots of the New York skyline, which Sam guessed had been taken just now as the Quinjet left.

Sam made sure to send a nice reply back. Jess replied again, and they chatted for a few minutes until Bruce came into the room.

Sam put away his phone when he saw Bruce wasn't on his phone. "Hey. How'd it go?"

Bruce shook his head as he came back to his couch, sitting in front of his half-eaten dinner.

"I told him unless I can see him face to face, and quite possibly do some blood work, all I can do is guess over the phone."

Sam nodded. "And your guess?"

"At the very least," Bruce said, picking up his bowl of noodles, "exhaustion, some form of malnutrition, probably all caused by the pregnancy."

"Hm. That's what I figured too," Sam said. "And I'm sorry to interrupt your dinner."

"No, don't be." Bruce began eating his noodles. "Besides, I think I scared him enough to consider actually coming in to see me."

"Wait, what?" Sam raised his eyebrows. "He said he'd come in?"

"Maybe not in so many words," Bruce said. "But I emphasised it would be in his best interest to see me as soon as possible, and he seemed to take it on board. But I had to promise," he added, looking Sam in the eye, "I wouldn't tell *anyone* else if he does."
Sam nodded. "Understood. Look, man, all I care about is him being well. Once that base is covered, him and Steve will have to sort themselves out."

"Yeah," Bruce agreed. "I guess we'll have to wait and hope he comes in soon."
Moira drove them as close to Times Square as she could get with the lunch time rush, before Bucky's nerves got the better of him and he told her to just drop him off at the next space she saw, instead of them sitting in traffic.

"You sure?" she asked, concern showing on her face.

"It's not far," Bucky told her, "barely a block. It'll be quicker if I walk."

"Yes, but--"

"Moira," he snapped, then immediately felt bad. "Please. I'll be fine."

The beta didn't argue with him, but she didn't look too happy about it either.

She dropped him at the nearest sidewalk, busy with tourists. Bucky pulled on his ball cap, and took off his seatbelt.

"I'll let you know when there's a lead," Moira said, as he opened the door.

Bucky nodded.

"At least text me later?" she asked. "Let me know if you feel better?"

"Okay," Bucky agreed. He got out of the car and shut the door quick, before she asked him any more questions. Then he hurried off in between slow walking tourists and other pedestrians.

His palms were sweating. Bucky walked toward Stark Tower, but not the front entrance where he'd left Lara almost three weeks ago. The doc had said go around back.

So, Bucky circled the building, avoiding the groups of waiting paparazzi, and scoped out the back entrance.

The doc was expecting him, but Bucky felt nervous about going in. The Avengers were away on a mission, he'd been told. Bruce, the doc, seemed like a good guy, and had promised to see him one on one.

No one else there.

It helped a little, knowing that, but Bucky was still nervous. His stomach was in knots, and he'd started shivering.
He gave himself a pep talk. "Come on, Barnes," he muttered under his breath. "You can do this."

He took one big breath, and started to make his way over.

After three steps, he panicked and turned back.

"Fuck," he hissed, hiding around the corner of the building.

Bucky closed his eyes, counted backward from ten, trying to slow his breaths and hammering pulse.

He wished he could ask Bruce to come outside and meet him, but would that make the paps start swarming?

Bucky would have to do this alone.

"You're a big boy," he told himself, channelling his inner Cassandra. "Go do the thing."

Sometimes he really missed hanging out with Cass, but that felt like a lifetime ago.

Bucky took another deep breath, squared his shoulders, and walked toward the entrance again.

This time he made it. He passed the waiting photographers without stirring much interest—he'd bundled up with a coat and scarf to hide his scent—and through the glass doors.

Security greeted him, and asked if he'd walk through the scanner.

They were acting like they'd expected him, but Bucky tried not to freak out too much, and just do what they asked. He went through the scanner, and thankfully didn't have to remove any clothing and give them all a waft of anxious omega scent, or be touched by anyone.

When he was through the other side, a voice overhead said, "Good afternoon, Mister Barnes. If you would please make your way over to the elevators."

Bucky looked around, but he didn't see who was speaking.

"Jarvis is an AI." One of the security team, a female beta, smiled at him kindly. "He'll assist you in any way he can. Elevators are right over there, sir."

She pointed across the atrium.

"Um. Okay." Bucky swallowed. "Thanks."

Then he hurried to the elevators because he didn't want to hang around making small talk.

This was supposed to be a covert visit.

One set of elevator doors opened as Bucky approached, so he stepped inside.

The doors closed, and before Bucky could even look for a panel of buttons or get his phone out to call Bruce, that disembodied voice spoke again.

"Doctor Banner is expecting you, sir."

The elevator went up.

Bucky blinked, feeling like he should be freaking out speaking to a computer... but it was actually kind of cool.
"Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome, sir."

"Please don't call me sir." Bucky held back a wry laugh. Today was going to be weird, he could tell.

"My apologies, Mister Barnes," the AI replied.

"Why is your name Jarvis?" Bucky asked, looking up at the ceiling like he'd see something there. He couldn't tell where the speakers were, but the voice was at a pleasant pitch, not too loud nor too soft.

"Mister Stark modelled me after his butler, Edwin Jarvis," the AI said.

"British?" Bucky asked.

"That is correct, Mister Barnes."

"Neat." Bucky looked side to side, wondering if he could lean on one of the elevator walls, but they were mirrored and he didn't want to smudge them or anything.

He shifted from foot to foot instead, anxious.

"Uh, Jarvis?" he started, swallowing down a sudden lump in his throat. "Is my daughter here?"

"Yes, Mister Barnes," Jarvis confirmed.

"Who's she with? They got a baby sitter?"

"Miss Croft is with her nanny," Jarvis supplied.

Bucky's eyebrows went up.

A nanny?

"Are they... nice?" he asked.

"Very pleasant, Mister Barnes," Jarvis told him. "All is well."

Bucky exhaled shakily, feeling his face flush and he tried to cover it up by looking at the floor.

If he was getting embarrassed talking to a voice in the ceiling, how was he going to cope with talking to actual people?

The elevator stopped, and when the doors opened Bruce was there waiting for him.

Bucky steeled himself, and stepped out of the elevator.

"Bucky." Bruce extended his hand, a welcoming smile on his face. "Good to meet you. I'm Bruce Banner."

"Hey." Bucky shook his hand, and felt a little better as he inhaled Bruce's calming beta scent.

"Thanks for seeing me," he added. "I'm sorry this is all..."

Bucky didn't know what to say. He felt bad asking for help from Steve's friends, but he was all out of choices.
"It's really okay," Bruce said. "Come on through, we'll see if we can get to the bottom of it."

Bucky smiled tightly. "Lead the way, doc."

~

Bruce was nice, unlike most other doctors Bucky had had to deal with over the years. He wasn't patronizing or rude, he was just straightforward and kind. Someone Bucky felt he could trust, which was why he'd agreed to come and have a medical exam in the first place.

Bruce took him through a high tech, open space lab, and into a smaller room that was more private and like a hospital room. Bucky took off his hat, coat, and boots, and Bruce started with the easy stuff by measuring his height, weight, and his blood pressure.

"Your blood pressure is really low," Bruce commented, making notes in a tablet. "But you haven't eaten today, right?"

Bucky shook his head. "Fasted since midnight last night, just like you said."

Bruce nodded. "I'll do a blood draw next, then you can eat."

"And have coffee?" Bucky asked hopefully.

Bruce smiled. "I'll get you a coffee. Why don't you lay back on the bed and roll your sleeve up."

Bucky got himself onto the bed, quickly rolled his sleeve up, and waited.

He was just about sick of blood tests, but he'd been having them all his life because of his hormone disorder since birth. It was all part of being alive for him.

Bruce was gentle, at least. Bucky hardly felt the needle go in.

He fixed his eyes on one spot across the room, some framed piece of art on the wall, and focused on that.

"Doing great," Bruce said calmly. "Almost over."

Bucky sure hoped so. He felt sleepy, but that wasn't unusual. He'd felt foggy and half asleep since being pregnant, and that fog hadn't gone away yet. He was fed up with not having enough energy to even get through the day.

"All done," Bruce said, taking out the needle and securing a padded band aid to Bucky's arm. "Let me label these quick and then I'll get you that coffee."

"Thanks," Bucky mumbled, closing his eyes. Maybe Bruce wouldn't mind if he dozed for a minute. The bed was really comfortable, and Bucky felt safe.

He must've actually dozed off, as the next thing he knew, Bruce was sitting on a chair beside the bed, a covered drinking cup in his hand.

"Hey," he said with a smile. "You okay?"
"Uh... yeah." Bucky blinked sleepily, and moved to get up.

Bruce held up a hand to stop him. "You may as well stay comfortable. Here." He held out the plastic cup.

Bucky took it and gave it a cautious sniff. "Coffee?"

"Close." Bruce chuckled. "It's coffee flavor, but it's a protein drink. I think it'll be better for you than a coffee."

Bucky stuck the straw in his mouth and took a big slurp. He was really thirsty, and it actually tasted okay.

"Thanks," he said. "So... how's the rest of me doing?"

Bruce nodded slowly, and he had one hell of a poker face. Bucky couldn't tell if he was about to get bad news or good news.

"Well," Bruce started, "things are generally about what I expected from talking to you before. You're a little underweight, you're undernourished and definitely anaemic."

Bucky frowned at that. "All this because my baby sucked the nutrients out of me during the pregnancy?"

"It seems the most likely cause," Bruce said. "Probably impacted by your hormonal imbalance, and not having the right dosage during and after pregnancy, like you should be getting."

"Mmm." Bucky took another slurp of his smoothie. "Yeah, my regular endo has gone off on maternity leave herself. Self medicating is harder than I thought."

"Okay, I have a solution for that," Bruce said. "I've got a contact who is an endocrinologist, and she's agreed to look at your blood results if I send them to her. With your permission, that is. And then she can video conference with you, to come up with a new prescription going forward."

Bucky was surprised at the offer, and felt his face heat up. "Really?"

"Yes, of course," Bruce said. "Although, uh... it might be good if I continue to see you as well. You may need a bit more monitoring. It could be nothing, but I've been running your blood with Jarvis just now, and the red blood cells aren't doing exactly what they should be doing. I have some experience as to what I think it could be."

Bucky braced himself for bad news. "What do you mean? Are you taking into account I'm Intersex?"

"Yes, and it's not hormonal," Bruce said. "It's your cells. They're regenerating faster than normal. Not as fast as your baby's cells, and certainly not as fast as Steve's, but they are fast. Which could be another reason why you're exhausted, if your metabolism has increased and you're not getting enough calories to sustain it."

Bucky opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Bruce patted his arm gently. "Drink that down. I'll send for some food shortly, but I just want to go over these results with you before we send them to my contact. Sound okay?"

"Uh... Okay." Bucky swallowed, trying to take it all in as Bruce moved away and went to get his
tablet.

When he came back, Bruce somehow brought the image on his tablet to display in the air, and pointed out which cells were Bucky's and which were Lara's.

"And here I'll bring up regular human blood cells," Bruce said, showing a third image. "See how much slower they are?"

"Uh..." Bucky stared, but he couldn't believe this. "Wait, wait... are you trying to tell me that... somehow Lara gave me something?"

"Steve's serum," Bruce clarified. "I'll be honest, Bucky, I really don't know. It could just be an anomaly in your blood that's been caused by being pregnant with Lara and also having a hormonal imbalance, and maybe with the correct diet it will wear off. But for nine months you and your baby shared a blood supply. It's possible this could be permanent."

"Permanent what?" Bucky asked. "Permanently tired and hungry?"

Bruce shook his head. "If you get enough food and supplement intake, like Steve and Lara have to, you should feel better. I can certainly write out a diet plan for you. And we'll get your hormone levels back in a regular range for a healthy omega too. Then we should be in a position to see what's happening. But I would like to monitor you just in case."

Bucky didn't know what to say. He stared into space, mind racing, before Bruce prompted him to drink his smoothie.

"If it's okay with you, we'll send these results to my contact, then ideally I'd like to give you a vitamin shot, and get you on an IV for fluids."

"IV?" Bucky didn't like the sound of that. "Can't I just have a few of these shakes?"

"You could, but getting fluids in your system faster would make you feel better, and your iron levels were very low. I honestly don't know how you're even awake right now."

Bucky sighed, and laid back on the puffy pillows. "Okay. Let's do it."

"It won't take too long," Bruce promised.

Bucky glanced around for a clock, but there wasn't one on the walls. He quickly took his phone out instead, checking the time.

There was a message from Moira asking if he'd made it and if he wanted a lift anywhere later.

He replied, No thanks, Mom, I'm fine.

Then he put his phone away.

There was a lump in his throat again, and he wondered what Lara was doing.

"Is... is Lara doing better?" he asked, hesitant. "Sam said she was?"

"Yeah," Bruce assured him. "She's doing great."

Bucky nodded, but didn't reply. He didn't trust his voice right now.

Bruce came over with yet another needle, but he paused before setting it up. "Look, I know it's none
of my business... but if you wanted to see her later, I'm sure that can be arranged."

Bucky smiled wryly. "I can barely pick her up, doc."

"Yeah, she is pretty heavy." Bruce went back to his needle set up. "Let's see if we can tackle that problem first, then."

~

Sam was texting in the Quinjet as they flew back to New York.

He was tired and a bit bruised; most of them were after the skirmish they'd just had in Rio de Janeiro, but Sam was in a good mood. Jessica had sent him a cute message, and she would be at the tower tomorrow.

Sam could hardly wait.

He was trying to text her back, when a loud snort from Barton sitting across from him made him glance up.

Barton grinned. "You've got a real dopey look on your face, just so you know."

"Leave him alone, Clint," Natasha said, though she was smirking too.

Steve and Maria were engrossed in their tablets and not paying attention, so Sam elected to get back to his message.

He did make more of an effort to keep his expression neutral, much to the amusement of Clint, who snort-laughed at him.


Sam sighed, and got back to his message.

He managed to finish and send it before Stark shouted from the cockpit, "Hey, Birdman! A word, if you please."

Clint made to get up, but Tony leaned around his chair and shooed him back. "Not you, Barton. I meant Wilson."

Clint looked put out. "But I'm the birdman."

"Clint." Natasha patted the seat next to her. "You'll always be the birdman to me."

Clint went to sit with Nat again, while Sam got to his feet and made his way over to the cockpit.

"Yes, Tony," he said, looming over him.

Tony gestured at the co-pilot chair, so Sam sat down on it. He raised his eyebrows at Tony expectantly, but Tony was busy tapping away on his mobile device.

"Just a small issue with the oven," Tony muttered.
Sam frowned in confusion, but before he could ask, Tony turned his phone screen around to show Sam.

There we was a message written there: *Rogers' omega in Banner's lab. Not well. Needs more time. Banner suggested you liaise with omega, while we keep Rogers busy. Good?*

Sam read the message twice, to make sure he understood. He nodded slowly.

"Sounds like the best option right now."

"Good," Tony said, taking his phone back and erasing the message. "That takes care of the oven. We're landing in twenty."

"Oven?" Sam repeated quietly.

Tony smiled, looking pleased with himself. "Bun, oven?"

"I get it, Tony."

"Well, when you think of a better codename," Tony replied, "you let me know."

"Oh-kay then," Sam said on an exhale.

He made to get out of the cockpit, and headed back to his seat, trying to look normal and not like he was keeping secrets or anything.

His long hot shower and putting his feet up would have to wait a bit longer.

~

Steve knew something was up.

First, it was Sam being shifty on the Quinjet after his conversation with Tony.

Then, Tony trying to distract him as they landed, suggesting they go straight into a debriefing and not to the showers and lounge like normal.

Even Maria side-eyed him. "You want to debrief now?" she asked. "Are you feeling alright, Tony?"

"Yes!" Tony smiled far too eagerly as they exited the Quinjet. "Let's get things wrapped up tight and we can all chillax later. I'll order in. What do you want? There's a gourmet burger place that I've been wanting to try..."

Tony rattled on about food, and Steve pretended to listen while he took a subtle look at his team.

Sam was rushing off somewhere, saying he had a call from Jessica, but Steve didn't hear anything even as Sam had the phone to his ear.

Even Nat and Clint were being overly enthusiastic about going to a debriefing.

Something was definitely going on.

"You know what's up with them?" Steve muttered to Maria.
"Afraid not," she murmured back, "but I'm sure I could find out."

"Do it," Steve said. "I'm going to go check on Lara."

"I'll come with you." Maria tapped her tablet, walking along beside him.

Tony whirled around when he noticed they weren't following him. "Uh... where are you going? Meeting room is this way..."

"We'll see you in there," Steve called over his shoulder, and walked away with Maria. He checked the polished reflective wall as he passed to catch a glimpse of Tony gesturing wildly to Clint and Nat behind him.

Clearly they were all trying to keep him busy.

"I know it's not my birthday for a while," Steve said to Maria as they approached the elevators, "so they can't be throwing a surprise party."

"Maybe a surprise for Lara?" Maria said, giving him a look. "Whatever it is, Banner has his lab on blackout right now."

Steve frowned. "Okay, then let's stop off there first."

Sam's scent led to the elevators, but Steve noticed that they didn't open straight away like they normally did, which meant Tony had probably asked Jarvis to delay them.

He sighed. "Maria, I'm taking the stairs. I'll meet you down there."

Then he took off at a jog, because he was getting anxious about what was happening.

"Rogers!" Tony called after him. "Hold up--"

But Steve didn't wait. He started running down stairs and across floors. It was only a couple floors away, and none of the team could run as fast as him.

"Jarvis," Steve said, breathless with worry, "where's Lara?"

"She is on your floor with Ms Khan, Captain," Jarvis supplied, "they are playing the alphabet game."

"Thanks." Steve kept running, his hunch confirmed.

Steve reached the lab, just as the elevators pinged and Tony came out, a stern look on his face.

"Banner said not to be disturbed," he called, but Steve barely heard him. A scent had caught his attention, sticking in his nostrils.

Bucky.

It was faint, and the air conditioner was colder than usual, likely to dissipate the scent, but it was definitely him.

Sam's too, ripe from their mission.

Steve ran across the lab, following their scents to the med bay. He heard a murmur of voices inside, and he threw open the door.

Sam blocked most of the view, and when he saw Steve he frowned slightly. "Steve," he said calmly, "stop right there."
Steve's pulse hammered loud in his ears. There, on the bed, was Bucky. Laying back with his dark hair all fanned out on the pillow, his sleeve rolled up and an IV drip attached to him.

He looked at Steve in alarm, as did Bruce, who was standing next to him with his tablet.

"Steve," Bruce said, then purposely angled himself to block Bucky from his view. "You're not supposed to barge in when I'm with a patient."

Steve tried to see around him, to see Bucky. "What happened?" he demanded. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Bucky replied, though his voice sounded shaky.

Steve looked to Bruce and Sam.

"Come on." Bruce began to shoo them. "Out of my space, please. I take my doctor patient confidentiality very seriously."

Steve didn't want to go, but Sam touched his shoulder gently to turn him. "Steve, just let them finish up." He started to herd Steve out of the room, along with Bruce.

Once they were out, and Bruce had spotted Tony and given him a frown, he shut himself back inside with Bucky.

Tony hung back, shaking his head. "You're a menace, Rogers." He turned and walked over to his espresso machine.

Steve ignored him, and looked longingly at the shut door.

"Steve." Sam kept a hand on Steve's shoulder, waiting for Steve to look at him. "Look, he's okay. Just a bit under the weather. Bruce hasn't even finished talking to him yet, so you can't go waltzing in there. People gotta see their doctors in peace."

Steve swallowed, and nodded sadly. He felt bad now, but he'd been worried.

"Come on, let's go get changed and see your girl," Sam said. "She'll be pleased to see you. And when Bruce is finished up, we can see how everyone is feeling, and what comes next."

"What do you mean?" Steve didn't understand. "Have you talked to Bucky?"

"Well, no," Sam said with a quirk of his lips. "I didn't get much chance. But if you want Bucky to talk to you, I'd suggest the calm approach, so let's go and do our thing, and wait until he's feeling up to seeing you."

Steve inhaled, and let it out slowly. "Alright."

What choice did he have?

Clint and Nat came over, but they weren't saying anything or making fun of him. They seemed more concerned than anything.

"Here's a great idea," Clint said softly. "We'll all go shower, because we probably stink. Then go hang out with Lara-pops. C'mon." He wiggled his fingers, gesturing for Steve to come over.

"That kind of sounded like you want us all to shower together," Sam pointed out. He gave Steve a gentle push, getting him moving.
"Hey," Clint waggled his eyebrows, "don't knock it till you've tried it."

"This is not what I signed up for," Sam replied.

They led Steve away, keeping up the playful banter between them. Nat came too, walking close to Steve and giving off a calming beta scent.

Maria was waiting by the elevators, and looked between them and Tony over in the lab, still sulking by his espresso machine. "So. I'm guessing you want to postpone the debrief."

"Yeah," Clint and Sam said in unison.

"Tony and I will debrief," Nat told her. "These guys need to wash and make themselves look more presentable." She gave Steve a wink. "Some clean clothes too. That blue shirt I got for you last week should do it."

Steve didn't understand at first, but when he did he felt himself blush.

"I'll be in my apartment if you need me," he said.

Nat nodded. "We'll see you later. Go freshen up."

"Don't worry," Clint said, saluting Nat and Maria as they left, "we're on the case."

~

Sam and Clint took him to the communal shower rooms, where each Avenger had a closet of spare clothes, and they could leave their suits for repairs or dry cleaning, all courtesy of Stark Industries.

Steve supposed he did smell quite strongly of alpha odor, so he took a long, lukewarm shower. Not too hot, because he ran hot enough.

He stared at the tiled wall and concentrated on steady breathing.

"All good?" Sam's voice across the stall sparked Steve into action and, after a quiet sigh, he reached for the shampoo and started cleaning himself up.

Clint and Sam were already showered and dressed by the time Steve got out. He went to the changing area, hung up his wet towels and pulled on some clothes; underwear, soft track pants, socks.

Steve was about to reach for a t-shirt, when Clint swept into the room, brandishing a shirt on a hanger. He made an eager face at Steve as he offered the shirt.

Steve didn't mean to pout, but it was easier than saying what was on his mind, and admitting out loud that he didn't see the point in dressing up. Bucky had made it plain he wasn't interested in Steve. Why would it all change over what shirt he wore?

Steve made his opinion clear when he picked out the t-shirt he'd already chosen, and pulled it on.

"Steve," Clint whined, tossing the dress shirt aside. "Nat will be disappointed."
Steve shrugged, and sat on the bench to put on his sneakers.

Sam came into the room, and leaned against the wall with his arms loosely folded. "Ready to go see Lara?" he asked. "Kamala said she's just had a change, so she's all nice and fresh for you."

"Thank God," Clint muttered.

Steve smiled. "Sure. Let's go."

He could do with a hug right now, and holding his daughter was like getting a good hug.

Especially if she fell asleep while he held her. Steve loved when she did that.

When they got to Steve's apartment, they found Lara on her padded play mat in front of the T.V., with Kamala sitting cross legged on the floor near her.

"Hey!" Kamala greeted, then bent down to Lara and said, "Your daddy is here!"

Lara banged her little fists on the squishy mat, and Steve smiled as he made his way over and bent down to scoop her up.

"C'mere, you."

Lara squealed happily as she was picked up. Steve turned her around so she could see him, and lifted her high above his head, wiggling her a little and saying, "Who's a wiggly worm? You're a wiggly worm!"

Lara let out a peal of laughter, her little face smiling.

Steve grinned back at her, and wiggled her again.

"Oh, the benefits of having super strength and endurance," Clint teased, as he flopped down onto the couch and sighed loudly. "I need a nap."

Steve brought Lara down and cradled her in his arms. She was still smiling, her gummy pink mouth open. Steve liked to watch her expressions, and often wondered what she made of his big face looming above her all the time.

"Have you been a good girl today?" he asked her, and he also glanced over at Kamala.

Kamala winced a little, and pointed at the baby walker across the room. "She got real excited earlier and almost tipped that over, even with the brakes on. So if you put her in it, you'll have to watch her all the time until Riri figures out how to weight it better."

Steve sighed lightly and bounced Lara in his arms. "Lara, what are we gonna do with you, huh?"

Clint huffed a laugh. "What's she gonna be like as a teenager, Steve? You'll be all, now wait a minute there, young lady!" he said, affecting a deep voice. "You're not going out dressed like that! And Lara will just, like, rip the front door of its hinges." Clint dissolved into giggles.

Steve frowned at him. "I don't sound anything like that."

Though he caught Sam and Kamala hiding smirks too.
"Okay," Steve said, changing the subject. "I'm starving. Can someone organise food? Kamala, do you wanna eat with us?"

"Love to," Kamala answered, getting to her feet, "but I'm meeting with Riri and Kate for a study group."

"What you studying?" Sam asked her.

"Just whatever projects we're working on," Kamala said with a smile. "We'll get a pizza and give feedback on each other's projects. Help out and stuff."

"Sounds neat," Clint said. "Tell Kate to stop stealing my candy when you see her. I know it was her."

Kamala pressed her lips together in an effort not to smile, then she said her goodbyes, with a little handshake for Lara, and left.

Sam was texting on his phone, and Steve kind of wanted to ask who he was talking to. "Are we eating?" he prompted instead, feeling irritable.

"Already on its way up," Sam informed him, putting his phone away. "I'm gonna mash up some banana for Lara so she has something to eat, and doesn't try to steal yours."

Steve nodded, and felt bad for getting snappy. "Thanks, Sam," he said quietly.

"No sweat," Sam said.

He went off to the kitchen, while Clint remained flopped out on the couch.

"You need a coffee?" Steve asked him.

Clint smiled sleepily. "Just inject it into my veins."

Steve's mind flashed to Bucky, seeing him laid out with an IV tube. Steve didn't even know why, or what was the problem.

Clint seemed to realise he'd said the wrong thing, as he caught Steve's eyes and said softly, "Hey. Everything's gonna be alright, you know."

Steve made himself nod, but he wasn't sure if he believed it.

He just wanted to know what was happening with Bucky.

They had their food sent up from the Stark Tower kitchens, and ate at Steve's table with Lara in her high chair, spoon feeding her mashed banana.

Conversation was a bit stilted, as every time Sam checked his phone Steve was on edge wondering if it was Bucky, or Bruce calling about Bucky.

Clint tried to make small talk. He got a message from Nat, saying she was eating dinner with Tony, Maria, Pepper, and Rhodey.

No mention of Bruce or Bucky though. Steve tried to focus on his food, and listen to Clint's chat about the post mission briefing. It'd been some arms group connected to AIM, who Tony had had
Steve just couldn't concentrate on it right now, he kept thinking of Bucky and if he was okay. And Clint's joke earlier about Lara being a teenager stuck in his mind. Would Steve still be a single parent then? Was he a single parent now, or did Bucky want to take Lara back when he was well again?

There was so much up in the air, it made his head spin thinking about it.

Steve gently spooned some banana off Lara's chubby chin. She was clearly enjoying the banana, a happy smile on her face.

Steve smiled back at her, and hoped he wasn't about to lose her. Not when he'd just found her.

The call came about an hour after they'd finished eating. Sam spoke on his phone, and Steve's hearing picked up Banner's voice.

He heard what was said, so when Sam hung up and repeated it, Steve was already panicking.

"Okay," Sam said calmly. "Just so we all know, Bucky is good, he's doing fine, and he's coming down in the elevator to talk to Steve. He's asked not to see Lara right now, so how about me and Clint take her to my apartment, as we got stuff for her there. And Steve, you can call me if you need her back, or want to come hang out."

Sam waited for Steve to react.

"Um." Steve swallowed, holding onto Lara. "Okay," he said weakly.

"Shit."

He was so unprepared for this.

"Alright," Sam said. "Clint." He gestured at the diaper bag, and Clint sprung into action, collecting things to put inside it.

"Get some diapers," Sam told him. "I got the other baby bag at mine already." Then he came over to Steve and held out his hands.

Steve gave Lara one last look, then transferred her over.

"Don't... don't let anyone take her," he said shakily.

Sam shook his head solemnly. "I wouldn't. Don't worry. We'll just be downstairs if you need us." He adjusted Lara, and patted a hand to Steve's shoulder. "Good luck, man. Try to stay calm, and think of Lara. You two have a responsibility to think of her first, so try keep it amicable at least."

"Yeah." Steve nodded determinedly. "I know."

"Okay." Sam moved away, called over to Clint. "I'm taking the other elevator now, make sure you grab some bottles too."

"Bottles," Clint muttered, racing to the kitchen with the open diaper bag, throwing things in as he went.
Lara started fussing as Sam took her away, but Sam bounced her gently and talked to her as he left the apartment.

Steve's heartstrings tugged, and he wanted to go after her.

But he also wanted to see Bucky. He felt torn.

He tried to make himself useful, and helped Clint gather up more of Lara's things. By the time they made it over to the elevators, Sam had already gone.

Another elevator was coming down, and when the doors opened, Bucky was there. He looked right at Steve and they locked eyes, then he looked away and shifted from foot to foot.

"Hey, man," Clint greeted, talking through the awkward silence. "Come on in. Make yourself comfy." He gestured to the apartment, and Bucky edged his way inside with a mumbled thank you.

Steve stood back a little to make room, so he wasn't looming over them both. Clint made to move past Bucky to get to the elevator. "Well, I'll leave you guys to it!" He said jovially. Then he paused, said to Bucky, "I gotta ask. Lara Croft?"

Bucky looked back at Clint, like he wasn't sure what he'd meant.

When Clint grinned, it seemed to put Bucky at ease, and he smiled shyly. "It was either that, or Casey Jones."

Steve recognised the name; it was a character from one of the movies he'd watched with Bucky.

Clint seemed to know it too, and exclaimed, "Casey Jones! Ah, man! Yes!" He laughed, then started speaking in a gruff voice, "Man, I hate punkers. Especially bald ones with green make-up..."

"Clint," Steve interrupted.

"Oh, yeah, sorry." Clint chuckled, and got into the elevator. "I'm Clint, by the way," he told Bucky as the doors closed. "Be good, kids!" he called.

Then he was gone, and it was just Steve and Bucky.

They looked at each other, with some more slightly awkward eye contact where Steve wasn't sure what he should do.

He tried not to scent the air, but just breathing in he smelled Bucky's omega scent. He smelled anxious, with some overlay of sterile medical room smells, and food he must've eaten recently.

Steve stepped back, to give them both some breathing space.

"Hi," he said, unsure what else to say.

"Hi," Bucky replied, lips tugging up in an almost smile.

"You, um. You wanna come in?" Steve offered.

"Yeah," Bucky said. "We should probably talk."
"You, um. You wanna come in?" Steve offered.

"Yeah," Bucky agreed. "We should probably talk."

"Right." Steve nodded, then got this pained look on his face as he averted his eyes and looked at the floor. "I mean... if you're not feeling well, you don't have to."

"I'm fine," Bucky insisted, which was pretty accurate. He hadn't felt this awake since being pregnant. It was like, finally he had some energy. "Your doc shot me full of so many vitamins, I'm actually pretty pumped right now."

"Vitamins?" Steve looked at him, eyes fixed on Bucky's arm. "Is that what the IV was?"

Bucky had a smartwatch kind of thing on his wrist, and as he noticed Steve looking at it, he held up his hand. "He's monitoring me. I gotta eat again soon, and have another protein shake in like, ten minutes, or something. This thing will beep to say when."

"Oh." Steve's concerned frown grew, and Bucky felt so awkward he had to look away.

Then Steve inhaled quietly. "Why don't you go on through to the lounge. You can sit down, and I'll make you a protein shake."

"You don't have to," Bucky tried to say, but Steve waved a hand.

"I'll need one soon myself, so... I'll go make them." He pointed behind him. "It's just through there, to the left. Make yourself comfortable. I'll just..." He gestured awkwardly toward what must be the kitchen, then hurried away.

Bucky was surprised all over again that for such a big guy, Steve was so quick and silent. One second he was there, the next he was gone.
Bucky tried not to loiter on his own, he headed straight for the lounge. It looked like Steve's friends must've left with Lara barely minutes before he arrived, as their scents were all fresh; Lara's baby scent, along with various beta scents from different people, one Bucky recognised as Sam's.

