There Is No Shortage of Blood

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There Is No Shortage of Blood
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Summary

The long slow recovery of Bucky Barnes after his escape from HYDRA.
(And the longer, slower recovery of his sex life.)

Notes

This story presupposes that the Winter Soldier was horrifically sexually abused during his captivity as a deliberate method of control, and recovering from that abuse and reclaiming his own sexuality is a lot of what this story is about; Bucky is not subject to such abuse from anyone in the present timeline of the story but he does run around making a lot of questionable choices about how to deal with what he's remembering and its aftereffects. Mistakes will be made. The tags are an attempt to get across the general flavor of things that take place throughout this very long story, but if you have any concerns, please get in touch and talk to me about it--my contact info is in my profile.
I owe so many thanks to so many people for their help and support during the last three years and going forward! Stoatsandwich, wherever you are, Rubynye, thefilthiestpiglet, feanor_in_leather_pants, the whole dumpster and all my trashfriends in general, Alby Mangroves for the amazing art, Medved, theletterelle, uhhh, and whoever else I'm forgetting!! Thanks to praximeter for coming in midstream and making things so much better!! Thank you all so much! <3

Art is posted on Tumblr in alby's There Is No Shortage of Blood tag

Title is, naturally, from The Mountain Goats' "International Small Arms Traffic Blues."

Current update schedule: Once a week on Sundays, as of 3/18/18.
Steve caught up with him for the last time at the Grand Canyon.

Bucky was perched on top of a railing, looking down over the sheer drop lit by a wash of brilliant stars and a half moon high enough in the sky to tell him that he had three more hours until dawn. He'd told himself he would make up his mind before then, but when he heard Steve's footsteps behind him, he knew what he'd been waiting for. Bucky closed his eyes and didn't move a muscle until Steve had climbed up onto the railing to sit beside him.

"Do you remember when we talked about this place?" Steve asked.

Bucky shrugged. "I knew I wanted to see it."

Steve nodded in his peripheral vision. "You enjoying the view?"

Bucky looked down--down and down and down--into the roiling river at the bottom of the chasm. The moonlight washed the color from the rocks, but he still couldn't mistake this for a snowy crevasse; the desert night was only pleasantly cool, a world away from the icy, enveloping cold of the Alps. "Could be worse."

Steve exhaled something in the neighborhood of a laugh and said nothing else for a while. Bucky kept looking down.

"I meant what I said," Steve told him finally. "You can stop running. You had a right to do what you did, to take out as much of Hydra as you could. But that's over now. You can start looking forward instead of back."

Bucky looked over at Steve, his familiar profile silhouetted against the stars.

If Bucky was remembering right, he could lean over right now and kiss Steve. If he was remembering right, if Steve wanted to pick up where they'd left off all those years ago, if Bucky was actually the same person. He thought of them overbalancing in a kiss, falling all the way to the river below locked in each other's arms. He didn't think either of them would let go until they smashed at the bottom.

Bucky looked down again. They'd probably both survive it. They'd be mangled to hell, bodies crushed right into each other, teeth all broken into each other's mouths, bones splintered through each other's skins. They'd probably still be alive, even then. They could suffer a long time together before they managed to die.

Bucky scooted his hand away from Steve's where they gripped the railing side by side.

"Where would I go if I did?" Bucky asked.

"The Army," Steve said promptly, which was when he knew that he'd been waiting for Steve to say, With me.

Bucky looked over at him again. "The Army?"
Steve nodded, meeting his gaze straight on. "Sergeant Barnes, seventy-year prisoner of war, needs to be reintegrated after his unprecedented traumatic experiences. The Army protects its own, Buck, and if there's anyone who can come anywhere near to helping you come back from what you've been through, that's where they are. A captured soldier's obligation is to escape and sabotage the enemy if he can, right? Well, you did that about as hard as any soldier ever could. Now it's time to come home, let the medics have a look at you. Recuperate."

Bucky glanced down at the river again. "Army's clean?"

"Hydra never really bothered infiltrating the military," Steve agreed. "They planned to take over at the top and be able to give the orders from a position of seemingly legitimate authority, with their loyal STRIKE teams for muscle if they ever needed to point guns. The Army's safer for you than any civilian agency, and a hell of a lot safer than being out on your own with no support and the possibility of being prosecuted for the things Hydra forced you to do."

"You've got it all figured out," Bucky observed.

"You want to give me any alternative that's not you stepping off this railing, I'll listen to it," Steve said simply. "I'm not here to make your choices for you, but I'm not letting you fall again. We've done enough of that."

Bucky had actually planned on using the gun holstered at the small of his back--he figured it would destroy enough brain tissue that he couldn't possibly come back as anything conscious or useful--but he also knew that that had been off the table once he let Steve find him. He'd had plenty of chances to lie down and die. He'd never taken any of them. He'd probably always been waiting for this--for Steve to show him the way out.

"All right," Bucky said. "Sergeant Barnes, reporting for duty."

Steve's hand rose up to catch his shoulder and squeeze, and then Steve hauled him backward off the railing. Bucky managed to twist and land on his feet, gun in hand, but he didn't even bother to raise it, just reversed his grip and offered it to Steve at the same time his feet hit the ground.

Steve took it with a nod and slung his arm around Bucky's shoulders, turning him toward the road.
By mid-morning Steve was walking him into an Army hospital in Texas. A half-dozen men waited for them near the discreet side entrance Steve had used: three in white coats, two in fatigues with MP insignia, wearing sidearms but no other visible weapons, and one in dress uniform who introduced himself as Major Exley and declared himself in charge of Bucky's--Sergeant Barnes'--reintegration.

Bucky nodded as Exley introduced the doctors--he didn't bother to introduce the MPs--and then Exley said, "We'll take things from here, Captain Rogers," and that was it. It was time for Steve to go.

Bucky turned to him one last time--thought of kissing him again, and wondered if they'd hang him for sodomy or just try to cure him of it. They used electroshock for that, didn't they? It'd be just like going home.

Then he thought of what they might do to Steve if Bucky pulled a stunt like that, and what they would think of him even if they couldn't do anything. He caught a motion of Steve's arm that looked like it might be a hug and even that seemed too risky; Bucky offered his hand instead. Steve's smile
stiffened a little, but he took it.

"You're gonna be all right, Buck," Steve said firmly.

"Of course I will," Bucky said. "You won't be here to get me in trouble."

Steve's smile warmed a little at that, and his hand tightened on Bucky's. "Jerk."

"Punk," Bucky replied automatically, and even that felt like too much to have let the officers hear. He turned quickly away, and let them escort him down the hall. He never heard Steve's footsteps going the other way.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Did you read the tags? Maybe read the tags again. Also I sure hope you like original characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

An hour later Bucky had had a haircut and a shower. He was wearing fatigues that matched everyone else's, with sergeant's insignia and BARNES on the chest. They'd given him socks, too, but since there were no boots to go with them he'd pocketed the socks and left his feet bare. No one had told him he couldn't--he was equally out of uniform either way--and the floors were smooth and clean.
One of the white-coated doctors showed him into an office. Dr. Lind, Exley had called him back in the corridor, but he was obviously military and Bucky had his rank pegged somewhere around Lieutenant Colonel. He didn't correct Bucky when Bucky responded to his instruction to sit with yes, sir, so he figured he knew where they stood.

Lind took his temperature and blood pressure and counted his pulse, and Bucky watched him with half-lidded eyes, evolving plans for killing him, plans for escaping from this room--but all the plans stalled out there. He had nowhere to go but here. He had no plan beyond this.

Lind pronounced his pulse and blood pressure, "A little high. But no surprise if you're feeling stressed right now, Sergeant."

Bucky nodded and muttered another yes, sir.

"Now," Lind said. "I need to take a medical history, as best we can. That means I'm going to ask you a lot of questions, and I need you to answer as honestly as you can--these are medical questions, not disciplinary questions. This isn't a debriefing, and nothing you say to me goes beyond this room. Do
you understand?"

Bucky studied him for a moment, wondering if he was actually supposed to believe that, or if it was just the motion they were going through. It didn't matter; he would cooperate. If they found something they wanted to execute him for--well, at least he could tell Steve he'd tried. They would probably let him see Steve one more time before they put the blindfold on. "Yes, sir."

Lind nodded and looked down at his clipboard. "If you can't remember an answer, it's all right, just say so. I know we're going to have gaps in what we know, but I want to at least know that the information we have is as accurate as possible."

Bucky nodded shallowly, and Lind started reeling off questions about Bucky's parents. Some of them he didn't think he ever could have answered, and some--how and when they'd each died--he knew because he'd looked it up in the last six months while he was a free agent.

A few of the questions--_did either of your parents drink to the point of drunkenness habitually?_--made memories flash through his head, a sensation he was almost used to. He'd found by now that the easiest thing was just to let the images go past without focusing too much on them, keeping himself grounded in the present as much as he could.

He said, "Yes, my father," and kept his eyes on Lind. The memories played out in his head, overlaying the world he was looking at: walking his father home from the bar when he was twelve, hushing the girls in their beds while their father stumbled around the front room. They were only glimpses of moments, bursts of anger, fear, shame, but as long as he told himself it was just the memory it would pass quickly enough.

Lind nodded and made a mark on his clipboard, and went on to questions about Bucky's childhood. There was a whole litany of diseases to ask about, and Bucky's automatic answer to the names of half of them was _Steve had that_. Only three times--chicken pox, measles, flu--did he belatedly add, _I did_.

Once--mumps--the automatic answer was different. "Trudy had that."

He stopped, frowning, trying to work out why he'd said that. There was no picture in his head, no flash of anything.

"Your youngest sister?" Lind asked, calmly, as if it were the next question on the list.

_Trudy_, a mop of brown curls and blue eyes, a spray of freckles over her snub nose. The feeling of her skinny arms around his waist. "I was eleven when she was born," Bucky remembered. "She was just a kid when I went away."

Lind nodded.

"I didn't have mumps," Bucky added, recalling the question. "Trudy, when she was ten. That's when I moved in with Steve, and then I just stayed."

Lind nodded and said, "German measles?" and that was that.

They fell into a kind of rhythm, questions and the search for an answer and then, with a longer or shorter gap, Bucky actually saying the answer, or that he didn't know.

Then Lind said, "Any recent sexual activity?"

The memory arrived, overwhelmingly vivid, without Bucky having to reach for it: Rumlow, the
showers, the stun baton, the moment when the bright electric pain became involuntary collapse—the rough stroking hand, the swell of pleasure and the moment of release.

"Not... very recent," Bucky said, looking around the room, forcing himself to be here and not there. "The day of the helicarriers. That morning."

Lind nodded slowly, watching him. The memory was lingering, the look on Rumlow's face, and Bucky put something together that hadn't occurred to him before. "I think it was a mercy thing. I think he figured out that I probably wasn't going to survive, so—like a cigarette or a last meal. Last time getting off."

Lind nodded again. "Did you know then that that was what he was thinking?"

Bucky shook his head. "Just knew I had a mission to get ready for, and he took me in the showers and did me. It just happened. I didn't think anything about it."

It occurred to Bucky right then that Lind hadn't reacted to the male pronoun at all. Hadn't stumbled over it or stressed it when he said it back. But that was all right; it didn't matter if Bucky implicated Rumlow now. It was only himself he was endangering, and Bucky didn't much care what they did to him.

"Do you remember whether you wanted him to do that?" Lind asked in the same neutral tone.

Bucky shrugged. "Didn't want things, back then. Guess I would've rather not, it was a waste of time. And it hurt pretty bad."

The information clicked into place in his mind as he said it: it always hurt, but that particular time it had hurt for no other reason, not anyone else's enjoyment—Rumlow had stayed fully clothed, handling Bucky's body with the same clinical attention as the techs—and not efficiently piggybacked onto a painful procedure or the aftermath of a mission.

He had been somewhat aggravated with the inefficiency even then, he remembered. He had decided that it must be a test, a challenge, to see how he performed in adverse circumstances. Mercy wouldn't have occurred to him as a motive back before he remembered Steve.

"We were on a tight schedule," Bucky concluded. "So no."

Lind nodded and wrote something down, the same brief notation he gave all of Bucky's answers. "And that was about six months ago. So nothing since then?"

Bucky shook his head. He hadn't been that close to anyone since then, except when he was killing them. And Steve, when Bucky had wanted to kiss him, but...

He remembered, then, that kissing led to sex sometimes. It had, with Steve. And it hadn't hurt, he didn't think. If he was remembering right. Those memories were distant, before, like something he'd seen in a film, people on the other side of a thick pane of glass. He couldn't feel it the way he felt the memory of Rumlow.

"How about on your own," Lind said. "Masturbation, any of that?"

Bucky shook his head. He remembered his own shaking hand—a technician squirted something chilly and slick into his palm before dropping his hand onto his crotch. He remembered curling his hand around himself, the same way Rumlow had touched him. It had felt the same, the wave of pleasure that briefly blotted out the pain. But there hadn't been any need for that since the helicarriers. No wipes, no procedures, and when he'd gotten injured he'd had other things to keep his hands busy,
treated his own wounds and maintaining sufficient concealment. It hadn't crossed his mind without someone putting his hand on his dick for him.

"No, sir," Bucky said briefly.

Lind nodded, made another note, and said, "How much sleep would you say you get each night?"

That was a trickier question, not answerable by any single memory, and Bucky set to work coming up with an answer.

The whole day went like that. The physical exam was followed by lunch, eaten sitting across from the guards, whose names were ANDREWS and MUELLER according to their nametapes. They seemed like a matched set of standard issue military police, staff sergeants with unreadable faces, probably both in their late twenties. They both wore their hair longer than Bucky's new buzz cut, though not by much; Andrews' short-clipped hair was more reddish, Mueller's more blond.

They weren't eating; it was just him. They barely seemed to be watching while he cleaned his plate, but they positioned themselves firmly between him and the door.

After lunch there was a series of physical tests in the gym, and then neurological tests supervised by Dr. Harris, and then two hours of psychological evaluation by Dr. Wojciechowski, who seemed pleased when Bucky effortlessly pronounced, and then equally effortlessly spelled, his last name, though he said "Woj" was fine as an abbreviation. Woj didn't ask him many questions about what had happened to him or what he remembered. Instead he had a lot of questions about things Bucky had done, or thought, or felt, in the last four weeks or the last six months.

Woj asked about sex, too, but they'd established for the purposes of the evaluation that the last six months started after the helicarriers, so Bucky's answer was a simple, "No. None."

Woj nodded and made a note, and, just like Lind, he said, "Masturbation?"

Bucky shook his head. Woj, instead of leaving it there, said, "Huh. Any reason why not?"

Bucky shrugged. "Just didn't. Didn't want to."

Woj nodded. "If you don't want to, you don't want to. Does it bug you that you don't want to?"

Woj had been asking him if a lot of things bothered him; he said one of the goals of reintegration was to make sure Bucky knew how to deal with things that bothered him so he could get on with stuff he wanted or needed to do. Not remembering most of his life, for example, was a thing that bothered him that Woj said he would learn ways of dealing with.

"Nah," Bucky said. He hadn't even thought about it until people started asking him.

Woj nodded. "We've got plenty of other things to work on," he said, and moved on to asking Bucky about what he liked to eat.

At the end of the day Bucky was given a pair of boots and transferred from the hospital to an army base nearby. Once they were out of the hospital, the MPs carried M4s, but they kept them slung, not in their hands. It was twilight when he walked into the barracks at an unhurried pace; the sky was deep blue and vast above him, the heat of the fall day fading. He was still alive, still able to look up at the sky.
The next day, after Andrews and a new guy--Lee, who was Chinese, easy to distinguish from blond Mueller even without his nametape--had escorted him to breakfast, Bucky had a meeting with Exley. The officer gave him his hour-by-hour schedule for the next week and then asked Bucky to explain what he knew, whether from memory or any other source, about where he'd been and what he'd done since he'd fallen from the train in 1945.

Bucky hadn't actually remembered, until Exley said that, what he fell from. The Smithsonian hadn't gone into much detail about his supposed death, and he always stopped reading books about himself before they got to that part. He had known there was a fall, and snow, and ice; woods and a river and men speaking a language he didn't understand, but he hadn't known he fell from a train. When Exley said it the memory rushed through him: two hands clutching cold metal against the whipping wind and the drag of his own body. Steve, screaming his name. The utter certainty that he was going to watch Steve die trying to save him. The faint satisfaction of falling alone, before it was swallowed up by terror.

Bucky waited for the memory to pass, and then told Exley what he knew, as briefly as possible. Exley's clarifying questions focused on what they'd done to him, not names or places or body counts. It went on for half an hour, and then it was time for Bucky to go on to the next thing on his schedule, which turned out to be physical training, a hard-bodied master sergeant with iron-gray hair and armed with nothing but a parade-ground voice, putting Bucky through his paces in an otherwise empty gym.

After that Andrews and Lee collected him again; Bucky consulted his paper schedule and determined that it was time for "morning orientation session." There was another long orientation session scheduled for the afternoon, after his session with Woj.

"What am I getting oriented to?" Bucky asked, as he was escorted to an empty room in another part of the HQ building housing the labs and Exley's office.

"Today, the 21st century Army," Andrews said.

He handed off his M4 to Mueller at the door of an empty classroom, and Lee and Mueller took up guard posts outside, while Andrews entered the room alone with Bucky, carrying only his sidearm. He closed the door behind them, and Bucky thought briefly about how easily he could kill Andrews before anyone outside knew what had happened.

The thought barely formed before he was wondering about what Andrews had to teach him, which seemed likely to be more interesting.

"Welcome to Staff Sergeant Andrews' class on modern soldiering. Have a seat."

Bucky folded himself into a desk in the front row, and Andrews rummaged around in a closet and came back with a square green paperback book titled Soldier's Guide. He set it on the desk in front of Bucky and said, "I want you to look through that. UCMJ--did you have the UCMJ back in the day?"

Bucky shook his head slightly, and Andrews opened the book and flipped to the table of contents, tapping his finger down on Uniform Code of Military Justice.

"Have a look at that, okay? You got questions, you ask me."

Bucky nodded obediently, wondering if Andrews had been ordered to prepare him for the charges he would be facing when they got done being gentle with him. The beginning of the section was about court martial procedures and possible punishments, all of which sounded laughably mild
compared to the ways he'd been kept in line by Hydra. The parts about the laws of war and the Geneva Conventions made a lot of images flash confusingly through his mind, things he'd done and things done to him all mingled together.

It was a relief, almost, to arrive at SECTION IV - STANDARDS OF CONDUCT, with the prominent heading below it, RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOLDIERS OF DIFFERENT RANK. Standards of conduct had to be where he was forbidden to kiss Steve, to do anything beyond kissing with him. That, at least, he'd be able to pin down. Bucky skimmed through the section, thinking with bleak amusement that as Captain and Sergeant they were prohibited on the basis of being officer and enlisted, but that was hardly going to be the main objection.

There was a section for OTHER PROHIBITED RELATIONSHIPS, but that didn't say anything about sodomy, or homosexuality, or whatever they were calling it now. The section after that was about extremist organizations, and Bucky flipped back and read the section on relationships again.

Maybe it wasn't considered a relationship? Maybe it was covered under crimes or something--Bucky flipped back to the table of contents and scanned through it, looking for anywhere it might be included. Maybe they didn't bother to say anything about it in the regs, since it was already a crime outside of regs? But he could have sworn it had been covered in the regulations, before.

"Looking for something, Sergeant?" Andrews asked.

Bucky froze, keeping his gaze fixed on the book, and then figured, what the hell? He slouched back in his seat and looked up to meet Andrews' gaze, which was somewhere between curious and challenging.

"The regs don't say anything about homosexuality," Bucky said. "Just wondering what the penalty is for that these days."

Andrews tilted his chin up, giving Bucky a long look, and then he shook his head. "There isn't one, Sarge. It's legal, and as long as anything anybody does is with consenting adults and on their own time, it's okay by the regs. People can love who they love, it isn't any of Uncle Sam's business. Hell, I'm from Iowa, we got gay marriage. We don't judge soldiers for their sexual orientation."

Bucky stared, trying to make sense of that. "Sexual orientation?" he asked finally, leaving the mind-boggling concept of gay marriage alone.

"You know, gay or straight, whatever. People are born liking who they like, so the Army's not in the business of telling them they shouldn't, not anymore. You call another soldier a faggot or a cocksucker or something, he actually might be, and there's not a damn thing wrong with that."

Bucky frowned down at the page in front of him. He didn't think that made any sense. There had been Steve, he knew, and there had been women, and there had been everything else that happened since. He had no idea what he could claim to like anymore, except for Steve, but he was pretty sure he was a long way from however he'd been born. And even before Hydra did anything to him, he was pretty sure he'd had sex with women and sex with men--it hadn't even just been Steve. He couldn't remember any women since Hydra took him, though.

"So people are just one or the other?" Bucky asked, not looking up.

That didn't sound right. Steve had adored Agent Carter, and every other guy Bucky had ever had sex with went after dames too. That was what a man did: he dated women, eventually he married a woman, and if he did things with other fellas sometimes, blowing off steam, having some fun, making do when there wasn't a woman in his life, that was still... kind of normal. Close enough, as
long as only other fellas like him knew what he was up to. Maybe the rules were subtler now; maybe you could have one or the other but you had to choose.

"Oh, uh, no, some people like both," Andrews said. "That's called bisexual."

Bucky picked his head up and stared at Andrews. "Bisexual."

"Yeah," Andrews said, shrugging like it was nothing to say it right out loud. "That's allowed too. People like who they like, and some people are assholes about it, but as long as you're in uniform you stick to the policy of the United States Army, which is that it's none of your goddamn business who anybody wants to sleep with unless they're offering to have sex with you, and then if they're not your type you say no politely and move on. You got that?"

Bucky nodded slowly. "Got it."

"And if anybody on your reintegration team actually tries that shit on you," Andrews added, abruptly sounding almost angry, "Man or woman, whether you're into them or not--if anybody tries to get in your pants while you're on this base, Barnes, you should know that that is not fucking well allowed, all right? Nobody who's around you right now should be making moves on you like that, and if anybody does you tell Major Exley about it. And if it's Exley, or if Exley doesn't listen, you fucking tell me and I'll go as high as I have to to get him busted for it."

Bucky blinked. Andrews didn't seem angry with him. Andrews seemed angry at the idea of someone trying to have sex with Bucky.

That seemed important somehow, but Bucky just nodded and looked down at the page in front of him. OTHER PROHIBITED RELATIONSHIPS. They didn't specify the reintegration team, but he supposed it must fall under a similar standard. Regardless of the insignia on his uniform, he was outranked by everyone here; no one else he'd seen was a prisoner-patient.

He glanced up at Andrews, who was watching him intently, and he felt an impulse he mostly associated with his memories of Steve.

Keeping his own face very serious, Bucky said, "What if it's you trying to get into my pants?"

Andrews looked startled and then somewhere between irritated and amused, and Bucky felt a little glow of satisfaction.

"You're not my type, Barnes," Andrews said. "Don't sweat it."

Everything Andrews had told him was bouncing around the inside of Bucky's head for the rest of morning orientation, through lunch and going to an office for Lind to give him a couple of shots--vaccines, he said, although they could have been anything and Bucky would have rolled his sleeve up for them just the same.

After that he went to Woj's office. He wondered if he should say it was bugging him, what Andrews had said, but Woj started asking him questions about dying, whether he wanted to, whether he wanted not to, and figuring out how to answer those questions kept Bucky pretty distracted. By the time Woj finished with that whole topic and asked Bucky how things were going otherwise, it was just another nagging question in the back of his head, and Bucky had plenty of those. Woj seemed more interested in how much sleep he'd gotten, anyway.

The afternoon orientation session turned out to be Andrews again, but this time back at the barracks, and Andrews handed off his M4 to another MP as soon as they entered the building, walking
practically unarmed beside Bucky down the hall. The room next to Bucky's had been made into a lounge, with a couch and a flat black rectangle of a television. There was a shelf of books, and another of DVDs.

"This is for you, for reentry," Andrews said. "I don't know how much popular American media you've had a chance to absorb..."

"Not much," Bucky said. Even over the last six months he'd stayed mostly away from televisions and radio, and the one time he'd tried to sit through a picture just to be in a dark theater for a couple of hours... that hadn't ended well.

Andrews nodded. "This room doesn't have a lock. Whenever you have barracks time, you can come in here, read, watch movies. Whatever you want. I'll warn you now, this area is monitored, but all that's gonna happen is I'll probably come ask you if you want company when you're watching stuff, and the doctors will know if you're staying up all night in here."

Bucky nodded slowly, glancing around. There were two cameras he could detect, both small and discreet by non-expert standards. They would give high-angle profile shots anytime he sat facing the TV, and he would bet there was another camera in the TV itself, so they could monitor his reactions to whatever he was watching. Bucky drifted over to the bookshelf and studied the titles.

On the top shelf his eye caught on a familiar one--*The Big Sleep*--and then he realized that it was shelved next to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which he abruptly remembered his ma and Steve's ma talking about one time. There was a whole little row of mysteries, and Bucky recognized enough of them to suspect that even the ones he didn't know had been written before he died.

After the mysteries there was *The Virginian* and *Riders of the Purple Sage*--he'd seen that picture, he thought. The title card flashed in his mind, the smoke-and-popcorn smell inside the theater, and then it was gone. His eye lit next on *The Hobbit*, and he knew as soon as he looked at it that Steve had hated it for about eight different reasons including the middle, the ending, half of the characters and all of the songs, but Bucky had read it himself three times. Past that was a whole bunch of stuff he knew--Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Upton Sinclair. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for God's sake.

Bucky picked that one up and turned to wave it at Andrews. "We had Mark Twain when I was in school, Staff Sergeant. Steve read this about a dozen times."

"Well, you're not in school now. None of this stuff is assigned," Andrews said easily. "You don't wanna read it, don't. We thought you might like some familiar things around, though, and there's new stuff on the next shelf."

Bucky looked down to the second shelf and his mouth fell open a little--his hand went to *Rocket Ship Galileo*, tucked in between *I, Robot* and *Out of the Silent Planet*.

"You can read those later, though," Andrews said, as Bucky continued studying the shelves--there was one called *1984* that pinged something in his brain, like he'd heard of it before somewhere--or, hell, maybe it was just that he'd done something important that year. "Come here, we're gonna watch a movie, you get to pick."

Bucky gave up and went over to the couch where Andrews was sitting, holding two DVD cases. Bucky squinted at them. The faces on one looked familiar, and the names they were labeled with--Ann Sheridan, Cary Grant--sparked hazy memories in his brain. They were both wearing familiar-looking army uniforms, and it was only when Bucky's eye settled on the title that he turned a glare on Andrews.
"What's that supposed to mean," Bucky demanded, feeling sick and exposed. "This some kind of queer--"

Andrews looked startled. "No, it's just a screwball--here, you wanna watch this one instead?"

He wagged the other one, which had unfamiliar faces on the cover, two women and a man. One of the women held a baseball bat, and the title was *A League of Their Own*. Her uniform looked familiar, too, somehow, and Bucky reached out for the case, flipping it over and searching for a hint.

*All-American Girls Baseball League.*

He looked up at Andrews, who said, "That one was made about twenty years ago, but it's set back during the war, when women--"

"I know," Bucky said, looking down at the case again. "Steve knew some of these girls. A few of the chorus girls from his USO show left to play ball, and he went to a bunch of their games in that first season, whenever he was in the right city on his tour. Threw out first pitches and stuff. When he was in Europe with us, they wrote to him. One of them...."

One of them had sent a picture. In fact lots of baseball girls had sent pictures, but one of them had sent a picture that Bucky pocketed because he knew Steve wasn't going to bother looking at it again. She'd been a little slip of a thing in a short-skirted uniform, and he'd been able to imagine the honey color of her hair from the black-and-white photograph, and the summer-sky blue of her eyes.

He had kept the picture, he remembered. He had looked at it when he was alone. Sometimes in bed. Sometimes he had touched himself, thinking of that pretty girl in her baseball uniform. He had imagined the wiry strength of her body against his. Imagined kissing her.

"Barnes?" Andrews said. "We can watch something else if neither of these is okay."

"No," Bucky said, handing the case back to Andrews. "Let's watch this one. I wanna see if they got the girls right."

Through the rest of the day--another PT session, this time running, followed by more neurological evaluations, and then dinner with Andrews and yet another different interchangeable MP, at which point Bucky concluded that it was pointless learning the non-Andrews names--the thought of the blonde baseball player girl kept coming back into his head. One of the girls in the movie had been enough like her that she melted into that image in his mind, and now he could picture the petite blonde from the war talking and swinging her bat and getting into fights. Somehow he liked that she got into fights.

He could picture her legs--not long but bared to his gaze, slender and strong, and sometimes bruised around the knees or high on one thigh from all her rough and tumble play. He could picture the way she would smile, her blue eyes lighting up when she was pleased. When somebody made her happy. He could picture her strong little hands, choked up on a bat, or gripping--touching--

That night, lying in bed, he finally let himself think of her without having to push the thoughts away to focus on what was demanded of him. He remembered how this went; he was alone in his bunk at the end of the day, and there was a pretty girl's picture held in his mind. He closed his eyes and slid his hand down into his pants, curling around his dick. He thought of kissing her up against a wall, her legs with their bruised knees wrapped around his waist, her arms around his neck. She would be arguing with him about something right up until he kissed her, and she would push into the kiss just...
as fiercely as she pushed into a fight.

Bucky squeezed his hand around his dick, but it remained the same as it always was, a limp piece of flesh between his thighs. He opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling, rehearsing the procedure again in his mind: the thoughts of a pretty girl, the thoughts of sex with a pretty girl...

He tried to think of the sex parts, to focus on the desired effect. He tried to think of it the way he would have before, about his fingers sliding inside her where she was all hot and wet and soft. He would make her whimper and moan with pleasure while he buried his face in the shallow curves of her little breasts, licking and sucking her nipples and tasting her smooth white skin. Finally, when she was begging for it, he would push inside her, her pussy all tight and hot around his dick.

His dick didn't twitch.

He knew that was the way he was supposed to want her. It was the way he used to want women, and he knew it wouldn't hurt. He knew she would smile at him when it was over, and he would smile back, and they would go right back to arguing. Everyone would get off, and everyone could be happy. But his dick didn't seem to care about that.

He tried the other way, then, picturing the kind of sex with her that he remembered feeling real. He imagined her little hands curled around a stun baton instead of a bat, putting him down on his knees...

She was tiny, though, and she had no authority over him. He would knock her across the room at the first blow, leave her crumpled in a heap against the wall. The image was vivid: he could see the blood leaking from her ear, trickling down to stain her pretty blonde hair.

Bucky yanked his hand out of his pants and rolled over to stare at the wall for a moment. His dick hadn't gotten any harder thinking about that, but now he felt sick, and he knew what he would dream about if he managed to sleep.

He stood after a moment and went to the room next to his with the unlocked door. He left the lights off, so they wouldn't see too much, and plucked three books off the shelf. He chose two new ones--*I, Robot* and *1984*--and then, not letting himself show either caution or desire in his body language, he took *The Hobbit* from the top shelf. He carried all three books back to his own room, and took them and a flashlight into the small space under his cot.

It was possible they could see him there, too, but the confined space and the solidity of the floor under him felt comforting. He propped his chin on his metal fist, leaned *The Hobbit* up against the wall in the beam of the light, and let his eyes fall on the familiar words, drawing him into a story he knew from start to finish. He already knew who the casualties would be. He already knew someone would make it home safe in the end. That was enough tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is [here on Tumblr](http://example.com/)! I am also on [Tumblr](http://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](http://example.com/).
He dozed and woke repeatedly in the middle of the book, dreaming parts he hadn't read and then waking to ruffle through the pages and find his place again. When the alarm clock rang he was jerked out of a dream of the final battle, and it took the whole length of his shower to drag himself back from Middle Earth to the real world.

He downed nearly all of his coffee before he touched his breakfast, and Andrews smiled a little and said, "You can get more if you want."

Bucky glanced around. The MPs were actually eating with him now, their M4s slung on their backs. Apart from the three of them there weren't any other soldiers eating in this little mess hall. The coffee pot was on the other side of the room; it might be as far as he'd been allowed to walk unescorted since coming here. It would put him between his guards and the door to the hallway.

"You want more?" he asked Andrews and the latest new MP.

Andrews shook his head, but the other guy--a black guy named Duncan, built broader than Andrews and with even shorter hair than Bucky--pushed his nearly-empty mug over. "Thanks."

Bucky went and poured two cups of coffee. He grabbed sugar packets for Duncan and brought them back with the refilled mugs. He did not look toward the door. He did not deviate from the shortest route to the coffeepot and back.

"Thanks, man," Duncan said again.

Bucky nodded like it was nothing and sipped more of his own coffee before he went back to his eggs.

The rest of the day went more or less like the day before, everything according to his printed schedule. His morning orientation session with Andrews was a review of the last seventy years of military history. Andrews was, once again, almost unarmed and alone with him in the room.

Bucky was oddly aware of how *American* Andrews' version of events was. He reminded himself that he was American, Andrews was American, and this was the United States Army. Andrews invited questions, though, and didn't mind when Bucky prodded at his point of view on conflicts up through the first Gulf War. He only got stiff and careful talking about Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bucky probably wasn't the only one being monitored, and Andrews was only a Staff Sergeant, interchangeable with a dozen others as far as command was concerned--expendable, if they were willing to leave him alone like this with Bucky. He had to toe certain lines. Bucky didn't push him too hard.

He noticed when he talked to Woj that Woj was also alone with Bucky, and not visibly armed at all,
but that seemed normal. Woj was an officer.

He told Woj that he hadn't slept much, but he didn't say that he'd avoided sleeping on purpose. He
only said he'd wanted to read *The Hobbit* because it was familiar. Woj seemed to know the story,
more or less, like maybe someone had told him about it before. He let Bucky talk about it for a while
instead of what was going on in his head.

It got the story back into his head, left him naggingly aware that he hadn't read all the way to the end
the night before. When he went to afternoon orientation in the TV lounge, expecting another movie
to distract him from it, Andrews said, "Which book were you reading last night?"

"Hobbit." Woj already knew. Whether he'd bothered to brief Andrews or not, it wasn't a secret.

"You get to finish it?" Andrews waved toward the bookcase. "If you want to read today instead of
watching anything, we can do that."

Bucky nodded and went to get the book, Andrews trailing him to the hall and then following him
back into the TV room. Bucky settled down in the spot he'd chosen the day before. Andrews sat
down on the other end with his own copy of *I, Robot*. Bucky's was still under his bed; he'd seen it
there when he went to get *The Hobbit*.

When Bucky had found his place and started reading, Andrews said absently, "You mind if I put
some music on?"

Bucky looked up. "Music I know?"

Andrews shrugged, and Bucky saw that he had a slim electronic device in his hand, but he was still
looking down at the book. "Could be. Your pick, pre- or post-1944."

"Post," Bucky decided, looking from the book in his hands to the book in Andrews'. He was
supposed to be getting oriented; if they were letting him have familiar things it had to be to ease him
into the unfamiliar. He couldn't act like he didn't want to learn new things.

Andrews nodded and touched the device, reaching behind him to plug it into something, and the
music started up, playing from the speakers around the TV. It was unfamiliar but not strange--like the
books, he thought, they were sticking to things not too far from what Sergeant James Barnes knew
before he fell.

It was an easy afternoon, quiet and simple; he had more PT afterward, and then a session of testing
his left arm's capabilities and telling Dr. Kwan and Dr. Chestek everything he knew about how it
worked.

Dr. Chestek was the first woman he'd seen since coming in. He tried to remember his manners.

At dinner Duncan was with Andrews again. When Andrews said, "So *I, Robot* is pretty good, you
gonna read that one next?" Duncan started arguing with Andrews about the stories being simplistic.

Bucky didn't have to contribute much, just watched them play out this little show for his benefit. He
told himself that it was just that, a dialogue they were acting out, but he found himself smiling by the
end of it, even if he refused to be drawn into any kind of debate about robots without having read the
book. He remembered some of the pictures he'd watched with Steve, magazine stories he'd read, but
those were obviously different from what Andrews was describing.

Bucky didn't even mind too much that they were obviously trying to steer him to read the next book
they'd chosen for him. He didn't let himself wonder if this whole conversation had been scripted for
Andrews and Duncan by someone else on the team. It sounded like a pretty good book, and he was in no position to object to being prodded so gently to do what they wanted.

Still, that night when he lay down in bed and wanted something other than his own thoughts to ease him down to sleep, he looked for a long moment at the two books lying on the floor and then picked up *1984*.

Three chapters into the book he moved under the bed. He knew they could see him there too, but he didn’t have to make it easy for them. He finished the book before the alarm clock went off, but he didn’t doze this time. He was wide awake, paging restlessly back and forth through the book, searching for something that would make its meaning unambiguously clear.
The book had every appearance of being mass-produced, with an original publication date of 1949. That would fit with everything else they'd made available to him, dating from within the first several years after he fell out of the world. George Orwell, according to the paragraph at the back of the book, had been a journalist, had reported on the Spanish Civil War, had opposed totalitarianism. The back of the book called it a great modern classic of "negative utopia".

That information was only relevant if the entire book hadn't been produced strictly to put into his hands, which it could have been. Maybe the title had seemed familiar because they cued him somehow, programmed him. Maybe Andrews and Duncan's whole performance of pretending to want him to read *I, Robot* had been intended to drive him to read this instead, to show him the hopelessness of attempting to make any decision for himself...
Bucky rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead.

There was no point in that. If they wanted him to do something, they knew how to make him. They had no need for this level of subtlety--this was the way they might handle Steve, but not Bucky. Bucky they would just put in a chair, point at a target. That was what he was; that was the whole point of what he had been made to be.

He had killed everyone who had used him that way. Bucky, with some timely assistance from Steve and his team, had tracked down every trace, every facility--every chair, every instruction for how to construct a new one. And yet he was still what he had always been. He was here in custody, and if the Army wanted to use him they had to know they could do it without putting nearly this much effort into dancing around the order.

But if it wasn't an instruction--if the book was exactly what it appeared to be--it still had to be a message. They had given it to him. They wanted him to read it. They wanted him to know something, but Bucky was still trying to figure out what, paging desperately through the book for hints, when his alarm bell rang.

He showered, shaved, dressed in a clean uniform. He slipped the paperback, slim enough not to show, into a pocket of his fatigues before he met Andrews and Duncan at the door for breakfast.

Andrews gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Is coffee going to be enough, man?"

"I'm fine," Bucky said. Fine was stretching the point, but he was functional, and everyone lied when they made small talk.

Andrews looked him up and down again, then shrugged. "Guess you need breakfast, anyway. Come on."

Bucky didn't get up for more coffee, but when his mug was empty Duncan said, "You want some more?"

Bucky nodded stiffly, conscious of the weight of the book in his pocket. Duncan took Bucky's mug along with his own, and Bucky drained half of it in a few scalding gulps as soon as Duncan brought it back.

After breakfast they took him to Exley's office. The meeting with Exley was the first thing on his schedule after breakfast every day this week. It was probably supposed to be another day of Exley being oddly gentle about asking Bucky to detail his war crimes of the last seventy years, but Bucky found himself balking at the chair in front of Exley's desk.

Exley, on the other side, gave him a sweeping look that was reassuringly sharp and tactical. "Is there a problem, Sergeant?"

"Sir," Bucky said. "Permission to..." but he didn't even know what to ask permission to do.

Exley nodded anyway and made a beckoning gesture.

Bucky reached into his pocket, and Exley's posture shifted slightly, his gaze sharpening. Bucky approved, at the same time he knew that that caution wouldn't have come anywhere near saving Exley if Bucky actually had been going for a weapon.

He pulled out the book and slapped it down on the desk.

Exley relaxed even before Bucky asked, "Sir, what is this?"
Exley nodded again, like Bucky had answered some question by asking. Like he'd done something correctly.

"It's a book, Sergeant. It's an important book, a book a lot of people are aware of. It's a book we wanted you to know about, and read if you were interested in doing so, before you went out into the world to encounter it, or references to it, in an uncontrolled way. And that's all it is, and all we wanted. Understand?"

The correct answer was yes, sir, or thank you, sir, but Bucky shook his head stubbornly. "That's not all--sir, that's not--"

"Have a seat, Sergeant." Exley sank into his own desk chair.

Bucky obeyed the direct order, leaving the book on the desk and placing his own hands on the arms of the chair, where they could be seen. Where they could be strapped down, if he let anyone get that close, if there was any purpose in securing him to a chair he could break without thinking about it.

"Did you get any sleep at all last night?" Exley asked. "Were you up all night reading?"

Bucky shrugged uncomfortably, aware of being cornered so that neither yes, sir, nor no, sir would be a correct answer. Everyone was so interested in whether he slept.

"I didn't sleep, sir. I was reading all night."

Exley nodded. "I can see how that book would have that effect. What did you think of it?"

Bucky cast about for words to fill the enormous space left by that open question. "Sir it's--that's HYDRA. That's--that's what they wanted, that's them winning, that's--it's all right there, in the book, for anyone to read."

"And millions of people have read it," Exley agreed. "Which is why all Agent Romanov had to do was tell people what they were to take them down--people know that that kind of technological domination is possible. Books like that one have made it clear to the world that that's not something we want. Promises of peace with that kind of price will always be a lie, and people know that. When that book was written, in '48, HYDRA was in tatters. They couldn't prevent it being written or published. They couldn't prevent people from knowing that their goal was something evil. And in the end, they couldn't pull it off. They never could exert that kind of control over people."

There was something wrong about that, but it took Bucky a moment to recognize what. The book had been so real, so true--

"Except me," Bucky said, when it fell into place. "They could control me like that."

They'd told him what they wanted him to know. He'd believed it every time. The war was whatever they said it was; the enemy was whoever they pointed him at. History changed whenever they told him a different story. Every time.

"Yeah, they did," Exley said softly. "They isolated you from other people, from your own memories, and they fed you what they wanted you to know and believe. But the second somebody started feeding you good information, what did you do?"

Exley hadn't asked him about Steve, or the helicarriers, before now. Bucky fixed his gaze on the book and said nothing.

"Look." Bucky jerked his gaze up before he realized that it was an expression, not an order.
Exley smiled slightly. "I know that you don't know for sure if you can trust us. I'm really pleased that you came to me with this--that says good things to me about what we're doing here. But I think it'd probably be good for you to be able to have some contact with someone you do trust. We weren't sure when you would be ready for this step, but I think now's a good time to schedule your first visit--or phone call, if you'd rather. Captain Rogers has indicated that he's happy to come and see you whenever your schedule allows, but if there's someone else you'd rather see or speak to, we can try to arrange it."

Bucky stared at Exley, trying desperately to calculate. He was being offered Steve--a reward for asking the right question? A test? Was he supposed to say no? Was he supposed to ask Exley to decide?

"You don't have to choose right now," Exley said, still in that patient, unruffled tone. "But how about this--if you say nothing about it, I'm going to ask Captain Rogers to come down on Saturday and spend a few hours with you. If at any time between now and then you decide that you'd rather not see him, or you'd rather talk on the phone instead of seeing him in person, or you'd rather see or talk to someone else, you can tell anyone on your team, including Staff Sergeant Andrews, and that person will let me know that we need to change the plan. Understood?"

Bucky gave up on calculation and let himself take refuge in the safe, correct answer. "Yes, sir."

Exley nodded and reached for a pad of paper. "Now, I asked you a question a little while ago, and it's something we should talk about. What can you tell me about what you did in the days leading up to the Battle of the Potomac?"

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is [here on Tumblr](http://example.com)

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Bucky knew perfectly well that Exley hadn't meant *if you say nothing about it* as some fairy tale test. He knew that Exley was just trying to make it easy for him, so that Bucky would get his treat by doing nothing.

He was careful anyway. For the next three days, he carefully didn't say a word about Steve or about the impending visit. He only nodded when the time was added to his schedule. He didn't even say Steve's name while answering Exley's questions about his own actions.

He didn't give them any other reasons to take the treat away, either. He read *I, Robot* a few stories at a time at night in the barracks, and he slept in his cot afterward with the lights out. He talked to Andrews and Duncan about the stories and tried not to betray his own fascination with them--they were so obviously false in the sense that *1984* was true, but they were full of hope, with a set of aspirations disguised as Laws of Robotics.

Bucky knew better than anyone that when humans made thinking things they made weapons, not these carefully safe semi-people, but the stories imagined better people. Better things.

Steve would probably like *I, Robot*. Bucky made a mental note to tell him about it if he visited.

He did the homework Woj set him. He learned about the civil rights movement and women's liberation, watched movies and listened to music. He demonstrated his arm's functionality for Dr. Kwan and Dr. Chestek through a series of incredibly repetitive tests. He got coffee for Duncan one morning, and let Duncan get coffee for him the next.

On Thursday afternoon he was introduced to his official chaplain, Father Guzman, an old man wearing all black but for the white rectangle of a clerical collar at his throat. Bucky's schedule said "Meet with Chaplain" so he wasn't surprised, exactly, but the sight of the white-haired man in black still struck him oddly; it was as if he'd been handed his old Johnson rifle. He still knew how to use it, but he had no idea why anyone would want him to.

It was on the schedule, though, so Bucky answered Fr. Guzman's questions, crossed himself and bowed his head when the priest asked him to pray. He made his confession, imprecise but honest. He promised to attend Mass on Sunday. If it was on his schedule, he would do whatever they told him to. That was the deal.

Steve's visit stayed on his schedule, and Bucky tried not to even think about it, let alone speak of it. Even if they didn't decide to take the visit away from him, something could go wrong. Someone else might need Steve to be Captain America. Someone else on Steve's team might need him for something. Any emergency would have to take precedence over coming all the way to Texas just to see Bucky for a three-hour block between lunch and PT.

He was so careful that it was actually a surprise when Andrews and Duncan escorted him to the barracks after lunch and Steve was standing outside Bucky's door. Bucky didn't let himself break stride, but his heartbeat kicked up and he couldn't help smiling.

Steve lit up like the sun, grinning back and looking Bucky up and down.

Bucky was distantly aware of Andrews saying, "I guess you can take it from here, sir," and Steve
answering distractedly, "Yeah, we'll be fine," without taking his eyes off Bucky.

Andrews and Duncan faded back without saluting—properly, because Steve wasn't in uniform, just jeans and a light jacket over his t-shirt. He'd gotten dressed in New York, where late fall was actually chilly, and not Texas, where it was still sometimes oppressively hot.

The sight of Steve in civvies made Bucky oddly conscious of his own neat and tidy regulation fatigues and his close-cropped regulation haircut. He ran a hand over his head, the fuzz of his hair a soft prickle against his palm. Steve's gaze followed the movement.

"That's new," Steve said, and Bucky could tell that he was trying for the same neutral tone that everybody on his reintegration team (except Duncan, who didn't seem like he had the hang of it, and Dr. Chestek, who got really excited about all the stuff he could do with his arm) used all the time.

Steve didn't quite get it either, or else Bucky had too much practice listening to him to fall for it. Either way it made him feel the bright, distracting warmth in his chest that went with seeing Steve and hearing his voice.

It was only when he identified it that he realized he hadn't felt it properly before now, the last several times he'd seen Steve. At the Grand Canyon and the handful of times they'd met up before then Bucky had known that he liked Steve, even knew he wanted to kiss him. The liking and wanting just hadn't felt like this, bright and distracting and physically present.

It was something that had woken back up in him this week. He'd have to tell Woj: this probably qualified as a positive emotion.

For now Bucky said, "Well, new century, gotta try new things."

Steve snorted. "New things like actually adhering to uniform regs?"

Bucky shrugged, and it was so easy to fall into place with Steve, to mirror his posture, leaning one shoulder against the wall. "Some of us don't get special orders written around us to accommodate tights and a mask as a uniform, pal."

Steve's grin widened, and Bucky was smiling back helplessly. He wanted to kiss Steve right then; he wanted it in a sharp and vivid way that blew what he'd felt a week ago right out of the water, a Technicolor rush of need to touch and taste and feel.

Steve's smile changed a little, his posture shifting. Bucky didn't know if that was because Steve knew what Bucky wanted—if he wanted it too—or if he just sensed that something was different.

Bucky shook his head a little, straightening up from his slump. "You got a plan for visiting hours?"

Steve shrugged. "We're not allowed to leave the barracks, but apparently we don't have to sit on opposite sides of a table while somebody watches us through a little window, which was about the best I was expecting until I got here. I guess we could... sit somewhere else? We can walk up and down the hall if you'd rather, though."

Bucky rolled his eyes and opened the door to the little lounge room. "Look, they gave me a couch and a TV and everything. And they got little cameras instead of a window."

Bucky waved in the direction of the cameras he'd spotted, and he saw Steve's quick glance take them in. Steve's smile was tamped down into something wry, not surprised but not best pleased either. "Ah."
"We can walk up and down the hall if you'd rather," Bucky offered, smiling again, even as he realized that this obviously was what he was supposed to do: stay here, in this room, where whoever was monitoring him could watch him and Steve together. They would want to know what happened, what he said to Steve and what Steve said to him.

Steve shook his head a little. Bucky thought he could see Steve figuring it out too, understanding that this was the task they had been set. "I don't mind if you don't."

Steve sat down in the middle of the couch, instead of taking the end like Andrews usually did. Bucky hesitated and then sat down next to him, copying his stiff pose, feet together on the floor, hands in lap. But this was Steve, and there was something about sitting here with Steve at his side, in his peripheral vision, that made him want to tilt his head back, let the muscles of his thighs relax, and... sprawl.

It took him a second to do it, to get his body to cooperate with the familiar-unfamiliar posture, but there after a moment it felt right. He glanced over at Steve, and Steve huffed a laugh and relaxed, too, melting into the couch, letting his knee swing out to tap against Bucky's.

"They catching you up on what you missed?" Steve asked, gesturing toward the TV and the shelves flanking it, which were still mostly empty, awaiting the arrival of stuff from after 1950. "SHIELD just kind of told me how to use my phone and computer and turned me loose."

"SHIELD probably wasn't worried about you getting upset by a movie and killing everyone in sight," Bucky said, shrugging a little. Before Steve could say anything to that, he added, "You know they made a movie about your baseball girls?"

"They weren't my baseball girls, Buck," Steve said, in exactly the same way he used to say it when they got a bundle of letters, but his cheeks went a little pink.

"Have you seen it, though?" Bucky asked. "It's pretty funny."

Steve wrinkled his nose. "I dunno--am I in it? I try not to watch the ones I'm in."

Bucky snorted and stood up, going over to the shelf to find the DVD. "You're not in it, Steve. Somehow they managed to make a movie about girls' baseball and completely leave out the five times you showed up at a game."

Bucky got the DVD set up and turned on the TV, and came back to sit with Steve again. It was easier to remember how to sit the second time.

"So you remember the baseball girls, huh?" Steve said, almost casually, while Bucky got the movie started.

"I remember the pretty ones," Bucky said, and didn't look at Steve or at the cameras. "Come on, you'll like this, there's a skinny blonde who gets to be a big hero."

"I thought you said I wasn't in this one," Steve said, and it was easy to tease him, to take turns shushing each other for the movie or talking over it. They'd never watched a picture like this before, just the two of them in their own little room, but they'd whispered their way through plenty of afternoons in movie theaters, knees pressed together, and...

And their hands had wandered a lot, Bucky remembered, when Steve set his hand down between them and his knuckles brushed Bucky's thigh. They'd never been as daring as some of the stories Bucky had heard, but they'd talked about it. They had whispered all kinds of things in each other's ears in the theater or later, when they really were alone and could play it out.
They had kissed and touched and done everything they could together, tried out everything. He couldn't remember all the details now, every night or every touch, but he knew that if he touched Steve now it would be familiar; he would know every part of Steve's body and all the right ways to touch him.

Steve would know how to touch him, too, Bucky thought. Steve knew how to get Bucky off--almost certainly better than Bucky knew himself at this point. Bucky watched the movie go by, and a part of him was enjoying knowing what would happen and waiting for Steve's reactions, being able to introduce him to something new even from inside his containment here.

But he was also thinking about Steve touching him, and Steve getting him off, and all the things they could do together when it was safe. When it was dark and no one was watching. He wanted to feel that, every inch of his skin begging for it, hungry or thirsty or lonely or some other word he didn't know for the way a body cried out for contact.

His dick still didn't get hard, though. He knew it would have, another time; he knew that just the idea of the things he and Steve could do together had been enough plenty of times. Just being this close to Steve had been enough, more than once. He knew that, but that knowledge stayed far away, leaving him here on the couch wanting Steve with nothing to show for it.

The movie ended. They'd talked easily enough through the whole thing, about what Bucky had been up to here and a probably highly-edited version of what Steve had been up to out there, but when the song over the credits went silent, they both fell silent too. That left Bucky with nothing to think about but what he wanted, and who was watching, and what he might be allowed to do.

Andrews had said it didn't matter who you liked, after all. Steve was a visitor; that had to make him not a part of Bucky's reintegration team, and not one of the people who should be reported for wanting to get into Bucky's pants. Not that Steve had shown any sign of wanting to, outside of Bucky's dim and fractured memories, but he felt increasingly sure about what he did remember.

"Are you still actually in the Army?" Bucky asked, looking over again at Steve's civilian clothes, remembering the absence of salutes. There hadn't been any salutes when Steve first brought him in, either, though Steve had been wearing civilian clothes then too.

"I am officially retired," Steve said, with what sounded like a certain amount of satisfaction. "After the helicarriers and all--I couldn't keep signing up to take orders from whoever wanted to give them, and I didn't want to have to go AWOL to find you. Took a while to make it official, but I'm out now."

"Well, I guess at your age," Bucky said, just to make Steve squawk and point out Bucky was still older, and they fell into a comfortably petty argument while Bucky thought that over.

If Steve wasn't in the Army anymore then Steve wasn't an officer anymore. That would mean there was nothing at all forbidden in Bucky kissing him. The thought was almost too big to hold on to, and Bucky didn't try to actually work it out, just went on ribbing Steve about his old age until something beeped in Steve's pocket.

Steve looked genuinely startled and then rueful. "I think that means time's up."

Bucky glanced at the clock display on the DVD player and nodded. "I've got about five minutes to change for PT."

Steve got up, and Bucky followed him.
"I won't keep you, then," Steve said, heading briskly for the door. Bucky stayed on his heels. "They said I could probably come back next week, if you--"

Steve turned as he stepped out into the hall, pivoting to keep looking in Bucky's direction as Bucky hesitated. Bucky was still on the threshold, but none of the cameras would have a good angle on him here, and he didn't think there were any close enough in the hall to get a good look at Steve.

Bucky caught the collar of Steve's shirt with his right hand. He pushed up slightly on his toes to close the difference in their heights and pressed his mouth to Steve's, which had fallen open in surprise when Bucky reached out.

Steve didn't move for a second, just letting Bucky hold the contact. He had enough time to think he'd made a mistake before Steve's hands closed on his elbows--both of them, right and left, as if they were the same. Steve's head tilted, getting his nose out of the way. Steve leaned into the kiss slightly, his lips pressing more firmly to Bucky's, his tongue just touching Bucky's lower lip. Bucky was flooded with a dizzy mix of memory and need and a kind of exhilarated terror.

He stepped back and Steve's hands released him. Steve was wide-eyed, his lips still parted.

Bucky grinned, trying not to just bare his teeth. Steve's mouth stretched into a smile in answer, bright as when he first saw Bucky, as though he were seeing him for the first time all over again.

The fear Bucky had felt evaporated, leaving just the flying feeling, and his smile relaxed into something easy and real. He stepped in again to brush his body against Steve's before moving past him toward his own quarters. "Gotta head to PT, Rogers. Get out of here."

"Yeah," Steve said, but he was still just standing there in the doorway when Bucky closed the door to his room.
Bucky put on his dress uniform the next morning. He was going to Mass and there was a dress uniform in his closet, so it seemed like what he was supposed to do. He was waiting at the door when his escort arrived, in the persons of Fr. Guzman and Woj.

Woj was dressed like him, so Bucky had guessed right. He was a major, Bucky noted absently, but did not salute because this was not, he suspected, properly Army business, so he wasn't technically reporting to a superior officer and Woj wasn't technically on guard duty. Fr. Guzman was wearing vestments over his regular black clothes—green for ordinary time, something in Bucky's backbrain reported, because Advent was still more than a month away. Everything was in order.

There were a dozen folding chairs set up instead of pews in a room next to the little mess where Bucky usually ate. There was no smell of breakfast this morning, which was just as well; he wasn't supposed to eat until after. Woj took a seat in the first of the three rows, so Bucky sat down beside him and didn't look around at the sounds of a few other people filtering in before Fr. Guzman came in, without any altar server to precede him, and they started.

The songs seemed familiar, although there was a sense of dislocation in the Mass itself; he mumbled the prayers along with Woj's strong voice at his side, but found himself stumbling awkwardly through them. It took Bucky until the first reading to realize that the strangeness was that Fr. Guzman was speaking English, and they were giving their responses in English. Father had told Bucky on Thursday that the Mass would be in English, but Bucky hadn't really grasped what that meant until he was sitting through it.

During the alleluia he recognized Steve's voice among the handful of voices behind him—he was in the back row, the chair nearest the door. Bucky could have thrown a knife through his throat without looking.
He didn't look.

He kept his hands in his lap and his eyes front, following along through the strange and familiar procedure of the Mass. His mind buzzed with the awareness that Steve could see him, that Steve had stayed overnight in Texas just to come to Mass this morning in the same place as Bucky.

He made himself focus on picking out other voices he knew in the chorus behind him. By the time Woj set his right hand gently in Bucky's left to say the Lord's Prayer, Bucky had identified the presences of Duncan, Master Sergeant Ripley from PT, and the kitchen guy who was always asking Bucky if he wanted a salad.

At the sign of peace Bucky carefully controlled his expression, and didn't turn toward the others until Woj turned first. Bucky shook Duncan's hand first, then the kitchen guy's, and then Steve was leaning up between them from the back row, hand extended. Bucky couldn't help meeting his eyes as he closed his hand around Steve's.

Steve said, "Peace be with you," like it meant something.

Bucky nodded and mumbled, "Peace," back, copying Duncan, and then let go of Steve's hand to shake Master Sergeant's.

The rest of Mass went by in a blur; before he knew it Fr. Guzman was telling them to go in peace and walking to the back of the room to let himself out. When the door opened a smell of coffee and bacon washed in, telling him that the mess hall was in operation now.

"Breakfast?" Woj asked, tilting his head toward the door. Bucky nodded and turned to exit, shuffling out after Duncan and the others.

Steve was waiting outside the door--wearing a suit, Bucky noticed now, unlike the dress uniforms everyone else had put on. He stood out just as much as he ever had with a starry target on his chest. Bucky stopped short at the sight of him, conscious of Woj stopping a step behind.

"Just wanted to actually say goodbye instead of disappearing." Steve was smiling a little, hands shoved into his pockets. They wouldn't touch again, not here, not in front of this audience. Bucky understood that. "Father didn't mind me attending Mass, but I gotta take off now."

Bucky nodded, at a loss for words with Steve so close, looking so different and so much the same.

"I'll try to visit again next week," Steve said. "Take care, Buck."

"Try not to crash any planes for a few days," Bucky said, a beat too late to be natural.

Steve smiled anyway and let Bucky have the last word.

Bucky turned away before Steve went out of sight around the corner. He got his plate of breakfast with Woj beside him instead of Andrews, and found when he went to take his place at the table that Duncan had already poured him a coffee. It was waiting at his usual spot with a donut on a napkin beside it.

Breakfast was the next thing on the schedule, and after that recreation time. He relaxed into the schedule and the company of his team and let them carry him along.

Chapter End Notes
Alby’s art for this chapter is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Sergeant Barnes!"

Bucky swiveled toward the sound, bringing the rifle in his hands to bear, and found Exley standing there projecting furious authority. Bucky swung the gun away automatically, back toward the--hostiles--guards--Duncan, standing there with his hands spread. Andrews slumped limply against the wall at his side, his head lolling against Duncan's knee.

It wasn't exactly like waking up from a dream; more like realizing that the dream had been real all along. He had stood up from the chair where he was sitting while Dr. Kwan examined his arm, shoving Dr. Kwan back in the process. He had disarmed Mueller when he rushed in, knocking him down as well, and when Andrews and Duncan ran up as he turned down the hallway, Andrews shouting at him to stop, he had--

Andrews wasn't moving. Duncan had blood on his fatigues. Bucky was holding an M4--had taken it by force from Mueller--had aimed it at Exley already--he had--

"Stand down, Sergeant," Exley ordered.

Something in Bucky--something that had known it had to report in to base when he stood up from the chair and refused to let anyone stop him--wanted to obey. The rest of him knew better.

He had maybe killed Andrews, hurt others, pointed a gun at his commanding officer. He had demonstrated that he could not be trusted. This would be the end of the gentle treatment, the endless schedule of activities designed to make him better. He was a thing after all, and not a safe one. As soon as he put down the gun--as soon as he stopped threatening Duncan, as soon as Andrews--

Oh God, Andrews.

Very soon now Exley would raise a gun, or order it raised, and put Bucky down. He only had a little leverage, a little time to work with.

"I want a phone," Bucky said, adjusting the aim of the M4 to Duncan's head. His hands were very steady. "I want to talk to Steve. I'm not putting the gun down until you let me talk to Steve."

Just one more time. Just to say goodbye instead of disappearing.

Footsteps approached from the opposite end of the corridor, and Bucky had to divide his attention between Exley and the handful of MPs surrounding him, to his right, and the fresh batch coming up on his left. The new ones were wearing red crosses, led by Woj and Dr. Lind. Two of the MPs were unfolding a stretcher as they came.

"Hey, Barnes," Woj said. "We need to take a look at Andrews. You don't have to put the gun down, but we need to take him, okay?"

Bucky flicked his glance down at Andrews, his face slack and unmoving but without the particular whiteness of death on his skin.

"You got me, Barnes," Duncan said, and Bucky's gaze snapped up to his face--his face looked
lighter than it should, blood drained out with fear, stealing the vivid undertone from his brown skin. There was blood trickling down from his nose, but he was giving no tells for aggression or deviousness.

"You've got me," Duncan repeated. "You keep the gun on me, you can let them take Andrews. You don't need him."

Bucky glanced from Duncan to Woj and the medics behind him, and then everything else around him was eclipsed by the distant sound of a familiar voice.

"Rogers here, is everything okay?"

"Captain," Exley said to the cell phone he was holding, and Bucky forced himself to maintain situational awareness while unable to drag his gaze away from the phone in Exley's hand. "Before I try to brief you further, could you please raise your voice slightly and ask Sergeant Barnes to cooperate with the medics?"

"I'm not asking Bucky to cooperate with anything if you don't tell me what's going on," Steve said flatly, which made Bucky feel ashamed. Even now Steve was trying to protect Bucky, thinking someone was going to hurt him and not that he'd hurt Andrews.

Of course Steve would want him to let the medics take Andrews. Bucky wanted the medics to take Andrews. And Exley probably wouldn't order him shot while Steve was still on the line, not when Steve didn't know enough not to take Bucky's side.

Bucky glanced toward Woj and gave a tiny nod, raising his rifle slightly to keep his aim steady on Duncan.

Woj and Dr. Lind moved forward, hands extended, showing him that they weren't carrying weapons, while Exley said, "Thank you, Captain, that did the trick. Sergeant Barnes has had a bit of an incident, and I'm afraid some people have been hurt. He wants to speak to you."

"Bucky?" Steve said. "Buck, are you okay?"

Exley raised his eyebrows and tossed the phone in Bucky's direction. Bucky snatched it out of the air without letting his awareness of Woj and Lind--carefully maneuvering Andrews onto his back without jostling his neck too much, neither of them so much as looking in Bucky's direction--waver any more than his aim.

"Steve," Bucky said, his voice grating out. "I'm..."

He wasn't okay, and even not hurt probably wasn't a situation that would remain in force for much longer. "I'm here. Exley's right. Don't be mad at him, it was me."

"What are you talking about?" Steve demanded. "Bucky, what happened?"

Steve wanted to believe that Bucky wasn't the one who'd done something awful. Steve wanted to believe that Bucky could still get better; he could hear it in Steve's voice, could feel it transmitted through the phone and into himself. Steve loved him, and that was what Bucky had wanted to hear one more time before he was put down, but it made everything worse.

He didn't want to die on Steve again, and make him witness it again, even if only over the phone. He didn't want to die at all when Steve was in the world.

But he wasn't willing to kill everyone in this corridor, starting with Duncan and ending with Exley.
He knew that sooner or later they would drag him down by sheer numbers outside—he would never
get off the base alive if he started fighting now, so he might as well not start.

Just a little more time, though. He just wanted a little more time. He kept the rifle steady on Duncan.
They were dragging Andrews away, and Duncan still had his hands raised in surrender while the
MPs with Exley kept their guns raised.

"I--I hurt people."

Bucky still didn't really know what had happened, why he had done it, but he wasn't going to say he
didn't know. Pleading ignorance wouldn't help. No one ever wanted to hear excuses for failure.

"I hurt Andrews. So I--whatever they do to me now, it's my fault. Don't go picking fights over it, it
was me."

"Nobody's doing anything to you without a hell of a lot of due process and me watching their every
move," Steve said grimly. "Where are you right now? Give me the tactical view, let's figure this out."

Bucky let his eyes flick around, taking everything in, turning it into a series of angles and obstacles.
He could play this game with Steve, if it would make Steve understand the situation was hopeless.
"Corridor, HQ building across from barracks. Back to a wall. Exley and five MPs with M4s out on
my three o'clock. Medics working on Andrews at my nine. Duncan's on my twelve, I'm holding an
M4 on him."

"You're not gonna shoot Duncan." It wasn't an order, or even a question, just an observation. "And
if they thought you were going to that wouldn't stop them from firing on you. You know that. You
can't take a soldier hostage."

"You got a suggestion, Cap, you just say the word." Bucky looked around again, keeping the rifle
up. Steve was almost certainly right, but Bucky couldn't let go of at least the illusion of leverage.

"You need a defensible position," Steve told him, like he didn't know that. "What's the nearest room
you can get into? You need a corner to hole up in while you regroup. You can hold off anybody if
you get the right layout, make them come at you one at a time."

Bucky found himself remembering the narrow space of a half-full boxcar, raising a sidearm in a left
hand made of flesh and bone. He'd only had to block a door. Just hold them off from Steve.

They had Andrews on the stretcher and were hoisting him up to carry away. Dr. Kwan and Dr.
Chestek's lab was back that way, around a corner. The doors he could see were heavy steel, too
sturdy to kick in quickly, but he didn't think he'd left the lab door in any condition to be locked.

"On it, Cap." Bucky met Duncan's eyes and jerked his chin to the left as he took a slow sideways
step. Duncan nodded and matched his stride, coming with him down the corridor, the gun still
leveled at his head. Exley and the MPs stayed where they were; another foot didn't make any
difference to their ability to shoot him down.

Bucky and Duncan progressed all the way to the corridor junction without anyone impeding them;
Bucky could hear Steve's steady breathing in his ear, and it felt like a lifeline, like a promise. No
matter what happened here, at least Steve was safe and far away.

At least Steve would know for sure. They would let Steve bury him this time.

Bucky jerked his chin again. Duncan nodded and leaned out into the cross-corridor, checking.
"Squad of MPs in each direction, Sarge," Duncan reported. "Ten yards back either way."

Bucky nodded, and beckoned to Duncan with the hand holding the phone. He was letting Duncan get into disarming range, but no one was getting a gun out of his hand right now, and it didn't matter anyway. Steve was right. He wasn't going to shoot Duncan.

When he had the barrel pressed to Duncan's chest, Bucky called out, "Coming around!"

He nudged Duncan with the rifle. Duncan stepped out into the crossfire first, and Bucky followed him, directing him with the gun to move left, toward the still-open--broken-open--door of Dr. Kwan and Dr. Chestek's lab. Bucky maneuvered them all the way around, so that he was at the door and Duncan was in the middle of the corridor, and then he shoved the M4 at Duncan, releasing his own grip on it, and shoved the broken door into place as he threw himself backward into the lab.

"Buck?" Steve asked, as the door slammed not-exactly closed. "You somewhere safe now?"

"The lab where I was before," Bucky said. "Door's busted, can't--"

He stopped short at the sight of movement on the other side of the door, through the narrow window of reinforced glass.

"Buck?" Steve repeated. "What's going on? Are they rushing you?"

"No, it's Duncan," Bucky said, his mind gone blank with shock. "I threw the rifle at him. He's. He's standing guard."

He had his back turned to Bucky--not keeping him in the room, but positioned to keep the MPs and everyone else out. Bucky could see the M4 cradled in his hands, ready for use.

"Good," Steve said in his ear. "That should buy some time, so we can figure out what happened and what we're going to do about it."

Bucky shook his head, backing toward the furthest corner of the room from the door. That put him behind Dr. Chestek's computer station. The monitor was showing a skewed view of the floor and the legs of the chair he'd been sitting in: the feed from the tiny camera Dr. Kwan had been using to peer inside Bucky's arm.
"I know what happened, Steve, I was there," Bucky said. "I was having an arm session--"

"Arm session?" Steve interrupted. Bucky rubbed his face and reminded himself that Steve had never seen one of his printed schedules, never mind knowing the way Bucky privately abbreviated the schedule descriptions.

"Yeah, it's one of my things every day this week, I come over to the lab here and Dr. Kwan and Dr. Chestek try to figure out how my arm works. This week they've started hooking it up to sensors, and today Dr. Kwan was having me open the segments so he could stick a camera in and get an idea of what's inside."
"Ah," Steve said. "Was that--did it remind you of..."

"No," Bucky said, and then glanced at the simple folding chair he'd been sitting on, which was still upright in the middle of the room. It didn't even have arms; he'd braced his wrist against his knee, or just held the arm rigid.

"I mean, yeah, it reminded me of getting my arm worked on," Bucky said. Especially on Monday, when they hooked up sensors for the first time, images and memories had flashed through his head so intensely he'd barely been able to keep track of who was saying what to him in the real world, but he'd kept still and stayed quiet, waited it out. Dr. Chestek had been patient with him.

"But I don't mind them working on my arm. I wasn't--I don't mind Dr. Kwan, he's fine."

Bucky glanced around the room again, trying to remember exactly how hard he'd pushed Dr. Kwan. There were spatters of blood in the room, but not pools. The medics would have been able to get to him immediately; Bucky had walked out of this room and hadn't looked back.

"I wasn't upset," Bucky clarified. "I wasn't scared, or angry, or anything. I was just sitting there."

"Okay," Steve said after a pause. "So you were sitting there and then what?"

"And then I stood up," Bucky said flatly, playing it back in his head, because it still didn't make any fucking sense and even now he wasn't going to whine to Steve that he didn't know why.

"I shoved Dr. Kwan away, and Mueller tried to stop me from going out the door--Mueller's one of the MPs, you saw him, he was there when you first brought me--and I disarmed him, knocked him down, went out into the hallway--"

Bucky stopped short, abruptly realizing where he'd been going.

"Buck?" Steve said. "What happened in the hallway? What happened with Andrews and Duncan?"

"They came running toward me. They didn't even have their sidearms out, no rifles, just running toward me, and Andrews was telling me to stop. And I was--he was in my way, so I--"

"What'd you do, Buck?" Steve prompted, but there was a tone in his voice like he already knew.

"What do you think I did?" Bucky demanded. "I was trying to--" and Bucky stopped again, because that was weird, that was--why the hell had he been trying to do that? It wasn't time for that. He'd been in the middle of an arm session.

"Exley just sent me security cam footage of what you did," Steve said. "So I know what you did. But why don't you tell me?"

Bucky blew out a breath. Steve didn't quite sound like Woj, poking around inside his head. He sounded like... Steve, needling him about something he thought he was right about, trying to make Bucky agree with him.

"I shoved him just about through the wall," Bucky said. "Hard enough that he didn't move after that. Hard enough that I knocked him into Duncan and hurt him too."

"Duncan's got--what, maybe a bloody nose? You're calling that hurt now? Bucky, I've seen you work--I've been on the other end of you trying to complete a mission, I've been next to you. I know what it looks like when you try to hurt somebody. I don't see that on this video."
Bucky looked at the screen again, the little camera still lying on the floor, and thought about the footage Steve was probably watching. He tried to make himself picture it from that angle instead of inside his own body, moving like he was in a dream, not questioning the logic of anything. Not questioning the orders he'd been given.

"Tell me exactly what you did, Buck," Steve repeated stubbornly. "Andrews and Duncan come at you, running toward you, Andrews yelling at you, and you're walking toward them with a rifle in your hands, and what did you do?"

"I," Bucky said, watching it play out, distant and grainy, in his head. "I... Jesus, I let Andrews get way inside my guard."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Yeah you did. You made it hand-to-hand instead of ranged. Some sniper you are."

"Fuck you, my hand is a weapon," Bucky replied, but without heat, because he was seeing what Steve was seeing. "I didn't even close my fist to hit him, though."

"You didn't," Steve said. "And speaking as someone who you have hit with a closed fist, I'm sure he'll appreciate that when he wakes up."

"Is he--did somebody--"

"His vital signs are stable, that's all they can really tell so far," Steve said. "Concussion, obviously, so anything could happen. But he's doing a lot better than he would be if you'd fired a short burst at center of body mass."

"But that," Bucky said, working through the implications. "That means--I was in control, then. A little bit. Because I knew enough not to hurt him."

"Ah," Steve said. "So you were mostly not in control, then. You hadn't mentioned that."

"I didn't..." Bucky shook his head and got out of his corner.

Duncan was still standing guard. Bucky picked up the camera and brought it back to the computer station, sitting down sideways in the chair and propping his left arm on the desk. He twitched his fingers in the way that made the upper arm plates separate, and jammed the camera into the third bicep segment, right where it had been when he'd stood up.

"Say again?" Steve prompted.

"The order wasn't to kill anybody. I didn't need to kill anybody." Bucky scowled at the computer screen as he wiggled the camera around, looking for—he didn't know what. Whatever had done it. If he set himself off again, at least he was alone this time and the MPs were already waiting for him.

"The order was to report in to base. That's why I stopped when Exley showed up. Once he was there, the order was complete."

Bucky counted out the seconds of Steve's silence, but he'd only gotten to four when the Cyrillic words engraved inside his arm flashed up on the screen. He heard Dr. Chestek's voice again, sounding out the short phrase in a slightly drawn out up-pitching tone of uncertainty—then again, still drawn out but in a different tone, slightly sing-song as she tried to find the stresses, and something in his brain fuzzed out like static.

_Report to base. Submit to commanding officer._
"--Bucky? Buck, are you there?"

The echo of compulsion faded, and Bucky discovered that he was on his feet, the camera on the floor again. The phone was on the desk where he'd set it down to free his hands. He hadn't even taken a step that time, just stood up. But then he hadn't actually heard the words, either, just remembered them.

"Yeah," Bucky said, looking around for the other camera, the one that had to be here somewhere--there, in the corner of the ceiling, right above the door. He looked straight into it as he said, "I think I know why I did it."

"What happened?" Steve asked.

Bucky swallowed and closed his eyes. It didn't even matter if it was his fault or not. It would matter to Steve, he would care, but the Army was just going to know that he was a weapon with a faulty mechanism.

"There was a trigger phrase," Bucky said, keeping his face turned toward the camera and enunciating clearly. "In Russian. Not just the words, a certain tone, cadence--Dr. Chestek just happened to hit it when she was trying to read what the writing inside my arm said. I needed to report in--I was heading for Exley's office."

"That's good," Steve said after a second, and Bucky snorted a laugh.

"No, Buck," Steve insisted. "I mean it--that means that even with the trigger phrase you know which side you're on and who your CO is, just like you knew you didn't want to hurt anyone too much. Mueller's got a split lip, Dr. Kwan doesn't even have that. You were trying to obey orders without hurting anyone."

"Well, that went fucking great," Bucky muttered, thinking of Andrews slumped like a broken doll against Duncan's leg.

"It could have been a lot worse." Bucky heard a thump that might have been Steve dropping himself onto a couch. He wondered suddenly what the hell Steve had been doing when his day got interrupted by Bucky's crisis a thousand miles away, but before he could ask there was a thud against the doorframe, like someone kicking it with their heel.

"Hey, Barnes," Duncan called through the not-quite-closed door. "Captain Finn here wants to talk to you."

Bucky frowned and edged toward the door. He'd never met or heard of a Captain Finn, and he didn't have any new people or sessions on his schedule this week.

"Sergeant Barnes?" The new voice sounded like a captain, young but absolutely sure of himself. Bucky had a sudden flash of Steve in a bar in London wearing a crisp dress uniform, and he felt dizzy with dislocation.

"I'm Captain Mike Finn. I'd lobbied for us to be introduced sooner--the meeting was planned for next week, but given the circumstances, Major Exley agreed to let me see you at once. I'm from the Judge Advocate General's office, Sergeant. I'm on your legal defense team, and I'm here for your protection."

Bucky stared at the door for a moment, and then said, "Steve?"

"Yeah," Steve said, sounding like he'd heard that too. "I'm here."
"I should--I gotta go," Bucky said, swallowing everything else he wanted to say to Steve. Not when Steve wasn't here, not on camera and with the door open and over Exley's phone. Not when it was starting to seem like this wasn't his last chance after all. "My lawyer's here."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
"You have attorney-client privilege with me," Captain Finn informed Bucky after he let him into the lab. "Not with Sergeant Duncan. If you want to move this discussion somewhere private--"

Bucky shook his head. "Here's fine, sir."

Captain Finn was a baby-faced blond with big green eyes, an inch or two shorter than Bucky, though he filled out his uniform as well as Steve ever had and didn't show an ounce of fear at being in a confined space with Bucky. "Call me Mike, Sergeant. I'm here to work for you."

"Bucky," Bucky offered. "I, uh--did you piss somebody off?"

Mike smiled. "To get stuck with this job, you mean? No, but I pissed a lot of them off trampling them to get it. Everybody at JAG wanted a piece of this case, and just about as many wanted to be on the defense as the prosecution--I worked with Colonel Griffin on a case a few months ago and he's lead defense counsel, so he picked me as one of his assistants. I've been camping out here on base since you reported in, waiting to be allowed to speak with you--Colonel's been breathing down Exley's neck."

"I've been..." Bucky said slowly. If Finn had been on base the day he arrived, and had time before that to fight to get on his defense team, then they'd been planning this before Bucky ever came in. This wasn't about anything he'd done today. "I've had a lot of new people to meet."

"Yeah, that was Exley's argument--they wanted to make sure you were fundamentally stable before forcing you to worry about your legal defense, but now this. You want to take me through what happened today?"

Bucky nodded and started to explain. Mike turned out not to need much in the way of getting up to speed on Bucky, though--he'd had a couple of weeks at least. He'd probably read every file Steve could dig up, if Steve hadn't been telling them that stuff directly.

Mike was really excited about the trigger phrase, carefully taking a picture of the computer screen with his phone when Bucky pulled it up again. Bucky didn't look at it himself, and did his best not to remember what the words had been.

"This is excellent, Bucky, this is--this is huge for your defense, do you realize that?"

Bucky stared blankly at him. "All somebody has to do is say the right words and I turn into a weapon again, and that's a good thing."

"It is," Mike said firmly. "Because we don't convict weapons of the crimes committed by people using them."

Bucky was a little unnerved by Mike's enthusiasm for proving that he was a mindless machine at least some of the time. He could see why Exley had wanted to give him a few more days before they met.

Still, it was reassuring to have Mike, steely-eyed and resplendent in dress uniform, at his side when...
Bucky finally stepped out of the lab. Mike flanked him, with Duncan on his other side, on the long walk to Exley's office. It soothed some itch in his brain he'd hardly noticed when he finally completed the trip.

He offered Exley's phone back, and Exley accepted it, saying merely, "Thank you, Sergeant."

Bucky nodded. "Did you hear what I said, sir?"

Exley nodded back, not bothering to pretend he didn't understand. "The first time, when you were speaking to Captain Rogers, yes. We turned off the camera as soon as Captain Finn entered the lab. You're entitled to meet with anyone on your defense team in private."

Bucky said nothing, waiting for judgment. Exley already had his side of it. He might not be willing to have Bucky summarily shot if he somehow rated a whole team of lawyers assigned to take his side, but Bucky was still waiting for the mag cuffs. It would be the logical next step for them to take.

Exley nodded again slowly. "Sergeant, I permitted Captain Finn to speak to you to set his mind at ease that your rights were not being violated, and to reassure you that you have an advocate here, but I don't think you're going to require his services just yet. What I saw today was a psychiatric incident which we all knew was a distinct possibility in a soldier being reintegrated after long-term captivity. That is a health matter and does not call for punishment. We did also have an incident of improper handling of a weapon..."

Exley gave Bucky a long, stern look, and Bucky understood, however baffling it was, that the entire incident of his holding Duncan at gunpoint was being reduced to that.

Exley nodded and carried on as if he hadn't paused. "For which I will be using my discretion as your commanding officer to administer a non-judicial punishment. You're confined to quarters for the rest of the day, and you may be on punishment detail for up to the next ten days--at least the next two, while we rework your schedule to account for some new treatment priorities. While confined to quarters and while on punishment detail you are permitted to ask at any time to see Fr. Guzman, Dr. Wojciechowski, or Captain Finn, and arrangements for you to meet with them will be made as soon as is reasonably possible. Would you like to speak with any of them at this time?"

Bucky shook his head, dazed.

"Captain Finn, you and Sergeant Lee please escort Sergeant Barnes to his quarters. Sergeant Duncan," Exley added, a little ominously, "stay here."

Bucky let his hand brush against Duncan's as he turned to go, and Duncan surprised him by catching his hand and squeezing briefly. Bucky squeezed back and then moved on, letting Mike herd him out.

Sergeant Lee, carrying an M4, fell into step with them right outside Exley's office. No one said a word as they made the short walk to the barracks building.

Bucky was in the process of stepping into his room when Lee said, "Barnes."

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Bucky was in the process of stepping into his room when Lee said, "Barnes."

Bucky turned to face him, keeping himself carefully on the inside of the threshold. He was officially confined now.

"We're all volunteers," Lee said. "And I don't mean like we got volunteered, and I don't mean because we volunteered back when we enlisted. I mean they sat us down for a briefing on who you are and what the Army knows about what's happened to you and what you're capable of, and we had to opt in to be considered for this detail. We get combat pay any day we're on duty where you are, and we all know why. Andrews knew why when he woke up this morning, and so did Mueller
and Duncan. So did I."

Bucky nodded, unable to actually smile or summon up a grateful expression. He shifted his gaze to Mike and said blandly, "That why you've been wanting to meet me? Get your combat bump?"

Mike smiled and shook his head. "No bonuses for JAGs on this detail, I'm afraid. I've just been trying to do my job."

Bucky nodded again and shut the door, closing himself in.

A few hours later Exley stopped by to inform him that his punishment detail was kitchen duty, and to give him the schedule for it—a featureless twelve-hour block—and the protective equipment he'd be required to wear while he was at it.

When Duncan, Lee, and Mueller came to collect him at 5:30 the next morning, Bucky already had the bulky headphones on over his ears, playing familiar music and blocking out all other sounds. The headphones would prevent him from being accidentally triggered again while a lot of ordinary troops who weren't getting combat pay for being near him were in range of whatever he might do next.

Bucky frowned, barely out of his room, when he noticed Duncan not only didn't have an M4, he wasn't wearing his sidearm. He pointed to the spot on Duncan's thigh where it ought to be, and Duncan nodded and slapped the back of his own wrist then pointed to himself.

Duncan was being punished too.

Bucky stopped in his tracks and said, "Why?" out loud. It was a weird sound, his own voice nearly drowned out by the music pouring into his ears.

Duncan looked from Lee to Mueller and then around the hallway—they were still in the otherwise empty barracks where Bucky was quartered—and mimed for Bucky to take the headphones off.

Bucky looked over at Mueller, who nodded, waving his hand permissively. Bucky tugged the headphones down to hang around his neck, music still spilling out but no longer blocking his hearing.

"Nice tunes," Lee said, offering a little smile and bouncing on his heels like he wanted to start dancing. It was what the music was for, after all.

Bucky's mouth twitched toward a smile, but he looked to Duncan for an explanation.

"We have a standing order about what to do if you turn aggressive and do not seem responsive to your environment," Duncan said with a shrug. "Big surprise, the order is not to run toward you yelling at you to stop."

"You weren't yelling," Bucky pointed out. "Andrews was yelling."

"Yeah, but I was right there with him," Duncan said. "So now I get to wash dishes right along with you."

"Is he," Bucky said, glancing toward Mueller and Lee, uncertain whether he was even allowed to ask. Exley would have told him if Andrews had died, but...

"Stable," Duncan said. "They're keeping him sedated for another day, there was some swelling in his brain. Tomorrow if it's gone down they'll take him off the drugs and see if he wakes up."
Bucky dropped his gaze and pulled the headphones back on. He kept his eyes on Mueller and Lee's feet all the way to breakfast.

Kitchen duty didn't actually feel like a punishment at all. The first sergeant who ran the kitchen, Baptista, didn't seem bothered by communicating mostly in gestures. Bucky worked next to Duncan all day anyway, so he could just copy what Duncan did: loading dishes into enormous dishwashers, scrubbing pots, unloading dishes from the dishwashers.

The hours went by in a long series of simple, repetitive tasks. No one was angry. No one wanted him to do anything that hurt. His feet and back didn't get sore, which he remembered being the main feature of jobs like this when he was young.

He was standing at a sink, scrubbing a pot, and had a sudden, vivid memory of going by Steve's place one night after work. He could feel it through his whole body: sitting on the foot of the bed and letting Steve's hands work over all the sore places on his back while the radio played.. this song, maybe, or maybe that was just the power of suggestion being piped into his ears.

Bucky shook away the memory. He didn't need that. His back wouldn't get sore from something as simple as a long day's rather gentle work.

But as he focused on the present again he was struck by the sight of his hands submerged in soapy dishwater. His camouflage shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing his mismatched forearms. He was clutching a rough green sponge in his metal hand while dance music poured into his ears to prevent him hearing any order that could make him hurt anyone.

And they called it punishment.
Bucky pressed his lips together, trying to hold back a wild impulse to laugh, but he made the mistake of looking over at Duncan. He caught Duncan looking over at him, and Duncan frowned in confusion at whatever strained expression was on Bucky's face as he tried to keep silent.

Bucky could keep silent in almost any conditions. He had done it before; he was a ghost, he was a weapon, and weapons didn't make a sound when they didn't intend to. But his ears were full of swing music and his hands were still half-submerged in dishwater and he couldn't help it. He burst out laughing.

Duncan looked even more confused for a second and then shook his head and started visibly laughing too, though Bucky couldn't hear the faintest sound of it. Bucky looked back down at the
pot in his hands and went back to scrubbing, but the sound of his own laughter kept bubbling up through the music, shaking him. Every time he managed to stop he would look over at Duncan and one of them would start laughing again, setting the other off.

Neither of them quit until Baptista banished them to opposite ends of the kitchen, Bucky emptying another dishwasher while Duncan mopped the floor.

The day passed peaceably. At the end of it Bucky went back to his quarters and slept the night through without even trying.

The next day went the same until he and Duncan were sitting down for their off-shift lunch of sandwiches with Mueller and Lee, between the busy hours of the troops' regular mealtimes. Bucky was looking away, not bothering to try to follow the others' conversation, when Duncan tapped his hand.

Bucky looked over, startled by the touch as much as curious about what Duncan wanted. Duncan was grinning hugely as he first mimed sleeping, cheek pillowed on hands, and then tilted his head upright and opened his eyes wide, mouthing He's awake.

Bucky grinned back, and hummed along with the music in his ears for the rest of the day.

Saturday was another day of punishment detail, but the featureless twelve-hour block was broken up by two PT sessions with Master Sergeant Ripley. It was a relief to stretch his legs in a run after so much standing around, to have a chance to work his body to its limits. Washing dishes after PT almost felt like the old days.

He didn't let himself think about wishing he could see Steve at the end of the day. He knew that wasn't going to happen. He didn't need it.

Sunday his schedule had last Saturday's afternoon on top of the same Sunday morning as the week before: Mass, breakfast, rec time, lunch, and then Visit, without a name in the box where Steve's had been last week.

Bucky didn't let himself think about it. He put on his dress uniform and was ready and waiting when Woj and Fr. Guzman came to get him for Mass. After three days it was strange to leave his quarters without the bulky headphones covering his ears; he felt half-naked and oddly unprotected.

"Should I complain about you not needing me at all?" Woj asked, smiling. "Punishment detail seems to agree with you."

"I've been sleeping pretty well," Bucky agreed, giving Woj a sideways look.

Woj's smile widened. "Glad to hear it."

They were almost to the chapel by then. Fr. Guzman peeled off to get ready for Mass, and Bucky went in with Woj, taking the same spot in the same folding chair he'd occupied last week. He listened to the other men coming in behind him, heard Duncan and Master Sergeant Ripley and the kitchen guy--Rogelio--take their places. The seat closest to the door in the last row stayed empty.

Mass in English was less jarring this time. Bucky managed to drift along on the familiar routine until Fr. Guzman offered a prayer, "For the speedy recovery of our brother, Eric Andrews."

Bucky ducked his head, folding his hands firmly together in the correct form for prayer. He was very conscious of Woj beside him and Duncan behind him. Not that Master Sergeant or Rogelio were any less aware of what Bucky had done, but Duncan had seen him do it. Woj had helped drag Andrews
away from him while Bucky was still brandishing a weapon.

Thank you, Bucky thought, to them, to his tightly-folded hands. He wasn't sure who he was thanking, why he was thankful more than he was scared or ashamed, but right then it was what came to mind. Maybe that was what praying was supposed to be like. He could ask Fr. Guzman, maybe, if he got scheduled for confession this week and didn't fuck everything up before he got there.

He was so distracted by the odd feeling of gratitude that he barely noticed the rest of the Mass. Suddenly it was time to go to breakfast with the others and he was shuffling out of the little chapel, Duncan ahead of him and Woj behind him. None of them spoke until they were sitting down. All of them were at one six-seater table, even Fr. Guzman. Bucky was on a corner, with all of them between him and the door, Duncan beside him and Woj across.

"So?" Duncan said after they'd all started eating, directing the single word, and his raised eyebrows, to Woj.

Woj nodded and sat back in his chair, giving Bucky a thoughtful look. Bucky took a sip of coffee, trying not to do anything obvious under scrutiny, even though he didn't know what he was trying not to be obvious about.

"So," Woj said. "You have a visit scheduled today, but you can opt out if you want."

Bucky knew, right then. He felt a mixture of eagerness and fear that took him back, with an almost violent completeness, to a day when he was sixteen years old and about to go out on his first real date with Eleanor McKinley. He'd wanted so badly to get it right, for her to like him, to make her laugh.

Please. His fingers curled in, and he was glad they were down in his lap where no one would mistake prayer for closed fists.

"Andrews wants to talk to you," Woj said. "He's still going to be in the hospital for a couple of days for observation. Obviously we're not taking you there, but we've got a video thing worked out, if you're willing to talk to him."

Bucky nodded jerkily, trying not to betray the rapid beating of his heart. He wanted so badly to see Andrews, to know he was all right, to replace the memory of his motionless body with the sight of him speaking, maybe smiling.

At the same time he was terrified that it wouldn't be the same as it had been--Andrews could be angry, or worse, afraid of him. But the wanting won out. He could make it come right somehow. He had been good at making people like him once. He had made Steve like him, and Steve Rogers at five years old had already been angry at half the world.

Steve--wasn't an option. He could hear that plainly enough in the silence around Woj's words. Maybe because he'd talked to Steve once already this week; maybe because he was being punished. Maybe talking to Andrews was a punishment, making him see what he'd done--but Andrews was getting better, and Andrews wanted to talk to him, so it couldn't be that bad.

"Yes, please," Bucky belatedly remembered to say.

Woj smiled. Duncan grinned in his peripheral vision, giving a triumphant little fist pump, like he'd won something when Bucky said yes or please. Bucky reached over and tapped the back of Duncan's wrist--not even a slap, just a gesture--and Duncan laughed out loud.

It was nice being able to hear it this time.
His block of rec time felt more like punishment than the actual punishment detail had. Bucky was left with three solid hours to "relax," which he spent in the lounge where he had watched movies with Andrews and listened to music with Andrews and read books with Andrews, waiting to be allowed to see Andrews and wondering what he was going to say.

He put on *I Was a Male War Bride*, feeling obscurely like he was apologizing to Andrews by watching it. It wasn't queer at all, really, even when Cary Grant wound up dressed as a woman at the end. It made Bucky think of Agent Carter a little, and what could have happened with her and Steve if Steve hadn't crashed that plane. But his thoughts kept stealing away to Andrews, trying to think of what Andrews would say to him, what he would say to Andrews.

He was attempting to strategize something that didn't involve trajectories and vantage points and wind velocities, without a straightforward mission objective. His brain circled uselessly the whole time.

It was a relief when two MPs he didn't know—though he thought he'd seen them on the other side of their rifles on Wednesday—came to escort him to lunch. They ate without speaking to him, M4s slung on their backs, and Bucky finally managed to force his own thoughts to silence and stillness. Whatever happened would happen. He would manage the situation as it arose.

When he was escorted back to quarters, there was once again someone standing outside his door: Exley, with a tablet in his hand. He handed it to Bucky. "Just hit the green button when it rings. You'll be able to see each other."

"You're not," Bucky said hesitantly. "I'm..."

Of course he wouldn't be unobserved, but he hadn't realized they were just going to leave him alone with Andrews.

"You can't hurt him from here," Exley pointed out reasonably. "And he asked that the conversation be private. He wants both of you to be able to speak freely. I've granted his request; you can speak to him in your quarters."

Implies that his quarters were not monitored, or at least wouldn't be for the next hour.

Bucky nodded, not knowing what to say to that. Exley nodded back and turned away. Bucky shut himself in his room, sat down on the end of his bed, and waited.

They didn't actually make him hurry up and wait much more, after all the waiting he'd already done. There was a noise like a telephone ringing and the black screen lit up with two dots, one green and one red, within a minute of Bucky sitting down. He touched the green one, and was immediately greeted with the sight of Andrews, pale and propped against a pillow, but alive and awake.

There was also an image of himself in the lower corner; he adjusted the screen until he saw less of his own nostrils.

Andrews smiled and said, "There you go," at the same time Bucky blurted out, "Thank you."

Andrews smiled, looking puzzled. "You're welcome? What'd I do?"

*You didn't die*, Bucky thought, because this would have been so much worse if Andrews hadn't woken up basically unharmed. *You asked to talk to me.*

But what Bucky said was, "You tried to stop me."
Andrews made a face. "So I gotta tell you--you'll love this--I don't actually remember what happened. The whole day is pretty much gone. Apparently that's normal with head injuries."

Bucky blinked and stared at him. He'd never been the one who remembered before. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Dunc says there's some good camera footage of the whole thing when I'm ready to watch, and I know what happened. I would probably do the exact same thing again next time, so you really are welcome, man. I just don't remember it."

Bucky blew out a breath. "Did they really brief you about me? And you volunteered?"

"Yeah," Andrews said with a crooked smile. "After your intake I even asked to take lead, be your orientation guy. Don't tell my wife that, okay? But yeah, they showed us videos and everything, so I should've known better than to go running up to you while you were in Terminator mode. I guess I just thought--"

Andrews made a sheepish face and waved his hand. "Anyway, I'm okay other than not remembering it, I wanted you to know that. I'm having some post-concussion shit, so I can't talk long, but I wanted you to see I'm all right. Are you okay?"

Bucky nodded, and realized what he was thanking Andrews for, and what he wanted to tell him. He knew what would be a sufficient thing to give in return for what Andrews had given him.

"They--after I started to come out of it, after I hit you," Bucky said. "They let me--I demanded to talk to Steve."

Andrews started to nod and then winced and kept still. "Yeah, Dunc told me about that."

"It wasn't that I thought he could really help," Bucky said slowly, pushing every word out with a deliberate effort while he watched Andrews for a reaction.

"I just wanted to hear his voice. I thought it was just a matter of time before somebody put a bullet in my head, and I wanted to talk to him one more time. I've been in love with him for a long time, and the last time I died we didn't really get to say goodbye."

Andrews' eyes widened, and he seemed to be trying to contain a number of reactions, but he didn't look disgusted or angry.

"Does he know that?" Andrews said after a few seconds, when he'd gotten his expression mostly under control. "How you feel?"

Bucky nodded quickly. "Oh, yeah, since... 1937, I think? And he knows I remember, and I still..."

Andrews was starting to grin. "Did he try to get into your pants, Sergeant? Did I not tell you to tell me if somebody was making moves on you?"

"He doesn't count," Bucky insisted, smiling back. He felt warm and invincible in the knowledge that he'd done it right, that he'd chosen the correct tactic for the situation. "He's not on my reintegration team. He's not even in the Army anymore."

And Steve hadn't made a move, other than raising his hands as far as Bucky's elbows, but Andrews didn't need to hear that part.

"Details," Andrews said blithely, and then his expression turned serious. "Have you--have you ever
told anyone that before? About you and him, or--about you?"

Bucky shook his head. "We didn't--we had a few friends who were like us who knew, back then, but we weren't the kind who talked much about it. It wasn't ever something I announced to anybody. That I was--bisexual. And with Steve."

"That's..." Andrews raised a hand to cover his eyes for a second, but he looked straight into the camera when he put his hand down. "Thank you, Barnes."

Bucky nodded. He knew what Andrews meant; it was the same thing Bucky had meant when he thanked Andrews for believing he could make Bucky stop just by telling him to, even if he'd been wrong.

*Thank you for trusting me.*

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is [here on Tumblr!](http://example.com)

I am also on [Tumblr!](http://example.com) And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](http://example.com).
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

So at some point I noticed that most of the terrible things in this story happen in odd-numbered chapters. Not every odd-numbered chapter, but... this one was definitely a data point.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky got his schedule for the week, as he had the week before, after dinner on Sunday. It looked a lot like the previous week's original schedule, but he had two meetings with Mike and his orientation sessions with Andrews had been replaced with Trigger Detection and Trigger Reduction. The first session listed Dr. Kwan and Dr. Chestek's names; after that there were no names listed.

So punishment detail was over. They were back to trying to fix him. He stared at the schedule for a long time before he went to sleep, tracing the shapes of the boxes. He couldn't make himself believe it, exactly, but he held the image in his head, along with the image of Andrews talking to him from the hospital, when he closed his eyes to sleep. All those orderly little boxes with the neatly printed words inside marked out the shape of his future one hour at a time.

In the morning, after Duncan and Lee had escorted him to breakfast and then to Exley's office, Exley said, "Let's talk about your schedule."

Bucky nodded. "You... you really think you can fix it? Fix me?"

Exley tilted his head a little and said, "That's what you're here for, Sergeant. The whole idea of all of this is to get you into shape to be out in the world again safely. Safe for you, safe for the world."

"I said it wasn't a matter for punishment, and it's not, but we can't ignore the fact that you could have killed Andrews and threatened to kill Duncan. We have to treat that if we're not going to punish it, so this is priority one. We have been given reason to believe that the trigger phrase activated the other day isn't the only one you're vulnerable to..."

Bucky kept still, calculating. He couldn't remember, but there was a feeling of familiarity around it, a weight of something about to fall on him. If they knew that already, and still meant to fix him...

He nodded.

Exley nodded back. "So we find as many as we can, and we start deactivating them. Woj will tell you more about the deactivation process; he's working with some experts on that, so when you see him today he'll give you the rundown. We're not giving up on you at the first sign of trouble, Barnes. We're soldiers. We're not failing in our mission without giving it all we've got, and we're nowhere near that. Understood?"

He couldn't remember ever being anyone else's mission before. He could barely absorb the idea that that meant something other than his death. But he did understand what Exley had said, even if he couldn't quite believe it.

"Yes, sir."
"All right," Exley said. "So that accounts for most of the new stuff on your schedule. As you see, you also have some meetings with Captain Finn."

The first day's session of Trigger Detection turned out to be Dr. Kwan finishing what he'd been doing in the first place, imaging the inside of Bucky's arm. He carefully scanned all instances of writing inside, checking the interior surfaces of the plates as well as the functional spaces. Dr. Chestek, at the computer station, didn't say a word this time as she studied the images coming in. Bucky watched her while she watched the screen and Dr. Kwan poked around inside his arm.

She had been the one who set it all off: Andrews was hurt because of her. Men could have been killed--Bucky could have been killed--because of what she did. Because of someone else's words in her voice, spoken without knowing what they meant or what they could do.

"Doc," Bucky said after half an hour of careful silence.

Dr. Chestek looked up, studying him with wary concern. There was no sign of the excited interest she'd had in the workings of his arm when they first met two weeks ago.

"Wasn't your fault either," Bucky said.

She blinked, smiled sadly, raised her hand to press a knuckle against the bridge of her nose for a few seconds before she looked up. Her second try at a smile looked more sincere. "Thank you, Sergeant. I'll try to remember if you will."

Bucky nodded, and went back to sitting quietly while Dr. Kwan worked.

Woj spent half an hour asking him about his favorite parts of the punishment detail; Bucky was more tempted to lie than he'd ever been, because his favorite parts had been nearly all of them. He didn't want them to make him do something worse--something really, genuinely punishing--the next time he did something terrible. But he'd already gotten into the habit of telling Woj the truth about things he knew Woj could find out just as well some other way--checking how long he'd slept and where, what he'd eaten, who he talked to. He gave up without much of a fight and told the truth about punishment detail, too.

It occurred to him, as he was speaking, that he thought Woj would have to get the truth out of Baptista, or maybe Mueller, if he wanted to cross-check what Bucky was saying. He didn't think Duncan or Lee would tell on him. He was starting to trust them, too.

Even if they did speak to Woj--he had already seen Bucky at his worst. Woj had helped get Andrews away from him, and teased him about being happy on punishment detail on their way to Mass. Woj put his hand in Bucky's metal one to say the Our Father on Sunday mornings. Woj had let him see Andrews--or maybe Exley had.

Exley had put him on punishment detail in the first place, a laughably mild response to what he'd done. Bucky didn't think the next time would be any worse, or that they would really be searching hard for something to hang a next time on.

"Barnes?"

Bucky realized he'd trailed off in the middle of talking about his suspicion that Lee liked swing music more than he did.

Bucky shook his head. Woj wasn't Andrews; Bucky didn't need to tell him what he'd just realized.
He went back to dutifully talking.

Eventually, toward the end of the session, Woj explained how trigger deactivation worked.

"We're going to try to desensitize you to them, basically," Woj said. "Which means you're going to get triggered in safe circumstances, where you can't hurt anyone, and we're going to try to encourage you to do anything that isn't what the trigger wants you to do. And then we're going to practice that, over and over, until we're confident that you can get control of yourself back from the triggers without anyone getting hurt."

"Exley said you had reason to believe there's more than one." Bucky didn't quite make it a question, but Woj answered it like one anyway.

"Based on what Dr. Kwan found written inside your arm and files uncovered by Captain Rogers and Agent Romanov. We don't know what all of them are, which is why you're scheduled for detection sessions all week. We're reasonably certain they're all in Russian, which is why you're allowed to have your regular sessions without hearing protection."

"But you're not sure," Bucky remarked, "which is why the MPs get combat pay."

Woj grinned. "You're getting the idea, Barnes."

Once Woj had gone over the whole procedure with him, he took Bucky down to a locked lab. He'd already told Bucky there wouldn't be restraints, but it was still a relief to find the room empty. There were a couple of gym mats on the floor, so he could sit or lie on them, but the room was otherwise featureless. No windows, no handle or keypad on the inside of the door.

Lee and Mueller flanked him while a doctor got a cap of dozens of connected electrodes settled over his head, pressing contact points through his short-cropped hair. He'd been bracing himself for pressure, for a feeling of danger or restraint, but the electrodes were tiny, lightweight, and connected only to a palm-sized object by a thin wire. They had Bucky put the recorder in his pocket, and assured him that it would transmit wirelessly to their computers. The whole setup only took a moment, and then everyone headed to the door. Duncan hung back, and tugged a thick paperback out of his pocket before he went, offering it to Bucky.

"You might like this one," he said. "Something to do when you got your brain to yourself in here."

Bucky looked down at the book, and his heartbeat kicked up in excitement. It was a new one by Tolkien: The Fellowship of the Ring, the first book of something called The Lord of the Rings.

Bucky looked up as the door closed, then went and sat down on the corner of the mats, opening the book. There was a map of Middle Earth at the front, and his eyes traced the locations he already knew, the new ones marked.

"Sergeant Barnes, are you ready for the first test?"

Bucky looked up toward the ceiling and Woj's voice. He carefully closed the book, and set it down beside him. "Yeah."

He had exactly long enough to recognize that the next sound he heard was Dr. Chestek's voice, and then the dream took hold.

It started out boring—probing the sealed, featureless door for weaknesses, finding none, searching more and more minutely—and then shaded into a nightmare, scratching and pounding frantically at the sealed door, gripped with an ever-increasing black horror of the consequences of his continuing
failure. It went on and on, and he was battering at the door with his whole body and getting nowhere, constantly aware of what his failure would cost him, until--

"Sergeant Barnes. Stand down."

He froze, and when the door opened--without him even touching it--he stumbled across the threshold, falling to his knees at his commanding officer's feet. Awareness leaked back in as he gasped for breath.

They had played the trigger phrase, a recording of Dr. Chestek's voice. He had been trying to report in to base. It was good, really, that he couldn't get out of the door, it was--

Bucky raised his hands to cover his face, and found it wet. His whole body ached from his attempts to use it as a blunt instrument. He could feel all the places where his arm's supports were anchored, because they all hurt with the almost-dislocated sharpness that meant they'd been strained close to breaking as he tried to exert more force with his left arm than the rest of his body could bear.

"All right, Barnes," Exley said gently. "I think that's enough for today."

Bucky didn't realize until Lee and Mueller took him to the lounge next to his room that he'd been released two and a half hours early from a three-hour session. He sat for a while, staring at the black rectangle of the television, feeling the sweat slowly drying all over his body.

The pain was already fading, but the desperate, trapped feeling clung to him even now that he was awake, making everything around him seem unreal and unfamiliar. He couldn't drag himself away from the nightmare of the unopenable door, or from the knowledge that he was scheduled for another three-hour block of it tomorrow.

There was a knock on the doorframe. Bucky looked up to find Woj standing there, holding the bulky headphones.

"Come on," he said, holding them out to Bucky. "Baptista's got dishes for you to wash if you haven't got anything better to do."

The schedule carried him inexorably forward: washing dishes was substituted for the rest of the Trigger Reduction block, and then there was PT, and then a session with Dr. Lind. It was ten minutes of talking about his physical health, and then the better part of an hour standing, sitting, and lying in various positions while they X-rayed him all over. Dr. Lind left a few minutes at the end to show him all the images on a computer screen. Lind pointed out the brilliant white of the structures that anchored Bucky's arm, and let him see every scan from head to toe.

After that was dinner and an evening in his room, reading Rocket Ship Galileo. He thought of The Fellowship of the Ring when he picked it up. Duncan said it was something for him to do in that room, when his mind was his own; it was something to earn by resisting the trigger phrase, then. He couldn't see how he was ever going to do that, but it was the task they had set.

The schedule said he was going to get better, so he trusted the schedule. He went to bed at lights out, and then next morning there was breakfast, and a meeting with Exley to review the previous day and prepare for the next.

"We'll be testing out possible triggers this morning," Exley explained. "And since we don't know what they're going to do if they turn out to be real trigger phrases, this is going to mean keeping you restrained. We'll still have you isolated, so there's no danger of you hurting anyone else, but we have
to consider that some triggers could make you try to hurt yourself, and that's not an acceptable outcome."

Woj had warned him about this part yesterday, so it wasn't a surprise. It was there on the schedule, even if they hadn't written that part down. Today they would put him in restraints and watch his brain through the cap of electrodes while they tried to make him a machine again. But the schedule box had an end. After two hours, he would come out of the restraints. They would stop testing. He would be human again; he would go to PT, and then to lunch, and then he would talk to Woj before they tested him again. He would trust the schedule.

At the end of his meeting with Exley, Mueller and Duncan walked him over to another lab, across the hall from the one with the sealed door. This one had a bed in the center.

Not a table. Not a chair.

A bed, with clean white sheets and a soft-looking blue blanket, and a pillow at the end. The bed also had rails, and the rails had heavy restraints attached: one for each extremity, and heavy bands that would cross his body at the thighs, hips, and chest.

But there was no head restraint. There was a pillow for his head.

Dr. Lind and Woj were studying computer screens at the end of the room. When Bucky came in Woj said, "Hey, Barnes. Ready for this?"

"Nope," Bucky said, eyeing the bed. "That's not going to be a problem, is it?"

"Not really," Woj said. "We'll be right here, Barnes. We're not going to let anything happen. Nobody's going to get hurt."

Bucky nodded and walked over to the bed, looking down at it. The legs were anchored to the floor, and everything looked strongly-constructed enough to hold him, even if he fought. They had made a door he couldn't get through, why not a bed he couldn't break?

His gaze kept going to the pillow, though. They had put a pillow on the bed. They wanted him to have a pillow.

"Take off your boots and belt, get comfortable," Woj said. "Blouse too, if you want. You're not going to be held to uniform regs here."

Bucky sat down at the foot of the bed and took off his boots and his socks. He'd never liked having socks on in bed. He stripped off his blouse as well, leaving himself in an undershirt and his fatigue pants. He took off the belt, coiled it neatly, and set it on top of his folded blouse. Mueller came over and took his things away, out of reach. Bucky closed his eyes for a second, taking a deep breath, and then he laid himself down on the bed, moving his arms and legs into position for the restraints.

It was Dr. Lind who fastened them, asking him with each one--even the left wrist--whether the angle and fit were comfortable. Lind put the cap of sensors on his head last, and Bucky lifted his head off the pillow for it, letting Lind position it just so. He stared up at the ceiling after everything was in place, thinking about how easy it would be for them to kill him now--except that it would also be a colossal waste of everything that had come before. They wouldn't have put so much work into him over the last few weeks to end it now, like this, in a soft clean bed.

Then Woj, sounding like he was over at the computer again, said, "All right, Barnes, we're going to start the trigger sounds. Just try to ignore them--it could take a while before we get the right tones and cadences even if we have the right words, and it may actually work better if you're focused on
Bucky waved his hands as much as the wrist restraints allowed—hardly more than a fluttering of his fingers—and said, "You got some dishes for me to wash?"

Woj laughed a little. "If only we could do it that way, Barnes, I swear we would. Here we go."

Bucky stared up at the ceiling as a flat-sounding female voice started up, saying the names of different colors in Russian, repeating them again and again in slightly different pitches.

He tuned it out and thought about the book in the room across the hall. The Fellowship of the Ring. The ring had to be Bilbo's ring, didn't it? There had been something important about the ring. When he reread The Hobbit last week Bucky hadn't been able to stop thinking about how much easier Bilbo's ring would have made some of his missions; operating in a strange dark shadow-world was hardly any price to pay for the things he could have done with that ring on his finger, but then he'd--

He shivered all over, shaking his head sharply, as if a bug had just flown at his ear. His train of thought snapped, and the mechanical voice was still repeating blue, blue, blue in slightly varying intonations.

"Barnes? Okay?" Woj asked.

"I think that was something," Bucky said, staring up at the ceiling and trying not to shiver again at the non-memory of that instant.

"Yeah, we're getting somewhere," Woj said. "Hang in there."

What had he been thinking about? The ring. The book. It was another book about a journey, he thought, from the look of the map at the front. He tried to imagine a map that traced his own travels of the last six months, everywhere he'd gone.

All that time he'd been carrying Hydra's control of him, etched inside his arm, stamped in his brain, waiting for someone to--

His whole body went limp, sinking into the bed, sagging in the restraints. He tried to tense, to move, to speak, but nothing happened. Woj didn't ask if he was all right; the voice was still speaking overhead. They couldn't even tell the difference. He wasn't even sure there was a difference, but—he tried to move, to throw his arms against the cuffs, his legs—to thrash his head on the pillow, to speak--

He couldn't move a muscle. He tried to hold his breath and couldn't even do that; his lungs kept filling and emptying steadily, as though he were perfectly calm. He could move his eyes, he thought—if they were moving, if he wasn't just imagining that—but he couldn't open them. He couldn't scream. He was trying to scream, he wanted to scream, because he knew what was coming next.

He knew how this went. First he couldn't move and then they did anything they wanted to him. They did everything they wanted, and he felt every second of it and couldn't even scream. At least the other times they let him scream.

Woj's voice rose, but it was a blur of sound behind Bucky's trapped panic, far away. This wasn't a dream, this was the opposite of a dream—not a nightmare, just a waking hell, a prison the size and shape of his own body. He couldn't move, and he couldn't scream, and he was trying, he was trying, and he couldn't--

Hands touched him—pushing, rubbing, petting his skin. He couldn't even flinch. They pinched and
prodded and he couldn't pull away, couldn't resist at all. They touched his face, his throat, his chest--they were touching him everywhere, they would do whatever they wanted. He knew how this went. He knew those hands, those voices, laughing and joking as they stripped him, turned him where they wanted him--

No, he was still on his back, pants still fastened. He could hear Woj's voice. Woj was saying his name, trying to get him to focus, but he couldn't look. He couldn't hold himself here against the tide of memory. He knew this. He knew what came next. He knew what was coming for him.

It didn't stop.

They unshackled him--no need for restraints when his body belonged more to them than to him--and he felt the hands all over his naked skin, a tongue forced into his unresponsive mouth. He remembered this, the taste and the smell--but the smell was wrong. The smell was--dish soap. He could smell dish soap from the kitchen.

"Bucky," Woj said. "From your brain activity we think you're conscious in there, and we're trying to make this stop. Just--Jesus, Barnes, I'm sorry. Hang in there. We're here. We're trying to fix it. We're not giving up."

He tried to answer, and couldn't. He was choking on what they crammed into his mouth, more bitter than soap, and it carried him back down into the darkness.

It went on and on and on; they fucked him, cut him open, poked their fingers into his wounds. They washed him, unconcerned that he would struggle. They disassembled his arm. They talked casually over him in Russian or in English, both at once sometimes.

For a while a fog rolled in that distorted everything, turned time and memory and terror gluey and confused but didn't end anything. He tried to move. He couldn't move. He couldn't scream. He couldn't even breathe hard.