And Steve's alpha scent too.

Bucky should've thought this through. All these scents were overwhelming, and made him want to burrow into the cozy-looking couch and nest as soon as he entered the living room.

There were baby things everywhere, all over the floor and on every surface. Toys, mostly. Some blankets, and little clothes. They probably all had Lara's scent on too, spreading it around the apartment.

Bucky tried to breathe through his mouth, and glanced up at the ceiling.

"Jarvis?" he whispered, unsure if the AI would be in here.

"Yes, Mister Barnes?" Jarvis replied, as Bucky almost jumped.

"Uh... um, can you like, turn on the air conditioner?" Bucky asked. "Or just, I don't know, clear the scent a bit?"

"I can extract smells from the room without affecting the temperature," Jarvis said. "Shall I proceed?"

"Yes," Bucky said with relief. "Thanks, pal."

"You're welcome, Mister Barnes."

Bucky went over to the couch, unsure about sitting on it. If he sat on something that comfortable, he wouldn't want to get up again. And Steve might get the wrong idea and want to sit next to him.

Bucky bit his lip, looking around at the other options. There were some single seats, and he chose one that was small enough to only fit one.

He had to be very clear about things here. Bucky knew he owed Steve that much.

He set his coat and his hat on the back of the chair, and deliberated a moment over his scarf. He wasn't cold, but it would be easier to keep it on and mask his scent a bit.

Although, Bucky was willing to bet he smelled strongly, as he'd been so anxious earlier. He kept the scarf on, and sat down on the seat.

Then he twiddled his thumbs and waited for Steve to come back. Bucky tried not to look around at the baby toys, but they kept catching his eye. Especially that extravagant baby-walker. Seriously, what the hell. It looked like a carousel on wheels.

Bucky tried not to feel jealous, or bitter. He really did. Seeing all the toys and baby stuff everywhere helped him make up his mind; Lara was better off with Steve. He'd take care of her, and she'd never want for anything.

If there was one thing that Bucky had been certain, was that Steve would look after her.

He stared pointedly at his hands, not at the baby things, and tried to calm his breathing. His heart was pounding away.

He jumped when he heard a noise, and realised it must've only been a blender in the kitchen whirring
Bucky rolled his eyes at himself. "Jeez," he muttered, pulling his scarf more securely around his neck. The last thing he needed was to be pumping out more scent right now.

Steve eventually came back in with not only the shakes, but an entire tray of food. Bucky blanched slightly as he saw it, and felt a mix of emotions that Steve had gone to all the trouble for him.

Steve paused when he noticed Bucky over in the single chair, but covered it up quickly, and set the tray down on the coffee table.

Then he picked up the entire coffee table like it weighed nothing, moved it closer to Bucky, and carefully set it back down.

Steve looked up briefly, and met Bucky's eyes, but he looked away again and went to grab one of the shakes. Bucky watched as Steve took his drink over to the couch, sat on the end closest to him, and crossed one leg over the other as he leaned back, affecting a casual position.

Bucky didn't for one moment believe Steve felt that laid back; he was probably trying to give off an air of nonchalance, or something. Alphas did that shit all the time.

Bucky leaned forward and picked up his shake anyway, because it gave him something to do.

"Thank you," he said softly. "You didn't need to—"

"It's no trouble," Steve said, also quiet. Matching Bucky's tone.

Bucky nodded, feeling embarrassed, and drank some of the shake.

It tasted way better than the one Bruce had made him. Bucky almost commented on it, but he wasn't sure Steve seemed in the mood for small talk.

Bucky finished off the drink nearly in one go, and then set the cup back down. The tray of food boasted sandwiches, bowls of fruit, nuts, and random vegetables that Bucky didn't recognise.

He couldn't remember when he'd last eaten a vegetable.

"Um..." Bucky cleared his throat, and gingerly reached into his pocket.

Steve looked over, eyes going to the folded piece of paper Bucky pulled out. He looked pensive.

"Um, Steve, I..." Bucky fiddled with the paper, turning it over in his hands. "I wasn't sure if I'd see you today, so I wrote you this. I can let you read it or..." He swallowed nervously. "Or we can talk? I guess? Just, like, I know everything's my fault, but I'm not really... I can't... don't yell at me, I don't... just not today, alright?"

"Bucky," Steve said gently. "I'm not going to yell at you. If you'd rather leave, you can do that too. It's completely up to you."

Bucky frowned at that, and swallowed again. He felt a little braver now Steve had assured him he wouldn't flip a table or something. Bucky just couldn't take any more stress today.

"Okay," he said, and opened the letter.

Better to get it over with.
"Steve," he started, his voice cracking a bit as he read it aloud. "I'm sorry. I know that it's not enough, and maybe never will be, but I am sorry. I was messed up for a long time, and running away from stuff was my way of coping. When I met you, I was in a bad place, and you kind of caught me by surprise. I wish I'd spoken to you, but I was..." Bucky felt his face grow hot, and tears prickling his eyes, but he pressed on. "I was scared. My therapist said that running away was the coping method that'd saved me from bad situations all my life, and using it then seemed normal to me. I know now that it's not the answer to every situation, but I didn't know what else to do back then. I'm still working on that, I guess. And...

Bucky took a breath before he rushed through the last part. "I'm sorry for dumping Lara on you without warning. I was tired and I couldn't afford a sitter, and I thought I was doing everything wrong anyway. And seeing on the news you were at Stark Tower was the first time I knew where you were, so I figured you'd have more money than me to take care of her, and I knew you'd do a better job. Thank you for taking her in."

Bucky folded the letter closed again, and drew in a shallow breath. His hands were shaking.

Steve didn't respond for the longest time, and when Bucky looked up to check, he saw that Steve was frowning into the middle distance.

Bucky's heart rate spiked, but he tried to stop himself from panicking and falling into the habit of backtracking and apologising for speaking, or trying to find some way to please the alpha in the room.

He thought of his therapist's calm voice, and what she'd told him repeatedly: stay calm, assess the situation before you pre-emptively act like the danger is already there.

Bucky was used to assessing for danger, but domestic environments were his weak spot. He knew that. He just didn't want to fall into the bad habit of going to extra lengths to distract and please an alpha simply to avoid a brewing argument.

Alpha silence was really disconcerting.

Bucky made himself stay still, not leap up and offer to make dinner, or clean the apartment, or anything to wipe that look of Steve's face.

It was a close call, Bucky was almost going to say something when Steve finally spoke.

"Do you still want to see Lara?" he asked calmly.

Bucky felt taken aback, then remembered this was Steve, he wasn't like other alphas. Not that Bucky had seen, but he always worried. People lost their tempers all the time, he was well aware of that fact.

"Uh..." He swallowed, looked away. "I don't know? She doesn't..." His eyes fell on a discarded plastic toy on the floor, something that looked bright and colorful, and also expensive. Something he'd never be able to afford.

"She doesn't really need me," Bucky finally admitted. "Maybe she'd be better off with you."

Steve looked at him, but his frown vanished. Now he looked distraught. "Of course she needs you. You're her parent."

Bucky huffed wryly. "I'm not really cut out for this parent stuff, Steve."
"Just learn as you go," Steve said earnestly. "I'm a parent, I haven't got a clue what I'm doing."

"Seem to be doing alright," Bucky mumbled.

He wasn't jealous. He wasn't.

Okay, maybe he was.

"Yeah, with help," Steve said. He was still so calm, though his scent had spiked with adrenaline.

Bucky felt his own pulse quicken in response, terrified that this was going to descend into a fight. He felt frozen to his chair, unable to move.

Another thing his therapist had tried to tell him, that sometimes people froze. Sometimes freezing was the safest thing to do in a dangerous domestic situation. Bucky wished it weren't the case, but sometimes he just couldn't help it.

"Bucky," Steve said with a sigh, "look, just... don't decide anything right now, okay? Lara needs you too, but if you need to take some time so you feel better, that's okay too, and I promise I'll take care of her. But please don't leave for good. She'll want to know you."

"You sound so sure," Bucky said, before he could stop himself.

"I am sure," Steve replied. "My dad died when I was very young. I hardly remember him, but I thought about him a lot. I still do. Kids want to know their parents, it's natural."

Bucky looked down at his hands, still fiddling with the letter. He thought of all the foster parents he'd had growing up in the system, and the biological parents he'd never known.

He knew Steve was right. Bucky wished he'd known his parents. But now he was the parent, all he felt was guilt and shame, and a gnawing worry that he'd never measure up to his baby's expectations.

Steve didn't know. He didn't know the full story, and Bucky didn't want him to know.

"Yeah, well," he murmured, more to himself than Steve, "we'll see."

Steve exhaled, long and quiet, and shifted on the couch, leaning forward as he stared at the floor.

When it became apparent that he wasn't about to move any time soon, Bucky watched him. This wasn't the reaction he'd expected, and his bubbling nerves prompted him to ask, "Aren't you mad at me?"

Steve looked up, his expression too neutral for Bucky to figure out what he was thinking.

"I'm not sure," Steve said quietly. "I don't think mad is the right word. I just... I wish you'd come to me sooner. I would've helped you."

Bucky felt himself flush hot again, this time with anger. He bit his lip in an attempt not to snap; to keep that knee-jerk reaction bottled up. He wanted to scream, *I don't need your help!*

Instead he took a slow breath, and gritted out as calm as he could, "I changed my phone, that's what I do. It keeps me safe. So, I didn't have your number any more, and when I went back to your apartment to talk to you, you had gone. I wasn't about to start calling up the government to ask where you were either. Good job too, after that shit in D.C. I saw on the news."

Steve winced. "I'm glad you didn't try to contact Shield. They can't be trusted. And I'm sorry I
moved, I just... I figured there was nothing in New York for me, and I got a new job offer." He sighed, silently, but his chest expanded, distracting Bucky for a moment because his pectorals were totally visible in that tight top.

Damn, Steve still looked amazing.

Which was just unfair, when Bucky knew he probably looked terrible.

"What about your friend?" Steve asked. "She had my number."

"Cass?" Bucky rolled his eyes fondly. "Not any more. She goes through phones quicker than I do. It's just a habit, it's hard to break."

Steve's brows drew together, like he was confused at that. Bucky had to look away.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "If I could go back, I wouldn't do the same things again. I'd literally change everything I ever did, and who knows where I'd be now."

"Everything?" Steve asked, his voice small.

Bucky's mind flashed to the one place he'd been trying so hard to avoid; that night in Steve's bed, their passionate fucking, Steve's huge knot and all the times he'd made Bucky come, and--

*Oh, God.*

Bucky's skin was on fire, his face flaming hot. He was positive his blush was noticeable.

"That's not what I meant," he choked out.

"What did you mean?" Steve asked.

"Just... uh..." Bucky couldn't get his words together, his mind in too many places at once. He didn't understand why Steve was like this, why he wasn't angry or throwing things around.

Bucky couldn't take it any more, the panic gripped him and he found himself snapping, "What do you even care?"

He regretted it instantly, started to recoil in his seat as he expected the outburst to finally light the touchpaper of Steve's temper.

But Steve only watched him quietly, and when he spoke it was gentle.

"I care about you, Bucky. We can be friends if that's what you want."

Bucky opened his mouth, but he had no words.

*Friends?*

That was worse than being yelled at. At least anger *meant* something, it meant that he mattered.

Didn't it?

Bucky's mind was racing, and when he felt panicked all his bad habits kicked in before he could stop and think it through. He got to his feet, and looked for the closest exit point.

Steve didn't move, didn't try to stop him. Like he really was going to let Bucky just walk out of here.
The thought of that took the wind out of Bucky's sails a little bit. He paused, caught between wanting to run and wanting to stay.

Steve's nostrils flared, scenting the air. "Bucky," he said calmly, "if you want to go, that's okay. There's rooms in the tower you can have, clean rooms with no scent. Would you like that? You can just have a room to yourself for however long you need."

Bucky's eyes filled with tears. He didn't understand why Steve was being so calm. He managed to hold off his freak out long enough to answer, "Bruce has a room for me."

"Okay," Steve said evenly. "So you'll stay? You'll see Lara and me in the morning?"

"Um. Maybe," he said. A tear escaped, dripping down his cheek. Bucky dropped the letter on the table, grabbed his jacket and hurried from the room, before he embarrassed himself any more.

Steve didn't follow him.

Bucky wasn't sure what to make of that, though he kept looking over his shoulder to see if he did.

The elevator opened as he approached it, and Bucky tucked himself into the far corner when he was inside, wiping angrily at his eyes.

He couldn't speak, it was taking all he had to hold himself together.

"Mister Barnes, shall I take you to Doctor Banner?" Jarvis asked.

Bucky nodded, and hoped the AI understood.

Miraculously, he did, as the doors closed, shutting Bucky in by himself, and he heaved a sigh of relief.

~

Steve stayed on his couch, listening to Bucky leave in the elevator.

Thanks to his enhanced hearing, Steve knew the elevator was going up. That meant Bucky was hopefully staying in the building, at least for tonight.

"Jarvis," Steve said.

"Yes, Captain Rogers?" the AI replied.

"Would you let me know when Bucky gets to Doctor Banner safely?"

"Yes, Captain."

Steve waited, and only a few minutes later, Jarvis informed him that Bucky was with Bruce, and being shown to a spare room.

"Thank you," Steve said. "Jarvis, would you maybe... not monitor exactly, but just keep an eye on Bucky tonight? If he gets upset, I mean. Let me know, or maybe... he seems to like Sam, maybe inform Sam? If he's awake."
"I shall ensure Mister Barnes is comfortable at all times," Jarvis assured him.

"Thank you, Jarvis."

"You're welcome, Captain."

Steve sighed to himself, and looked over at the table where Bucky's note was. Steve wasn't sure if he wanted to read it right now, but he went and picked it up, tracing the paper with his fingers, then put it safely in his pocket.

He picked up the untouched tray of food, and took it back to the kitchen. He should probably eat it, Steve figured, so it wouldn't go to waste. Or, he could take it to Clint and Sam.

"Jarvis," Steve asked, "what's Lara doing right now?"

"Miss Croft is having her diaper changed by Mister Barton," Jarvis informed him.

Steve smiled at that.

Then he took the tray over to the elevator, and got in it. "Sam's apartment, please, Jarvis."

When Sam let him in, he seemed a little surprised to see him.

"Hey, man," he said. "You okay?"

Steve shrugged, and offered Sam the tray of food. "I think it'll be one to sleep on," he said quietly, before going to find Lara.

Steve wasn't ready to talk about it all just yet. He was still trying to sort his own head out.

He found Lara in Sam's lounge, sitting on Clint's lap on the couch.

"Oh!" Clint scoffed when he saw Steve. "Perfect timing, Captain. It's almost like you knew."

"Knew what?" Steve asked with a smile. "That she'd just had a diaper change?"

Clint grinned. "Tactical evasions only work for so long. You're changing her next."

"I'm sure I will," Steve said, and bent down to pick Lara up.

She grinned when she saw him, and Steve never got tired of that; her being so pleased to see him.

"Did you do a doodle?" he asked her, cradling her in his arm. "Did you do a big doodle for uncle Clint?"

Lara giggled, while Clint laid back on the couch with a groan.

"It sure was a big one," Clint said.

Steve mocked a gasp, and went to tickle Lara's belly. "Is that so?" he said, giving her a tickle.

She squealed in delight, so Steve did it again.

He felt instantly better being with Lara, but when he glanced round, he noticed Sam watching him closely.
Clint was busy demolishing the food Steve had brought, so that kept him busy. Steve carried on playing with Lara, because it was easier to interact with her than it was with adults.

He managed to get away with it for a bit, but when Natasha arrived and plopped down onto the couch next to Clint, Steve worried that they’d all force him to start talking, or something.

Nat watched Lara, then looked at Steve. "Don't babies sleep?" she asked, a note of sarcasm in her voice.

"Uh, well..." Steve held up a hand to block the rattle Lara was currently trying to beat his face with. "She sometimes has a nap early evening, then she'll have a longer sleep from around midnight."

"What will make her settle?" Nat asked.

"We could watch a movie and snuggle?" Clint suggested with a smirk.

Natasha smiled back, but she got up to trade places with Clint before sitting back down, so she was on the end of the couch.

Lara had tugged on Nat's hair once, and clearly once had been enough.

Steve took Lara and went to sit next to Clint. Sam was in the easy chair, texting on his phone.

"What shall we watch?" Steve asked.

"Predator?" Clint said, which had both Nat and Sam frowning at him. "What?" Clint shrugged. "It's a good movie."

Steve had an idea, because seeing Bucky today had reminded him of all the movies he'd introduced Steve to. "What about Pixar?" he said. "Finding Nemo is nice? And Lara would like the colors."

"Good choice," Sam said, and that was decided.

Thankfully, it looked like Steve was going to get away with not having to talk about his feelings right now, and he could settle back with Lara in his lap, and his team mates around him, and just decompress.

As they watched the movie, Steve found himself wondering what Bucky was doing, and wishing he could ask Jarvis.

But that would be an invasion of privacy, and it seemed like privacy was something Bucky needed right now. He'd seemed pretty spooked earlier, like he might run off again. Steve really hoped he wouldn't leave. There was still so much to talk about, and Steve tried his best to set his feelings aside and think about what was best for Lara.

He hugged her close, and kissed the top of her head.

_I'll fix this_, he promised her silently. _I'll make sure you get both your parents, even if they're not together._
Warnings for chapter:

Bucky has an anxiety attack during his talk with Steve, and has to leave. Steve is calm in response (which is somewhat confusing for Bucky).

(Gentle reminder that anxiety manifests in different people in different ways. Also that healing and recovery are not linear, and can take time.)
Bucky slept soundly, probably as a result of the emotionally wrought day he'd had. He had some pretty stressful dreams too, his mind helpfully providing him with all the ways that the conversation with Steve could've gone, with Steve getting angry and shouting at him, or much worse.

There were some sex charged dreams mixed up in there too; Steve's tantalisingly strong alpha scent must've stuck in Bucky's nose and just made itself at home in his subconscious.

He also dreamed of Lara. Or rather, he dreamed of running endlessly from room to room, searching for her, with her scent on the very edge of his senses.

Bucky jerked awake at five in the morning, so used to Lara waking and screaming her head off to be fed. For a moment he forgot where he was, and frantically looked around for her, but he was alone.

The room he was in looked expensive, minimalist and impeccably clean, like some fancy hotel. When Bucky slowly remembered where he was –the absence of scent in the room made him even more confused at first– he sank back into the pillows with a groan.

His heart was hammering, and he didn't think he'd be going back to sleep any time soon. The little wristwatch monitor Bruce had given him started beeping softly, and Bucky squinted at it to read the instruction.

It told him to eat, and as if on cue, his stomach rumbled with hunger. He threw off the covers and went to investigate the supplies Bruce had left for him in the kitchenette.

It was more like a one bedroom apartment than a room, Bucky thought.

Certainly better than anywhere he'd ever stayed.

He wore one of the fluffy white robes that'd been in the bathroom, heated up a pot of porridge oats – packed with extra protein or whatever Bruce had put in– and took the bowl back to bed with him.

He didn't realise how ravenous he was until he'd eaten the entire bowl, and decided he may as well go eat another one.

After his second bowl of porridge, and drinking some of the vitamin water too, Bucky started in on the bunch of bananas.
He hadn't eaten this much at once since he was a teenager, and he didn't even feel full yet. Next, he took out the container that was labelled pie, and heated that up.

"This is so weird," he muttered, in between spoonfuls of delicious, hot pie.

At least after finishing that, his stomach seemed to be satisfied.

Finally.

Bucky laid down on the bed, but he wasn't sleepy. He blinked up at the ceiling, a little shocked by that revelation.

He'd woken up without feeling like he needed at least a week's worth of sleep. He actually felt awake.

What a novelty.

Bucky went to the bathroom and took a long shower, using all the nice shampoo and body wash hanging up in the stall. He didn't do what he normally liked to do if he had time, which was stroke himself off, because he hadn't felt like doing that since after having Lara.

Literally the polar opposite to how he'd felt in the later stages of his pregnancy, when he'd been so incredibly horny all the time. He'd had to take care of his needs on his own, and felt cranky about it when all he wanted was an alpha holding him down and and screwing him senseless.

But then after the birth, he'd just felt so exhausted and worn out, he'd barely even thought about anything like that.

The thought did tease his mind today, which was more than it'd done for a long time. Maybe he wasn't so broken after all.

Bucky shut off the water and towelled himself dry. He used the little shaving kit and the body lotions on display too. Most of them were scent dampening, and he applied the lotion liberally over his skin.

He fussed around with his hair for the longest time, until he gave up and tied it back instead, hoping he didn't look too scruffy.

Then he got dressed, and borrowed some of the clean clothes in the closet Bruce had said to help himself to, like a t-shirt and a hoodie, because his own top from yesterday was certainly sweaty and covered in scent.

He wore his jeans again though, and his boots, because the only things in the closet were sweatpants and slippers, and Bucky didn't feel comfortable enough to walk around in lounge-wear.

For all he knew, he'd be asked to leave the moment anyone saw him.

It was now closer to seven, and Bucky was itching to get out and do something. He wasn't seeing Bruce until a little later, and surely everyone else would still be asleep.

Then again, Steve used to get up early every day.

"Um, Jarvis?" Bucky asked quietly.

"Yes, Mister Barnes?" Jarvis answered.

"Is Steve awake?"
"He has just gone to bed, Mister Barnes," Jarvis said. "Do you wish to speak to him?"

"No, no," Bucky said hurriedly. He didn't want to disturb anyone's sleep. "Did he stay up all night?"

"Yes, Mister Barnes. He and Mister Barton were with Miss Croft."

"Oh." Bucky felt surprised at that. "Wait, who's Mister Barton?"

"You met him by the elevators yesterday, Mister Barnes."

"Oh," Bucky said again, remembering the blond beta with the nice arms who had gotten all excited over the mention of Casey Jones. He'd seemed nice, but now Bucky felt jealous.

Which was stupid, because he'd pretty much convinced himself that Steve had to be seeing someone by now. The alpha wasn't living on his own like he was before, he was living in a tower full of superheroes and he very likely had a superhero partner, or partners.

There were certainly a lot of good looking betas here. Bucky had eyes, he'd noticed.

"Um. Jarvis? Is Lara asleep too?" he asked.

"Miss Croft is with her nanny, Mister Barnes."

"Oh," Bucky said, and wondered if he'd be allowed to see her without Steve there. "Uh, what's she doing? Is she okay?"

"All is well, Mister Barnes," Jarvis informed him. "If you wish, Ms Romanov has offered to escort you to see your daughter."

"Huh? When?"

"As soon as you wish, Mister Barnes."

Bucky breathed out nervously, and considered the offer. "Uh... won't Steve be mad?"

"Captain Rogers informed me that if you wished to see Miss Croft at any time, you were to be treated as his welcomed guest. In the event of his being asleep, one of his team will stand in for him and assist you."

"Stand in for him, huh." Bucky pulled a face at that.

Steve didn't trust him with Lara. Maybe he thought Bucky would run off with her, or something.

In a stroller, Bucky thought wryly, because damn, that kid was heavy and he wouldn't be able to run anywhere with her for long.

Not that he was going to, but Bucky didn't blame Steve for being suspicious.

He deliberated on it for a while, and he went to watch TV in bed to take his mind off it.

But he couldn't stop thinking about Lara, wondering what she was doing, what he was missing out on, until he couldn't bear it any longer.

With a huff, he gave in and asked Jarvis for that escort-slash-Steve-stand-in.

Not long after, there was a soft knock at his door, and he opened it to see the red-haired beta.
She gave him a neutral smile. "Wanna come see your girl?"

Bucky nodded, and picked up his jacket and his hat, unsure if he was coming back to this room or not.

"Yeah, thanks," he mumbled.

"This way," she said, leading him to the elevators along the hall.

The elevator ride was a bit awkward. Bucky shuffled nervously, but the beta, Natasha, was still and silent to the point of being unsettling.

When she spoke, Bucky startled a little, but all Natasha said was, "She's cute."

"Huh? Who, Lara?"

Natasha gave him a side-long smile. "Yes."

"Oh." Bucky felt stupid, and on edge. He forced himself to try calm down. "Um, yeah. When she's not shitting and screaming her head off, she is."

Natasha regarded him quietly, then she said, "Jarvis has charts of how often she laughs versus how often she cries, and she's definitely crying less now she's on her new diet plan."

"Diet plan?" Bucky repeated, then remembered what Sam had said, and what Bruce had told him. "Oh, the, um. Body builder thing?"

Natasha smiled again. "Specially designed for a faster metabolism, and accelerated growth."

"Yeah." Bucky cleared his throat. "That."

They were silent for a moment, then Natasha said, "Banner is a good doctor. He'll look after you both."

Bucky looked at her, unsure what to say. "Uh, yeah, he... he's been great."

She smiled, and they rode the rest of the way in silence.

When they got off at the floor, Natasha led him down halls and into what looked like some big communal lounge, free of any overpowering scents thanks to the air conditioner.

There were a couple of scents present, and the first scent Bucky picked up on was Lara, and all the baby products that he associated with her.

Also, a beta he didn't recognise.

Natasha led him in, and Bucky spotted Lara in a fancy-looking crib next to the couch. A young beta was with her, and she got to her feet as they approached.

"Kamala," Natasha said, "this is Lara's omega, Bucky. Bucky, this is Kamala, Lara's nanny."

Bucky tried not to look surprised. This beta was barely a kid herself, and she was looking after Lara? Kamala waved her hand eagerly, and smiled. "Hi! It's great to meet you!"
Bucky smiled, a bit wary. "Hello. So, um, how long have you been..." He gestured to Lara, laying in her crib and, miraculously, barely making a sound. Just a few huffs and murmurs, and stretching her tiny arms in the air.

"Just finished my first week," Kamala said proudly.

Bucky's eyes widened in alarm, and Kamala must've realised how that'd sounded, as she quickly added, "Oh! I meant my first week with Lara. I've been a nanny for longer than that." She laughed nervously, looking between Bucky and Natasha. "Wait... am I being fired?"

"No," Natasha said firmly. "Just carry on as normal. Bucky has some time and he wanted to say hi."

"Oh, phew!" Kamala breathed out in relief. "Okay, well, um. She's been fed and changed. I was just seeing if she'd go down for a nap, but she's busy chatting to herself, so maybe not."

"What's with the crib?" Bucky asked, looking it over. He was almost afraid to approach it.

"Tony designed it," Natasha said. "It's self regulating, and has lots of functions to help the baby sleep better. I'm sure he'll explain it all to you later, Tony likes to talk." She sat on the edge of the couch, watching Bucky. "What would you like to do?"

"Me?" Bucky looked between them, then at Lara.

"Why don't you come sit here," Natasha suggested, "and we can move the crib closer so she can see you?"

"Yeah, it's easily portable," Kamala said.

"Um... uh..." Bucky felt flustered about having to make a decision, especially with an audience watching him. "I dunno. I don't want to disturb her."

"She's not sleeping anyway." Kamala shrugged. "She's a pickle like that. But Doctor Banner said she doesn't need as much sleep as regular babies."

"Oh." Bucky bit his lip, and gingerly approached the crib to peer in.

There she was, in a cute, stripey baby-grow, all snuggled up in the compact crib. Lara's big blue eyes found him, and she gazed up at him silently.

Bucky worried that she didn't recognise him, didn't know who he was.

For the longest moment she just stared at him. He took a shaky breath, and whispered, "Hi, baby."

One of Lara's chubby hands came up, and she let out a soft, "Ah," sound.

Bucky reached in, and clasped her little hand very gently in his fingers. "Hey, you."

Lara gripped his finger. And boy, she had a strong grip. Bucky smiled down at her. "Little super baby," he murmured, wiggling her hand back and forth.

Lara shouted, "Ahhh!" The sound which usually meant she wanted something, and if she didn't get it soon she'd only get louder.

Bucky glanced up, found Kamala and Natasha both watching him intently. He flushed, feeling embarrassed. Like he was a stranger peering in at his own kid.
Kamala seemed to pick up on the awkwardness, as her scent spiked, sending out calming beta pheromones.

"Why don't you take her out?" Kamala suggested. "She's clearly awake."

"Um..." Bucky looked to Lara again, unsure what to do. But when she tugged on his finger, harder this time, he gave in. "Okay," he agreed. "How do I...?"

"Oh, it's like this..." Kamala came over and started fiddling with the crib. "You can sort of make it bigger, so there's more room to grab her." With a few adjustments, the crib's inside expanded a little, and Bucky was able to slide his hands in around Lara's little body.

Lara shouted again, getting excited. Bucky had almost forgotten how loud she was.

"Okay, missy," he said, "hang on a sec." He lifted her out of the crib.

He felt a lot stronger today, like he wasn't about to lose his grip on her or keel over sideways. Bucky cradled her in his arms, surprised at her weight.

"Jeez, you feel even heavier," he complained.

"She has put on weight," Kamala said, tidying up the crib and refolding the discarded baby blanket. "But Doctor Banner's tracking her growth and stuff."

"Let me guess," Bucky said, bouncing Lara gently, "accelerated everything?"

"Pretty much," Natasha said, watching them from the couch. "But he seems happy with her progress so far, and said she's in a healthy range. Banner's worked with Steve long enough to have some idea of what to expect."

Bucky nodded, but he didn't really want to get into this subject right now. The thought of it kind of freaked him out. He just wanted his baby to be alright, to be healthy.

He cradled Lara in one arm and used his other hand to smooth back her fluffy blonde hair. "Look at all this," he murmured, stroking her head. "You need a haircut."

"Oh, no," Kamala pleaded. "Please keep it long! Then we can tie it back and make cute hairstyles."

"But it'll be so cool!" Kamala insisted.

Lara laughed then, her little face beaming.

"Aw." Bucky tweaked her nose. "You like that idea? You wanna be Rapunzel with long golden hair?"

"Aahh!" Lara shouted, which sounded like an affirmative.

Bucky's arms started to tire from holding her; it'd barely been a minute, but he was pleased because it was certainly longer than the last time he'd tried to hold her.

He took Lara over to the couch and sat down. Kamala made sure he had some extra cushions, as balance for holding Lara. Bucky tried to thank her as he held Lara against his chest, then winced in pain as Lara simultaneously grabbed onto his sensitive nipple, and slapped a hand against his chin.
"Ow, Lara." Bucky went to rearrange her, and Kamala came in beside them to help. "I don't know why she always slaps my face," Bucky grumbled.

"My favorite is when she grabs Steve's nose," Kamala said with a laugh, seemingly unaware of how awkward that news made Bucky feel. He swallowed, and tried to smile through it.

They got Lara sitting on his lap, and she chewed her fist while looking up at him. "There," Bucky said. "That's better, right? You just eat your hand and don't slap me, okay?"

Lara opened her mouth to burble loudly, and reached out with her wet fist to wipe it down Bucky's top.

Bucky smiled at her. "Thanks, Lala. I really needed drool on me."

"She's scenting you," Kamala said excitedly. "If they're not able to reach your major scent glands, they use saliva instead and make sure to mark you with it."

Bucky looked at her in surprise. "What? Really?"

"Yes." Kamala grinned. "Isn't she cute though? She's started doing it a lot now. She did it to me the other day. I've never felt so blessed."

"Oh." Bucky looked down at Lara's drooling mouth and happy smile with a whole new outlook. "I didn't know..."

"This is behaviour you'd normally see in toddlers," Kamala explained. "The fact that she's doing it this early is really exciting. Doctor Banner said she'd probably develop early, so we're monitoring her development and making sure she's got enough stimulus to keep her happy. You wanna see the new flashcards I got her?"

"Kamala," Natasha said, calmly interrupting the excitement. "Maybe later, okay? Why don't you have a quick coffee break, and we'll stay here on the couch."

"Oh, sure." Kamala ducked her head shyly. "Of course. Sorry. I know I flail over this stuff."

Bucky felt bad for ruining her fun, so he said, "I'd love a coffee, and then you can show us the cards afterwards?"

Kamala grinned at him. "Okay! I'll get the coffee. I wanna try out that espresso machine Riri made."

And with that, she got up and dashed away.

Bucky looked to Natasha, and she smiled at him. "She's a good kid."