Words. Just one person speaking, somewhere close by, and the words were--the words--

"What is a hobbit? I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy." Bucky recognized Exley's voice long after he recognized the familiar words, falling into the rhythm of them and letting the images bloom in his mind.

Exley's voice and the familiar story pulled him near enough to the surface to know where he was: in the bed in the lab. Still clothed, not hurting anywhere, not even the lingering ache of healing. He'd been remembering, that was all. No one had hurt him here, now, today. No one was touching him.

The restraints were gone. The blanket was pulled up over him. Exley kept reading, like he meant to read the whole book. He was acting like Bucky was a kid being put to bed with a story, which was all backwards. He was already asleep, or might as well be for all they could tell. He might as well be frozen--they would tip him into the tank--

He strained after the sound of Exley's voice, but the cold and ice took him away from it, down into the dark. He tried to scream and couldn't, couldn't, couldn't.

There were hands on him, icy-cold hands everywhere, opening him where he should be closed, fingers intruding, prodding. He couldn't even shiver, couldn't cry--but he could feel something wet on his face, dripping ticklishly down his temples and into his ears, and he could hear--
"That would be no good," said the wizard," and Bucky recognized Andrews' voice, sounding slightly flat and far away, like he had sounded... Sunday. When Bucky had spoken to him on the tablet, from the hospital, because Bucky was in the lab now. They'd triggered him and he was in the lab, frozen but safe and clean, and Andrews was reading to him.

"Not without a mighty warrior, even a hero. I tried to find one, but warriors are busy fighting one another in distant lands..."

He managed to stay longer this time, listening to Andrews, before another wash of terror and memory dragged him away into the dark and the cold and the prison of his own body.
The next voice to drag him to the surface was Steve's. For a moment he recognized Steve's voice but not the words, because they didn't belong together.

"Very well then, we must just tighten our belts and trudge on," Steve said, and that was... Steve was reading *The Hobbit* to him, his voice warm and bright and *false*. That was--that was bad, that was really bad.

Steve was pretending, and that meant they were--they were letting Steve see him again, this had to be--they weren't going to be able to get him free and they didn't want him to know it, but they were letting Steve see him, speak to him one more time before they--before they--and Steve was going along with it, Steve--

"No, it's--" Steve's voice broke abruptly out of the cadence of the story, sounding strained but honest. "It's because he knows I hate this book, he's freaking out because it sounds like I'm lying to him. I'm sorry, Buck, here--"

"And of course there were no nuts," said another voice--female but warm, not the voice of the trigger-words. It took him a second to recognize Romanov. "Nor even hawthorn-berries. He nibbled a bit of sorrel, and he drank from a small mountain-stream..."

He clung to Romanov's voice for a long time, just knowing that she had to be with Steve, that Steve had to be watching and listening over her shoulder. Steve wasn't alone. That was good.

The familiar story and Romanov's voice kept him anchored there, close to Steve even if he couldn't hear him, even if Steve wouldn't touch him, until a turn of phrase sent him tumbling down again. The hands and the mouths and the scalpels and the screwdrivers were waiting there for him, and he forgot there was anything else.

He still couldn't scream.

It went on like that for a long time; he could almost surface sometimes, and listened to Duncan and Lee and Mueller and Father Guzman all taking turns reading to him. Father Guzman did voices for all the dwarves. It was kind of funny, but Bucky couldn't laugh any more than he could scream, and the dark always pulled him down to be used and hurt and tormented again. He fell and fell until the terror dulled into numb expectation of pain and horror, and even that was finally swallowed up by the dark.

He was already moving when he realized he could move, throwing himself out of the bed to land on his knees on the hard floor, breathing in heaving gasps. He cowered from motion on the other side of the bed, throwing himself backward, arms up, already gasping out, "Please, please not again, please--"

"Barnes."

It was Exley coming around the bed, and Bucky made himself hold still, shaking with the effort of not cowering further as Exley approached him. He couldn't make himself lower his arms, even knowing that it left his torso vulnerable. He was dripping sweat from his exposed armpit and down his spine, and his left arm was whirring continuously, frantically calibrating as it tried to throw off heat, bracing for attack.

"Please," Bucky managed, and the word came out as an unmistakable sob. His chest was heaving; it was all he could do not to let out an audible whine on every breath.

Exley didn't come any closer, dropping down to sit on the foot of the bed. His hands turned palm-up
on his knees, inviting an offer instead of threatening.

Bucky made himself tilt forward onto his knees. He could move, he could speak, he could shake and
gasp. He could do anything, if they would just not lock him up like that again. He made himself
crawl forward a little.

"Please, sir, please," Bucky managed. "Please, not again. Please, I'll do anything, just--just not that
again, please. I'll--"

Bucky knew what he should offer, but he could still feel it too vividly, hands all over him, cocks
shoved down his throat and up his ass. His throat spasmed when he tried to say it, choking the words
off. He crawled closer, his face almost between Exley's knees, and tilted his head up.

He saw the man by the door then--Duncan, standing guard. Seeing him crawl, seeing him beg.
Bucky squeezed his eyes shut, feeling tears run down, and forced his mouth open.

"Please, sir, I'll do anything, just--please, anything, just not that again, please. I'll do the door a
thousand times, I'll--sir, please, I'll be good for you, I can--"

He choked again, words and breath stopping together as he fought not to actually gag, when Exley's
hand closed on his right shoulder. He held still except for the trembling, and the way he had every
muscle locked, waiting for what Exley would do. Duncan would watch, or join in, and Bucky would
be good for them--wouldn't fight--he would thank them for it as long as they let him speak, if they
would just--just not--

"Barnes," Exley said. "Open your eyes. Look at me."

Bucky squeezed his eyes tighter shut for a fraction of a second, then tipped his chin up and looked.
Exley's hand was still on his shoulder. Exley was looking down at him steadily, patiently, with a
conspicuous lack of either lust or cruelty visible in his face.

Bucky wanted to shrivel up in the face of that matter of fact kindness. Exley wasn't going to accept
anything from him; his begging and bargaining only exposed his own filth and would win him
nothing from that implacable calm authority.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Barnes."

Bucky's breath left him in another hollow, hopeless sob.

Exley's hand tightened on his shoulder. "I'm not going to tell you you're never going to have to do
that again. But not tonight. Not this week. This is off the rest of your schedule, all right? For the next
five days, you don't have to worry about this. When you do have to do it again, it will be on the
schedule. You'll know in advance, and we'll do everything we can to keep it from being that bad, or
going on that long. And it won't be tonight, and it won't be tomorrow. You don't have to do it again
right now. I promise you that, Barnes."

Bucky had to look away, shaking his head, shaking everywhere. "Please, no, please, please--" he
raised both hands to cover his ears as he sobbed again, like that could protect him.

"Duncan," Exley said.

Bucky folded down over his knees, clutching his hands tighter, even knowing that Duncan was
going to come over here and drag his hands away, force him to--force him--

"Hey," Duncan said softly, "Hey, Barnes, here."
Bucky heard the bright and incongruous sound of dance music.

He dropped his right hand from his ear to reach for it even before he quite realized what he was hearing. Duncan was offering the protective headphones he wore in the kitchen. They played only safe, known music, so he couldn't be triggered. Bucky took them, fumbling the headphones on over his ears. When they were in place he looked up at Duncan standing over him, Exley still sitting on the foot of the bed.

Exley stood up and made a beckoning gesture. Bucky forced himself to uncurl, standing as well, relaxing into the music. Exley pointed to his watch, letting Bucky see: 0127. It was the middle of the night. He'd missed the entire day, locked in his body in that bed.

Exley gestured him toward the door, and he followed Duncan to it. Bucky brought his hands up over the headphones as they stepped out, as though something might snatch them away from him, but there was no one outside, the corridors all quiet and dark. Duncan and Exley walked on either side of him through the chilly desert night on the short exposed walk back to the barracks, and they waited, flanking him, as he hesitated on a threshold, looking up at the stars and moon and taking one more deep, clean breath. Bucky kept his hands clamped over the headphones until Duncan pulled his door shut behind him, leaving him in his little barracks room alone.

He folded down to his knees and crawled under the bed. He stayed there, protected by the bright strains of swing music, until he shivered himself to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is [here on Tumblr!](https://example.com)

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](https://example.com).
In the morning--after four more hours of sleep and a shower--Bucky was able to make himself leave the headphones off when he got dressed for breakfast. He knew, mostly, that no one had known what the trigger would do. They still didn't know, really. All they'd seen was Bucky lying motionless in bed. They didn't know--

Duncan was standing there with Lee when Bucky opened the door, and Bucky remembered begging at Exley's feet. Duncan knew, if anyone did. Duncan had seen him crawl.

All Duncan said was, "No tunes this morning?"

Bucky shook his head.

Duncan shrugged acquiescence. "Coffee's on me, then, man. Come on."

Breakfast was just like any day when it was Duncan's turn to get the coffee, except that Duncan found paper cups and lids somewhere. He got Bucky a third cup of coffee at the end of breakfast, and let him carry it with him to Exley's office for the morning meeting.

Bucky's hands shook a little when he met Exley's eyes for the first time, remembering Exley's hand on his shoulder. He remembered the way his throat had closed on the offer to suck Exley's dick if he would just put off the next round for a while. He was glad to have the coffee in his hands; he sipped it to distract himself when Exley waved him into his usual seat.

"I'm sorry," Exley said briskly, and Bucky froze.

"Woj is going to say this too," Exley said, meeting his gaze steadily. "Your morning detection block is going to be a debrief with him, but I'm your CO, so I'm saying it first. I'm sorry. We fucked up yesterday, and you took the hit for it because we weren't as prepared for every eventuality as we thought we were. We will not repeat that trigger until we're sure we can sedate you out from under it or otherwise control duration. That was--we tortured you, Barnes. It wasn't acceptable, even as therapy, and no apology is sufficient, but I want you to know that it was not what we intended, and that I am sorry."

Bucky stared at him, bewildered.

"You didn't..." he said, struggling to make sense of the words.

He'd still been wearing his fatigues when he woke up under the bed this morning; he'd had to piss so badly he almost couldn't, and he'd been ravenously hungry at breakfast. He hadn't been sore anywhere. There had been no blood to wash away. Nobody had actually done any of those things to him yesterday.

His team had sat by the bed and read him a book; Exley had stayed beside the bed until he woke up. Duncan had brought him the headphones. They'd even tried to let him hear Steve's voice, unless that part had been a nightmare. He wasn't quite ready to ask, when Exley had just said we tortured you and Bucky was so close to being sure that it wasn't true. But Exley had also said I won't lie to you.

"Sir? You... tortured me?"
"But," Bucky said, and stopped short. Exley raised his eyebrows and made a little beckoning gesture. Bucky let himself be coaxed.

"It wasn't you. It was--it was me. It was my brain. None of you did anything to me. I did it to myself."

"We put you down there, Barnes," Exley said, shaking his head. "We thought we could pull you back up, and we failed. That's on us."

"It looked like torture," Woj said, when Bucky had haltingly explained what Exley had said.

Bucky frowned. "I was just lying there. People were reading to me."

"Yeah," Woj said, "you were just lying there wearing the sensor cap, remember? We didn't take it off you until you hit delta sleep after you lost consciousness. Before that we had nearly ten hours straight of your brain activity, and you were lighting up all kinds of patterns associated with not just fear, but physical pain, over and over. We could see when you were listening, when you were relatively calm and reacting to language, and we could see when you were responding to stimuli that were nowhere in the room. We knew when you were scared and when you were hurt; even if it wasn't happening in front of us, we know exactly how real it felt to you."

Bucky felt abruptly cold inside, images washing through his head almost as vividly as they had when he was frozen in the bed. He opened his eyes wide, looked down at his own hands as he closed them into fists and then forced them open again.

"Barnes?" Woj said gently.

"You could... you could see?" Bucky asked.

He didn't even know if he was remembering things that had seemed to happen yesterday, or remembering things that had happened before, or just thinking of the worst thing they could have seen. Wherever they came from, images kept washing over him, the pain and the filth and what went with it sometimes.

"We couldn't read your mind," Woj said. "We couldn't see what exactly you were feeling or remembering, but we had an idea of what kinds of sensations you were experiencing, from the way your brain lit up the sensors."

Bucky's stomach twisted tight. "The kinds of sensations."

"Yeah," Woj said, and his voice was still very gentle. "Yeah. Some of it looked like sexual sensation, for instance. Was there something like that? Is that what you're worried about us seeing?"

Bucky flinched, shrugging as he tried to push away the memory of being unable to struggle while they did what they wanted. "It's not--it wasn't that different. Not really. Just I couldn't scream."

"That's pretty different," Woj said. "Screaming helps. There have been studies; it's easier to endure pain if you can yell and cuss when you feel it. Pain hurts more when you can't scream, scary things are scarier."
"But you saw." Bucky stopped again. Woj had been letting him have an out, maybe.

"I saw that you were experiencing sexual sensations, and maybe some arousal or even pleasure, in the middle of a hell of a lot of pain and fear," Woj said. "Barnes, there's a word for that."

Bucky flinched.

"No, I'm--I know we haven't made a big deal about this before because we've had a lot of other things to talk about, but--when you say it wasn't different, you mean it wasn't different from what, exactly?"

"Other times," Bucky said, and his voice came out a hollow whisper. "When they had sex with me. Rumlow, the last day, with the stun baton, or any of the other times."

"Other times they raped you," Woj said, like it was the same thing.

Bucky actually looked up, shaking his head.

"I mean," Bucky said. "They did that too. They raped me--fucked me--but I mean they, sometimes they would--I would get off, too. So that was, it was--"

"No," Woj said sharply.

Bucky stopped, startled into awareness that Woj was also an officer.

"Sorry," Woj said. "But that's factually incorrect, Barnes. Any time they forced you to have any kind of sexual contact--whether they were fucking you, whether somebody was sucking your dick, I don't care what it was, if it was forced, and very emphatically if you were scared, and in pain, and unable to even scream--it doesn't matter if you got off on it. It was rape. It wasn't your fault. If they made you feel things when they did that--it was still rape."
Bucky just stared blankly at him for a few seconds, blinking, and then said, "Are you telling me I haven't had sex since 1945?"

"I'm--" Woj sighed. "I'm not telling you to feel any differently than you already did about whatever happened. If it felt good sometimes, if it hurt less that way, if it was something at least partly good in the middle of something really bad--I don't want to take that away from you if that's how you feel about it. But I want you to understand that it was rape. You were forced--they forced you, they took away your right, your ability, to decide who to have sex with or whether to have it at all--and that is what the word rape means. Especially if you were paralyzed like that--you were completely defenseless and unable to communicate. It can't have been anything else. By definition, even if it hadn't hurt at all, anything that anyone did to you sexually when you were under the influence of that trigger would be rape."

Bucky could barely remember anything they did to him that hadn't hurt at all, but he remembered the things that had felt good on top of hurting. He remembered Rumlow's mercy, the day of the helicarriers, and the technicians who slicked his hand and opened his pants for him while he was shivering in the chair. He remembered the burst of pleasure in the middle of all the pain, so vivid he could feel it now, an echo in his balls and down his spine.

"Rape," he repeated, trying to make the word fit in his head. Everything that had felt good, every moment they touched him, everything that felt real in his memory.

"It's the correct word for what they did to you," Woj said, sounding tired. "It means it wasn't your
fault, and you have nothing to be ashamed of. You didn't do anything wrong. I want you to know that."

"Yes, sir," Bucky mumbled.

Woj rubbed his face with his hands.

"So the point of all that is we made you relive it yesterday and we didn't mean to do that and it was counterproductive and I'm fucking sorry," Woj said.

"We had a sedative formulation that worked on Rogers, so we thought it would work on you, but you've obviously had a lot more opiate exposure along the way than he has, or you just naturally have a higher tolerance. We could see from your brain activity that it wasn't actually putting you under, but we didn't really know what it was doing for you except that you were still scared. We're going to test some combinations and doses on you in the next few days in a controlled and planned way, when you're fully conscious and you can tell us how it goes--for some people some sedatives have paradoxical effects, and the last thing we wanted to do was up the dose on something that was just going to ratchet up your panic response and still not put you under."

Bucky nodded slowly, although there hadn't been a question in there anywhere.

Woj looked at him for a while and didn't say anything until Bucky said, "When you find something that works, you're going to trigger me again."

Exley had already told him that. They would do it again when they could control the duration. When they could do what they did mean to do to him, for just as long as they meant to.

"Yeah," Woj said. "Yeah, we are. We have to. The only way to make sure no one can use that trigger on you again is to break it. Which is going to mean using it under safe circumstances."

Bucky looked away. He couldn't beg them not to. He couldn't offer anything they wanted. He'd always known this, hadn't he?

As long as he'd known Steve, he'd known that people who were trying to do the right thing were the most relentless. It didn't matter what he did. He couldn't stop them, not when they were determined to help.

"Barnes," Woj said. "Do you have any idea how they used to snap you out of it? If you were remembering while you were down, did you..."

"They froze me," Bucky said, swallowed hard and forced the words out. He might as well tell them what they were up against, if he couldn't stop them from trying to fix it. "They would switch me off when they didn't need me to do anything anymore, and they'd do what they wanted while I was switched off--they did a lot of maintenance like that. And then they'd freeze me. Or they--sometimes the chair, I think. Fifty thousand volts will reset anything."

"Okay," Woj said after one of those little pauses that meant he wasn't going to make Bucky say how he felt about it.

Bucky didn't want to know what the word for that was, what he should call the relief of the tank or the chair bringing that imprisonment to an end.

"Okay," Woj repeated. "So neither of those is an option. We'll figure out the sedatives, and we won't try it again until we have it right."
The schedule stayed the same, with Sedative Testing substituted for Trigger Detection the next two mornings. He spent Thursday morning being not-unpleasantly stoned for fifteen minutes before the first thing wore off, then anxious and itchy for nearly an hour after they gave him the second formulation, pacing around the lab and chewing his lower lip until it bled. The third formulation left him asleep for half an hour followed by three hours of confused grogginess that didn't wear off until he was in the fourth mile of his PT run.

Friday morning they put him to sleep and woke him up without much ill effect twice, and then the third time Bucky was convinced the dose hadn't done anything until he realized he could smell colors. The effect wore off after half an hour, but left him rubbing his nose, trying to remember those impossible phantom scents, for the rest of the day.

"Was that," Bucky said, when he had his hour with Woj that afternoon. "Did you get it right today?"

Woj nodded slowly. "We think so. We'll do some more sedative tests Monday morning."

So Monday morning wouldn't have a Trigger Detection block either. But that still left Trigger Reduction in the afternoons. He'd done the door five times in the last two days, trying to get to Exley under the report in trigger; the second time each day he was able to at least remember while he was pounding at the door that he had been triggered, and that he should try to do something else. He had actually managed to stop pounding at the door for a second today, and Exley had opened it from the other side before he swung his fist again, setting him free. He was assured that that was progress.

"So," Bucky said. "You're going to try it again? Monday?"

Woj nodded. "If the sedative works again on Monday morning, yeah. That'll be the trigger we try on Monday afternoon."

Bucky nodded, staring down at his hands. They wouldn't make him stay down there for hours again. It wouldn't last longer than the schedule block.

"In the meantime," Woj said, "it's almost the weekend. Got any big plans?"

His voice was gently teasing--Bucky's plans were exactly the size of the schedule boxes--but one of the schedule boxes, tomorrow afternoon, had Visit: Rogers in it. Bucky had been doing his damnedest not to think about it all week, in case he fucked up and got it taken away, in case Steve reading to him over the phone for thirty seconds was as much Steve as he was allowed this week. In case anything else went wrong.

"Maybe," Bucky said. "If... maybe. I'll tell you Monday."

Woj smiled a little and didn't press the question, just talked to him about breathing exercises and lucid dreaming.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is [here on Tumblr](https://example.com)! I am also on [Tumblr](https://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](https://example.com).
This time when Bucky saw Steve standing outside his door, he stopped dead.

Steve didn't smile. He stared for a second and then started toward Bucky in long strides that Bucky recognized as Steve not letting himself run.

Bucky took a step forward to meet him just as Lee and Mueller sidestepped out of Steve's way, and then he had Steve's arms wrapped around him, the wall of Steve's body pressed to his. Bucky pressed his face down against Steve's shoulder and clung to him just as tightly. Steve had started it; no one could blame Bucky for following his lead.

"See you for PT, Barnes," Mueller said, and Bucky didn't even bother to pick his head up.

Steve was rubbing a hand up and down his spine, and Bucky was just realizing that he had been wanting this, to be held on to like this and to be able to hold on right back. He had been needing this like water or air, for days.

"This has been--" Steve pulled away a little, and Bucky made himself loosen his grip, tilting his head back to meet Steve's intent gaze, "--the longest two weeks of my life."

"Got you beat." Bucky barely had the words out before Steve's mouth was on his.

It wasn't a rough kiss, nowhere near as fierce as Steve's hug, but Bucky shuddered into the press of Steve's lips against his. He closed both hands in Steve's shirt and held on tight.

Steve broke the kiss after a moment and leaned in, touching his forehead to Bucky's. "I wanted to come. Last week, after that whole thing, and then Tuesday, when they called me. I wanted to be here."

"Who talked you out of storming the gates?" Bucky felt warm with the certainty that Steve would have stormed the gates if he really thought he needed to, if it was the only way to get to him. If they'd tried to keep him away even one more day, judging by the strength of Steve's grip now.

"Exley, the first time," Steve said. "On Tuesday, after they told me what was going on--Natasha and Sam both kind of sat on me."

Bucky grinned, picturing it literally: Romanov sitting with deceptive daintiness on Steve's chest while Wilson sprawled over his legs. The picture in his head included Romanov holding a paperback book, and he remembered her voice in the dark, reading about a hungry hobbit.

"You read to me, right?" Bucky asked. "I didn't dream that?"

"For about thirty seconds before they told me you were panicking harder than before, yeah," Steve said, with a little half-smile. "They'd just finished giving me this whole lecture about not saying anything unscripted to you because we didn't know what you were hearing or how you were interpreting it, if it would just become a part of the panic attack. They figured giving you a familiar story to come back to was safer, and familiar voices would help. If you hadn't calmed down for Natasha I think Exley would have found some way to have me put on short rations for saying as much as I did where you could hear."
"I understood," Bucky said. "Once you said it--I knew it was you. I understood."

Steve nodded, and didn't ask whether he'd been right about why Bucky was panicking at the sound of his voice in the first place. Then Steve's gaze moved past him, and Bucky realized that they were standing in the corridor, clutching each other like they would never let go. Steve had waited until Mueller and Lee were out of sight to kiss him, but anyone could have walked in. Anyone still could.

"Should we," Steve said, cutting a glance toward the lounge, his expression turning wary. Bucky knew he was thinking of the cameras, and was reluctant to trade the hallway for the illusory privacy of a closed room where they would be observed every moment.

He hadn't actually asked anyone. No one had ever told him he had to stay in the lounge for visits. He had had his visit with Andrews in his own room, in fact, because Andrews had asked for it to be private.

"They, um," Bucky said, glancing toward the other door. "I don't think they monitor me in my room. Not all the time, at least."

Steve licked his lip, and Bucky froze, suddenly unsure of whether Steve had heard that as a different invitation than it was, if he had somehow meant more without knowing he did. Steve's hold on him still felt only good, but if it turned into more--

Steve pulled him closer, hugging him tightly again instead of going for another kiss. "No rush, Buck."

Bucky nodded and turned, letting go of Steve enough to walk. Steve kept an arm over his shoulders, and Bucky had a sudden, intensely physical memory of doing that with Steve when Steve was smaller than him, his arm fitting easily over Steve's shoulders. Steve had mostly only tolerated that hold.

Bucky remembered the way he had wished Steve would return the grip with an arm around Bucky's waist; he did it himself now, wrapping his arm around Steve's back, and Steve looked over at him with a startled smile while Bucky maneuvered them to and through the door of his room, twisting so neither of them had to let go.

They sat down together at the end of the neatly made cot, and Bucky turned in toward Steve, hiding his face against Steve's shoulder for a while. He breathed in the smell of him, trying to print the fact of Steve's presence on his skin and let it sink into his bones.

He had made it to Saturday. They had let him have Steve again.

And now Steve was letting Bucky huddle against his side without saying anything. He couldn't even put a movie on in here to fill the silence.
"So," Bucky said without lifting his head. "What've you been up to when you're not getting sat on?"

"Oh, this and that." Bucky could feel the false lightness in Steve's voice. He knew that Steve was letting him hear it, letting him know that Steve was required to elide most of what he was actually up to out there in the real world. "Sam refuses to believe that I can't cook, so he keeps trying to teach me."

"Does he understand that you just honestly don't care what food tastes like as long as there's a lot of it?"

"I care--" Steve started, which was a lie. Bucky started laughing loudly enough that Steve gave up
and redirected. "I can tell, anyway. It's just not a big priority. There's frozen foods, and restaurants! It's so easy to get food that tastes good, why would I mess around trying to make it myself?"

"So Sam'll leave you alone?" Bucky offered.

"Yeah, but then Sam'd leave me alone," Steve countered. "Or start trying to fix something other than my cooking skills, which..."

Bucky patted the center of his chest. He understood that much. If they offered him the choice between three hours of cooking lessons and his next session of trigger reduction, he'd have an apron on so fast their heads would spin.

"So? What's he got you cooking?"

Steve heaved a sigh and started talking darkly about the many, many ways it turned out to be possible to fuck up making Sam's mom's special-recipe cookies by not paying attention to what you were doing. Bucky leaned into him and laughed and managed, a few times, to let go long enough to gesture or wipe his eyes.

After a while Steve let a little silence fall, and they were quiet together, still pressed as close as they could get, still holding on. Then Steve said, "Were they hard on you, last week? I was worried."

Bucky groaned and pulled back enough to look Steve in the eye. "Tell me you didn't try to call Exley up and tell him not to punish me for almost killing Andrews."

"That... may have figured into the conversation where he told me to get my star-spangled civilian superhero nose out of his chain of command, and that I'd be arrested if I attempted to come on base without authorization."

Bucky jabbed him with his metal fist, just hard enough for him to feel it, and then went back to hanging on, tucking himself in close again.

"It was a hell of a lot less than I deserved," Bucky said. "Punishment detail for a few days, washing dishes. They gave me these headphones to wear so I couldn't hear anything else and I couldn't get set off again. I'd say not getting to see you over the weekend was the worst of it, except it sounds like Exley was punishing you more than me."

Steve made an apologetic noise and rubbed his cheek against the top of Bucky's head. It was briefly really distracting, how well he could feel that contact with his hair cut so short. "So you were on your own for the weekend?"

Bucky snorted. "I'm hardly ever on my own, in case you didn't notice my two shadows. And they let me talk to Andrews on a video thing from the hospital on Sunday, he--"

Bucky hesitated, wanting to explain the tangle of kindness and trust and familiarity between him and Andrews that had made Bucky say what he said to Andrews. He frowned down at his own hand clutching Steve's shirt, realizing it as he spoke. "Andrews is my friend."

He saw Steve nod slowly in his peripheral vision. "That's good, Buck. I'm glad you've got a friend here."

Bucky nodded, and didn't try to explain about any of the others. Andrews was the main thing. Andrews was the one he had told.

"I told him about me. About being in love with you."
"Yeah?" Steve said. No hesitation this time, although Steve's fingers dug in a little harder on the word love. "You tell him I'm nuts about you, too, or does he think I'm breaking your heart?"

"He just wanted to know if he needed to protect my virtue from you," Bucky said. "I told him that horse has been out of the barn a while."

Steve snorted. He rubbed his cheek against the short crop of Bucky's hair slower this time, like he was enjoying the feel of it too. "I'm not in any hurry to scandalize your chaperones, Buck. We can wait for actual privacy, can't we?"

Bucky thought he could probably wait longer than that—not that he had any idea how long he might be in here for, or whether Mike and the rest of his defense team could keep him out of Leavenworth or a noose at the end of it—but then again maybe at some point in this process he'd be better enough to get his dick hard. And if Steve wanted privacy, Bucky wasn't going to push him on it.

"Yeah, we can wait," Bucky agreed, like he was the one making the concession. "Don't want to shock Andrews."

Steve let that go in silence for a few seconds, and then said, "So, now that you're not washing dishes, how are they keeping you busy?"

It wasn't what the hell happened on Tuesday?, but it was probably as close as Steve was going to get to asking. Bucky explained it in the fewest possible words: the bed, the test, and how he'd panicked when he realized he couldn't move or speak.

"God, that's awful," Steve said, his hands tightening on Bucky again. "I used to have nightmares about that. Polio."

Bucky didn't know if he'd never known that or if it was just one of the memories cut loose at some point since he fell, but he closed his eyes in silent gratitude. If Steve thought that was scary enough, he wouldn't look for anything else. Bucky didn't have to talk about what he'd remembered, what they used to do to him when he was switched off.

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Just—being stuck like that. I didn't know whether it would ever stop, and I couldn't--"

Steve silently squeezed him tighter, and Bucky made his voice lighter as he said, "Anyway, they're working on ways to fix it. They tried a sedative on me yesterday that made me smell colors."

Steve turned out to have really strong opinions about what colors should smell like even when they were somebody else's hallucinations. They wound up arguing about different shades of green for the next half hour. He didn't ask any more questions for the rest of the time they had, and he never let go.

At the end of three hours Bucky's flesh hand ached a little, and the whole right side of his body felt tender and exposed when Steve stood up from the bed, like skin that had been under a bandage. Bucky tugged Steve in for one more kiss, firm and necessary but still close-mouthed, both of them still only using their hands to hold on.

"I'll see you," Steve said quietly. He didn't say when, so there was nothing to jinx, nothing to question. It was a simple fact. They would see each other again, even if Steve did have to storm the gates this time. "Good luck on Monday."

Bucky nodded, and knew that that meant Steve wouldn't be following him to Mass tomorrow morning, but that was all right. This was enough, and he just had to keep looking forward, past tomorrow, past Monday. Next Saturday, or the Saturday after that.
"I'll see you," Bucky agreed, and opened his hands.

Chapter End Notes

Alby’s art for this chapter is here on Tumblr!

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Monday morning Bucky stepped out of his door to find Andrews waiting there with Duncan to escort him to breakfast. Bucky stared for a moment, feeling a startled grin stretch his face while Andrews did a slightly better job of looking impassive.

"Does your wife know where you are right now?" Bucky asked as he got his face almost under control.

It was Andrews' turn for a startled smile. Duncan laughed outright before Andrews said, "Nah, if she asks, I'm doing something nice and safe like munitions testing, okay?"

"That is exactly what I will tell her when I see her," Bucky agreed, and Andrews nodded firmly and led off toward the cafeteria.

Andrews took the spot by the door when Bucky went back into the lab that afternoon. They'd done the final round of sedative testing in the same lab that morning, but Bucky couldn't convince himself that this was the same thing. He took off his boots and socks, his belt and his blouse. He handed them all over to Duncan, and then sat down on the end of the bed and waited to be told what to do next. He almost wished for the restraints; at least that would be a sign that they didn't know what was going to happen.

"Okay, Barnes," Woj said, coming over to crouch in front of him, looking up a little to meet Bucky's eyes. He handed Bucky the cap of electrodes, and Bucky got it into place, remembering how it had felt before. He tucked the recorder into his pocket again.

"We're going to keep it short this time, and if you get into a sustained fear state we will sedate you immediately. You know how fast that stuff hits you; it won't take long to knock you out. The plan for today is just to try not to panic. We're not going to be able to eradicate this one quickly, so we want to start with helping you stay calm and in the present when it happens. No one will touch you after the trigger except in a dire medical emergency. I'm going to talk you through it, and I just want you to focus on my voice until it's time to go to sleep. That's all you have to do."

Bucky nodded, and Woj gave him a grim little smile and nodded toward the bed. "Get comfortable, then."

Bucky lay down and then decided to take Woj at his word, curling over onto his side, left arm on top. Dr. Lind came over, touched a few of the sensor contact points, and then set down the IV kit on the bed. Bucky pushed his right hand out, letting Lind slide the needle in and hook up the length of capped tubing, ready to push the dose as soon as he needed it. Lind taped the IV into place and patted Bucky's wrist gently, and then Woj took his place in the chair by the bed.

Bucky glanced over his shoulder at Andrews, who gave him a firm nod. Bucky nodded back and then turned back to cuddle into the pillow. He wasn't alone. They wouldn't abandon him. He would come out of this unharmed. They had promised him that.

The recorded voice cut through him like a bullet, turning his muscles to water. He noticed, this time, that the arm deactivated as soon as his body went slack. There was a silence where it normally emitted an almost-subliminal hum, and he could feel the deadness of it in the same way he could
sense the unresponsiveness of his limbs.

"All right, Barnes," Woj said. "You're down, you're doing fine. Try to notice what you're smelling--can you smell bleach or detergent on the pillow, there?"

He could. He could also smell his own sweat. Just sweat, though--not blood, not the rank smell of an unwashed terrified body. Just the lab. He was in the lab. He could hear Woj's voice. He didn't need to try to speak; Woj wasn't expecting an answer.

"Great, you're doing great. Keep listening to my voice," Woj said, and then nothing.

Bucky woke up already in motion again, but this time he managed to stop at sitting bolt upright and flinging his arms wide as he caught sight of Woj, still sitting in the chair by the bed.

"What the hell was that?" Bucky demanded. "That was ten seconds."

"That," Woj said. "Was a success. That was a fantastic success--you did amazingly well."

"You didn't give me time to do anything," Bucky insisted, and Woj smiled.

"Correct," Woj said. "We didn't want you to get scared, so we didn't give you time to get scared. If you had panicked instantly, we wouldn't have waited even as long as we did, but you hung in there. Next time we'll shoot for a minute."

"A minute," Bucky repeated, disbelieving. He could endure anything for a minute; Woj had to know that. "Okay, let's go, let's do a minute."

Woj shook his head. "No, we're not sedating you again right now. You're done with this one for the day. If you want to take a few runs at the door you can do that, though."

"Fine," Bucky said. "Jesus, fine, yes, the door. Ten seconds, what did that even prove."

Woj was still smiling when they shut Bucky in the blank room. He stomped over to the copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring* lying abandoned on the gym mats. He defiantly opened it to the first page and started reading, and he managed an entire page before the dream kicked in and he dropped the book and made for the door.

The second time, he set the book face down to mark his place before he stood up.

He felt shaken and exhausted after two tries at the door, but at least like he'd done something. There was still an hour and a half left in his trigger reduction block, but it wasn't a surprise this time to be told he was done and have Andrews and Duncan escort him back to the lounge.

Andrews pulled out a DVD Bucky hadn't seen before, though, and said, "We're going a little bit out of order--this came out in 1977--but I think you're ready for it."

The cover showed a cartoon wizard with a long, snowy beard standing behind a hobbit perched on a heap of gold, a dragon in the air behind them. *The Hobbit.*

"They made a movie of it?" Bucky said, reaching for the DVD case while Andrews put the disc in. Duncan squeezed in next to him on the other end of the couch, and Bucky sat back, letting his head rest against the back of the couch.

"As you see," Andrews said, sitting back down next to him as the title screen came up. "They made
Duncan made a little noise, and Andrews didn't even look over as he said, "If you can't behave during movie sessions you can go stand guard in the hall, Dunc. We are watching the movie of *The Hobbit* now."

"No, no, I'm good," Duncan insisted as the movie started.

Bucky said, "Shh, both of you," and no one spoke again for the next hour.

Bucky woke up and still couldn't move. There was a hand on his throat--taking his pulse?--Woj had said no one would touch him unless it was an emergency, but maybe it was--but Woj wasn't talking to him.

A familiar voice, Exley's but also his second controller's, spoke in Russian. He was laughing a little as his hand tightened on Bucky's throat, shaking him by that grip, and Bucky couldn't have screamed even if he weren't switched off.

He couldn't even breathe now, and the other hands were arriving, along with a babble of other voices, all familiar but none he could name. They were speaking a babble of English and Russian and German and languages he didn't understand, telling him what they were going to do to him, hinting unintelligibly at worse things.

The pain of being fucked--sudden and unprepared, splitting him bloodily open--hit him like a stab, and he tried to scream and couldn't. He remembered Woj saying *scary things are scarier, pain hurts more*, and it was true. Everything was too immediate, too intense, with no outlet at all. There were hands all over him, pulling him open, manipulating his dead limbs, and he couldn't stop feeling the hot breath on the back of his neck and the relentless, vicious fucking.

A slick hand touched his cock, stroking him in time to the cock splitting him open, the cruel hands touching him everywhere, the voices speaking over him. He still couldn't move, and he couldn't make himself not feel this, either. He couldn't keep himself from responding.

It had been so long since he'd felt anything this sharp and real, and right through the pain the pleasure seemed to take over his body. It made him want to writhe and moan, to push up into that hand, but he couldn't move an inch. He couldn't so much as take a breath out of the rhythm forced on him, couldn't--

He realized his left arm wasn't disabled, a twitch of his fingers advancing immediately into a closed fist. He swung and hit nothing, overbalancing, and fell out of bed.

He hit the floor hard, totally failing to twist the right way to absorb the impact. He was panting and shaking with residual terror and his dick was tenting out the front of his boxers. He stared down at himself in the near-darkness of his barracks room, feeling a little sick and a lot desperate to chase the only sensation that had been real in all of that: the pleasure that cut through everything else, vivid and arresting.

He shifted to sit with his back against the edge of his cot and shoved his right hand into his boxers. As he did, he remembered again the slick touch of some other hand, remembered a technician squirting lube into his palm and dropping his hand on his crotch.

The slide of his palm up the underside of his cock made his breath blow out in a shaky sigh, lighting up his whole body with the sensation of gentle friction on taut, sensitive flesh. He tipped his head back against the mattress and reminded himself that he was here now, like Woj had been teaching
him to do. In his room, safe. Probably no one could see him; definitely no one was touching him or had touched him, and...

And even as he curled his hand around it, his dick was going soft.

"No," Bucky muttered out loud, shoving his boxers down with his left hand like being able to see it would help, like he could control his dick better by looking at it. He tightened the grip of his right hand, but the sensation was already slipping away, fading into the usual blankness, almost numb.

He tried to call up the sensation of the nightmare, the sick helpless sense of paralysis, the pain, the way everything had felt so real, but the dream tattered and blew away like smoke just when he wanted it to stay. Instead he was intensely aware of what was real: his dim familiar room, his ass protected from so much as touching the hard bare floor by his boxers, the bleach-and-detergent smell of his sheets. His dick was shrinking into his hand, returning to the usual soft shape that wasn't good for anything but pissing.

Bucky took his hand away and pressed it to his forehead instead. He was going to have to tell Woj about this tomorrow--part of it, at least. If not the failure to jerk off, the fact that he'd had a nightmare about the off switch. He stayed there on the floor for another moment, letting his breathing settle.

He thought about going and getting a book or listening to some music, but as the nightmare and that burst of arousal both faded, he just felt tired. He had three more hours before he had to be up, and a long day ahead of him, with the full complement of schedule boxes: trigger detection and trigger reduction and orientation, Exley and PT and Woj and a meeting with Mike.

He climbed back into bed, curled over onto his side and was asleep a few minutes later.
Chapter End Notes

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"Well," Woj said, after Bucky described the nightmare and then stopped. "That's not too surprising. Have you been having nightmares before now, these last few weeks since you got here? Or before then, when you were on your own?"

Bucky shook his head. "Not... like that. Not that I remember, at least."

Woj nodded. "That's fairly typical. You've been operating in crisis mode, staying ready for the next threat. Now that you've been here for a little while, you're settling in and feeling more secure, and you're starting to process. And with the trigger exposures, we're putting you through some literal nightmare shit during the day, so no surprise if that's following you at night."

Bucky nodded, looking down at his hands. That made sense.

"So," Woj said, "what bothered you about it?"

"It hurt?" Bucky hazarded, startled by the question into meeting Woj's gaze. He'd figured Woj would take I had a nightmare as a sufficient level of being bothered all by itself. "I got raped and I couldn't move?"

"Yeah," Woj said. "Yeah, that's what makes it a nightmare and nightmares are awful. But you seemed kind of hesitant to tell me about it, which makes me think something about the whole thing really bothered you apart from having the actual--"

Bucky winced, and Woj pointed. "Yeah, there we go, what's that face? What bothered you?"

Bucky squared his shoulders and pushed through it. "I was hard when I woke up."

Woj nodded, waiting for more, but Bucky gritted his teeth on the rest.

"Okay," Woj said. "So that's weird for you, huh? You said at intake that you hadn't jerked off in at least six months--" Woj flipped some pages in a notebook, "...because you didn't feel like it, right? Did you mean by that that you never got hard?"

Bucky gave a short, sharp nod.

"Okay," Woj said again. "But you said it wasn't bothering you not to, so we didn't focus on that at the time. Sometimes it's a physical health thing, but that probably isn't what's going on with you. Last night demonstrates that it's physically possible, right?"

Bucky nodded again.

"Right," Woj said. "So, if we also count the possibility that you were getting a little bit aroused at times during that first session when we switched you off, then you're getting aroused in pretty specific circumstances, relating to the way you were raped. It seems like that bothers you."

"I tried," Bucky said, even though he hadn't meant to say anything about that part.
Woj didn't jump to offer him an end to that sentence, though, so Bucky figured he might as well finish it. He knew Woj would be silently putting it together, and apparently he didn't have any problem talking about this, so fine, Bucky would talk.

"I tried to jerk off after I woke up. And I couldn't. I mean, my hand worked fine, I could do it, I just--my dick didn't. It didn't feel like anything."

Woj nodded. "How did you feel about that? When it didn't work?"

Bucky shrugged, remembering saying no even though he'd already known exactly what was happening. "Kind of... surprised but not surprised? For a second it felt so good, but then it didn't, and I kind of knew it wouldn't. That I couldn't."

Woj blew out a breath, studying him. "Is this something you want to work on? I don't know if we can get a specialist in sex therapy cleared to come in and meet with you, but we might be able to rig a video thing like when you talked to Andrews so you could work with someone on this, or I could try to coach you--"

Bucky made another face, and Woj clearly didn't have a problem interpreting that one, because he stopped cold and grinned.

"Andrews told me," Bucky said tilting his chin up and using the deadpan that was the closest thing he could pull off to primness these days. "I was supposed to tell him if anybody on my reintegration team tried to get into my pants, because that's not allowed."

Woj snorted. "Well, he was right, but if you wanted to work on this therapeutically--not that I would touch you, but I could discuss it with you, or someone else could. If it's bothering you that much, if it's something that you want to work on. We can make room in your schedule somewhere if you feel that's a priority."

Bucky shook his head, thinking of everything else that crowded every hour of every day of his schedules, never mind the weirdness of scheduling that, and discussing it with some stranger. "It's not--it's just.... isn't it weird?"

Woj shrugged. "Everything about you is weird, Barnes. You're a genuinely unique psychological case. If you're asking if it's bad, that's kind of up to you to decide. Our goal here is to help you regain full function in daily life and to avoid hurting yourself or anyone else. Full function generally includes sex, but getting aroused only at certain times is closer than never getting aroused at all, so as far as I can see you're on an upward trajectory. You're still recovering, and it may be that as you continue to recover, the problem will resolve itself. It may just take time."

Bucky nodded, looking away.

Woj said, "So you never told me how your weekend plans went."

Bucky looked up without turning his head, feeling caught out even though he knew Woj had to know. Bucky forced himself to relax. "Fine. I got Steve onto my bed and kissed him twice."

Woj smiled, tilting his head as if acknowledging that Bucky had scored a point. "And is the state of your sexual function bothering you in that regard? Did it bother you on Saturday that you didn't get to do more than kiss him a couple of times?"

"It didn't," Bucky stopped, trying to untangle what the hell he'd thought of it. "It didn't bother me that I couldn't, but it--I didn't want to. I know I used to want to."
Woj's expression got really neutral, although he sounded almost as easy as ever as he said, "Did you want to kiss him?"

Bucky's hands closed into fists, remembering his own grip on Steve and Steve's grip on him, and he nodded quickly. "Yeah, I. I wanted that. I'd been wanting that. And we just hung on to each other, and stayed close, and that was good. But I didn't want the rest, not--not yet, at least--and Steve thought, or I let him think, that there were cameras and someone might be watching. And he didn't want to where somebody could be watching, so he wants to wait until I'm out for anything else."

Woj relaxed, and Bucky realized that Woj had been bracing himself to have to put a stop to Captain America molesting his patient. He felt strangely certain that Woj would have done it, and Exley would have backed him up. Hell, Exley had already threatened to arrest Steve just for trying to visit when he wasn't allowed to. If he thought Steve were doing something to Bucky that Bucky didn't want, he'd do more than that.

Bucky smiled, and ducked his head to try to hide it, but Woj smiled back. "Your visits with Captain Rogers have been unmonitored by default, Barnes. We're not going to change that unless there's a serious reason to, but you don't have to tell Rogers that if you want an excuse to wait. And on the other hand if you tell him you want to wait because you're not ready just yet--"

"I know," Bucky said. "He'll wait. It's just--it's easier not to have to say."

Woj nodded. "Well, how you conduct your relationship is up to you. You're probably going to want to tell him the truth at some point, but if that's not your top priority right now, it's not. You've got a lot on your plate."

"Maybe I'll be back in working order by the time I leave, anyway," Bucky said, watching Woj for a reaction.

Woj's face went carefully neutral again as he said, "Yeah, maybe you will."

When Saturday afternoon rolled around, Bucky realized, as Mueller and Lee walked him back from lunch, that he knew Steve would be there. It was on the schedule; it was part of the routine. On Saturday afternoons he got to see Steve.

Bucky grinned when he came into the hallway and Steve was standing there. It was a good feeling, not being surprised.

Steve grinned back at him, but this time he managed to say a polite, "Fellas," to Mueller and Lee as they peeled off.

From Mueller's smirk and Lee's headshake Bucky didn't think they were really fooling anybody on Bucky's reintegration team.

Bucky still waited until they were out of sight to step in for a kiss hello, and Steve's arms came around him immediately, squeezing him almost too close to kiss. Bucky's heart was beating fast when Steve loosened his grip, but he found himself smiling again without even trying.

"I could get used to this," Bucky said. "Seeing you all the time."

Steve smiled back. "I could get used to seeing you as often as you'll let me."

Bucky nodded agreement, and glanced in the direction Mueller and Lee were gone. He and Steve were once again standing in the hallway with their arms around each other, in an unmistakable
embrace. "Could you get used to other people knowing?"

Steve actually looked back over his shoulder, though he had to have been able to hear Mueller and Lee walking away as well as Bucky had. "Don't they already?"

"Just my team," Bucky said, shrugging. "They know everything about me. I meant--after. If there's an after."

"I'd tell 'em right now," Steve said. "You know I would, Buck. I was never anything but proud to be your guy."

Bucky nodded. Steve had never hidden what they were from other guys like them, the ones who could be in the know. It stood to reason that now that it didn't matter if the whole world knew, Steve wouldn't hesitate to tell the whole world. Still, it was a nice thing to hear. Bucky gave Steve a little shove toward the lounge, and Steve went where Bucky wanted him without arguing.

"You ever played tennis, Steve?" Bucky asked, picking up the Wii remotes and flipping one in his right hand.

"That's not tennis," Steve said darkly, which meant he had played this kind and was awful at it. This was going to be even more fun than Bucky had thought.

"Did you break something?" Bucky asked, offering Steve a remote. Steve took it more gingerly than Bucky had ever seen him handle dynamite. "Andrews was really specific about having to wear the wrist strap and not use my left hand."

Steve shook his head, but he put the wrist strap on as he said, "That doesn't help if the remote is the thing you break."

"All these years practicing with that body and you're still a bull in a china shop." Bucky shook his head. "You could've stood some actual training, Rogers, you know that?"

"Regular disgrace to the Army, yeah, that's why they kept sticking all those pins on my uniform," Steve agreed. "Speaking of which, how's Army life treating you?"

"Oh, well." Bucky busied himself with setting up the game so he wouldn't have to look at Steve. "They're working on those trigger phrases--they're going slow with the off-switch thing. I panicked yesterday when we tried to do twenty minutes, which Woj says is what I get for not just agreeing to ten like he said. I got to sixteen before they had to knock me out, though, so I was right about ten being too easy."

When he glanced at Steve, Steve was giving him one of those looks. An I know you and I know you're not telling me something look.

Bucky looked away, navigating to the screen of little Mii characters so Steve could see the one Bucky had made for him. The red-white-and-blue color scheme really stood out; Bucky's was in khaki, and Andrews and Duncan were both in camouflage, distinguishable by Andrews' peach face and Duncan's brown one.

"Yeah, they found a new trigger on Thursday," Bucky said. "Another off switch, kind of. It stopped my heart."

"Bucky." The remote dangling from Steve's wrist smacked him in the shoulder as Steve grabbed him. Bucky let himself be hugged tight--even cuddled into it a little despite it being completely unnecessary. He wasn't upset, but he wasn't really going to turn down a hug from Steve, either.
"It wasn't bad, actually," Bucky said into his shoulder. "I just blacked out and then woke up after they resuscitated me--it didn't feel like anything. They made me stay in the lab with a bunch of extra monitors stuck all over me for three hours. I got to read a whole bunch of the next Tolkien book. And then yesterday when they tried to duplicate it I got to read another three chapters, because it didn't work the second time. Apparently it was a one-time-only self-destruct, because I sat there for an hour."

Bucky shook his head, remembering, and pulled back to look at Steve. "Do you know how many times a recorded voice can say 'Sputnik' in an hour? Spuuuut-niiik," Bucky parroted, reproducing the exact tone and cadence that he'd heard a few thousand times that morning. "It doesn't do anything anymore, so chalk up one trigger eliminated. Andrews got me a cupcake with a candle on it to celebrate at lunch."

"Bucky," Steve repeated, tightening his grip a little. "Could you please try not to die on me before the next time I see you?"

"I'll do my best," Bucky said. "Maybe if there was some kind of reward involved. Can you promise me more than a cupcake?"

"I can promise you," Steve said, releasing his grip on Bucky just to pull him into a kiss. For the first time it wasn't chaste at all, Steve's tongue teasing at Bucky's mouth until Bucky opened up to him. Bucky was startled by the surge of desire he felt, the way he wanted this, suddenly and consumingly. He wanted Steve.

He closed a hand on Steve's neck and kissed back hungrily and hard, licking into Steve's mouth like he was reclaiming conquered territory. Steve groaned against his lips and went with it, kissing back with just as much obvious need.

Steve was the one who pulled away, eventually. They were both breathing hard this time. Steve angled his body away, and Bucky realized that Steve had been getting hard, while his own dick was as unmoved as ever.

"I can promise you more of that," Steve said as firmly as he could with a vivid pink flush on his cheeks. "If you don't die."

"Okay." Bucky didn't point out that Steve was in fact rewarding him for dying a little bit this week and this kind of sloppiness with positive feedback was going to make a mess out of any reward-conditioning he was trying to do. "It's a deal. I'll try not to die."

"Right," Steve said, and looked around the room like he was trying to remember where he was. "I'll try not to break anything, then."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](https://example.com)

I am also on [Tumblr!](https://example.com) And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](https://example.com).
Chapter 12

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

If it's an issue for you, please particularly note the "Self Harm" tag going into this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Who's going to have the off-switch?" Bucky asked, when Exley finished explaining about the new Field Trip blocks on his week's schedule, Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

Exley nodded slowly. "That's... one of the options I was going to discuss with you."

"Somebody has to have the off-switch if you're going to take me where there could be civilians,"
Bucky insisted. "You said-- spouses shop at the commissary, there are women, they could be bringing kids with them. Somebody has to be able to stop me cold if there's even a chance I go wrong there."

Exley nodded again. "You can choose, then. Who do you want to have it? Whoever you choose, they'll have a recording of the trigger phrase, and an appropriate sedative to administer as soon as you're down. We wouldn't be able to track your internal state in the field, so you would be sedated as soon as it was safe to do so and then medically evacuated back here. To a child or a civilian watching it would look as though you had a seizure and the person with you administered some sort of medication."

Bucky nodded. That sounded all right; it would still be scary for a kid to see, but no one would get hurt. He just had to pick someone who wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger when they had to, someone who would understand exactly when it was necessary. He played over the options in his mind, then nodded. "Duncan."

Exley looked faintly surprised, but he didn't argue with Bucky's choice.

The next afternoon Bucky walked into the base commissary with Andrews at his side, Duncan walking a few steps behind, in Bucky's blind spot. Mueller and Lee had already gone in and declared the store safe for Bucky to enter. Bucky didn't know exactly what their standards were--no one speaking Russian? no one already brandishing weapons?--but he trusted their assessment well enough to do what he was told.

"Okay," Andrews was saying, "so you have some really significant choices to make here, all right. I mean, this is huge."

"I actually was feeding myself for six months before I came in," Bucky pointed out as Andrews led him briskly through an aisle of groceries, not bothering to stop and consider any of them. They were just a blur of color to either side. Bucky kept pace with Andrews and automatically clocked two women they walked past and an obviously civilian man, by haircut and body language--a female soldier's husband? A male soldier's husband?--with a baby sitting in the front of his shopping cart. They weren't hostiles, not threats--they were civilians to be protected in an adverse event. None of
“All I've been in stores before.”

Yeah?” Andrews led Bucky around a corner, past a refrigerator section full of gallons of milk that seemed color-coded in some obscure way, to an aisle full of food in shiny bright bags. “Tell me all about your favorite junk food, then. What kind of chips do you like? Pretzels? Have you ever eaten a Dorito, Barnes?”

Bucky had eaten mostly frozen meals, which were reassuringly like rations, with the odd excursion in the direction of energy bars and protein shakes, or fresh fruit whenever the craving for it became overpowering. He'd eaten chips when they were offered at lunch time on base, but as far as he knew they came in exactly two forms: potato and tortilla. The aisle Andrews led him to offered an overwhelming variety of flavors and styles.

Bucky took a step back to try to see the whole array at once, taking in information and rapidly ranking options. He'd almost arrived at an answer when there was a blur of incoming motion at knee height. He twisted, dropping his left hand to intercept--

A kid, hardly more than a baby, round-cheeked and with black unruly curls puffing out around his--her?--head. The kid blinked up at him with wide, green eyes, and Bucky stared back, flexing his gloved left hand to make sure he wasn't holding on too hard. The kid's face crumpled, like he was going to cry, and Bucky looked around and spotted a woman running toward him just as the kid burst out in a wail; all her attention was on the toddler, none on Bucky.

It was easy to see her intention as she stepped into his space to scoop up the kid. Not hostile. Civilian, to be protected.

Bucky straightened up as she did, and she made an apologetic face that froze a little as her eyes dropped to his nametape. Her gaze darted up to meet his, and Bucky offered a smile. The woman looked past him toward Andrews and Duncan, then at his insignia, then his nametape again.

“Sergeant Barnes,” she said, even as she patted the kid's back in automatic motions. “Sorry about that.”

“No trouble,” Bucky said absently, easily, while he studied her signals of recognition and anxiety. “I know they're hard to keep track of at that age. My little sisters were terrors.”

Her eyes widened a little when he mentioned his sisters, and her gaze dropped to the kid, who was already quieting and squirming to be put down, and then she nodded. She glanced toward Andrews and Duncan again, and said, “Thanks, guys,” before she turned away.

Bucky turned back to face Andrews and Duncan, who were both watching him with guarded expressions.

“I want the Jalapeno ones,” Bucky said, pointing, “And the Cool Ranch. And I want to know if everybody on base was warned that I was going to be here today.”

“Jalapeno,” Andrews repeated, picking up the bag Bucky had pointed to. “And Cool Ranch. And no, there wasn't a general advisory, but word gets around. People who work on base know you're here, they talk at home, any of their wives might recognize your name and rank if they see you. That a problem? Weren't you kind of famous in the old days, running around with Captain America? There were newscasts. You're in the Smithsonian, for God's sake.”

Bucky shrugged. “I was in a war zone the whole time, I never really met anybody who'd seen the
newsreels. Glad-handing was Steve's job."

"Welcome to the 21st century, Barnes," Andrews said, shoving the bags of chips at him. Bucky casually positioned them to cover his nametape, and Andrews affected not to notice. "Next stop, candy aisle. Try not to step on any preschoolers."

The second trip was the same but more so: he was off base, out in the city, surrounded by real civilians outside the tiny perimeter created by Andrews and Duncan flanking him. There were still a few stares at his nametape--and the library woman's eyes went briefly very wide at his name and date of birth--but no one said anything about recognizing him. It was just a crawling awareness at the back of his neck. He was in unsecured territory, and some number of people around him knew who and what he was.

It was a relief to pass through the gates of the base, although he didn't relax fully until they were well past the commissary, into the extra-secure area where he was normally contained.

"How many more of these am I going to have to do?" Bucky asked Andrews.

Andrews glanced past him to Duncan, then shrugged. "Kind of depends. Outside factors, man. You did fine, though, you know."


Steve's grin dropped into a scowl when he caught sight of Bucky, probably because the sleeve of his fatigues didn't quite hide the air cast on his right arm.

Bucky didn't bother trying for a hallway kiss, just waved after Andrews and Duncan as they made themselves scarce and led the way into the lounge.

"I just want to point out that I didn't die at all," Bucky said as he threw himself down on the couch.

Steve dropped down next to him and reached for his right hand, taking it gingerly between both of his when Bucky held it up for him. "What the hell happened, Buck?"

"Lots of things," Bucky said to the ceiling, trying to ignore the feeling of Steve's hands around his but barely touching. "I ate Doritos and Butterfingers for the first time. I got my library card. I got to thirty minutes under the off switch without panicking."

Of course, the next day he'd panicked as soon as the trigger phrase hit, reversing his previous trend so unexpectedly that Woj had let him go for a couple of awful minutes before he ordered the sedative, which had kicked Bucky's nightmares into high gear that night. And none of that had anything to do with Bucky's wrist being broken.

Steve stayed silent long enough that Bucky had to look down, and found him looking slightly disappointed with a clear option on weapons-grade disappointment if Bucky didn't shape up promptly.

"They found another trigger phrase," Bucky admitted, tugging his right hand out of Steve's grip to wave it at him.

"They keep me in restraints when they test new ones, and this one required me to get loose, and--" Bucky swallowed, remembering the complete calm of that one, closing around him like clear water,
the series of calculations that only seemed gruesome in retrospect. "When I couldn't get loose it seemed pretty logical to snap my own arm."

"Bucky," Steve said, his voice so carefully restrained it might just as well have been a shout. "What were you going to do if you got loose?"

Bucky winced. Nightmares about succeeding at it had displaced off switch nightmares last night, which was a change of pace. He was terrified after he woke up, instead of during. He couldn't wait for the dreams to start combining, so he could be scared the whole time and still never get off on anything.

"Steve, you don't--"

"Jesus, now you have to tell me," Steve interrupted, his voice going sharp. "What--"

And then Steve cut himself off, horror dawning in his eyes, so Bucky did have to tell him, just to make him stop thinking up new things.

"It's a self-destruct," Bucky said, the cleanest phrase he'd found for it yet. "It would've been quick if I got loose. I wouldn't even need a knife, just my left hand."

Steve looked no less horrified at that. Bucky touched his jugular with a metal fingertip, the way he'd been doing in awful fascination ever since he woke up. Cutting his throat was the first contingency; he'd resorted to trying to tear his right arm off and bleed out from it as a backup.

They had kept him under even more observation after he woke up than they had the time they stopped his heart.

"You said not to die," Bucky said, dropping his left hand. "I didn't die, and the wrist will be healed completely in another day or two."

Steve looked from Bucky's throat to his wrist, and Bucky could see him squaring up to the mess in front of him. "Okay. Yeah. Good work not dying, Bucky." He actually smiled a little as he finished with, "I'm proud of you, you know that?"

Bucky rolled his eyes and scooted closer. "I was promised rewards, Stevie, you can do whatever you want with your pride."

"Come here, then," Steve said, slumping back into the couch, keeping his arms and legs spread and waiting for Bucky to come to him.

"How come I gotta do all the work if this is my reward?" Bucky asked, but he was moving as he said it, swinging a leg over Steve's thighs and straddling him, positioning himself so he was safely clear of Steve's crotch, unable to feel Steve's reaction there or let Steve feel his lack of one. Bucky propped his casted wrist out of the way above Steve's head, and used his metal fingers gently, delicately, to tip Steve's chin up.

"Well, this way you get exactly as much reward as you want," Steve said. He didn't resist Bucky's metal fingers, didn't flinch from them or even seem to be bracing himself not to. He closed both arms around Bucky's waist, but loosely, not trying to pull him down flush to his own body. He waited for Bucky to lean down and close the kiss, and Bucky wasn't shy about taking what he'd been promised.

It started out already open-mouthed, but slow at first, exploring, learning this again. Bucky licked down into Steve's mouth and Steve responded at the same pace, not rushing anything, letting him feel this. It wasn't just a reward, it was like waking up for sure, out of all the dreams and all the
nightmares. There was nothing remote here, with his mouth on Steve's, his tongue pressing into Steve's. Nothing calm. Nothing still.

Right here, kissing Steve, Bucky remembered exactly why he wanted to be alive, to get better, to get out of here. Not in his head, but all through his body, every inch awake and alive and eager for more--every inch except the few between his legs, anyway, but he was used to that. He'd put up with that for the feeling of Steve's mouth, the feeling of wanting more.

Steve's arms tightened around him and quickly loosened, like Steve was remembering not to pull him down. Bucky smiled into the kiss and let things speed up, let the room fill with the wet, filthy sounds of them kissing like they couldn't get enough.

Steve changed his grip, pressing his flat hands to Bucky's back, rubbing restlessly over Bucky's back but making no move to ruck up his shirt, not reaching anywhere below the belt. Bucky let his metal hand move a little, down Steve's throat to his chest to feel the heaving of his breath.

Bucky's right hand closed into as much of a fist as he could manage, uselessly gripping the edge of the air cast when he wanted to be touching Steve. He wanted--God, he wanted to take Steve apart. Bucky wanted to be kissing him everywhere, to hear all the little sounds he knew how to coax out of the mouth under his.

Steve was already gasping a little, sucking at Bucky's lower lip, begging for it. Bucky wanted to twist and push him flat on the couch and get on with it, or let Steve win a round and bear him down. He could have Steve's weight grinding him into the couch, and maybe then Bucky wouldn't be able to move at all, maybe--

Bucky jerked back, shuddering with the collision of desperate lust and a flash of horror, and Steve's hands dropped away from him instantly. He looked up at Bucky with a worried little frown, out of place on his kiss-flushed face.

Bucky shook his head. That second of fear was already gone, although it had taken most of the excitement with it.

Bucky bent to drop a last kiss on Steve's pink lips, still slightly parted. He didn't let himself chase the frisson of wanting that woke up again at the touch. That road didn't actually lead anywhere. "Just--maybe that's enough for now."

Steve nodded as Bucky dropped down to sit beside him again, and he did that squirm that Bucky knew right down to his bones--that was Steve half-hard in his pants and refusing to adjust himself because even that much of a touch would be a tease. Bucky did his own version of the same move automatically, like the next step in a dance, even though there was no need for it, just his limp dick shifting in his boxers. Steve gave him a sideways look and a sheepish little smile, though, and Bucky smiled back.

"So," Bucky said. "You been bored in New York while I've been having all kinds of exciting times down here?"

"Oh, you know, I keep busy," Steve said. "Sam took me flying the other day and eight people put it on YouTube--have they let you look at YouTube yet?"

"Andrews showed me a couple things," Bucky said. "I don't have computer access yet, though. They don't want me loose on the internet for some reason."

"Well," Steve said, pulling a phone out of his pocket. "I do. Wanna see my highlight reel?"
Bucky scooted in close, curling himself half around Steve's body to peer down at the little screen, and Steve tilted his cheek against Bucky's head and pulled up the video.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, I'm pretty sure I wrote this chapter in February or March 2015, so I thiiink it predates the whole Dorito thing but I'm honestly not sure at this point. :)  

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!  

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Bucky's Monday meeting turned out not to be only with Mike. It wasn't a deviation from the schedule, because it said *Meeting: Defense Counsel*, and Bucky had a pretty good idea of who the Colonel waiting in the conference room with Mike was.

Sure enough, Mike introduced him to Colonel Griffin, his lead defense attorney, who gave him a firm handshake and held his gaze as he said, "Let's get right to the point. Mike has told you there's been an official investigation going on--an Article 32 hearing."

Bucky nodded, not letting himself look to Mike for confirmation. He did know. Mike had kept him up to date. The Article 32 hearing was only for determining what evidence existed, and what charges could be brought against him. It wasn't the actual trial. "Yes, sir."

Colonel Griffin did not tell Bucky that he worked for him, or to call him by his first name. He waved Bucky to a seat and sat down himself as he said, "I want to discuss strategy with you, Sergeant Barnes. There are some decisions that you need to make. I'll give you the best advice I can, but your defense team will abide by your choices about how you want to proceed."

Mike had taken the seat next to Bucky--Colonel Griffin was in Mike's usual place, across from him, and it probably meant something that Mike had put himself on Bucky's side.

They were all supposed to be on his side, here. "Yes, sir."

Griffin gave him a grim little smile and still didn't tell Bucky to relax. "The majority of what we're doing in the Article 32 hearing is determining the facts of your actions, as well as they can be demonstrated through actual, admissible evidence. We haven't had you testify in that regard because, frankly, as far as legal evidence goes, no one believes you're a reliable eyewitness to anything that's happened in the last seventy years."

Bucky nodded slightly. Mike had told him that, too, and Bucky couldn't really dispute it.

"There is very little actual evidence of any crimes you may have committed during your captivity prior to the days surrounding the Battle of the Potomac, nothing that looks likely to rise to the level of a charge unless something new comes to light before charges are referred. Captain Rogers is claiming responsibility for everything you can be connected with after--no one appears willing to touch that, although you're both personae non gratae in Russia and a few other countries. That still leaves enough evidence of your actions that you are going to be facing one or more charges under the heading of Aiding the Enemy--that is, treason--and Misbehavior Before the Enemy, which is also potentially a capital crime."

Bucky nodded. He'd always known they might decide to kill him; that they were going through all the rituals of a trial first would at least be some comfort to Steve. It did seem cruel to have spent all this time getting him not to want to die before doing it, but he supposed that this made it a more effective punishment. They had to have learned something from putting him on kitchen duty.

"We want to be sure," Griffin continued, "that you're charged with every offense we can track down actionable evidence for, because believe it or not, a general court martial is the most sympathetic
hearing you're ever going to get. The simple act of trying you means claiming you as a serving member of the military continuously over the last seventy years, and endorses the interpretation that you were a prisoner of war for most of that time. That is an automatic argument against your responsibility for all your actions in that time."

Bucky blinked, and looked over at Mike, who gave him a tiny encouraging smile.

"Sir," Bucky said, looking back at Griffin. "Do you--are you actually saying you think..."

"I didn't take this case to lose, Barnes," Griffin said firmly. "But there are a couple of routes we can take. One is to try to have you declared incompetent to stand trial. Technically you are intermittently incompetent to stand trial as long as those trigger phrases have effect--but that's a holding action at best, because you're obviously competent overall and recovering steadily. Even if we were able to dodge a court martial completely by having you declared disabled and given a medical discharge, it would just open you up to an array of charges in civilian courts, because you wouldn't have been tried. There's a lot on the record already due to the Article 32 hearing, which a federal court could subpoena, and..."

Griffin shook his head, grimly dismissing that undesirable set of outcomes.

"We can also ignore the question of competence completely, go to trial, and fight this out, making our best case for you having been coerced. The Article 32 hearing is laying down a pretty solid set of incontrovertible facts about your actions, so we're not going to have a lot of luck fighting on proof, although we can certainly try to introduce reasonable doubt here and there. I think we have a strong case for you being forced into the things you did do, but we would have to put you on the stand in open court to speak to how you were forced, and most of what we would be presenting in your defense would be detailed descriptions of your torture."

"And I'll be facing multiple capital charges," Bucky said. "So if the case for coercion isn't good enough on even one count, that's it."

Griffin raised his eyebrows, cutting a glance at Mike, who tilted his head with another little smile.

"I'm not actually stupid," Bucky said, since apparently no one else was going to say it. "I just spent a lot of time deprived of relevant information."

Griffin did smile then, and gave Bucky a nod that was almost a bow. "We are trying to rectify that now. So, going for a straight acquittal is high risk and high cost--your torture gets picked over in open court, and even after that's been dragged through the press, you might still be convicted, possibly executed, though I think even in the case of a capital sentence, we'd have a strong argument on reducing your sentence in light of time served."

Bucky spared a second to think about his lawyers arguing that he shouldn't be put to death for his crimes because he'd already died, repeatedly, in captivity, and then put that thought firmly away.

"On the bright side," Griffin added wryly. "If we actually got you cleared on all charges--and let me be clear, if there is any justice, we will--you would be welcome to choose to continue your career in the Army."

Bucky looked down at his hands. It hadn't really occurred to him that there was a possibility he could stay, but if Griffin was saying it, it had to be something the Army would consider. Griffin clearly wasn't in the habit of offering false hope or sugarcoating the situation. So maybe Bucky could just take up his life where it had left off when he fell--go on having a uniform to wear, orders and a schedule to navigate by, a team around him and a CO to guide him. Unless...
"Does the Army want me to be their sniper instead of Hydra's?"

"Not in the way you're thinking, no," Griffin said immediately. "You'd never make special forces with that arm--given your history and your level of notoriety I doubt you'd be cleared for any kind of front line duty again, let alone covert ops. I can't promise you a specific posting, obviously, but based on what I've heard and seen discussed, if you chose to continue your enlistment after an acquittal you'd be in the States somewhere, probably working with our special forces--training snipers, training men in survival and evasion. Regular hours, housing allowance, a normal senior NCO's life."

"Normal," Bucky echoed. He could be like Andrews, going home every night to--to Steve? God, Steve would move to whatever base Bucky was stationed at in a heartbeat, even if he had to run off every other day to be Captain America.

Except, of course, the entire world would know everything that had happened to Bucky by then. Including Steve. And Griffin was calling it torture, but they would dig up everything. They would make him sit in front of a courtroom and talk about how Hydra made him come when they raped him, how they used him in the most shameful ways and made him like it.

And then he could go home to Steve, go to bed with Steve, knowing Steve knew who else had had him. Knowing that was what he got off on, while Steve's kisses and touches left him cold.

"So there's another option," Bucky said, because Griffin wasn't trying too hard to sell him on acquittal, even with the possibility of a normal life at the end of it.

"Article 850a," Mike said, startling Bucky into looking over at him. "It's the one I was talking about the day we met. We go for a verdict of Not Guilty Due to Lack of Mental Responsibility. If we do it after charges are referred, you're still considered to have stood trial for all the charges, so civilian courts can't touch you on the same counts, but the evaluation is private. We don't really have to prove anything point by point for every charge the way we would have to with coercion, just that you weren't mentally responsible throughout that period of time.

"All that's released to the prosecution and the court is a report that states whether you were mentally responsible for your actions at the time the crimes were committed. If they agree that you weren't, that's it, the trial ends there. If they find that you were responsible, we can still try for an acquittal the other way. 850a gives you a chance to get out from under the whole thing, permanently, without going through a full public trial."

Bucky looked from Mike to Griffin, who looked less enthusiastic about this than Mike, though he didn't dispute anything Mike had said.

"But," Bucky said slowly, "then I'm released with no public trial. Nobody ever knows why I was found not guilty. They just know that I'm insane."

Griffin gave him another nod. "Correct. If you're found not guilty on those grounds, you're remanded to a hospital to have your current mental state evaluated, and there's a second determination made on whether it's safe to release you. At that point you would go before a Medical Board to judge your fitness to continue serving. No matter how fit you are currently, with that verdict on charges this serious, there is no way the Army could let you continue to serve at any level, in any capacity. You might be allowed to retire, or you might be discharged due to disability."

Which would mean he could go wherever Steve was, instead of dragging Steve out of New York to live on some Army base. He could maybe work with Steve, if Steve's team needed another sniper and didn't mind his record. And everyone in the world would know he was crazy, but no one would
know why.

He thought of the woman at the commissary, the way she wrapped her arms tightly around her toddler when she saw his nametape, and the looks he'd gotten from people in the city. "Do people know?"

Neither Griffin nor Mike answered, but there was an answer in their silence, their careful non-expressions.

"About me?" Bucky elaborated, determined to draw it out of them. "Do people know I'm alive, that I'm here?"

Mike nodded slowly, but it was Griffin who spoke. "Shortly after you came in, the Army released a brief report stating that you had been found alive and had returned voluntarily to the Army for treatment after your ordeal in Hydra custody. That turned the press and the public loose, and people have been chasing down everything they can find out or speculate about where you've been and what you've done. How you survived. Captain Rogers has been trying to keep the worst of the speculations under control; the Army has commented only occasionally. I'm pleased to say there have been no leaks from your team or any base personnel, although a photo of you taken last week when you were in San Antonio has been... widely circulated."

"Yeah?" Bucky said, trying to get his head around the idea of the world knowing he was here, all those eyes turned toward this Army base where he had thought he was hidden, anonymous. "How did I look?"

Mike was startled into a laugh, and Griffin smiled. "There has been an inordinate amount of discussion regarding your current hairstyle. Captain Rogers has been quoted as saying it looks better in person."

Bucky shook his head but couldn't help running a hand over his hair. He'd had a haircut this morning before trigger detection; his hair, which had been starting to fluff out around his head, had been buzzed back down to a velvet-short layer to keep it from interfering with the sensors.

"Well, he's biased," Bucky muttered, and no one argued with that.

"Barnes?" Woj said, coming around to stand over the bed where Bucky was restrained while they tested possible triggers. "How are you feeling?"

Bucky looked up at his controller and blinked at the strange question. "Optimal condition, sir."

Bucky saw Woj mouth optimal as he nodded, but that wasn't an instruction or a question. He waited.

"Something happened there," Woj said, gesturing toward the ceiling, where a woman's voice had been intoning sing-song nonsense words until a moment ago. "Your brain waves altered sharply. Do you feel like doing anything in particular right now?"

"Ready to comply, sir," Bucky said.

Woj didn't look pleased with that answer, but Bucky knew it was better to await correction in silence than to try to apologize for a mistake before he understood what he had done wrong. He would wait for his controller to tell him.

On Thursday he was in the middle of reading about the hobbits being attacked by the Ringwraiths on
Weathertop when the trigger phrase kicked him into the dream. Bucky started to mark his place, and then he thought, *No, it's just a dream.* He rolled over to put his back to the door, pressing his finger to the page to keep his place.

The voice from the ceiling spoke again, making Bucky's mind slide sideways away from the book, but his finger stayed planted. He shook his head. "No. It's just a dream. I don't have to."

The third time, he pressed his face into the book next to his finger, his whole body going rigid with the effort of resisting. He couldn't even remember why or what he was resisting anymore, except that he knew it was a dream and he didn't have to do whatever it was.

The voice came again, and Bucky yelled, "*No!*" as he stood up, book in hand. He threw the book at the spot on the ceiling where the voice came from, and it bounced down hard, pages fluttering loose from the binding. He stared at it in horror and ran to gather up the remains of the book—he'd broken its spine, and for what? For a bad dream?

The door opened and Bucky looked up, hands full of the corpse of the book. Exley was standing there looking pleased, and the dream evaporated completely. Bucky tried to smile back, but he'd still killed his book.

Andrews presented him a new copy at dinner, along with a cupcake with two candles stuck into it. Two triggers down, and it had only cost him three weeks and a paperback.

"You didn't tell me," Bucky muttered, when he'd kissed Steve enough that his lips were tingling and his body was crying out for things it wasn't going to follow through on. "That everybody in the world's seen a picture of me ordering coffee."

Steve gave him a startled little smile and said, "Not everybody, Buck. Tony figures it's been seen by a couple hundred million people, tops."

Bucky tried to make that number mean something and then shook his head, pushing it away. "Still. You could've told me."

Steve glanced pointedly toward the cameras in the lounge and said, "I was told not to. You're in here, away from all of that, so you can focus on getting better. You don't need to be worrying about what strangers on Twitter think about your haircut."

Bucky put *Twitter* down on the mental list of words--like *Terminator* and *Expelliarmus* and *disco*--that were probably going to make sense later on in his education. "You could've told me what you think of my haircut instead of letting me hear it from my defense counsel."

He saw Steve's expression harden a little at *defense counsel*, but Steve raised a hand to run over Bucky's short hair. "I hope your defense counsel doesn't actually know what I think of your haircut, Buck."

Bucky raised his eyebrows; Steve blushed a little. Bucky abruptly remembered rubbing his stubbled chin against Steve's cheek, his throat, the top of his thigh, the way Steve--who no matter what size he was, couldn't grow a beard to save his life--loved that sensation.

"It's pretty soft," Bucky pointed out, ducking his head to rub his hair along the line of Steve's jaw. Steve's hand closed on the back of his neck, gripping *tight* for a second, like he forgot to be careful of his strength, and Bucky shivered.
They didn't find any new triggers in the seventh week, and by Friday they'd killed off the one that made him try to return to some location in Washington DC that had been set as his home base before the Triskelion fell. He could sit quietly under the restraints after the self-destruct trigger, and he'd had two successful instances of working himself back out of a panic while under the off-switch.

He had played a lot of stupid children's games and done a lot of dancing under the obey-controller trigger. His MPs were taking turns stepping in as controller, and it turned out that he had been right; Lee did like swing music even more than he did. They'd determined that the off-switch overrode every other trigger they'd identified, and Bucky had collected an impressive collection of bloody noses, split lips and short-lived bruises from falling down when it kicked in.

"You're not well yet," Woj said at the end of the day, going over his progress. "But you're on your way. We have a pretty finite set of acute problems to deal with. You're adjusting well, and your chronic problems seem fairly well controlled. Your memory is returning; you're not experiencing unmanageable levels of the organic stress reactions that sometimes follow severe traumas. If we can get the triggers under control, you're going to be in good shape."

"And by good shape," Bucky said, "you mean competent to stand trial."

Woj nodded. "Standing trial is the hoop you have to jump through to go on with the rest of your life. So, yes. That's what we're aiming for."

Woj also said the rest of your life like he expected Bucky to have one. That night when Bucky went to bed he tried to really imagine it: going to New York with Steve, maybe becoming an Avenger or at least someone the Avengers called for backup once in a while. Someone Steve would want watching his back. A life that was, if not normal, then still his own. A life with Steve near him all the time, the way he used to be.

He'd been remembering more and more of what that was like--the way they'd talked to each other, the way it had felt. The way they had touched each other. He didn't know if the hunger he felt for touch, for Steve's touch specifically, was something that got stirred up by remembering, or something that was coming back to him as he recovered, but he felt it more and more all the time. He couldn't always make himself stop thinking about it between visits, even though there was nothing to do about it when Steve wasn't around.

He doubted he was going to be able to do anything about it even when Steve was around, but he couldn't help sliding his hand into his pants as he pictured it. Maybe it would be different with Steve. The kissing felt so good, so real.

Maybe when he was with Steve it would all just work. He curled his hand around his soft dick and imagined having his hand on Steve's instead, Steve's hand on him--Steve's mouth--pushing into the tight heat of Steve's ass. Steve would be looking up at him with his eyes all wide and dark, dazed with sex, making all those breathy sounds Bucky remembered, wanting just what Bucky wanted. Bucky would be hard, and everything would just fall into place, fucking Steve and getting him off the way he liked the very best. Everything would work, and everything would be good.

Bucky let himself rerun the scenario again and again, although eventually he took his unmoving hand off his dick and rolled over to sleep. He didn't dream at all that night.

The night after he said "Well Bucky says go fuck yourself," to Mueller's "Simon says give Duncan a piggyback ride," Bucky got a three-layer chocolate cake with five candles in it at dinner. He shared it out with Andrews, Duncan, Mueller, and Lee, who had all joined him for the meal.
The only active trigger left was the off-switch, which was still nowhere near being eradicated. He could mostly stay calm under it, or calm himself back down when he panicked, and had once managed to fall asleep long enough to reset it without any other intervention. But he couldn't so much as twitch an eyelid or alter the pattern of his breathing until its hold on him broke.

The next morning, at his regular morning meeting with Exley, Colonel Griffin was waiting. Mike was nowhere in sight.

"Sergeant Barnes," Exley said formally, looking as grave as Bucky had ever seen him. "As your commanding officer, it is my duty to inform you that charges are being referred against you, and you will be facing a general court martial for capital crimes."

Bucky nodded. He could still remember the taste of the chocolate cake. Andrews had promised to watch all fourteen hours of the three Lord of the Rings movies with him, declaring him ready now that he'd not only read the books but seen what Andrews said were all the Star Wars movie a decent person needed, and Jurassic Park.

"I will now read the charges to you," Exley went on.

Bucky stood at attention before his desk while Exley read out the thirty-four charges: various counts of aiding the enemy and misbehavior before the enemy, misconduct as a prisoner, and eighteen counts of murder in a litany of names he barely recognized. Nicholas Fury. Jasper Sitwell. Flight Leader Mark Hathaway, and fifteen others. And then the attempted murders: Steven Rogers. Samuel Wilson. Natasha Romanov. Breach of the peace. Multiple counts of destruction of property. Reckless operation of a vehicle.

It all matched up with what Mike had briefed him on, piece by piece, over the last few weeks. The Article 32 hearing had been winding down. He had known this was coming, but the weight of it all being read out at once was still surprising.

When he reached the end of the list, Exley looked up at him, cleared his throat, and said sternly, "Do you understand these charges, Sergeant Barnes?"

Bucky looked to Griffin. He nodded, so there was nothing unexpected lurking in what Exley had said, and Griffin trusted that Bucky did understand.

"Yes, sir," Bucky said. Exley gestured for him to step forward, pushing a sheaf of paper and a pen at him.

Bucky flipped through the pages, letting his eye trace over the neatly printed words that might be the death of him, forcing himself to read each name listed. He remembered Fury's, Sitwell's. They had been assigned targets; he had been briefed. The others--nothing. He remembered the day, the moving bodies that had gotten between him and his target. He remembered Romanov and Wilson. He remembered Steve.

He picked up the pen and signed, and pushed the papers back to Exley.

Exley sighed. His shoulders sagged as he sat back in his chair, rubbing his face with a hand spread wide to hide behind. Griffin also visibly relaxed, and Bucky realized that this had been a required ritual, and now it was over.

"Now what?" Bucky asked when Exley lowered his hand, aiming the question at both or either of them.

Exley looked to Griffin, and Griffin nodded, accepting responsibility.
"You have at least another week here while the court martial is convened. Everyone concerned is aware of our defense strategy, and preparations for it are moving along speedily. Next week you will be transported to Fort Hood. We'll enter your plea, at which point the trial will be suspended so that you can be evaluated to determine whether you were mentally responsible for your crimes. That panel of experts is already being assembled, so you should be able to undergo the evaluation immediately, although we expect that process to last several days, as your doctors will need to present evidence regarding your past mental state to the panel. Once the panel makes its finding, it will issue a report to the court, and the trial will resume."

"One point, Barnes," Exley added when Griffin finished. "The trial will be public. It's being held on base, and the Fort Hood base commander is going to be responsible for clearing civilians to come on base and making sure they're supervised while they're on his premises, but there will be times when the press has access to you."

Bucky nodded, looking down at his hands before he steeled himself and met Exley's eyes. "But not today, right? Not this week."

Exley gave him a small, grim smile, and Bucky knew he was remembering what Bucky was remembering: the night he had refused to lie to reassure Bucky about what he was going to have to face. "Yeah, Barnes. For the next four days, you don't have to worry about this. We'll put it on your schedule when the time comes."

Steve visited that Saturday, the tenth Saturday in a row that the same Visit: Rogers block appeared on his schedule. The last time.

"It's going to be fine," Steve said, having dragged Bucky more or less into his lap to hold on to him more effectively. "You're going to be fine."

Bucky nodded against Steve's shoulder, wondering if this was the last time he would feel this, the last time they would be this close. It felt like one of the first times again; kissing wasn't as important as just holding on like this.

Of course, if they could have done more, one last time--the thought barely formed before Bucky was abruptly immersed in the memory of Rumlow taking him into the showers the morning before the helicarriers launched. Forcing him to respond, one last time before he died. Mercy. Rape.

Either way it was nothing he wanted to ask Steve for now. Better to have this quiet connection one last time. Better to remember this, when it all went to hell.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He woke early on Monday morning and put on his fatigues, just like it was any Monday, but when he stepped out into the hallway to meet his escort, he had the garment bag with his dress uniform inside hung over his shoulder and the duffel bag of things he was allowed to take with him in his hand. Andrews and Duncan were carrying garment bags too. Exley was already wearing his dress uniform, as always. No two-hour car ride would dare to disturb the immaculate order of Major Exley's ribbons.

Bucky watched the midwinter landscape of central Texas go by from inside the truck with its tinted windows, and remembered the long drive from the Grand Canyon with Steve. He and Steve had barely spoken for all those hours; Bucky had hardly known how to speak to him then.

There was a tap on his shoulder, and Bucky turned his head.

"Look," Andrews said, his expression solemn. "I gotta tell you something, okay, before you get out into the world. I don't know when I'll have a chance after this."

Bucky nodded. Andrews and the others had been given Exley's permission to attend his trial, but they would be spectators, not his guards, once he was in custody at Fort Hood.

"The thing is..." Andrews took a bracing breath. "There's another movie of The Hobbit. Except it's actually three movies."

Bucky stared at him. "How the hell could they make three movies out of that?"

Andrews nodded grimly. "Now you see why I didn't show it to you to begin with, right? The thing is..."

____________________________________________________________

He barely had time to glimpse the crowd of people on either side of the road before Exley said, "Eyes front, Sergeant."

He was staring intently at the dash of the truck by the time the words penetrated, in the kaleidoscopic jumble he'd taken away from that brief glance: Traitor and God Bless and Murdered My Daddy and POW. American flags and red stars and sickles, Steve's shield and swastikas and a black banner he couldn't decode at a glance. He swallowed bile and lowered his gaze to his lap, where his mismatched hands rested on a field of desert camouflage.

Another hundred yards on they reached the gates of Fort Hood, the driver and Major Exley exchanging calm, businesslike questions and answers with the gate guards. The truck was allowed to pass inside the gates, and even knowing what awaited him here, Bucky's shoulders sagged a little. He was on base again, in secure territory.

The truck delivered him directly to the stockade, and a squad of MPs was waiting outside to take custody of him. Exley got out and performed the prisoner transfer, complete with papers for his counterpart to sign. Bucky was allowed to shake hands with his team before the strangers formed up around him and escorted him inside. Now that he was a prisoner, Bucky was distantly amused to note, someone else carried his bags.
He was taken to a cell which wasn't much different from his room back in his barracks at MEDCOM, though a little smaller and with a freshly-installed heavy lock on the outside of the door. They hadn't carried the farce of being able to contain him against his will as far as handcuffs, though, so Bucky politely ignored the lock. They left him alone to change after pointedly searching his bags.

He dressed carefully, checking every line of his uniform, the correct position of every pin and ribbon. Then he stood, waiting, his eyes on the narrow window with its reinforced glass. The knock came soon enough, and he stepped out into the custody of a team of MPs for the second time that morning. It was strange to feel déjà vu kick in and know that it was coming from something as mundane as doing the same thing twice in one day.

Everyone paused just outside the stockade to don their hats, the January morning only pleasantly cool. Bucky put his hat on along with the rest of them, straightening it to sit neatly on his head. He'd had a haircut on Friday so he'd be in perfect trim today, and he ran a thumb over the soft stubble at the back of his head and remembered Steve's lips there. Then he dropped his hands and faced front, trying not to think of anything on the march to the administrative building.

There were a dozen people standing outside, surrounded by more MPs than were escorting him. Civilians, holding cameras instead of signs. He didn't let himself look to try to read their expressions. They didn't try to speak to him, but he could hear a cacophony of shutter-clicks as the cameras recorded every instant of his walk into the building.

Then they were inside, a dim space compared to the blazing morning outside, and after they all doffed their hats again, Bucky was escorted down a side hallway. An officer was guarding the door he was brought to, and motioned him to wait. Another ten minutes passed--Bucky did not listen to what was happening on the other side of the door--and then he was brought into the courtroom.

It didn't look much like the courtrooms he'd seen in movies; the military judge and the panel--two majors, two captains, a first sergeant, and a staff sergeant, five male, one female--sat at simple tables at the front of the room, and facing them were two more tables. Colonel Griffin and an assistant counsel Bucky hadn't met were already seated at one table, so the opposite table would be the prosecution.

That just left the rows of chairs that would be behind him once he sat down next to Griffin. They were already full of silent, attentive people, cordoned off by yet more MPs. But the row directly behind the seat waiting for Bucky was all familiar faces: Exley and Woj, Andrews and Duncan and Mueller and Lee.

Bucky's eyes skipped past them almost as soon as he saw them. In the back row, in the seat closest to the door, Steve was sitting in the same tense silence as the rest of the spectators. He was in full dress uniform adorned with every medal and ribbon anyone had ever hung on him. Captain Rogers, to the hilt.

Bucky ducked his head and didn't let himself show anything at all, gratitude or delight or terror. He walked to his place and sat down beside Griffin, and the silent, expectant room was brought superfluously to order.

The charges were read out again. Bucky curled his hands quietly into fists and didn't let himself react to anything they said. Not the names. Not Steve's name. None of it.

Griffin stood and announced the plea--Not Guilty Due to Lack of Mental Responsibility--and there was a sudden rustling and shuffling from most of the spectators, like a shower of rain out of the blue. Bucky thought he could hear the silent places where his team and Steve were sitting behind him, unsurprised and watchful.
He'd been in the courtroom barely ten minutes before he was escorted out again, and his trial began for real.

The stockade had a clinic and several interview rooms. The evaluations were conducted in those places, so Bucky didn't have to go anywhere a camera could get at him for the next week. He had one-on-one interviews with three different doctors that first day, repeating something like the intake procedure he'd done with Lind and Woj back at the beginning. This time, though, the doctors pressed for details, specifics, and Bucky realized fully just how gentle his team had been with him right from the start. Woj and Lind and Exley had wanted to earn his trust; these doctors knew he would see them as the adversary and just wanted to get the information.

Bucky gave it up as smoothly as he knew how. Nothing else was going to save him, and he was in the habit of telling the truth to people like this by now. He couldn't read these strangers, but it didn't matter. He told them the truth. What they made of it was their business.

When they sent him back to his room--cell--room, it was time to open the present Andrews had given him on the way here. It was only wrapped in a couple of pieces of red string, tied in a bow like a ribbon, to save the Fort Hood MPs having to open it for him. They had left the string in place when they searched his things.

Bucky untied it now and read the title as if he'd been unable to see it before: *The Silmarillion*, the book Andrews said he needed to read before watching the new movies of *The Hobbit*. It was a collection of songs and creation myths and histories, new pieces of an old story.

Bucky opened the book, and a quarter sheet of thick paper slipped out. It was drawing paper--good stuff, he knew, even before he touched it. His throat went tight at the sight of the drawing. It was a curved leaf in green and silver, a copy of the pin on the Fellowship's cloaks. The gift from Galadriel to bring them home: it was vivid in Bucky's mind, since he and Andrews had watched all the movies in the past week to fit them in before Bucky had to leave.

He traced his fingers over the lines, knowing the depth of this gift. He would recognize Steve's hand anywhere.

Tuesday morning the MPs brought him breakfast, and then told him he would have an exercise period afterward. He penciled those items into the gray boxes of the schedule Exley had given him on Sunday night, where each day was a featureless column labeled *Court Martial: Fort Hood*.

Exercise took place in a small gym in the stockade. Not knowing whether he would get another session today, Bucky went straight to a treadmill and started running, and kept it up until they told him to stop an hour later. At the end of that there was another shower, and then a featureless stretch of day before him.

There had been a certain finality to the doctors' interviews the day before, and Woj had warned him that much of the evaluation period would be taken up with his and Dr. Lind's presentations of the evidence of Bucky's past mental states. Bucky had told the doctors who asked yesterday that he didn't need to be present for that, but it meant he was stuck in his room, waiting.

He was two pages into *The Silmarillion* when there was a knock at the door accompanied by the mechanical sounds of the heavy lock being released. Bucky set the book down carefully and stood, walking over to peer through the window in the door. Mike was on the other side, and he made an inquiring face and raised his hand to knock again.
“Yeah, come in,” Bucky said, waving his hand, and Mike stepped inside. He was in fatigues, not dress uniform, so he must not have needed to make any formal appearances today. On the other hand, he was carrying a briefcase.

“Sorry I didn't get this to you sooner,” Mike said, setting the briefcase down and popping it open. “I've been running around trying to nail people down so we could get it accurate.”

Bucky blinked at the sheet of paper Mike pulled from his briefcase--a brightly colored schedule grid for the week, divided into tracks that showed what Bucky was doing (not much, though he was pleased to see that he got an afternoon exercise period each day) as well as what the experts evaluating him were doing--meeting with Woj, for the next two days, and then seeing Bucky again on Thursday after he'd had breakfast and PT.

Each morning and every afternoon there was a Meeting with Defense Counsel in Bucky's track. The box gave them two hours to meet each time.

Bucky looked from Mike to his briefcase, and set the schedule aside. "You didn't just come to bring me this."

"No," Mike said. "We've got work to do, Barnes. Do you want to prepare for the panel finding you responsible--" Mike pulled a sheaf of paper out of his briefcase, "Or not responsible?" He raised his other hand, holding a set of folders, each one stuffed with papers.

"Paperwork," Bucky said, scrubbing both hands over his short hair. "Of course there's paperwork even if it goes right. Not responsible first."

"Good," Mike said, setting down an inch-thick stack of paper. "That's the one we might be able to finish today."

The first day of preparing for being found responsible mostly involved Mike, and in the afternoon Colonel Griffin, going over everything they would drag into court in a coercion defense, leaving Bucky feeling filthy even after his post-PT shower. It was a relief to go back in front of the doctors on Thursday.

It was less of a relief when it turned out that they wanted to see his last remaining trigger demonstrated, but Woj had warned him about this. Lying down on a clinic bed, Bucky was aware for the first time that everyone in the room would know his trigger phrase, and be able to use it against him, after this. He'd never really thought about it with his team--half a dozen of them must have known his self-destruct and obey-controller triggers while they were still active--but these strangers would all know his off-switch after this.

It wasn't really a surprise that he panicked as soon as they put him down. It got worse when there were hands on him, touching him, unfamiliar voices coaxing, shouting, insulting him, weaving right into his nightmares until he had no idea what was real except that he could not move. That part was always real.

He woke up in the same clinic bed with Woj sitting beside him; he knew at a glance both how angry he was, and that Woj's anger was directed nowhere near him.

No one else was in sight, not even the unfamiliar MPs. There would be cameras, probably, but they had at least let Bucky wake up with someone familiar one more time.

"Hey," Bucky said. "Do they believe me now?"
Woj snorted, unbending a little, and picked up a plastic cup full of water with a straw poking through the lid. He offered it to Bucky, and Bucky reached out to take it effortlessly, his hands obeying him as though they'd never betrayed him.

"Now that they've stuck their fingers into the wounds of your goddamn crucifixion? They'd fucking better."

But they'd better wasn't yes, and they both knew it.

On Friday he made the rounds of the doctors again, answering more specific questions about his trigger phrases, what it felt like to have one of them activated. He talked about the different shades of dreaming and calm clarity. He told them, in the fewest possible words, about the off-switch and why he hated it even though it left his mind technically clear. They took notes. Two of them shook his hand. The others did not.

There was no special Saturday afternoon visit on his schedule, just a reprieve from defense meetings. On Sunday morning he met a new chaplain, who didn't argue with him when he said he didn't want to confess anything or pray about anything. The chaplain said a short Mass, alone in a little room with Bucky, without even a makeshift altar. There were no songs, and Bucky declined to hold a stranger's hand during the Our Father. It was over quickly, and then Bucky had a whole afternoon to read The Silmarillion, turning Steve's hand-drawn leaf over and over as he did. The corners of the paper were already getting dull.

Sunday night after dinner Mike came for him with a new schedule. The only thing on it was a one-hour block on Monday morning: Court Martial.

Bucky looked up at him. Mike tilted his head. "I'll give you a new one if you need it."

Getting dressed Monday morning, Bucky folded back the edges of the paper all around the leaf Steve had drawn for him so that he could tuck it behind his tie, where it would be hidden under his jacket. He went through the routine all over again, being led to the administrative building by his MPs, four of them boxing him in.

This time, though, when he came in sight of the little crowd standing outside, there was one figure towering over all the camera-carriers, and half the cameras were aimed at him.

Steve held his position behind the cordon of MPs until Bucky reached the closest point on his path to the door, and then he shouldered through them. Bucky didn't even think; he did the same. As the yelling started, Bucky broke ranks and met Steve halfway, at the center of a ring of alarmed MPs, with the camera-shutters chattering like a swarm of locusts.

There was a Sergeant Major shouting at both of them in a tone of authority that should have gone straight to his spine, but Bucky didn't hear a word of it, just a blur of noise. Steve's hands came up to frame his face, and Bucky wrapped his right hand around Steve's left wrist and closed his eyes as Steve leaned in and kissed him in the bright morning sunlight.

It was just a press of lips, simple and brief. It felt like a promise.

"Can't resist a grand gesture," Bucky muttered as Steve lowered his hands. The MPs grabbed both of them then, dragging them apart. Bucky watched Steve make the same decision he was making himself, to cooperate now that he'd gotten what he wanted.

"Can't resist you," Steve said, not raising his voice, but Bucky had no trouble picking it out of the din even as he was pushed back into place among his escort. They hustled him inside, down the same
hallway to the side door into the courtroom.

There was a little palpable silence while the officer at the door had them wait, and one of the MPs--his nametape said MARTINEZ--said, "So I guess Dunc wasn't shitting me."

Bucky looked over at him, and Martinez winked and said, "Good for you, man. You tapping that? Captain America?"

Bucky fought down the urge to laugh and shook his head, feeling dazed. He glanced around at the other three MPs boxing him in; one of them was frankly staring at him, while the other two had their gazes fixed intently just past him. They'd seen what Martinez had seen, though. Everyone had seen. A few hundred million people had looked a picture of him ordering coffee; a picture of him kissing Steve might actually pull everyone in the world. Jesus.

"Not in about seventy years," Bucky said. "But I guess we'll see after today."

Martinez nodded. "Good luck."

There wasn't anything to say to that. Bucky waited with his eyes closed, remembering that kiss in the midst of chaos, until he was ushered into the courtroom. He kept his eyes turned down, not looking to see whether Steve was sitting in the back row. They might have barred him after that stunt, and if he wasn't there, Bucky didn't want to know. He took a deep breath instead, feeling the folded paper shift between his shirt and his tie.

He took his seat at the table with Griffin, letting the formalities of the courtroom wash over him as they reopened the trial.

It didn't take long before the judge got to the point. "The court has been presented with a report from the panel of medical and psychological experts who evaluated Sergeant Barnes since this court was last in session. The report states unanimously and unequivocally--"

Bucky let his hands close into fists and stared at the edge of the table where the panel was sitting, nowhere else. He remembered to breathe. A sniper had to be aware of his breathing.

"--That Sergeant Barnes was, at the time of his alleged crimes, suffering from an array of induced pathologies including psychosis, dissociation, disorders of executive function, disorders of memory, and assorted other induced dysfunctions. Therefore he has been found by the experts to be not mentally responsible--"

There was a roar behind him: not the rainstorm of the first day, but an ocean suddenly crashing to shore at his back, and in that chorus Bucky heard Steve's voice, a wordless, triumphant yell. He struggled not to smile as he bowed his head, squeezing his eyes shut. He'd survived. He was going to survive.

There was some shouting from the MPs, a sharp banging from up at the judge's table, and the courtroom was quieted down again so the judge could continue. Bucky kept his head down. He was starting to shake, his ears ringing as adrenaline flooded through him. Any shot he took now would go wild.

Oh, God, they might actually clear him to handle weapons again. He might get to hold a rifle again someday.

"Sergeant Barnes has been found by the experts to be not mentally responsible at the time he committed the crimes with which he has been charged, and therefore this court martial returns a unanimous verdict of Not Guilty Due to Lack of Mental Responsibility."
The judge hesitated for a palpable fraction of a second, waiting for another uproar, but the courtroom was silent. Bucky could feel it waiting, coiled to strike, at his back. The judge went on. "He will be remanded to psychiatric care at Brooke Army Medical Center for evaluation of his fitness to be released from custody. This court is adjourned."

Griffin stood, and Bucky automatically stood with him, and let Griffin grab his hand and shake it. Griffin was actually smiling like he was happy, which Bucky didn't think he'd ever seen before. He managed a dazed, "Thank you, sir," before his MPs crowded around him, reaching out. He shook Duncan's hand, Mueller's, Lee's.

Andrews said, "You're not gonna hit me, right?"

Bucky blinked, and then understood Andrews' open arms and shook his head, his mouth twitching into a smile that quickly stretched out of control as Andrews hugged him, pounding on his back. Bucky saw Steve three yards away over Andrews' shoulder, working his way through the crowd. Steve looked up from the task of not stepping on people and met Bucky's gaze with a look of such beaming, brilliant happiness that Bucky couldn't see anything else.

He was barely conscious of Andrews laughing and saying, "Watch out, boys, Saturday's two days late," as he sidled away. Steve elbowed through his last few obstacles and covered the distance between them in one long running stride and a leap.

Bucky caught him, staggering back a half-step and closing his arms around Steve's thighs as they wrapped around his hips. He wound up bent back under Steve's weight, head tilting back for Steve's kiss as Steve devoured his mouth.
Steve picked his head up and whispered, "You're coming home," and Bucky finally noticed the deafening silence around them.

"You forget how much you weigh?" Bucky asked, shifting the grip of his left hand firmly up to the
cheek of Steve's ass. If people were gonna watch, let them watch. There were no camera-clicks going off; there were no cameras allowed in the courtroom, Mike had told him back before this all started. People would talk about this, but no one else would actually see it.

"We both know you can take it," Steve said, and tucked his face down against Bucky's throat, wrapping his arms around Bucky's shoulders to hug him. Bucky let his gaze settle on the ceiling--white speckled acoustic tiles, maybe a void above, maybe access to the vents--and held on to Steve while the silence eased back into rustling and shuffling and talk, none of it coming too close.

"Sir?" Bucky frowned and turned his head, about to tell Martinez that he worked for a living and not to call him sir. But Martinez's gaze--amused and a little scared--was directed at Steve.

Bucky squeezed Steve's ass and said, "That's you, Cap."

Steve sighed against his throat, making Bucky want to shiver, and then picked his head up and said, "Yes, Staff Sergeant?"

"We gotta take him, sir," Martinez said apologetically, coming a step closer, still out of arm's reach. "Sergeant Barnes is going back to BAMC. He's still in custody. We've gotta hand him over to the MEDCOM transport team."

Steve tightened his grip for a second, and repeated, "You're coming home," in Bucky's ear before dropping a last, light kiss on his lips. Then he finally put his feet down and stepped back decisively.

Bucky straightened his uniform and then turned to face Martinez, taking his gaze sharply away from Steve to step into the formation of MPs. They took him out through the side door and out of the building, and Bucky couldn't help breaking into a grin despite the clicking of the camera shutters, because Exley and his own MPs were waiting to take custody of him back from the Fort Hood MPs. They reversed the transfer from a week ago and hustled him back into a truck--someone had packed for him, his duffel and garment bag were already on board--and then he was headed for the gates, leaving Fort Hood and his court martial behind.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, letting the familiar voices of his team wash over him. *I'm going home.*

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is [here on Tumblr](https://example.com)

I am also on [Tumblr](https://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](https://example.com).
They took him into BAMC through the same side entrance Steve had brought him to three months earlier. He'd met Exley and Woj and Lind and Andrews and Mueller here, and now they escorted him through the half-recognized corridors up to a secure ward and a secure room.

The room was entirely plain and featureless, except for a few items left out on the bed: an iPod and the set of bulky headphones that he sometimes couldn't sleep without. He'd managed, during the trial, though his nightmares had gotten vicious toward the end.

Exley gave him another schedule before they left him alone in his newest locked room: it designated the remainder of Monday as rec time. Evaluation took up all of Tuesday.

Bucky spent the day rereading his favorite parts of *The Silmarillion*, the slightly battered leaf once again tucked behind the front cover. He slept that night with the headphones on. His nightmares didn't chase him more than a minute or two out of sleep.

In the morning they conducted tests of his reflexes and perceptions, asked him yet more long strings of intake questions. He was becoming practiced at reciting the details of his sleep patterns and nightmares, his incidence of positive and negative emotions. But there were new questions now, questions like, "You've gotten a lot of support from a large team while you've been reintegrating at MEDCOM. What supports do you think you'll rely on if you're released from care?"

"Steve."

There would be others. Woj had started to talk about things like referral to a civilian therapist in the week before his court martial, and he supposed he would have the right to some sort of veterans' services. He could ask Wilson how that worked; Steve said he was still keeping a hand in at his day job. But the answer to the question of support, who he would lean on--that was Steve, and Steve was a complete answer.

"Just Steve?" the woman asked neutrally.

Bucky shrugged. "He's all I've got left. He's enough. He's--" tougher than he looks, he wanted to say, except of course he wasn't anymore. If anything it was probably the other way around now; anyone looking at him would think he was completely indestructible.

"I'll try not to put everything on him." Bucky lowered his gaze and let himself frown a little. It was true, anyway; he knew there were things he didn't want Steve anywhere near. "But I don't want to assume his friends are my friends. I'll have to find my own. But I know I'll have him."

When he looked up the woman nodded and almost smiled. She asked him a question about whether he planned on going to church if he got out, and he didn't have to talk about Steve anymore.

In the afternoon the questions got less rapid-fire and rote, and his sessions were a little more like his regular sessions with Woj, but it was all the same stuff. He talked about what they wanted him to talk about; he was as cagey as he dared to be about Steve and what was between them and how long it had been there, which he knew was a little stupid when there were probably penguins in Antarctica
who'd seen Bucky kissing him by now. Still, no one pushed him hard enough on it to make it seem like he had to cough up details.

He was close to eight hours into the barrage of evaluation when a doctor observed, "There's no way of knowing whether your doctors at MEDCOM actually found all your trigger phrases."

Bucky shrugged and shook his head. "No. They did a bunch of stuff, checked a lot of random possibilities on top of all the intel they could track down--that's how they turned up the return-to-base one--but there's no way to know for sure."

The doctor nodded. "Does that concern you? That someone out there might know another trigger phrase and be able to... activate you in some way?"

Bucky studied the doctor for a moment, looking for the real question under that oblique probing. "Yeah. It does. But I'll tell you this, doc--if you keep me locked up because someone might come along and turn me, all you're doing is making me easy for them to find when they want me. You send me out there, you give me some room to maneuver and you put the only guy who's ever been any good at cutting heads off Hydra at my side."

The doctor nodded slowly. "Also, if we kept you locked up because someone might come along and turn you, we would be punishing you for someone else's possible future actions."

Bucky squinted at the doctor and then nodded back. "Sure. And I'm a Pisces born in the Year of the Snake, while we're stating facts that are totally irrelevant to the question of whether or not it's safe to let me out."

Wednesday morning he got up and got dressed as if he were on a normal schedule, even though his schedule was blank for the day. He was in the process of lacing up his boots when he saw that a sheet of paper was lying on the floor, as if it had been slipped through a gap under the door.

It was another schedule, and Bucky's hands clenched a little too hard on the page as he read Return to MEDCOM and a string of meetings labeled Separation Briefing through the rest of the day, and then, a couple of hours after dinner, Covert Departure: Rogers.

There was a knock on the door, and he opened it. Duncan offered him a paper bag and a disposable coffee cup, and Andrews said, "Come on, they didn't really schedule you breakfast. You got the time it takes to walk down to the supervising shrink's office to get that down."

Bucky managed the egg sandwich and nearly all the coffee before Andrews and Duncan stopped him to throw out all evidence of his breakfast in an exam room. They checked him for crumbs and then escorted him the last ten meters to an office where Exley was waiting along with the last doctor from yesterday, the one who had acted as if not punishing Bucky for things he hadn't done was a meaningful factor in his decision.

"I think this will not surprise anyone," the doctor said, "but we have of course found you competent and safe to be released from close custody. You are therefore returning to your reintegration unit. Normally you would next have to go before the Medical Board to determine whether you are fit to continue serving, but" the doctor touched a familiar folder, one of the ones Bucky had gotten through with Mike back at Fort Hood, "you've already entered your request for retirement, which I expect will be granted with all due speed, so you'll be spending the next few days completing your reintegration process and preparing to leave the Army."

Bucky nodded, unsure whether to thank the doctor or acknowledge orders. The doctor studied him
in silence for a moment, and then stood and leaned across his desk, offering his hand. Bucky stepped in and shook it, trying not to let his confusion show too obviously.

"I want to tell you, on behalf of everyone who's evaluated you here, and--if they didn't say so--on behalf of everyone who evaluated you back at Fort Hood, that I am sorry for everything you've suffered, and I sincerely hope that your recovery continues as well outside Army care as it has begun here."

Well, that at least made it clear what he should say. "Thank you, sir."

The doctor gave a little grimace-smile but didn't press him for more. He was formally handed over to Exley yet again, and Exley walked with him, flanked by Duncan and Andrews, out to the same truck that had brought him down from Fort Hood. Once again someone had fetched his things for him, knowing better than he did that he was leaving. His duffel was already waiting in the truck.

They took him back to his barracks room at MEDCOM, and Bucky felt, all at once, the acute sense of coming home and the awareness that he would be leaving for good soon.

This room wasn't what Steve had meant, back in the courtroom at Fort Hood, when he said *you're coming home*. Steve had meant whatever was on the other end of *Covert Departure*—tonight, in fact. He wouldn't even spend another night in this familiar place. Tonight he would be with Steve, somewhere else.

*Home*, apparently.

But he had one day left on his familiar base, with his familiar team. He met with Exley first, and Exley had just explained that his retirement would go through on Friday but he was being given leave effective tonight to give him a chance to dodge the press, when the memory tickling at the back of Bucky's mind burst fully into his awareness: his mother, the day before he left for boot camp. The whole *Separation Briefing* boiled down to Exley telling him to be good and write home and stay safe. Exley gave him a flash drive with digital copies of all of his records that the Army would let him keep—service record, medical record, what had to be a truckload of psych notes, and everything they'd figured out about his arm. Exley also passed along the number to that cell phone Bucky had commandeered months ago while holding Duncan at gunpoint, plus contact information for a case worker at the New York VA and some personal friends of Exley's, retired officers who could help him with navigating the bureaucracy.

Every session after that was the same: he collected Lind's contact information and referrals to a half-dozen doctors in New York. He got Woj's phone number and the names of three civilian therapists, all retired military officers, who Woj thought would be "less horrifyingly out of their depth than most" in helping him continue his recovery.

Even Fr. Guzman gave Bucky his number along with a recommendation of two parishes in New York where he would be welcome—one in Manhattan, one in Brooklyn.

"They're very progressive," Father assured him with a little wink. "You and Captain Rogers can attend Mass together."

What was left of the afternoon was devoted to Staff Sergeant Andrews' Final Orientation Session. It was held in the classroom where Andrews had first introduced him to the UCMJ and took the form of an impromptu dance party with music playing live from an actual radio station. Bucky recognized some of the music from his final week of orientation before his court martial, but Taylor Swift was new, and so was the style of dancing.
When they weren't trying to teach him to shake his ass to 21st century standards, the guys took turns yelling trivia questions at him, ("Tom Hanks!" Bucky yelled back. "Why do you always think you're going to stump me with Tom Hanks?") and rushing over to the laptop set up on one of the tables to show him vitally important internet memes.

Twice he caught glimpses of himself kissing Steve in the corner of the screen, but they always hastily closed those windows and got on with explaining Doge or All Your Base Are Belong to Us.

At some point Bucky looked up and Steve was leaning in the doorway watching. He was wearing civvies, hands tucked into his pockets. He was smiling softly, exactly like he used to when he sat on the edge of some dance hall, watching Bucky having fun with girls he didn't care about.

"Rogers, come here," Bucky yelled over the music, and the others turned to look. "Lee, get that video back."

Lee grinned and did it, cueing up Gangnam Style again while Bucky went over to drag Steve into the room by the hands. He started blushing and laughing when Bucky positioned him where he could see the laptop and started prodding him through the steps, but he gave it a game try, tripping over himself the way he did when he was aware of trying to dance. If he were drunk he'd be good at it--his body ought to be able to dance just fine--but his self-consciousness got in the way, keeping him stiff and awkward and clumsy.

Bucky laughed just as hard, trying to guide him, and Andrews had collapsed on a desk and was laughing so hard there were tears in his eyes.

Steve eventually sat down and insisted that he wanted to watch Bucky dance, which turned into the rest of Bucky's team fighting over the most suggestive song they could play and giving Bucky advice about how to give a lap dance. Bucky had seen Closer a few weeks ago, so he had the general idea, and unlike Steve he didn't have any disconnects between his brain and his hips.

He was doing pretty well, watching Steve turn redder and redder, until Steve hauled him down into his lap. The room erupted into yelling about not touching the talent and Bucky flipped them all off with both hands and gave Steve a sloppy, showy kiss.

Steve squirmed a little under him and Bucky realized Steve was hard. It made his breath catch, and for just a second the wanting raced ahead of the awareness that nothing was going to be that simple.

Bucky stood up as quickly as he could without looking like a scalded cat. "All right, fellas, let's show Steve how real dancing goes. Lee, come on, get some actual music playing."

Lee laughed but agreeably switched to swing, and Bucky showed Steve what he'd been teaching the guys. He had a funny double-vision moment as he remembered doing this with the Howlies a time or two when they were billeted somewhere without women around, bored and restless. Steve had been exactly the same then, too awkward to be any good though he liked watching well enough.

Eventually the last orientation session ended, and they adjourned to the mess for Bucky's last dinner on base. Steve sat at the table with them to eat, still just watching quietly, while Bucky enjoyed having his whole set of MPs around at once.

Halfway through dinner, though, Andrews turned to look directly at Steve and said seriously, "Barnes has told us a lot about you, Cap."

Steve smiled slightly--he had pretty good radar for shit-giving, having survived a year with the Howlies--and he said, "The shelter half thing was an honest mistake."
Bucky hadn't remembered that until Steve said it, and he almost choked trying to suppress a laugh.