"Yeah." Bucky nodded in agreement. "She seems nice."

"Her and Lara get on really well," Natasha added, looking at Lara from where she sat.

"You like kids?" Bucky asked her.

Natasha raised an eyebrow, her smile becoming more enigmatic. "They're okay from a distance. And when I can leave."

Bucky snorted a laugh. "Ain't that the truth."

Lara was making a grab for Bucky's chest again, her little hand grabbing onto the swollen mound of
his pec. Bucky tried to move her hand away.

"Lara, not now."

She kept reaching for him, making noises like she wanted something. Natasha must've caught on, as she asked, "What does she want?"

"Feeding, I guess," Bucky said. "I was doing a mix of formula and my own milk, because she always seemed so hungry. But the post natal clinic gave me a such hard time for doing both. They acted like using formula was a mortal sin."

Natasha was quiet a moment, then asked, "Did Banner say if it was okay for you to breastfeed her now?"

"Um." Bucky's face flushed hot. "He said if I wanted to, I should do it before we get my new prescription, because my hormone levels will change again and I don't want to be giving her extra testosterone through the milk."

"Of course," Natasha agreed. "That makes sense. When will you get your prescription?"

"Bruce said hopefully later today, once I talk to his endo. Then he'll order it in and do the first shot with me."

"So today could be your last chance to breastfeed," Natasha said thoughtfully.

Bucky sighed. "I guess..."

"Do you want to breastfeed her?" she asked.

"Um... I don't want to upset the feeding schedule, or anything."

"If Banner said she'd be okay, then surely the choice is yours," Natasha said, eyeing his t-shirt. "But doing it in that could prove difficult."

"Yeah," Bucky agreed. "But I don't really fit in men's button ups right now."

"I can fix that," Natasha offered.

She waited until Bucky nodded, then she said, "Jarvis, would you have someone send up that bag by my apartment door?"

"Certainly, Ms Romanoff," Jarvis replied.

"Thank you, Jarvis," Natasha said, then looked at Bucky with a smile. "It won't be long."

"A bag?" Bucky asked.

Natasha smiled wider. "I got a bit carried away shopping the other day... some of these things were being sent back, but if they fit you, then you may as well have them."

"Oh, no, you don't have to--"

"Please." Natasha reached over and placed her hand on his arm, squeezing it once before she let go again. "I want to."

"Um. Okay, then. Thanks."
The delivery arrived, with Kamala answering the door for them. She brought the bag over, saying she was still trying to figure out the espresso machine in the kitchen.

She offered to hold Lara so Bucky could try on some of the shirts.

There were so many, Bucky didn't know where to start. But Natasha had insisted, so he took them all to the bathroom nearby, and started trying them on.

They were probably women's shirts, but they looked neutral enough in design that he could probably get away with it. The fabric was softer, and certainly fit better, especially the larger sizes. Still a bit snug across his shoulders, but at least they allowed for his fuller chest.

It wasn't like he was huge or anything, his pecs had just gone round and full, and softer. He'd been assured that once he stopped producing milk they would go down again, and he could lift some weights to get his chest back into shape.

Bucky huffed to himself, buttoning up the dark blue shirt he'd chosen.

Yeah, like he had time for that. Maybe he could just lift Lara a few times. She was heavy enough.

He pulled the hoodie back on too, as it zipped up from the front, and he went back into the lounge.

Kamala and Natasha approved of his choice, and he managed a smile. He sat back on the couch with them, and Kamala handed Lara back to him.

"Good color on you," Natasha commented, looking pleased.

Bucky felt shy, but he managed a quiet, "Thank you."

"I'm gonna get those coffees," Kamala said. "I might just use the regular machine though. I give up with these espresso ones, they're too complicated."

"I'll literally take any coffee," Bucky told her. "I'm not fussy when it comes to caffeine."

Kamala nodded, and left them again. Natasha suggested they watch some TV, and Bucky agreed.

"What time are you seeing Banner?" she asked.

"He said he'll send for me," Bucky said, holding Lara close. "Mid to late morning, unless I need him."

"And you feel better?"

"Yeah, tons." Bucky was relieved about it too. "I thought it was something real bad and the doctors just weren't telling me, you know? I thought that was gonna be the rest of my life, feeling shitty and exhausted."

"I'm glad you're better," Natasha said softly. "We're lucky to have Banner. He's very dedicated."

"Yeah." Bucky smiled down at Lara, and she made to grab for his chest again. "Oh, Lara. Maybe I can just give you a bottle?"

"If you want to feed her," Natasha said, shifting on the couch, "I promise I won't look. If you prefer."
"I don't care about that," Bucky said. Giving birth in a hospital with numerous people seeing literally everything had been the height of awkwardness for him. Getting his boob out in a private and comfortable home wouldn't even come close. "I just don't want to muck up her schedule, or anything."

"Ask Jarvis," Natasha suggested. "He knows her schedule."

"Okay. Um, Jarvis?" Bucky asked. "When is Lara's next feed due?"

"In approximately one hour, Mister Barnes," Jarvis replied.

"Oh. Well, that's sort of soon, I guess," Bucky said. "Maybe..."

"Go ahead." Natasha got out her phone and made herself look busy. "I have important Instagram feed to scroll through."

"Okay, then." Bucky began to unbutton his shirt.

~

Steve couldn't sleep. He was too keyed up. He'd managed a two hour nap, then he'd tossed and turned for a while, before giving in and getting out of bed.

Two hours sleep, instead of his usual four or five. Maybe he could take another nap later on.

He got in the shower, because it gave him time to just stand there and think, to plan his day. He'd have to postpone his meetings, he thought, but Maria would understand. She'd probably bench him for missions unless there was an emergency, but Steve didn't want to go anywhere today anyway. He wanted to talk to Bucky, try and figure things out.

An image popped into his mind, of him and Bucky taking Lara out in her stroller for a walk, maybe to the park.

Steve sighed, and told himself not to expect things.

He took his time in the shower, then got out and started to get ready. He shaved his face, and styled his hair. Maybe he took a little longer than he normally did, and maybe he deliberated over his clothes too.

Eventually, he was ready to face the world. He pocketed his phone, and picked up the tablet Maria kept insisting he use, and went to find Lara.

Kamala would probably tell him off for not getting enough sleep when she saw him, Steve thought. And Sam definitely would, but with any luck Sam wouldn't be around yet, as he'd said he wanted to have an extra long sleep in today.

Steve absently followed his nose; Kamala must've taken Lara to the communal lounge again.

Steve approached the lounge as he read through the messages on his tablet. A lot of today's missions were being delegated to Team Alpha One, which was Tony's team, and Team Alpha Two, which was Thor with Maria joining him.
Everyone else looked like they were on standby for the day, and Steve hoped he’d get a day to himself so he could talk to Bucky in peace.

He caught Lara's scent as he entered the lounge, and heard the TV. Natasha and Kamala were there too, and, Steve realised, as he raised his head to look, so was Bucky.

Bucky was already with Lara.

Steve's heart skipped excitedly, and he hurried into the room. He spotted their heads over the back of the couch, with Kamala sitting on the carpet organising her flash cards.

"Hey," Steve said, quietly, in case Lara was napping. He rounded the couch, so thrilled to see them all together. "I just–"

Natasha and Bucky both looked up at him, and Steve's eyes went immediately to Lara in Bucky's arms, his shirt wide open and Lara's mouth latched onto his small, bare breast.

Steve faltered, mind going blank as he stared.

It wasn't that Steve had never seen breastfeeding before, he just hadn't expected to see it now, with his own kid and with Bucky.

His heart leapt to his throat. "I- I'm sorry," he choked out, and whirled back around to exit the room.

Except, his shin banged into the coffee table and sent it flying across the room.

"I got it!" Kamala said, reaching out with her hand, a hand that grew in size and caught the coffee table before it flipped over.

Kamala's giant hand carefully moved the table back into position, then reduced down to normal size like some sort of illusion.

Steve blinked at her, too shocked to take it all in. His shin really hurt as well; that coffee table was heavy.

"Um... good catch," he said, and felt his face flush hot. "I'll just... go somewhere else for a bit."

"Steve," Natasha said, amusement in her voice, "you don't have to leave."

"It's fine, it's fine," Steve insisted, walking away while keeping his gaze averted. "I'll go get a coffee."

He almost made it out the room, but his enhanced hearing picked out Natasha whispering in an amused tone, "I've never seen an alpha blush so hard."

~

After his spectacularly embarrassing entrance earlier, Steve returned a half hour later and made sure to announce his presence this time.

He heard several sets of giggles in reply, and when he entered the lounge he found Natasha, Bucky, Clint and Lara all on the couch, with Kamala sitting on the floor in front of them.
They all looked at him as he approached, and he shifted awkwardly on his feet and muttered a hello.
Lara was asleep, it seemed, and tucked into the portable cradle between Bucky and Clint.

"Steve," Natasha said, a wolfish smile in place. "How nice of you to join us."

"Um, yeah," he said quietly, so as not to wake Lara. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to, uh... yeah."

He looked at Bucky, who gave him a shy smile before looking away.

Steve decided to redirect the conversation, and turned to Kamala. "So," he said. "Ability to grow your hands at will wasn't on your resume?"

Kamala looked sheepish, fiddling with her stack of flashcards. "It kind of was, but Ms Hill said you didn't need to know right now."

"Oh." Steve raised his eyebrows at that. "She said that, did she?"

Kamala nodded, and bit her lip. "Am I in trouble?"

Before Steve could open his mouth, Bucky beat him to it and said, "You saved the table that Steve kicked over, and stopped any damage from happening. I'd say you deserve a raise."

Everyone looked at Bucky. Clint made an impressed face and nodded in agreement.

Bucky looked at Steve, like he was challenging him to disagree.

Steve managed to find his words, and said, "I... sure. I was going to say the same. Well done, Kamala."

Clint signed 'congratulations' to Kamala then punched his fist in the air.

Kamala blushed a bit, but she looked pleased. "Ms Hill also said she would try and get me on the apprentice program."

"Okay," Steve replied. "We can have a conversation about it later, alright?"

"Sure!" Kamala grinned, then glanced over at Bucky.

Steve watched them share a smile, and felt a mix of feelings about his team getting to know Bucky while he wasn't around.

Not that he begrudged it, he just...

He felt jealous.


"We have coffee," Nat informed him.

A quiet beeping noise went off, and Bucky checked his wrist-monitor.

"It's Bruce," he said, moving to get up. "I gotta go to this appointment."

"Clint will take you up there," Nat said, and quickly signed to Clint.

Clint pulled his hearing aid box out of his pocket and gave them the thumbs up.
Kamala moved Lara's crib to the side, and sat beside her, while Clint and Bucky got up.

"I don't think it'll be long," Bucky said softly, looking to Steve.

Steve nodded, figuring he wasn't invited but that was fair. "I... I hope it goes okay," he said. "I'll just hang out here if you need me."

Bucky ducked his head shyly, but he nodded.

Clint meanwhile, was smirking like he was enjoying this exchange.

Steve frowned at him. "See you later," he said, mostly at Clint so he knew to stop being annoying.

Clint was still smiling as he led Bucky away, putting his hearing aids in so he could chat.

Steve watched them go, and once they'd disappeared he flopped down onto the couch with a sigh.

Natasha shifted to face him. "Doing okay there, Rogers?"

Steve huffed in wry amusement. "I don't know. Am I?"

Natasha was clearly fighting a smile. "Try to relax. Your scent keeps spiking, and you'll only make him more nervous if you're nervous."

"Noted," Steve said.

Natasha reached out and touched his arm, to be comforting. "He's just as wary as you are. One step at a time, and I'm sure things will work out."

Steve almost asked, what things specifically? But he'd already decided that he would do his best to make sure Bucky was comfortable, that he was well, and then discuss co-parenting with him.

That seemed like the most straightforward and fair direction right now. As for anything else, Steve would just try not to get his hopes up too much.

He stared into space and permitted his mind to wander back to that image of Bucky nursing Lara; stoking at the embers of want and longing deep inside him.

---

Yes, that's right; The Talk: Round 2 is coming up next. Will Steve be able to stay as calm and collected a second time? lol
Also, if you haven't seen Kamala's awesome giant hands before, check out a clip here.
Nat had a meeting with Maria, so she left Steve with Kamala.

Lara was still sleeping, amazingly, so she stayed in her crib while Kamala sat close by on the couch, working on her tablet.

Steve made himself busy over in the kitchen; it was open plan so he could look over to the lounge and see Lara, which he liked to do.

He'd already eaten a quick bite earlier, and he wasn't ready to go back to bed any time soon, so he made himself his main breakfast. He also made a sandwich for Kamala, with a side salad and a glass of milk, taking it over to her on a tray.

"Thank you," she said softly, so as not to wake Lara. "I could've done this."

"It's fine," Steve assured her with a smile. "Thanks for being patient today with all the... uh, stuff going on."

Kamala gave him a smile, and balanced the tray on her lap. "He's really nice."

"Who, Bucky?"

"Yeah."

Steve nodded, and smiled in reply.

Of course Bucky was nice, he thought. Bucky was very nice. That wasn't the problem; the problem was his tendency to vanish without warning.

At least Bucky had stuck around today, but Steve wondered if that was just because he had business with Bruce. What would Bucky do after that? Steve still needed to talk to him about Lara, and about what he planned to do.

He'd just have to be patient until then.

"Enjoy your lunch," Steve told Kamala. "I'll be over in the kitchen."

"Eating your twenty pancakes with twenty sandwiches," Kamala teased.

"Yep," Steve said, and went to turn away. He paused. "Don't you need extra food for your, uh... abilities?"

"Not really." Kamala shrugged. "Guess I'm more evolved."

Steve chuckled. "Oh, that's how it is, huh."

Kamala snickered into her glass of milk, and Steve left her to eat her lunch.

He went to get started on his own breakfast, taking his time to cook and prepare the food, eating when it was ready and enjoying all the different flavors.
He also made some protein shakes, whisking them quietly by hand instead of the blender. He poured the mixture into cups, and set a couple aside in the refrigerator for Bucky to have later.

Steve wasn't sure what was going on exactly, but if he was unwell, protein shakes with extra vitamins always seemed a good option.

About halfway through his breakfast, Steve heard voices down the hall, and recognised Clint and Bucky straight away. He tensed, excited about seeing Bucky again, but tried to force himself to relax.

He kept busy making more breakfast; pancakes, and chopped fruit. Clint didn't appear, but Bucky came into the kitchen.

"Hey," he said, smiling briefly.

He seemed nervous again, so Steve did his best to project calm. "Hi," he replied, and gestured at the counter full of different plates of food. "You want to eat?"

"Um, yeah, Bruce said I should," Bucky admitted.

"Pull up a chair," Steve said. "There's plenty to go round."

"Thanks." Bucky gingerly got onto a stool at the island, and Steve deposited a plate full of freshly cooked pancakes in front of him.

"Where's Clint gone?" Steve asked, looking for him.

"He said he'll be back later," Bucky said, picking up utensils. "Something about apprentice training."

"Oh, right." Steve set some bowls of fresh fruit onto the island for Bucky, along with the syrup. "I'm just going to make more eggs, if you want any?"

Bucky nodded eagerly. "Eggs would be good."

"Okay."

Steve set to work. When he got eggs from the refrigerator, he remembered Bucky's protein shakes, and gave him one of those too.

Bucky was demolishing his first stack of pancakes, only pausing to tap his finger to his wrist-monitor.

"You entering in your food intake?" Steve asked, then worried he was being nosey. "Sorry, I didn't mean--"

"It's fine," Bucky said, going back to cutting up his pancakes. "Actually, just timing how long I eat for." He shovelled more pancake into his mouth, eating like he was ravenous, and swallowed. "I'm kinda... eating a lot today. Bruce wants to know if that changes later."

"Oh." Steve was concerned, and had so many questions but didn't know where to start, or what would be too invasive. "I can do bacon with the eggs?"

Bucky smiled brightly. "I wouldn't say no to that."

Steve was so happy to see Bucky smile, he smiled in return and went to get bacon, and milk, from the refrigerator. "How do you want the eggs?" he asked, uncapping the milk.
"I don't mind," Bucky said. "I'll eat anything right now." He cleared his throat, and added, "Bruce thinks I have your serum."

"What?" Steve was so surprised, he sloshed milk over the counter. "Shit." He grabbed for a towel to mop up the milk, before turning to Bucky to see if he was serious.

Bucky watched him warily, like he thought Steve would react badly. "Yeah," he said quietly. "He thinks that's why I was so worn out all the time. Not enough food."

"But... how?" Steve couldn't believe it. "Lara...?"

"Yeah."

"Bucky, I... I didn't know," Steve told him. "I'm sorry."

Bucky simply shrugged. "I think we both know it's my fault," he said dryly. "It was my idea to not use protection, and I'm the one who said it'll be fine." He went a bit pink in the cheeks, adding, "No one's ever coming near me without a condom again, that's for damn sure."

Steve felt his face flame up instantly, his mind flashing back to that night with Bucky, remembering everything; how Bucky felt, how he smelled, what he looked and sounded like when he came time after time.

"Uh..." Steve managed, then turned around to hide his embarrassment—and his stirring interest—and get back to making breakfast.

Steve tried his very best to think of un-sexy things, like... Dum Dum Dugan, washing himself in his skivvies in a cold stream while on mission in snowy France.

Yes, that helped.

Steve thought of those missions with the Howlies, the pungent scent of unwashed alphas and betas, and Dum Dum's pale white, hairy ass as he bent over to give them all a view while he washed.

Steve breathed in relief, and kept those images in mind while he continued to make breakfast. He cooked up eggs, bacon, and more pancakes, splitting it between him and Bucky.

They ate in companionable quiet for the most part, which was kind of nice. Steve almost asked Bucky more questions, but he wasn't sure he was prepared for an in depth discussion right now.

What he settled on was, "Did Bruce say you'll be okay?"

Bucky nodded. "He thinks so. He said it might even be temporary, but he wants to monitor me."

"Yeah, Bruce likes monitoring." Steve smiled fondly. "You want to stay in the tower? It'll be a lot easier for you to see him, and you can see Lara, too."

Bucky looked at him, quietly assessing. Then he gave a neutral smile. "We'll see how it goes."

Steve felt disappointed, but he nodded calmly. "Sure," he agreed, and hoped Bucky would decide to stay.

~
Sam texted, *I'm having lunch with Jessica. I presume nobody needs my immediate attention and/or awesome friendship skills rn? Everything ok?*

Steve smiled as he read it, and texted back, *We're all good. Enjoy lunch. Is that lunch lunch, or date lunch?*

Sam replied with several emojis, most of which were the sweatdrop-laughing face.

Steve texted back, *In that case, good luck! Come find us later if you want.*

Then he checked his other messages. Maria had definitely benched him today, there was mostly radio silence about missions, but Steve found he didn't mind so much.

He had other things to take care of.

After the breakfast banquet, Lara had stirred awake, and Kamala changed her diaper. Then Bucky said he wanted to try feed her again, as it would be his last chance before his new hormone prescription started.

He'd looked at Steve when he'd said it, like he was asking permission, and Steve tried not to appear so flustered about the prospect.

"Sure, of course," he agreed, and made an excuse about clearing up the kitchen while Bucky went into the lounge.

Steve heard him make a joke to Kamala about how he'd feel more balanced after this feed, and even though Steve wasn't watching, his mind provided him with the image of what he'd seen earlier; Bucky's small breast, and his fat pink nipple with Lara's mouth around it.

Bucky must've meant that he would use the other breast to feed Lara right now, and Steve desperately wanted to watch, but...

He just really wasn't sure of his place, and he didn't want to make Bucky feel uncomfortable.

He scrubbed at the dishes and pans instead, his ears and face burning as he listened out for the little sounds Lara made, and the soft murmuring as Bucky spoke to her.

Steve tried not to look, he really did, but in the end his curiosity won out. He glanced over at the lounge. From his angle at the sink, he could only see the top of Bucky's head over the couch, and that was probably for the best, because even just looking over and knowing Bucky and Lara were there gave Steve all sorts of feelings he didn't know what to do with.

He forced himself to stop staring, and get back to his washing up. His breathing had picked up, and there was a tremor in his hands that made him almost drop a plate back into the soapy water.

Just focus, he told himself. Don't make it weird, as Sam would've said.

Footsteps approached from the hall, and Steve glanced round to see Riri enter the kitchen, twirling a small spanner in her fingers.

"Hey," she greeted, before sitting down at the counter. "Just modified Lara's baby-walker. She shouldn't be able to flip it over now." Riri grinned, and added, "Until she gets stronger, that is."

"Um, right," Steve said, nodding. "I'll ask Banner to keep an eye on that. She's due for a check up
"Sweet." Riri set down the spanner, and picked at a bowl of chopped fruit. "How's she doing?"

Steve nodded again. "All good. Had a long nap, actually."

"Lucky for you guys." Riri looked over to the lounge. She waved when she spotted Kamala, but stayed in the kitchen eating.

Steve made her a sandwich, and poured her a glass of fruit juice to go with it.

He liked this kitchen; it was small but it always felt sociable due to everyone coming and going from the lounge.

He finished clearing up, then drank a bottle of water. He hadn't even been on his run today, but that didn't matter. Steve wanted to stay close to Bucky and Lara.

He loitered in the kitchen, waiting for Bucky to finish feeding Lara and button his shirt back up. Kamala was there helping him, so Steve wasn't needed.

Or, rather, Steve wasn't sure if he was needed, so he stayed put.

They wrapped Lara in a blanket and settled her with Bucky on the couch, and he seemed content to hold her.

Steve smiled, pleased. He certainly didn't want to interrupt, if they were having bonding time.

Kamala came over to the kitchen, and did a high five with Riri before reminding Steve it was coming up to her lunch break, and asked him what he wanted to do.

"Oh," Steve glanced over at Bucky with Lara, then back at Kamala. "We'll be fine. They're fine, right? We'll be fine."

Kamala gave him a look. "Are you sure, Steve? I can stay a bit longer."

Steve waved a hand, insisting, "No, you need a break. We'll be fine. There's two of us."

Kamala didn't look convinced, but Riri said, "They're adults, Kay. C'mon, let's go get lunch."

"Okay, well. Bye!" Kamala waved as they left, and Steve waved back, trying to bite down on his internal panic at being left alone with Bucky.

What should he do? Steve floundered in the kitchen a moment longer, before deciding he should stop being ridiculous and just go over there.

He put a glass of water and some snacks on a tray, and carried it into the lounge.

"Hey," he said, approaching.

Bucky looked up at him, with Lara snuggled in his arms in the specially made baby-sling, and blinking slowly.

"I think she's going to sleep again," Bucky whispered. "I literally can't believe it."

"Oh." Steve sat the tray down on the coffee table—taking extra care to not bang into it this time—and hovered awkwardly for a moment. "Do you want me to...?" He gestured over his shoulder, but
Bucky shook his head.

"You don't have to go. Unless you want to?"

"No," Steve said quickly. Perhaps too quickly. "Shall I...?" He edged to the other end of the couch, and sat down very carefully so he didn't jostle them. "She does seem really calm today," he said quietly.

Bucky frowned, said, "You don't think I'm mucking it up?"

"What up?" Steve asked.

"Her schedule or something?"

"No, of course not," Steve said. "She probably just wants to cuddle with you..." He swallowed around the lump in his throat, and didn't say the rest of that sentence; because you smell really nice.

Bucky's smell had definitely changed, and he didn't seem anxious right now, he was calm and happy, giving off a very enticing omega smell.

Steve really wasn't sure what to make of it, he'd never been around an omega with a baby before. Not like this.

He tried not to stare, but it was a losing battle. Steve loved watching Lara anyway, and watching her now in Bucky's arms felt like something really special. He couldn't look away.

Besides, Steve worried this may be his only chance to see this. He still didn't know what Bucky planned to do, if he planned to leave again or if he wanted to stay.

Bucky spoke, bringing Steve out of his thoughts. "She's never been like this with me," he said softly.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked, watching Bucky look down at Lara.

She was slowly falling asleep, her eyes staying closed longer after each blink.

"She'd just cry so much," Bucky explained. "I guess I know now that she was hungry, but at the time I didn't know what was wrong. I thought... I thought she really hated me."

Steve felt sad at that. He stopped himself from saying what he was thinking, that he wished he'd have known, and that he would've helped.

Instead, he said, "She seems happy right now, so I'm sure that's not true, Bucky."

"Yeah." Bucky smiled down at Lara as she fell asleep. "Let's hope so."

"When she wakes up later you can play with her in this baby-walker she's got," Steve offered. "It's real fun. She loves it."

Bucky nodded. "Okay. Wait, aren't you busy saving the world, and stuff?"

"No, it's fine," Steve said. "We're a big team now, we can manage."

"Um, if you're sure."

Steve felt so happy he wanted to squirm. "I am sure. I'm sure Lara would enjoy it too."
"Okay," Bucky agreed, brushing his hand over Lara's curls of hair. "She needs a haircut, Steve."

"Oh?" Steve kind of liked her wispy blonde hair. "Well, be my guest. See if she stays still long enough."

"You do it when they're asleep," Bucky told him, giving Steve a wry look. "Surely that's easier?"

Steve smiled playfully. "Alright, I'm sure there's time to do that later. I'll find some scissors and you can be the one to break the news to Kamala. She's been wanting to put Lara's hair up."

Bucky huffed. "Kids don't need that. It'll be much easier to keep it short."

"You have long hair," Steve pointed out.

"Yeah, but I'm not wearing hairstyles."

Steve looked at Bucky's hair, currently tied back in a style that looked messy but also nice. "I disagree."

"It's literally pulled back in a knot," Bucky said. "And I'm an adult, not a baby."

"What exactly don't you like about babies with long hair?" Steve asked, barely holding back his amusement.

"Nothing," Bucky insisted. "I just don't want lots of bows and shit in her hair, looking like a mini Barbie."

Steve didn't know who that was, and considered getting out his phone to Google it.

Bucky must've realised, as he added quickly, "Too much pink, basically."

"Okay. What if it's not pink?" Steve suggested.

Bucky muttered something, but eventually said, "Maybe."

Steve grinned, excited to be planning things for Lara. "Don't you want to dress her up and take pictures," Steve asked, "and bring out the pictures later to embarrass her with? Clint says it works really well when they're teenagers."

Bucky's face changed, going blank as his smile faded.

Steve hoped he hadn't said something wrong. He'd just been too excited...

"Anyway," he said, quickly moving on, "we'll do whatever you want, Bucky. It's not a problem."

"Okay," he said quietly, but he didn't smile again.

~

Bucky got an alert that Bruce was waiting for him with his new prescription, so he carefully transferred a sleeping Lara over to Steve, and asked if Steve would be okay on his own.

Steve assured him he'd be fine, and when Bucky left the lounge, Steve rested his head back on the
couch and closed his eyes.

He probably wouldn't sleep, but it was nice to just shut his eyes and relax. Lara was breathing softly in her sleep, and Steve felt comforted by her heavy weight in the sling against him.

He stirred when he heard snickers nearby, and opened his eyes to see that Clint and Nat had managed to sneak in close, phones poised to take pictures.

Steve gave them both a look. "Knock it off," he said.

"But you look so cute," Clint told him. "We need photos for the collection we're making."

"Collection?"

"Baby's first year," Natasha informed him. "Don't be a grouch, Rogers. Smile."

Steve supposed he wanted photos too, so he tried to smile for the camera.

"Actually, don't smile," Clint said. "You're grimacing, and it's weird. That's your PR smile."

Steve frowned. "No, it isn't."

Nat took a photo of him frowning, and Steve rolled his eyes.

"Did you two want something?"

"Just came to see if Daddy America needed any help," Clint said, and bent down in mock alarm to inspect the coffee table. "No further damage to the furniture?"

Nat was smirking, and Steve sighed.

Thankfully they soon let him alone because Lara was asleep, and went to hang out in the kitchen instead. Steve closed his eyes again, listening to Clint and Nat talk softly between them.

It was comforting, knowing they were there.

Steve didn't doze off exactly, but he rested. When he heard Sam's voice, he opened his eyes, looking over to see Sam in the kitchen with Jessica, and Clint.

Natasha had come to sit on a chair in the lounge, and must've been so silent that Steve hadn't realised.

Sam came over when he noticed Steve was awake. He grinned wide. "Hey," he said softly, and gestured to Lara in Steve's arms. "She's out like a light."

Steve smiled. "I think I'll get her in the crib, if she'll go," he whispered.

"Need a hand?" Sam offered, already moving to get the crib.

Together, they carefully laid Lara down in her crib, securing her in. She slept on, and Steve placed one of the tiny baby blankets over her.

The crib regulated her heat, so it wouldn't let her get too hot or too cold.

When she was safely tucked in, Steve left her in the crib, and walked into the kitchen with Sam.

"Hi, Steve," Jessica greeted, keeping her voice down. "We didn't want to disturb you or anything."
"Hey, Jess," Steve replied, and offered his hand to shake. "It's fine, she's fast asleep. It's great to see you again."

"You too," Jess said, smiling happily. "I have to say, I am really enjoying New York. I think I should stick around." She shot a look to Sam, still smiling.

Steve noticed, and he noticed Sam's answering smile to Jess, but he didn't comment on it.

Not yet, anyway. He'd roast Sam about it later.

"We're happy to have you," Steve said, and Clint mumbled an agreement with his mouth full, eating a pack of candy.

Sam made a fresh pot of coffee, and handed a mug out to everyone. Nat came over to join them they hung out at the kitchen island, chatting and catching up.

"There's a meeting upstairs soon," Nat said to Steve. "Maria thought you'd be busy, but if you wanted to come when Kamala gets back..."

"What's the meeting?" Steve asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

He and Nat were at one side of the kitchen island, and Steve was trying to be subtle as he watched Sam and Jessica flirting across from them. He smiled to himself at how happy Sam looked.

"Maria wants to go over our training programs," Nat answered. "So we all know how to work with each other, especially if we team up for missions."

Steve nodded. "Makes sense. What's she got planned? Another power point?"

"Sure hope not," Clint muttered, as he poured himself more coffee. "I say we should just get in the training room and have at it."

Jessica chuckled at that, and said to Clint, "Except I'd win."

Clint grinned. "Them's fighting words. Why don't we double date later? You and Birdman against me and Nat."

Sam looked mildly alarmed, but he smiled when Jessica elbowed him and told Clint, "You're on. Get ready to lose, though."

The four of them were all so busy grinning at each other, Steve cleared his throat and said, "Um, hello? What about me?"

"You're busy," Nat said. "Take a day off, Rogers."

"But-"

"Steve," Sam laid a hand on his shoulder. "A day off now and then is absolutely fine."

"Okay, okay," Steve relented. "I'll have a day off. I'll watch from the observation window and heckle."

"That is not a day off," Clint scoffed. "Why don't you go to the park or something?"

"Yeah," Jessica joined in. "It's a lovely day for it."
"Well, uh..." Steve felt his face grow warm, and he prayed he wasn't blushing in front of his team. "Maybe. I mean, Lara's asleep right now."

"Whatever you end up doing," Sam said, "it has to be not Avengers related. Okay?"

"I said okay," Steve huffed. "I was already taking a day off anyway."

"Atta boy," Clint told him. "Napping on the couch is an awesome way to spend a day off, don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"I wasn't exactly-"

Steve cut off when he heard voices getting closer, and the detected the scents of Bucky and Doctor Banner. He stiffened, alert, which probably gave him away to his team, but Steve was too excited about seeing Bucky to care much.

Bruce led the way, leading Bucky to the kitchen. "Hey, everyone," Bruce greeted. "Most of you have met Bucky."

"Hey, man," Sam greeted. "You haven't met Jessica yet. Jess, this is Bucky. Bucky, this is Jessica."

"Hello!" Jessica gave a little wave, but didn't approach Bucky. Which was just as well, as Steve thought he seemed skittish again.

Bucky smiled back tightly, said, "Hey."

To shift the focus off Bucky, Steve said the first thing that came to mind. "Lara's in her crib, still fast asleep."

Bucky looked at him, as did everyone else, and Steve felt his face flush hard.

"Oh, is she yours?" Jessica exclaimed, looking back to Bucky. "She's so beautiful! I just adore her curly hair."