Andrews wasn't deterred. He shook his head seriously. "Listen, you seem like a nice guy, but we have to get something straight. He's told us you have something against *The Hobbit*, and that's not a joking matter around here."

Steve raised both hands placatingly and charged right in. "Look, hey, I respect Bucky's--everybody's--right to love boring, dismal children's stories--"

There was an immediate barrage of food and wadded-up napkins in Steve's direction, and Steve swatted a fair portion of it away while taking the rest like a man, yelling, "Look, he was a brilliant linguist!"

Bucky just put his head back and laughed, letting the fight rage around him. Steve eventually and very gallantly surrendered on terms--promising to watch all three of the new Hobbit movies with Bucky but not like them too much--and they all pushed back from the table. No one was in a hurry to go anywhere, and this was a blank space in the schedule. Covert Departure wasn't scheduled for another hour.

Given the way things had been going, Bucky wasn't surprised when Woj turned up with a cake--no candles, just white frosting and the word *Congratulations* in swoopy writing among a horde of little green plastic army men.

It was a parade from then on. Practically everyone Bucky had had contact with in the last three months turned up to eat cake and congratulate him on his imminent retirement, although most of them seemed unaware of just how imminent it actually was.

Baptista from the main base kitchen came by, and the kitchen guys from the little mess where Bucky always ate came out and had cake. They all exchanged fistbumps with him, except for Rogelio, who grinned and shook his hand like he did every Sunday. Master Sergeant Ripley showed up and told him not to go running himself into the ground now that no one was supervising his PT. Dr. Chestek and Dr. Kwan and half a dozen other techs and doctors who'd had something to do with him along the way all stopped by.

Right at the moment when Bucky was starting to wonder when Covert Departure was going to kick off, Exley walked in--in civvies, which was a strange sight, but it spared anyone the impulse to be too deferential. He picked up a piece of cake and jerked a thumb toward the door. "Rogers, base is closing for the night soon. Day visitors need to get a move on."

"Yes sir, of course," Steve said smoothly, which meant he'd had enough warning to prepare himself to lie half-convincingly. "Buck, walk me out?"

That was it. Everyone in the room acted like nothing strange was happening, like Bucky was just going out to the hall to kiss Steve goodbye. Bucky set down his cake plate, adrenaline suddenly rushing through him, even though this had been on his schedule and was all part of the plan.

Steve put a hand on his arm as soon as they were out of sight of everyone in the mess, guiding him silently along to a door he'd never gone through before. They walked into an honest-to-God laundry next to the kitchen, and out through it to a waiting truck with its back doors standing open.

Bucky smiled at the now-familiar sight of his bags already packed for him and waiting in his newest mode of transit. There were boxes with them, this time, and he didn't have to look inside to know someone had packed up the contents of the shelves in the lounge, so he wouldn't have to track down all his books and DVDs again.
There were no benches--this truck obviously wasn't intended as actual transport--and Steve tugged him down to sit in a forward corner a moment before someone came up and slammed the doors shut without seeming to notice them inside.

They were alone in the dark, then, sitting pressed together, and Bucky was acutely aware that this was it. He was leaving the base, and the Army, and not coming back. Running away with Steve, into whatever the future was going to turn out to be.

"Do you feel like there should be streamers and tin cans tied to the back of this thing?" Bucky asked.

Steve burst out laughing beside him and said, "God, yeah, I was just thinking that! We had our first dance in front of your friends and everything."

"Jesus, Andrews wanted to make sure you'd treat me right." Bucky put his head down to laugh into his knees while Steve brayed with laughter beside him, nearly drowning out the sound of the truck's engine starting up. Bucky leaned into him as they started on their way.

The truck eventually entered an enclosed space and pulled up to a stop; Bucky heard the driver get out and walk away. Steve switched on a flashlight, filling the back of the truck with an indirect glow as he set it on the floor. "You might want to change."

Bucky glanced down at his fatigues. It had been months since he wasn't in uniform--fatigues every day, PT uniform for workouts. He slept in the underwear they'd issued him. He ran a hand automatically over his short-clipped hair, and Steve said, "Hat, maybe?"

Bucky nodded, looking anywhere but at Steve, trying not to let Steve see how weird this felt. He'd been on his own for six months before reintegration. He used to choose clothes to wear all the time, although he'd chosen them for closest possible resemblance to his Hydra-issue tac gear back then. Now Steve was standing up, picking up a second duffel bag that wasn't one Bucky recognized.

He offered the bag hesitantly to Bucky. "I got your sizes and picked out a few things, just to get you started."

Bucky took the bag and crouched over it, putting his back to Steve again while he dug through the contents. He was a little surprised to see they weren't exact copies of Steve's clothes--the jeans were a dark blue that was almost black, and the shirts were in darker colors as well.

Bucky chose a pair of pants, shirt and undershirt more or less at random, and changed quickly without looking at Steve. He put his boots back on after, tugging his jeans down to mostly hide them, and Steve offered him a plain black cap. Bucky pulled it on, and Steve offered him an encouraging smile. "Looks good."

Bucky glanced down at the clothes. They fit tighter than fatigues, but not as tight as some he'd seen civilians wearing. He could move in these. He nodded. "Where to now?"

"If nothing's gone horribly wrong," Steve said, walking down to the doors, "there's a car out there for us and no reporters."

Bucky tensed, half expecting a literal explosion as Steve eased one of the back doors open, but all he could hear was the same silence they'd been surrounded by since the engine cut off. Steve nodded, opening the door in increments to check their surroundings, and finally pushed it wide and jumped down. "Pass me some boxes?"

They made short work of transferring everything from the back of the truck--including, Bucky
realized when he brought it to the doors and handed it down to Steve, Steve's shield. It had been propped behind Bucky's bags, out of sight, though where Steve had been sitting he'd have been able to touch it and know it was there.

It was the most dangerous object Bucky had touched since he pushed Mueller's rifle at Duncan after taking him hostage, but Steve took it from him just as casually as he'd taken Bucky's bag of entirely useless fatigues. Bucky jumped down and brought the last box over to the unassuming sedan. He fit the last box into the trunk while Steve settled the shield in the foot well behind the passenger seat, where he'd be able to reach over from the driver's seat and grab it.

"Shotgun," Bucky muttered, shooting Steve a smile, and Steve grinned back as Bucky got into the passenger seat--a civilian vehicle, with Steve. This was it.

Steve pulled out of the parking space and headed toward the entrance to the parking garage doing--Bucky didn't even have to look at the speedometer--exactly five miles an hour. Bucky groaned and slumped back in his seat. "Are you going to abide by posted speed limits all the way to New York?"

"Just to the airstrip," Steve said, and reached over to pat his knee. "Hang in there, Buck, it's not far. And we wouldn't want to get pulled over tonight."

"Yeah," Bucky said, and looked out the window at what must be the outskirts of San Antonio going by. Steve wasn't really here to guard him; he was just giving Bucky a ride. If Bucky opened the door when Steve stopped at a light, he could get out and walk away. Steve would probably let him go at least long enough to park the car, and he wouldn't force Bucky back in.

Bucky didn't have a CO now. Whatever he did, there was no more punishment waiting.

Steve's hand was still on his knee, and he squeezed before he took it away to use both hands making a turn. "Not far now."

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end... of Act I!

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr](http://example.com).

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Chapter 16

Welcome to Act II! There was a time when I thought this was where the story started, and then realized I need to write just a tiiiny bit of setup to get here...

The plane waiting for them at the airstrip was a little black thing, perched on legs like a malevolent bird. The silhouette of it in the dark made something go sideways in Bucky's brain. That wasn't just a plane, that was a target--no, it was transport, and he was--

Bucky shook his head hard. "Steve? Is that..."

"SHIELD manufacture, now owned by Stark Industries--bought it for a steal when a lot of surviving materiel was sold off after Triskelion--and loaned out for the purpose," Steve said firmly. "It's completely private, and we can lift off here and land on top of Stark Tower, no need to get through a New York airport unseen."

Bucky blew out a breath at the thought, and made himself look around, taking in the scene: the scent and feeling of a January night in Texas, the expanse of dark starry sky above them, the quiet airfield. He knew where he was and what this was. It was weird, but it wasn't as confusing as it had seemed for a second there. He was with Steve. He was going back to New York for the first time in a long damn time.

"Right. Let's go."

There was another short flurry of loading things, with no sign of any crew for the jet, although Bucky did notice, on a trip inside with boxes, someone up in the pilot's compartment going quietly through a checklist.

"Okay, Clint, we're in," Steve called up, setting the last box down gently. The rear ramp pulled up, and Bucky looked around the space and remembered his Russian combat team crowded around him. Grisha and Vanya checking his gear and handing him his weapons, and after, once when he was wounded and exhausted, Grisha putting him on his knees, telling him he'd earned something for all that work...

Bucky closed his eyes and said, "They transported me in one of these a few times."

"Yeah?" Steve said, his voice very calm. "You going to be okay in here for an hour?"

From up in the cockpit there was a distinct silence. The pilot's checklist was on hold. Barton wasn't going to go anywhere with Bucky in the troop transport hold if he thought he was about to go off.

Bucky opened his eyes on Steve, who was holding himself carefully still, studying Bucky. Steve wasn't going to shove a rocket launcher into his hand. Steve wasn't going to do any of the things Grisha had done.

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Yeah, it's fine. just--don't let me forget where I am?"
Steve smiled and reached for him, tugging him over to sit on a bench with Steve's arm draped over his shoulders.

"So," Steve said. "At long last I can tell you what I've actually been up to for the last three months."

"Please tell me it's been something more productive than telling people not to be mean to me on Twitter," Bucky said, accepting Steve's gambit. Andrews had, for practice, shown him the scrolling list of things people were saying about Tony Stark at any given moment on Twitter. Bucky hadn't asked to look at the same list for himself or Steve after that.

"I don't argue with people on Twitter," Steve said loftily, and then spoiled it by adding, "Anymore. PR locked me out of my account months ago. But no, I've had one or two days more exciting than that."

Bucky nodded, and settled in for a briefing on Steve's professional activities. Other than Steve's arm around him it could have been any tactical briefing he'd ever gotten from Steve. It was completely businesslike, catching him up on what was left of Hydra, what fronts it seemed to have disappeared into, what seemingly-unrelated threats were competing with them for the Avengers' attention.

He managed to stay almost completely absorbed in the briefing—which occasionally veered off, as Steve's briefings were prone to do, into stories about the best part of an op. He got the rundown on truly amazing explosions, Romanov and Wilson's best moments, Tony's worst and most hilarious moments, all of it.

Still, time was ticking by in his head, and when Barton's amplified voice said, "Coming in on final approach now," it clicked neatly, reassuringly into place. It had been fifty-eight minutes. Steve's estimation of an hour had been accurate. They were almost done with the trip. They were almost in New York, almost home.

Steve went back to the story he'd been telling, but he was as distracted as Bucky was with the imminence of their arrival.

Bucky turned to actually look at him for the first time in an hour, sudden worry blooming. "There's not going to be a welcoming committee, is there?"

"N--," Steve didn't even get an entire syllable out before he stopped short, his eyes going wide. Bucky followed his train of thought effortlessly: Steve couldn't guarantee that no one had gotten that bright idea into their head in his absence.

Steve raised his wrist to his mouth and said, "Clint? Is there anybody waiting for us on the roof?"

"Nope, all clear," Barton called back promptly. "But if you want me to hover at your windows and let you jump for it, just say the word."

Steve raised an eyebrow, and Bucky rolled his eyes and shook his head, gesturing at the amount of stuff they needed to move. Steve tilted his head in acknowledgement of the point and said, "No, thanks, a normal landing is fine as long as we don't need to make evasive maneuvers."

"Roger that," Barton said, and Steve smiled a little, like the pun on his name had settled into a well-worn half-joke. Even if Steve had never mentioned Barton before, Bucky would have known just from that twist of his lips how much Steve liked him.

They landed a moment later, a weird vertical descent that could not feel like anything but a quinjet landing. Bucky turned his face into Steve's shoulder, inhaling the scent of him to push away the memory of Grisha telling him to get up off the floor now, mission was over, and then they were
Steve shook him gently, like he thought Bucky might not have noticed that they had arrived. Bucky nodded into his shoulder and stood up, organizing gear to be carried in a single trip. He could take two stacked boxes and his duffel, and that left Steve one box, the bag of civvies, and his shield.

They trooped down the ramp together, into the windy chill of a January night—real January, New York January—a hundred and three stories up. Bucky could handle the cold just fine, but after what passed for winter in Texas it was still a shock. Steve didn't dawdle, leading the way to an elevator that took them down only a handful of floors and opened directly into an apartment that was spacious and bright but not as huge as Bucky had been expecting from the size of the building and the fact that it belonged to a Stark.

That was all he really had time to take in before Steve dropped what he was carrying; the shield hit the floor with a familiar clatter. Bucky dropped his own load just in time to turn and face Steve as Steve backed him into the wall and kissed him like he'd been starving for it.

We're home, Bucky thought, and that was the last thought he had for a while. He was too busy with feeling Steve's body plastered up against his, holding him tight against the wall, and Steve's mouth open to his, no longer hesitating at all. At long last, there was nobody watching.

Bucky felt himself waking up under Steve's kiss, even with Steve's hands still resting chastely on his sides. They could do this now—no stopping, no holding back. He was about to get all his rewards at once. He had definitively survived and now he could kiss Steve as much as he wanted to—could have all of Steve that he wanted, and he wanted so much his whole body was humming with it like a live wire. He arched against Steve, rubbing their bodies together, nipping at Steve's lip as they kissed.

All his half-formed fantasies about this rushed back in on him as he let his hands slide down Steve's back, feeling the strength of that familiar body. Steve was his, and he could have this. He could do all the things they used to do together and maybe—maybe--

Maybe he had only needed Steve, all this time. Maybe it was going to be simple; maybe it could be easy. Maybe there wasn't really anything wrong with him at all except that he'd been kept apart from his best guy for too long.

Bucky tugged up on Steve's shirt, sliding his hands beneath it to touch Steve's bare skin, and Steve made a strangled noise and ground in against him. He was hard, Bucky could feel that. He wasn't himself yet, but it was early and Steve had always been excitable. It could still be all right.

Bucky ran his hands up Steve's back, spreading his fingers wide over Steve's shoulder blades. He remembered how sharp they had once been, almost delicate under his hands compared to the brawn of him now. But he had always been Steve, always Bucky's. They had always known each other. They had always fit together like this.

Steve took his hands—and his mouth—off Bucky just long enough to strip out of his shirt, and then he was pulling at Bucky's shirts—why had he put on two?—tugging them up and off while Bucky fumbled to help.

Steve stopped, his eyes riveted on Bucky's chest—on his shoulder, Bucky realized, the ugly seam where metal met flesh. Bucky leaned against the wall, letting Steve look.

"You remember the first time I saw you after?" Bucky asked, and Steve's eyes jerked up to meet his, briefly searching, but he didn't have to explain what he meant by saw you or after.
He could see Steve put it together: that hour they'd spent away from the column marching from the factory at Kreischberg back to the Allied lines, when Steve had stripped to wash up in some icy Italian stream.

Bucky had declined. He had needed the armor of his clothes from the whole world but especially from Steve right then, not wanting Steve to see any telltale marks from what they'd done to him until he could figure out how to play if all off.

There had been no hiding what had been done to Steve. His new body had been--still was--objectively beautiful, but it had been strange as hell, almost grotesque, when Bucky's eye expected the small form he'd known so well.

"Yeah," Steve said, and clearly he remembered Bucky's approach to getting to know the new Steve, because his gaze dropped to Bucky's shoulder again, an extra little flush of pink on his cheeks. "Yeah, I remember."

He raised his hand to touch, feather-light, as if he thought the scars still hurt, or as if Bucky might split apart at the seam if Steve pressed too hard. Bucky pushed into the touch, wanting Steve's hands on him even there, especially there, and Steve obeyed the silent demand, rubbing his thumb along the short ridge of a scar.

The weird ghostly sensation of it made Bucky shiver, made his skin feel tight all over and his nipples stiffen. Bucky reached for Steve, curling a hand around the back of his neck, and Steve was already leaning in to press his mouth where he had just touched, kissing and then licking over that scar, nuzzling up the line where metal merged into skin.
Steve's left hand roamed over his chest, relearning him inch by inch, while Bucky leaned against the wall and held on to the nape of Steve's neck. His breathing got rough as Steve's mouth explored his scars and then moved higher, tracing the line of his collarbone to his throat. Bucky hauled him the rest of the way up then, into another kiss, and Steve moaned at the touch of his tongue. His hands slid down to bracket Bucky's waist, just above the top of his jeans.
Bucky's hips jerked against Steve's instinctively, and he could feel how hard Steve was as Steve ground back against him. He wanted that--wanted to touch that, feel that, wanted to know how good he was making Steve feel. Bucky flattened his hands on Steve's chest and gave him a little push. It wasn't enough to make Steve back off, but enough to signal to him that it was Bucky's turn to lead.

Steve took the cue gracefully, as if it had been a day and not decades since Bucky last gave it to him. They swung around in a brief whirl that was the closest they'd ever come to really dancing together--Steve was never clumsy when he wasn't thinking of it as dancing--and then it was Bucky pressing him into the wall, free to kiss his way over Steve's skin, exploring his body and learning it all over again.

Steve let his head fall back as Bucky tried to kiss his way to the bottom of his blush, lips tracking the heat of it lower and lower. Steve's breath was coming fast. He was caught between laughing and moaning when Bucky rubbed his cheek against the generous firm curves of Steve's pecs, mouthing at his nipples as his hands eased down to Steve's hips.

Bucky straightened up most of the way, kissing along Steve's throat again to feel Steve's pulse thundering against his lips. Steve's arms went around him, trying to pull him closer, and Bucky slid his hand down between them, pressing his palm to the familiar bulge of Steve's cock straining eagerly against the front of his pants. Steve made a gut-punched noise and Bucky grinned against his throat and worked his hand up and down, giving Steve just a little friction while Steve's hands tightened on his hips.

It was the first time in a long time; Steve might just be distracted enough to be selfish for a minute. Bucky tilted his head, making little encouraging sounds as he dropped nipping kisses at the top of Steve's throat. He aimed for that point at the back of his jaw that could make him go off sometimes with just the right scrape of teeth.

But Steve's hands tightened hard on him, pushing a little and asking for the lead back, and Steve gasped, "Bucky, hey, wait up."

Bucky pulled back, but instead of letting Steve take charge again he squirmed out of Steve's grip. He hooked two fingers into the waistband of Steve's pants to tug him along as he turned away.

"There's a bed here somewhere, right?" Bucky asked, not looking at Steve, knowing Steve would let him have some leeway. He and Steve had a whole vocabulary for this, asking each other for what they wanted without asking. Steve would remember the old signs and countersigns better than Bucky did.

"Yeah," Steve said, sounding breathless, but when he touched Bucky again it was a gentle hand on his shoulder, pushing him forward a little instead of reeling him back in. "My room's first on the left, or--"

Bucky led off, not waiting for Steve to offer him other options.

The door to Steve's bedroom stood open--and so did another room, a little further along, but Bucky wasn't worrying about other possibilities right now. He was going to bed with Steve. Steve's room seemed tidier than usual, like Steve had anticipated this moment, or something like it, before he left. He'd been expecting to bring Bucky back here, to this neat room, this properly made up bed.

Bucky reversed his grip on Steve's pants and gave him a push toward the bed. Steve went, falling down on his back and pulling Bucky after him gently enough that Bucky didn't have to make any obvious effort to land propped over him. He didn't give Steve any time to try to take charge, chasing him down into a kiss while he got his hand on Steve's cock again, rubbing it through his jeans.
His hand remembered this--not the texture and fit of Steve's blue jeans, which made it startlingly different, but teasing Steve through his clothes, feeling Steve turned on for him like this. It sent a flash of heat through his body, making his skin feel tight all over and his hips jerk reflexively.

Steve made a hungry little sound into Bucky's mouth, rolling his hips up into Bucky's grooping hand, and Bucky moaned right back, kissing him deep and hard. He gave Steve another few strokes through his clothes and then made himself shift his hand up, fumbling the button of Steve's jeans open and yanking the zipper down. Steve squirmed a little, working his pants down and making it easier for Bucky to get his hand inside.

Closing his hand on Steve's cock sent a jolt through him, a weird combination of familiarity and lust, an even deeper recognition than anything yet. Bucky knew this. He knew how this worked; he could fall into this routine and follow it.

He let his mouth slide away from Steve's so he could hear the little sounds Steve made as Bucky stroked him in the rhythm his whole body remembered, kissing along his jaw as Steve's breath sped up and Steve started moving under him, not quite fucking his fist but starting to want to. This was good, this was right, they could--

Steve's hand pressed against the front of Bucky's jeans, unerringly finding his cock, and Bucky froze, his hand stilling on Steve, his breath cutting off sharply. His face was already half-hidden against Steve's throat, and if he just didn't move, maybe--

Steve's hand rocked against his cock, which was as soft as ever, and Steve's other arm came around Bucky's shoulders. "Hey. It's all right, just let me--"

Steve rolled them over, putting Bucky on his back, and Bucky let his hand fall away from the straining firmness of Steve's cock, slinging his arm over his face instead so he could watch from cover as Steve got Bucky's pants open and tugged them down.

Steve looked intent, but not upset, not disgusted. Like there was a problem here for him to solve, and he was going to solve it. Maybe he could; he'd never--hardly ever--failed Bucky before. Maybe all Bucky really needed was Steve's hand on him, Steve's mouth, Steve in the flesh.

Steve's hand curled around his soft cock and Bucky felt another jolt at the sensation. For a second it wasn't just Steve's familiar hand touching him so intimately, but Grisha's hand closing on him while he knelt in a spreading pool of his own blood on the quinjet, Rumlow's hand while he was twitching on the floor of the showers from a barrage of blows from the stun baton that still buzzed in his ear, ready to go again if he struggled. Maybe, maybe, please.

Steve gave him a few firm strokes, and Bucky couldn't hold back a moan at the touch. He wasn't hard, but he was wound up, wanting Steve's touch everywhere. He could feel the possibility of it humming hungrily under his skin. "Stevie, please."

"I got you, Buck," Steve said, looking up at him with a confident smile, and then he bent low between Bucky's legs, taking Bucky's soft cock into his mouth, and Bucky closed his eyes and almost sobbed at the sensation. Steve's mouth, God, he'd missed this, this exact heat, the little fidgeting touch of Steve's tongue. Steve sucking him so sweetly, sending shudders of electricity through his whole body. Maybe, maybe--

But this wasn't anything like Grisha, or Rumlow. Bucky was spread out on Steve's soft bed, with Steve's gentle hands resting on his thighs, and Steve's mouth was a world away from the rough stroking of those careless hands. After the first few seconds the feeling of potential evaporated like the fizz on soda pop, leaving him with just the slightly weird sensation of Steve sucking on his
almost-numb flesh.

Bucky let out another sound, really nearly a sob this time, and Steve slid one hand down from his thigh, cradling Bucky's balls, playing with them, but it was the same weird feeling of numbness. He knew Steve was touching him, he could feel it, but it was like a touch on his metal arm. It wasn't real, not like it should be.

Bucky shoved the fingers of his right hand into his mouth, stopping his own breath. If he could just choke a little, if he could just make it hurt, maybe...

He bit down as much to feel any real, vivid sensation as to try to help things along. For a wild second he thought of really closing the bite, breaking the skin, maybe breaking the bones, but he already knew it wouldn't help. It would scare Steve, too, so it would be worse than just not enough.

Bucky jerked his fingers out of his mouth and pushed up on his left elbow, using his right hand to push at Steve's forehead.

"Steve," Bucky said, and heard his voice coming out weary and defeated. "Knock it off."

Steve backed off immediately, picking his head up and moving his hand back to Bucky's thigh. His mouth hung open, his lips pink from kissing, but no more than that. He hadn't exactly been straining himself on that mouthful.

"It's not gonna work," Bucky said, aiming for a matter of fact tone, forcing his lips up into a little smile. "I'm sorry. It just... doesn't work."

Steve frowned--looked down at Bucky's dick like he expected to see a jammed mechanism he could clear--and then back up at Bucky. "What..."

Bucky shrugged and curved his hand around Steve's cheek, tugging up. Steve followed the pull, but curled himself carefully around Bucky like his dick was a wounded place he shouldn't press against, or like his own hard cock was suddenly an impoliteness that shouldn't be mentioned.

The hell with that. Bucky got his hand on Steve again, rolling onto his side and kissing him firmly.

"I just can't," Bucky said with his forehead pressed to Steve's so he didn't have to meet his eyes. "They fucked me up pretty bad. Machines aren't supposed to feel too much. So I don't. I thought maybe with you I could like I used to, but..." Bucky shook his head. "Wishful thinking. It doesn't work. That's all."

"Bucky," Steve said softly, trying to pull away, but Bucky kept pressing close, threw his leg over Steve's to hold them together and kept his hand on Steve's cock.

"I don't care," Bucky insisted. "I don't. I've missed this so fucking much, Steve. I want to have sex with you. I don't care if it doesn't get me hard, I just--I want this. I still want you. Okay? Can you just--just pretend I'm not fucking--"

He felt Steve get it all at once, understanding and acting on it in the same second. Steve rolled onto his back, getting both hands on Bucky's ass to pull him close, and kissed Bucky hard enough to save him from having to say anything else.

Bucky kissed back fiercely, with all the passion of a close escape, because if Steve let him keep talking too much longer Bucky might have started saying words like unless or maybe, and he wasn't going to say those things to Steve. The things those words led to were things Steve never needed to know about. Telling Steve how exactly they'd broken him would only make this worse.
And for now he had half of what he wanted--Steve's body under his, Steve's bare skin against his, Steve wrapped around him.

Bucky shoved Steve's pants down to his thighs, and Steve returned the favor, though there was no point trying to get further out of their clothes than that. Neither of them had stopped to take off their boots, and they weren't going to stop now. Steve ground up against him and Bucky remembered this move, getting Steve's cock to line up just right with the hollow of his hip, letting Steve thrust up against his belly, using his whole body to give Steve the weight and friction he wanted while they kissed like they were starving for it.

The rub of Steve's body against his kept sending up little odd flares of pleasure and sensation that felt almost real, almost enough to mean something, and he just let them go past like surfacing memories, not trying to grab at anything. It felt good to be here with Steve like this, to hear his breath getting faster and feel his hands gripping tight on Bucky's ass, pulling him down in just the rhythm Steve wanted while the strength of Steve's body surged under him like the tide.

"That's it," he whispered, when Steve's breathing took on that almost pained edge that meant he was getting close. "Stevie, yeah, come on, come for me, let me feel it--"

Steve rolled them over again, but Bucky knew that move, had been waiting for it. He gave himself up to the hard weight of Steve's body over his, Steve thrusting down against him almost bruisingly, Steve's kisses disintegrating into open-mouthed presses of teeth and tongue as he worked his cock against Bucky's belly, pounding him hard and fast until he went rigid all over, eyes closed and mouth falling open. Bucky stared up at him and felt something fall into place, some old wound finally closing as their long separation really ended.

He was here, with Steve, watching him come. They were both home, together.

Steve melted onto him, going boneless with a politely gradual slump. Bucky laughed softly under his weight and ran his hand up Steve's back to card the fingers of his right hand through Steve's blond hair.

He felt content, and tired, and happy, and glad to have Steve's weight holding him down here. The wetness of Steve's come trapped between their bodies was less annoying than his jeans cutting into his thighs or the increasingly unavoidable awareness that he was still wearing his boots and so was Steve.

"You should get undressed before you go to sleep," Bucky pointed out, pitching his voice low.

"Gimme a second to enjoy this," Steve mumbled, tucking his face down against Bucky's throat.

Bucky smiled and let him, keeping his breathing matched to Steve's as it evened out into sleep. He felt that last fraction of wakeful tension slip out of Steve's body, his weight trusted completely to Bucky's body. He waited a little while past that, and then he rolled them over, tipping Steve onto his back and resting on top of him.

Steve didn't make a bad pillow, and Bucky let his eyes close there, half tempted to just stay. But it didn't take long for his drifting half-asleep thoughts to return to the quinjet and Grisha, and the unsatisfied hum of tension in his blood that couldn't be exhausted.

He was going to have nightmares tonight, and he wasn't going to have them in the same bed with Steve.

Steve started snoring, a familiar little stuttered noise he'd never made before he got his new body.
That meant he was properly asleep, and Bucky could ease away from him, scooting carefully down the bed. He stopped to get Steve out of his boots and then his jeans, and Steve surfaced enough to make a sad sound when Bucky pulled them away, curling onto his side like he was cold.

"Bucky?" Steve reached out, groping around the vast bed without opening his eyes.

"I'll be right back," Bucky said softly. "Keep the bed warm for me, Steve."

"Mmph," Steve returned agreeably, snuggling into the pillow, and Bucky found a blanket to toss over him before he slipped out of the room with his own pants hanging open, Steve's come smeared across his stomach. He tugged his boxers up to cover his soft dick.

The open door further down the hall turned out to be another bedroom, as Bucky had expected, more or less the mirror image of Steve's. There were curtains drawn across one whole wall that must be windows, and the bed was the same kind of vast expanse as the one in Steve's room, covered in a thick blanket striped blue and green.

There were some photos on the walls. The one nearest to the door, Bucky realized with a wry smile, was a grainy shot of him, Andrews, and Duncan standing in a Starbucks. Bucky was looking up at the menu board while Duncan pointed at something, very seriously explaining the range of Bucky's options. Andrews was standing slightly behind them, looking just to one side of the camera, scoping out the scene.

Clearly this was Bucky's room. He went out to the main room, collected as much of his possessions as he could carry in one trip, and took them to his room. He closed the door firmly behind him before he stripped to his skin, pulled on a pair of clean Army-issued boxers from his duffel.

He got into the bed alone, lying down carefully along one edge so he could pretend it was a narrow cot he couldn't possibly get lost in.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 17

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When he heard the whine of the stun baton beside his ear while Grisha's cock was buried down his throat and Vladi's hand was ruthlessly stripping his cock, he thought, *This is a dream.*

He tried not to know it, to go on being choked, being used--to keep feeling that hand on him and all the pain that meant he had earned it fairly--but the knowing made everything turn insubstantial. A moment later he was awake, stretched out on his back in the too-big bed. He threw the covers back and stared down at the tent in his boxers, his cock straining against the thin fabric.

"Fuck you," Bucky said breathlessly. The ache of it, the almost-pleasure, was dancing right under his skin, just begging to be made real.

He shoved his hand into his boxers already knowing it was futile, just for the sensation of wrapping his hand around his hard cock. At least he could feel it and know it was there. It was real, even if it wouldn't do him any good. But as soon as he touched himself he couldn't resist trying; he jerked himself frantically, trying to remember the taste of Grisha's cock and the way it choked him, the exact sensation of Rumlow's stun baton lighting up his whole nervous system with those arcs of blinding pain.

"Please, dammit, fucking--" Bucky stroked frantically, like maybe he could get there in time if he hurried. But his cock shrank and softened in his hand with every pull, until it felt as weird and pointless as Steve's hand had last night. "*Fuck.*"

Bucky yanked his hand out of his boxers and rolled onto his side to pound his fist against the mattress in a flurry of bouncing blows that felt exactly as pointless as the rest of this. "*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*"

Bucky woke up in the act of rolling off the bed, and halfway through scrambling for a corner to put his back against he remembered where he was. Stark Tower, New York, Steve's apartment. His own bedroom, with the door closed so Steve wouldn't come in. *Home.*

He looked around the room. It felt big--it was at least three times the size of his barracks room--but comfortable. There was plush carpeting under his feet, and the curtains let in enough light that he could tell it was morning. It was probably later than it felt; he'd changed time zones last night.

It occurred to him that it didn't matter much what time it was. He had nothing scheduled today, or ever again. He stood there for a moment, feeling lost in the spacious room, and then he shook that off and headed for the shower. He knew how to start a day, at least, no matter where he was.

He steered himself deliberately away from his duffel full of uniforms when he came back from the shower. He picked up the bag of civilian clothes Steve had brought for him, sorting most of it into drawers before pulling on a clean t-shirt, fresh underwear, and the same jeans he'd worn the night before. There weren't any shoes, so he dug out his PT sneakers and put them on.

He told himself he was ready now for... whatever came next.
No one was waiting outside the bedroom door. Bucky hesitated for a second, wondering if he was really allowed to just walk out unescorted. The next second he heard Steve clattering around in the kitchen, and he shook his head at himself and headed toward the sound.

Steve was sitting at the kitchen table with a bowl of cereal in front of him. The coffee was dripping, and two mugs were set out by the pot. Steve hesitated for a moment with his spoon halfway to his mouth. "Morning, Buck."

"Morning." Bucky was willing to pretend this was all perfectly normal for as long as Steve let him. He found the bowls and spoons and poured himself a bowl of cereal to match Steve's before joining him at the table.

As soon as Bucky's mouth was full, Steve said, without looking up at him, "Did I wake up at all when you left?"

Bucky chewed, watching Steve until Steve actually met his eyes. He looked like he was struggling so hard not to be either mad or hurt that he didn't know which one he'd rather be. It was an expression Bucky had learned to decode on Steve's face a long time ago.

"A little," Bucky said. "I told you I'd be right back so you wouldn't fuss. When did you notice I was gone?"

"Two thirty-seven in the morning," Steve said promptly. "But the door to your bedroom was closed, so I figured you found it just fine."

Bucky nodded. "It's nice. Thanks."

Steve stared at him for a moment--Bucky took a bite of cereal, chewing and looking back--and then blew out a breath, shaking his head. "Bucky, come on, say something."

Bucky shrugged, dropping his gaze for the first time. "I'm fine, Steve. We're fine. I just ain't gonna be able to sleep in the same bed with you. Not for a while."

"For a while, or ever?" Steve prodded.

Bucky looked up sharply. "Well, based on what I know to expect from talking to anybody else who's ever been through exactly what I've been through..."

Steve winced, and Bucky sighed and got up to step around the table and kiss him good morning and sorry all in one.

"I don't know," Bucky said, looking down at Steve. "Okay? I don't know. I'm trying to get better, but I don't know."

Steve tugged him down for another brief kiss. "I didn't mean it like that, just--you could have told me. I wouldn't have fuzzed at you. You didn't have to sneak off in the middle of the night like..."

Like there was something to hide. Like he had something to be ashamed of. Like he used to.

"I know," Bucky said. "I just wanted you to keep sleeping, that's all. From now on you'll know. If you want me to leave before you fall asleep, I'll do that."

Steve shook his head, but before he said anything else, there was a little click from the coffee maker as it turned off. Bucky had an excuse to turn away then, going to fix coffee for both of them.
After breakfast Steve said, "So do you, uh... do you have a plan?"

Bucky nodded slowly. "I'm gonna need to figure out somewhere to run laps. Stark got something like that here?"

Steve looked a little bemused--it obviously wasn't what he'd meant--but Bucky could already feel the itchy need to move coiling under his skin. He hadn't had a proper PT session in days.

"Yeah," Steve said. "There's--we have our own gym, actually, let me show you. We've got the whole floor. I made Tony cut it up into rooms that I could see to the other side of, but that means it just kind of keeps going forever once you start opening doors."

The gym, which featured weights, punching bags, wrestling mats, and a treadmill that Steve assured Bucky could keep up with either of them, had a beautiful view out over the city. There was also a small library, a separate room for watching TV--Bucky was amused to see that Steve had already acquired all the DVDs Bucky had had back in his lounge, plus what looked like a few hundred more--two barely-furnished guest bedrooms with their own bathrooms attached, and a few more empty rooms that Steve confessed he had no idea what to do with.

"Do you have some paper?" Bucky asked, as the tour wound down. "And a ruler?"

"Sure." Steve fished both out of the drawers of a desk in the living room, and offered him a pencil along with them. "Sketching a layout?"

Bucky shook his head. "Schedule. I always had a schedule before. I don't know what the hell I'm going to put in mine, but I need to figure something out. A schedule's like a plan, right?"

Steve smiled a little, nodding. "I got myself into a routine without plotting it out like that, but yeah, I know what you mean. Let me know if there's anything I can help you fill in?"

"I will." Bucky leaned in to kiss Steve again instead of telling him right away what he was going to need help with. It would be simpler when it was a box on the schedule.

Twice-daily PT sessions were easy enough to put into the schedule. Meals were theoretically also easy, except that he didn't know when Steve usually ate. Bucky hesitated a while over that, then penciled in breakfast on the assumption that Steve normally ate at the time he'd eaten today. Steve had said he understood about schedules and routines, after all. Bucky made some guesses about the other meals. He could adjust the schedule or just eat without Steve. Given the nature of his work, Steve probably wouldn't be around for regular meals, plenty of the time.

Everything else depended on outside factors. Bucky wrote himself a box on the current morning that said Develop Schedule: phone calls, and made an associated list with the contact information for the doctors and therapists Lind and Woj had recommended.

He wrote down the contact information for the churches Fr. Guzman had told him about, too. It would feel sort of strange not to go to Mass on a Sunday morning, now that it had become part of his routine, and maybe Steve would go with him again. Sit beside him, for once, instead of out of sight at his back. Bucky thought he would like that.

After that he wrote down, Arm: Stark.

The schedule for all of that would depend on the people he could contact, but there was one box that he knew should be on there every day, or as often as it could be arranged. That didn't require a phone call, just a conversation.
In the early afternoon of each day, before afternoon PT, Bucky sketched in *Trigger Reduction.*

Then he went to find Steve.

Steve was in the living room, curled up in an armchair like he thought he was still five feet tall. He was frowning into a copy of *The Silmarillion,* and Bucky was totally distracted from his errand by a rush of baffled affection.

"What the hell are you doing with that?" he asked, leaning against the back of Steve's chair to look over his shoulder at the part Steve was reading.

"Reading it," Steve replied without looking up. Bucky could hear the determined frown in his voice. "Or trying to, anyway--I think I gotta make a chart of who all these people are. And some kind of timeline. Did you read this one already?"

Steve looked up at Bucky, still frowning intently. Bucky couldn't help laughing, at his own sense of reprieve as much as Steve's earnest seriousness.

"I read all the words in it, yeah," Bucky said. "During my trial. I got no fucking clue how it fits together, though. I just let it kind of go by and didn't think too hard about any of it."

"But it's..." Steve scowled back down at the book. "Sam said this one explains everything. I thought if I could figure this one out I'd finally get what you like so much about the other ones."

"Well," Bucky leaned down to kiss Steve's jaw right where it was clenched. "Make a chart, then, I guess."

Steve huffed, but he reached up to run his hand over Bucky's short hair. Bucky tucked his face in against Steve's throat and let him do that while Bucky played the words he needed to say over in his head.

He tried out the easiest ones first. "You wanna go to Mass with me on Sunday?"

Steve's hand tightened against his head, and he felt Steve's whole body go rigid, his left hand tightening hard on the book he was still holding open. Bucky held perfectly still and waited him out, his stomach sinking.

"Yeah," Steve said, setting the book down and twisting in the armchair to look up at Bucky, letting go of him as he did. "Buck, yeah, I'd be happy to. Are you--do you want me to ask a priest to come and celebrate here at the Tower? There's gotta be someplace we could set up a chapel, God knows we have space..."

Bucky carefully did not crumple the sheets of paper in his hand as Steve trailed off. Schedules could be adjusted. Plans could be changed. If that was how it had to be, that would be all right. Still, he had to understand the situation.

"Am I not allowed to leave the Tower, then?" Bucky asked. "Is that--do you--"

Steve was already shaking his head, his expression turning determined. "No, Buck, it's not that. You're a free man. It's just--nobody knows you're in New York yet. The Army's only been saying that your retirement is being processed, and the whole point of leaving Texas the way we did was to give you a little breathing room before the press found you. But if you and I go out somewhere as public as Mass together, people are going to spot us for sure. And..."
"And after the display you made of us," Bucky filled in, thinking it through, "people are going to have a lot to say about you and me walking into a church together."

Steve nodded, a little unnatural caution overtaking his stubborn look. "I just--I don't want to make it worse for you than it has to be."

Bucky thought of the signs he'd glimpsed outside Fort Hood. Traitor, Murderer. Swastikas, for God's sake. Whatever he'd been, he'd never been a Nazi, but angry people said all kinds of stupid things.

"Also," Bucky said. "I'd be making a hell of a mess out of a lot of regular people's Sunday morning."

Steve tilted his head, allowing the point.

"I'll ask, then," Bucky decided, folding that into his list of phone calls to make. He'd needed to call to find out the times of services anyway; it would just be a longer call now. "I'll ask the pastor if it's okay for me to come--for both of us. Father Guzman recommended a couple of parishes that wouldn't mind us too much."

"Oh," Steve said. "Do you want me to--" he cut himself off with a sharp headshake. "Yeah, okay. Tell me how that goes. I can get in touch with some people if those don't pan out."

Bucky nodded. "So, uh--is there a phone I can use?"

He hadn't seen an old-fashioned one anywhere in the apartment. He knew that people were private about their individual phones, but he also knew that there wasn't much Steve wouldn't share with him, as long as Bucky was allowed. You're a free man probably meant he had phone privileges.

"Oh!" Steve said again. "Yeah, sorry, I completely forgot--where did I--"

Steve jumped to his feet and went over to the boxes and bags Bucky had left by the elevator last night, digging through his own knapsack until he pulled out a slim black rectangle that looked a lot like Steve's phone. "I programmed in my number and a few others I thought you would want, and the security features are all set up already. It's linked to JARVIS even when you're not in the Tower, too. He can do most things, but I try not to just use him as an operator all the time."

Bucky nodded, thumbing through the phone's screens and menus. He was surprised and pleased--and then after a second's thought not surprised at all--to see that Andrews, Duncan, Mueller, and Lee's phone numbers were already programmed in. He pulled up the camera and snapped a photo of Steve watching him.

Steve made a little outraged sound at the click of the shutter, but it was, as ever with Steve's new body, not really an actually unflattering picture. He was frowning a little, but to anyone who didn't know he was worrying about whether Bucky would be okay with his new phone he'd probably look like he was thinking deep, important Captain America thoughts.

"I'm gonna get that printed," Bucky announced with great satisfaction. "And I'm gonna frame it and hang that right next to the picture of me in a Starbucks that you stuck on my wall."

"I thought you'd like a picture of you with Duncan and Andrews," Steve said innocently, and Bucky retaliated by snapping five more pictures of him in rapid succession, finally managing to catch him with his eyes half-shut and mouth hanging open on the fourth try. He immediately sent that one to Andrews with no accompanying text. "It was that or the ones from Fort Hood, and there weren't any good ones of you with them from after the verdict. No one had a good angle on your faces after you were transferred back to your team."
"Aww," Bucky said, and this time Steve crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out just as Bucky hit the camera button. Bucky sent that one to Duncan. It was easier than asking Steve if there were any good pictures from Fort Hood. He could find out himself; all he had to do was type his own name in on this phone and he'd get a hundred of them. "So thoughtful."

"Whatever I can do to help," Steve said easily, but that reminded Bucky abruptly of the schedule square he'd drawn in without a name inside. He faltered a little, his hand lowering the phone, and Steve obviously caught the change in Bucky's mood, his goofy expression turning on a dime to concern. "Buck? I mean that."

"I know," Bucky said slowly. "I just--I gotta ask you something... complicated. If you can't--"

"Ask," Steve said firmly.

"You know I," Bucky started, and then blurted, "the off switch."

Steve's eyes widened for a second, his expression freezing into something too controlled to quite betray horror. Steve nodded cautiously, like a wrong move would set off an explosion.

"They couldn't actually eradicate that one," Bucky said. "I can stay pretty calm under it in controlled conditions, but when they evaluated me during the trial--"

"They did that to you during your trial?" Steve demanded.

Bucky waved it away, unable to deal with any reaction more emphatic than Woj had been when Bucky woke up. "Yeah, they had to see. But I--I have to keep trying to beat it. I have to beat it. And the only way to do that is to keep practicing, but I really--I really don't want to practice with strangers. I want to, if you--I want to practice with you. Please."

Steve's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, tiny flashes of expression passing over his face too fast for Bucky to be sure of any of them.

"How," Steve said finally. "How would that work?"

Bucky felt suddenly wrong-footed. For all he'd explained the procedure to Steve during visits, he'd never really thought through what Steve would have to do. From his own side it was simple: lie down in the bed, hear the voice, try to stay calm.

"Oh," Bucky said, realizing. "Uh. Hell. You'd need whatever sensor rig they had at MEDCOM, and something to read the output with. And the sedative. The formulation is probably in my file--I know scans from the sensors are--but..."

"Okay," Steve said. "I just watch a computer, right? And administer a sedative. I can--we can figure that out. Your doctors can probably explain all the details to me, and I can arrange to have medical backup available in case something goes wrong. But if you want me to be the one who's with you, I'll do it."

"I just," Bucky said, and hesitated again, then plunged on. "There's about twelve people who know my off-switch now. They could say it, and I would--" Bucky flipped his hand, miming his sudden drop to the floor when the off-switch hit. Steve flinched like Bucky had used that hand to slap him instead.

"If there's gotta be one more, I want it to be you," Bucky said. "And that way, for as long as it does still work, you know what it is. If I--if you need it. You'll know it."
Steve shook his head, his expression turning mulish. "Never. Bucky, I'm never going to use it on you. Help you practice, help you beat it, yeah. But never that."

"Okay." That was exactly why he could trust Steve to be the one to know it--not just because his first instinct was to promise Bucky he'd never use it, but because Bucky knew him well enough to know he would break that promise when the alternative was something worse.

"I should make some phone calls," Bucky said, waggling his phone at Steve without his finger anywhere near the camera button.

Steve still looked unnerved, but he nodded and then picked up *The Silmarillion*. "I guess I have a chart to make."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](https://example.tumblr.com)

I am also on [Tumblr!](https://example.tumblr.com) And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here.](https://example.tumblr.com)
Bucky hit a snag less than a minute into his first phone call, to Woj's first-choice therapist for him, when the receptionist asked, "Do you have health insurance?"

"Uh," Bucky said. Shit, he should have asked about that first, he knew he had some kind of benefits, probably. "Hang on, let me..."

He was in the process of standing up to go ask Steve when a glowing rectangle appeared on the wall he was facing toward. It contained the words, Yes. Coverage under the Avengers Plan for the Wildly Uninsurable. Below that were several lines of text and numbers.

"...Yeah, I got it here," Bucky said, not letting himself look around for cameras. "You, um, you need a--"

Policy number, the glowing box suggested, flashing the words above the column that was strings of numbers.

"Policy number?" He finished.

"As long as you have Aetna or Blue Cross," she said, and he spotted both of those names in the left hand column, "we can take your information when you get here. I just need to know that you're insured."

"Yeah," Bucky said firmly. "Yeah, I am."

"Okay," she said. "Your name?"

"James Barnes."

"Oh, yes," the receptionist said, with only the tiniest tense wobble in her voice. "We've been expecting your call. Dr. Padfield is available for an intake any time after four. What time is convenient for you?"

Thanks, Woj, Bucky thought, because he had a pretty firm idea that, health insurance or not, that wasn't the answer normal people got. But it was probably in everybody's best interests to have a doctor keeping tabs on him, so Bucky couldn't feel too bad about it. He looked down at his sketched out schedule. "Four's fine."

"Let me give you Dr. Padfield's number," she said. "You can text him the location, and he'll be the only one who knows."

Bucky wrote down the number along one side of his schedule, and after the receptionist made her escape from the call, he filled in the schedule box and then programmed Dr. Padfield's number into his phone. He glanced toward the glowing box of information on the wall, unsurprised to see a new line of text: Authorized visitors may be directed to the main security desk at Stark Tower to be escorted to a private floor.
Bucky tapped out a text message: *Dr. Padfield, this is James Barnes. Please come to the main security desk at Stark Tower for our 4 o'clock appointment.*

He hesitated after sending it and then added, *Thank you for seeing me here on such short notice.*

He'd barely sent the second message before his phone buzzed with a response: *It's no problem, James. I'll see you at four.*

The phone call to the medical doctor Lind suggested went similarly; he was prepared for the health insurance question this time and added immediately, "This is Bucky Barnes."

"Oh," Dr. Hernandez's receptionist said, a little less smoothly than Dr. Padfield's. "Oh. Let me give you the doctor's direct number so you can schedule something."

Dr. Hernandez, unlike her receptionist, sounded calm and professional and not at all alarmed to have Bucky Barnes on the other end of the line; she offered to come see him at seven that evening, and he agreed promptly and added it to the schedule.

After that there were two calls left on his list. Bucky sat for a moment on the edge of his bed, looking at the still-glowing rectangle of information, and then he said, "JARVIS?"

"Yes, Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS replied promptly. It made Bucky twitch a little how he couldn't place the source of the voice. So much for not being under surveillance anymore. Steve had explained JARVIS, sort of, but he was so blasé about it that Bucky had forgotten until now.

"Thanks for all of that." Bucky waved at the wall, because there was no reason to be rude to whoever was watching over him now, even if he was an artificial intelligence. "Now I, uh... I need to talk to Stark. You have a number for him?"

"Fifty-eight," JARVIS answered without hesitation, "is the number of the floor he is currently on in this building. I can direct you to his lab."

Which had to mean that Stark had *told* JARVIS to direct Bucky to his lab, so apparently that was how this was going to go. "Okay. Thanks."

Bucky went back out to the living room. Steve had moved to a drafting table by the window; he had the paperback book held open by a couple of jointed figure-drawing models while he drew an honest-to-God chart of some kind on expensive drawing paper with a plain #2 pencil. Bucky stopped to watch him, mostly fascinated with how Steve had positioned the figure models to be tilting their heads toward each other, like they were having a chat while they held the book for Steve.

"Hey," Steve said, looking up. "I think I've got some of this figured out."

"Good," Bucky said. "Tell me about it later? I gotta go talk to Stark."

Steve twitched toward standing and then made himself settle back into his seat, ducking his head over his work. "Okay. JARVIS is going to help you find him?"

"Yeah, he's down in a lab on fifty-eight," Bucky said, filling in the place where Steve didn't ask Bucky if he wanted company and Bucky didn't tell him he had this one covered.

Of course he'd rather have Steve with him, but he'd promised he wasn't going to lean too hard on Steve. He had to do some things for himself. Taking an elevator down thirty floors to talk to Tony Stark was something he could do for himself. "Seeya."
"Seeya," Steve echoed back, doing a pretty good impression of already being lost in his work again, though his hands were absolutely still.

Bucky turned away, shoving his own hands untidily into his pockets, since he was in civvies and allowed. It wasn't a big deal, walking away from Steve. He would come back upstairs later and Steve would still be here; Bucky didn't have to hold on tight to every second they had together anymore. Steve wasn't a once-a-week treat. He was the guy Bucky lived with. His boyfriend, even if Bucky wasn't exactly, as Martinez had put it, tapping that.

The elevator opened smoothly for him as Bucky walked up to it, and the 58 button was already lit as the doors shut on him. "So if I didn't ask to see him, were you just going to tell me to get in the elevator at some point?"

"You would have been allowed a grace period of several days," JARVIS assured him, and Bucky smiled down at his toes. But he'd put it on his schedule for today, so it was happening today. Arm: Stark.

Bucky hesitated between the elevator doors when they opened, trying to scope out all of the fifty-eighth floor at once. There was a succession of glass-fronted rooms to either side--blast-proof glass? if so, blast-proof enough to withstand his arm at short range? Beyond the glass was various equipment he couldn't make sense of at a glance, irregular shapes and lab tables creating a complicated topography of possible threats and possible cover.

While he stood there, a figure walked up to the glass, twenty meters down the hall. Stark was wearing jeans not unlike Bucky's, and a few layers of soft shirts pushed up to his elbows. He rapped on the glass with his knuckles. "You awake in there, snowflake?"

"Just calculating where I should stand if I need to shoot somebody," Bucky called back, stepping fully out of the elevator.

Here went nothing.

Stark folded his arms across his chest and watched Bucky walk toward him--not bracing for attack, just watching. The door to the lab unlocked audibly when Bucky reached it, and he swung it open and stepped through.

"So I'm guessing this isn't a social call," Stark said, moving away from the glass to stand across a worktable from Bucky.

"Yeah, if I were here to thank you for letting me move in I'd've brought a cake."

Somewhere in the back of his mind he felt a faint echo of guilt--not actual guilt, but the awareness of the spot where guilt ought to be--for not having done something along those lines. Stark was doing him a favor, after all. He pressed on.

"The docs who worked on my arm got it pretty well mapped, and they ruled out the possibility that it's doing anything to me or requires any routine maintenance, but they were still a long way off from figuring out how it works or whether it could be upgraded in any way. And if it requires non-routine maintenance I'm going to need somebody who knows their way around a neural-mechanical interface and complex robotics. They told me I probably ought to ask you before I went looking for anyone else for that."

"Probably." Tony gave a shrug of elaborate unconcern. "I mean, you could just go into a random chop shop and ask the first mechanic you see to take a crack at it. Or you could ask me." He dropped
the pose of disinterest altogether as he asked, "Who did the Army have working on you?"

Bucky fished the flash drive out of his pocket and slid it across the worktable. "Chestek and Kwan."

"Huh." Tony plugged the flash drive in and glowing images bloomed in the air between them. Tony shoved aside most of them, grabbing two file folders and a schematic of Bucky's arm. Actual screens on the wall began to fill with text and another flashed up dossiers with photos of Dr. Chestek and Dr. Kwan, both of them caught in the slightly frozen smiles of their ID badge photos.

Bucky remembered their real smiles over cake--last night? Yeah. Just last night.

"Chestek," Tony said, waving a finger in the direction of her dossier while apparently focused on spinning the schematic of Bucky's arm, making it bloom into 3D. "Works at a university--pure research, refuses to be tempted away. The Army doesn't particularly like letting me play with their toys since I took mine and went home, and the same goes for anyone affiliated with me. She was a reasonable choice given those constraints. Kwan's one of the people they've got studying War Machine and failing to reverse-engineer it, so he's had plenty of practice making detailed observations of machinery he doesn't understand. I can probably work with their research, won't have to duplicate too much of the groundwork."

Bucky nodded.

"So," Tony said, waving both hands and making the 3D schematic take up the whole space between them. Bucky found himself face-to-face with his own segmented fingertips; Tony put one hand on Bucky's metal-coated clavicle and rocked the display back and forth by it. "Here's my question about your arm. I've thought about this, and it's the thing that I really think we need to get to the bottom of."

Bucky nodded again more cautiously, keeping his gaze fixed on Tony instead of the swaying lines of light.

Tony narrowed his eyes and spun the whole thing 180 degrees, so that he had Bucky's fingers in front of him while Bucky had the bristling array of bones and neural connections.

"Do things get caught in the grooves?" Tony asked, frowning intently. "Do you have to clean stuff out of all these joints all the time?"

Bucky shifted his gaze from the huge schematic to his own actual arm. He rubbed his hands together, thinking before he spoke, and frowned. "No."

"No," Tony replied emphatically, pointing, and he actually came around the table. "Isn't that weird? There are all these points of articulation, all these joints--you should have grit in there all the time, all kinds of shit. Literal shit, maybe, if you--"

"I don't," Bucky said flatly.

"I'm just saying," Tony said, waving his hands. "It's weird. Come here, I want to see this."

He picked up a can of some kind of spray lubricant, aimed it toward Bucky's left arm and raised his eyebrows in polite inquiry. Bucky extended his hand toward the nozzle, curious himself.

The stuff beaded up as soon as it touched the surface of Bucky's hand. He remembered soapy dishwater doing the same, during his punishment detail in the kitchen. It flowed evenly down his fingers. The liquid didn't change direction at the joints or flow along them.
"Huh," Tony said. Bucky had never heard it from him before, but alarm bells went off in his head anyway. He had a feeling that that was the sound of Tony Stark getting really interested in a problem. "Towel."

Bucky looked around for one, but some kind of robot was already rolling up to Stark's side, holding a bright yellow shop towel in a claw at the end of its one arm. Tony plucked the towel from its grasp-"Thank you, Butterfingers"--and offered it to Bucky.

Bucky wiped his hand, really paying attention for the first time to the way it was left perfectly clean.

"I don't suppose anybody knows what this thing is made of?" Tony asked, reaching across the worktable to come up with a small electrical probe. He tapped it against different spots on Bucky's hand, scowling every time nothing happened.

"Vibranium, probably?" Bucky offered. It had to be in one of the files somewhere. "The inside components are analyzable, but they couldn't get a sample of the outer plates."

"Vibranium, maybe," Tony said, frowning, tapping the probe on each of Bucky's fingertips. "This doesn't make any sense. It's obviously segmented but behaves like an unbroken surface, and the level of dexterity and sensation is way out of proportion with the level of neural connection mapped."

"So you're saying..." Bucky prompted warily.

"I'm saying this is interesting." Tony straightened up to look him in the eye. "I'm saying this is seventy-year-old Nazi tech that I can't understand at a glance, which shouldn't be possible. So yeah, I'm in. I want to study your arm. Give me a few hours to catch up on this--" Tony made a pulling gesture in midair, and the files he'd pushed aside reappeared, hovering in the air.

"We'll check out the fluid dynamics of your arm's surface more rigorously," Tony announced, his attention already diverted from Bucky to the glowing pages of information. "Check for interesting anomalies, plus whatever is going on inside. Incidentally, one question, did you kill my mom?"

Bucky went very still, caught off guard.

Tony actually deigned to look at him after a few seconds of silence. "And Dad, of course, but people overlook my mom. She had nothing to do with SHIELD. HYDRA had a rational reason to kill my dad, but my mom was either collateral damage or plain cruelty, and I wonder sometimes which it was. So--did you kill my mom?"

Howard and Maria Stark's murders weren't among the official charges brought against Bucky; Mike had briefed him about them, because the question had been raised during the Article 32 hearing and Mike knew that Bucky had known Howard, to say nothing of Steve's connection to Tony. Bucky had needed to be aware of the situation, even though there was no substantive evidence on which to base charges.

He'd known Tony might ask him this question, though he hadn't expected it at this moment, or framed in this way. He'd already decided on his answer.

"Yes," Bucky said simply.

Tony stared at him in silence, stunned and perhaps slightly disbelieving, which was rich. If he was just going to ask point-blank like that he should have expected an equally blunt answer.

Bucky raised his metal hand and made a little pinching motion, just hard enough to make a metallic click audible in the silence of the lab. "Brake lines weren't really a match for--"
Tony grabbed something from a rack on the robot and swung it full-force at Bucky's face. The impact was targeted on Bucky's right side, but he already had his left hand raised; it was easy to open his metal hand and position it defensively.

He positioned it a quarter-inch short of where it should be, so the heavy object--a wrench--struck his cheek but then stopped hard. He saw the sudden stop jolt Tony's whole body, and didn't have to do any more than close his fingers around the wrench to break Tony's grip on it.

"Fuck you," Tony snarled, going for an actual punch when he was still off-balance from Bucky stopping the wrench. Bucky stepped smoothly out of the path of the blow. Tony didn't make a third attempt, or summon his armor. He raised his right hand to point again.

"Fuck you, Barnes, don't fucking lie to me. It wasn't the goddamn brake lines. You think I didn't go over every inch of that wreck personally? I reassembled every component of that car searching for a mechanical cause. I was my very own NTSB investigation. You think I wouldn't have known it wasn't an accident twenty-three years ago if it was the brake lines? They weren't cut and hadn't been suddenly replaced before I got to them. So once more, without fucking lying to me, did you kill my parents."

Bucky spread his hands, keeping hold of the wrench just in case. His cheekbone throbbed. He was going to have a nice bruise there for a while; he could already feel it puffing up, and it felt like his whole eye was going to swell.

"Without lying, I have no idea. I don't remember. The Article 32 hearing couldn't uncover any meaningful evidence either way. They turned up solid evidence of things I don't remember, and I remember things there's no other evidence for. I remember things that contradict all other evidence. So I have no way of knowing. But if it matters to you, we should probably work from the assumption that I did."

Tony stared at him for a moment and then turned half away, leaning both hands on the worktable and looking down intently at its surface like he was doing something other than avoiding Bucky's gaze. "So you made a completely pragmatic choice to say yes to that question on the basis of some kind of Pascal's Wager regarding whether you murdered my parents."

"Yeah," Bucky said evenly, studying Tony's body language. No further threat. He let his left hand fall to his side so the wrench was out of sight.

"Right. Obviously. I don't know why I imagined you could give me a satisfying answer to that question. Also even if you did it you probably didn't know who they were or what it meant or why you were doing it."

Bucky nodded slowly; Stark had obviously been through this line of argument a time or two before. He had let Bucky move in before he asked, after all. "That's why they let me go, yeah."

"Yeah," Tony said, finally looking up to meet his eyes again, looking tired and startlingly older. He was Howard's kid, but he was undeniably older than Bucky, and a decade older than Howard had been when Bucky knew him. "Yeah. Induced psychosis, Jesus, never actually tell me what they did to you if I start asking, okay?"

Bucky nodded again, twisting one corner of his mouth up into something almost like a smile. "I won't."

Tony held his gaze for a moment and then straightened up, shifting his attention pointedly to the glowing files hanging in the air between them. "Do you remember him at all?"
"Howard?" Bucky struggled to shift gears, sifting through the fragments of memory he'd recovered on that topic. It was mostly impressions, only one or two actual incidents. "A little. He was mostly interested in Steve. The rest of us I don't think he noticed much. He bought me a drink once when we were in London, August of '44."

Tony lowered his gaze from the files to squint at Bucky, looking unwillingly but genuinely interested. "Like, _bought you a drink_, bought you a drink?"

Bucky pulled up a smirk. It made the throbbing of his cheekbone worse. "Well, Steve had snuck off somewhere with Carter, so we were both at loose ends..."

Tony opened his mouth and closed it with a snap. "I am two for two on asking questions there's no good answer to today. Let's never speak of this again."

Bucky nodded. "I'll let myself out."

"Yeah, I'll be in touch when there's some actual testing to do." Tony turned fully away from him, already absorbed in the glowing pages.

The robot that had brought the towel--Butterfingers?--extended its arm to Bucky, opening and closing its claw. Bucky handed over the wrench, and it escorted him to the door.

Bucky managed to walk tall to the elevator, and then he kept going straight to the back wall and pressed his forehead against it. His right cheekbone throbbed dully, and his eye felt puffy, but he could still open and close it well enough. The doors closed behind him, but the car didn't move.

"JARVIS," Bucky said after a while. "Could you take me somewhere where nobody else is? Not to Steve's."

The elevator began to rise gently, and JARVIS said, "The eighty-sixth floor is open to everyone who lives on floors eighty-five and above. It is currently unoccupied, and the odds of anyone with access using it in the next hour are under one percent."

"Eighty-six then," Bucky said, turning to face the door just in time to see the number 86 appear above it, the rise halting smoothly and doors sliding open on a cavernous room. Bucky hesitated in the doorway, taking in all the angles. This room was easier to clear than the labs--more open, undivided except by groupings of furniture.

Bucky headed for a small arrangement of chairs in the furthest corner, in the angle between a solid wall and one that was all windows, showing the mid-morning sky and a vast sweep of the city. Bucky leaned with his metal shoulder against the glass, where nothing could enter the room without him seeing, taking in the view in little glimpses and trying not to think about anything.

He jumped at an electric vibration against his thigh, then realized it was his phone. He pulled it out of his pocket and saw that he had a message from Andrews. _Don't tell me the honeymoon's over already?_

Bucky let out a startled laugh, and for a crazed second he imagined answering _Well, the wedding night was a bust_. He thumbed open the message and realized it was a response to the hideous picture of Steve he'd sent.

_Just figuring out my phone_, Bucky replied, scowling in concentration as he tapped out the letters with his thumb.

He waited for a reply to that, but the phone vibrated in his hand, the green and red circles he
remembered from talking to Andrews in the hospital popping up. He pressed the green one. No image of Andrews appeared, so Bucky held it to his ear. "Hello?"

"This is quicker than typing," Andrews said. "And I got some time free this morning, since I'm officially still on guard duty for some guy who's secretly already out."

Bucky felt something in his shoulders unknot at the familiar sound of Andrews' voice. He backed away from the glass and sat down in the armchair with the best view of the room, letting himself sprawl. "Hope you're not getting bored."

"Aww, I'm managing," Andrews said. "I'm home, actually, but Izzy's down for a nap and Cara's out running errands. Are you bored already?"

"Nah," Bucky said, tilting his head back to stare up at the ceiling. "I, uh. I just met Tony Stark."

"Yeah?" Andrews said. He didn't sound particularly impressed. He'd never seemed really impressed by Steve, either, though Steve had to be a legend to him. Bucky hadn't realized until right now how much he liked that.

"Yeah," Bucky agreed. "He said the Army doesn't like him much."

"That's not true," Andrews said, in a tone that made the corners of Bucky's mouth curl in anticipation. "The Army actually hates his fucking guts for breaking eighteen defense contracts when he up and got religion about making weapons. He single-handedly created a fucking nine-month delay in the supply of replacement weapons and ammunition to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I'd like to introduce him to some guys I knew who were affected by that except they're dead, so Tony Stark and his robot suit that he uses to shoot people can go fuck themselves."

Bucky raised his hand to prod at the still-swelling bruise on his cheek and decided not to tell Andrews about that part.

"Sorry," Andrews said after a few seconds. "He's your landlord or your boss now or whatever. He's probably not such a bad guy personally, he just--"

"Nah, it's okay," Bucky said. "I don't think we're going to be buddies. You haven't been replaced, pal."

Andrews didn't reply for a second, and then he said, "Well, if you do wind up doing any sniper work for the Avengers, make Stark cough up an S-19 for you even if he has to fucking forge it by hand like Andúril, the Flame of the West, all right? Our snipers treat the ones we've still got in circulation like they're made of gold, and they're not fucking wrong."

Bucky stopped poking his bruise and looked up at his hand, opening and closing it. He remembered Howard's face at the bar, remembered Tony's face as he swung the wrench. "You think he's actually going to put a gun in my hand?"

"I think he'd be more of a fucking hypocrite than we already know he is if he didn't," Andrews said firmly. "And anyway, everybody knows Cap calls the shots on Avengers stuff, and Rogers knows you're okay."

Bucky let out a little sound that almost managed to be a laugh, thinking of all the ways he was busily showing Steve that he was nowhere near okay. "Speaking of Steve--and Andúril--he's trying to fucking read The Silmarillion because he thinks it'll make him like The Hobbit better."

"Jesus, Barnes," Andrews said, sounding a little awed. "He's got it bad for you. Fucking hang on to
that one, all right? You need some sex tips or anything, you just say the word."

Bucky did laugh that time, hoping it didn't sound quite so wild and bleak over the phone. "Yeah. Yeah, I will."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Andrews had to go eventually--Izzy woke up, and Bucky could hear her calling for her Dada. He was freshly, sharply glad that he hadn't hurt Andrews worse; he would never have to face a grownup Isabelle Andrews and tell her he killed her dad.

Bucky stayed where he was a little while, looking out over the city without really seeing anything, and then remembered that he had one phone call left to make. He pulled out his little list and dialed the parish Fr. Guzman had suggested in Manhattan; it was down in Chelsea, practically in the Village, which seemed about right if they weren't going to mind about him and Steve.

He got through to a receptionist pretty quickly, and asked if he could speak to the pastor, Fr. Roche.

"Oh," the woman said. "I'll check if he's in his office--what did you want to talk to him about?"

"I just want to know if it's all right for me to come to Mass on Sunday," Bucky said, hesitating to explain all of it to a stranger who wasn't even a priest.

"Oh, all are welcome," she said gently. "We're very inclusive--"

"My name is Bucky Barnes," Bucky interrupted sharply. "And I think I'd better ask Fr. Roche before I show up on Sunday."

There was a long enough pause to make it clear that she recognized his name--probably no one in the world wouldn't recognize his name right now--and then she said, still gently, "Let me get Father."

There was, Bucky thought with bleak amusement, no more hedging about checking whether the pastor was in his office. Not with an ex-crazy ex-assassin on the line.

"Sergeant Barnes!" the voice on the other end of the line said, and Bucky knew just from the almost aggressively enthusiastic tone that the answer was going to be yes. "This is Fr. Roche. I understand you were feeling unsure of your welcome here at St. Ignatius."

"I just... don't want to make people mad by showing up," Bucky offered, not getting into I'm not even sure why I'm going in the first place, it just seems like the thing to put on the schedule on a Sunday morning. Not when he was being welcomed.

"Ah," Fr. Roche said, his voice ebbing down into seriousness. "Well. If you don't want to make anybody mad, Sergeant, I don't know if St. Ignatius is the place for you. I don't know if the Catholic Church is the place for you, for that matter."

It was the answer he should have expected in the first place, but Bucky was weirdly blindsided by it. "I... I'm sorry, Father."

"Don't be," Fr. Roche said sternly. "Just understand that we're not put on this earth to avoid making anyone angry. We're here to do the right thing--and for me, and for St. Ignatius Parish, that means supporting our brothers and sisters in their journeys on this earth, regardless of what the press might say about them. If no one's angry at us we're not doing our job right."
Bucky opened and closed his mouth a couple of times and finally blurted out, "God, you sound just like Steve."

Fr. Roche laughed. "You seem to like him pretty well, so I'll take that very much as a compliment."

"It's... not an insult," Bucky agreed, rubbing his palm against his forehead. Fr. Roche, he could already see, wasn't just going to be in his corner. He was going to be out in front of Bucky's corner, picking this fight for him. Once he and Steve joined forces... Bucky mentally penciled church in on every Sunday for the next thirty years.

Well, it was nice to be able to predict something.

"So I'll see you at Mass on Sunday," Father said, not quite a question.

"Yes, Father," Bucky agreed. "Uh, what time?"

"Mm," Fr. Roche said. "Ten o'clock is our biggest service, and twelve is also usually pretty crowded. The families with children are usually at one of those. The early Mass, at seven-thirty, is quieter."

"How does anybody get their kids to wait until noon to go to Mass?" Bucky asked, instead of saying what he meant, which was seven-thirty, thanks, goodbye.

Fr. Roche laughed again. "I'm afraid these are sadly degenerate days, Sergeant. The rules for fasting are relaxed enough now that it's all right to feed the kids breakfast before Mass."

Bucky frowned. With everything they'd caught him up on, no one had ever told him that--but then Mass had always been scheduled early, and he wouldn't have wanted to forego his Sunday breakfasts with the guys who attended Mass in the little barracks chapel. "Oh. Right. See you Sunday, then, Father. Seven-thirty."

"Seven-thirty, Sergeant," Fr. Roche agreed firmly. "I'll be looking for you."

"Yes, Father," Bucky repeated.

"God bless," Fr. Roche said briskly, and hung up before Bucky had to say anything else, the words still ringing sternly in his ears. It had sounded more like an order than a prayer.

Bucky pocketed his phone and headed for the stairwell he'd spotted when he first entered the room--Steve's place was only four flights up, and after all that talking Bucky wanted to move a little. He'd have a late early PT session after this, he decided. Maybe extra PT in the afternoon, too, since he and Steve couldn't do Trigger Reduction until sometime after Bucky talked to his doctors tonight.

It was only as he walked into Steve's apartment, and Steve looked up alertly at him entering, that Bucky remembered that the vague throb in his cheekbone was something Steve would be able to see.

Bucky watched Steve struggling not to get overprotectively furious for a few seconds, until it was more depressing than it was funny. He shook his head. "It was my own fault, Steve. I could have stopped him and I didn't."

"That doesn't make it your fault," Steve said, giving up on at least a part of his effort at restraint and walking over to Bucky.

Bucky shrugged. "He asked me if I killed his mom and I said yes. I figured that earned him a shot."

Steve stopped still out of arm's reach, searching Bucky's gaze. The hard line of his mouth twitched
but didn't soften. "You stood your trial, Buck."

Steve stepped in closer, reaching out to run his fingers lightly over the swollen ache of Bucky's cheekbone. The touch didn't quite hurt, but it could so easily that Bucky shivered, turning his cheek into Steve's touch. Steve stepped in closer, dropping his hand only to touch his lips to the same spot, and Bucky's whole body lit up with the memory of Steve's mouth on his scars, Steve's mouth on his dick.

If Steve would just press down harder there it would hurt, and Steve could--could--

Bucky took a sharp step back, shaking off the barrage of images. Steve wouldn't. Bucky didn't want that.

Steve was standing carefully still, hands at his sides, and Bucky stepped in again to press a kiss to Steve's mouth instead. He couldn't stop noticing the throb in his cheekbone now, the way it sharpened when he tilted his head, pushing into the kiss. He had a flash in his head of his dream last night, Grisha's cock shoved down his throat, and the way it would make the bruise on his cheek hurt more if he took someone's--took Steve's--now.

Bucky kept his eyes closed and pushed the memory away. Rape, he reminded himself. That was rape. This is Steve.

He made himself stay gentle, like he was supposed to be with Steve. This was supposed to be good.

Steve pulled back first, and Bucky only realized then that Steve's hands were still at his sides.

"I, um," Bucky said, too many impulses flashing through his body at once. "I'm gonna go run. Too much sitting still lately."

"Sure," Steve said, and took a deliberate step back, his smile only a little stiff. "Enjoy."

In the afternoon Steve had to go do a public appearance. "Mostly so it's obvious I'm not in Texas, or holed up anywhere other than Texas with you," Steve explained. "But hopefully the kids have a good time too."

Steve carefully didn't betray any reluctance to leave, so Bucky just blew him a kiss and went back to flipping through The Silmarillion and writing arguments around the edges of Steve's chart.

Steve had been gone about twenty minutes when Bucky's phone buzzed with a message labeled STARK: Up to speed. Fluid dynamics testing time, come back to the lab. Bucky got up and headed to the elevator without thinking, and only stumbled on the threshold when he noticed that he hadn't thought--that it was automatic to obey that command.

Sweat broke out down his spine, but he made himself turn and walk away from the elevator, and it was easy. It wasn't waking up out of a dream; he didn't even have to try. He turned and walked away as easily as he'd walked toward.

He stood there for a few minutes with his back to the elevator, thinking out the logic of it. He needed to have his arm studied, and Tony was the best person to do that--the only person he had access to now. Tony had obviously decided to ignore the fact that Bucky might or might not have killed his parents; Bucky's arm was of professional, technical interest to him.

After a moment Bucky walked over to the schedule grid he'd left lying on the table when he stood
up. He sketched in *Arm: Stark* before afternoon PT, which in turn bumped up against Dr. Padfield's appointment. It was on the schedule now, so now it was all right to do it without thinking too hard about it. Bucky turned and headed to the elevator again.

Stark greeted him with a peremptory gesture, already motioning him over to the apparatus he'd set up as he asked, "Did you get lost?"

"Nope," Bucky said firmly, and that was all there was to say.

At five minutes to four Bucky was showered and freshly dressed after afternoon PT. His body was humming pleasantly with use and activity, and the bruise on his right cheekbone looked a few days old, already faded from purple to brown and painless unless Bucky poked it. Steve still wasn't back, but he'd sent a text with a picture of three little kids holding homemade shields, so the appearance couldn't be going too badly.

At three minutes to four, Bucky's phone buzzed with a text labeled TOWER SECURITY: *Dr. Owen Padfield is here to see you. Please confirm permission to escort him to a residential floor.*

*Confirmed, floor 90,* Bucky tapped back, feeling an odd thrill of nervousness in the moment that followed. But he was pretty sure he hadn't killed Dr. Padfield's parents, so this schedule item couldn't be as bad as his arm session. It was just another intake, another evaluation. The doctor would do his job, and Bucky would cooperate. He knew the drill by now.

Padfield stepped out of the elevator confidently, leaving the guard behind. The uniformed guy made eye contact with Bucky before he let the doors close again, and Bucky gave him a firm nod, like he had any idea whether this was all right--but the guard nodded back and glanced upward. That seemed to cue the elevator door to close, leaving Bucky alone in the apartment with Padfield.

Padfield was about Bucky's height and probably around Tony's age--he had silver in his hair, which he wore in an unmilitary tousled style that contrasted with his authoritative bearing. *Major,* Bucky guessed, though he was obviously a civilian these days. Retired, like Steve and Bucky. He wore a light blue button down shirt with tan pants; Bucky did not glance down at his own dark jeans and layered shirts, though he couldn't resist running a hand over his close-cropped hair. He'd have to keep it trimmed short for as long as Trigger Reduction took.

"Hello," Padfield said, offering his hand as he approached. His eyes flickered to the bruise on Bucky's cheek for only an instant before meeting his gaze steadily. "I'm Dr. Owen Padfield. You can call me Owen, or Dr. Padfield, whichever you're more comfortable with. Do you prefer James, or something else?"

"Bucky's fine," Bucky said, giving Padfield's hand a shake. "I just said James because it's... official."

Padfield smiled a little, a warm expression that made lines around his eyes. "That's fine, Bucky. Where would you like to meet? I'd suggest somewhere with a door for privacy, but we can do this wherever you're comfortable."

"Yeah," Bucky said, "there's--" he waved behind him and then turned and set off, leading Padfield past the bedrooms to the row of variously little-used rooms on the way to the gym. The library had a desk and a few armchairs, and felt the most like being back in Woj's or Exley's office.

Padfield headed for an armchair by the window, though, leaving Bucky behind to pull the door shut behind them, so Steve would know not to interrupt when he got back. Bucky walked hesitantly over to the nearest armchair and sat down in it while Padfield opened the bag he'd had slung on his
"I'm sure you're aware that I have a general idea of who you are," Padfield said. "And unavoidably, I know some of the things that everyone knows, or thinks they know, about your mental health history. I'm not going to pretend that's not out there, but I'd like you to start by telling me why, from your perspective, we're having this meeting. What problems are you having--what do you want to work on?"

Bucky frowned and nodded. He and Woj had winnowed the work left to be done down to a finite set of problems; it made sense that Padfield wanted to pick up where they left off instead of figuring Bucky out from scratch all over again.

"The main one is that I still have at least one active trigger phrase," Bucky said. "I need to keep up the desensitization work on that--talking to you's not going to get me anywhere with that, that's something I have to work on separately, but I know we have to strategize it."

"Trigger phrase," Padfield repeated.

Woj had maybe not prepared the ground as thoroughly as Bucky had been assuming.

"Programmed commands," Bucky explained. "We eradicated most of them during my reintegration, but I've still got the one that paralyzes me. You can talk to Woj about it, I can give you his number or--"

"Right," Padfield said, reaching into his bag and pulling out a sheet of paper. "We got to this faster than I expected--this is a release giving me and your previous therapist permission to discuss your case and treatment."

Bucky read it over briefly, nodded and signed it. He'd been assuming they were doing that anyway, but it was nice to be asked.

"So," Padfield said. "Okay, understandably, dealing with the trigger phrase is job one, but that sounds like something you already pretty much have a treatment plan for. So what is it you want my help with?"

Bucky worried his lower lip with his teeth. If Padfield was going to be talking to Woj, even if he hadn't already--and if he was going to be talking to Woj about the off-switch--he was going to find out. There was no point trying to hide anything.

On the other hand, he didn't want Padfield's help with sex any more than he wanted it with the off-switch.

"There's another problem I have," Bucky said slowly. "I--you should know about it. But Woj said it might just get better over time, and I want to wait and see."

Padfield nodded, making an inviting gesture with one hand.

"I was," Bucky started, then shook his head. That wasn't the problem, that was the reason for the problem. "I can't have sex. Can't get it up, I mean. I'm physically capable, because it happens during nightmares, but not--not with Steve, not when I want to."

Padfield nodded, not looking surprised or alarmed. "Do you have any idea why that is? The nightmares?"

"I was raped," Bucky said firmly, because that was the correct word for it. "Repeatedly. That was
the only time they let me--made me--get off, so now I can't. But I told Steve--" told him enough, as much as he needed to know, anyway. "And he understands, so we're good, and I figure--I'm still getting better, right? So it'll probably fix itself."

Padfield nodded again, slowly. "If you're communicating openly with your partner, engaging in whatever kind of intimacy feels good to you is probably the best strategy. Are you okay being close with him, physically? Does that set off anything negative for you?"

Bucky shook his head quickly. "No, I mean, we had sex last night. I got him off once I explained he shouldn't bother trying to get me there, it was--it was good. I mean--" Bucky smiled, and Padfield smiled back in immediate response, following his lead. "Getting off would've been better, but it was fine. He's nothing like them, being with him isn't anything like that. I know that."

"Good," Padfield said. "That's half the battle, then. The rest will come--"

Bucky barked a laugh, and Padfield grinned and shook his head.

"Pardon the expression. But just give it time, be as patient with yourself as you can. You're young, physically speaking; you're in good health, and if you still feel the drive to engage with your partner that way, your response will probably work itself out over time. If you get to the point where you want to work on that intensively, I can recommend people, but it sounds like you're okay with where you are for now. So," Padfield settled into seriousness again, "that brings me back to the main question: what do you want my help with?"

"I guess," Bucky waved his arm. "Everything else. I gotta get back into the world. I know I was out there on my own before I went for reintegration, but I was avoiding everything, everyone--and I sure as hell wasn't all over TV and the internet back then. Now, if I'm gonna be with Steve, if I'm gonna do any kind of work, I've gotta be ready for the rest of it. I know I was sheltered, while I was in the Army, I know I'm still being sheltered here--you're doing a house call, for God's sake--but I have to face it. That's what I need to know how to do. I'm out now, I have to be able to function on my own."

Padfield frowned slightly, but he didn't look displeased or disapproving, just thoughtful.

"I agree," Padfield said slowly. "That's the goal here. But that's a lot, and it's not an all or nothing question. You don't have to be okay in every situation all at once. Just about no one in the world could be effortlessly okay with the level of press coverage you're getting right now, and on the other hand there are probably lots of situations you could handle right now--give or take other people's reactions, which you can't control."

"But I need to be ready," Bucky insisted. "I need to know, I need to--look, one of my triggers, they tried it on me and it stopped my heart cold. I had to be resuscitated."

Padfield's expression got blank and guarded, but he nodded.

"And after that--Sputnik, Sputnik," Bucky chanted it in the cadence he'd heard a thousand times. "It couldn't do anything to me anymore. If it's bad, it's bad, but I have to be able to do things. I have to know."

Padfield nodded again slowly. "But it worked out as well as it did because nobody tried that trigger on you outside of a situation where they could resuscitate you. I agree you need to try things, you need to see how it goes, but adjustment is big, it's global. It's not going to be as straightforward as desensitizing a trigger phrase. And when you work on it, you need to have supports in place. I can be that, some of the time. And if you're going to push yourself when I'm not around..."
Padfield gave him a knowing look, and Bucky felt a quiet certainty click into place that he could trust Padfield to be his guy on this. Even if that meant going however slow Padfield told him to. Bucky nodded.

"Then you still need to make sure you have support," Padfield said firmly. "From Steve, from other people--it's important to develop a support network and actually let yourself be supported, okay? I don't need to tell you you've been through hard things, but recovery isn't a sprint. It's not even a marathon. It's the rest of your life. You push too hard, you injure yourself, you slow everything down because you're just stacking on another thing you have to recover from. Got it?"

Bucky nodded. "But I--I have to start somewhere."

"Sure," Padfield agreed. "You have to start somewhere. You mentioned that you were sheltered, that you still feel like you're being sheltered, but you know you've been in the press--have you seen any of that? Have you been on the internet?"

Bucky shook his head, remembering the signs he'd seen outside Fort Hood. *Traitor. Murderer. Swastikas, sickles, that black banner he hadn't deciphered.*

"Right," Padfield said, reaching into his bag and pulling out a tablet. Bucky tensed like Padfield had pulled out a weapon, badly enough that he knew it had to be visible. Padfield raised his eyebrows, and balanced the tablet on the arm of his chair, folding his hands away from it.

"We don't have to do it right now," Padfield said. "We could just work on getting you ready to look. Like I said, lots of people don't want to look at the stuff that gets said about them online; avoiding it is arguably very healthy."

"No," Bucky said immediately, even as he thought of the things he'd seen people saying about Tony when Andrews showed him Twitter. "No, I can do it."

"Sure," Padfield said. "You could jump out the window, too. Doesn't mean it's a good idea. But--here, let's take a look..."

Padfield picked up the tablet and tilted it so that Bucky couldn't see the screen, tapping rapidly at the surface with one hand. He stopped, studying the image Bucky couldn't see, and then nodded slightly. "Here, have a look at this. I did an image search, so all you're getting are pictures people have associated with the words I searched for. No text, except what shows up in pictures, okay? I'm going to take the tablet back after two minutes, but you can go ahead and look at the results I got."

Two minutes. The off-switch had taught him exactly how much horror he could pack into two minutes, but he could endure it. It would only be pictures on the screen.

Bucky nodded, and Padfield handed him the tablet.

The first six images across the top of the screen were four slightly different angles on Steve kissing him out in the open at Fort Hood. Below that were two artists' renderings of Steve in his arms after the verdict--one had toned it down a little by leaving Steve's feet on the floor, but the other looked more or less accurate. Bucky was bent back under Steve's weight, his mismatched hands on Steve's uniform-clad ass as they kissed.

Bucky tapped that one, and it expanded to take up most of the screen. His eyes traced every line, memorizing. He'd thought the absence of cameras meant that moment would be private, unseen
outside the courtroom; he hadn't thought of this. And now here it was all over again for five hundred million people to see, and Bucky was one of them.

He made himself shrink that picture and look down to the next row of images--there was one of them pushing toward each other, two of them being pulled apart, and then two old pictures from before he fell, before Steve crashed that plane, back when their war was one they shared with the rest of the world in common. They were standing shoulder to shoulder, somewhere out in the field, both grinning.

It finally occurred to Bucky to look at the top of the screen and see what Padfield had searched for. He just had time to read *Bucky Barnes Steve Rogers together* before Padfield said, "Time's up."

Bucky looked up and met his eyes as Padfield took the tablet from his unresisting fingers. Padfield said gently, "Just a reminder, Bucky. You're not alone. You don't have to do any of this alone."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr](https://example.com).

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](https://example.com).

For anyone who recognizes who Fr. Roche is named after: I promise this is not that kind of story.
Bucky walked Padfield to the door at the end of the appointment, a satisfying dovetail of good manners and good security procedure. He saw Padfield clock Steve’s presence in the living room—curled up in the chair nearest the window again, working on the chart or just sketching—but Steve didn't look up and Padfield didn't look over or break stride.

They were at the door when it occurred to Bucky that it had probably been up to him to allow the two of them to acknowledge each other and make introductions. By then the elevator doors were opening, Padfield was leaving, and Bucky had made it to the end of a schedule box.

He let his shoulders sag once the elevator doors had closed, raising both hands to rub over his face. Behind him, still in the chair by the window, Steve said softly, "All right, Buck?"

Bucky nodded into his hands before he dropped them, turning around.

Steve set down his sketchpad but otherwise stayed where he was, letting Bucky close the distance at his own pace. Bucky went all the way, getting right onto the chair with him. There was room for him to jam his knees in on either side of Steve's thighs, and Steve's face lit up as Bucky settled over him, so Bucky went straight for the kiss, not bothering to explain what he wanted. It'd be obvious in a minute anyway.

Steve's mouth was warm and easy under his, a connection clicking back into place. Bucky raised both hands to frame his face, tilting Steve into the kiss just the way he wanted while Steve's hands came to rest on the outsides of his thighs. Steve's hands were steady, nearly as warm as the kiss, not pushing him anywhere, not demanding or even asking for anything. It was just a touch, somewhere for Steve to rest his hands while Bucky kissed him.

When Bucky finally lifted his head, Steve was looking pleasingly dazed. He didn't react at all when Bucky stroked both thumbs along Steve's cheeks.

"Hi." Steve gave him a dopey smile. "Appointment go okay?"

Bucky nodded, and leaned in to kiss Steve's open mouth again, licking in for a little taste, before he answered.

"Yeah. I'll introduce you to Dr. Padfield tomorrow, if you're around."

If Steve was around tomorrow afternoon they'd be doing trigger reduction, and Dr. Padfield would be monitoring it and debriefing Bucky afterward, but it wasn't time to talk about that yet. Bucky stroked along Steve's jawline on both sides with his thumbs and kissed him again before he picked his head up to let Steve speak.

"You, um..." Steve's lips were getting red, the beginnings of a flush rising on his cheeks. "You wanna make out until your next appointment?"

Bucky grinned, mashing his unbruised cheek against Steve's to hide it. "Wanna suck you off, actually. And then we should eat dinner."

Steve's hands tightened. "Firm grasp of priorities, there, Buck."
"Firm grasp of something," Bucky agreed, sliding his metal hand down to Steve's throat, waiting for him to notice. Bucky put just enough pressure behind the touch to make sure Steve could feel it, working his palm up and down the side of Steve's throat. It only took a few seconds before Steve's forehead crimped into a little frown.

"Close your eyes," Bucky said. "Don't think too hard, just feel it."

Bucky raised his left hand to Steve's lips, touching with fingertips first, then slowly turning his hand to rub the whole length of his metal fingers over Steve's mouth, his palm and then the back of his hand and the side. Everything moved as smoothly as skin over skin. Maybe smoother.

Bucky could feel Steve's mouth dimly and distantly through his metal hand, but Tony had insisted that even that was more sensation than he should logically have. Bucky wasn't about to complain; given the way he used his left hand sometimes, he didn't think he would want it to be as sensitive as the right even if that was possible.

Steve's eyes finally opened when Bucky pressed his metal thumb between Steve's lips, and his pupils were wide, his eyes blue-rimmed pools of darkness. Bucky grinned, feeling heat and need rush through his body. He could take Steve apart with this hand.

"But it's..." Steve barely drew back enough to get Bucky's thumb out of his mouth before he spoke.

"Uh-huh," Bucky agreed, tracing Steve's lips with just the tip of it. "But Stark did a bunch of tests today to establish scientifically that it acts like a seamless surface. So I figured I should try it out."

He'd avoided using his left hand to touch Steve before now--partly because if he really wanted to feel he needed to use his right, but also because he figured it would be chilly or pinch, or that Steve just wouldn't like it. Wrong on all counts, apparently. Bucky cradled Steve's cheek with his left hand and leaned down for another kiss.

This time when he shifted his left hand down to Steve's throat he kept on sliding it down until his thumb clicked softly against the button of Steve's pants. Steve drew in a shaky breath but only shifted forward an inch in the chair, slouching lower. Bucky gave him one more kiss and then scooted back, moving down to kneel on the floor between Steve's thighs.

When he looked up, he saw a shadow of doubt interrupt the pleasant fog of lust in Steve's eyes for the first time.

"Buck," he said. "Do you..."

"Doc says the fastest way to get my dick in working order is to keep doing stuff I like with you."

Bucky rubbed his metal hand over the bulge in Steve's jeans.

He could feel the different densities under his touch, knew exactly how hard to press down. For Steve that translated into something that made his eyelids flicker and a fresh tide of pink wash over his cheeks.

"I like this," Bucky added, leaning in to nuzzle at Steve's cock through his jeans while his metal thumb rubbed slow circles at the head. Steve's eyes opened, looking down at him, but his thumb already detected the faint added heat of pre-come soaking through cotton and denim, even if the wet spot hadn't become visible yet.

"Well." Steve let his head fall back and looking at Bucky through his long eyelashes. "As long as it's part of your therapeutic program."
Bucky grinned against the base of Steve's cock, watching the way it made him twitch. He was having to work not to thrust at Bucky's mouth before he was even out of his pants. "Extremely therapeutic. Practically medicinal."

"Whatever you need," Steve agreed, and Bucky got him unzipped in no time.

The motions of getting Steve far enough out of his pants were automatic, a back-brain subroutine. Steve lifted up and jerked his hips just so while Bucky tugged in the right places. Their eyes met when they got to the end of that second of easy synchrony, and Bucky grinned as he wrapped his left hand slowly but firmly around Steve's cock.

Steve's eyes went wide and his hips jerked, shoving his cock into Bucky's metal grip. Bucky kept his hand exactly steady and watched Steve's face.

"Oh, God," Steve said, and moved again, thrusting experimentally through the smooth ring of Bucky's fingers. "That looks so--how--"

"Close your eyes," Bucky said. "If you have your eyes open you know it should hurt because you can see the joints, but if you close your eyes all you feel is--"

Steve tipped his head back, raising an arm to cover his eyes for good measure. Bucky could still see his mouth fall open into a perfect pink ring. "Oh, fuck."

"Mm-hm," Bucky agreed, closing his own eyes so that it wouldn't look like he was hurting Steve. Then all he could feel was the perfect smooth glide of his metal hand over that straining, delicate flesh, and every little twitch and jerk that told him he was doing this right. He was making Steve feel good. Bucky leaned in and licked at the head of Steve's cock.

The familiar taste and feel of Steve on his tongue woke up a flurry of memories--distinct flashes along with a blurred composite, a dozen more familiar and coordinated moves available to him. He knew this. He knew how to make Steve come like this. He knew how Steve would react to anything he did, and whether it was something he remembered or something that woke up with the memories, he wanted to do all the things he knew how to do.

His whole body flashed hot with eagerness. Bucky worked his metal hand lower on Steve's cock while he closed his mouth around the head. He sucked softly the way Steve liked when they were just getting started, when he wasn't fully hard yet and still needed to be coaxed a little. That wasn't going to last long, judging from the groan Steve let out and the hand that dropped to Bucky's head, fingers spread wide over the short stubble of his hair.

Bucky sucked harder, setting up a rhythm, but after a moment the flexing of Steve's fingers against his skull got distracting. Bucky pulled off to say, "Try as much as you want, Rogers, you're not gonna be able to get a grip on my hair."
"Sorry," Steve said, sounding a little strangled and raising his arm enough to peek out at Bucky from under it. Bucky just shook his head and took Steve's cock back into his mouth.

Steve let out a breathy little sound and covered his eyes again, and his hand slid down from Bucky's hair to press his palm to Bucky's cheek. His fingers played over the hinge of Bucky's jaw as Bucky worked him over. Bucky let his eyes close again so that he could feel the smoothness of his metal thumb and finger when his lips met them, so he could be nowhere but right here, between Steve's legs, sucking Steve's cock.

Bucky worked further down Steve's cock, easing his hand lower and taking more and more into his mouth. Steve was squirming under him in tiny movements, his breath getting fast, and his thumb kept
sweeping over Bucky's cheekbone.

It crossed Bucky's mind for just a second, when he had just his thumb and finger around Steve's cock and most of it in his mouth, that he could pretend, if he really tried, that this was Grisha's cock, or Rumlow's. He could pretend that he was being forced right now.

The thought had barely formed before Steve moaned, "Oh, God, Bucky, I missed that so much."

Bucky tried to grin with his mouth full and went down just a little further. He wasn't *that* good at pretending, and he didn't want to waste his time with Steve on imagining something worse. So he didn't try to choke himself, just did the tongue thing that made Steve jerk up hard under him. Steve made exactly the same startled-pleased noise Bucky remembered, and it only took a few more hard sucks before Steve was coming in his mouth.

Bucky swallowed tidily--another nearly-reflexive practiced motion--and let Steve's cock slip from his mouth at the exact second when he knew Steve would be getting oversensitive. He moved to rest his forehead on Steve's thigh while Steve's breathing returned to normal.

He felt slightly outside his body at the realization that he wasn't hard or even really out of breath himself. That part of the routine hadn't arranged itself while he wasn't looking, but the rest was right. This was still good, the taste and smell of sex, the feel and sound of Steve coming down from his orgasm.

Steve's hand had slipped from his cheek, resting open on Steve's opposite thigh. Bucky watched the sex-flush fade from Steve's throat and face; he'd dropped the arm covering his eyes, though he still had them closed. He opened them while Bucky was looking up at him, and ran his hand over Bucky's hair a few times without speaking.

Bucky wanted to close his own eyes and stay there with his cheek pillowed against Steve's thigh all night.

Steve did let him stay there for a while, quiet and still, but eventually he gave Bucky a gentle kick that was more of a nudge. "Go brush your teeth, Buck. I'll get dinner."

Bucky snorted, but moved enough to let Steve stand and tug his pants back up. When he reached down for Bucky, Bucky let himself be pulled to his feet.

"Don't like the taste anymore?" Bucky asked, and kissed Steve just to be obnoxious, but Steve sucked on his tongue the same as ever, licking up the taste of himself as he curled an arm around Bucky's waist.

"I don't mind a bit," Steve assured him, turning away to the kitchen. He called back over his shoulder, "But it might be awkward if your doctor tells you to open up and say *ah.*"

Bucky took Dr. Hernandez into the library, just like Dr. Padfield. He thought there would be less of this appointment that he needed to keep from Steve, but if she was going to talk about that stuff, it was going to be this time, during the intake.

Practically the first thing she said, though, after she settled herself and Bucky side-by-side at the desk and opened her laptop, was, "If you're okay signing a release, I'll get your medical records from Dr. Lind at MEDCOM, and we won't have to redo your whole history."

Bucky said, "I actually have them," and offered her the flash drive.
Dr. Hernandez gave him a smile, bright white in contrast to her dark brown skin, and said, "Good, thanks, even better."

"I can still sign the release," Bucky added. "If you want to talk to him--Dr. Padfield had me do that so he could talk to my last shrink."

"That would be very helpful," Dr. Hernandez agreed. "In fact, if you're comfortable with it, I'd like to take the lead on coordinating your care--this is something I do for a lot of my patients who have complex conditions, and I suspect I'm going to be more use to you in that respect than as a GP. You're not going to be coming to me with bronchitis or a sprained ankle, more likely than not--if you do have a medical problem, you're going to require specialists, and I can refer you to the best ones for your case and make sure everyone is on the same page with your treatment."

Bucky nodded agreeably and gave her Padfield's phone number, signing the forms she gave him, because apparently once you weren't in the Army anymore people asked about this shit all the time.

She looked through his file and observed that his physical health was really quite good, and Bucky nodded and said, "I think the main thing I'm gonna need from you is, uh, sedatives."

Dr. Hernandez raised her eyebrows. "Are you having trouble sleeping?"

Bucky shook his head. "No, it's--is there a section in the file called Trigger Reduction?"

Hernandez tapped in a search and her eyebrows went up further, her gaze darting sideways to Bucky. "Do you mind if I just read this for a minute?"

Bucky shook his head and sat back, averting his gaze from her face while she scanned through the relevant part of his file.

"All right," Dr. Hernandez said finally. "I see what you're working on here. Dr. Padfield is aware of this?"

Bucky nodded. "I don't want... I want Steve to be the one in the room with me. But we need the sensor gear and the sedative, and Padfield said he wanted to be monitoring, and--"

"I will also be monitoring," Dr. Hernandez said firmly. "And if we're dosing you with that to make it stop, I'm getting an actual pharmacologist and an anesthesiologist on board from the get-go. I can see from your records that it's probably not actually going to stop your heart, but I'm not going to mess around with it. And if you can tolerate these doses, sooner or later you're going to start resisting them, so we'll need to be monitoring exactly how it affects you so we can be prepared to stay ahead of the curve."

"Do they have to be there?" Bucky asked. He could handle his doctors observing, he thought, as long as Steve was the one actually with him--he knew Woj and Lind had had other doctors and techs on hand sometimes when they did Trigger Reduction, but he'd known and trusted Woj and Lind a hell of a lot more than he knew Dr. Padfield and Dr. Hernandez so far.

Dr. Hernandez pursed her lips, her eyes skimming over another screen of the file, and then she shook her head slowly. "I can handle being the medical backup for this, and I can study up on how to read the sensor information to monitor where you're at--"

"Can you," Bucky said, considering this. She was going to see his history in the file; she was going to know what happened to him when he was under, in the past and during Trigger Reduction. She was going to know. "Can you just tell Steve when to put me under, then? Not anything else you see, just--when I'm too scared and need to stop."
She tilted her head. "You want Steve to be the one in the room with you, but you don't want him to understand the procedure?"

"I don't," Bucky looked down. "I trust him to protect me. It's--better if he doesn't have to know what he's protecting me from."

Dr. Hernandez made a distinctly dubious noise, but she said, "We can probably accommodate that, yes. You do have a right to privacy, and I'll maintain that as much as possible where Steve is concerned, if those are your wishes. I'm told your insurance coverage is excellent, so we can rush order the supplies. When do you want to start work on this?"

Bucky pulled out his schedule and his phone, and in under ten minutes they had the whole thing arranged: Trigger Reduction was set for three o'clock the following afternoon. All Bucky had to do now was wait for it.

"Come to bed?" Steve asked hesitantly that night. "Not for--just, come lie down with me for a while?"

Bucky was nodding agreement almost before Steve finished asking, although he managed to parry a little, smiling as he asked, "You want me to read you a story?"

Steve smiled back, but his voice was serious. "No. And don't wait till I'm asleep to leave, either. I just--like having you in my bed."

"You just like cuddling," Bucky informed him.

"Me?" Steve said. "I like cuddling? I seem to recall you climbing into my bed on a pretty regular basis, Buck, and I'm not gonna believe your lines about needing to keep me warm any more now than I did then."

"We both like cuddling," Bucky amended, too glad to be allowed to do it to quibble much over it. It was about eighty years too late to pretend like he had any dignity to defend from Steve.

Not about anything as simple as who liked cuddling more, anyway.

It was good, lying in the dark with Steve and knowing it wasn't going to turn into anything else. It was a little bit like being back at--back at MEDCOM, in his barracks room. Which had never been home. This was home: this sprawling apartment in the sky, in Manhattan, with Steve.

"I don't know if I've ever told you how glad I am," Steve said after a while. Bucky was plastered against his back, their bodies curved together with Bucky's left arm tucked over Steve's waist. Bucky was keeping his smooth, cool fingers to the outside of Steve's t-shirt, no matter how tempting it was to touch just a little bit of skin.

"I got an idea," Bucky muttered, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the back of Steve's.

Steve huffed and elbowed him a little. "I didn't even tell you what I'm glad about, fathead. Might have nothing to do with you."

Bucky grinned in the dark. "Okay, then, tell me all about how glad you are to have Stark for a landlord."

Steve snorted, and said, "Shut up and let me be nice to you for a second, Barnes." He was twisting as he did it, rolling over to pin Bucky down.
It was playful; Bucky knew it was all playful. It was good. It was nothing he and Steve hadn't done a thousand times together, as familiar and routine as a blowjob. He knew that; he knew he was supposed to laugh and push back and tell Steve not to do him any favors.

He went limp instead, Rumlow's voice echoing in his ears—*gonna do something nice for you, don't struggle.* For a second Steve didn't notice, and Bucky had Steve's weight on him, had that crossed wire in his brain saying *okay, yes, don't struggle, it'll feel good somewhere.*

Then Steve went very still for a second and boosted his weight up just enough that he wasn't holding Bucky down. "Buck? You okay? Did I..."

That was backwards; that was Bucky's line, unused since before Steve got his new body. He didn't actually ask the whole question, didn't say, *Did I hurt you?* because Steve would get his back up. Just a trailing *Did I...*

"I'm fine," Bucky said, because even backward, that was the next line. He understood in a new way why it was the only thing Steve would ever say, even nursing fresh bruises or a split lip from a badly-aimed elbow or badly-timed try for a kiss.

He squirmed away from Steve and Steve let him go. Bucky swallowed the impulse to repeat it. *I'm fine. You didn't hurt me.*

"I'm gonna go," Bucky said, scooting toward the edge of the bed.

"Yeah," Steve said, "Come here a second, let me--"

Bucky darted in to meet Steve's outreaching hand. Even in full darkness, they were too keenly aware of each other's locations to actually give anyone a split lip this time. The kiss landed squarely on the first try, and Steve's hand rested apologetically open on Bucky's right arm.

"You didn't," Bucky told him firmly, breaking script just a little. Steve needed the reassurance more than Bucky ever had in the old days. "It wasn't you, I just--I need to go to bed now."

"I know," Steve said softly, and brushed one more kiss over Bucky's mouth before dropping his hand. "Good night."

"Night," Bucky murmured, before he went back to his room to put on his headphones and turn up the familiar music. Even with that protection, it took him a long time to fall asleep at the edge of his too-wide empty bed.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this chapter is [here on Tumblr!](http://albyart.tumblr.com)

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](http://albyart.tumblr.com).
The next day, Bucky woke up knowing where he was and what to do next.

Breakfast was first. Steve looked up at him with some lingering hesitation in his eyes—not as bad as the day before, but still there when Bucky checked for it. Bucky kissed it off him before he went to fix himself some food, and Steve relaxed at the touch. After that breakfast was easy. Bucky's morning continued with PT and a shower, and then he had homework from Padfield to get done before the afternoon's session.

He found Steve in the TV room, watching something he turned off as soon as Bucky pushed open the not-quite-closed door. Bucky glanced toward the blank screen and said, "Something I'm not cleared for yet?"

Steve made a face that made Bucky suspect Steve had been watching the news and not highly classified Avengers' intelligence reports, but Steve said, "We should talk about that--getting you cleared. Getting you on the team."

"Do the PR people who stop me from fighting on Twitter come with that?" Bucky asked.

Steve relaxed a little, smiling, and said, "Yeah, Stark Industries has a vested interest in making sure we've got a good support team."

"And health insurance," Bucky observed, coming to sit down beside him, and Steve nodded.

"Yeah, is that--you've got that all squared away with your doctors?"

"First thing," Bucky agreed. Steve probably hadn't made a doctor's appointment since 1943; he asked about it like something he'd heard of but never experienced. "JARVIS got me the numbers and everything. So how do I get cleared?"

Steve made another face, a *this is awkward but I'm your CO now, Bucky* face, which stirred up a surge of well-worn fond annoyance that didn't connect to any particular memory. "You're cleared when Tony and I agree that you're cleared, basically. There isn't a real formal structure, and--probably the rest of the team could veto a new person, but they all know I'm planning on bringing you on, and they're not arguing."

"So I have to convince Tony," Bucky said, and there was a flicker of *something* on Steve's face that made it click. "And you. I have to convince you that I'm ready."

Steve nodded, squaring up to the responsibility like he expected to take a punch over it. "Yeah."

Bucky nodded back. "Okay. How?"

Steve looked exactly like he'd been braced for a punch and nobody threw one and now he didn't know what to do. "It's not that you're not--"

Bucky shook his head. "Steve, I know. I'm less than a week out from being declared not mentally..."
responsible for my own actions. I'm not even cleared to handle weapons, nobody knows where I am, obviously I'm not joining the Avengers at nine o'clock on Monday. You can't jeopardize your team by putting me on before you know I'm ready. So how do I prove to you I'm ready?"

Steve said hesitantly, "You need to be ready for the attention--" and then interrupted himself to ask, "wait, who says you're not cleared for weapons?"

Five minutes later they'd tracked down Tony.

Bucky didn't bother with any lead up. "Steve says there's a gun range in the Tower I can practice on. I want an S-19."

Tony, who was in a different lab than last time, although still on the 58th floor, said, "Do you think I just keep sniper rifles my company no longer manufactures around for--"

"The highly-trained sniper you know is going to be moving in with an eye toward joining your team?" Bucky interrupted. "Yeah, I think you might have put two and two together and decided you want me to have the best materiel available."

Someone gave a little amused snort, and Bucky realized there was another guy in the lab, half-hidden behind glowing displays floating in the air. He was projecting not a threat loud enough that he might as well be shouting it through a bullhorn. Bucky hadn't been especially on guard, with Steve at his side and on relatively familiar ground, but he still should have spotted the guy.

"Bruce, meet Bucky," Steve said, stepping up close to Bucky's shoulder. "Bucky, Doctor Bruce Banner, another member of our team."

"And also the other other member of the team," Bruce added, smiling sheepishly but warmly as he came around the desk and offered a hand for Bucky to shake. Steve had told him about the Hulk, so Bucky accepted the handshake with respect, meeting Bruce's gaze steadily. They'd let the guy who sometimes turned into a giant green rage monster on the team; Bucky didn't have a lot of doubts that he was going to be able to convince Steve that they could keep Bucky's gun pointed in the right direction.

Just as soon as they let Bucky have one. He let go of Bruce's hand, nodding politely to him before turning his attention back to Tony. He was rummaging through a drawer but still knew exactly when Bucky looked at him, because he said, "I want to do more sensory mapping later, check the patterns of neural activation for your right hand versus your left. I still don't think you actually have enough nerves hooked up to do what you're doing with that hand."

"It's great for bracing a rifle, I can tell you that," Bucky persisted. "And you're in the middle of something."

"Obviously I'm in the middle of--" Tony found what he was looking for and pulled a snack bag of some kind out of the drawer. He tilted it toward Bucky. "Cranberries?"

Bucky plucked a handful from the bag--Tony had offered him about eight different random snacks the day before while studying the surface of his arm. None of them had turned out to be poisonous or even notably unpleasant to eat, so Bucky was pretty sure Tony had already decided he was on the team.

"So I'll get on with what I'm doing while you go down to the gun range where there's already an S-19 among the items in your dedicated weapons locker," Tony finished.
Bucky about-faced and headed for the elevator as Tony yelled after him, "Sensory testing at one o'clock, JARVIS, don't let me or him forget."

"I have made a note of it," JARVIS intoned smoothly. The elevator was already open when Bucky reached it with Steve on his heels, ready to whisk them down to the gun range.

The elevator took them deep underground--the only way to get enough horizontal space for a decent range in Manhattan, Bucky figured. There were only a handful of lockers--one marked BARTON, one WHATEVER YOUR NAME IS above a little hourglass sigil, two unmarked. The last one said BARNES.

There was no handle on the door, let alone a visible lock, but a rectangle lit up at handle-height on the right-hand door, so Bucky pressed his palm to it. A little click sounded and the doors swung open, revealing racks and shelves of weapons, gleaming in readiness. Missions flickered through Bucky's brain--everything he could do with this, everything he had done with less or more than this. He picked up a knife without thinking, flipping it lightly in his hand before putting it away.

There was an M4. Bucky's fingers were on the stock before he thought, and he exhaled. He remembered the dream, remembered taking the gun from Mueller's unresisting hands. He remembered taking aim on Duncan.

Steve was no further away now than Duncan had been then--already inside his guard. But Bucky knew where he was and what he was here for. Nothing was driving him but the will to prove himself ready.

He took his hand off the M4 and reached for the gleaming beauty of a sniper rifle that had to be the S-19. He'd never used one before, but by the time he had it in his hands he knew it, knew what it could do for him, what he could do with it.

He turned to Steve, barrel pointed toward the distant sky, his finger nowhere near the trigger. Steve was watching him steadily--not unconcerned, but not alarmed, either.

"All right, Cap," Bucky said. "Point me at a target and see what I can do."

It turned out that Steve still liked watching Bucky shoot; he got an hour or so with the S-19, trying out all the different trick targets Stark's range could offer and developing a deep appreciation for the weapon, before Steve had him pressed up against the wall of the shooting stall.

They kissed, grinding against each other frantically, hands wandering, but Steve didn't press for more than kisses even when Bucky could feel how hard he was. He redirected Bucky's hands when he tried for more, and Bucky gave up and pushed the other way, pinning Steve to the opposite side of the stall, only to kiss, and kiss, and kiss.

They were both red-mouthed and dazed when JARVIS made a discreet little noise like a computer's cough and said, "Agent Barton is on his way down for target practice."

Bucky took that opportunity to bite down hard on the side of Steve's throat, leaving a livid mark that would only last a few minutes--but it was still visible the whole time Bucky was securing his rifle while Steve said a slightly strained hello to Barton.

Barton looked amused but nothing more, shaking his head and muttering, "You better have wiped down any surfaces you used," as he snapped a collapsible bow into shooting shape.

Bucky felt a temptation to stay and watch--why a bow, who would choose a bow when there were
rifles in the world?--but Steve touched him and he followed without thinking.

They were halfway back to Steve's floor when Steve suddenly laughed. "I didn't actually introduce you, did I?"

"I think we can both figure it out," Bucky assured him.

Steve went back to grinning his goofy, red-lipped grin while Bucky watched the bite-mark fade to pink, disappearing into Steve's happy flush.

Lunch was followed by sensory testing: another arm session. Bruce--Dr. Banner, after all--was in the lab with them this time, but having an extra doctor in the room wasn't so strange. Bucky closed his eyes and let it wash over him. The scientists talked around him and occasionally told him to do something with his left or right arm so they could make noises about whatever results they were getting from the sensors they had placed all over him.

Trigger Reduction was less than two hours away now, but that was normal too. It all fit neatly on the schedule.

Tony and Bruce were talking about the arm's neurofeedback, debating something about inputs and outputs. Bucky, with half his attention already thrown forward to off-switch practice, opened his eyes and said, "It turns off."

They both stared at him. It had been twenty minutes since he spoke, but they didn't seem surprised that he could, just surprised that he'd chosen to now.

"When?" Tony said, immediately taking his meaning.

"When I can't move," Bucky explained. "I have an off-switch--a trigger phrase. Once it hits I can't make any voluntary movements, and the arm powers down as soon as it hits."

Bruce turned away before Bucky had finished speaking, his hands closing into fists and his shoulders going rigid. Bucky cut his gaze to Tony, but Tony stayed focused on him--not unaware of Bruce's reaction, but not overwhelmingly concerned by it either. So Bucky probably wasn't quite pitiful enough to call forth the Hulk and wreck the fifty-eighth floor; good to know.

"If you're paralyzed how do you know it actually powers down?" Stark asked. "It's not like there's a green light that goes out, and you couldn't see it if there were."

Bucky stared at him for several seconds, and then said slowly and distinctly, "It's my arm."

Stark raised his eyebrows like that didn't answer his question.

"There's a hum," Bucky said, because that was actually the main thing that distinguished it from his right arm. "A--vibration, something, I don't know, it's not actually a sound, just a feeling of animation, or potential. It stops when I go under the off-switch. It's just a dead piece of metal until I get control back."

His greatest source of strength, and they could take it to pieces, or leave it as nothing but an anchor to his left side while they--but he wasn't thinking about that. Tony didn't know his off-switch and wouldn't be allowed to know it.

"Could the arm be responding independently to the trigger phrase?" Tony was looking back and forth from Bucky to the readouts to Bucky's left arm. It was propped on the lab table Bucky sat
beside but not restrained in any way--he could have torn through the sensor-wires without trying if he needed to move.

"We didn't find any auditory sensors," Bruce said evenly, without turning back to face them. "It has to be responding to the change in neural signaling when voluntary muscle movement cuts off."

Tony nodded. "I need more data. This off-switch of yours, do you ever--"

"Tony," Bruce said sharply, turning back around, but Bucky was already saying, "Yeah, I'm going under this afternoon."