Bucky seemed shy, ducking his head a bit, but Steve noticed his mouth quirk in a smile. "Thanks."

"One more in favor of longer hair," Steve muttered, hoping the others weren't paying too much attention.

Bucky cracked a grin at that. "Yeah, yeah. Then he gestured to the lounge. "I'll just..."

Steve nodded, then watched Bucky retreat over to the couch, probably hiding from all the betas he didn't know well.

"What's for lunch?" Bruce asked, sidling up to the island. Nat pushed a bowl of chips toward him with a smile. "Oh, thank you. I'll probably need a sandwich too."

"Sandwich time!" Clint sang, before several people shushed him. "Oh, yeah," he said, quieter. "Oops." Then he grabbed a bread-knife and twirled it in his fingers. "Thick cut or thin cut?"

"Thick for me," Bruce asked, which made both Nat and Clint giggle. "What? What's funny?"

Steve wasn't sure, so he shrugged.

Bruce didn't seem too bothered, and while everyone else moved around to get plates and food out of
the refrigerator, he turned to Steve quietly and said, "Bucky knows he's supposed to be eating at regular intervals for the next couple of days at least, but a little prompting wouldn't hurt. Make sure it's protein rich."

"Oh?" Steve blinked in surprise, caught off guard. "Does he need to eat now? We only ate like, an hour ago."

"At least every two hours," Bruce told him. "He knows that, but as a guest he may not feel comfortable helping himself to food, so I'm asking you to make sure there's always something for him."

Steve nodded. "I can do that."

"Perfect." Bruce smiled. "You coming to the meeting, or sitting it out?"

"I've been benched today," Steve said. "Take notes for me?"

Bruce chuckled. "Will do, Cap. Enjoy a quiet afternoon. Team Alpha One is already pretty busy today, as far as I know."

"Are they okay?" Steve asked.

"They seem to have it under control," Bruce said. "I was talking with Tony earlier..."

As Steve got caught up with Bruce, Clint cut the bread and Sam stacked the sandwiches with slices of meat and cheese. They bickered over condiment choices.

When everyone had eventually been given a plate full of sandwiches, Steve was surprised to see the rest of the team pick theirs up and start to leave the kitchen.

"You're going?" he asked.

"Gonna be late," Nat said with a wink. "Give you some space, too."

"Be good, kids," Clint told him, clapping his shoulder as he passed by with his stack of sandwiches. "We'll catch up with you later."

"Bye!" Jess waved, and one by one they all left.

Steve was on his own with Bucky again. Which was fine, really. They'd managed earlier, and it'd been fine. Steve could do that again. No sweat.

He exhaled slowly, and then picked up the two plates that were for him and Bucky.

*Okay, Steve, you got this.*

He went over to the couch, setting the plates down on the coffee table.

"Hey," he said, noticing that Bucky was texting on his phone. "Plenty of sandwiches if you're hungry."

Bucky glanced up at him, and he seemed wary.

"Thanks," he murmured, and quickly pocketed his phone.

Steve tried not to overanalyse things, and made himself sit down on the couch, leaving a respectful
distance again. "You hungry?" he asked.

"Um... not right now," Bucky said, shifting in his seat.

Steve detected a spike in his scent, and inhaled as subtly as he could to determine if he was right, or if he'd imagined it.

No, Bucky definitely smelled anxious.

Steve's heart sank a little, expecting the worst; Bucky was going to leave again.

"Steve," Bucky started, not looking at him, "I've, um. I had a message about work, so... I'll have to head out soon."

"Work?" Steve frowned. Surely that was a lie, or his cover to leave? "Can't you take the day off?"

Bucky gave him a small smile, and something about it seemed bitter. "Not really, Steve. It's important."

"Bucky, you're not well," Steve insisted, softly. "Surely a day or two won't hurt? If it's about money, I can-"

"It's not about money," Bucky hissed, clearly annoyed. "Although, seeing as you brought it up, I do have a ton of bills that I can't pay. I couldn't work, Steve. I was far too pregnant, so I used credit cards and... I kind of made a bit of a mess."

"Bucky, I'll pay them," Steve promised. "It's the least I can do. I'll take care of it. And you don't have to work right now, surely they'll understand if you need time-"

"It's not like that." Bucky heaved in a deep breath and blew it out in a huff. "Shit. I knew you'd get like this."

Steve frowned, unsure how he was supposed to feel. He was trying his best. Bucky wasn't giving him anything to go on, and it was starting to get frustrating.

Steve shifted carefully on the couch, trying his best not to look like he was all tensed up and on the defensive. "I'm not sure what you mean. I only want to help you, Bucky."

"I know, Steve," he said quietly. "But... after this, it should be finished, and I can take some time off, okay? But I gotta go." He looked at Steve then, his eyes serious. "Take care of Lara for me."

Steve felt stunned for a moment, and watched Bucky get up from the couch. Something felt wrong, Steve realised.

Something was off. Bucky was scared, and the plea to take care of Lara had sounded far too fatalistic to Steve's ears, something he recognised from his war days when soldiers put on a brave face before headed into battle.

Steve quickly got up, putting himself between Bucky and the door. Bucky halted, surprised, and backed up to put space between them.

Steve remained still, and as calmly as he could, asked, "Just tell me where you're going, at least."

"Um, Hell's Kitchen." Bucky's eyes darted to the door, like he wanted to bolt.

Steve hated doing this, but he had no choice right now. He angled his body to block more of Bucky's
escape route. "Bucky, I just want to talk. Please. Why do I get the feeling you're not telling me something?"

"Because it's none of your business?" Bucky scoffed. "Jeez, you're full of it."

"Hate me if you want," Steve said, "but I'm worried about you. I could come with you? Whatever it is, I can help."

He'd expected a fight from Bucky over this, a verbal one anyway; what Steve hadn't expected was for Bucky's shoulders to slump, his whole body wilting as he sat back down on the couch.

"This is important, Steve," he said shakily. "And you're making me not want to go. You can't do that."

"I... sorry." Steve moved, and went to stand near the couch instead, so he wasn't blocking the exit. But he was too jittery to sit down. "I just... I'm worried about you."

Bucky breathed in and out slowly, like he was regulating his breathing. "Look," he said finally, "sometimes we need to do things we don't want to do, and I know I've spent a lot of my time running away from stuff like that. Well, this is one time I can't. I have to go do a thing, to make other things right." He swallowed, and went on, "It'll be fine, I'll be done in a few hours. It'll all be over."

That fatalistic tone again, Steve thought. "You realise this is sounding really suspicious, Bucky?" he said. "Can't you tell me what it is? Can I help?"

Bucky shook his head. "It's nothing, I just gotta go meet someone, and help them with a thing, then it's over."

Steve sighed. "Then I'm coming with you."

"No!" Bucky glared at him. "You're too recognisable, for a start."

"I can wear a disguise," Steve said, but Bucky snorted.

"If you mean a baseball cap and a pair of aviators," Bucky said, "I got news for you, pal, they don't do shit to hide who you are."

"Then I'll do a better disguise," Steve insisted. "Bucky, please. Tell me what's going on? Let me help you."

Lara made a noise, clearly woken by the raised voices. Bucky looked over at her crib, and cursed under his breath.

"Alright," he said tiredly, getting out his phone. "Just remember, you asked for this."

Steve watched him select a contact, then put the phone to his ear. Steve's enhanced hearing picked out the other voice clearly when it answered, a gruff male voice saying, "What?"

Not hello, not hi, just what. Steve felt himself bristle in response.

"Um," Bucky started, biting his lip nervously, "don't say I told you so, but I have a situation here..."

There was a brief snort from the phone, then the voice asked, "Let me guess, an alpha situation?"
"He's offered to help," Bucky said into the phone. "Maybe-"

"That depends," the voice said. "What can he do?"

Steve had heard enough. He stepped forward, holding out his hand. "Let me talk to him," he said firmly, as Bucky blinked up at him in surprise.

"Steve, just-"

"Let me talk to him," Steve repeated.

"Oh, my God," Bucky muttered, and handed over his phone. "This is so unnecessary."

Steve put the phone to his ear, and in his Captain America voice said, "Bucky isn't going anywhere until I've established he'll be safe. Who are you?"

There was breathing down the phone, Steve's hearing picked it up. Then a deep, rumbling chuckle.

"Cap?" the voice asked.

Steve tried not to let his surprise show, and demanded, "Who am I speaking to?"

"Logan," the voice said, sounding amused. "Small world."

"Logan...?" Steve felt like he was missing something here; this man, and surely an alpha too, seemed to know him. "Logan who?"

"Look, Cap," the man said, "our window for this is very tight, so how about I swing by, and we can talk face to face. You wanna help? Maybe you can help."

Then he hung up, and Steve stared at the phone for a moment in confusion, before looking to Bucky. "Did you tell him about me?"

Bucky shook his head. "I didn't tell anyone about you."

Oh.

Steve blinked in surprise, and tried not to let his hurt show at that admission. From a tactical point of view, it was a wise move to have kept Steve's identity a secret, for Lara's sake.

But it did dent Steve's pride a little.

"Okay," he said, and handed Bucky back his phone. "He's coming to talk to us."

Bucky nodded, a neutral look on his face. "Fine. Just do me a favor, okay? Let him talk before you make a decision."
Hey all, the tags for this fic have been updated.

~

Warnings for chapter:

This chapter will bring up talk between the characters that includes: past sex work, talk of trafficking and exploitation of omegas, talk of OFC (original female character) offscreen death.

Also, I just want to say that if any readers ever want to ask me for more info, or spoilers, on this fic (or any of my fics) so they can read without anxiety/anticipation etc, please do comment or get in touch, I'll do my best to help you.

~

Huge thank you's to splinteredwinter and SMDarling for all your beta help! <3

~

~

"Who is he?" Steve asked, trying really hard to keep his voice calm.

Bucky kept looking over to Lara, crying in her crib, like he wanted to go over there but was afraid to move. He looked back at Steve and said quietly, "FBI."

"FBI?" Steve frowned. That wasn't what he'd expected, and he wasn't sure if he was relieved, or more concerned. "What do they want with you?"

Bucky sighed. "Look, I'm just helping them locate a guy. Someone that Rumlow used to work for. You remember Rumlow, right?" He shot Steve a fierce look. "He's the one that had you crashing through a window to rescue me from."

Then he got up and hurried to Lara's crib, watching Steve over his shoulder the whole time.

Steve felt a little taken aback, but it reminded him to keep calm. He didn't want to get into a fight, but he knew it was brewing between them.

"Yes, I remember," he said. "So, why can't the FBI find this guy themselves? What do they need you for?"

Bucky didn't answer, busy looking down at Lara and shushing her gently.
"Bucky," Steve repeated. "What do they need you for?"

Again, Bucky didn't answer. He gave Steve a brief, guarded look, and Steve could only jump to the worst but most logical solution.

"They're using you as bait."

Bucky huffed. "It's not like that. I just have to talk to him and-"

"No," Steve said firmly. "Absolutely not."

This earned him a furious glare. "You can't tell me what to do," Bucky gritted out. "You said you wanted to help-"

"I'm not going to help put you in danger," Steve said, his voice rising. "Bucky, this... you can't do this. Think of Lara."

Bucky growled lowly, and adjusted his stance so he was facing Steve, looking like he was ready to fight. "If that's how you're gonna be, fine. I don't need your help anyway."

"Oh, so, that's it?" Steve was getting desperate, wanted so badly to go over to Bucky. But he was next to Lara's crib, and she started crying louder, just as Bucky was clenching his fists like he wanted to charge Steve right then and there.

"Jarvis," Bucky snapped, "would you ask this alpha to leave the room."

Steve stiffened, hurt and embarrassed all at once. "Bucky-"

"Captain Rogers," Jarvis's cool voice interrupted, "I've been asked for you to-"

"Okay." Steve held his hands up in defeat. "Okay, I'm going." He walked briskly out of the room, furious with everyone and everything.

He didn't look back, he headed straight to the elevators and got inside. "Gym level," he gritted out, and tried to contain himself a few moments longer. Just until he could get to a punching bag and safely beat the stuffing out of it.

~

Bucky held Lara as she cried, shushing her gently and rocking her side to side. "Don't cry, Lala," he murmured, watching her face get all pink.

She hadn't gone into full screaming mode yet; this was more, *I'm not sure what's going on but I'm going to cry about it* scream. Hopefully she would settle down.

"It's okay." He kissed her little forehead, which was warm and creased up with distress. "No one's shouting any more. It's okay."

He held onto her and stepped side to side, jiggling her about. "There we go, moving about. Isn't this fun. Yay, this is fun, right?"

Lara cried on.
Bucky sighed. "Well, I knew the no crying gig wouldn't last," he told her. "Maybe you saved it all up just for me, huh?"

He kept rocking her, murmuring softly because that was what he was used to doing. If this had been a month ago on their own, Bucky would've felt resigned to the fact that Lara would only get louder and louder until she tired herself out. But now, she seemed to slowly settle down.

It was like a gift from heaven.

"There, there," he said, gaining confidence as she quieted. He kept up the movement, expecting his arms to tire from it, but actually he was doing okay, despite how heavy Lara was.

"It's okay, sweetheart. It'll be okay."

~

Kamala smelled the tension in the air before she even reached the lounge.

"Uh oh," she murmured, approaching cautiously.

Steve's scent had faded, but Bucky and Lara were both there sitting on the couch, and both anxious judging by the smell of them.

Kamala put on a smile and went over there. "Hello," she said gently, mindful of Lara fussing in Bucky's arms. She was making upset noises, but not too loudly so that was a good sign. "Everything okay?"

Bucky gave her a look, like he was unsure how to answer.

Kamala sat down on the couch carefully. She reached out a hand to wave at Lara, and made a silly face to distract her.

It worked; Lara went quiet as she watched Kamala, and even reached out to try grab her hand.

"Aw, she's precious," Kamala said, smiling back at Lara. "Are you a precious little baby-boo?"

Lara brightened, her face beginning to smile.

"Aw, that's right," Kamala soothed, holding Lara's hand. "It's all good."

They sat quietly for a few moments, until Bucky breathed in deep and said, "Thank you."

He sounded relieved. Kamala was worried, and had to ask. "Did something happen?"

"Uh..." Bucky frowned, shifting Lara in his lap. "Me and Steve... kind of had a fight."

"Oh," Kamala said softly. "Well... I guess these things happen, right? I'm sure it'll be okay."

Bucky huffed wryly. "I don't know. Lara started to cry and I got so mad, I made him leave the room before it got worse. I just... I've never done that before, but I didn't want to shout in front of Lara, you know?"
"That's understandable," Kamala said. "I'm back from my lunch now, so I can take her. She probably wants some food and a change anyway."

Bucky looked at her strangely, like she'd just grown a second head. "Don't you need some help?"

"I'm cool," Kamala smiled reassuringly. "Big hands, remember? I can multitask. Besides," she added, "maybe you could go talk to Steve? I'm sure it'll be easier with only adults in the room. Babies crying can make things worse, because instinct will make you want to defend her, and alphas don't always understand that."

Bucky's face was blank as he seemed to process that, and he looked down at Lara as she wriggled in his lap. "I... really? Yeah, I mean, I did feel really angry suddenly, like I didn't want Steve anywhere near her and I could've punched him if he came any closer."

"That's your protective instinct kicking in," Kamala said. "If you guys have to talk in future, it's much safer doing it far away from your baby. Omegas especially can get really defensive over their kids. It's just a thing."

"A thing, huh." Bucky made a face. "I feel like an idiot now."

Kamala shrugged. "I feel the same when I lose my temper, too. But my mom says we're all human, and we can't be perfect."

Bucky smiled at that, and shook his head. "I guess that's true. Hey, look, don't listen to me, anyway. That's not your job."

Kamala giggled. "No, my job is taking care of Lara. And she'll be a lot happier if her parents can get along." She opened her arms in invitation. "Why don't you leave her with me? Go take a walk, or get some coffee. Whatever you need to do."

"Okay." Bucky carefully moved Lara over to Kamala, settling her in. Lara made noises about it, but Kamala was used to that and was good at distracting her.

"Who's the sweetest baby?" Kamala cooed, making eye contact with Lara.

Lara had a big smile in answer, so Kamala was confident all would be well.

"We'll be fine," she told Bucky, not taking her eyes away from Lara. "Go do your thing. We'll be in here if you need us."

"Alright." Bucky gave Lara's blonde hair one gentle brush with his fingers, then he got up off the couch. "I'll... I'll be back soon."

"Sure thing."

After he left, Kamala said quietly to Lara, "And let's hope they can work it out, huh?"

~

Bucky got off at a floor that looked like a private member's gym; everything in there screamed money. He raised his eyebrows at equipment he didn't have the slightest idea what it was for, and meandered around the different rooms looking for Steve.
He wasn't hard to find. Even without the dull *thud-thud thud* sounds giving away his location, Bucky could smell the bitter tang of alpha sweat.

He rounded a corner and saw Steve giving a large punching bag a good workout. He hadn't even taped up his hands.

Bucky approached him, anxious to get this talk started, and hopefully over with soon, but as he got near the alpha and Steve's scent really hit his nose, Bucky realised what a dumb idea this had been. Steve's sweat wasn't visible on his skin yet but it was in the air; Bucky was sure he could smell it clearly, unless his brain was playing tricks on him.

And the problem was, Steve smelled *really* good; a strong, young alpha in his prime, ripe for mating. Bucky's long dormant libido decided to wake up suddenly, but he managed to catch himself before he drew in a deep breath of alpha scent.

He'd just have to breathe through his mouth for a bit and try to ignore it.

Bucky cleared his throat. "Steve?"

The alpha paused in his punches, briefly, then carried on hitting the bag.

Bucky sighed inwardly, and moved around so he was standing directly in Steve's line of sight. Not near enough to get hit -he wasn't that stupid- but near enough to not be ignored.

"Look," Bucky said, "I'm sorry about earlier, but you can't get mad at me when Lara's there."

That got Steve's attention, finally. He stopped punching, catching the bag as it swung, and directed an intense frown at Bucky. "Where is she?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"Kamala's with her," Bucky said. "She's fine. Look, Steve. You wanna get mad at me now, go right ahead. But you can't go all alpha when she's near me, okay? If I think she's in danger, I'm worried I'll attack you without a second thought. And neither of us really want that."

Steve's face went from dark to blank in an instant. "I- I would never-"

"Steve," Bucky tried, "I know that. Logically, I know that. But, ugh, I can't describe it, there's this *rush* that kicks in if I feel threatened and she's near me. You were really close to flipping me back there, that's why I asked Jarvis to send you out of the room." He folded his arms, waited. "I'm here now, and if you wanna talk, better make it quick because you're the one who invited Logan, and he'll be here soon."

"I didn't invite him," Steve said glumly, staring at the bag in front of him.

"Well, he's coming anyway," Bucky said, and glanced across the room to a row of wooden benches. "Come sit down, and I'll tell you about it?"

Steve nodded, and followed him over, sitting at one end of a long wooden bench. Bucky took the hint and didn't sit too close.

Steve sighed deep, and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "I'm listening."

"Okay." Bucky fiddled nervously with his sleeve cuff, said, "So, uh... I had all these credit cards I couldn't pay off... and, um, I didn't have any money and I was really tired. I was shoplifting some diapers, and I got caught. They sent me down to the precinct, with Lara too, because she was with me. I thought they would take her away, call Child Services. I really thought my time was up, you
know? But before they booked me, this beta from the FBI arrived, and said she'd make all the charges go away if I helped her find this alpha that Rumlow used to deal with."

Bucky risked looking at Steve then, and saw he was looking right back at Bucky with a stricken look on his face.

"They're blackmailing you."

Bucky pulled a face. "Not exactly."

"Sounds like it to me, Bucky."

"Okay, well," Bucky sighed, "however they go about recruiting, I agreed to it now and I want to see it through. This asshole needs to be caught, Steve. He's the worst of the worst."

"Bucky," Steve said, a pleading note in his voice, "that's what the FBI are trained and paid to do. They can't force you, a civilian, to help them out, it's too dangerous."

"Steve, I already know the guy, that's why they need me." Bucky went back to fiddling with his cuff again, feeling nervous. "If they don't have a way in, they'll never find him. They've been trying for years. Moira said the bureau are inches away from closing the case, because the guy's like a ghost. He just vanishes without a trace."

"This isn't your responsibility," Steve insisted. "They're playing you, trying to get you to do their work for them."

Bucky looked up at him, met Steve's eyes. "Remember I told you about Michelle?"

Steve's blue eyes searched his, and he nodded. "The omega? You gave her money, and told her to leave town?"

Bucky swallowed, nodded. "That's right. Well, she was one of his, before... Before she came to stay with me and Rumlow. When I told her to leave town, she never got far. They found her, Moira showed me the photos. What he did to her... Steve, even before he killed her, what he did... It was torture. And it's my fault, don't you see? I should've known. Michelle was just a kid, and I let her go off on her own, and those assholes found her."

"Bucky, no." Steve's voice was gentle. "No, you couldn't have known that would happen. I'm so sorry."

Bucky shook his head. He felt far away from the reality of it right now, and he needed that. He needed that distance to get through the day. He couldn't afford to dwell on Michelle, not when catching her killer was so close.

"I'm not arguing it with you," Bucky replied, "I'm just explaining. This is why I'm doing it. This is why I didn't want Lara near any of it, and I knew she'd be safer with you. And... this is why I thought she'd be better off with you. Without me, I mean. She doesn't need me bringing all this shit into her life."

"Bucky, please don't talk like that." Steve shifted closer, slowly, so that Bucky could pull away if he wanted to. Steve gingerly reached his hand across the bench. "Please, Bucky. Don't do anything reckless. Let me help you."

"You're one to talk," Bucky tried to joke, his voice choking up. "Captain Reckless. I see it on the news, remember."
Steve kept reaching, left his hand on the bench. "Let me help."

It would be so easy, Bucky thought, to move his own hand and touch Steve's.

But.

What would Steve say when he found out the whole truth?

Bucky gave him a quick smile instead. "If you want to help, you can help us catch the creep, but we have to get information out of him first. He's an omega trafficker. There's more lives at stake here, Steve, that's why we're doing this."

Steve nodded, and silently withdrew his hand. "Alright, Bucky. But there has to be a way to do it so you aren't in danger. Guilt isn't an excuse to put yourself in the firing line. Take some advice from someone who's been there."

"Yeah, alright. I hear you."

"Excuse me, sirs," Jarvis's voice interrupted. "There is a Ms. MacTaggert, and a Mister Howlett waiting to see you."

Steve's back went ramrod straight, and his mouth opened a little. "Can't be..." he said.

"What?" Bucky asked, concerned.

"That Logan?" Steve stood up. "But... I haven't seen him since the war."

They took the elevator down to the private reception rooms, where Jarvis had their visitors waiting.

The reception rooms weren't anywhere near the resident apartments, but much lower, and often where Tony and Maria hosted meetings with people who weren't as high on the tower's security clearance. The rooms were minimal, with only soft furnishings and seats.

Steve led the way, almost subconsciously putting his body in front of Bucky when they entered the meeting room.

A woman in a business suit, a beta, was sitting on one of the small couches, while a man, clearly an alpha from the overpowering scent of him, was slowly pacing the room.

Steve was immediately wary; no alpha smelled this strongly, only one that he'd ever met smelled like that, and he was a mutant, more animal than human.

When the alpha turned and faced him, Steve felt like he was seeing a ghost.

"Logan?" he said in disbelief.

The other alpha hadn't aged, not that Steve could see. He looked almost exactly the same as he'd done back in 1944, when he'd joined the Howlies on missions. Maybe his haircut was a little different, and his clothes more modern, but those were the only changes.
"Cap," Logan greeted, lips twitching into a smile. "Fancy seeing you here."

Bucky pushed past Steve's still form, and looked between them both. "You know each other?"

"We worked together," Logan said, not giving any more than that. "Been a while."

"Sure has." Steve stepped forward and held out his hand. "It's good to see you."

Logan took his hand in a firm shake. "Likewise. Could hardly believe the newspapers when they said you'd been thawed out-"

Bucky interrupted with a snort and said, "No one reads newspapers anymore."

Logan raised an eyebrow, but ignored the remark. "Then saw you and your costumed pals fighting aliens on the news. I would've helped, but I was in Borneo at the time."

"Borneo?" Steve said, carefully neutral. "Well... maybe next time."

"Yeah." Logan smirked, and gestured around at the room. "Nice tower."

"It's not mine," Steve said quickly, watching Logan as he went to stand a little ways off, putting distance between them.

Alphas never stayed too close to each other, in Steve's experience.

That was fine.

The beta got to her feet, and came forward with her hand extended. "Hello, Captain. I'm Moira MacTaggert. FBI."

Steve shook her hand too, to be polite. "FBI," he repeated, waiting for her to elaborate.

"Yes." She smiled neutrally. "Mutant Division. I'm tasked with cases where mutants are involved, and the bureau want to keep as much out of the public eye as possible, so as not to cause a panic. But," she sighed while giving him a wry look, "I have to say, now that your team are very much in the public eye, and Shield is in a mess, things could be changing. If I don't close this case at the next opportunity, we could lose our lead and it'll be ten months of undercover work down the drain."

"And one month for me," Bucky said, moving to stand beside Moira. He fixed Steve with a look. "This is important."

"Okay, I get it," Steve said, raising his hands. "Are you going to tell me what you know?"

"I have the file." Moira gestured to her briefcase on the couch. "Come and take a look."

Steve went over with her, glancing back at Bucky when he heard Logan say, "Hey, kid. You alright?"

Bucky huffed, and muttered, "Yeah, I'm fine."

It was almost like a grumpy kid answering their parent, and something about their little exchange put Steve at ease. So, he turned to Moira as she got out a file, and started handing him printed photographs.

"I apologise for the nature of these images," she said quietly. "But this is what we're dealing with."
Steve looked at the photos, his brow deepening. Black and white images of young girls, probably all omegas, afraid and huddled together in a dirty basement.

"These shots were from a successful raid just upstate," Moira explained. "We haven't caught the ring leader, only one of his betas. The information we got was that there's not only more brothels like this one all over the state, but also a large storage facility.

"We don't have any idea of location; the omegas told us they were blindfolded when they were transported anywhere, but they could tell us that one of the places they were kept smelled like a barn, and it felt hot. That's all we have. This ring have been doing omega trafficking for years, maybe even decades."

Steve nodded, and handed the photos back to her. "What else have you got on them?"

"Not a lot," she said. "Unfortunately. They're almost impossible to track, and believe me, we've tried. They must be based somewhere, though, for the scale of operation they run. No one knows enough to give us a lead on the location, but one alpha's name comes up more than most. We don't have a photo of him-" She pulled out other photographs. "But we have some surveillance footage of the ring robbing banks. These are taken from across several states, over the last five years."

Steve looked at the photos; stills of bank robberies in action, with civilians cowering on the floor and armed robbers holding machine guns.

What stood out about these robbers was they weren't dressed for stealth; they looked more like a biker gang, in denim and leathers with outrageous haircuts, tattoos and piercings. None of them had their faces covered to protect their identity.

"So, they're not shy," Steve observed. "Not afraid of getting caught." He looked at each photo, memorising faces. "Enhanced? Some of them seem to have robotic arms or hands."

"Mutants," Logan said gruffly. "Mutant cyborgs."

Steve felt a stress headache coming on. "I see." He handed the photos back. "And your intel on their ring leader? How do you know it's accurate?"

Moira didn't answer, but she looked over at Bucky. Steve, surprised, looked at Bucky too.

"His nickname's Pretty Boy," Bucky said, folding his arms. "That's all anyone knows. He's a piece of shit, but he's definitely high up in that chain. He's sure to know where the omegas are kept, anyway."

"And you're sure about that intel?" Steve asked.

"Yes, Steve, I'm sure."

"Okay." Steve set his jaw, and turned back to Moira. "The Avengers will help you in any way we can. Bucky, however, is not an Avenger, and he'll have to sit this out."

"But Captain," Moira tried, before Bucky shouted over her, "Steve, don't you get it? Without me, there's no way in!"

Steve looked at him, but he refused to budge. "There will be another way."
"They won't let you in, Steve!" Bucky insisted. "I'm the best chance because they already know me."

"Then you can set up a meeting over the phone," Steve said, "and get him to meet us-

"That won't work!"

"It has to work," Steve answered. "This is far too dangerous, Bucky."

Bucky let out an angry growl, and Logan quickly stepped in between them.

"Okay, cool it," he said calmly. "Let's just hold on a second. Now, Cap, look. Bucky's been working on this for weeks, getting them to agree to an actual meeting. It's the best chance we've got at getting more intel, and rescuing those kids."

"How could you put him in this situation?" Steve demanded, his anger spilling over.

Logan raised his eyebrows, nonplussed. "Oh, he didn't tell you? It was his idea."

Steve had heard enough. "Bucky," he bit out, "can I talk to you? In private." He marched to the door, opened it, and waited for Bucky, who rolled his eyes dramatically but followed him out.

Steve closed the door after them. Before he could open his mouth, Bucky was rounding on him with a furious glare. "Let's get one thing straight, Captain," he said lowly. "You don't tell me what to do. Not now, not ever. Do you understand?"

"Bucky, you are not trained for this," Steve argued. "Didn't you hear what Logan said? These aren't regular criminals, they're enhanced. They're even more dangerous."

"I'm aware of that, Steve. I've met them before. They know me."

"This can't be the only way," Steve said. "You're putting yourself in danger-

"It's my choice!"

"What about Lara?" Steve was desperate. "What if something happens to you, and she-

"Will you stop using her to get to me!" Bucky shouted. "This is my mess, and I have to fix it!"

"This is not your responsibility!" Steve shouted back.

"Yes, it is!" Bucky hissed, getting up in Steve's face. "I knew about this for years and didn't do anything! I got money out of this, Steve. Money that came down that chain and into my pocket. I'm no better than any one of those assholes, and now I have the chance to make it right, you are not taking that away from me."

Steve paused, blinking into Bucky's furious face.

Had he misheard?

"What?" he said, taking a step back. Bucky seemed so angry, and Steve chose to back off a step. "What do you mean, you got money?"

"I was Michelle's pimp," Bucky said, and Steve watched as the anger drained from his features. "I told you. I'm no better than the rest of them."
He turned away, walked off down the hall.

"Bucky, wait..." Steve went after him, could've easily caught up but he went slowly. "Bucky..."

"What?" Bucky shot him a glare, but the viciousness had gone. Now, he only looked wary.

"Bucky, talk to me." Steve stood next to him, tried to give him space at the same time. Bucky folded his arms, and continued to glare.

"What's there to talk about?"

Steve sighed softly. Okay, so Bucky was defensive. But clearly this was important, for both of them.

"Was it your choice?" Steve asked simply, though he could already guess the answer.

Bucky looked at him, confused for a moment. "What?"

"Was it your choice?" Steve repeated.

"I... that's not the point," Bucky said dismissively. "I still did all those things for them."

"But were you made to do it?" Steve asked.

Bucky looked away, and didn't answer. Which was answer enough for Steve.

"Bucky," he said quietly, "being made to do something isn't the same as choosing to do it."

"You sound like my therapist," Bucky grumbled.

Steve tried for a smile. "Is that good or bad?"

Bucky looked up at him finally. He didn't smile back, but he searched Steve's face. "Don't... don't you hate me?"

"Of course I don't hate you," Steve assured him. "Bucky... I've done some not great things, too. I've done things for the army, the government, that now I'm questioning if they were ever the right things to do at all. I mean, not so much in the war, but more recently. Shield... they lied to me, Bucky. They probably sent me on missions that were more for Hydra's benefit than anyone's, and yes, I kind of hate myself for that. So, now I'm going to question every mission I take, and make my own judgements. Hopefully I can feel more in control of my choices that way, and hate myself a little less."

Bucky searched his eyes, his own getting watery. "It's not quite the same, Steve."

"Seems exactly the same to me," Steve said, confident he was right. "We've both been in situations where we ended up doing things for someone else, and now we realise that wasn't what we wanted. You're not a bad person, Bucky. No more than I am, at least."

"But I am," Bucky insisted.

"I'm going to disagree." Steve reached out, very slowly, and touched his hand to Bucky's shoulder. "I say you're a good person. Maybe you can return the favor, and occasionally remind me I'm a good person too?"

Bucky hastily wiped at his eyes, jostling Steve's hand away, but he nodded. "Okay," he murmured.
"Okay, then," Steve replied.

"I still gotta go on this set up," Bucky told him. "I gotta make it right for Michelle. I owe her that."

Steve sighed deeply, resigned to it now. "Okay," he said again. "But I'm coming with you."

The sound of a throat being cleared down the hall had them both looking over. Logan leaned out of the meeting room, said, "Hate to break up the party, but we have less than three hours to do this."

"Alright," Steve said, and he hoped to God he was doing the right thing. "Jarvis," he asked, "can you let Maria and the team know that we need an emergency meeting?"

"Of course, Captain," Jarvis replied.

"Good," Logan said. "Let's get this thing over with."
The mission had been approved, much to Bucky's surprise. After the slightly awkward meeting between them and the rest of the Avengers –where it turned out Logan knew Clint too, although Clint had called him Wolverine, not Logan– most of the team had their orders, and they also had to leave within the hour if they were going to make it downtown in time.

Bucky took the opportunity to go find Lara, because he wanted...

He just wanted to say goodbye to her.

So he went back to the lounge where Kamala had said they'd be. He found them in the kitchen, Lara in a little high chair and being spoon fed at the table.

"Oh, hey," Kamala greeted. "How's it going?"

Bucky nodded in reply, and pulled up a chair. "It's okay, actually," he said, still kind of in shock, but he didn't have time to process right now. He just had to keep going until this was over.

Bucky leaned in close to Lara, who smiled when she saw him, and slapped her little hands on her plastic table excitedly.

"Hey, now, calm down," Bucky murmured, taking one of her hands so she could hold his finger instead. "Always slapping things."

"She has a lot of energy," Kamala said with a chuckle. "After this feed, we're going to play the cube game, if you want to join us?"

"Cube game?" Bucky had no idea what that meant.

"Yeah, it's like, matching the shapes," Kamala said, offering a new spoonful of food to Lara, who
was too busy giggling and shouting to notice.

"You mean an electronic toy, or something?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Kamala said. "It's an app on the tablet. It's like a brain game for babies, she just presses the shapes to match them up. She's really good at it."

"Huh." Bucky smiled, feeling proud, and leaned in closer to gently pinch Lara's cheek. "Are you a smart kid? Where'd you get that from?"

Lara laughed with her mouth open, her face squishing up with delight. Bucky pinched her other cheek, then leaned back. "Sorry, Kamala. You're trying to feed her and I'm interrupting."

"No sweat." Kamala smiled at him. "It's not like this is a ten minute job, and she doesn't seem that interested in food right now."

"I'd better leave you guys to it," Bucky said, and he gave Lara a quick kiss on top of her head. "I just... I just wanted to see her before I head out."

"Oh, okay. Going anywhere nice?"

"Um..." Bucky stalled, and turned when he heard footsteps.

Steve.

"Hi." Steve smiled as he approached. "Sorry to interrupt, I--"

"Oh, no, you're not," Bucky said, shifting awkwardly. "I just... you know, wanted to say 'bye. Before we..."

Steve nodded. "Yeah. Me, too, actually."

"Okay." Bucky went to move out of Steve's way, just as Steve stepped into the same spot, presumably to get out of Bucky's way. "Sorry," he said, just as Steve mumbled the same thing.

Bucky almost laughed. He gestured for Steve to go first. "After you."

"Sorry," Steve said, his cheeks turning a little pink.

Kamala was watching them both with an amused expression.

Steve sat down in the chair next to Lara, and said softly, "Hey, kid."

Bucky watched them, unable to look away. He knew he should probably go, let Steve have his time with Lara, but...

It was hard to look away.

Lara smiled and giggled at Steve, like she was pleased to see him. Bucky liked seeing that, especially after that fight they'd had earlier. He was relieved that Lara was okay, and smiling again.

Bucky heard someone else enter the lounge, and had to drag his eyes away to look at the newcomer.

Natasha smiled at him. "Hey," she said. "Sorry to interrupt, but we need to suit up. Oh, and Steve, Maria has an outfit for you."
"Okay," Steve said, glancing over at her. Then shot a smile to Bucky. "Hope it's better than my cap and glasses look, because apparently that sucks."

Bucky bit his lip, and tried not to smile.

Natasha tilted her head, considering. "Not untrue. But this new one will be a step up."

"Alright," Steve replied. "I won't be a minute."

Natasha nodded, then looked to Bucky.

"You need to suit up too," she said. "Come with me."

She led him down halls and into some high tech looking locker room. Bucky spotted stacks of guns and their magazines, and rows upon rows of knives and weapons.

Natasha pulled out a rail of clothes, and went to open hidden cupboards. "Don't shower, you'll smell better as you are. But you need some protection."

She started handing him clothes; a compression top, a fresh t-shirt, a variety of knives, an ear piece that was so small Bucky nearly dropped it, and a roll-on stick without a label.

"Use the roll-on for your scent glands," Natasha said. "It sort of enhances your natural smell. Distracts alphas pretty good."

"Right," Bucky said, holding all the stuff.

"You've got your own jacket," Nat pointed out, "and it'll be better if you're as much yourself as possible. You don't want to look too different to them and rouse suspicion."

Bucky nodded.

Nat smiled at him kindly. "Maybe re-do your hair? Have half of it down, or something?"

Bucky huffed at that. "Okay."

"Oh, Nat, did you-" Jessica entered the room, then paused. "Oops, sorry! Shall I go?"

"It's okay," Bucky said, and couldn't help notice what she was wearing; a skintight red catsuit with black and yellow accents, and her long black hair loose.

"Alright." Jess smiled back at him. "So, I'm kind of ready? I figure I can wear my suit under clothes, which is what I usually do on jobs. I've got some boots, and a long top, so it'll look like I've got red leggings on. Will that fly?"

Bucky nodded. "Yes. Maybe a jacket?"

"That's what I need Natasha for," Jess chuckled. "I'm afraid I didn't know I'd be undercover on this trip, so I only brought a very un-biker bar jacket with me. Is there one I can borrow?"

"There's a wardrobe of spare clothes," Nat said, headed into another section of the walk-in closet. "This way."

"Awesome." Jess winked at Bucky as she passed, and followed Natasha in.
Bucky breathed out, and decided to quickly get changed while he could. He found a mirror with a counter, deposited all the things Nat had given him, then whipped off his hoodie and t-shirt, tossing them aside. He uncapped the roll on, and wiped it around the skin of his neck, letting it dry a moment.

Then he pulled on the compression top, adjusting it so it wasn't squishing his chest too much, and wore the black t-shirt on top. Bucky checked himself in the mirror; it looked like he had a flatter chest now, and the compression top gave him support too, so that was pretty good.

He took the knives Nat had given him, and started hiding them; one in his boot, one in his back pocket, and the switchblade tucked into his waistband because it had a cool little clip.

Bucky would be keeping that one, if he could get away with it.

He put the ear piece in his pocket too, and went to find his jacket.

They didn't have much time left.

~

"Hey, Wolverine," Clint said, as he drove them downtown, "when was the actual last time we went on a mission together?"

Clint was up front in the driver's seat, with a ball cap and sunglasses on. The rest of them were all tucked inside the back of a commercial van.

A good disguise, and at least there were small benches to sit down on.

Logan shrugged, and said, "Hell if I remember, Barton. Going on ten years, at least."

Everyone was in their disguises, or suited up; Jessica and Nat in tight clothes, leather jackets and a lot of make-up, Sam partly suited up, Moira in an armoured vest, Logan in his usual scruffy lumberjack look, and Steve doing a very good impression of the lumberjack look with a shaggy brown wig, trucker cap, a fake mustache that actually looked really convincing, and wearing denim with a checkered shirt.

The shirt was baggy to conceal subtle body armor underneath it, but Steve didn't have his shield, and Bucky was already fretting over his safety.

Steve looked at him then, and asked, "Any more intel we can use?"

"Uh." Bucky tried to focus; Steve was a super-soldier, he could handle himself. "Yeah, actually. Some of them have Australian accents, and if any of their jackets have patches or logos that say Reavers on them, they're part of the gang too."

"Australian?" Sam repeated.

"Yeah, like, really obvious," Bucky said. "I mean, it's a noticeable accent."

"And the target?" Steve asked, distracting Bucky with his mustache moving as he spoke. "What does he look like? As there's no pictures of him."
Bucky usually tried to avoid thinking of Pretty Boy, to keep his temper in check, but he had to picture him now. "I guess... think of an '80s Patrick Swayze, but with black hair, and more of a biker look."

"Interesting," Natasha commented.

"I'm not exaggerating," Bucky said flatly. "He literally looks like an '80s throwback. They all do, but him especially."

"Didn't get the memo about the change in decade," Logan said, and Bucky gave him a look.

"Did you just make a joke?" he asked in surprise.

Logan's lips twitched. "Maybe."

Nat and Jess were smiling. Before they could continue the banter, Clint's voice came through on the interior speaker. "We're making good time," he informed them. "Way ahead of schedule. I propose dropping off Team Alpha and Omega at the next intersection, while we go set up."

Logan huffed. "You suck at code names, Barton."

Moira looked to Bucky, said, "We'll go on ahead, as planned. Check your ear piece and wires are working before you leave."

"Oh, right." Bucky slipped his ear piece in quickly, as did Logan. Then he pinned on his wire, disguised as a small button, under the lapel of his jacket. "Testing?" Bucky said, waiting for an answer.

Steve smiled at him, though it was strained. "Coming through loud and clear."

Bucky nodded, and drew in a long, steady breath.

"Coming up on the drop zone," Clint announced. This was it, then.

Bucky was so busy trying to get his game head on, that when Steve leaned close and said his name quietly, Bucky almost jumped in surprise. "What?" he whispered, looking at Steve and his ridiculous mustache.

"Bucky, just... take care of yourself, okay?" Steve asked him, looking right in his eyes.

Bucky blinked, and had to fight the urge to lean in and seek comfort from an alpha. He couldn't afford to do that right now, he had to focus.

He nodded stiffly, said, "You too."

Then Bucky made himself look away, before he did something impulsive, like reach up and tweak Steve's mustache just for the hell of it.

The van was slowing down, indicating they'd reached the drop point.

"Okay, this is you," Clint said, as they rolled to a stop. Sam opened the side door, while Logan jumped out onto the sidewalk first, keeping watch as Bucky followed him. The door was pulled shut behind them, and Logan tilted his head at Bucky to indicate they keep moving.
They walked, slipping in between pedestrians hurrying to get places. It was fast approaching rush hour, the perfect time to blend in. Logan led the way, clearing a path for Bucky with his stocky bulk and -more than likely- threatening scowl that he always had on in public.

At the first hole in the wall that served food, they ducked in and ordered something, just to have a table and hang tight until they got the word to move.

Bucky nursed a soda, and tried to keep a handle on his nerves.

You can do this, he told himself, over and over until it sunk in.

You can do this.

~

"Aaand, we're here," Clint announced, parking the van. "Team Alpha Three-Beta One is in the building."

"That's a long ass name," Sam commented, as Clint climbed into the back with them. They both began to pull on blue overalls; their cover to get into the apartment building next door.

"Hey, I didn't choose it," Clint said. "It's better than Strike Team Delta, right, Nat? STD. Worst team name ever."

"Clint, focus," Nat said, inserting her ear piece. "Let us know when you're in position."

"Roger." Clint picked up a tool bag -his bow and arrows- while Sam grabbed the other bag -his wings packed inside- and they opened the side door to get out. "Laters, 'taters," Clint said as he shut the door.

Moira was on her laptop, a headset in place. "I'm using traffic cameras so I have visual from the street entrance to the bar, also covering the alley where they park their bikes." She looked up over the lid of her laptop at them. "I'll cover the streets surrounding the block too, so I should be able to give you ample warning if there's anyone suspicious approaching. Inside the bar, you're on your own."

"We got this," Natasha replied.

"Yeah," Jessica agreed. "We're only getting information, then getting out."

Moira nodded. "It's safer not to engage. If Bucky or Logan raise the alarm, you guys go in. I also have a SWAT team on standby, if we need to make arrests quickly. But nothing will stick unless we get it on record, and we find the omegas to charge him and his ring with trafficking." She gave Steve a firm look. "That means we have to let it play out. We have to let Bucky talk to him, gain his trust, and get him to set up a transaction. The more evidence we have, the longer we can put him away."

Steve nodded. "I know. But the second Bucky is in danger, I'm stepping in."

"It shouldn't come to that," Moira assured him. "Logan knows what he's doing. He won't let Bucky go anywhere without him, and even if they go somewhere else for the transaction, they can't get far. Not in rush hour traffic, so they'll be on foot if they do leave."
"We're close to the meat-packing district," Nat pointed out. "My guess is they have somewhere around here. Maybe an old warehouse, with a business front. They have big vans going in and out all the time."

"That does seem likely," Moira agreed. "Although the FBI searched this area barely two months ago. Either we missed something, or they have a different location."

"We'll find it," Steve said.

They had to.

Waiting for Clint and Sam barely took twenty minutes, but it was tense.

Steve checked his comms in the meantime, tuning into the secure channel. Clint and Sam were talking; they'd gotten into the apartment buildings nearby, undercover as maintenance workers, and once they were in position they were to suit up and report in.

Steve wasn't expecting Bucky's voice over comms suddenly, complaining, "Are you two going to chatter the whole time? I can't hear myself think."

There was a pause on comms, before Sam chuckled and Clint replied, "Ooh, tetchy."

Steve smiled despite his nerves. Then he spoke into comms, "Bucky, I can adjust your channel so you'll only get one or two of us in your ear."

"Yes, do it," Bucky replied. "Before I throw this ear thing against the wall."

"Roger." Steve smirked, and used the app on his watch to reset Bucky's line. "I'll leave you with myself and Nat. You're with Logan anyway. Everyone can still hear you, and if you want to reopen your channel to any of the team, just say their name before speaking."

"Okay," Bucky said, before going quiet again.

Steve heard Logan mutter something over comms, then Clint and Sam both confirmed they were ready and in position, covering the front of the bar and the south facing alley behind it.

Steve checked the time. "We have less than thirty minutes. Let's go."

He, Nat and Jess exited the van, leaving Moira inside. "Good luck," she told them, before shutting the door.

Steve led the way out of the parking lot, trying his best to act the part of dude who was on his way to a bar to do some drinking, and not Captain America on his way to kick anyone's ass who so much as looked in Bucky's general direction.

"How are we playing this?" Jess asked as they walked along.

She was like Nat, Steve thought; all streamlined precision, effortlessly slipping into a disguise. Unlike him, who felt all bulky and awkward.

"We go in as three," Nat said. "One of us peels off once we're inside, so we cover more angles."

"I can do that," Jess said. "Let me approach the door first, though. Try not to breathe too deeply when I'm flirting with whoever we need to get past."
"Why's that?" Steve asked, as they got to a stairwell, and headed down.

Jess winked at him over her shoulder. "You'll see. It's one of my tricks."

Steve got the feeling that Jessica didn't feel comfortable discussing her skill-set over comms, probably because of the FBI listening in.

He could relate.

Nat smiled appreciatively. "I can't wait to see this. Am I backing you up on entry?"

"I should be able to manage," Jess told her. "It'll be better for you both if you stand back a bit. So, I'll head in first, and see if I can find a vantage point inside the bar. You two follow and cover the door."

"Alright," Steve agreed.

They got out in the street, and Natasha linked her arm through Steve's.

"Slow down a bit," she said lowly, leaning into his side. "We're a happy couple out for a good time, remember?"

"Right," Steve said stiffly.

Undercover never got easier.

Jessica strutted ahead of them, and as they approached the bar Steve took note of the people loitering outside, and the rows of motorbikes parked in the side alley.

There were a couple of biker types outside, smoking and talking, and one enormous guy, possibly a beta, leaning against the door. The neon bar sign blinked on and off behind him.

Jessica went straight up to him, a smile on her face. "Oh, hey!" she said brightly, getting his full attention.

Nat tugged on Steve's arm to hold him back, giving Jess space. Steve's enhanced sense of smell picked up the spike of scent; Jessica's regular beta scent changed, now pumping out a heady omega scent. An omega on the verge of heat.

Steve was surprised, and even moved back a step. He didn't want a smell like that in his nostrils, distracting him.

Jessica spent barely ten seconds with the beta on the door, flirting with him while he blinked at her dumbly, then he was opening the door for her.

"Thank you so much." Jess held his eyes until she stepped inside, saying over her shoulder, "They're with me."

Steve and Nat stepped forward, edging their way through the dark, narrow door.

The bar was small, almost claustrophobic. The inside space was long and narrow, with a bar set up to the left, a pinball machine at its end, and further along at the back, a gloomily lit seating area.

"Oh, pinball," Jess said, turning to smile at the hairy, looming bartender. "I just love pinball." She strode over to the machine, while Nat subtly tugged Steve to the bar.

"Whiskey, neat," Nat said to the bartender, giving him one of her flirtatious smiles.
While she distracted him, Steve scratched at his chin and tried to look bored as he took in a quick scan of the bar and who was where. Biker types, as far as he could tell, sitting or standing throughout the bar. The music was loud enough to mask conversation, but Steve could pick out the patrons he was wary about just by looking at them. The ones who looked like they rode around on bikes every day, and quite possibly got in fights every day too; scrappers, brawlers.

But were any of them part of the actual trafficking gang, or were they just regular bikers stopping off for a drink?

Steve tried not to stare. The last thing he needed was any alpha here thinking he was looking at them wrong.

Nat got them their drinks, passing that hurdle, and they situated themselves at the bar. Natasha was excellent at blending in, and reminding Steve when to blend in too. They drank their whiskey slowly; just a regular couple hanging out.

Steve knew Natasha was also scanning their surroundings. Jessica must've been too, as she finished her pinball game then started rummaging in her purse that she'd brought along as a prop.

"Aw, man, don't say I've lost my lipstick," Steve heard her say, before she flicked her hair and meandered off into the bar. "Where's the restroom," she murmured, probably for Steve and Nat's benefit. "Ah, here it is."

Steve listened, as did Nat. Jessica murmured to herself as she was clearly scoping the place out, walking around to find a restroom, and pretending to flirt with someone on the way.

Then she muttered, "Wow, this is disgusting," followed by, "Don't use the restroom here, whatever you do."

"Noted," Natasha replied. "See anything?"

"Literally nothing down here," Jess said, with the sound of a tap running. "In the bar, by the way, there's a back room; it's square layout. A few alphas and betas, but no omega scent anywhere. Nothing standing out to me."

Steve lifted his glass to his mouth as he murmured, "What about this Patrick Swayze guy?"

"Can't see anyone," Jess said. "I used to love Patrick Swayze. This is such a bummer."

"I don't know who he is," Steve muttered, starting to feel stressed.

Nat put an arm around him, leaning in so he could smell her beta scent. "It's okay," she said softly. "He'll be here. We'll listen in, then we'll all leave."

"And not a moment too soon," Jess said. "Okay, coming back now."

Within a minute, Jessica had come back into the bar, got herself a beer from the bartender, and went back to the unoccupied pinball machine.

"Nine minutes," Nat whispered into comms. "Anyone have visual?"

"None yet," Sam's voice answered. Clint and Moira reported negative too.

"We're moving," Logan reported. "Be there in five."

"Nat, Steve," Jess said quietly, "my advice, get your next drink and head into the back room. If
there's shady meetings to go down, it'll be in there. I can cover the door from here."
"She's right," Nat agreed, then she turned to the bartender to flirt with him and get them new drinks.

Steve gritted his teeth. Bucky would be here soon, and he'd have to stay calm.

He stroked his mustache to cover his mouth, and asked, "Are there any empty tables?"
"Yes, two," Jess replied. "Just head on back there like a couple. It'll be fine."

Steve made a noise in the back of his throat. Nat must've heard, as she elbowed him a little when she handed him a bottle of beer.

"Time for more kissing practise," she murmured.

Steve forced himself to smile. "Enjoy the mustache," he told her, which brought out a genuine chuckle.

"I'll try," she said dryly, hopping off her barstool and plastering herself into his side. "C'mon, hot stuff," she said at normal level. "I can't wait to taste you."

Steve almost expected some remark from Clint or Sam on comms, but they'd gone quiet.

Nat leaned up to kiss along Steve's jaw, pulling him out of his stool. He said in her ear, "There's whiskey in my mustache, so you'll probably be tasting that."

"Stop making me laugh," Nat told him. "C'mon."

She led him into the back bar, prompting him quietly the whole way. "Smile. Look at me, be enamoured."

"I'm trying," Steve replied, and went with Nat as she dragged him over to a table.

They managed to sit down without much fuss, and Natasha did a good job of pressing her face close to scent him, so that the couple on the next table watching them eventually looked away.

Steve tried to scan the room; counting the tables, six, the patrons, easily twenty, and the exits, two. One back door in the far corner, with an emergency exit light above it, and another door across the room which probably led to the restroom.

"Was there any exits in the restroom?" Steve asked.

"Through that door is two disgusting cubicles," Jess replied, "and a locked door that's probably the cellar or something. I couldn't detect any scents."

"There was a small hatch out on the street," Nat said. "Probably leads there, it's in the right place."

"Clint, did you copy that?" Steve asked. "Possible exit routes."

"Loud and clear," Clint replied. "Don't worry, Cap. We're watching."

"Okay," Steve said, feeling tension creep in. "Logan. We're in position."

~
"Copy that," Logan said, puffing on a fat cigar as they walked down the street.

Bucky tried not to be distracted hearing Steve's voice in his ear too. He actually felt somewhat relieved that Steve was already in there, which wasn't a feeling he'd expected. Bucky would've thought the shame and guilt at exposing this part of his life to Steve and his team would've debilitated him by now, but it didn't feel like any of them were judging him, not even Steve. They just wanted to help.

Bucky felt the closest he'd ever been to shutting the door on all this shit for good. Maybe... Maybe when it was all done, he could even go home with Steve, and be with Lara.

Maybe-

"You okay?" Logan asked, interrupting his thoughts.

And, shit, Bucky's mind had not been on the task at hand.

"Yeah," he said, forcing himself to focus. Now was not the time for day dreaming.

"Yeah," he said, forcing himself to focus. Now was not the time for day dreaming.

"Listen," Logan told him, "you got this. You've been there before, so just act like you normally would. And don't be surprised if you recognise Cap or his team inside the bar."

Bucky rolled his eyes minutely. "What, do I look new? I'm not stupid, Logan."

"I didn't say you were," Logan gruffed back. "But we all have our off days."

Bucky almost argued, but figured he'd save his energy for the actual meeting. Logan had already escorted him to and from a dozen dead-end meetings now, with Bucky desperately trying to get a one on one with that slippery douchebag, Pretty Boy.

Finally, it was time for the pay-off.

"Alright." Bucky took a deep breath in. He spotted the bar across the street, as they waited for a break in traffic to cross. "Here we go."

"Approaching the bar now," Logan said quietly, then after a second he grumbled, "Shut up, Barton."

"What?" Bucky asked.

Logan shook his head, and stubbed out his cigar on the sidewalk. "Nothing. Barton thinks he's funny, that's all."

Bucky ignored it, and led the way across the street. Logan hung back, covering his six. He was supposed to be Bucky's muscle for hire, which was believable enough to have him tail Bucky around.

They reached the bar, the gathering of betas at the door going quiet as they approached. Bucky recognised the doorman, a beta, but couldn't remember his name.

"Hey," he said, as evenly as possible.

The doorman nodded. " Ain't seen you here in a while."

Yeah, nearly three years, Bucky thought. "Been busy," he said, and when the beta didn't move,
added, "I'm meeting someone."

This made the jerk smile. "Yeah, I know," he said, and opened the door. "Go on in."

Bucky nodded, though what he really wanted was to flip him off. He calmly walked through the door, Logan close behind him.

Being back inside the shithole bar again was surreal. There was a time way back when Rumlow had dragged him in here pretty much every other weekend. Bucky hadn't missed this place, that was for sure. There was grime on every surface, and the place reeked of unwashed alpha.

Not the nice, tantalising smell of alpha either, just plain old gross dudes.

Time to breathe through his mouth, Bucky thought, leading the way through the bar.

They were right on time, and he wasn't going to risk getting a drink here. He headed straight to the back room, spotting Jessica along the way. To her credit, she didn't even look at them as they passed, but she must've known they were there.

Steve was another story. He and Natasha were seated at a small table in the back room, and when he looked up Bucky's eyes locked with his for a moment, and Bucky worried their cover would get blown when neither of them could look away.

Luckily Natasha got Steve's attention, cupping his face in her hand and whispering what looked like sweet nothings to him, but Bucky heard them muttering over the comms.

He couldn't afford to pay attention; he looked around, to see if there was anyone he knew among the scruffy bikers at tables.

One skinny alpha, with a shaved and tattooed head, did a subtle wave with his fingers, and Bucky nodded in turn. He slowly walked over, wary of the other alphas and betas all around them.

Logan was behind him, his presence palpable and reassuring. Bucky approached the table with the skinny alpha, and thought he almost remembered his name. Angelo, or something.

The betas at the table got up, leaving their seats empty as they went to stand at the wall and watch. Not intimidating at all, Bucky thought.

The alpha, Angelo, gestured for Bucky to sit. "Ain't seen you in a while, sunshine," he said, in a broad Australian accent.

Bucky's pulse quickened. They were close now. So close. He sat down on an empty chair, while Logan remained standing behind him. Bucky made himself smile as he said, "Could say the same for you."

This made Angelo laugh. "We're always about, mate. Heard you were looking for us."

Bucky nodded. "I have a business proposition. But if your boss doesn't want to talk to me, I can take my business elsewhere."

"Oh, ho, ho!" Angelo chortled. "He'd love to hear that. You sit tight, princess. He's coming."

Bucky waited calmly as Angelo got up, and stalked over to the supply closet set in the wall. Bucky had seen the inside of that closet a few times, when he'd been nearby and watched the staff open it to fetch extra cases of beer, or the mop and bucket.
Angelo knocked on the door, which made Bucky frown in confusion. Surely no one was inside that? It could barely fit the cases of beer in there.

Angelo joined his betas, leaning back against the wall and watching Bucky and Logan closely. Bucky almost panicked, but then the closet door opened and out stepped a tall alpha dressed in biker leathers.

Bucky's breath caught. It was him. Pretty Boy.

And the douchebag looked over his way, and grinned. Bucky felt frozen in place, tried to keep a handle on his anger and resolutely not think about Michelle right now. But it was hard when her killer was strutting over like he owned the place, and sliding into the seat opposite Bucky.

"Bucky, baby," he leered, leaning in on the table. "It's been a while."

"Sure has." Bucky smiled back neutrally. "How's things?"

"How sweet of you to ask, deary," Pretty Boy said, his accent thick. "Things are sweet. And I hear you want to make things even sweeter?"

Bucky inclined his head, seizing the opening. "I'm in the market," he said.

Pretty Boy snorted a laugh. "Yeah, I bet you are. Heard about Rumlow, banged up in Rikers."

"He got sloppy," Bucky said, which was certainly true. "But, these things happen."

Pretty Boy nodded along, showing teeth as he grinned. "Sure do. So, what do you need me for? Looks like you already got yourself a new alpha."

Bucky tracked Pretty Boy's line of sight as he sized up Logan. True to his part, Logan remained silent and still. Bucky leaned forward a little, making it seem that he didn't want Logan to hear what he said next. "Hired help is one thing," he said, a smile playing on his lips, "but I need a man who has more... business sense, if you know what I mean."

"Ah hah." Pretty Boy's eyes were on him again. "What sort of business?"

Bucky wanted to reach across the table and throttle him for stalling, but he forced himself to be patient. Alphas were so Goddamn annoying.

"You were in business with Rumlow," Bucky said. "I'm good with that side of things. Let me take Rumlow's place."

"Ohhh." Pretty Boy chortled, and waggled his eyebrows suggestively. "You wanna work under me, hotness?"

Bucky smiled back. "Make it worth my while, I can work anywhere you want."

"Get this kid!" The alpha slapped his hand onto the table, making Bucky jump a little. "Now, then. Sounds like we can continue this conversation in my private office..." He got up, gesturing grandly to the broom closet.

Bucky frowned, and almost said, seriously? But he held his tongue. Moira had been very clear; they needed as much evidence recorded as possible, and so far this jerk hadn't given Bucky anything.

If going inside the closet would make him talk, Bucky would do it.
He got to his feet, as the other bikers watched closely. Pretty Boy opened the door, holding it for Bucky as he peered inside.

It was just as small as he'd remembered, but with slightly less alcohol stock this time.

Most bizarrely was the tiny old man sitting on a beer crate in the corner, working through receipts on a calculator, and wearing one of those little green visor hats like Bucky had only ever seen in movies.

Not what he'd expected.

Logan was right behind him, and Bucky turned to him. "You can wait out here for me. It's literally a closet."

Logan did not look pleased, but he muttered, "Leave the door ajar. I'll be right outside."

"Relax, hairy one, we're just gonna talk." Pretty Boy chuckled. "Ain't that right, Bucky?" He laid a hand on Bucky's shoulder, steering him to the closet.

Bucky went with it; they'd been prepared for a second location, and if it was only inside this closet, well. That was easier than he'd expected. Now he just had to grit his teeth and let the bastard talk.

He walked inside the closet, ducking his head under the door. Pretty Boy came in after him, and he breathed in deeply.

"You sure smell good today," he said. "It's different. Why do you smell different?"

Bucky tried not to panic, and turned to face the alpha. "I changed my deodorant," he said with a shrug. "So, can we discuss business?"

"Oh, sure, babe." Pretty Boy grinned, and pulled the closet door almost closed behind him. "But we're not in my office yet."

"We're not?" Bucky looked around pointedly. There wasn't anywhere else to go.

"Not yet." Pretty Boy gestured to the old man. "Gateway."

Bucky watched as the little old man looked up, his eyes completely engulfed in black, and the scent of ozone filled Bucky's nose.

The dusty wall with shelves of beer vanished as, in their place, a black hole whirled into shape. When it cleared, Bucky saw dusty yellow earth, like he was looking through a window to somewhere else.

Pretty Boy grabbed him under the arm, and stepped through the hole with him.
"Something's happened," Jessica murmured on comms, at the same moment Logan made a noise, a dark growl, and moved toward the closet door.

Steve tried to move too, but Natasha put her hand on Steve's leg, to remind him to stay put. "Steve," she said in a low voice. "Wait."

Steve couldn't bear it, not knowing what was going on inside the closet, not being able to see. Logan had begun to open it, when the bikers who'd been lining the walls quietly blocked him.

"What's your problem, mate?" the little alpha, Angelo, taunted.

"Outta my way," Logan gruffed.

"Now, now." Angelo wouldn't budge. "Can't go in when the boss is busy."

Logan ignored him, and called out, "Bucky?"
Steve tried not to be obvious, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the scene playing out across the bar. *Come on, Bucky,* he thought. *Come on.*

"Bucky?" Logan tried again, but no one answered.

Steve couldn't bear it. "Logan," he said into his comm, "check on him."

Logan grunted in reply, and reached out with both hands, grabbing the two bikers closest to him, Angelo and a larger beta, by their jackets. He heaved them off their feet with a mighty growl, and sent them knocking into more bikers.

Steve stood up, as did Natasha next to him and unfortunately the rest of the bikers. "We'll cover you," Steve said, as he picked up his stool and used it to smack into the first meathead who charged at Logan.

Logan nodded, and after landing a punch to a biker near him, opened the closet door and dove inside.

The bikers nearest the closet tried to follow Logan, so Steve leapt in to block their way. He swung his stool, cracking it into heads and shoulders as he went.

Natasha was fighting behind him, kicking at bikers as they came at her.

"I take it we're engaging?" Jess asked over comms.

"Yes!" Steve answered, bringing the wooden stool down over a large alpha, only for it to smash into bits.

*What the hell?* These guys were tough.

Steve punched the alpha instead, and as his fist connected against something more solid than meat and bone, he was pleased he'd worn reinforced gloves.

"Cyborgs," Steve gritted out, wrestling with the guy. "Some of these jerks are stronger than normal."