It occurred to him, all complete between one word and the next, what he wanted Tony to figure out--what he wanted Tony to be willing to do for him. He could give Tony the data Bucky wanted him to have and turn him up sweet by letting him play with a new toy. It was the simplest strategy in the world.

Bucky smiled as he asked, "Want me to leave this rig on?"

There was a different bed now in one of the guest rooms in Steve's apartment, a windowless one on the opposite side of the hall from his and Steve's rooms. This one was almost exactly the same size and shape as his own, with an attached bathroom and a closet in the same spots. He wondered if this room had been his in some other contingency where he couldn't be trusted with ninetieth-floor windows, or couldn't bear them. It was Bucky's now anyway, if not for normal sleeping.

The bed here was unlike the wide soft one in his bedroom, narrow and utilitarian like no bed he'd seen since MEDCOM, its frame a familiar kind of indestructible. There were no restraints, though, just soft-looking sheets, a warm-looking blanket, and a pillow. There was a chair and a little table beside it. The table had a camera and a laptop, so Steve could talk to the docs who would be in the next room, and the doctors could keep an eye on Bucky.

Bucky curled up on his right side in the bed, facing the camera. He was all wired up with the sensor cap on his head and Tony's sensors stuck all over his left arm, inside and out, and down his spine and the back of his neck and his whole left side down to the bottom of his ribcage.

He pulled the blanket up over himself the best he could, once he and the sensor array were in place. Steve matter of factly tugged it up over his shoulder and adjusted it so it wasn't touching his face.

"Thanks," Bucky muttered, and Steve just nodded, looking a little pale and strained but determined to see this through. Bucky wormed his right hand out from under the blanket when Dr. Hernandez came in, and she sat in the chair while Steve perched on the edge of the bed. Steve was the only one to actually touch him; Dr. Hernandez talked Steve through placing the capped IV line in the vein on the back of his hand. Bucky could see Steve memorizing every word, every movement, the exact amount of force required to punch the needle through the skin and into the vein. He taped it down carefully when he was done, and only then did he look over to meet Bucky's eyes.

"Good work," Bucky said, rubbing his cheek into the pillow as he winked. "Didn't feel a thing."

Steve rolled his eyes and returned his attention to Dr. Hernandez, who was showing him the syringe with the dose of sedative, and how to push it through when she told him Bucky needed to be knocked out.

It didn't take long before the door was closing behind her and it was just him and Steve in the little quiet room. Bucky laid his head back down on the pillow so Steve could line up the camera, and then he focused his attention on Bucky again.
Okay," Steve said firmly. "There's no audio pickup on the camera, and JARVIS has no surveillance in this room. I'll be able to hear the trigger phrase, but no one else will."

Bucky nodded. "Okay."

Steve frowned as he picked up the little--eminently destructible--recorder that held what Woj had promised him was the only copy of his trigger phrase outside the brains of the people on his team who'd heard it.

"We could probably make it so I can't even hear it--hook it up to headphones--"

"No," Bucky snapped, sitting up sharply, and Steve froze at the sudden motion.

Bucky looked down, breathing through the spike of visceral panic. "No, you can't--headphones are for blocking. For safety. Not for triggers."

"Shit," Steve said under his breath, and then, "Of course, Buck. You're right. No triggers in headphones ever. Dumb idea, forget it."

Bucky nodded, staring down at his hands for another few seconds. Steve tapped something on the keyboard--explaining to the docs, who would just have seen Bucky suddenly disappear from the frame, and probably something kinda interesting happen on the sensor readouts. Bucky waited until his breathing was back under control, and then he looked over at Steve, who was still holding the recorder between his thumb and finger, just waiting.

"It's okay," Bucky said. "I know it seems bad from the outside but it's really not that bad anymore. And if it's bad you'll knock me out."

Steve nodded slowly. "If it's bad I'll knock you out."

Bucky nodded back, rubbed his face with his right hand hard enough to make the loose end of the IV tubing flap against his wrist, and then he lay back down. Steve tugged the blanket up over him again, brushed the backs of his fingers gently over Bucky's cheek.

Then the voice, and Bucky was in darkness, held absolutely still.

The phantom touch of Steve's fingers against his cheek lingered, even when he could hear Steve settling back into the chair, too far away to reach. No one would touch him, now that he was switched off, except in a true emergency. And if someone did touch him it would be Steve, so that was all right. Steve could touch him any way he wanted.

"Okay," Steve was saying. "You said I should pick something to read to you, so I talked with Sam and I picked this one--he says I'll like it exactly as much as I don't like The Hobbit, so that seems like a pretty good bet, and he didn't think there was anything in here that you'd find upsetting, but if you do..."

Steve trailed off, and Bucky wanted to smirk; he actually did sort of roll his eyes, behind closed lids where Steve couldn't see in and Bucky couldn't see out.

If Bucky did find it upsetting, Steve hadn't said, sooner or later he'd panic down there or do something else the brain sensors could see, and Steve would knock him out rather than go on reading to him.

"Yeah, yeah," Steve said, just as if he knew Bucky's reaction to the words he hadn't spoken. "Well, here goes. Oh--it's called Have Spacesuit--Will Travel. Heinlein. You had a few of his books, right?"
Bucky had read *Rocket Ship Galileo* months ago and more recently had been fascinated by *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Andrews had said that after that one Heinlein's books only got weirder and more involved with sex, and Bucky felt a stray twinge of prurient curiosity—but Steve almost certainly hadn't put him under the off-switch to read naughty books to him, and Wilson probably wouldn't have suggested one to set him up. Romanov, yeah, but not Wilson.

Steve cleared his throat. "Okay, here goes. You see, I had this space suit. *How it happened was this way:* 'Dad,' I said, 'I want to go to the Moon.'"

Definitely more at the *Rocket Ship Galileo* end of the spectrum, then, but that was all right—it felt like sharing an old pulp magazine with Steve, although Steve had never been a great one for reading that stuff. He'd humored Bucky back then, and he was humoring Bucky now, reading him a story about a kid who wanted to go to the moon.

Bucky started drifting at some point, losing the thread of the story, but that was all right; he had Steve's voice, and he could still almost feel that last touch of Steve's fingers against his cheek. He found himself focusing on that last sensation until it drowned out the comfortable weight of the blanket over him, the softness of the pillow against his cheek, the push of the tube through his skin—all the sensations he'd learned to hold as guideposts during off-switch sessions back at MEDCOM.

No one at MEDCOM had ever touched his face like that. They were his team; they treated him professionally. They always kept a certain distance.

Steve could touch him when he was under, Bucky thought. He wouldn't mind.

He remembered the way Steve's hand had run over his hair yesterday, after Bucky sucked him off—that gentle petting, nothing sexual in it, barely even anything to do with Bucky. Steve just liked the feel of Bucky's hair under his hand.

Steve could touch him like that now—but, no—the sensor cap was in the way. Steve could touch his cheek again. Next time Bucky wouldn't shave in the morning—he had no uniform regs to adhere to, he could look as scruffy as he liked if it would make Steve want to touch him. Steve could run his hand over Bucky's cheek, rubbing against the grain down the line of his jaw—his hand could curl around Bucky's throat and—tighten—

The sick sense of helplessness washed over him, dragging a queasy curl of desire in its wake. He knew how to walk himself back from this, but he dove down into it instead, letting the images flood his mind. Steve could climb onto the bed, get both hands on Bucky, his jaw and his throat, hold his mouth open—choke him with his hands, but why use his hands when he could--

But even unmoored his mind shied away. That wasn't Steve, that wasn't what he had with Steve. Steve would never do that to him, that was *rape* and Steve had never, *could* never--

But if it wasn't Steve—memories crowded in through the opening he'd left them, and suddenly he was back there, helpless even to breathe under their hands, around what they stuffed into his mouth. He was submerged in animal terror down below anything a person would call fear, the blank panic of *no air no air no air*.

And at the same time there was a hand between his legs and he was rising to that touch, that one thread of pleasure in the midst of terror. He couldn't breathe but he could hear Rumlow laughing, and Bucky couldn't hear anything else. The steady sound of Steve's voice had cut off, and Bucky thought that that was good. Steve shouldn't be here for this. He could bear this, as long as Steve didn't see.

The blackness took him all the way down.
Chapter End Notes

Alby’s art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](https://example.com)

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For a second he didn't know where he was, or why it was Steve sitting by his bed instead of Woj. He felt a disoriented burst of fear—*what had gone wrong, what had he done, why had they brought Steve in?*—and then it all fell into place. He was in Manhattan, in Steve's apartment. He lived here now. This was home.

Steve smiled when Bucky met his eyes, the grimly determined smile Bucky had seen him bestow when he visited field hospitals, touring the beds of the guys who didn't just heal everything away without a trace. Bucky suddenly couldn't remember whether Steve had actually touched him at all, and he thought Steve needed to feel he was all right at least as much as Bucky needed to feel Steve's touch.

"Hey," Bucky said, sitting up. "Help me get all this off?"

"Sure," Steve said, a beat behind, but he got up and perched on the edge of the bed again. His hands were steady and warm as he unstuck the sensors from the back of Bucky's neck while Bucky took off the cap and started in on the ones stuck to his chest.

Bucky waited until all the sensors were off to grab the collar of Steve's shirt and pull him in for a kiss.

Steve made a startled little noise but then pulled him in tight. He kissed like the hour when he wasn't allowed to touch Bucky had been weeks of separation.

Bucky shivered a little when Steve's hand ran over his hair, and Steve pulled back with a last swipe at Bucky's lower lip. "You, uh--your doctors said you should sleep it off and they'd talk to you on Monday, but Padfield said you should give him a call if you wanted to talk about anything sooner."

Bucky shook his head. It hadn't been anything new, not really--not anything he wanted to tell Padfield, anyway.

"I'm fine," Bucky assured him, and if Steve didn't look exactly like he believed it, he didn't argue either.

It was the opposite of a trigger phrase, yanking him awake. He was on his feet, running toward the sound of Steve's voice before he'd recognized that the word ringing in his ears was his name, spoken in a desperate tone. It came again as he burst through the door of Steve's room, only to find him in bed, asleep. Dreaming. "Bucky!"

"Steve," Bucky said, walking over to the bed in quick strides. Steve was lying flat on his back, too still, and Bucky grabbed his hand. "Steve, I'm here, I'm--"
Steve's hand tightened hard on his, and Steve jerked awake, barely moving except that his eyes flashed open. He stared up at Bucky like he didn't believe what he was seeing, or like it wasn't any comfort.

Bucky summoned up a smile and tugged on the hand he was holding. "Bad dream, Steve. I'm here."

"You were," Steve said blankly, and then he sat up and flung his free arm around Bucky's shoulders, hugging him tight, clinging like one of them was about to fall.

You were. Bucky was--there? There and not responding to Steve, maybe. His mind jumped to his glassed-off memories of not being Bucky yet, of seeing Steve as a target no matter what Steve said, and then he realized it was simpler than that.

Steve had said it the very first time Bucky told him about the off-switch: I used to have nightmares about that. Being helpless, paralyzed, had been the scariest thing Steve's brain could conjure up for him. Bucky had asked Steve to do that to him--to paralyze him and then sit and watch while Bucky couldn't respond to anything he did or said until Bucky got so scared Steve had to sedate him.

Bucky pressed his face into Steve's shoulder and returned his grip just as tightly.

"Sorry, pal," he muttered, and Woj's words from months ago popped out of his mouth. "Put you through some nightmare shit today, huh?"

Steve shook his head. "Not me, you--"

"You're the one having nightmares about it," Bucky pointed out, and he only realized as he said it that he hadn't had a nightmare of his own about it tonight. "If you can't stand seeing me like that..."

Bucky didn't actually want to finish that sentence. He didn't want anyone else to be sitting beside him when he was like that--definitely didn't want to think of anyone else being able to touch him when he was switched off.

"I can," Steve insisted. "I can. If you can do it I can do it, I just--" Steve squeezed Bucky's hand again and rubbed his back with the other hand. "I had a nightmare, that's all."

"Sorry, pal," Bucky muttered, kissing the side of Steve's face. He just managed to choke back the words let me make it up to you because nothing was more guaranteed to make Steve tell him no right now. He pressed another kiss to Steve's cheek, moving closer to his mouth, coaxing without coaxing.

Steve lasted another fifteen seconds--three or four more kisses, and Bucky was nearly down to his jawline--before he shifted his grip on Bucky and turned his head for a real kiss, fast and hungry and hard. Bucky knew how to respond to that; he knew what Steve needed. Proof of life.

So he kissed back just as hard, pushing Steve down to the bed, and Steve surged under him, not letting him have it all his way. They kissed like fighting, like sparring--Bucky groaned a little at the thought of sparring with Steve, but Steve had put a rifle in his hand today, so why not throw a punch tomorrow? Steve moaned back in echo and pushed at him, rolling him over on the bed, grinding their bodies roughly together while they kissed and kissed.

They changed places a few more times, rumpling up Steve's bed, warming them both up until Bucky wanted it as badly as Steve did, even if his dick refused to get involved. Steve's had definitely accepted the invitation, pressing up urgently against him. Bucky wanted to feel this. His whole body was humming for it, hungry for sex, desperate to get off, to be where Steve was right now. If Steve would just touch him the right way, he could get there, he could feel it--
Bucky shifted under Steve's weight—under, yes, that was a good start. He spread his legs to wrap around Steve's hips as he said, "I want you to fuck me."

Steve pulled back enough to meet Bucky's eyes, going still, but he looked as hungry as Bucky felt. All he said was, "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Bucky said, exhaling his relief that Steve wouldn't argue with him. "Please, come on."

"Yeah," Steve agreed and then he was kissing Bucky again, lips hot and rubbed half raw. Bucky pushed up under him, rolling them over so he could reach the bedside table. Steve had expected their first night together to go differently—Steve had expected him to want what he'd always wanted, and that had to mean Steve had been ready.

He fumbled at the drawer until Steve broke the kiss to laugh and batted his hand away. That was even better, because Steve was pulling the lube out, rolling Bucky over and dropping the little bottle on the bed beside them. He ran his hands down Bucky's bare chest, and Bucky arched up into it greedily.

He shoved his own boxers down at the same time, squirming under Steve while Steve ducked his head to nuzzle at Bucky's scarred shoulder. It felt shivery-weird, but he wanted more of Steve, so once he had his boxers off Bucky tried to focus on maneuvering into position. Steve's knees were planted outside Bucky's thighs, so Bucky couldn't spread his legs very far, but he could motivate Steve to get with the program.

He pressed his hand to the front of Steve's underwear, curling around his cock where it was straining against the cloth, a damp spot already spreading around the head.

"Come on," Bucky gasped, arching under Steve as Steve's mouth moved lower, teasing his nipples while Steve's hands stayed at Bucky's waist. "Stevie, you're killing me, I know you want this--"

Steve bit down on one of Bucky's nipples, and Bucky's breath caught at the little thrill of pain, the awareness all over again of Steve's strong body over his.

"Please," Bucky redirected. "Please, I want you in me, I want you so bad."

"Keep talking," Steve directed, but he was moving at the same time, bringing his knees in between Bucky's and forcing his legs apart. Bucky spread them eagerly, still pushing up into Steve's mouth and squeezing at Steve's cock.

His brain went completely blank of things to say, but Steve had given an order and Bucky really, really wanted to comply.

"Please," he repeated. "Please, I want you, I need you, I need you inside me, I need to feel you, Steve--"

Steve's dry fingers were pressed up behind his balls, and Bucky made a helpless noise at the shivery feeling he got when Steve nudged against his prostate from the outside. "Oh God, please just--harder, in me, please--"

Steve didn't have to slick his fingers—he could go in dry, it would hurt and Bucky wouldn't protest, he would lie still—so still, he could take it—but no, Steve needed him to keep moving, keep talking.

"Steve, please, please, I need you."

"I know," Steve said, picking his head up to give Bucky another lingering kiss, and then he pulled
away altogether, kneeling up. "Turn over, Buck. On your knees, ass up."

Bucky shivered at the hint of command in Steve's tone, and at the promise of what he was going to do. Bucky knew that position; he knew what Steve wanted. It was the opposite of going in hard and fast and rough, but he wanted it anyway, and maybe--just maybe--maybe this was all he needed. Maybe he just had to get fucked. He didn't even need his dick hard for that; it could still feel good anyway. It always had, with Steve, because Steve would never settle for less.

Bucky rolled over and got his knees under him, still spread wide, resting his forehead against his folded arms as Steve's hands came down on his ass, spreading him open wider. Steve kissed his tailbone and each ass cheek before his mouth moved lower, licking right over Bucky's hole, and Bucky moaned and pushed back into it. He needed this, needed Steve, needed to feel it.

Steve's mouth on his hole was familiar, no less than Steve's mouth on any other part of his body. Bucky moaned and writhed, begging with his mouth as well his hips, as Steve licked him open. Steve was good at it, sweet and thorough, and it felt like it had always felt, pleasure and anticipation racing up his spine.

And then--less. And then nothing. He felt almost numb again, sealed off from his own skin, and Steve was still licking away.

"Buck?" Steve said, picking his head up, because Bucky had fallen silent.

He couldn't tell Steve it didn't feel good anymore. Steve would stop if he said that, and Bucky still wanted to be fucked--he couldn't help but feel that, at least, if he could just make Steve fuck him hard enough. But Steve wouldn't if he thought Bucky wasn't into it, and Steve still needed him to talk, to respond. Signs of life.

"Please," Bucky said, making his voice shake just right, nearly a sob as he pushed his hips back. "Stevie, please, I need you, I need more."

Steve's fingers pressed against his spit-slicked rim, and Bucky made himself relax for it. God knew he'd learned to do that, at least, to let himself open up for whatever was put into him. He just had to remember to keep talking.

"Come on," Bucky said, remembering to make his voice a little rough, a little demanding, the way Steve would expect. Steve's finger slipped into him, just the tip, and Bucky pushed back for it even though it was too wet, too easy, barely enough to feel at all. "Steve, come on, please, just--more, I need more."

"It's been a long time, Buck," Steve said. "Let me feel--"

Bucky jerked his hips back at just the right second and succeeded in taking Steve's finger down to the knuckle, the rest of Steve's hand pressing up behind his balls.

"Please," Bucky insisted, grinding back on that barely-there pressure, and Steve's tongue touched him again as Steve's finger twisted inside him. That was better than more arguing, though, so Bucky made himself keep talking, varying his tone, making his hips move in little jerks like they were supposed to, like they would on their own if he could just feel any of this properly.

Steve worked another finger into him, and for just a second he could feel the stretch of it--but then his well-trained body relaxed further, trying to avoid injury by accepting the intrusion. Bucky's frustrated choked-off sob was entirely unfeigned.

"Please, I'm ready, I'm so ready," Bucky moaned against his wrist. "Been waiting so long for you,
And thank fucking God, Steve flexed his two fingers inside in the testing way that Bucky knew meant he was gauging whether Bucky really was ready. He made himself relax another little fraction, his hole soft and open for Steve's fingers. Steve gave him a last lingering lick and then pulled his fingers out.

"Please, please, please," Bucky chanted, pushing back toward the sound of Steve slicking his cock--he was big, bigger than he'd been before the serum, big enough that he had needed to be careful with Bucky when they did this before. Bucky would feel it. He had to be able to fucking feel this.

Steve's cock pushed into him in a slick, easy glide that his body adjusted to almost instantly--the stretch of it was just the warm burn of a well-worked muscle. Steve was in him to the hilt, and he could feel Steve's body plastered against his from his thighs to his shoulder blades, but Steve was still being gentle, holding back--not using his weight to hold Bucky down, not thrusting in hard, just buried deep.

"Please." The shakiness in his voice was becoming real, because the further it went the more he knew that he needed this. He needed this to be real, and every second of lingering carefulness made it feel further away even when Steve was inside him. "Please, more, I need you."

"I got you, Buck," Steve murmured, kissing so sweetly along the top of Bucky's shoulder that he might as well not be touching him at all. He pulled out agonizingly slowly and moved slowly back in. When Bucky snapped his hips back impatiently to get him faster, Steve just laughed softly and started easing out again.

Bucky whined into his wrist, rocking his hips to try to find anything that felt as sharp and immediate as it should. He bit down on his wrist a little, and tried to imagine that this was meant to be torture, dragging things out so that he couldn't get off on it--the man on his back taking his own pleasure with no care for his, doing whatever he wanted no matter how Bucky begged.

He felt a little frisson of something then, the slow drag of the cock in his ass pulling out of him as he made himself just submit to whatever was going to be done to him.

The next second there was a warm hand on his chest, thumb rubbing softly at his nipple as Steve kissed the line of his spine. "Okay, Buck, tell me how to make this good for you."

Bucky bit back the frustrated sound that tore at his throat--he didn't know if it would have been a sob or a scream, but either one would have made Steve stop.

"Harder," he choked out. "Make me feel it. Been waiting so long for you, please. You know I won't break."

Steve made a thoughtful humming noise that still made Bucky's heart jump and his dick want to, because he knew the sound of Steve strategizing. Then Steve's fingers curled in against his chest and Steve pulled out faster, slammed in harder.

Bucky pushed back to meet the thrust, felt the hard smack of flesh on flesh. It could have hurt if he were less practiced at this, if he were tied down and couldn't angle himself to meet it. If he were already hurt and every muscle in his body was tensed against the pain--he clenched down hard on Steve's cock, winning a hiss from between Steve's teeth and a harder thrust, Steve instinctively meeting the unspoken challenge.

Bucky set his teeth against his wrist again, trying to make it hurt enough, trying to make Steve fuck
him hard enough to feel something other than just the fact of a cock in his ass. He kept getting little
shivers of it–he could almost hold the fantasy if he just ignored how easily he could move, the
way nothing held him down. He made himself remember Rumlow's fingers digging in hard on his
hips, Grisha resting his sidearm between Bucky's shoulder blades so that the muzzle sighted right up
his spine to the base of his skull.

Steve was stronger than either of them--Steve wouldn't need a weapon, he could use nothing but his
hands, he could snap Bucky's neck if he wanted to, he could--

Steve bit a kiss against the back of Bucky's neck, stinging a little but a world away from being cruel.
His hands were both on Bucky's chest as he muttered, "God, I missed you so fucking much."

Bucky felt suddenly, dizzily sick at what he'd just been thinking. Steve wouldn't--Steve would never
hurt him like that. This was a world away from any of that. That had been rape and this was love.
Steve wanted nothing but to make him feel good--every thrust Steve was angling into Bucky just so,
his cock skidding across all the spots that used to drive Bucky wild. Not Steve's fault that Bucky was
numb to anything but the worst now. Steve shouldn't have anything to do with that, even--especially-
in Bucky's head.

Bucky's stomach turned, and he pressed his forehead against the back of his metal hand, breathing
evenly and trying to fight down the feeling of sickness, pushing back and back against Steve, trying
to make it good enough to get this over with. Steve deserved to come. Steve deserved to feel like
Bucky liked this. Bucky ought to have liked this. Steve was fucking him as hard as any normal
person could want, now, but still without really hurting him or holding him down. Steve would never
do that. Steve wasn't like that.

"Steve," Bucky gasped, trying to gauge where they were. "Stevie, yeah--"

"Buck," Steve groaned, and Bucky knew he was close.

It would be over soon. Bucky just had to keep breathing a little longer, keep tightening up on Steve's
cock to coax him along. He just had to not think about anything at all and it would be over soon.

Steve's hands tightened on his chest, hard enough to tug a little on the flesh where it joined to the
metal. Bucky had a bright, vivid memory of that seam tearing under pressure, blood dripping down
to his nipple and careless fingers streaking it across his chest as he was fucked. He couldn't help the
noise that burst out of him.

"Yeah," Steve moaned, snapping his hips in hard, that quick stuttering rhythm Bucky knew. Steve
was coming inside him, his hands flashing open because Steve had learned not to tighten his serum-
powered grip when he came. Bucky held still, breathing evenly, steadily, as if he were going to fire a
rifle at the bottom of his exhale.

Steve went back to soft kisses against the back of Bucky's neck when he finished, his weight resting
almost heavily enough to mean something against Bucky's back--except it didn't mean that. It could
never mean that.

This was Steve, and his body was a blanket over him, a shelter, love and comfort and nothing else,
not ever. Bucky felt sick deeper than his stomach, down to the marrow of his bones.

He'd brought something filthy into Steve's bed. Something evil. He couldn't let Steve know.

Bucky folded slowly down to lie flat on his face on the bed, and Steve courteously rolled away,
easing out of Bucky's ass and running a warm hand down the line of his spine.
"D'you want," Steve mumbled, sounding sleepy already. "I can..."

"Go to sleep," Bucky mumbled back, matching Steve's tone. "I'm all set. Just tired."

"Mm," Steve yawned. "Glad you're here, Buck."

"Me too, Stevie," Bucky replied, and counted the seconds until he could slip out of Steve's bed and go do his best to scald off his own skin in the shower.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr](http://example.com)!  
I am also on [Tumblr](http://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is [also also on Tumblr](http://example.com), [over here](http://example.com).
Chapter 23

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve kissed him in the morning without hesitating at all, soft and sweet and good. Bucky kissed him back the way Steve deserved to be kissed. Steve had already fixed his coffee for him, and Bucky got the rest of his breakfast and tried to feel like everything was fine, like he hadn't thought anything awful about Steve last night, like it didn't make a difference.

Then Steve said, "So I gotta tell you, Buck--everybody knows about you now."

Bucky froze, not even looking up at Steve, his stomach sinking and trying to reverse out of his throat all at once.

"It's okay," Steve said gently, reaching out one hand to cover Bucky's. "They've known since last night, actually--the White House did a press release on your retirement being final at about five o'clock Friday afternoon, to bury it as much as possible over the weekend, but the news outlets have put two and two together and know you're probably here in New York with me."

Bucky took a deep breath in and out, pushing away the blankness of panic as he mentally rearranged the last few seconds.

"Everybody knows," Bucky said slowly. "That my retirement is final. That I've left MEDCOM."

"Oh, hell," Steve said, sounding apologetic. "Yeah. I didn't mean..."

Bucky looked up as Steve trailed off, and that was worse. He could see that Steve didn't know which secret Bucky might be most upset about people knowing, but his brain was working at it. That was the last thing Bucky wanted.

"Okay," Bucky said instead of acknowledging Steve's chagrin. "Does that affect our plan for tomorrow at all?"

Steve snapped into focus at that, just as Bucky had expected him to. Steve couldn't resist a plan. "No, I don't think so--I mean, we were going to be discreet about leaving for Mass anyway, and the odds of us not being spotted before the end of the service were never good, although now they're basically zero. So we can probably get into the church without a circus, but we're likely to be facing one when we leave."

Bucky nodded slowly. "Signs, all of that? People yelling stuff?"

They'd asked him that during his final evaluation sessions--how he would react to a dozen different scenarios that all boiled down to strangers hate you now, and they will tell you so to your face.

Steve winced. "Could be, yeah."

"So," Bucky steeled himself. "Now's probably a good time to ask--what do people know about me? Really know, I mean, not the rumors and the bullshit and the screaming. What have they actually been told about me?"
Steve's expression turned serious and thoughtful. "JARVIS, could you pull together all the official statements to the press about Bucky from the last few months?"

"I shall queue them to your television," JARVIS said. "Would you like your own statements to be included?"

"Yes," Bucky said immediately, gleefully, while Steve still had his mouth open, trying to formulate a no. "Put all of those first, JARVIS."

Steve shut his mouth, exhaled through his nose, and then said, "Put ’em in chronological order, JARVIS, so they make sense."

Bucky got through the rest of his breakfast in record time, Steve grimly keeping pace with him. Clearly he was planning to watch all of this along with Bucky.

It wasn't long before they were both settling in in front of the TV, and the first clip started without either of them having to press a button. Text on the screen helpfully identified it as a Pentagon press conference given--Bucky had to count back, calculating--the day after he’d come in, after he was out of BAMC and safely behind the gates at MEDCOM.

The spokesman, a rear admiral in full dress uniform, stepped up to the podium and said, "I will give a brief statement. I will not be taking questions on this topic, and no further information on the matter will be released at this time."

"Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, last assigned to the Strategic Scientific Reserve covert strike team known as the Howling Commandos and lost in action, believed killed, on January 26th, 1945, has been recovered alive."

There was a swell of noise from the audience of reporters that reminded Bucky viscerally of being in the courtroom during his court martial. The rear admiral waited it out, then continued when the room was quiet.

"Sergeant Barnes escaped from HYDRA captivity and has returned voluntarily to the custody of the US Army under the guidance of his last assigned commanding officer, Captain Steven Rogers. He is currently undergoing a program of reintegration at Fort Sam Houston under military medical supervision."

There was another roar from the audience, but the rear admiral just nodded slightly and turned away.

Bucky glanced over at Steve, but his face was already screwed up in anticipation. He returned his gaze to the TV in time to see someone shoving a microphone in Steve's face and asking, "Cap, what can you tell us about Bucky escaping from HYDRA and returning to the Army?"

Steve gave a dazzling, giddy grin and said, "Happiest day of my life, both times it's happened. That's all I have to say right now."

"Sap," Bucky said, leaning into Steve's side as the scene on the TV cut to another briefing room.

"Not one word of a lie." Steve kissed the point of Bucky's jaw as he curled an arm around him.

Watching all the briefings and Steve's appearances, which rocketed back and forth between being hilarious and almost physically painful to watch, was strangely exhausting. Bucky did PT after, but felt like he was running with weights strapped to his legs; after his shower he realized it was Saturday and the whole day was downtime, so he didn't struggle against falling asleep on the couch.
with a book loosely held in his hands.

He half-woke when Steve sat down and tangled his legs with Bucky's, then sank back down into sleep, knowing he was safe at home.

When he woke up properly it was nearly lunchtime, and Steve said, "So I was thinking--if your schedule's clear today..."

Bucky stretched and nodded, studying Steve. It didn't look exactly like he was about to suggest spending the whole afternoon in bed, but he wanted *something* that he thought Bucky might not be interested in.

"Sam and Natasha would like to see you," Steve explained, running a hand through his hair but keeping his eyes on Bucky's. "I figured--visits on Saturdays, right? They could come by for a while this afternoon."

Bucky was already nodding as it occurred to him to wonder if he should tell Steve that getting in touch with Sam and Natasha was part of Bucky's homework from Padfield. He'd meant to ask Steve for their phone numbers yesterday, before the question of getting cleared to join the Avengers distracted him. Then he wondered whether Padfield would dock him points for not actually initiating the contact himself--but if he did, Bucky figured, he could virtuously claim to have been accepting Steve's support. Padfield wanted him to take the easy way on everything, as far as he could tell; he might as well take the easy way on this.

"Sure," he said, and then, figuring he might as well put his back into this a little if it was going to happen, added, "let's go for broke, invite 'em to stay for dinner."

Steve gave him nearly the same smile he'd bestowed on the first reporter to ask him about Bucky, but he only said, "What, are you gonna cook for them?"

"If by cook you mean ask JARVIS where to order food from, yeah, sure," Bucky said easily. "Come on, you like these people, you don't want them eating your cooking *or* mine."

"Well, they like us," Steve said, that last pronoun almost not coming out pointed. "They might go along with it anyway. Could be fun to watch."

"I don't know why anybody thinks you're the nice one," Bucky shook his head, poking his toes roughly into Steve's stomach. "I'm gonna order a whole chocolate pie just for them and not let you have any if you keep this up."

"Yeah, but you'll order a whole strawberry pie for yourself and let me have half of that," Steve said easily. He was already tapping out an invitation on his phone.

A couple of hours later Romanov and Wilson arrived--Natasha and Sam, Bucky mentally corrected. They turned up together, like neither of them wanted to go into unsecured territory alone, which was an instinct Bucky approved of.

Natasha offered him her hand to shake, and he took it, saying as he did, "Thanks for keeping him from getting into worse trouble while I was locked up. And--did you read to me?"

Natasha smiled, and he could see the watchful calculation in it, but he could also see that it was a smile. "I did. I'd never read the book before--I wound up reading the whole thing, afterward."

Bucky smiled a little wider. "So are you on my side or Steve's side?"
She shrugged, tilting her head. "It was a book, I read it. I'm not joining any teams on that basis."

Bucky shook his head and turned to Sam, offering his hand. "Tell me you have an opinion, come on."

"I'm with you, man," Sam said firmly, shaking his hand. "And I don't think anybody who's read Upton Sinclair voluntarily gets to talk shit about Tolkien."

"It's not like I read Sinclair as a bedtime story," Steve said, picking up his exasperation exactly where he must have left it off the last time Sam gave him shit about that.

It stayed like that for the rest of the afternoon, and through dinner and the near-total demolition of three pies for dessert. Steve and Sam and Natasha fit together comfortably, like a team, and Steve and Bucky fit together the way they always had. Bucky would catch Sam's eye sometimes, or Natasha's, and share the awareness that they were letting Steve push them together, shape them into a team of four--but that was fine. Bucky knew how to join in, how to fit like this.

He found himself remembering the months before he'd gone in for reintegartion, his peripheral awareness of Romanov and Wilson flanking Steve, assisting with missions. Even Steve hadn't been on his team then, no matter what Steve told reporters and Army prosecutors about who was in charge. Bucky had been carrying out his own mission, and had allowed Steve and the people in Steve's train to participate when they showed up in the right place at the right time.

He felt a strange wistfulness--it could have been like this--remembering the Howlies as he sat around a table with Steve and Sam and Natasha, but he knew that was a world away from true. The man he'd been then--well, the man-shaped package of programming and desperately-conserved functionality--couldn't have done this. He couldn't have seen the utility in doing this. If he could have, he would have. He had had to get here by the path he'd taken.

_There and back again_, he thought, and in the middle of Steve telling a story about some mission he and Natasha had done once, Bucky leaned over his nearly-empty plate and said, "I still can't believe you don't like Bilbo, though."

Steve stopped dead, startled, and then leaned in to mirror Bucky. In a tone of patience that had already been strained seventy years ago, he said, "Bucky, it's not like Bilbo's an actual person who I dislike, okay? If Bilbo was a friend of yours, I'd invite him to come have dinner with us. I don't like the book Tolkien wrote, I don't know how many times I gotta tell you that."

"At least one more," Bucky said, glancing to the other side of the table to be sure Sam and Natasha weren't bored by yet another go-round on the topic.

It was still new for them, though, and they both looked amused, so Bucky sat back and enjoyed the show.

There was a suit in his closet, so Bucky wore it on Sunday morning instead of his dress uniform. He was a civilian now, just like Steve. When he walked out of his room wearing it, he found Steve dressed the same--Bucky thought the suit he was wearing was the same one he'd worn to attend Mass on base at MEDCOM, the first time he visited Bucky there. Bucky straightened Steve's tie, and he straightened Bucky's; they exchanged a chaste Sunday morning kiss and headed for the elevator, barely speaking, as though they were fasting as much from each other as from food before Mass.

They took the elevator down to only a few levels above the gun range, and in the garage they got into the back of a black car with darkly tinted windows. Bucky had a flash of a mission, maybe a
half-dozen missions; this was a car for dignitaries, for people to be protected or people with something to hide.

Well, he was two of the three now, and Steve was arguably the rest. Between the two of them they covered all the bases.

It was a short ride to the church, and all was quiet outside. A few people were heading to the church doors, mostly elderly people in ones and twos, bundled up in long coats and scarves and hats against the January chill, despite the sunshine. Neither he nor Steve had bothered with an overcoat, let alone a hat or scarf; nothing would get in the way of anyone recognizing them.

"Ready?" Steve asked.

Bucky wanted to say no, because he was about to step into an unsecured and unscouted space, unarmed, unable to defend Steve from whatever might happen next.

Bucky shook off that thought. What was going to happen next was Mass. Bucky met Steve's gaze and gave a short, sharp nod instead of lying outright, and opened the door to lead the way out of the car. Steve stayed a step behind him, protecting his blind side, but there were no threats here to detect, just people heading into the church in the quiet of an early Sunday morning.

Bucky hesitated on the threshold as he stepped through the church doors, letting his eyes adjust to the light as he assessed the scene. Almost the first thing he spotted was a priest--Fr. Roche, Bucky recognized his voice immediately--greeting people as he came in. He was dressed in black, no vestments yet and seemingly impervious to the cold. He was tall and lean, in his early forties at most. He smiled as soon as he looked over and spotted Bucky, and Bucky had to step inside then, Steve still patiently dogging his heels.

"Welcome, Sergeant Barnes." Bucky shook his hand obediently as Steve stepped up to his side, resting a hand on the small of his back instead of actively covering him. It felt deeply weird to have Steve touching him even so seemingly innocently inside a church, but Fr. Roche didn't bat an eye. He greeted Steve with the same warm smile. "Captain Rogers, good morning."

"Steve, please," Steve said, and Bucky added, "Bucky," without thinking, even though Father Guzman had always called him by his rank. He'd been an Army chaplain, though, not a neighborhood priest.

"Or James," Bucky added absently, as that train of thought whizzed along, carrying him right back to his Brooklyn childhood.

Fr. Roche just smiled. "I'm so glad to see you both here today, Bucky, Steve. I hope you'll feel right at home."

"Steve, please," Steve said, and Bucky added, "Bucky," without thinking, even though Father Guzman had always called him by his rank. He'd been an Army chaplain, though, not a neighborhood priest.

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Fr. Roche just smiled. "I'm so glad to see you both here today, Bucky, Steve. I hope you'll feel right at home."

It was a firm, clear dismissal. Fr. Roche was already shifting his attention to the next person through the doors, and Bucky stepped off, heading up the aisle to find seats.

He aimed automatically for the front half on the right hand side near the outer aisle, so a person could escape quietly out the side door without absolutely having to genuflect first. Steve let him have the aisle seat, planting himself between Bucky and anyone who might join them in the pew, but the church was still only sparsely filled. If anybody was taking note of the newest members of the parish they were keeping it quiet enough to be hidden under the rustle of coats being taken off and hymnals and church papers being flipped through.

Mass started a few minutes later; he and Steve had timed their arrival as tightly as they dared. Bucky
let himself fall into the rhythm of it, halfway between Sundays at MEDCOM and what he remembered from before the war. It was all in English, but there was something about the space of a church, the feeling of people all around him, that was entirely different from the makeshift barracks chapel.

That, and he had Steve at his side now, not out of sight somewhere behind him, not a thousand miles away. It was Steve's hand he held with his left one during the Our Father, Steve he turned to at the sign of peace to exchange a self-conscious handshake. Other people were turning in their pews, leaning over from various directions to offer handshakes. Their gazes lingered curiously but not unkindly, and Bucky shook all the hands he could reach, nodding a silent echo to Steve's good-natured peace be with you.

Sometime during the sermon he became aware of a sound from outside. It could have just been the city waking up, getting noisier, but it sounded close. Focused. People were gathering outside the church. Steve's hand settled on his knee, letting him know Steve heard it too.

A few seconds later Bucky clocked a quiet movement throughout the church. The ushers were taking up stations at the doors—and the ushers, he noticed, were all young, broad-shouldered guys this morning. He hadn't been to church in a while, but he was pretty sure the ushers at the early service didn't usually fit that description; they certainly didn't fit the demographics of the early-morning congregation.

Up front, Bucky thought he saw Fr. Roche notice the movement, but the priest carried on without a hitch in his sermon. He gave no acknowledgment even when the sound of the crowd outside got loud enough that Bucky saw civilians turning their heads to look. No one tried to breach the doors, at least, though the ushers stayed at their posts during the collection. Other people got up to pass the baskets around.

Bucky felt a moment of odd caught-out panic at that. He didn't have any cash on him; he didn't have anywhere. But Steve pulled a little envelope from the inside pocket of his suit jacket when the basket reached their pew, dropping it in among the other envelopes and loose bills. All Bucky had to do was pass the basket to the white-haired woman standing in the side aisle so she could pass it to the next row.

He forced himself to focus on at least going through the correct motions of the rest of the Mass. When he went up for communion Fr. Roche gave him a fearless smile he was sure he'd seen on Steve when they were kids, right before Steve sailed into a fight. It was more reassuring than it should have been, and Bucky nearly smiled back when Father tipped him a wink as he laid the Host on Bucky's tongue.

Bucky crossed himself as he stepped away, and came the closest to sincerely praying that he had in a long time: Just don't let him get hurt today. Not any of these people. Me, even Steve could take it, but not Father. Not the civilians.

All through the Mass, Fr. Roche hadn't made any special mention of Bucky's presence, other than a bland, routine-sounding welcome to visitors and newcomers to the parish at the start. Just before the concluding rite, with the noise outside definitely audible at the altar now, he paused to say, "I think you can all hear that we're experiencing a visitation this morning."

He paused and the congregation laughed, sounding more genuinely pleased than dutiful. Bucky felt, right there in that exactly timed pause and cheerful laugh, how much these people knew and trusted Fr. Roche. He saw a handful of people glance back in his direction, but none of them looked angry.

"So if you don't want to get caught up in it, please feel free to wait until I give the all clear before exiting the church. If you are prepared to get caught up, please follow the procession directly out."
Bucky glanced over at Steve, and Steve cut a glance at the side door--they could go out that way and draw attention away from the main body of the congregation, keep themselves separate. Face whatever was out there alone. Bucky tilted his head in acknowledgment.

Fr. Roche completed the Mass, and before he'd even come down off the altar Bucky was having to reconsider that plan. Damn near everyone in the church--what looked like everybody who was able to walk easily--was already standing, shrugging on their coats and moving in toward the main aisle, lining up to march out in Father's wake. Into the shitstorm that Bucky and Steve--but mostly Bucky--had brought down on them. They'd all laughed; they were all in on the joke. They all knew approximately what was waiting.

Fr. Roche waved the altar boys away, and they ducked into the sacristy without even coming down off the altar--they didn't look like they were even out of high school yet. Bucky approved of that care for the children even as he weighed the possibility of a bolt hole accessible from the sacristy, or some truly concealed exit--a church basement that connected up elsewhere, maybe...

Steve shifted his grip from Bucky's knee to his hand, tilting his head toward the main aisle. The lector--a stocky woman with short red hair streaked blue--was raising the crucifix in the altar boys' absence, leading Fr. Roche down the main aisle, and people were streaming out behind them, forming up three across and walking with heads held high, purposeful.

Bucky sighed and nodded, and Steve tugged him to his feet and down to the inside end of the pew, where they fell in with the column. More people continued to form up behind them as they headed up the aisle.

Fr. Roche paused at the main doors, where the space was wider and the neat ranks turned into a crowd, with Bucky and Steve firmly in the center. The unexpectedly large ushers all took outside spots, and the lector set aside the crucifix and grabbed a brightly-colored parka before she waded into the crowd to find a blonde woman with her hair in a ponytail and a toddler on her hip. Not all the kids had been sent to safety.

"I'm gonna smile, if I can see anybody to smile at," Steve murmured in Bucky's ear. "Maybe wave. Can I hold your hand?"

Bucky swallowed and shook his head. He would need his hands free. He would need to be able to maneuver as best he could with this many civilians around him.

Steve's expression creased into a frown. "Buck? Are you--"

"I'm fine." It was a lie, but probably an allowable one.

His heart was beating fast, his vision going bright with adrenaline. He remembered the way he'd felt going into Fort Hood, catching sight of the protesters. He remembered the storm of camera clicks outside his trial, the roar of voices at the verdict. It was going to be more, and there were no MPs here; only these mostly-elderly civilians stood between him and the crowd.

He couldn't let anyone get hurt, and he couldn't get angry, and he couldn't let them see him upset. As long as he could do all of that, he'd be fine. His right hand was shaking, his left arm whirring softly under the muffling layers of his shirt and suit jacket. He took a deep breath.

Bucky looked up at Father, who was watching him--not Steve, but him. This once, Sergeant Barnes had to give the order.

Bucky nodded. Father grinned and pushed the door open, letting in the roaring of the crowd outside.
There were about a dozen civilians ahead of them, led by Fr. Roche. The tide of noise broke on them, only to redouble as soon as Steve and Bucky cleared the door.

Steve stopped right there on the top step, looking around. Bucky was peripherally aware that Steve had found people to wave and smile at, but he was busy scanning for threats. There were a handful of flags and banners--rainbow-striped ones, and two or three of that black and gray one he'd glimpsed before. There weren't many signs--people hadn't had much notice to make them--but there were a lot of people. Some were cheering, some were screaming, nearly all of them holding up phones and cameras. The sound of shutter clicks was nearly lost in the human noise, but flashes went off constantly.

"Come on," Steve said, leaning close to speak in his ear. He touched Bucky's back, urging him on.

Bucky nodded and walked forward, scanning constantly for threats. No one pushed through their human cordon of civilians. He heard the words they were shouting--there was a constant drumbeat made up of his own name and Steve's, but other words popped out too. Love you, Nazi scum, die, hero, thank you, burn in hell--but those were only words. He didn't think. He didn't let the words touch him.

He was halfway to the car when he realized he had stepped into something like a dream. He stopped walking, looking down at his own hands to be sure he could move them as he chose. He could. There was no trigger here, just the storm of voices--all of them speaking harmless English--around him.

He shook his head when Steve touched him again, put his chin up and kept marching forward, watching for threats, waiting to be crushed. Nothing happened. The screaming continued, the photos were snapped from every angle, and then Fr. Roche had reached a black car pulled up at the curb, and their human shield flowed out to keep a path clear for them to it.

Fr. Roche opened the door and held it for them, and Steve prodded Bucky to get in first. He hesitated for a second, looking around--some of these people hated him, some were crying, and there was a kid right at the edge of the crowd who might have been a girl or a boy, he couldn't tell under the muffling layers of winter gear. They were red-cheeked with cold like they'd been out here a while, holding up their hands to make the shape of a heart.

Bucky raised his hand to wave to that one, shaping his mouth carefully into a smile, and then he got in the car. Steve followed him in, grabbing his hand immediately, and Fr. Roche leaned in to shout above the storm. "See you next Sunday, boys!"

Steve laughed. Bucky made the corners of his mouth turn up again. The door slammed, leaving them in the muffled safety of a closed space. The car started to move, and Bucky looked down at his fingers again, flexing them, one hand and then the other. He came up against Steve's grip, but he could feel that, and his fingers still moved at his command.

"I'm not dreaming," he muttered aloud, mostly to see that he could.

"You're not, Buck." Steve squeezed his hand tight, but still not tight enough to keep him from moving at all. "A lot of those people were for us, did you see that?"

Bucky nodded, but he couldn't summon up the words to explain the way everything had gone numb when he stepped out that door. His fear had disappeared. Everything had disappeared, as sharply as if he'd been triggered. He thought he could stand at the edge of the Grand Canyon right now and feel nothing but the turning of gears as he calculated whether to jump.
He made himself look at Steve, and observed the absence of feeling even from that. He knew Steve when he looked at him. He knew that he loved Steve, knew that Steve was the only person he would allow to hold his hand this way, that he would go home with Steve and have sex with him if Steve wanted to. But Bucky didn't want anything. He didn't feel any of it. It was as if he'd been hit with an off-switch from the inside out. He could still move where everyone could see; it was only inside that he was frozen.

Steve, looking back at him, was starting to frown. Bucky could feel the blankness of his own expression. It felt familiar. It felt just like old times.

He looked away, so he wouldn't have to see Steve and feel nothing. So he wouldn't have to watch Steve worrying about him when he couldn't remember how to worry about himself.

Steve didn't let go of his hand all the way back to Stark Tower.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

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They ate breakfast together in near silence, and Bucky looked at the empty places at the table and remembered eating with Sam and Natasha the night before. He had liked it. He had been glad to have them there, on the team.

There was nothing inside him now where that sensation had been. It felt almost like he'd gone back in time, to the way he'd been before reintegration.

*Maybe they'll send me back,* he thought, and he felt, like a bomb set off deep underwater, the echo of a tremor somewhere down in the dark. He thought it was hope. He thought he didn't want to know what else was down there with it. He held very still and focused on the numb quietness in his head until the ripples died away, and then he got up and cleaned his dishes. He walked out of the kitchen without saying a word to Steve.

He went into the TV room and sat down on the couch. "JARVIS, did we make the news?"

"There are several," JARVIS started, before Steve cut in with, "Don't show him that."

Bucky turned to stare at Steve, standing in the doorway with his arms folded belligerently across his chest.

"Why the hell not?" Bucky asked, and he could hear the expressionless flatness of his own voice. He needed to know. And now, while he couldn't feel anything at all, was the logical time to watch.

He would be calm. Nothing could touch him. Not even that look on Steve's face. It was all about getting desensitized, right? He would watch the video again and again until it couldn't touch him at all.

"You're not," Steve said, and cut himself off sharply. More gently he said, "Maybe not right now, Bucky."

"I'm not what," Bucky said, turning his gaze away from Steve to stare expectantly at the blankness of the TV. "Don't tell me I'm upset. I'm not upset."

"Yeah, I can see you're not upset," Steve said. "I can see you're barely you. I know you, Buck, and I've seen you like this before. You just spent three months recovering from this. You need to shake it off, not make it worse."

"I don't need to do anything," Bucky said, but he could feel his calm being threatened again. It wasn't hope in the depths this time. It was something much hotter and more dangerous. Steve didn't have any right to tell him how he was supposed to be or what he could do.

If *that* broke the surface...

Steve touched his shoulder, and Bucky had a sudden memory of hitting Steve in the face. Bucky had been hitting him and hitting him while the helicarrier went to pieces around them, while the river loomed up below. He remembered how it had felt—he had been going to pieces inside every bit as much as the enormous machine around him, burning and falling apart. For a split second his body was rocked with the impulse to push away Steve's touch, to twist and swing and bloody his nose, to
bare his teeth in the face of whatever would happen next--

And then the calm clamped down around him, and he didn't feel even the echo of anything.

It didn't matter. If he wasn't supposed to watch the news then he wasn't. He normally didn't; it wasn't as if watching the news was on the schedule. Padfield would show it to him tomorrow if he was supposed to see it.

"Okay," Bucky said, a minute after Steve had already withdrawn the hesitant touch from his shoulder. "Sure. Okay. I'm going to go run."

"Bucky," Steve said helplessly, "Buck, would you--"

"No," Bucky said. "You're right. Not now."

As he ran he remembered that he had been like this for months at a time, not that long ago--for years, really. Decades. His whole life had been made up of this cold mechanical calm, between being broken by HYDRA and reintegration. Reintegration had broken him again, made him feel again, but the cold HYDRA implanted in him had been waiting to catch him as soon as things got bad.

It was for the best, really. He wouldn't hurt Steve this way (except that he hurt Steve every second he was like this--but then maybe Steve would send him back to MEDCOM if he didn't get better).

If he couldn't feel happiness, either, or hope, or hunger... He didn't need those things, did he? He'd been all right without them. He had Steve now. He was better. He was safe. He didn't need to feel things on top of all that. He didn't have to break again. He would be all right.

Steve left him alone after that; in the middle of the afternoon he told Bucky he was going to see Sam. He didn't invite Bucky along. Bucky nodded acknowledgment of Steve's departure.

"JARVIS," he said. "Can I watch something that's not the news?"

"Perhaps a documentary," JARVIS suggested, and when Bucky wandered into the TV room there was a list on the screen. Bucky selected *Cosmos* and lay down on the couch. He was still lying there feeling nothing--except a little better informed, and full of random facts he should tell Steve sometime--when Steve came back eight hours later.

"Oh, *Cosmos,*" Steve said, and Bucky immediately jettisoned all the facts he'd accumulated that Steve would like. Steve already knew. There would be no point in telling him.

"Yeah," Bucky said. He did know how to be polite, so he paused the TV and said, "How's Sam?"

"About eight hours away from a pretty bad hangover," Steve said, leaning over the back of the couch, close enough for Bucky to smell whiskey on his breath, though he showed no sign of intoxication.

Still, Bucky experienced a frisson of something like concern, or maybe something like amusement. There wasn't enough of it to be sure what it was. "Did I drive you to drink?"

Steve gave him a lopsided, tired smile, lit up in the blue light of the paused TV. "Well, I can't actually get drunk, so no harm done. Except to Sam, but I've told him not to try to keep up with me."

"I'll tell Sam I'm sorry, then," Bucky said, turning his gaze back to the TV. He still didn't feel
anything, looking at Steve, past that moment of... something. But it was gone now. Steve was fine. That was all he needed to know.

"Hey," Steve said, leaning lower, gusting a whiskey-scented breath in Bucky's direction. "Buck, would you--would you come to bed with me? Please? I'm sorry about the stuff I said. I'm sorry I--"

"No harm done," Bucky parroted back. His feelings couldn't be hurt when he didn't have any. "If you want me to, I will. Sure."

Steve brushed a hand over Bucky's hair, down to the side of his neck. It was a gentle touch, so light he almost couldn't feel it. Bucky waited in stillness for Steve to finish touching him, then got up and followed him to his room.

Steve left his underwear on, so Bucky did too. No sex, then. That was fine. They lay a little further apart than usual, not touching, which couldn't have been what Steve wanted. Steve wanted to touch him.

Steve probably didn't want to touch Bucky when he could tell that Bucky felt nothing at being touched, though. He wouldn't initiate in those circumstances. It was up to Bucky.

He rolled onto his side and reached for Steve with his right hand, making his touch a slow caress up from Steve's narrow waist to his shoulder. Steve shifted toward him in the dark, saying softly, "Bucky?"

"Mm-hm," Bucky agreed, already scooting in closer, catching Steve's mouth in a kiss.

He knew that he knew the moves for this, but it was hard to manufacture the right sequence without his own hunger as a guide. Steve was being oddly passive, not pushing his own kiss onto Bucky's lips the way he usually did.

After a moment Steve pulled away and said, "Bucky, stop. You don't have to do this."

"I know," Bucky said. He did know. It didn't feel like anything now, any more than sex--the kind of sex Steve could have--felt like anything. That didn't mean he couldn't do it. "For you, though--"


Steve made Bucky turn away so that Steve was at his back, and then he curled up around him. His arm went around Bucky, and the movement of his breaths pressed against Bucky's back. His crotch was pressed tight against Bucky's ass, and Bucky could feel that Steve was just as unaroused as he was.

"Like this," Steve said quietly. "Just stay like this, all right? Let me just hold you a while."

Bucky nodded and stayed. This was good. It was good, being held close like this, being near to Steve.

There was a second when he was aware that he could feel something stirring, deep under the numbness that had sealed him off all day. He had just enough time to know it was coming, and then it broke through in a shattering silent tide. He felt the pleasure of being so close to Steve, a shamefully intense gratitude for Steve's patience and care, and the bone-deep desire for Steve to do more, to put his teeth to the nape of Bucky's neck, push him down on his face and make him be still.

Bucky shivered, trying to suppress it all, but his body felt like an animal on a flimsy leash, a tiger he was riding. He started shaking harder. He squeezed his eyes shut against the prickling feeling in
them, and he suddenly remembered coming out of the off-switch for the first time, the way he had crawled before Exley, the way he had begged.

Unfreezing was like this, too, he remembered distantly. It hurt, being thawed. Everything felt like too much all at once.

"Bucky?" Steve said softly. His arm over Bucky's waist shifted, his hand coming up to spread against Bucky's chest, where he would be able to feel Bucky's racing heart, the breaths he was still trying to hold in. Bucky raised his own hands to hide his face, as if that would help. As if that was the only way he could give himself away to Steve.

"Hey," Steve said softly, moving behind him. A kiss touched the nape of his neck, and then the scars at the seam of his shoulder.

Bucky shook his head behind his hands, shivering harder. When Steve said his name again he opened his mouth to try to answer, and his voice came out as a sob.

"Bucky," Steve said again. He sounded hurt, helpless, and that was even worse than this overwhelming crush of feeling, worse than the memory of all those people crowding around, some hating and some adoring and all of it more than he could bear.
Bucky's fingers dug in against his hairline as if he could force the feelings back inside his skull, and he pressed the heels of his hands over his mouth, trying and failing to stifle another sob. Steve was kissing all over his shoulder, the back of his neck, his ear, murmuring low, soothing nonsense. Bucky just shook harder, feeling still more like he was drowning—Steve could crowd him more than any mob, could push in on him harder than any hundred people.
When he couldn't bear it anymore he broke out of Steve's hold and bolted from the room.

The need to escape drove him like a physical urge, like he would break apart if he couldn't get to a refuge fast enough. He grabbed the headphones from his room, where he already knew that there was no open space under the bed, and bolted to the room where he'd gone under the off-switch.

There was no surveillance there. No one could see him. Bucky pushed past Steve, standing bewildered in the hallway, and slammed the door in his face before he threw himself under the steel frame of the bed. He curled on his side, switched on the familiar music, and lay there shaking until sleep smoothed everything into blankness.

When he woke up under the bed in the wrong room it was Monday: breakfast with Steve. PT. Shower. Rec time. Padfield and trigger reduction in the afternoon.

He remembered the day before, the way he'd swung from feeling nothing to feeling too much, but the whole thing was blunted now. It felt like a nightmare, something coming back from far away. He could shake it off. He could get on with his day.

He opened the door, and Steve was lying on the floor in the hallway, exactly on the spot where he'd been standing last night. He'd followed Bucky out to the hall when Bucky bolted from his bed, and Bucky had brushed past him going from his bedroom to this room. Steve hadn't budged all night.