"Got that right," Natasha replied, using her Widow's bites to take out the bikers circling her. They went down convulsing. "Electric shock's gotta hurt if they're part metal."

Steve was still trying to take down the big alpha. He was built like a tank. "You wanna send one of those bites this way?" he asked, managing to kick at the alpha's knee to knock him off balance.

Natasha climbed up the torso of one biker, using her shock gloves to bring him down. As she leapt off him, twisting in the air, she threw a Widow's bite at the alpha facing Steve, nailing him with an electric current.

"Thanks," Steve said, turning his attention to the remaining bikers advancing on them. "I could really use my shield right about now."

A great glob of spiderweb flew in, nailing a large biker to the wall as he shouted in surprise.

"Mind if I cut in?" Jessica said, as more spiderweb shot through the air, engulfing the bikers and pinning them to the walls and floor where they stood. One by one, they went down, cussing and wriggling to try free themselves.

Steve was amazed. As Jessica herself appeared, he gave her a nod. "Thanks."
"Yeah," Nat agreed. "That's pretty cool."

"It might not hold them for long," Jess said, watching the bikers squirming in the sticky webs. "If they're enhanced."

"Then we better get out of here fast," Steve said, hurrying to the closet door.

But when he opened it and looked inside, there was no sign of Bucky.

Only Logan, who was currently interrogating an old man.

Steve's stomach dipped with a sick feeling. "Where is he?" he said shakily.

Logan had the little old man up against the wall by his shirt, and shook him as he growled, "This snivelling little shit is gonna tell us. Ain't ya, bub?"

"Please," the old man sobbed. "Please, they make me do it. They have my family. I can't say no."

"Do what?" Logan questioned.

"Open the door," he said, voice quivering.

Steve stepped into the closet, trying to see any hidden doorways. "Door? What door? Where is Bucky?"

~

Bucky knew he was somewhere, and it probably wasn't New York.

The air was different; hotter, dryer. The ground they walked on was hard, dusty, and the sounds and smells weren't like anything he was used to.

His first thought had been ranch. There was an empty field out on the left, and a couple of small buildings that had seen better days near it. Old, rusty equipment lay forgotten by wooden fence posts.

Maybe a farm, Bucky thought, as Pretty Boy dragged him along a dirt track, toward what looked like an open barn. Just a roof, with hay bales stacked haphazardly.

Wherever he was, Bucky knew he had to remain calm, buy time, and get Pretty Boy on side. Whatever happened, he'd probably have to go along with it, for his own safety, and to get as much information as he could.

"You don't have to pull me," he said, tugging against Pretty Boy's grip. "I came here to do business, didn't I? I'm not going anywhere."

"Get a load of you!" Pretty Boy cackled, yanking Bucky in close and grinning at him. The stink of beer and engine oil was on his breath, and Bucky tried to keep a neutral expression, to not show any distaste.

"Look, princess," Pretty Boy said, "I know you've been running around doing whatever your sweet
little self wants, even when you were with Rumlow, but that shit won't fly with me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bucky said, trying to keep his voice even. "I worked for Rumlow. I made him good money, and I can do the same for you."

"Ain't you sweet." Pretty Boy brought his other hand up to take Bucky's chin in his thumb and forefinger. "Sweet, but stupid. Don't worry, I'll train that out of you."

He stared into Bucky's eyes, and Bucky tried very hard not to blink too much. "I'm not lying," he insisted. "I worked for Rumlow. The omegas trust me more than you alphas. You can use me."

Pretty Boy snorted. "That's not wrong. But you're too soft on 'em, that's the problem, deary."

"No, I'm not."

"Yeah, you are." Pretty Boy held his gaze, and something about his eyes stilled Bucky, held him in place. "Don't worry, babe. Michelle told me all about it. How you helped her, get her out of doing work when she didn't feel good. Aren't you a good boy scout?"

Bucky tried to move, to shake his head, but he couldn't look away. He was getting tunnel vision, couldn't see anything else except Pretty Boy's strange green eyes.

"Yeah, feel that?" Pretty Boy said smugly. "Let me introduce you to my mutant power. I can hold you still and read your mind. Cool, huh? I read Michelle's mind too. She showed me how you helped her, how you cheated that idiot Rumlow out of money and he never even noticed. How you made it seem like Michelle was working when she really wasn't. Sneaky little git, huh? Then you helped her run away. You thought I wouldn't find out?"

Bucky whimpered, unable to move. His cover was blown, and he felt the panic start to seep in.

"I know, doll," Pretty Boy went on, caressing his face. "Don't worry, I might keep you around after all. I lost my temper with Michelle, but I just can't stand it when they bitch and cry. You gonna cry for me, babe?" He grinned wickedly. "Or are you gonna be good for me?" He blinked, releasing Bucky from the strange hold he had.

Bucky gasped, and blinked his eyes shut on instinct.

Pretty Boy laughed. "Quiet, huh? Well, that's fine. You play your cards right, I might keep you around after all." He pulled on Bucky's arm, dragging him toward the open barn. "What d'you say we make some hay?"

Bucky looked around desperately, for anyone else, for something to delay what Pretty Boy had in mind.

He just hoped Steve and the others found him soon.

~

"Where is he?" Logan growled, slamming the old man against the wall.
Steve leaned in too, feeling the hold he had on his anger quickly unravelling.

"They have a farm," the old man wheezed. "But my family, they keep them somewhere else. I've never been able to find them. I'm trapped, please. Don't kill me, or they'll die."

"We won't kill you," Steve said firmly, stepping in. "But you have to bring back Bucky now. We'll help you find your family then."

The old man shook his head. "I can't. He'd punish me by killing my family if I go against what he says."

"Then take us there," Logan growled, near throttling the man by the neck.

"Logan," Steve tried to say, then turned as he heard a commotion behind him.

The bikers were starting to break free, one lunging for Natasha.

Nat kicked him down, and Jessica shot more web from her wrist to pin him to the floor.

"Clint," Nat said through the comms, "we could use some back up."

"On our way!" Clint replied.

The old man must've been waiting for the distraction, as when Steve turned back to them he saw what looked like a black hole opening, and the old man and Logan tumbling into it.

"No!" Steve shouted, diving in after them. Wherever Bucky was, Steve was going too.

A glob of spider web latched onto Steve's leg, and he heard Jessica say, "I've got you!" before the force of the portal yanked them both through.

Natasha watched as Jessica was pulled into the closet, into some wormhole that promptly whirled itself closed and disappeared.

"Shit," Natasha murmured, turning her attention back to one of the bikers wriggling free. She kicked him in the face. "Hill," she said into the comms. "Half the team just got portalled somewhere. Can you track them?"

~

Steve tumbled onto hard ground, landing in a crouch with Jessica, Logan and the old man next to him.

"What just happened?" Jessica exclaimed, rising to her feet.

The little old man tried to get up, and stumbled. Logan grabbed him. "C'mere, you piece of shit." The old man squawked as Logan stood, and held him up by his throat. "I don't buy that cock and
bull story of your family held hostage."

"Me neither," Jessica said. "So where the hell are we?"

"My guess?" Logan said. "Australia."

"Australia?" Steve could hardly believe it. "Is Bucky here too? Where did they take him?"

"Steve," Jess said, touching a hand to his arm. She pointed across the dusty track to an old barn. "He's right over there."

"Bucky!" Steve took off at a run, Jessica and Logan close behind him. As he rounded the barn, he saw Bucky and the biker ahead. He looked like he was about to drag Bucky toward a stack of hay.

"Hey!" Steve shouted, feeling all his hackles rise. "You better let him go!"

The biker, Pretty Boy, snarled back, moving Bucky in front of him like a shield. "You assholes again!" he shouted.

Jessica and Logan came in to flank Steve, Logan still holding the old man.

"Got your butler here, bub," Logan called out, dangling the old man like he weighed nothing.

"Gateway!" Pretty Boy admonished. "What're you doing, mate?"

The old man only gargled in response, held by Logan's grip.

"Let Bucky go," Steve called out. "You can have him back."

"I got a better idea," Pretty Boy laughed. "You three can die." He brought a hand to his mouth, using his fingers to let out a whistle.

Steve was about to charge forward, but Bucky used the moment to reach behind him, and punch Pretty Boy in his groin.

The biker huffed, doubling over. Bucky tried to move away, but he'd never be quick enough.

Steve was about to run, when Jessica stepped forward and shot out a string of spider web.

The web caught Bucky square on his torso, and Jessica yanked on it hard. Bucky shouted as he came flying toward them. Steve opened his arms and caught him, both of them grunting with the force of it.

"Not bad," Logan said to Jessica, who smiled in response.

Steve set Bucky down on the ground, keeping a hand on his arm. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Bucky said breathlessly. "Thanks."

Steve nodded, then looked to Logan. "We should go."

Logan growled in agreement, the old man tucked under his enormous arm in a headlock. "Come on, portal man. Send us back to New York, and maybe I won't slice you into salami."

The old man, stuck in the headlock, chuckled darkly. "I think we'll stay here. You can meet the other guys."
"I'd rather not," Jessica muttered, but it didn't look like they had a choice.

More bikers appeared, loping out from the farm buildings and the surrounding property. They came and stood behind their leader, maybe a dozen or more.

Steve felt wary, especially without his shield and behind enemy lines, cut off from their team. He moved himself in front of Bucky, who for once didn't argue and let Steve protect him.

"Anyone on comms," Steve tried, but there was no response. He had to assume communications were down.

"They'll find us, right?" Bucky asked, sounding worried.

"Don't worry, kid," Logan replied, squeezing his hold on the old man, who made choking sounds. "I'll get this clown to send us back."

Pretty Boy had recovered, and was motioning to his bikers to advance.

"Better make it quick," Steve said. "We'll hold them off."

The old man was coughing, but finally relented. "Alright, alright! I'll do it."

Logan loosened his hold, and the old man looked up, his eyes filling with black. A portal whirled open right next to him, but Steve's relief was short lived as he looked across the dirt track and saw a portal opening right next to the bikers.

"Logan--"

It was too late, a biker leaned in through the portal and tried to grab the old man. Logan roared, his claws coming out on his free hand. He stuck his claws into the biker, who screamed, sparks flying out of him. Another biker pulled on them, and they all fell through the portal.

Jessica shot webbing at them, but the portal closed again in an instant.

Steve looked over at the group of bikers across the way, seeing Logan and the old man tumbling in among them. Logan's claws were out, and he was pissed.

"Shit," Steve swore, as Logan started fighting the bikers all on his own, and they piled in on top of him. "Bucky, stay here. We have to go help him."

"Okay," Bucky said, as Steve and Jessica took off at a run.

"There's only a few of them," Jessica said, keeping pace with Steve, "we can handle it."

~

"What happened?" Clint asked, joining Natasha in the bar and using a stun gun on the remaining bikers.

"Must be another mutant," Natasha told him. "They opened a portal. No idea where."
"Shit," Clint said, shooting down a biker, as Sam did the same behind him. "Does Hill know?"

"Yeah, but wherever they are, she can't track them," Natasha told him. "She's bringing the Quinjet in to pick us up now."

"Right," Clint said, as the bikers were all subdued. "Moira, tell the SWAT team to come in, but they're dealing with mutants here."

"Roger that," Moira replied on comms.

Sam came up to join them. He looked as worried as Natasha felt. "And what are we gonna do?" he asked her.

Natasha placed a hand on his arm reassuringly, and said, "We've called Thor."

---

Steve punched cyborg bikers left and right. Logan slashed with his claws, and Jessica webbed up their guns and yanked them away so they couldn't shoot. All three of them had enhanced strength, and they were more than a match for the dozen bikers, knocking them down.

"Come on!" Steve shouted, punching a biker out of his way and trying to get to their leader, the alpha. "You too scared to take me on by yourself, hot-shot!"

Pretty Boy snarled, hiding behind his cohorts. He and two more cyborg-bikers exchanged parts quickly, building what looked like a small canon launcher, aiming it at Steve.

"Heads up," Jess said, throwing up a web to clog the canon. While the bikers were distracted removing the web before Steve reached them, Jess held up both hands and shot out a bright white blast, knocking Pretty Boy and the bikers around him to the ground.

Steve stopped to give Jess an impressed look. "Well, that's pretty useful."

Jess gave him a smile. "It only acts as a stun. But we've got 'em on the run. We can finish this now."

Logan lifted up a biker with his claws, and with a snarl threw him at the remaining group of men who were still standing. They went down with a shout, tumbling in the dirt.

Scrambling to his feet, Pretty Boy shouted across the yard, "Gateway! Get the other boys here, now!"

Steve looked to where the old man was cowering behind an old shed, and began to open a portal.

"Shit," Steve hissed, as the portal grew wider.

Bikers, dozens and dozens of them, spilled through the portal wielding guns and metal body parts, braying for a fight.

Logan and Jessica came to stand either side of Steve, flanking him.
"We can take them too," Jessica said, "there's only..." She trailed off as a man's torso attached to a small Panzer tank trundled out of the portal, with one big canon pointing right at them. Two more cyborg-men melded to loud buzzing motorbikes came through last, rearing up on their back wheels and gunning their engines.

"You have got to be kidding," Steve muttered.

Logan snarled, readying his claws with a snikt. "All metal cuts up the same to me. Let's get 'em."

"Okay," Steve said quietly, "here's the play..."

The bikers they'd only just defeated were getting up and regrouping, circling around to the new cyborgs who had just arrived. Steve, Logan and Jessica were being surrounded.

Steve really wished he had his shield right about now.

"We-" he started, when a crackle in the sky made him look up.

The bikers looked up too, and they all watched warily as a column of light landed on the ground close by, in dazzling rainbow colors.

Relief shot through Steve, and he grinned when he saw the silhouettes of his team-mates appear. The rainbow dispersed, Thor standing front and center in full armour, with his hammer held aloft. He was flanked by Nat, armed to the teeth, along with Sam, and Moira.

On Thor's other side was Clint and his apprentice Kate, armed with a huge automated crossbow; someone in an Iron suit; and Kamala in a costume and domino mask.

"Hey, Cap!" Riri's voice said, as the person in the Iron suit tossed his shield to him.

Steve caught it, a little stunned that all the kids were on the battlefield with them, but he couldn't stop now.

The bikers were regrouping, facing the newcomers, and the tank-guy was taking aim.

"We are discussing this later," Steve called to Clint, before he turned to face the enemy with his shield ready. "Avengers!"

The sound of weapons powering up came from behind Steve and in front, as the bikers drew their guns, and the motorbike-cyborgs revved their engines. Thor raised his hammer, charged with lightning, and Steve shouted for them to attack before that tank fired up.

"Go, go, go!" He charged, Logan and Jess at his sides. Thor flew overhead, along with Riri, Sam, and dozens of arrows and bullets zipping past to strike down the bikers.

It should've been an easy attack, they were almost on top of the bikers, but then a skinny guy in ripped jeans broke the ranks, inhaled deeply and let loose a sonic scream, battering the air with shock waves and knocking them all back.

Steve fell to the ground, mostly unhurt but stunned. More worryingly, he saw Thor, Riri and Sam all fall from the sky.

"Sam!" Jessica cried, leaping up and shooting out a long line of web. She managed to snag Sam, yanking him toward her as she took a mighty leap up into the air, pulling him with her to slow his momentum.
Thor and Riri landed hard on the ground, sending up clods of dirt.

Behind him, Steve heard Clint curse about his hearing aids, and he guessed what had happened. "Electrical outage!" Steve shouted to his team, getting to his feet. "Take that guy out first, before he does it again!"

"I'll do it!" Kamala answered, and Steve looked behind him in alarm to see Kamala clench her fists and shoot up in size fifty feet, shouting, "Embiggen!"

"Holy crap," Logan muttered, standing next to Steve as they watched Kamala dive forward. Her giant booted foot shook the ground as she stepped around them and went to kick at the bikers, dispersing them easily. She leaned down and swung a huge fist along the ground, knocking them down like pins in a bowling alley.

Steve blinked in surprise. "Wow."

"Your nanny's pretty cool, Steve," Jess said, back on the ground and helping Sam to his feet.

"Uh, yes," Steve agreed. Kamala had provided them a good distraction, buying them time, but the bikers were regrouping, with the tank-guy and the motorbikes buzzing around Kamala's legs. "Don't let them shoot at her!" he instructed, taking off at a run. Logan, Jess and Sam –removing his wings and folding them into a shield– followed behind him.

They charged at the scattered bikers. Logan and Steve leapt at the motorbike-guys, knocking them down and denting their wheels. Jess shot webbing at the tank's main gun to stall it, while Sam smacked his shield into a biker wielding a gun.

Clint and Nat joined the fight. Clint used his bow in its staff form, Nat her batons. Their electrical equipment must've been shorted out, but they took down bikers one by one.

"Assholes," Clint shouted, spinning his staff and taking out a biker. "Blew out my hearing aids. That shit's expensive!"

Nat was busy taking down two bikers at once with a perfectly executed scissor kick.

"Guys," Steve said, diving in to shield them from a hail of bullets, "the kids-"

"We didn't have much choice," Nat said, quickly signing to Clint.

Clint nodded, and said, "Ms. Marvel, the fifty foot wonder. Iron Heart, and..." He paused, checking behind him. "Junior Hawkeye back there with Moira, on bow and arrows."

"Are Thor and Iron Heart alright?" Nat asked. "Their comms are out."

"I'll go take a bird's eye view," Jessica said, shooting web onto Kamala and flying off into the air. "I see them!" she called back. "They're over there on the ground, and they're starting to move."

Steve looked to Nat, Clint and Sam. "You guys cover Kamala. I'm gonna take down that tank."

They nodded, and Steve took off, breaking away from the group. Logan followed, running alongside him. The tank-guy had pulled the web free of his main gun barrel, and was taking aim.

"Hey, Cap," Logan gruffed, as they dodged bullets and ran. "Just like the old days?"

Steve smirked, and gave one final push before he leapt. Logan jumped too, claws out and snarling.
The tank shot a shell, aiming for Kamala's giant leg, but Steve blocked it with his shield. The shell bounced off the vibranium shield and exploded, the force knocking Steve to the ground in a daze.

Logan landed on the tank, sliced his claws through the main gun, ripping the metal apart, then punched out the cyborg attached to the tank.

The tank taken care of, Steve picked up his shield and shook his head, his ears ringing a little. He had to find that little skinny biker before he let loose another sonic scream.

Two big bikers tried charging him as he was down, but Sam jumped in with his own shield, protecting Steve. Webbing shot down from above, catching the two bikers as they shouted in surprise before being yanked up out of the way.

Steve grinned, and grabbed Sam's hand when he offered it, being pulled to his feet. "Thanks."

Sam nodded. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Steve said.

Jessica jumped down next to them, a pile of bikers caught up in webs falling to the ground beside her. "The rest of them are scattering," she said. "I was just up on Kamala's shoulder. There are a lot of sheds around here, they seem to be heading for those."

Steve nodded. "Once these guys have all been subdued, we'll search the area for anyone else."

The skinny biker-mutant appeared, catching them by surprise, as he inhaled deeply to let loose another scream. Steve was about to throw his shield, but Thor flew in swinging his hammer, and knocked the kid to the ground with a resounding clang.

The kid didn't get up.

"I do not need the lightning to wield Mjolnir," Thor declared, standing over him. He shook his head a little. "That was an experience, I must say."

"Thor," Steve said, "are you alright?"

"Yes, Captain!" Thor smiled cheerily. "A minor set back. Iron Heart too, is perfectly fine." He gestured across the yard as the Iron suit got up, and by its posture alone Steve could tell Riri was pretty mad.

"You jerks scuffed my new suit," her amplified voice said, as the suit recalibrated to fire out dozens of tiny rockets, hitting any remaining bikers within a thirty foot radius, bringing them down cleanly.

Any of the stragglers out of range were already running away.

Kamala shrank back down to her normal size, hurrying to Riri's side. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good, Kay," Riri answered, her mask flipping open to show her face. "You?"

Kamala nodded, rubbing at her arm. "A few scrapes, nothing my healing ability can't handle."

"That being so," Steve said, resting a hand on Kamala's shoulder, "you guys go regroup with Kate and Moira, and stay safe while we round the rest of them up."

"Hey, Steve?" Jessica said, getting his attention. "I'm sensing something. You should go to Bucky."
Steve looked around at the yard and the surrounding area, but he couldn't see Bucky anywhere. "Where is he?"

~

As the fighting started, Bucky slipped away. While they were all occupied, he was determined to find where the omegas were kept, if there were any here at all.

He crept stealthily up to the biggest barn, but it was half open and full of hay inside. It wouldn't make sense to keep anyone there.

Bucky followed the side of the barn round, and counted the number of buildings he could see out on the land. He picked the biggest one on a hunch, and hurried over.

When he got there it appeared more like an empty stable. Disappointment cut through him, and he had almost turned away before he caught a scent. He whirled back around to examine where the scent was; the wooden door frame.

He leaned in to sniff. Yes, there. An omega, a young girl, must've touched it. And not that long ago, judging from the scent. It was saliva, like she'd licked or sucked her thumb before using her hand to touch the door.

Bucky opened the door and slipped inside.

He'd never been in a stable, but he figured it was for horses, judging from the single stalls, the hay, and riding tack on the walls. No sign of any horses though, and it didn't smell of anything except hay and stale air.

Bucky searched carefully, and started to feel frustrated when he couldn't find anyone or any clue where the omegas could be.

Maybe it was only a temporary holding place, he thought, and kicked at a hay bale in anger.

He should check the other buildings too, just in case. He turned to walk back to the door, when a noise outside made him freeze on the spot. That soft whooshing sound the portal made, then heavy booted feet scuffing on dry earth.

Shit.

Bucky's heart leapt into his throat, and he looked around for another exit.

There was none. He was trapped in here.

Bucky jumped inside one of the stalls, pressing himself up against the wall just as someone opened the stable doors.

The intruder sniffed, once, twice, then chuckled lowly.

"Buckyyy," he sing-songed under his breath. "You in here? Come out, I won't bite."
Bucky held his breath, trying to slow his heartbeat as Pretty Boy shut the stable door and came in.

"I know you're in here, sweet-cheeks," he murmured. "Little bitch, wrecking my gig here." Heavy boots scraped along the straw laden floor.

Silently as he could, Bucky took out his thickest knife, clutching it in his hand. The grip on the handle was rubbery and secure, which was good as his palms had started to sweat.

He listened as, step by step, Pretty Boy came closer to his hiding place.

"If you come out now, I'll make you a deal," Pretty Boy said.

Bucky stayed still, trying not to make a sound, and hoped he wasn't pumping out too much scent.

"You get your super-friends to scram," Pretty Boy went on, "and I won't take a portal to a certain place..."

The footsteps got closer, closer.

Pretty Boy chuckled. "Somewhere your cute little baby is," he said, as the footsteps stopped right by Bucky's stall.

Bucky didn't dare breathe, and he thought he was made, until a noise rustled in another stall—a mouse?—and Pretty Boy moved over there, away from Bucky.

Bucky allowed himself one shaky exhale, silent as he could manage.

"I saw her, you know," Pretty Boy taunted. "I saw her in your mind. You popped a sprog, huh? I thought you smelled different, Bucky. Reckon she'll be a tasty little omega? I'll take good care of her."

Lara.

A feeling of white hot rage flooded Bucky, and he stood in one fluid motion, leaping up from the stall as he raised his knife.

The biker whirled around in surprise, then grinned as he went to block Bucky with his arm, his face morphing into surprise again when Bucky batted his cyborg arm away with sheer force and plunged his knife into the soft skin of his neck.

They tumbled to the floor together from the momentum of Bucky's attack, and Bucky twisted the knife in Pretty Boy's neck as he twitched and convulsed under him.

"You won't touch her," Bucky growled, and pulled out a second knife to stab him in his chest.

They were his hands, but Bucky felt as though he was watching himself do it. He didn't come back to himself until he felt a two sets of hands on him, pulling him back and talking calmly.

Steve, and Jessica. Their calming scents, and Steve saying softly as he prised the knife from Bucky's hands, "It's okay, Buck. It's okay. You can let go now. I got you."

Pretty Boy twitched on the floor, some of his circuits shorting out. Logan stood over him and gave him a kick, then huffed.

"Still alive. You took him down pretty good though." He gave Bucky a look, raising his bushy eyebrows, and Bucky felt the air rush back into his lungs, and he gasped.
"Oh, God," he wheezed, horrified at what he'd done. "Oh, my God."

Steve put a hand on his shoulder, turning Bucky away so he wasn't staring at the injured body on the floor. "It's okay," he repeated, wrapping his arms around him.

"Oh, fuck," Bucky whispered. "What have I done?"

"Nothing he didn't deserve," Logan said, followed by a gruff, "what?" when Steve and Jess gave him looks.

"We'll ask Riri to take a look," Steve murmured. "Make sure he'll survive. He needs to go on trial. They all will."

"I couldn't find the omegas," Bucky said helplessly, clinging to Steve's shirt. "I smelled a scent. I was sure they were here."

Steve held him tight, and looked to Logan again. "Your senses are better than most. Can you smell anything?"

"Lemme check." Logan started moving around the stable, scenting noisily. He followed his nose into a stall, saying, "Yeah, over here. There's a trap door made of stone."

"Let me try," Jess said, and motioned for Logan to stand back. Then she shot webbing onto the trapdoor, yanking it hard and shouting with the effort. She ripped it from the floor, Logan having to duck as the square of stone flew past his head and hit the far wall.

"Hey, watch it," Logan gruffed.

"Sorry," Jess said.

They cautiously approached the open hole to investigate, as the smell of frightened omegas filtered up, along with several whimpers.

"Hey, it's alright," Jess said softly, crouching down and peering into the dark hole. "We're getting you all out of here. You're safe."

"You found them, Bucky," Steve said into Bucky's ear. "You found them."
Avengers battle with cyborg baddies, *The Reavers* (Uncanny X-men), canon typical action and violence. No blood (just like a 12 rated movie!)

**Pretty Boy** holding Bucky hostage, mutant power of *mind reading*, and threats to Bucky’s personal safety (rescued by Avengers before anything happens).

Brief fight between Bucky and Pretty Boy, including Bucky's knives and stabbing (again no blood, bc it's a cyborg baddie).

Omega youngsters rescued from a cellar, briefly described, nothing graphic.

~
With all the cyborg-bikers now detained, the Australian authorities were called in. They showed up fast, with police vans and sirens.

Steve had instructed Clint and the junior Avengers to hang back, and watch Bucky. Clint wasn't one for rubbing elbows with the authorities anyway.

Steve and the rest of the team assisted the police, making sure none of the bikers, mutants or cyborgs escaped, while the Sentinel Services agents clipped power-dampening collars onto the detainees, handcuffed them and loaded them into prisoner transport vans.

The group of young omegas were escorted into a van too, by one of the agents and Moira, who had shown the agents her FBI card and explained the situation.

"You taking care of the kids?" Steve asked her, as they helped the omegas into a comfortable, air conditioned van, and shut the doors safely.

"Yes," Moira said. "I'll liaise with the FBI from here, and make sure these omegas are all back with their families if they have any, or in social services so they can have normal lives." She offered out her hand. "Thank you for all your help, Captain Rogers. We brought down a huge omega trafficking ring today."

Steve shook hands. "Happy to help. I'm glad we saved these kids."

"Yes." Moira smiled kindly. "Please tell Bucky as well, he was very brave today. And I'll make sure these jerks are put away for good with all the evidence we have stacked against them."

Steve nodded, and after saying goodbye, Moira left to get in the front of the van. Logan also came up to Steve and offered his hand.

Steve shook gladly. "Logan. You staying too?"

"Yup." Logan nodded, folding his arms. "I'll close the case out with Moira. Make sure her and these kids all get somewhere safe."

"Well, if you need us," Steve offered, "you know where we are."

Logan chuckled. "I do, now. Might swing back to New York again when this is all over."

"Stop by if you do," Steve told him. "You've always got a place with me."

"Ain't it Stark's tower?" Logan asked, raising an eyebrow.
Steve smirked back. "Yeah, but I get to have guests. You should come meet him."

"He anything like Howard Stark?" Logan asked.

Steve considered. "Hmm, yes and no."

"Guess I'll find out for myself one day," Logan chuckled, then paused to add, "Hey, look after Bucky, okay? I know he puts on a tough act, but he's only a kid. Hell, you both are. You were a kid in the war, and you've only been out of the ice for what, a couple years?"

"I'm twenty-eight," Steve said, "not counting the years I was frozen."

Logan huffed, smiling at him. "Trust me, Cap, you're both kids, and everyone makes mistakes. Relationship mistakes especially. Just... it's harder the first time around, it cuts deep. Doesn't mean a mistake has to be the end of the world, though."

Steve felt his face heat. "Did Bucky talk to you?"

"Not much." Logan shrugged. "I'm just good at reading people. He obviously cares about you, but he's had a rough ride. I mean, look at all this mess." He gestured around at the police officers, and the mutant services vans being loaded up with biker gang members. "Things like this don't make life any easier. So just go easy on him, 's all I'm sayin'."

Steve nodded. He didn't think he'd been particularly hard on Bucky, but... maybe he could make more of an effort to talk to him. Things had been kind of awkward between them since he'd shown up at the tower.

"Hey." Logan interrupted his thoughts, and clapped a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Don't sweat it, everyone's human. Well," he added with a wink, "not all of us."

Steve smiled at that, and gave a wave goodbye as he watched Logan go and get into the van with Moira. They left first, with a police escort.

The omegas were safe.

Steve inhaled steadily, and looked around at his team-mates, checking who was doing what. Most of them were scattered about, overseeing Sentinel Services securely detain all of the biker gang.

Riri had leant her mechanical expertise to ensure Pretty Boy would live, and he was currently being wheeled by stretcher into an ambulance.

The portal-making old man had been caught too, and had a collar on so he couldn't disappear. He was loaded away with the others.

Steve headed back over to where Bucky was, passing Sam and Jessica along the way. Sam burst out laughing, and gestured to Steve's face.

"Yes, I know," Steve said dryly. "I still have the 'stache on. I figured it could be my new look."

" Doesn't really go with the blond hair," Jess pointed out.

Steve's wig had come off at some point during the battle, and he simply shrugged. "If you see my wig on the field, let me know."

He left the pair of them snickering, and went over to Bucky.
Kamala, Kate and Riri were chattering excitedly, signing at the same time to recount their adventures to Clint. Steve caught the tail end of their conversation, Kate doing an impression of Kamala growing big and stomping around, to Kamala's delighted giggles.

Bucky was a little further away, watching them but not joining in. He'd seemed a bit shell-shocked earlier, and Steve was concerned.

"Hey," he said quietly, approaching him. "How's it going?"

Bucky gave him a watery smile. "Still got your 'stache on," he said.

"What is it with everyone and my mustache," Steve joked, hoping to make Bucky feel at ease. "I'm starting to think none of you like it."

Bucky gave him a better smile this time. "It makes you look like a cop. Take it off." He reached up, like he wanted to tug it away.

Steve blocked his hand gently, catching it in his. "No, don't. I've tried already, and it's not coming off. Natasha glued it on pretty good."

Bucky drew his hand back, blushing lightly. "Not brave enough to rip it off like a band aid?"

"I'd rather leave my top lip where God intended," Steve chuckled, and was pleased to see Bucky still smiling. "Hey," he added softly, "we'll be leaving soon. They're almost done out here, and Moira and Logan will make sure all those kids are safe."

Bucky nodded. "Yeah, I... I'd like to get back to Lara."

"Won't be long now," Steve promised. "And what's more, we'll probably get to ride back on the bifrost."

"The what now?"

"The bifrost," Steve told him. "It's that sparkly rainbow Thor flies around on."

Bucky raised his eyebrows. "I heard all the thunder, but I guess I missed that."

"Well, then," Steve grinned, "you're in for a treat."

~

Thor took them back to the tower on the bifrost, landing outside on the hangar next to the Quinjet. Bucky had held Steve's arm during the ride, and he looked a little wide eyed as they set down.

"Okay?" Steve asked, and Bucky nodded slowly.

"That was a trip."

Maria came outside to greet them, holding her Starkpad. "Welcome back," she said, business-like as usual. "Team Alpha One is still on mission, and another mission just came in. Does anyone need to sit out, or are you all good to go?"
Clint groaned mildly, making Nat and Jess chuckle. Steve smiled too, as he stepped forward to accept the Starkpad from Maria.

"What kind of mission?" he asked.

Nat came in at his side, looking at the Intel.

"AIM," Maria said. "A small cell. Shouldn't be too hard with more of you."

"I myself am in fighting spirits!" Thor announced jovially.

"Sure, why not?" Jess put in.

"I'm good to go," Sam said. "Just gonna switch out my glider for one that works."

"Alright, then," Maria said.

"Steve," Nat said to him quietly, "you should sit this one out. I'll head the team." She took the Starkpad from him. "Stay here with Bucky."

Steve was a hair's breadth away from arguing, when he remembered Logan's similar sentiment from earlier.

"Okay," he relented. "If you're sure?"

Nat nodded, looking pleased. "There's plenty of us to go around. Who knows, at this rate we could even get scheduled vacation time."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Steve quipped back, then stepped aside to let Nat confer with Maria.

Steve went over to the team. "Nat's leading on this," he told them. "Follow her orders."

"Will do," Clint said with a grin, signing at the same time. "Hope these guys don't have a sonic mutant on their team."

"No, let's hope not," Steve agreed with a chuckle.

"I'll grab some new comms, too," Sam said, as he loped off to get his equipment.

"Are we going too?" Kate asked hopefully.

"We're all suited up," Riri pointed out, still in her Iron suit.

They all looked to Steve, who looked at Clint.

Clint shrugged. "I guess? Someone go grab my spare hearing aids for me? And you kids are still on back-up duty only, by the way! Diaper Division all sticks by me, and that's an order."

"Unless we're needed to kick some ass?" Kamala said, holding up her fists and miming a quick one-two punch.

Steve grinned at that. "Good luck, everyone. Listen to Clint and Nat, and stay safe."

Then he went back over to Bucky and said, "C'mon. I'll show you where the showers are, then we can see Lara."

He led the way across the hangar, headed to the tower. Bucky glanced over his shoulder, watching
as the team got themselves organised, then disappeared again in the bifrost.

"Think you just lost your nanny, Steve," he said gleefully.

~

When Steve asked Jarvis where Lara was, and he informed them she was in the common lounge with Happy, Steve expected Bucky to want to head straight there.

Except Bucky shyly informed him that he wanted to go back to his own room on Bruce's floor, and shower there.

Steve was a little taken aback, but figured Bucky wanted to shower in private. He walked Bucky to the elevators, trying not to feel sad or anxious when the doors closed and separated them.

Now Steve was on his own, and he sighed softly.

"Jarvis?" he said.

"Yes, Captain?" the AI replied.

"Please make sure Bucky gets to his room safely, and if he needs me... uh, if he needs anything at all, please help him out."

"Of course, Captain," Jarvis said.

Steve went and showered. He managed to work the fake mustache free with a lot of soap and hot water, peeling it away then scrubbing the sticky substance off his skin.

He finished washing, got out and towelled dry, changing into casual clothes. Then he went down the the common lounge, finding Happy with Lara.

Happy seemed relieved to see him, looking a little harried from caring for a baby all on his own.

Steve smiled, remembering how panicked he'd felt when he'd first met little Lara only a few short weeks ago. Now he felt confident as he picked her up and shushed her gently, getting her to settle.

Lara seemed pleased to see him too, smiling wide and reaching out to grab Steve's nose.

"Thanks for watching her, Happy," Steve said, taking Lara's hand off his nose, and blowing a loud raspberry into her palm. She squealed in delight.

"Not a problem, Captain," Happy said. "Anything else I can help you with?"

"We're all good," Steve told him. "I'll take it from here."

~
Steve waited around for Bucky for over two hours, expecting him to join them. He changed Lara in that time, and managed to feed her some mashed banana too.

It felt odd, kicking about in the lounge by himself.

Steve checked in with Maria via Jarvis, getting updates from all the teams. Everything was going well, so there was literally nothing for Steve to do.

He made himself some sandwiches, and ate those with one hand, rocking Lara on his hip at the same time.

"Maybe we'll try get you down for a nap after this, huh?" he said, cramming the last of his sandwich in his mouth.

Lara babbled happily in response.

At no sign of anyone returning, and Steve beginning to feel tired too, more emotionally than physically, he gathered up Lara's things, and took them to his apartment.

Lara was often better at settling down for naps if someone was there with her, and Steve got them both on his King size bed, on top of the covers. He set out Lara's soft play mat, and she lay on her front, occupied with touching the toys on the mat and chatting to herself.

Steve lay on his side next to her, helping her play. If she showed signs of getting sleepy, he'd move her into a nap position later. Steve had Jarvis play some music for him, just some soft easy listening.

When Jarvis interrupted him about an hour later, Steve was pleasantly surprised to hear that Bucky wanted to join them.

"Please show him in," Steve said to Jarvis.

He heart skipped a little, and he smiled at Lara happily. "You gonna be a good girl?" he asked softly. "Be nice for Bucky when he comes in."

Lara gurgled, now laying on her back and chewing on a plastic toy. She was sleepy, but not falling asleep yet.

When the door opened, Steve looked up. "Hey," he greeted, as Bucky stepped in.

He must've showered and changed too, and his long hair was tied up. He ducked his head shyly, giving Steve a brief smile.

"Hey," he said, voice a little rough. His eyes seemed red too. "Sorry, I... I went to see Bruce. I was a bit worried about, um..."

"What?" Steve sat up on the bed, but he couldn't leave Lara so he had to stay put.

"Just, when I got mad and tackled that douchebag in the barn," Bucky said, shifting nervously, "I haven't exactly done that before. And I felt... kind of weird, like, stronger than I normally am. So I had Bruce check me out, but he couldn't find anything. He doesn't know if it was an adrenaline rush, or if I'm getting stronger because my body is adjusting to my new diet." He huffed out a weary sigh. "I don't know. I felt stressed out so he gave me a Valium, and now I feel pretty calm about it."

"Oh," Steve said, somewhat surprised. "Oh, I see." He glanced at Lara, still burbling to herself, then
back at Bucky. "Well, look, don't... don't worry about that right now. You wanna come sit with us? Or we can go in my lounge and watch a movie, if that's more comfortable for you?"

Bucky rubbed at his arm, and bit his lip as he looked at Steve. "Actually, laying down would be good right now."

"Sure," Steve said, elated. "There's plenty of room. We can like, box Lara in so she doesn't try rolling away. She does that."

"Yeah." Bucky smiled, and came around the other side of the bed. "Shall I just...?"

"Yeah, hop on." Steve gestured at the bed, tried not to stare too much as Bucky got onto the mattress, and laid down carefully. He scootched up close to Lara, reaching out to gently wiggle the toy she was playing with. "Hey, you," he said softly.

Lara stopped chewing and looked at him, then reached out with one chubby hand.

"Oh, hey." Bucky let her grab onto his finger. "Hello to you, too."

Steve smiled, extremely happy right now, and grabbed a comforter from the end of the bed, laying it over Bucky's legs. "Here. If you need to doze, go right ahead. I'll watch her."

"You're not tired?" Bucky asked, stifling a yawn.

"I'm fine," Steve told him, and laid back down himself.

They were almost eye to eye on the pillows, and Steve couldn't help watching Bucky play with Lara. When Steve breathed in, he smelled Lara's clean, familiar baby scent, and now Bucky's calm, happy omega scent too.

Steve smiled to himself, watching them together. "Hey, Buck," he murmured, "I'm real happy you're here. I wanted you to know that."

Bucky looked at him, surprise registering on his face briefly before he smiled. "Thanks, Steve. Me, too."
The One Where Bucky Goes Into Heat

Chapter Notes

Unbeta'd from here on out, so please be kind ^.^

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Mild warnings relating to sex for next 2 chapters, please see END NOTES for this chapter if you wish to check first.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

The days following the mission were a little tense, but manageable.

Bucky seemed quiet at first, withdrawn, but Steve understood post mission fatigue well enough, that was why he always tried to keep himself busy.

Bucky spent time with Lara, which made Steve happy and anxious at the same time. He just wanted them to get along. Kamala was great at smoothing over any awkward situations and getting them both to focus on Lara anyway, and Bucky seemed to get on well with her.

He also spent some time going to see Bruce, who was monitoring him on his new diet. Bucky's metabolism didn't show any signs of slowing down, and Bruce didn't have anything conclusive yet either; they could only go on Bucky's own estimates that he said he felt stronger than usual, and other little things he'd noticed. Natasha offered to do some physical training session with him, and curious about it, Bucky went to the gym with her most days. Not for very long, as Bucky didn't seem to care much for the gym, but Nat proposed a basic circuit of the gym equipment in order to monitor his results and endurance levels, and they'd send the data to Bruce.

Time would only tell if Bucky would get any stronger, or if whatever version of the serum he had would burn itself out and he'd go back to normal.

He didn't seem unhappy about it, at any rate.

Steve was busy too, doing his share of caring for Lara, and liaising with Maria, Tony and Nat for missions. He'd taken more of a back-seat in Avengers work than he'd intended, but he didn't want Lara or Bucky to be left on their own all the time, so he was satisfied in the tower for the most part, using the gym or going out for runs in the early morning, whenever Lara was asleep.

He took shorter missions when he was available, and started working with Clint on training the junior Avengers. Tony had recruited a kid named Peter, and Kate showed up one day with a girl called America.

Jessica was still based in San Francisco, but flew over to visit, much to Sam's delight. One day she brought her San Francisco team-mates with her, introducing Scott and Hope to the team.
Scott was very excited to meet Steve, and shook his hand while babbling, "Wow, you're Captain America! This is awesome!"

"It's good to meet you, Scott," Steve had replied, wondering when he'd get his hand back.

Sam, and Bucky holding Lara, had had to smother their laughter over it.

Bucky seemed fond of Sam too, Steve had noticed. Which he couldn't fault him for, Sam had proven himself to be a true friend, probably Steve's best friend, besides Nat and Clint.

They spent a lot of time together as a team in the lounge, or Steve's apartment, hanging out with Lara, watching movies and catching up.

Almost three weeks had passed, and both Logan and Moira kept in touch, giving updates on the omegas being re-homed, and the charges brought against the trafficking ring.

Bucky usually tensed up and became quiet at these updates, and Steve tried to balance giving him space while also making sure he felt welcome enough to stay. Bucky was still in the guest suit on his own most nights, if he didn't stay up late with Steve baby-sitting.

Steve understood that most regular people needed way more sleep than he did, and he was fine letting Bucky get a full night's sleep. Bucky spent more time with Lara during the days, so it worked out okay.

Steve didn't want to press Bucky for anything more right now, he was just so relieved that he was staying in the tower with them. Lara seemed happy too, so as far as Steve was concerned, everything was okay.

There were some mildly awkward moments though, like when Bucky would catch Steve staring longingly at him, or Steve noticed Bucky look at him too, like he was waiting for Steve to do something. Or they both reached for one of Lara's things at the same time and pulled their hands back at the contact, stuttering apologies.

Steve caught Sam and Clint sharing minute eye rolls one time that happened, and he almost said something, but Bucky seemed skittish enough and Steve didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable by causing a scene.

Besides, Sam was just as bad around Jessica, which was pretty funny.

On week four, everything was still pretty normal, except on one morning when Lara wasn't eating her meal fast enough, Bucky got noticeably irritable.

Steve asked if he could take over, and Bucky snapped at him, then stomped out of the kitchen.

Sam, over in the lounge, looked at Steve and raised his eyebrows in a *uh oh* expression.

Steve tried not to let it bother him, and got on with feeding Lara.

But later in the day, whenever Steve tried talking to Bucky about anything (and they had loads to organise; interview new nannies for Lara, as Kamala would be going part time soon, plus think about toddler classes for gifted youngsters, as both Bruce and Kamala seemed sure that Lara was a very quick learner) Bucky only gave him short, clipped answers.
Bucky was definitely in a bad mood, Steve decided, and didn't want to bother him any more that day. Bucky even snapped at Kamala, which was so unusual because they got on so well.

Everyone gave Bucky a wide berth that afternoon, and he went back to his room again in the evening without talking to anyone.

The next morning he came down to the lounge, looking like he hadn't slept a wink. He smelled different too, like... really nice. Steve got a little distracted at breakfast, and spilled some of his oatmeal on the table because he was staring at Bucky.

No one said anything though, so maybe the betas didn't notice Bucky's smell, or maybe it was all in Steve's head.

Later on, Tony breezed into the lounge, chattering away. Rhodey was with him. Tony paused, sniffed a few times, then declared, "Uh, okay, warn a guy if there's an omega in heat!" He promptly turned around. "Rhodey, change of plan, we're going out for brunch."

Steve, Sam and Kamala all looked at Bucky, who had a slowly dawning look of horror on his face. "What the hell," he muttered, setting down his coffee and getting up. "I- I'll just... go see Bruce."

He hurried out of the lounge, leaving a trail of sweet smelling scent behind him.

Steve was shocked. He hadn't realised that's what it was. Sam looked at him and Steve didn't know what to do.

"We might want to ask Jarvis to keep an eye on him," Sam suggested.

"Is it that bad?" Steve asked.

Sam shrugged. "I don't know."

Steve was at a loss, he didn't know that much about omegas and how heats worked. Any of his knowledge was surely out of date, and the only omegas he'd known surely took suppressants, so they didn't get heats.

"I think you should ask Jarvis," Kamala said. "Just in case."

"Okay," Steve said, feeling embarrassed. "Jarvis? Will you make sure Bucky arrives safely at Doctor Banner's floor?"

"Of course, sir," Jarvis replied.

Bucky reportedly got to Banner's okay, and Steve waited for news. Sam had a mission to go on, so he left, while Steve stayed with Kamala and Lara. Clint joined them briefly for his lunch break, as he was training the juniors all day.

After a few hours, Bruce appeared, and gestured for Steve to join him in the kitchen.

Steve left Lara with Kamala, and went over. He was concerned about Bucky. "Hey. Is everything alright?"

Bruce poured himself a coffee, and tilted his head side to side in a so-so motion. "It's okay," he said. "Um, Bucky told me to, uh, relay this to you, as he won't be able to take care of Lara right now. He's
gone into heat. It came up rather sudden. He's fine, just usual heat symptoms, so nothing to worry about. He's in his rooms and Jarvis will monitor his vitals. His blood pressure was a bit high, I don't know if that's because this is his first heat in a while, or if it's the serum somehow making it more intense." Bruce cleared his throat and took a sip of coffee.

"Anyway," he went on, "I gave him suppressants but I'm not sure they'll take effect now the heat has started. I have zero information to go on here, I've never dealt with an enhanced omega before, and I didn't want to give him too many suppressants before I've been able to research it, and consult with an omega doctor."

"Uh, right." Steve nodded. "I understand. But Bucky's okay?"

"Yeah." Bruce shrugged. "He'll feel the normal mood swings and increased libido for a couple days. That's all."

A couple of days didn't sound too bad, Steve had thought, but after nearly twenty-four hours with no sign or word from Bucky, Steve began to worry.

He was able to check with Jarvis that Bucky wasn't in any trouble; Jarvis would alert Doctor Banner if it ever came to that.

So, there was nothing for Steve to do except wait, and he felt restless. He tried Googling for advice on his phone, for lack of any other ideas. The phrase how to care for an omega during heat brought up a lot of what seemed like porn sites, and Steve certainly didn't click on those.

Except, now the thought of having heat sex was on his mind, Steve found it hard to focus on anything else.

He kept searching through Google, and did manage to find a couple of dating advice blogs. They were aimed at male alphas and female omegas, but he read them anyway. A lot of the articles said things like, a good heat partner should create a nest for the omega, and have plenty of fluids and refreshments on hand, and also some towels on the bed for all the extra lubrication the omega would produce during heat.

Steve felt his face flame up as he read that last bit, and quickly put his phone away.

He wasn't sure what to do. Should he go and offer to help Bucky? Would Bucky get mad at him for trying to take advantage?

Steve certainly thought about it, and imagined having sex with Bucky again. That one night they'd shared had been pretty amazing, Steve hadn't forgotten it. But would having sex again make things worse between them?

Steve didn't know.

Natasha went to visit Bucky in his room, taking a slice of the toffee cream pie they'd had at lunch, so he wouldn't feel left out.

Jarvis had the tower's catering service send up all the food Bucky would need otherwise, so he didn't want for anything while he was confined.

When Nat came back down barely twenty minutes later, Steve couldn't help but hover near her and ask how Bucky was.
"He's grumpy," she said flatly, "because he's horny and on his own, without an alpha." Then she sighed in what seemed like relief. "I am so glad I'm not an omega. It must be awful craving for an alpha like that."

She left Steve frowning to himself, worrying over what to do.

By the next day with no change or news, Steve had made a decision. He'd go see Bucky. Maybe just being there or having an alpha scent around him would help.

Although the more Steve thought about it, the more he knew he was kidding himself. He wanted to be the one helping Bucky through his heat. He wanted to be there for Bucky.

So, he cleared his schedule for the day, left Lara with Kamala and Sam, gathered some refreshments together, and headed up in the elevator.

He'd just give Bucky the option, he told himself. If Bucky didn't want him, he'd leave, no hard feelings.

Steve swallowed, his throat a little dry.

No hard feelings.

He got off at the floor Bucky was staying on, and went to his door. He knocked, and heard a muffled reply, "Just leave them by the door!"

Steve wondered if Bucky thought he was one of the staff dropping off supplies. He didn't want to leave, now he'd worked up the courage to actually get here. Maybe he could drop the bags inside the apartment, say what he'd come to say, then... leave, if Bucky wanted him to.

He took a deep breath, then entered Bucky's apartment. He was instantly hit with the thick, sweet scent of omega in heat.

"Uhm," he managed, pausing to stand in the threshold like an idiot.

Bucky stomped into view, all tense and glaring at Steve like he'd grown a second head. "Steve? What're you doing here?"

"I, um, I brought, um, refreshments," he said, setting down the bags carefully.

"I can see that," Bucky snapped, his scent spiking with arousal. He looked furious, and his hair was a mess like he'd been tossing and turning in bed for hours.

He'd never looked more beautiful.

"Um," Steve said, getting distracted. "Is... is there anything I can do?"

Bucky growled, sounding frustrated. "Steve, there is only one thing I want right now, and I don't need you dangling yourself in front of me like a big, oblivious carrot, so you better go and let me get back to sulking in peace."

Steve's pulse picked up, and he sensed his own scent spiking. "Um, well, if you want... if you want, I'll have sex with you."

The scowl instantly disappeared from Bucky's face as he stared at Steve in shock.
"What?"

"Sex," Steve said, feeling his face grow hot, but he tried to remain calm. "I mean... it's not like we haven't done it before. If you need a heat partner, I'm here, and I'm willing." He fished inside his pocket and pulled out the pack of alpha brand condoms. "I even came prepared."

Bucky was staring like he couldn't believe it, and Steve felt nervous, close to taking it all back. Then Bucky nodded shakily and pulled his top off, tossing it aside before fleeing the room.

Steve was confused, until he heard Bucky call, "C'mon, then! In the bedroom."

Steve followed his voice to the bedroom. He couldn't help but stare at Bucky's bare chest, at the soft looking, small breasts he had now. Steve licked his lips absently, and swallowed as he watched Bucky throw off his pants, bare underneath, and get onto the bed.

Steve hadn't seen Bucky naked since their one night together, which seemed a world away now, and he drank in the sight greedily. Bucky got onto his back straight away and lifted his knees up, parting his legs brazenly to give Steve an unobstructed view of him. His dick was hard and flushed, and the smooth opening below it was shiny with slick.

Steve swallowed again, his pulse thudding loud in his ears. "Fuck," he murmured, and quickly got with the program, dropping the pack of condoms on the bed and shedding his clothes.

"Steve," Bucky whined, beginning to squirm around on his back. "Hurry up."

"I'm here, Buck," he soothed, crawling onto the bed. "Can I... can I taste you?"

Bucky nodded his head fast, so Steve settled between his open legs and ran his hands up the insides of Bucky's thighs, sticky from slick. Steve swore under his breath in awe. "You're so wet already."

Bucky whimpered, and his cunt flexed with need. "Please."

Steve didn't intend to keep him waiting, and he got down onto his elbows and ducked his head in, extending his tongue to lap at the slick coating Bucky's skin.

Bucky let loose a moan, shifting his hips closer, pressing his cunt to Steve's mouth. Steve licked faster, used his hands to gently hold Bucky's ass and inner thighs, spreading him open. Bucky went with it, opening his legs to let Steve close, whimpering with need as Steve drove his tongue inside him.

Steve fucked Bucky's entrance with his tongue, driving it in and out, and then licking all around at the flushed twin mounds of flesh, puffy with arousal. It was like eating out a soft, ripe peach. Slick poured from Bucky's cunt, and Steve pulled back to watch it seep from him. He pushed two fingers into the hot, tight hole to feel how wet he was.

Bucky writhed in place, pushing down on Steve's fingers as he gasped. "Steve, I need... your knot, please..."

"You'll get it, I promise." Steve kept fingering him, and leaned down to take Bucky's dick into his mouth. Bucky moaned softly, rocking his hips to push into Steve's mouth, and then down onto Steve's fingers.

Steve let him set the pace, let Bucky use his fingers to get off, and fuck into his mouth at the same time.
"Uhh," Bucky cried, hands fisting the bedsheets. "Uh... Oh, fuck, I'm coming, I'm..." He rocked his hips faster, pushing harder into Steve's mouth before his body tensed and started shaking. He gasped in great breaths as he came, his cunt clenching around Steve's fingers.

"Oh, ohhh!" he gasped. Steve fingered Bucky through it, sucking at his dick as Bucky rode it out.

Bucky's dick didn't ejaculate, not like Steve's would have, and while his cunt was soaking wet, slick sliding down Steve's wrist, Bucky didn't seem to have ejaculated from there either. Steve really wanted to see him do that again.

He pulled off of Bucky's dick, wiped at his mouth with the back of his other hand. "You want me to keep going?" he asked, two fingers still inside Bucky.

Bucky grunted softly, his eyes half closed. "I want your dick in me, please. I need your knot, like now."

"Okay, Bucky," he soothed, and carefully removed his fingers.

Steve opened the condom packet and tore out a condom, easing the rubber over the head of his engorged cock.

"You don't need those," Bucky mumbled, but Steve only smiled wryly and continued to roll the rubber down his shaft, making sure to get the base secure.

"What happened to 'no one's coming near me again without a condom on', huh?" he teased.

Bucky growled, watching Steve lazily. "Not you, though. Want your knot."

"You're getting my knot." Steve climbed on top of him, loving how open and passive Bucky was. He lowered himself down on his arms, dipped his head to lick a wet stripe over one of Bucky's dark pink nipples.

At Bucky's wanton groan, Steve did it again, licking around the soft breast before sucking the hardened nipple into his mouth.

"Uhh, fuck," Bucky groaned under him, arching into Steve's mouth. His hand gripped onto Steve's shoulder as Steve tongues and sucked his nipple.

"Uh... maybe... not so hard," Bucky gasped, "or you might get a surprise."

Steve lifted his head. "Surprise? Oh," he said, as it dawned on him that Bucky had been breastfeeding until not that long ago. "Does it hurt?"


"Since you asked so nicely," Steve teased, shifting his hips into position and aiming his cock between Bucky's legs. The head bounced off and slid against slick skin before it found the hole it sought, and Steve pressed forward.

Bucky stilled as Steve penetrated him, gasping his breaths as Steve slowly, slowly sheathed himself.

"Uh. Oh... fuck."

"Okay?" Steve asked him, trying to hold it together and wait. He adjusted his position, held himself up so he wasn't leaning on Bucky too much.
"Yeah," Bucky gasped, his hands clutching at Steve's back and shoulders. "Forgot how big you are. C'mon, Steve, fuck me. I can take it."

Steve rolled his hips once, making Bucky cry out. "You sure about that?" he teased.

"Fuck," Bucky hissed, and hitched up his legs to lock them around Steve's hips. "Fucking give it to me already."

Steve obeyed, rolling his hips again and starting up a steady rhythm. Bucky was so wet, the slide was smooth, each thrust making slick noises as Steve fucked into him.

Bucky cried out, hanging onto Steve. "Oh, fuck, yeah... ah!"

He started shaking, and Steve felt Bucky's tight, hot cunt clench around his shaft. Bucky's head rolled back on the bed as he gasped, and Steve fucked him through his second orgasm.

"Yeah, that's it," Steve said lowly, rolling his hips faster. "You keep on coming for me."

Bucky whimpered, his nails digging into Steve's skin. "Alpha," he whined, and Steve was so stunned that his pace faltered before he picked it back up.

"I got you, Bucky," he soothed, pushing harder with his thrusts. "I got you."

He pounded into Bucky through a third orgasm, with Bucky shuddering and clinging onto him. Steve was getting close too, his knot growing at the base of his cock. But he really wanted to see Bucky squirt again before his knot swelled.

Steve moved to sit back on his knees, grabbed Bucky's legs and pushed them up, tilting his pelvis for the perfect angle as he thrust in and out of Bucky's wet hole, slick now coating the both of them.

Bucky whimpered with need, still desperate for a knot, his face all pink and flushed. "Steve," he begged, "knot me, please. I need it."

"It's coming," Steve promised, thrusting hard, aiming for that spot inside Bucky. "Gonna knot you up so good."

Bucky kept making noises, little huffs and pleas, as he was speared on Steve's cock over and over. "Oh," gasped, eyes screwing shut. "Oh, yeah, right... Uhn." He bared his teeth on a snarl, his body tensing up.

Steve looked down just in time as Bucky's cunt clenched around Steve's dick and shot come in a high arch before it splashed down over both of them, soaking their genitals.

"Fuck, I love it when you do that," Steve gritted out, and picked up his pace. He thrust hard and fast, his knot swelling. "Uh. Yeah. Fuck." He slammed into Bucky's body, groaning as his knot swelled and pushed up.

"Yes," Bucky whimpered, "yes, give it to me!"

Steve held the base of his dick, checking the condom was in place still. Satisfied it was, he gave over to the pleasure with one final thrust. His knot expanded and he came, spilling inside Bucky.

Bucky squirmed under him, making happy omega noises, pushing down on Steve's knot to keep it inside him. The inner muscles of his sex gripped hard, holding onto Steve's knot, tying them together.
When they were locked tight, Steve let go Bucky's legs and moved in closer to him. They both groaned with the movement and shift of the knot, sensitive, but Steve needed the closeness.

The last time they'd done this, they'd made a baby, their daughter, and Steve felt overcome with emotion. He leaned down to kiss Bucky, rocking his knot very gently inside him, making Bucky huff and gasp open mouthed into the kiss.

"Okay?" Steve panted against his lips.

Bucky nodded, and kissed him again. He seemed so calm now, the most passive Steve had ever seen him. He nipped at Bucky's lower lip, trying to goad him into kissing more.

Bucky hummed, blinking heavy lidded up at Steve. He seemed like he might fall asleep. But they were knotted, they couldn't move for a while yet.

Steve directed his attention to Bucky's nipples, dipping his head to tongue at them. Bucky groaned happily, seeming to enjoy it. Steve got so into it, he felt emboldened enough to change position and sit up, Bucky gasping as he was adjusted; Steve sat on his haunches, the omega impaled on his cock beneath him.

Steve cupped Bucky's small tits in both hands, feeling them gently. Bucky arched his back, pushing into Steve's hands. Steve squeezed the small, round tits together, imagined what it'd be like to slide his dick between them and rut there. The thought made him hot, and he squeezed and rolled the breasts in his hands. Bucky sighed in pleasure, then tensed when Steve tweaked both his nipples with his fingers.

"Ah!"

Steve stilled, watching Bucky's reaction. "Does it hurt?"

"No," Bucky managed, and shivered. "Just sensitive."

Steve slowly brushed the pads of his thumbs over the hardened nipples. "Want me to stop?"

Bucky shook his head, so Steve kept going, pinching and rubbing Bucky's nipples with his fingers. Bucky gasped and groaned, started to rock his hips minutely, fucking himself on Steve's knot.

Steve bit his lip at the overstimulation, but he could take it. He watched Bucky, and kept playing with his nipples, and then Bucky was tensing up again and coming, tied to Steve's knot so he couldn't escape, his cunt clenching and ejaculating as he cried out in pleasure.

Steve wished he could come again himself from watching it. "That was so hot," he said, knowing this image be burned into his mind's eye for a long time.

He figured Bucky should have a break now, so he left his nipples alone and began smoothing his hands up and down Bucky's hips and thighs in a soft massage.

Bucky hummed appreciatively. "If you wanna massage me, my lower back kills."

Steve slipped his hands under Bucky's hips, fingers digging into the meat of his lower back. "Here?"

Bucky groaned happily. "Yeah.

Steve rubbed his hands back and forth, kneading the muscles. "So, I've never done this... um, heat partner thing before. How long does it usually last?"
Bucky snorted a little. "I dunno, I've never had a full blown heat before."

"Oh," Steve said.

~

Seventy-two hours.

Nearly three days and nights of Bucky demanding to be knotted, whining and complaining when Steve made him stop to rest, or eat.

It was kind of tiring. Thank God for super soldier stamina, Steve thought. He had no idea how other alphas managed if this was what regular heats were like for omegas.

Though, if Bucky's version of the serum and being post pregnancy was messing with his cycles a bit, it wasn't exactly his fault either.

Steve's alpha body responded to him with a rut, eager to screw an omega in heat, but the need for it didn't last nearly as long as Bucky's heat did.

During a small reprieve when Bucky wasn't demanding cock, he explained that due to his hormonal condition he'd been on suppressants and prescription hormones since puberty, and had only experience light heats very rarely, so nothing like this.

"Are you going to go back on suppressants?" Steve had asked, unable to stop thinking about the prospect of Bucky needing him for sex every month.

"Yes, Steve," Bucky had snapped at him, "I'm horny, sore, and being a cranky bitch. Once I've been on my new prescription long enough they shouldn't happen anyway. I'll talk to Bruce again as soon as I'm not being a cranky bitch."

"You're not... those things," Steve had assured him.

He'd later reconsidered that statement when Bucky had smacked the condom packet from Steve's hands (they'd had to order in more) snarling about how he needed a bare knot. "I don't want condoms!" he'd shouted, throwing a pillow at Steve. "I want you to breed me!"

"We've done that already," Steve reminded him, trying to stay calm, and dodge anything hurled his way. He was kind of shocked at the display of aggression.

It was the heat, he reminded himself, not Bucky talking.

"We already have a baby, Bucky."

Bucky snarled at him again and complained, and when Steve tried to roll on a condom he only got angrier. Steve gripped the back of Bucky's neck, and carefully but firmly pushed the omega face first into the mattress.

"You're gonna calm down, or I won't fuck you at all," he warned.

Bucky snarled back, but Steve waited it out, holding the nape of his neck to subdue him until Bucky calmed, and instead of snarling began to whimper softly.
"That's better," he praised, and cautiously removed his hand.

Bucky stayed still, wiggling his ass impatiently, so Steve put on the condom, gripped Bucky's hips, and fucked him until they knotted again.

Steve gave Bucky what he needed, but he wore condoms. Despite how much he wanted to be inside Bucky bare, with nothing between them.

But Steve didn't want to make another mistake. It was hard enough worrying that Bucky could leave again after this. That's what'd happened last time; amazing sex, then Bucky had vanished.

Steve hoped he'd stick around this time.

He messaged Clint, Sam, Nat and Kamala when he could, if Bucky was actually sleeping in between rounds of knotting.

The team teased him a little, asking if they'd ever see him again, but mostly just sent him updates and pictures of Lara playing with Kamala, or with one of the team on baby-sitting duties.

Steve was very grateful for all of them pitching in. He tried to show Bucky one of the new pictures of Lara smiling, but after gazing blearily at the photo, Bucky knocked Steve's phone aside and tried to climb him like a ladder, saying things like, "Breed me, Alpha, I want all your cute, blond babies."

Steve barely had time to get a condom on before Bucky was climbing onto it and moaning to be bred.

Yep, it was an interesting seventy-two hours.

At the end of it, Steve was finally able to get some rest, and fell into an exhausted sleep, much the same as Bucky.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Warnings in full:

Chapters 25 and 26 contain themes with heat sex, which could be viewed as mild dub con, though clear communication for a NSA (no strings attached) heat partner is given beforehand.

There's also communication/disagreement on using protection for sex, be raging hormones win out to common sense, so could be viewed as sexual persuasion to not use
protection.

If any of those themes aren't your thing, you can skip ahead to the Epilogue.

~
Bucky stirred, groaning lightly.

It felt as though he was waking up from an all night party that’d gone on for a week. He wasn't too sore or stiff though, which was a pleasant surprise. Bucky rubbed his eyes and rolled onto his back, seeing that Steve was awake next to him.

"Hey." Steve smiled, that sweet little bashful smile of his. His hair was rumpled, but otherwise the alpha looked glowing and gorgeous.

Bucky swallowed, croaked out, "Uh. Hey."

"There's a protein shake on the side," Steve told him.

Bucky looked over at the nightstand, saw the sealed cup with the straw, and sat up to grab it.

"Thanks," he said, sticking the straw in his mouth and sucking down the drink. It was caramel flavor, Bucky's favorite, and still cold. Steve must've put ice in it too.

Steve had been pretty damn good during this whole thing, Bucky realised. It was... nice. Being cared for. And he didn't feel panicked or claustrophobic over it like he used to; instead, he actually felt calm, relieved.

Bucky wasn't sure if the calm feeling would last, if it was post-heat euphoria, or if he'd go back to feeling anxious later. He kind of hoped the calm would last, though.

"Steve," he started, setting aside the now empty cup. "Thank you."

Steve watched him for a moment, then said softly, "You're welcome, Buck. You think you're through it now?"

Bucky nodded, feeling a blush heat his face.

"Okay." Steve sat up in the bed, rubbed a hand on the back of his neck shyly. "I, um... I can get started on breakfast, or... do you want to sleep more? I can go get out of your hair?"

Bucky blinked at him. "I- I don't mind. What do you want?"

Steve held his eyes and said, "I just want you to be comfortable, Buck."

"I am comfortable," Bucky replied, daring Steve to say more. "Now that's established, what next?"

"What do you mean?" Steve asked. "You mean... you and me?"

"Yeah."
"Um." Steve looked at his hands, fiddling with the edge of the blanket covering him. "I don't know, Bucky. What do you want?"

Bucky snorted a laugh, he couldn't help it. "Shit, we're like those vultures going back and forth. What d'you wanna do? I dunno, what d'you wanna do?"

Steve gave him a questioning look, his face adorably confused.

"The Jungle Book," Bucky said.

"The... novel?" Steve guessed.

"Oh, my God!" Bucky exclaimed. "You haven't seen The Jungle Book! It's a Disney classic. Seriously, Steve."

"Oh," Steve said. "Is it good, then?"

"Is it good?" Bucky scoffed, enjoying teasing him. "Yes, it's amazing. The songs are the best."

"Sounds neat." Steve smiled at him. "Maybe we can watch it later with Lara?"

The smile froze on Bucky's face at that, and his blush returned tenfold. "Um, yeah? I mean, if that's okay with you?"

"Of course, it's okay, Bucky," Steve said. "I'm sure Lara would enjoy it. She likes songs."

Bucky nodded, relieved. "Okay. Yeah."

There was an awkward moment of quiet before Steve made to get up. "I'll get started on breakfast," he said, smiling pleasantly.

Bucky watched as Steve turned away to sit at the edge of the bed, pushing the covers off. He searched around on the floor for clothes, picked up a pair of lounge pants and tried to pull them on while keeping his back to Bucky, maintaining an air of modesty.

Bucky watched all the same, because he couldn't help it. He couldn't stop staring at Steve's big shoulders and his slim, tapered waist, all that pale, smooth skin. When Steve stood up to pull his pants over his pert, chiselled ass, he also had to carefully tuck in his morning wood. Bucky got a glimpse, and it was very tantalising.

Like he hadn't already been screwed and knotted senseless over the last couple of days, Bucky felt his interest more than stir, it was instantly alight.

Steve, saint that he was, moved to leave the bedroom and only gave Bucky a polite smile. "I can bring yours in here if you want to stay in bed?"

"Uh... okay?" Bucky answered, and watched Steve begin to walk away.

He didn't want Steve to go.

Urgency clawed in his chest, and Bucky scrambled up, realised he was naked (and didn't think it was fair to try talking to an alpha when he was naked) so he hastily wrapped the covers around himself, clutching the sheets as he hurried to get up.

He stumbled a little when his foot caught in the sheet, before righting himself. Steve turned at the sound, coming back to check on him. "Are you alright?" he asked with concern. "What's wrong?"
Bucky tried to gather his dignity, what was left, anyway, and straightened up, clutching the covers around his body. He ran his other hand over his hair, getting it out of his face, and hoped he didn't look too much of a fucked out mess.

"Um," he started, "look, I just wanna say..." He paused, losing his nerve again, but when he looked up at Steve's face, saw the expression there, like the alpha was ready to do whatever Bucky asked for, and it gave him hope.

"I want you to know," Bucky said quietly, "that it wasn't just heat sex for me." He glanced down shyly, saw Steve's erection tenting his pants.

Desire burned through him, gave Bucky the courage to look back up and meet Steve's eyes.

"I want you, is what I'm trying to say. But if you'd rather talk about all this later, I get it, I--"

Steve swept forward, capturing his mouth in a kiss. Bucky gasped in surprise, but he wasn't about to pass this up; he held onto Steve's shoulders and kissed him back thoroughly. He forgot about the sheet and let it fall to the floor. Steve's big, warm hands settled on Bucky's bare hips, and he broke the kiss panting.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked.

Bucky moved his hands to cup Steve's face carefully, like the alpha was the most precious thing he'd ever held besides their baby girl.

"I'm sure," he said, giddy with delight. "Are you sure, though? You really wanna give me another chance?"

Steve nodded, and leaned back in to press his lips against Bucky's in a soft kiss.

His erection bumped into Bucky too, pressing against his abdomen urgently. Bucky hummed with want, pressed his body into Steve's in turn.

Steve pulled back once more. "Are you really sure?" he asked, a concerned frown on his face. "It's just... I really care about you, Bucky. I don't want to mess up again, or push you into anything."

"You didn't mess up," Bucky insisted, holding onto Steve. "I care about you too, Steve, and that's not something I've ever felt before. I was scared back then, but now I want to give this a chance. I want to stay with you." He searched Steve's blue eyes, stroked his thumb along Steve's jaw. "I really do."

Steve smiled at him, his eyes glistening. "I want you to stay, too, Bucky."

"I will." Bucky kissed him, said against his lips, "I promise."

He kissed Steve again, and Steve kissed back. They made out slowly at first, the urgency building as they clutched at each other, grinding together.

Steve smelled so good, it was driving Bucky mad with want. He tugged at Steve to pull him back toward the bed, Steve busy kissing Bucky and feeling his naked body with his hands.

When they reached the bed, Bucky pulled away from Steve so he could get onto the mattress. "Get your pants off," he said with a grin, watching as Steve hurried to step out of his pants and leave them on the floor.
Bucky laid back, opened his legs invitingly and bit his lip as he looked up at Steve. "Fuck me again?"

Steve was staring openly at his body, and Bucky felt hot under his gaze. He liked the alpha watching him, having his undivided attention. Bucky reached up to cup his breasts, squeezing them lightly and pushing them together to entice. "Please," he begged.

Steve licked his lips, then climbed onto the bed and on top of him. He held himself up as he leaned down to kiss Bucky on the mouth. Bucky moaned into the kiss, but he wanted more and was getting impatient. He hooked his legs around Steve's waist, trying to pull him in. "C'mon, big guy," he murmured. "Want you."

Steve was so strong though, immovable as a rock, holding himself up and not giving in yet. He raised his head from where he'd been kissing Bucky's jawline. "I gotta get a condom."

"No, you don't," Bucky said, using his thighs to try and hold Steve in place. "Just don't come inside me and it'll be fine."

Steve paused, looking at him. "You sure you're not still in heat?"

"Yes," Bucky said with a grin. "I'm sure. I still want your dick, heat or no heat. Put it in me, would you? Just for a second. C'mon, it'll feel so good, you know it will."

"Yeah, but if I use a condom--"

"Steve," Bucky whined, rutting up against his body. "Just for a few strokes, it'll be fine. Steve, please. I need you."

Steve's scent spiked, his pupils blowing wide. "You're a devil, you are," he gritted out, then finally adjusted his position and moved his hips low.

Bucky made a happy, satisfied noise, tilting his hips up so Steve's cockhead could find his entrance. He was still open and wet from their last fuck only a few hours ago, with a fresh wave of slick trickling out of him.

Bucky felt the tip of Steve's cock press at the soft folds of skin. He looked up at Steve, grabbed onto his shoulder. "Please, Alpha."

Steve leaned down to kiss him, sealing his mouth over Bucky's as he pushed forward with his hips, spearing Bucky with one deep thrust. Bucky made a noise, muffled by Steve's kiss.

He held tight to Steve and dug his nails into his back, kissing Steve's mouth desperately. Steve pulled his hips back slowly then pushed his cock deep inside over and over again, keeping his pace slow but steady.

Bucky moaned into Steve's mouth as he fucked him. Knowing he was bare, with no barrier between them, made Bucky hot with desire, and he wanted Steve to knot him like this, to come inside him.

Steve groaned too, breaking the kiss to mouth wetly at Bucky's neck. "You feel so good," he rasped out, right over Bucky's scent glands.

Bucky turned his head to give Steve more room, offering himself up. "Please," he begged, "knot me, I want your knot."

Steve mouthed wetly over Bucky's neck as he thrust his cock in and out. "You'll get pregnant again."
Bucky moaned in reply; being knocked up was all he could think of right now. The desire for it had taken over his brain. He tightened his legs around Steve. "Want your babies," he moaned. "We can do it right this time, do it together."

Steve growled in reply, a deep happy rumble. He sped up his thrusts, slamming his cock into Bucky, and Bucky hung on tight, half closing his eyes in sheer bliss.

Then Steve gasped, and abruptly pulled back, prising himself out of Bucky's grasp.

"Steve," Bucky whined, as he felt Steve's cock slip out of him, leaving him empty and gaping. "Steve. What are you-"

Steve was getting a condom, opening the packet.

Bucky sighed in defeat. "I thought you'd wanna make another baby with me."

"I do." Steve rolled the rubber onto his cock. "But we got time for all that, and more." He climbed back on top of Bucky, nudging his legs open and shoving his cock back inside.

Bucky cried out softly, and held onto Steve, needing the closeness of his alpha. Steve set a fast pace, fucking into Bucky in deep, smooth strokes. All Bucky could do was hang on, let the friction do all the work on his engorged and overstimulated g-spot. He threw his head back on the pillow as he felt his orgasm spread out fast, seizing him with waves of pleasure.

"Yeah, that's it," Steve praised him, fucking him through it. "You gonna make me wet too? Love it when you do that."

Bucky gasped in reply, and Steve didn't slow down, but kept his fast pace, hips slapping against him with each thrust, and Bucky felt the burn of orgasm roll through him again. "Oh... oh!" he cried, as his cunt clenched, releasing a stream of come that splashed down onto his abdomen. "Oh, fuck."

"Yeah, just like that," Steve huffed. "Wanna fuck you dry."

Bucky let out a surprised laugh. "Then we may be here a while."

"Fine by me," Steve said.

~

After more orgasms, and a quick nap for Bucky, they showered clean and got dressed together.

There were new sets of clothes for them, soft lounge pants and cotton t-shirts that'd been sent up by Jarvis. Bucky towelled his hair dry, then tied it up, glancing at Steve shyly.

"Hey, you know, um... while I did mean those things I said, I'm also glad you used a condom. I guess I got a little carried away in the heat of the moment."

He was blushing, and Steve felt his own face grow hot in turn, thinking about getting Bucky pregnant again, and seeing him grow round with their baby.

"Um. Sure," he fumbled, clearing his throat. "That's probably something we should... talk about, if it's what you want."
Bucky laughed, a little nervous. "I can barely deal with one kid right now. I really don't know, Steve. Every single day I panic that I suck at being a parent."

"Yeah, I know the feeling." Steve smiled, thinking of Lara. "It's okay, Bucky. Let's just take it one step at a time, yeah? And you're great with Lara, I hope you know that."

"Ah. Thanks." Bucky blushed, and bit his lip. "So... I guess all your friends know why we were gone for three days?"

"Um... yeah," Steve admitted.

"Lucky you already had a nanny."

"Very lucky." Steve opened the door, waiting for Bucky to go through first. "Let's go find them."

As they walked to the elevator, he quickly sent a text to Clint's group chat, asking them all to please be nice to Bucky when they saw him.

Clint didn't reply, but Nat sent a thumbs up, then asked, Does this mean you're alive and coming to see us?

Omw, Steve replied.

Lounge, Nat sent, along with a smiley face.

They took the elevator down to the common lounge, Steve walking in first, but it was only Sam and Nat sitting on the couch, with Kamala on the floor playing with Lara on her baby mat.

"Hey," Sam called over when he spotted them.

Lara gurgled, and at the sound Bucky eased past Steve and headed over to her. Steve watched with a smile as Bucky sat on the floor in front of Lara, who shook one of her toys at him in greeting.

"Hi!" Kamala said cheerily. "She's full of beans this morning. We just fed her not long ago."

"And she did a huge doodle," Sam said solemnly.

Steve's smile turned into a grin. "Thank you for watching her, guys."

Lara was sitting up, supported by Kamala, and chewing on a toy. She smiled a gummy little smile at Bucky, and waved her toy up and down again. Bucky smiled too as he spoke to her softly.

Steve sat down on the couch next to Sam. "Where's Barton?"

"Having a nap," Sam said.

"He was on night time sitting," Nat explained.

"Ah, right," Steve said. "Pretty sure I owe him and all of you dinner."

"Don't worry," Sam laughed, "we already had Jarvis schedule it in. You're taking us out Tuesday next week, and Friday the week after that."

"Oh." Steve chuckled. "Okay."

"You guys wanna swim with us later?" Kamala asked excitedly.
Bucky looked up at her with a mild frown. "Swim?"

"Tony's letting us use his pool," Nat said.

Bucky's jaw dropped, and he looked round at Steve. "There's a pool here?"

"There's two," Steve told him. "One on the gym level, and one on Tony's floor."

"Tony's is nicer," Nat said. "I think he modelled it after that one in the Playboy mansion."

Sam snorted a laugh. "Well, anyway, we're going up there after lunch. When Barton wakes up. You coming?"

"I got little swimsuits for Lara!" Kamala said. "And a floatie chair, and armbands. Everything she needs."

"Sounds fun," Steve said, looking to Bucky to see what he thought.

"Uh, I don't know how to swim," Bucky said, seeming embarrassed.

"There's a shallow end," Nat assured him. "Or you can sit by the pool and chill."

"C'mon, it'll be fun!" Kamala pleaded.

"Okay," Bucky agreed, smiling. "Sure."

After lunch, with Clint joining them, they went and got changed into swimsuits on Tony's private floor, and went into the pool room. The ceiling and walls were clear, tinted glass, giving the illusion of being outside with blue skies all around them. The pool itself had been fashioned to imitate a tropical paradise, with the water winding in and out of rock gardens and outcroppings, miniature waterfalls and exotic plants.

There was even a disco light setting under the water, which Clint turned on for a joke, but Sam and Nat complained was too much, so they switched back to the natural lighting.

Sun loungers were set all along the edge of the pool, along with inflatable toys. Clint and Nat went off to the deeper end of the pool for a game of volleyball, while Sam sat on the edge to watch with his feet dipping in, drinking a fruit smoothie.

Steve stayed at the shallow end, helping Kamala with Lara, who was in a little bathing suit, and sitting securely inside an inflatable baby chair. They waded into the water, floating Lara on the surface. She was fascinated by the water, and kept splashing at the it with her hands, laughing and squealing.

Bucky was with them too, in swim shorts and a sports top Nat had given him, stepping cautiously in at the shallow end.

"Wow, it's heated," he said, wading in more, the water coming up to his thighs.

"Let's pretend we're on vacation!" Kamala said, holding Lara's inflatable. Lara did a happy little laugh, and Steve smiled.

"I think she likes it," he said. "Lara, smile for a picture!"
He'd risked bringing his phone in because he wanted pictures of Lara's first swim. Kamala helped to get Lara sitting still and looking at the camera. Steve snapped away, and took videos too.

He looked over to see Bucky was slowly getting closer, gingerly walking through the water to join them. The water now lapped at his chest.

Steve smiled at him. "How's it feel?"

"Yeah, fine." Bucky nodded, gazing around at the place. "I feel like I'm in another world right now."

Steve laughed. "Me, too."

Kamala pushed Lara gently through the water to Bucky as he approached. "Whee!" she sang, as Lara gurgled.

Bucky reached out to hold onto the little chair, and Kamala asked, "You okay holding her?"

"Yeah," he said, frowning in concentration.

"Just try and keep her level," Kamala explained, showing Bucky where to support the chair. "She wriggles around quite a bit."

"Don't I know it," Bucky replied, and managed to get a good hold on Lara's chair. "I got you now, wriggle monster," he told her, as Lara rocked her chair happily, splashing her hands in the water.

Steve raised his phone. "Can I take pictures?"

Bucky glanced at him, and nodded.

Steve took pictures, and a couple of short videos. He managed to get a few good pictures of Bucky and Lara smiling at each other. Steve's heart felt fit to bursting with joy, and he managed to say, "That's great."

"What about you?" Bucky asked. "I can take some of you with her?"

"Let me?" Kamala offered, shaking the water off her fingers.

Steve handed over his phone, feeling a bit nervous. Then he pushed through the water to get where Bucky stood, holding Lara still in her chair.

"Shall I..." Steve moved to Lara's other side, and held her chair too. Lara was busy rocking about and gurgling to herself as she slapped the water. "How's this?" Steve asked.

"It's fine, you dork." Bucky smiled at him, but Steve noticed the rosy blush on his cheeks.

Steve smiled back and, feeling brave, reached out underwater to hook his hand around Bucky's waist. "And how's this?" he asked softly.

Bucky nodded in reply, and gave him a shy smile, so Steve put his arm around Bucky properly and pulled him in close. They held Lara between them, and shared a smiled before turning to face the camera.

"Alright," Kamala said. "Say cheese!"
Chapter End Notes

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If you enjoyed the fic, please leave a (nice!) comment, kudos, or you can reblog the rebloggable post on tumblr here to give it a signal boost.

And if you want the super happy ending, please read on to the Epilogue!
Bucky was on his last nerve this morning.

Sleeping had become difficult, with his back hurting, and the baby starting to squirm around usually just as he was trying to drift off. He wasn't having any caffeine either, so he couldn't get his coffee fix in the mornings.

That, and Lara being a demon child the last few months. She wasn't even two yet, and already a handful in her toddler tantrum phase, getting mad and smashing her toys a lot.

Bruce had said toddler tantrums were all relatively normal. Which was fine for him to say, because he didn't share an apartment with Lara's ear piercing screams.

Bucky stood at the kitchen counter, making little sandwiches and packing lunch items for Lara's day. He hoped Kamala and the others would get here soon to pick her up, but Lara wasn't even dressed yet. Currently she was running around the lounge without her diaper on (as she had a tendency to rip those clean off now) and screaming loudly.

"If you won't use the potty, I gotta put a diaper on you," Steve's calm voice filtered through, barely audible above Lara's frustrated yells.

Bucky rolled his eyes, and carried on making the sandwiches. He finished making the lunch and snacks, packing them into Lara's Avengers lunch-box, a joke gift from Clint, because it had cartoon versions of the Avengers on its front, and the drawing of Steve just looked all kinds of muscly and hilarious. Bucky smirked as he set the lunch-box on the kitchen table, along with the pre-packed bags that would go with Lara today.

Bucky couldn't wait to have a day off; it was Steve's birthday, and Kamala was taking Lara out for the day, probably to the park, and then she'd stay with Kamala on her floor later.

Bucky poured himself a glass of water, other hand on his hip as he drank it down, and listened to the screams coming from the lounge.

Seriously, Steve, he thought, setting down the glass and stomping into the lounge.
Lara was still running around without a diaper. She didn't want to wear them any more, but she didn't want to use the potty either.

Bucky took a deep breath, and said firmly, "Lara."

She halted her screams, looking over at him with a surprised expression. Bucky gave her The Look, but instead of calming down she instantly burst into tears and started crying.

Luckily Steve came and scooped her up in his huge arms. "Aw, what's the matter," he cooed, amusement clear in his voice. "Come on, let's put a diaper on and you can have a yoghurt tube. Yeah?"

Lara's cries subdued a little, and Steve took her to the changing mat.

Bucky exhaled in a huff, and went back into the kitchen.

 Damn, he wanted a coffee. Or something stronger.

He got a snack out of the refrigerator, a compote of berries, yoghurt, and honey, and jabbed at it absentely with a spoon as he leaned at the counter.

As soon as this baby was born, he was going on a junk food binge.

Only a few minutes later, Kamala arrived at the apartment. She must've had Riri with her, and their voices filtered through as they greeted Steve and said hello to Lara.

Bucky was in the bathroom, tidying up the mess of toys from the bath, and also kind of hiding because he was craving peace and quiet.

The baby handover went reasonably well; Lara still had a cry about it, but Steve and Kamala were both pretty good at soothing her. Kamala especially was good at distractions. Bucky sighed with relief when they left with Lara, and the apartment was suddenly blissfully quiet.

He stayed in the bathroom and contemplated if he could be bothered drawing a bath, or if a shower would be easier.

Steve came into the bathroom and gave him a smile. "Hey. They've taken Lara now. I thought you were in the bedroom. Kamala and Riri say hi."

Bucky nodded, and Steve must've sensed he was in a mood, as he came up behind Bucky and carefully wrapped his arms around him.

"You okay?"

Bucky leaned into him and sighed. "Just tired."

Steve kissed his head, holding him securely. "I know, Buck. Hey, if you want a few days off or anything, you can just head on down to the spa again."

Bucky huffed a laugh. Ever since he'd had one day at the tower's fancy spa, Steve had been on at him to go back. "Was I in a noticeably better mood after the spa?" he guessed.

Steve chuckled, shaking Bucky lightly. "Not at all, I figured you'd like the rest, that's all." His hand slid down Bucky's body, coming to rest on his swollen belly, holding it gently. "You sure you're
okay?"

Bucky was close to drifting off, enclosed in his alpha's arms and surrounded by his scent. "Mm," he said. "Come take a nap with me?"

"I will. If you tell me what's on your mind?"

Bucky inhaled, and admitted quietly, "I feel like I'm a cranky parent. I'm gonna be the mean one, you're gonna be the nice one."

"Ah," Steve said, squeezing him affectionately. "I don't think that's true, Buck. But if you're worried, I'll try being a bit more... assertive, with Lara. It's just that I read the terrible two's are like this because their little brains are growing so fast, they get confused and it comes out in frustration. That's why all the screams. It's not us, and it'll pass soon."

Bucky rolled his eyes, and pulled away. "Alright, mister child psychologist." Grabbing Steve by the hand, he tugged gently. "Now come lay down on the bed with me, and I can fall asleep while you tell me all about it."

Steve laughed, and went with Bucky to the bedroom.

"It's true, though," he went on. "Studies show that--"

"Shh," Bucky shushed him, sitting carefully on the bed and rolling onto his side. "Come spoon me."

Steve got onto the bed behind him. "Want me to rub your back too, your highness?"

"Yes, please."

Steve cuddled up to him, his huge, warm body providing an amazing big spoon. He rubbed his hand on Bucky's lower back, and it was such bliss that Bucky fell asleep pretty quickly.

When Bucky awoke, some time must've passed, as he had a comforter over him and Steve wasn't in the bedroom.

Bucky looked at their bedside clock, realised if he didn't haul ass, he wouldn't be ready in time for Steve's party. Thankfully all the planning had already been taken care of. Tony and Pepper were saints.

He got off the bed, cradling his bump with both hands as he went to find Steve.

The alpha must've heard Bucky move about, as he appeared in the hall immediately. "Hey." He smiled easily. "I'm just drawing you a bubble bath."

Bucky grinned, and went up to Steve to lean into him. "You're spoiling me."

Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky, kissing him on his temple. "I may have an ulterior motive."

"Oh?"

"I could get in with you?"

Bucky snickered at that. "Only if you plan on giving me a foot rub."
"Sure," Steve agreed easily.

He really was too good to be true.

After a long, lazy bath together, more loving touches and cuddling than anything else, they got out and towelled off.

There wasn't long until Steve's party started, but luckily they didn't have far to go.

"Which shirt?" Steve asked, holding up two almost identical royal blue button downs.

Bucky rolled his eyes fondly, and picked a shirt for him. "Fold the sleeves up a bit," he added. "I like to see your big strong arms."

"Oh, that so?" Steve teased, slipping the shirt on over his enormous shoulders, and doing up the buttons which barely met across his large chest. "Maybe I should wear a tank top instead."

"Or a crop top," Bucky said.

"What's that?"

"It's like..." Bucky paused in his dressing to give Steve a look. "Do you really not know, or are you fucking with me?"

"Language," Steve said, smirking. "Remember, we agreed."

"Lara isn't even here!"

"But we gotta get in the habit, Bucky," Steve told him.

"Fuck off, Steve," Bucky said, and giggled when Steve reached a hand out to tickle him. "Stop it! Anyway, you can't wear a crop top. Pepper would have an aneurysm. It's a dress up event, no exceptions."

"Maybe another time," Steve said.

"You can wear one on my birthday," Bucky suggested. "That would be pretty cool."

"Sounds fun."

They finished getting dressed, Bucky pulling on his favourite pair of maternity jeans, like black skinny ones just with a big black elastic bit over the stomach. He was only at fifteen weeks, but the bump was noticeable.

Over the top he wore a new shirt, dark green, and cut so that it fell over his chest and bump in a flattering way. Nat had helped him pick it out.

Steve was ready too, and hand in hand they headed out to the elevator.

The party was being held on one of the Stark Industries floors, with cocktail bars, canapés going around on silver trays, and a dance-floor with a live band at the center.

Steve's team were there already, all dressed up, and came to greet them, brandishing gifts for Steve; Nat, Clint, Sam, Maria, Bruce and Thor, along with newcomer, Carol.
Tony and Pepper were running the event, and Steve made an *I'm not sure about this* face at some of the décor; red, white and blue everywhere. There were cupcakes with the Captain America shield on them too.

Bucky elbowed him while they chatted with Tony and Pepper, reminding Steve to smile. "It's a free party," he said quietly, when they had a moment alone. "Besides, Thor said he was bringing some alcohol from Asgard that would get you drunk."

"Well, in that case!" Steve laughed, and gladly accepted a drink from Thor when he offered one.

More guests arrived; friends and family of the team, some close colleagues. Jessica too, having brought Scott and Hope with her. Jessica herself was in a very eye catching red dress, and asked Sam to dance with her.

Sam looked thrilled, and Bucky grinned happily as he watched them trail off to the dance-floor together.

"At last," Clint muttered beside him, cramming two mini cupcakes into his mouth at once.

"What you do mean, at last?" Nat arched her eyebrow. "They've been a thing for a while now."

Clint looked at her in shock, as did Bucky. "They have?" Clint spluttered, as Bucky demanded, "Since when?"

Nat only shook her head. "You two are hopeless."

Another guest arrived later, when most people were well on their way to getting drunk. Bucky was stone cold sober, because he was pregnant and couldn't indulge in anything fun, so he was happy to see Logan appear. The alpha was in jeans and a scuffed biker jacket, no surprise there, but with two very sharply dressed betas at his side.

Bucky tugged on Steve's arm to get him to stop bickering with Tony, and yanked him over to greet their new guests.

"Logan!" Steve declared, slightly tipsy on Asgardian liquor.

Logan raised an eyebrow, and smiled. "Cap. Happy Birthday. Brought some friends, hope you don't mind. This is Storm." He gestured to the beta with white hair at his side, who smiled warmly and extended a hand.

"A pleasure," she said. "And happy birthday."

"And this is Gambit," Logan said, indicating the tall beta next to him, who smiled wolfishly as he eyed Steve up and down.

"Enchanté," he drawled, Cajun accent thick.

"Don't even go there," Logan warned him, though Bucky caught the twinkle in the alpha's eye as he shared a secret smile with the beta.

Okay, Bucky wanted to know *all* about that later.

Logan handed Steve a gift wrapped parcel. "Here, Cap. Had to pull a few strings, but I hope you like it."
"Aw, you didn't have to get me a gift," Steve said, tearing open the paper. 

As he was occupied, Logan glanced at Bucky, eyes drifting down to Bucky's bump. "Hey, kid," he said, smiling again when he met Bucky's eyes. "All good?"

Bucky nodded, smiling back. "Apart from a super bratty toddler right now, but what can you do?"

Logan grinned, and they watched Steve open his parcel.

It was a clear picture frame, holding what looked like a copy of a vintage photograph. Bucky leaned in, trying to see, as did several of their friends. The photo was black and white, a snapshot of a troop of men in army clothes, some sat on a tank, the others standing around it.

Steve was there, in his original Captain America uniform, holding his shield. He had a big grin on his face, as did the other men.

"Aw, Steve," Bucky murmured.

"Wow," Steve said, looking closely at the photo, then up at Logan. "I don't think I've ever seen this picture."

"No one has," Logan said. "It's never been on show. Managed to dig it out recently."

"I don't know what to say," Steve choked out.

"He's a bit drunk," Bucky explained.

Logan nodded. "I noticed. C'mere, Cap." He opened his arms to Steve.

Bucky grabbed Steve's picture, so he didn't drop it in his haste to hug Logan, and they slapped each other on the back in a very alpha-bro hug.

Nat and Sam wanted to see the picture too, so Bucky let them hold it. Bucky had another look too, and burst out laughing when he noticed Logan in the picture. "Those are some big ass side burns you got going on there."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, it was an ongoing battle with Dugan. Which I won."

"Wait, hold up," Tony butted in. "You're in the photo with Capsicle? But that means--"

"I'm old." Logan smirked. "You must be Stark junior? Yeah, you remind me of Howard, alright."

Tony was speechless for a moment. Steve laughed, which seemed to rile Tony up more. "Well, Rogers," Tony said, "who knew you had a secret grandpa's club?"

"Watch it, Stark," Logan told him. "Besides, I look younger than you."

That had Tony huffing, as Clint said, "Hah! Burn."

Pepper stepped in among the alphas, saying cheerily, "Now all your guests are here, Steve, I think we can bring out your cake."

"As long as it's not red, white and blue," Steve mumbled, but Bucky shushed him gently.

"All you gotta do is smile and blow out the candles."
A giant cake was wheeled in across the floor, as everyone took up the happy birthday chorus. Steve looked embarrassed at first, his cheeks flushing pink, then when the cake got closer his jaw dropped in awe. The cake was tiered, decorated in colorful swirls of marble, resembling the night sky with sparkling stars and lots of fizzing candles all over it.

"Happy Birthday, Steve," Pepper said, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Here's to Cap," Tony said, raising his glass.

"This is amazing," Steve said, staring at his cake. "Thank you."

"C'mon." Bucky nudged him. "Blow 'em out and make a wish."

Steve gave him a sloppy grin, then took a deep breath and blew, extinguishing all the candles at once.

And also blowing some off the cake.

Everyone clapped and cheered, as the wait staff started to slice the cake and pass it out among the guests in little cups.

Steve must've felt a bit shy from all the attention, as he grabbed Bucky in a hug, mindful of his bump, and buried his face in Bucky's neck, inhaling his scent.

Bucky hugged him back. "What'd you wish for?"

Steve hummed against his skin. "Does it still come true if I tell?"

"Yeah," Bucky said with a chuckle. "Only if you tell me, no one else."

"I wished for another healthy baby with you," Steve said, pulling back to look at Bucky with a dopey smile. He slipped his hand around and cupped it over Bucky's tummy, over their baby. "That's all I wish for, truly."

Bucky smiled back, and placed his hand over Steve's. "Well, gimme around five to six months to work on that wish, and we're all good."

End Notes

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Thank you for reading!

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