All the things he'd felt last night in Steve's bed rushed in on him again, a pain in the center of his chest. When he thought, *You deserve better than this, pal,* it felt like an old thought, bitterly familiar and worn nearly smooth with repetition. *You deserve better than me.*

But also familiar was the guilty relief of knowing that Steve loved him, and that Steve was exactly this loyal. He wanted Bucky, and Bucky had always wanted Steve to have what he wanted.

He lay down on the floor facing Steve, his head cushioned on his right arm. With his left hand--steady for delicate work, and in no danger of feeling too much, no matter what Stark said about it feeling more than it should--he traced one fingertip down the line of Steve's jaw, rubbed Steve's lower lip with his thumb.

Steve smiled with his eyes closed, making a throaty welcoming noise. Bucky ached for the ability to follow the touch with a kiss and the kiss with a slow easy grind of his body against Steve's. How many times had he woken Steve up like that? Before he could resolve to try it anyway--he could make Steve enjoy waking up, even if he couldn't himself--Steve's eyes were blinking open, and his hazy cheerfulness was hardening into concern.

"Sorry," Bucky said, withdrawing his hand. "I didn't think about you waiting out here for me all night."

Steve shook his head. "I know. Sleeping in a bed's still hard for me some nights. I couldn't have slept any better anywhere else, and I didn't want you to just show up at breakfast and pretend nothing happened."

Bucky winced. "I know. I'll talk to Padfield about it."

"Buck," Steve sighed. "It's--I'm glad you've got doctors, I'm glad they're helping you. But you know you can talk to me about it, too, right? You don't... I'm not dropping in for three hours a week anymore. I'm here. I'm on your team now."

Bucky could make a joke about the Avengers, but he knew better than that. He looked down at the
carpet, rubbing his thumb against that instead of Steve. "I just... it was like a switch flipped when I was in the middle of all those people yelling at me. I couldn't feel anything at all. And then in your bed, when you were being sweet to me, it just--it all came back right then. It was too much."

Steve flinched the way he never did from actual pain. "Hell. I didn't..."

Bucky shook his head. "Took my reintegration team months, you did it with one hug. You're a pro, Rogers."

Steve snorted and shook his head a little, but he set his hand down beside Bucky's, hooking one finger over his.

"You were upset," Bucky remembered, thinking back over it. It was obvious--should have been obvious even then, but he'd been too taken up with feeling nothing to think about what anyone else felt. "You--it bothered you, didn't it?"

"Yeah, it did," Steve said simply. "That crowd, you going away after--all of that bothered me. I'd rather deal with a hundred crowds than watch you disappear like that again."

Bucky dropped his gaze to the plush carpet, and Steve's hand came up to settle on his cheek. "And I'd rather watch you go away in your head a hundred times than not see you at all, okay? If I can help--I'll help. Anytime you want. Anything I can do, Bucky. And even if I can't help, I'm here."

"I'm here too," Bucky said, because there wasn't anything else to say. He scooted in and kissed Steve before he could look too long into Steve's eyes. "Come on. Breakfast."

Chapter End Notes

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Bucky sat next to Steve instead of across from him for breakfast. It made Steve smile, bumping his shoulder against Bucky's. Bucky aimed his face down at his bowl of cereal and didn't think too hard about the fact that this made it easier not to meet Steve's eyes.

"You and Sam do anything other than drink yesterday?" Bucky asked. It felt like old times, like Steve was visiting and Bucky was asking for the inevitably edited version of what Steve had been up to lately. "You didn't try to cook, did you?"

Steve snorted. "He offered to make cookies to cheer me up, but I was pretty sure I wanted whiskey. He made me go shopping for it with him--did you know that there's about two hundred flavors of vodka these days? He made me hold eight different bottles of the silliest flavors we could find--toasted marshmallow, and Mountain Dew, and Froot Loops, and bubblegum and I don't know what else--and he took a picture and sent it to Natasha and Tony. We wound up standing in the aisle listening to Natasha yelling at us from Sam's phone while Tony yelled at us from mine for about ten minutes."

Bucky smiled, imagining it. He wished he could have seen it--except if it had been him, they would have been surrounded by a furious crowd before Bucky got a chance to ask Natasha if Mountain Dew vodka was authentically Russian. "Nobody took your picture? Yelled at you about burning in hell with your--"

"Hey," Steve said sharply, stabbing his spoon down with weird vehemence. "Don't."

Bucky didn't say anything, although the words rang in his ears a little. The words themselves weren't so bad--he was pretty sure he and Steve and the Howlies had all called each other worse than any of the names anyone had yelled yesterday, though always with an undercurrent of team that made it all right. But there was the opposite undercurrent in the screaming voices outside the church. Enemies.

And worse, enemies everywhere. He had enemies who looked like friends, enemies who weren't legitimate targets because they were Americans, civilians, women and children, and yet they hated him more than the people who tortured him ever had. He remembered Rumlow's hands again, Rumlow's mercy, the way Rumlow had never called him worse than soldier. But that was rape and cruelty, and the people yelling vile names at him were civilians. To be protected.

"We were in Jersey," Steve added, and Bucky had to backtrack for a few seconds to work out what Steve was talking about. "And I was... slightly disguised."

"Slightly?" Bucky looked over at Steve, letting himself be drawn. "Fake glasses but no mustache?"

Steve blushed a little but said, "Definitely no mustache."

Bucky drew him out to tell the story, as well as describing his other few adventures going incognito. They got through breakfast safely, and Bucky had only just finished drying the dishes Steve washed when his phone beeped in his pocket. Bucky pulled it out and saw a message from Padfield: I'd like to talk to you this morning. Can I call now, or would you like me to come there in person?
Bucky glanced over at Steve, but Steve was already looking away, drying his hands. Bucky headed to the library as he tapped out, *Call now.*

Padfield took him at his word. The phone rang almost before Bucky had the door closed behind him.

"Hi," Bucky said, braced for a scolding about pushing himself too hard the day before.

"Bucky," Padfield said, sounding grimly amused. "I saw you on the news this morning. And last night."

Bucky winced, although this didn't sound like scolding. Padfield was still taking the soft and gentle approach, apparently. "Yeah. I, uh, I guess I should tell you about that."

"Yeah, that's something we should probably discuss," Padfield agreed. "I figured I'd be calling you this morning to see how you were doing after your trigger reduction session on Friday, but that's probably been eclipsed at this point."

Bucky nodded. "Trigger reduction was fine. I'm okay now. I'm good to go again today."

"Mm," Padfield said. "That's actually why I wanted to talk to you before this afternoon. I'm advising a different approach on getting you past this trigger phrase. I don't think you should do any more sessions under the trigger phrase until you've learned some skills that could help you break out from inside it. I talked to Woj, and we discussed some of the lucid dreaming stuff you did for the triggers that affected your state of consciousness instead of your body. That helped you figure out when you were in a dream, so that you could stop being in the dream, right?"

Bucky was stuck somewhere back on *no more sessions under the trigger phrase,* but he knew what answer he was supposed to give. "Yeah. That helped."

"Right," Padfield said, like that settled something. "So this trigger affects your ability to control your body, so we want to give you better tools to exert control over your body--I want you to work with a therapist on biofeedback, which involves learning to consciously affect the autonomic systems in your body--your heart rate, that kind of thing. When you can do that, I think it will give you a key to get back control of the rest of your body even when you're switched off."

"Oh," Bucky said. He felt almost switched off now, unable to argue or resist. Padfield was the doctor, and if Padfield refused to have him put under--Padfield would tell Dr. Hernandez, they would tell Steve, and that was it. Bucky couldn't do trigger reduction anymore.

Not that Bucky wanted to do trigger reduction, exactly. He knew what was down there waiting for him in the dark. But then again, he knew what was down there, what he could feel down there, that he couldn't feel anywhere else.

"I... I usually do better, that time was--"

"You did fine," Padfield said gently.

He didn't know what Bucky had been thinking, the way he'd gone looking for the memories while he was under, or the things he'd been thinking later that night, in Steve's bed.

He wasn't cutting Bucky off on purpose to keep him from any of that, but the thought of stopping trigger reduction made him suddenly aware of how it had seemed like a certainty, something that *had* to be on his schedule--which meant he could always choose to feel what was down there, if it was worth the terror and the pain.
"I'm sure you could have done better, but it was fine. Learning to stay calm under the trigger is only useful if we're accepting that the trigger phrase is going to be part of your life. This is about getting rid of the trigger phrase. You told me that's what you need to do, right? You need to be able to beat it."

"Yeah." Bucky couldn't say that he wanted to go back there. He didn't. Of course he didn't. How could he want that? It couldn't actually be worth it, and anyway that wasn't what trigger reductions was for. He wanted--he needed to beat the off-switch. He had to get it out of his life. He had to earn that last candle on a celebratory cake.

"Okay," Dr. Padfield said. "Then we're going to have you work on biofeedback, during the time when you would have gone under the off-switch today, all right? Do you want to choose someone to work with, or--"

"Anybody's fine," Bucky said. He would take whoever Padfield recommended anyway. There had to be something on the schedule, something to move him forward, and the sooner he did this biofeedback thing, the sooner he would be back to trigger reduction. "It's--I'll put it on the schedule."

"Bucky," Padfield said gently. "I know this is a big change from what you were expecting. We can talk about this today, you don't have to start biofeedback right away--"

"No," Bucky said tightly, reaching for a sheet of paper to start drawing a new schedule. Schedules changed sometimes. He could handle this. "I can. It's fine. I'll see you this afternoon."

"Okay," Padfield said. "You still feel like you're doing okay?"

Bucky gritted his teeth. "Yes. But I have to go to PT now."

"Okay," Padfield repeated. "I won't keep you, then. I'll see you at three."

"Goodbye," Bucky said, and wished he could do something more physically satisfying to end the call than jabbing his softer thumb against the little red circle on the screen.

He stood there for a moment, thinking of going out and telling Steve he was off the hook and they wouldn't be doing the off-switch again. He thought about not having to do that anymore--no more trips down into the dark, no more feeling the things he felt when he was remembering.

Bucky picked up his phone again and scrolled through the list of contacts to Woj's number.

"Barnes," Woj said. "Watch this, I'm psychic: you just talked to Padfield about changing your treatment plan."

Bucky let out a frustrated little growl. "He said he talked to you."

"Yeah, he did," Woj said. "But I kind of thought you were going to wind up wanting to hear it from me."

"He can't--he doesn't know," Bucky said, letting the wound-up tension he could feel all over his body leak into his voice, where it sounded almost like anger. "He's met me once and he thinks he knows what to do, he's changing everything."

"Well," Woj said. "Yeah. That's kind of the idea, honestly. Even if you'd stayed at MEDCOM, it was probably about time for me to quit being in charge of your therapy."

"What?" Bucky was totally derailed from his own frustration with Padfield, honestly baffled by the
idea. Woj was his doctor. Who else could be in charge?

"Look." Woj sighed. "Normally there's this very firm line drawn between a therapist and a patient. On either side, you're supposed to avoid getting attached. Patients naturally do to some extent—a therapist is this person they tell all their problems to, who helps them deal with a lot of really private things. But the therapist is supposed to stay detached, and I gotta tell you, Barnes, that went to hell a long time ago. I know you better than is normal for a working relationship like ours. It was unavoidable in the reintegration situation, and it was important for you to be working with people you trusted. But it wasn't really supporting the best care you could possibly be getting, in the long run."

"That's bullshit," Bucky insisted, going over to throw himself down in the chair where Padfield had sat the first time they met. "Woj, you were the best, of course it was the best care. I'm so much better, I--you were the greatest."

Woj snorted. "I'm the guy who was available and willing, Barnes. I didn't have special qualifications for this--no one has qualifications to deal with everything you've been through. I did my best for you, and I'm glad you feel like I did a good job. You really did make a lot of progress, obviously.

"But I met you when you were doing a lot worse--that was always the image of you I was holding in my head. Between that and your first time under the off-switch, I had a lot of my own feelings going into treating you. Padfield's objective, and he's looking at you exactly the way you are now and taking a fresh bead on how to go from here."

"He doesn't know me," Bucky insisted, because he couldn't say, He won't let me go back there, I need to go back there.

He didn't want to. Of course he didn't. But...

"He's the guy on the spot, Barnes," Woj said firmly. "Look, if somebody sent you on a mission, and they told you what your target was, you'd listen, right? But if they also told you in advance based on some forecast how to compensate for windspeed, weather, atmospheric conditions, that'd be bullshit. Right? You're the guy on the spot. You have to make your own judgments based on the conditions you find."

Bucky glared harder at nothing.

"You have to trust him to do his job," Woj said gently. "Or if you can't, you need to choose a new therapist. But I can't keep treating you. I can be your friend if you want, you can keep in touch with me, we can talk things over sometimes. But I can't be your doctor anymore. I can't make treatment decisions for you. Understood?"

"Understood," Bucky muttered grudgingly. Another time he would have been warmed by the idea of adding Woj to his little stock of friends, but right now all he could hear was no more off-switch.

Not that kind of off-switch, anyway.

"I have to go," Bucky muttered, feeling twice as obvious as he had escaping the phone call with Padfield. "I have PT."

"Sure," Woj said easily. "Call me any time, okay? Let me know how things are going with Padfield. If his way really doesn't work for you, I can help you find someone else."

"Sure," Bucky parroted. "But I have to go."
PT helped. Bucky ran on the treadmill, staring out at the sky, and reordered the schedule in his head. Padfield, and biofeedback. Tony hadn't scheduled another arm session, so Bucky would go and ask him about that. Among other things.

If he wasn't going to go down into the dark under the off-switch, well. He could still find his way there on his own; all of that stuff was in his own head, after all.

He would have had to find another way anyhow, sooner or later. It wasn't like he could do anything under the off-switch; the things he felt when his memories dragged him down weren't enough to get anywhere.

It was like Padfield had said, really. He needed to be able to take control of his body, didn't he? His dick not working wasn't the same as the results of his trigger phrases, but it was something HYDRA had programmed into him all the same. If he wanted to fix that—if he wanted to be able to be with Steve like before, if he wanted to get off ever again—he had to take charge of the situation.

The off-switch—the one in his head—wouldn't let him do that, but maybe... maybe he could get hold of something that would help carry him down. Not under Padfield's supervision, not with Steve sitting at his bedside; this would be his own set of private schedule boxes. His own course of treatment, which no one else would control.

Bucky was the man on the ground, after all. He had to make his own calls. No one else could really know the conditions.

It would be better this way. Steve wouldn't have to see any of the awful parts. Steve wouldn't have to know about any of it until after it worked.

Bucky smiled as he ran, imagining Steve's reaction. That would be a hell of a lot better than candles on a cupcake. That was something worth aiming for, for sure.

Bucky waited until after lunch to head down, as if casually, to Tony's lab. Steve had gone off to make some sort of apology visit to Sam, so Bucky didn't have to maneuver around him.

Tony glanced up from the glowing projection in front of him when Bucky walked into the lab, but merely grunted and went on with what he was doing. It looked like nothing to do with Bucky's arm; he was working on his armor this time.

Bucky perched on a stool and watched with some interest. When Butterfingers brought him a bag of nuts, he politely ate a few, feeling like he was front row at a magic show.

For a second the world wavered around him, the Stark Expo rising up as ghostly as Tony's hologram, but then it was just him and Tony sitting in the workshop again. Bucky ate a few more nuts, focusing on the weird, peppery seasoning on them that tasted nothing like 1943.

"Okay, what," Tony demanded twenty minutes later, when he'd come to the end of the virtual tinkering he was doing and, apparently, his patience for Bucky sitting quietly and watching.

"You're not scheduled for more scans yet, I've only just begun to understand what's going on in your arm, and in case you haven't noticed, I have a few other projects."

"I want to ask a favor," Bucky said. "In exchange for letting you study my arm."

"You probably should have done that up front, did no one ever teach you to negotiate?" Tony demanded. He looked interested, though.
"You have the data from the off-switch," Bucky said, staying his course without letting Tony draw him off. "Could you use that to make something that just switches off my arm?"

Tony's expression went very guarded, and Bucky snorted. "Okay, yeah. So since you've already figured out how to make something that switches off my arm, could you make me a copy of it?"

Tony's look turned openly calculating. "Why would you want that?"

"If I tell you it's for sex will you stop asking questions?" As Bucky had figured it would, the unexpected angle of attack stopped Tony short, his face screwing up in irritation for a second before it smoothed out.

"Try another one," Tony said shaking his head.

Bucky rolled his eyes. Not his fault if he put the truth right out there in the middle of the room and Tony refused to see it.

"All right, not sex, but--look if you couldn't take your armor off, if you had to take it to bed with you, wouldn't you want to be able to switch it off before Ms. Potts--"

Bucky stopped short himself at the expression of startled horror on Tony's face. It only showed for a second; Tony turned away, fiddling with things.

"First of all," Tony said. "Never invoke Pepper in an argument you're having with me. Ever. It won't get you what you want, and just--don't. Especially if you're talking about her safety."

"Sure," Bucky said. He'd touched a sore spot, that much was obvious. "Sorry."

Tony shrugged. "Second, give me a few hours to fabricate. I'll definitely have it done for you before bedtime, even bedtime for ninety-eight-year-olds. Come back in four hours, we'll make sure it's only turning off the stuff it's supposed to turn off and not, I don't know. Anything else."

"Sure," Bucky repeated, and did not point out that Tony had in fact just demonstrated that invoking Pepper in an argument did work. It was disconcerting enough that Bucky wasn't going to try it again anyway. Not unless he really needed it.

"Thanks," he added on his way out, not looking back to check whether Tony had some response to that. He took the elevator straight down to the gun range.

For a moment, when he was sitting in a chair in Tony's lab and Tony was standing over him, watching him put the little device in place on his left shoulder, Bucky remembered Dr. Kwan and wondered if he was putting Tony in danger.

Would he panic? Would he try to fight back?

Then Tony, maybe thinking the same thing, maybe just catching a glimpse of something on him, took a step back--that much closer to the flash of red Bucky could see reflected in a few gleaming surfaces, an Iron Man suit waiting to be stepped into, half-hidden behind a lab bench.

So that was all right; he couldn't hurt anyone.

Tony made a flourishing gesture. "Okay, go ahead and try it."

Bucky looked up at him, and over at Butterfingers, standing by to help brace his arm if he lost his balance. He tapped the little button.
His arm went dead, and heavy, and Bucky's head tipped back onto the back of the chair, his lips parting automatically, ready to let the techs get to work. Everything hurt less if you just didn't fight.

"Uh, Barnes? You... all right there? Shit, was that thing powering your frontal lobes or something?"

Tony stepped in closer, peering down into his eyes with a frown, snapping his fingers next to Bucky's ear, and that was enough to jerk him into the present. No technician was ever displeased at him being too still and quiet.

Bucky widened his eyes, shaking his head as he forced it upright against the drag of memory, as well as the weight of his arm. He worked his jaw like he was shaking something off, blinking a few times; Tony stepped back, his posture easing, as Bucky showed the proper signs of life.

"That... feels really weird," Bucky said, making himself look down at his arm, to remember where he was, who he was supposed to be here. "Might, uh, might take some getting used to. Fuck, that's heavy, too."

He made himself look at Tony, who, yes, had already pulled up some scans and readouts. "You need to poke at anything else?"

"No," Tony said. "Your heartrate actually did drop a little, there, that's... reduced strain, somehow? The neurological load..." Tony fell silent, tapping rapidly through different graphs and charts, then refocused through the floating lights at Bucky, still sitting in the chair, restrained by nothing but the weight of his arm, but still waiting for something, though he didn't exactly know what.

"No, no, it's doing what it's supposed to, isn't it?" Tony flapped a hand, looking away again, and Bucky still wasn't moving, still waiting for something. "You can turn it off. Or turn your arm back on, whatever. You can go."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
In bed that night, Steve lay scrupulously on his own side. It took Bucky a minute to realize that Steve was being careful, trying not to set something off like he had the night before.

Bucky scooted over and settled down, lying on his back with Steve curled facing him, his chin at Bucky's shoulder, his knees pressed against Bucky's thigh. When Steve didn't move, Bucky reached down and hooked his fingers behind Steve's knee, pulling his thigh across Bucky's.

Steve finally took the hint, resting his arm over Bucky's chest, settling his cheek on Bucky's shoulder. He didn't seem to mind that it was the metal one at all, even when the arm rippled through a recalibration that had to brush against his skin.

"This is okay?" Steve asked after a couple of breaths.

"Just right," Bucky assured him, running the fingers of his right hand through Steve's hair. He knew that Steve could feel something like a lie in that. There was a tension running through Bucky's body that would betray that he was a long way from sleeping, but Steve didn't need to know why. Bucky was pretty sure he wouldn't guess the truth.

Steve sighed and turned his head to drop a kiss--not starting anything, just a touch Bucky could barely feel--on the top of his shoulder.

"Today was okay?" Steve asked.

They'd hardly seen each other since breakfast. When Bucky saw the relief in Steve's eyes after he told him trigger reduction was off, he'd lost the nerve to explain anything else. He felt sure somehow that if he told Steve about his session with Padfield, and his fruitless session staring at a monitor and trying to make the numbers go down by lowering his heart rate, he would go right on into telling him everything else, too.

Steve didn't need to know that. He didn't need to see these things. He definitely didn't need to know about that moment in Tony's lab, or not any of it that wasn't the side Tony could tell him. Just seeing Bucky under the off-switch had hurt him, and he hadn't even known what Bucky was remembering.

"Today was good," Bucky assured him, dropping a kiss of his own on top of Steve's head. "And, hey, Padfield says that the thing that happened at church was a reaction to feeling threatened, so I guess we know what I'll do in combat. I'll just get calm."

Steve flinched like that wasn't good news--or like he didn't want Bucky in combat. Bucky stopped
running his fingers through Steve's hair.

Steve pushed up to look down at him, and Bucky met his eyes. It was only when Steve's expression hardened that Bucky realized he was scowling himself.

"Not yet," Steve said. "Bucky--soon, maybe, but not yet."

"Because I was too calm?" Bucky demanded. How was he supposed to fix that? Did Steve want him to be frightened in a fight? Distracted by irrelevant concerns? How was he supposed to train up to that?

"That's not--just not yet," Steve repeated. "Not while we can spare you. If it were the Chitauri again I'd be telling you to load that whole locker into your pack," Bucky didn't flinch at the mention of it, didn't let Steve see him thinking of what he'd already brought out of the lockers, "and join up. But we aren't facing anything like that right now. We have the luxury of giving you a little more time--maybe just another week or two, Bucky. Just give yourself some time."

Padfield had said that. Give it time. Be patient with yourself. But at least Padfield told him what the goal was that he was supposed to be patient about reaching.

The biofeedback therapist, Jennifer, sitting there watching him watch the monitor while nothing happened, she'd said the same thing. It's all right, it's your first try. Take it easy. Take your time.

But he'd lost so much time already. He'd waited so long--decades--not even knowing he was waiting, and now Steve was telling him to wait without telling him what the hell to wait for.

But there was a note in his voice that said Steve was ready to dig his heels in on this--and anyway, Bucky had his own plan for proving to Steve that he was better. Steve wouldn't tell Bucky he had to be exactly like his old self before Steve would put him on the team, but if Bucky could take him to bed and sweeten him up the old way, it couldn't help but be an argument in his favor.

And Steve didn't need to know anything about that, not until Bucky was ready to show him the results.

Bucky made himself roll his eyes, shaped his mouth into a sour little smile. It wouldn't do to give in so easily that Steve realized there was something else behind it. "Yes, sir, Cap, sir."

Like clockwork, Steve leaned in to kiss his mouth out of that tense curve. Bucky's hand was still in his hair, and he tightened his grip when Steve's lips touched his, shoving his tongue into Steve's mouth and turning the kiss hot and hungry.

Steve gave as good as he got, shifting his weight fully onto Bucky, straddling him and pushing hard into the kiss, his tongue fucking its way into Bucky's mouth. It was too familiar to imagine it being anything but what it was: the punctuation to an argument he and Steve weren't even bothering to have out loud.

Steve didn't take the obvious next step, though. He didn't start grinding into him or groping. Bucky kept his left arm at his side, his right hand in Steve's hair, and the roughness of the kisses petered out into a drowsy truce. Bucky's lips felt hot and half raw by the time Steve picked his head up again.

"Okay?" Steve asked.

Bucky rolled his eyes again but nodded. It felt less like an act now that he knew he was right. Steve would've pushed it through if Bucky could have given as good as he got; he was going easy because Bucky couldn't fuck him back, and Bucky already had a plan to solve that.
"Just give me some time," Steve said, and his voice was steady, but Bucky could hear the need under it. "Just--just a little longer."

"Oh," Bucky said, without meaning to, and he understood abruptly that it wasn't only Bucky who Steve was going easy on. Steve was asking for another week or two before he had to risk Bucky again, not a week or two before he'd believe Bucky was ready to run those risks.

"Stevie," Bucky said softly, and Steve settled down half on top of him again, pressing another kiss to his shoulder.

"I just got you back," Steve said softly. "Just--can you just stay a little while?"

"Yeah," Bucky said, skritching his fingers through Steve's hair again, thinking that he'd been even more right than he knew. Steve wasn't ready to see him hurt, or even to know it was happening, but that was all right. Bucky could protect him from that. "Yeah, I'll stay. I'll stay until you're sleeping, okay?"

Steve's arm across his chest tightened, but Steve's voice stayed low and sleepy. "Yeah, okay."

Bucky half expected Steve to stay awake on purpose to keep him there. He wouldn't even have resented it, really, even though the need to get on with the plan was like an itch under his skin now that it was so clear ahead of him.

Steve needed him. Bucky could never begrudge that.

But Steve fell asleep quickly, his breath going slow and shallow. His body was a limp weight against Bucky's side. Bucky counted out seconds--another minute, just to be sure, and then one more--but it was time now. It was time to try. The secret schedule box was awaiting him.

Bucky slipped out from under Steve and kissed him one last time, soft and sweet. He moved soundlessly out of the room and down past his own bedroom to the room where they'd done Trigger Reduction.

It was the one room where he was absolutely sure JARVIS couldn't see or hear him.

He'd left the off-switch Tony had made for his arm in his pocket--no harm if he'd gotten caught with a piece of tech Tony made for him. That wouldn't even stay secret past the first time it occurred to Tony to ask Steve how well it was working, but Tony had seen enough of his reaction that it wouldn't be hard to explain away. He could say he wasn't comfortable with it yet, not ready to sleep with his arm switched off.

_I just need some time_, he might say to Steve. Steve wouldn't argue with that.

Now Bucky pulled it out of his pocket and snapped it into place against his arm, but he didn't turn it on just yet. First he brought out the supplies he'd brought up from the open locker down on the gun range and stowed on the closet shelf in here: a fistful of zip tie restraints and a stun baton. He had other things stashed away in his own room, but these seemed like the easiest place to start.

He studied the objects lying on the bed, and then he flipped a corner of the blanket over them and went to his bedroom to rummage through the bedside table for the bottle of lube he'd seen there when he was putting his things away. He didn't know if that was standard in every bedroom in the Tower, or if Steve had optimistically stocked both bedrooms with supplies, but there it was.

It wasn't the same stuff they used to squirt into his hand when they let him--made him?--jerk off in the chair after repairs or a wipe, but it would do.
He hadn't asked Woj whether those times counted as rape. No one had really touched him, exactly. Just unzipped him and slicked his hand and put it where it should go. He'd been the only one to touch his dick.

But he couldn't exactly ask Steve to help him out with just the being-restrained-and-electrocuted-until-half-conscious parts, especially not when Steve couldn't even bear to risk putting him in the field, so he'd have to improvise.

As he went back into the Trigger Reduction room and locked the door behind him, he remembered the talk he'd had with Padfield that afternoon.

*It's actually what other people call a trigger,* Padfield said. *Lots of people who've been through a trauma have triggers. Something that reminds them of when they were in danger. It takes them right back there again. Sometimes it's just one element—a sound, a smell, a touch, an object.*

For Bucky, apparently, being surrounded by a lot of people who wanted to kill him was a trigger that took him back to being the soldier, cold and calm. But he would bet he could find something else to take him back to a different part of his past. Something he could do all by himself. If he could just go back to the right moment, the right feeling—just enough to get off, to get some relief, to start teaching his brain and his dick that it could happen again...

Bucky flipped the blanket back to reveal his little set of supplies. He set the bottle of lube down next to the stun baton and considered his options. The bed was sturdy, and he could use it to restrain himself at least a little, but it was more comfortable than he wanted if he was trying to get back there. He needed hard edges, hard surfaces, and preferably something less conductive than that steel frame.

The chair and table in the room weren't nearly sturdy enough, and everything else in the room was a smooth surface—blank walls, wood floor. Ceramic tile in the bathroom. Easy to clean up, and the best he was going to get for hard edges.

Bucky stripped down to skin, just like when he was coming off the ice, or when he was being cleaned or examined for some reason. He closed his eyes and remembered shower rooms, examining rooms. Rooms with fluorescent lights and steel fixtures and tiled floors sloping down to drains. There had been a lot of those, he thought.

He remembered the smell, suddenly. The exact smell of the shower room where Rumlow had taken him that morning, the feel of that space around him. He remembered what it felt like to be what he'd been then, knowing only the mission and his orders.

He closed his eyes and picked up the stun baton and zip ties and lube, and went to sit on the floor in the bathroom, kicking away a little rug to sit on bare chilly tile. The bathroom was so big he could stretch his legs out without hitting anything, and the lights were bright in here when he turned them all on, though they didn't have the harsh edge of fluorescents.

He hadn't had anything against his back that time. Rumlow had stood him in the middle of the room, told him to hold his right wrist with his left and then told him to lock the arm in place.

He'd done it. He'd just done it, without even thinking about what it meant.

Bucky reached over and tapped the off-switch, and his left arm went dead, the weight of it dragging at him. Bucky leaned over to let his left arm rest on the floor. He wrapped a zip tie around that wrist, and fed another one through to attach his left ankle to it.

He could break the zip tie even without reaching over and turning his arm back on, but it gave him
the feeling of being trapped, and the weight of his dead left arm made his left leg swing out, leaving
him open and exposed.

Rumlow had undone the soldier's belt, let his heavy combat trousers drop around his ankles. Nudged
his feet apart until they were spread as wide as his pants would allow.

Bucky pressed his right ankle to the wall and picked up the stun baton, hitting the button to charge it.
The whine of it made him shiver, made something skitter down his spine, fear or excitement or both.
He felt every naked inch of his skin, anticipating the touch of the stun baton.

He was going to be able to feel this.

He braced his right wrist on his right knee. He didn't open his eyes. He knew the angles, and not-
seeing added a little frisson of fear. He could miscalculate, he could--

He tapped the baton against the inside of his left thigh, and a little startled gasp was wrenched out of
him as the pain arced through his body, a white-hot snap that made his head jerk back, pressing the
nape of his neck over the cool edge of the bathtub.

His whole body hummed with potential as the pain faded, awake and alive. He tilted the stun baton
so it was clear of his body and let his right hand slide down his thigh to his crotch, rubbing at his
cock with the heel of his hand, and he whimpered at how good it felt. He could feel it now, with the
pain still echoing. His dick twitched under his hand, and the stun baton was still humming.

He raised his hand and swung the baton down, a harder impact, higher on his thigh. His leg went
into spasm, his hand tightening hard on the baton before he could pull it away. For a second he could
only feel the pain, and then he brought his hand back to his cock, holding on to the baton with thumb
and two fingers while he curled the other two around the head of his cock and sobbed. Pleasure was
more shocking than pain now. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like, how real it could be.

He shivered with it, whimpering a little for the touch of his own fingers. He wasn't hard, but he could
feel the blood plumping up his dick, making it possible, making everything sensitive and eager.

He knew how to get the rest of the way. He dragged his hand off his dick and opened his eyes just
enough to see dim shapes through his eyelids as he reversed his grip on the stun baton and tapped it
against the center of his bare, unprotected belly.

His whole body seized up under it this time, the pain flooding through him. He lost his grip on the
stun baton--it dealt a glancing aftershock blow to his dick as it fell, a brighter echo in the wash of
pain. His hand was shaking, his whole body felt full of sparks, and he closed his unsteady grip on his
dick and felt every stroke, every growing swell of pleasure cutting through the pain. He could feel
tears on his face, heard his own breath coming in jagged, half-choked sobs, the white-hot pain still
gripping his body.

His dick was thickening in his hand, stiffening eagerly, and he was already tensing against the next
blow, awaiting the jolt of pain that would break him open further.

It didn't come.

For a moment he kept going, stealing one more touch, one more stroke, one more pulse of pleasure,
but after a moment he had to open his eyes and look for it.

Reality crashed in. The stun baton was lying on the floor, a few feet away where it had rolled when
he dropped it. He was alone in this unused bathroom in Steve's apartment, in Stark Tower, hidden
from JARVIS and perfectly safe. No one was going to hurt him. He would have to pick up the stun
baton and do it himself if he wanted to be hurt.

He didn't want to be hurt. He told himself to take his hand off his dick and pick it up, told himself to extend his free foot and tug it closer, but he didn't move, and didn't move, unless he counted the shivers running through him. If he picked that thing up again—if he used it again—it would hurt. It would hurt and he didn't want to hurt and suddenly he'd lost his momentum, and he didn't know if he could do it. He was the goddamn Winter Soldier, but he couldn't make himself pick up that weapon, couldn't steel himself to take more pain.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to make the memory be enough, trying to feel it just a little more—but the pleasure was fading even faster than the pain, and the bitter certainty poured out over everything.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't hurt himself the way they'd hurt him, not enough. He couldn't get off just remembering what they'd done, he couldn't get off any other way, and like hell was he going to turn himself over to anyone who would hurt him.

Bucky felt sick, and coldly clear-headed. He realized that he'd snapped the zip tie anchoring his left ankle to his left wrist, and now he reached over and de-activated the off-switch with a sharp, frustrated movement. He grabbed the stun baton, darting his hand out fast, and powered it off. He gathered up the spilled zip ties and the unused bottle of lube.

He was an idiot. He'd been so stupid to think he could do this alone, on his own terms. He needed to be raped, and he'd kill someone before he let it happen again, so he just wasn't going to get off. He couldn't train himself to be better; he'd have to prove himself to Steve some other way. He'd have to just... get used to it. That was all there was to it.

Bucky bundled up his useless supplies in his clothes and carried it all back to his room, where he stuffed the whole bundle into the box at the back of the closet that held redundant DVDs.

On his knees there, naked and sore, among his shoes and hanging clothes, with his hands in that box that someone on his team had packed for him, Bucky was gripped with the need to go home to MEDCOM. It shook him like a fever, like a gale wind. He belonged there, locked up for everyone's safety, carefully supervised.

He just wanted to sit on a couch with Andrews and watch some movie, and let Andrews explain to him what it meant. He wanted not to know that he'd been raped, that he was broken beyond repair. He wanted to go back there where he had believed they would make him better.

He wanted to go home.

He thought he should go get his phone, call Andrews or Woj or just send them a message, see a few words from someone familiar. But it was the middle of the night and they were finished with him. They weren't his team anymore. His friends, maybe, but they weren't responsible for him and anyway he couldn't make himself move, couldn't go find his phone any more than he'd been able to make himself pick up the stun baton to use it on himself again.

After a long time he crept closer instead, curling around the box like it could be some comfort, his cheek against his discarded shirt, his hand resting on top of the DVD of Dr. No. He was being stupid, he knew. He was home now. If he wanted someone he only had to go get Steve. He should at least get his headphones, let one of his safe playlists lull him to sleep.

But he didn't move, and didn't move, and eventually he closed his eyes.
Chapter End Notes

Alby’s art for this story is here on Tumblr! (This chapter’s art coming soon!)

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Bucky woke up naked on the floor of his closet, half on top of three different pairs of shoes, with his head pressed against a cardboard box and a handful of DVDs cradled against his chest.

For a few seconds he didn't know why he was there—like a reflex, the thought that he must have gotten drunk last night flitted across his brain—and then he remembered that he couldn't.

And then he remembered what he'd done.

The memory of it squirmed in his stomach. It was embarrassing and disappointing, but the shame and despair were blunted by a night's distance as much as the pain and pleasure of it.

He straightened up, absently rubbing his neck and dropping the DVDs back into the box. He glanced at the bundle of clothes and... other things, and carefully laid the lid of the box down over it before he got up.

Last night hadn't worked, not entirely. But it hadn't missed the target completely either. He'd been able to feel it when he hurt himself enough; it had felt real, felt good like he'd almost forgotten he actually could. The potential had been there, so close he could taste it. It was only that he'd hurt himself so much with that last blow that he lost track of what he was doing, lost his momentum and spoiled the effect.

A little voice in his head that sounded disturbingly like a Stark said, *This is a design flaw. Get back to the drawing board.*

He was turning it over in his head all morning: while he ate breakfast with Steve, during PT and target practice, while exchanging text messages with Andrews and Duncan consisting solely of emoji, only half sure he had any idea what they were trying to communicate.

As an experiment he opened up a new text message, addressed it to Steve, Sam, and Natasha, and sent five emoji at random: cactus, comet, swimming guy, Christmas tree, turtle.

He got back five gold stars and a plain :) from Natasha immediately. A moment later Sam volleyed back with a more complicated message including pizza, a balloon, a fish on a fishing pole, and a fist.

Bucky was still trying to decipher it—and Andrews' latest message, which included the flags of Turkey, Switzerland, and Sweden and ended with a caterpillar—when Steve sent a monkey covering its eyes, the same monkey with its eyes uncovered, and then a full body shot of the monkey, followed by a palm tree, a sun, a snowboarding guy, a jack o' lantern, and a bumblebee.

That one he definitely understood: *monkey see, monkey do*, and an echo of Bucky's random first message. Steve was pointing out that Bucky had no idea what he was doing with the little pictures.

Bucky opened up a private message to Steve and sent him the party horn and pile of poop.

Steve sent back an hourglass by itself and in the next message to Bucky, ninety-eight birthday cakes.
Bucky counted them to be sure, and then sent back ninety-seven baby bottles.

*Yes I know I will always be younger than you.*, Steve texted back, and Bucky grinned. Steve had broken and used words first. Bucky was just considering which emoji to use to convey his triumph when his phone actually started ringing—Steve's number.

Bucky looked around. He was in the TV room, an episode of *CSI* paused while he fiddled with his phone. He hadn't wondered why Steve responded with emojis, but if he was calling instead of just coming to the door to tell Bucky he was an idiot... Bucky hadn't even known he wasn't in the apartment somewhere.

Bucky hit the green button. Steve's face appeared on the screen, looking grim and apologetic, and Bucky knew.

"I have to go," Steve said. "It's not--I want you to sit tight, Bucky, okay? Someone will let you know if you need to suit up, but I don't think it's going to come anywhere near that."

"You going to be on the news?" Bucky asked. He hadn't tried watching the news yet, but if it was going to be about Steve, if that was going to be how he could keep watch...

Steve shook his head a little, and Bucky couldn't tell if he was saying *no, we won't*, or *no, don't watch*. Before he could ask or argue, Steve said, "We're going to be in transit for at least an hour--JARVIS, patch Bucky in to the control room monitor views."

Bucky glanced at the TV, and the frozen view of a crime lab was replaced with Steve's face from a different angle—he was still in civvies, holding his shield in the hand that didn't hold the phone, but Bucky could see people moving around him, Natasha gearing up. Little boxes appeared on one side of the screen with vital signs for each of the Avengers as they checked in. Steve wasn't there. Steve wasn't suited up yet.

Steve had stopped to call him first.

Steve was going into danger without him, and Bucky felt a surge of anxious frustration at the same time another thought dropped into his head, clear and complete: *I can try again while he's gone.*

He'd keep watch during the actual mission, of course. But they'd be in transit for an hour, and that would mean at least another hour after it was over, after he knew that Steve was safe. That would be a window of time he could use without worrying about what he was missing, sealed in the room where he wasn't being monitored.

But first Steve had to get through this mission safely; there was no point thinking of anything else until the crisis was past. "I'll be here, watching."

Steve's smile was tense, but there was relief in his eyes and the line of his shoulders. "Won't be long till you're out here with us, Buck. I know you're not far off from being ready."

Bucky gave his own grim smile back, and didn't think too hard about how he planned on proving he was ready. He didn't want Steve noticing anything yet, not when he was going out on a mission.

"Stick with your team out there, okay?" Bucky said, glancing again at the readouts. Banner's name was up there now, which meant that whatever they were going into, there was at least a chance that this was going to get bad enough that unleashing the Hulk was better.

"Will do, Buck. I'll see you soon, all right?"
Bucky nodded. It might be up to him to storm some gates this time, to go to wherever Steve was if
Steve couldn't get home to him. But he would do it if Steve needed him, and nothing else would
keep Steve from coming home to him.

"I'll see you. Now go get suited up before you have to do this in your damn undershirt."

Steve glanced down at himself and grinned. "You remember what I was wearing the first time?"

Bucky grinned back. He hadn't noticed the tights under Steve's pants until well after Steve had gotten
him out of that factory, but it had been a pretty fucking memorable discovery. "Still rather you have
Kevlar covering that ass if you can. Stop stalling."

Steve nodded, his smile shrinking, and the screen went blank. He'd let Bucky have the last word.

Bucky looked up at the TV, just in time to see Steve turning away from whatever camera was
showing him. Bucky looked down, not wanting to watch him disappear again.

"JARVIS, could you, uh--could you put the TV back on part of the screen?"

"Of course," JARVIS said, and CSI reappeared, covering three-quarters of the screen while the
boxes of vital signs fit in around it. Steve's lit up as Bucky watched, and Bucky stared for a moment
at the little red flashing heart.

He caught himself trying to match his own pulse to it, but that just made him think of his sessions
with Jennifer and the numbers on the screen that wouldn't change--God, he'd have to sit through
another one of those sessions this afternoon, after--after everything.

After Steve was through his mission, and safe. Bucky turned the TV back on, for something to
distract his gaze, though he kept looking from one box to another while the episode rolled on.

The phone vibrated in his hand, and he reflexively said, "Steve?" out loud as he looked down.

It was another text message from Duncan, continuing his and Andrews' inscrutable exchange of
emoji. This one had the flag of Spain twice and then a cigarette.

"JARVIS," Bucky said, staring down at his phone. "What can I--can I tell them anything without
violating OpSec?"

"The fact that the Avengers are scrambling will not endanger operational security in this instance,"
JARVIS assured him.

He'd barely finished speaking before Bucky was tapping out a message.

Guys, Steve is on his way into something.

His thumbs hovered over the keyboard, wondering what else to say. He wasn't asking them to do
anything about it, and he didn't have anything else to tell them. He just needed someone to know
what was happening right now, and his team were the only ones he could tell.

He hit send, and raised his gaze to stare again at Steve's vital signs--all reflecting calm and good
health. Still in transit. Still safe so far.

His phone started vibrating frantically as messages came in.

Andrews' text was first, Are you alone? but Duncan's arrived nearly on top of it, Did everyone go?
Bucky glanced at the screen again. He could see Sam and Natasha and Barton all listed there, along with Steve and Tony and Bruce.

"JARVIS, is anybody still here?"

"There are thousands of people in the building, Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS said. "Regrettably, you are the only resident of the top eight floors still present. Ms. Potts is currently attending a meeting in Malaysia."

Just me, Bucky texted. He glanced at the TV and then added, I'm patched into their monitors.

Andrews had sent Fuck before Bucky finished the second message, and then, FUCK, you're watching?? and I can't talk, D can you?

No go, Duncan had texted. Trying to get Lee or Mueller.

No go, M's here, Lee's out with Rapid.

Bucky, is anything happening yet? Andrews asked.

In transit, Bucky typed back, a little thrown by the urgency of their responses.

You shouldn't be alone, Duncan texted him. Call someone. Is there anyone local?

That priest, Andrews added.

Bucky stared at the message, bemused, before realizing that Andrews and Duncan and everyone at MEDCOM would also have seen him on the fucking news on Sunday. Fr. Roche, who hadn't been able to make a quick getaway from his own church, had probably had to answer questions.

Can you call him? Isn't that what priests are for?

Heathen, Duncan replied, but a second later he added, Call him, Barnes. That actually kinda is what priests are for.

Bucky frowned at that. It wasn't what priests were for. You called for a priest when the situation was hopeless, when there was no use calling a doctor.

He glanced up at the TV screen again. On the other hand, there wasn't going to be a damn thing he could do for Steve but pray. Might as well have an expert on hand.

JARVIS put the call through so Bucky didn't have to stop looking down at the texts on his phone. The receptionist's voice, and then Fr. Roche's, were projected next to his ear just like he was holding the phone there. He didn't have to say much more to Fr. Roche than he'd had to say to Andrews and Duncan; he offered to come to the Tower before Bucky could work out how to ask.

"It might be nothing," Bucky said, glancing again at the screen, all those steady, unconcerned heartbeats in their little boxes. "It's probably not a big deal."

"Well, I've been wanting a chance to speak to you anyway," Father said. "I'm sure it won't be a wasted trip. I'm glad you called, Bucky. I'll see you soon."

"Thank you, Father," Bucky said, and the call ended. He sat still for a moment, staring at the TV, watching fictional crime-fighting still playing out alongside the view of the life signs of nearly all the people he knew in New York.
His phone buzzed with another message from Andrews. *Did you call?*

*Yeah, Bucky* typed back. *He's on his way.*

Like the sight of the words was a trigger phrase, Bucky felt a sudden compulsion. He stood up and then hesitated for a second, trying to work out the source of the urgency.

He remembered the smell of his parents' house, first, and then his mother bustling around, setting out food, telling Bucky to comb his hair, telling his sisters...

Bucky shook his head. He could remember the tone of her voice, but not what she'd told the girls to do. The tone was enough, though. Company was coming--important company, a priest.

"There should be cake," Bucky muttered, looking around. He ran a hand absently over his hair. It wouldn't need combing, at least, short as it was. "Coffee."

He went into the kitchen and started the coffee, rifling through cupboards until he found some cookies that seemed like more or less the right kind of thing, if there wasn't any cake. He placed them neatly, carefully on a plate, and then frowned down at them. There should be more, he should be doing more, they weren't the right kind at all, store-bought and dry and the wrong *shape*...

"If I may offer an observation," JARVIS said, and Bucky looked up toward the ceiling, even though there was nothing there to see.

"Modern manners call for a certain informality," JARVIS informed him. "Particularly in a case such as this, when the visit is not purely social, but a response to some distress on the part of the person visited."

Bucky nodded, frowning down at the cookies again. He adjusted the arrangement with a few delicate motions of his metal fingertips.

"If you take too much care with preparation for the visit," JARVIS added, "Fr. Roche may feel he has added to your distress by making you feel the effort was necessary."

Bucky nodded again and took the plate of cookies into the TV room. JARVIS had gotten rid of CSI, and the screen now showed two camera views.

His eyes went automatically to Steve talking to his team--half of them were out of the frame, but Bucky could see Steve pointing to locations on some kind of hologram map, laying out a strategy. He tried to make sense of the terrain, but it was nothing he recognized.

The other shot showed several trucks and police cars arrayed at rifle range from a cluster of buildings in a wooded area. No one was visible among the buildings, but there were a few figures behind the trucks, keeping the bulk of the vehicles between themselves and the buildings.

Standoff.

Steve and the others were coming in to break it up, which meant it was worse than it looked, but Bucky's fingers itched to solve it. Take sniper position there, or there, with a good parabolic mike or a long-range heat sensor, and he could pick off targets before they dared to pop their heads out. Walls might be reinforced; he might start with a few M203s to soften them up, maybe draw them out...

"Fr. Roche has just boarded the elevator," JARVIS announced.
Bucky's gaze darted to the other screen, where Steve was now standing talking quietly with Barton and Sam, smiling a little. He'd be joking with them, keeping them calm now that the business of planning was done and there was nothing left to do but wait for the right moment.

Bucky forced himself to turn away, going out to the front of the apartment. "JARVIS, you'll tell me when--when--"

"I will," JARVIS assured him.

The elevator doors opened, and Fr. Roche was standing there, all in black but for the square of white at his throat.

Bucky was still halfway across the room, but he stopped short and looked down at himself, barefoot in jeans and a t-shirt. He should have gotten dressed properly, but he knew that if he went to his bedroom for clothes, it would be his fatigues he reached for. Combat boots. Weapons.

Steve had insisted that he was cleared for weapons, after all. No one had particularly said he wasn't allowed to bring things up from the gun range, and no one had objected when he did. The stun baton and zip ties weren't the only things he'd brought upstairs.

Bucky shook off the thought and took a step forward. "Father, hi, thank you for coming. There's--coffee."

Fr. Roche smiled and stepped inside. "It smells wonderful, thank you. I'd love a cup."

Bucky nodded and turned back toward the kitchen, aware that Father was going easy on him but not at all inclined to tell him not to. He poured a cup of coffee for Father, mutely offering the sugar bowl and pointing toward the fridge.

Father shook his head and took a sip without adding anything at all. "It's very good. Are you going to have some?"

Bucky nodded and poured another cup, using his own usual mug. He had left Steve's alone. Steve would want it in the morning, for breakfast. In the morning Bucky would get up and Steve would be in the kitchen before him, eating breakfast. Tomorrow this would be over.

"I've been wanting to ask you," Father said, and Bucky's gaze shot up to meet his. "Were you all right on Sunday? I know it's not the entrance--or rather, the exit--you wanted to make."

Bucky's lips twitched toward a smile. "What happened to if nobody's mad at you you're not doing it right?"

Fr. Roche smiled back. "I didn't say you did anything wrong, Bucky. But an angry mob is a lot to deal with, first thing in the morning."

"Well, second," Bucky pointed out. "Mass was first."

Father nodded, and Bucky braced himself for the question to be repeated, wondering how he would explain how he'd been on Sunday.

But the next thing Father said was, "And how was Mass? Did you find what you were looking for?"

Bucky blinked. He hadn't been looking for anything, except something to fill the Sunday morning space in his schedule. He had found that, though. It had felt right, being there with Steve. It had been good, before the crowd. Before the trigger.
"Yeah," Bucky said. "Yeah, it felt like--felt right."

Father nodded. "Is it strange for you, hearing it in English?"

Bucky shrugged. "Had a few months of practice at that. We had Mass in English back at MEDCOM. Smaller congregation, though."

"Steve wasn't attending, for instance," Father remarked.

Bucky felt himself tense a little. But Fr. Roche had to know, everyone knew--

"You gave me communion," Bucky said.

"Well, you were next in line," Father said easily. "So yes, I did."

"And Steve was next after me," Bucky pointed out. "And you had to know I--we--I hadn't been to confession."

Father nodded. "Well, as I said, you were in line. It's not for me to deny you the sacrament. Did anything you did with Steve before Sunday violate your conscience?"

Bucky hesitated. But no, nothing he'd done had been bad. The things he'd thought, the things he'd wanted--but he hadn't done any of it. He hadn't let any of it touch Steve. He was keeping it all away from Steve. His conscience was clear on that; he was doing the right thing.

He shook his head.

"Well, then," Father said. "It can't have been a very serious sin, and for the small things we trust to the general absolution. So you--"

"Excuse me," JARVIS said, and Bucky didn't wait to hear what else he said, just bolted for the TV room.

A figure was standing alone between the trucks and the cabins, wearing Steve's uniform. It wasn't Steve, Bucky could see that at a glance, though the man--Banner? Maybe Barton, but he wouldn't be sure until he saw the man move--was holding Steve's shield, trying to be as square-shouldered and upright as Steve.

He heard Steve's voice--there was a camera angle showing Steve, somewhere dim, probably still inside the quinjet--asking someone to come outside peacefully now that he was here.

If they'd asked for Steve and Steve knew well enough not to go out to meet them, it had to be--

There was a bolt of blue fire, and Bucky saw it splash out as it hit the figure wearing Steve's uniform, saw something that looked awfully like disintegration--and then the Hulk was rising up out of the shreds of Steve's uniform, flinging the shield away and roaring toward the source of that blue blast.

Bucky stared, barely breathing. He could see the Hulk stomping toward the cabins, he could see Iron Man flying around and hear Steve's voice, but he could also smell the mud of the trench and Dugan's cigar. He could hear his team around him, and he could see the tanks coming up over the rise, flashing blue fire.

There was nothing he could do but pray for mercy, and there was no mercy here.

He was on his knees, still staring. His chest hurt. He was breathing fast but not getting any air, and he couldn't take his eyes away from those snaps of blue fire. Steve was out there now, deflecting
with his shield, and if he missed just once, just once--

He was aware of someone beside him, kneeling shoulder to shoulder with him, and a low voice, threading under the sounds of battle--Steve's voice, the tanks coming over the rise in the darkness, men screaming, his own rough breathing.

"Sancta Maria, Mater Dei," the other voice said, and Bucky's lips moved automatically with it. "Ora pro nobis peccatoribus nunc et in hora mortis."

Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

"Ave Maria," Fr. Roche began again, and Bucky dragged in a breath and joined him for the rest of the prayer, speaking the familiar words over and over.

His eyes never left Steve. Steve never missed with his shield, but the blue fire kept coming and coming. Bucky realized eventually that Steve was drawing fire, letting the others pick off the shooters, but he couldn't look away from Steve to try to get the tactical view any more than he could stop praying.

His lips were half-numb, moving on autopilot, when Steve stopped moving. He straightened up from his defensive crouch, lowering the shield slightly, and Bucky yelled, "No!"

Fr. Roche didn't stumble in his praying, but Bucky was knocked out of the rhythm of it and could only stare. Steve just stood there, though, and no one fired on him. It took nearly a minute for Bucky to take his eyes off Steve and register that it wasn't just an inexplicable lull: the fight was over.

Natasha was standing at Steve's side, entirely unprotected, and Tony had the faceplate of his suit open and was hovering at eye level with the Hulk, gesturing persuasively. Sam glided down from where he must have been flying overwatch, and gestured toward Natasha. She turned so that Bucky caught a glimpse of the torn sleeve of her suit.

Sam started to inspect it, Steve shifted his weight toward them, and Bucky screamed Steve's name at the top of his lungs.

He didn't even know what he'd seen until Steve lunged and brought the shield up, splashing blue fire away from himself, Sam and Natasha. No second bolt followed, and Bucky spotted the shooter standing in the wreckage of one of the cabins--just a kid, maybe twelve years old, holding a gun that had to weigh half of what he did.

Bucky's hands twitched around the rifle he wasn't holding even as his lips tried to form a prayer. This was his shot; this was why he was supposed to be in the field with Steve. Steve was still focused on shielding Sam and Natasha, and blocking their shots in the process. They couldn't turn the Hulk loose when there might be other kids in the wreckage, and Stark would have his hands full keeping him back.

This was Bucky's shot to take, and if he'd been there he'd have taken it by now, dropped the kid cleanly as soon as he took that potshot at Steve. He'd have done it before the others even had time to notice how young he was. It would only rest on his conscience, not theirs.

The tableau seemed to last days, but Fr. Roche had barely gotten five more words of prayer out before something struck the gun the kid was holding. Sparks ran over its surface and the kid dropped it, flinging his hands wide, and before any of the Avengers could move two more kids burst out from cover and tackled him--whether shielding him or stopping him from trying again, Bucky couldn't tell.

Barton appeared, walking tightrope-fashion to the end of a tree branch overlooking the cabins, and
Sam stepped out from behind Steve's shield, spreading his wings and flying up to bring Barton down.

Bucky bowed his head and covered his face with his hands, breathing harshly. Of course Steve had a sniper. A sniper who didn't even have to kill, who wouldn't make Steve feel the guilt of lives taken under his command. Of course Steve hadn't needed him.

Fr. Roche's hand closed on his right shoulder, and the priest said softly, "Gloria Patri et Filio..."

_Glory to the Father and the Son..._

Bucky joined in, lowering his hands and raising his eyes to see again that Steve had come through safely, and so had his whole team. "Nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum."

_Now and forever, world without end, amen._

Steve lowered his shield again and reached into one of the pouches on his belt. Bucky had barely recognized what he pulled out before he heard his own phone start ringing somewhere on the other side of the couch.

Bucky lunged straight over the back of the couch, rolling awkwardly on the other side but laying his hand immediately on his ringing phone, which had fallen between the couch and the coffee table. Bucky stabbed at the green button with his thumb.

"Steve," he said, and then couldn't get out another word; the urgency of battle was still gripping his lungs, squeezing his heart, but it was over now. In another minute he'd be able to breathe normally again.

Steve was smiling up at him from the phone's screen, looking sweaty and grimy but basically pleased with himself: a job well done. They'd come through it safely.

"Hey, Buck. You saw that?"

Bucky nodded jerkily, feeling his heart start to beat again, his head going a little light with the belated excess of adrenaline, and he couldn't help smiling back. "You're an idiot."

"Yeah, I didn't think you'd like that plan," Steve said, looking entirely pleased with himself in that familiar maddening way after something had come out well when it had no earthly right to. "Figured I'd better get all those tactics out before you're in the field with us telling me not to."

"I'd make a more convincing fake Cap than Banner," Bucky pointed out, not even dignifying the rest with a response. He'd already had enough words with Steve about carrying a shield that doubled as a target to last them both a few lifetimes. It hadn't made a dent in 1944, and it wasn't going to today either.

"Next time, maybe," Steve said, smiling wider. "Buck, I've gotta go do the mopping up--"

"Yeah, go," Bucky said, waving him off. "Go on."

Steve's gaze turned searching. "Were you--was it all right, seeing this? I should've--"

"I had company," Bucky said airily. "Father came by to sit with me. Pretty sure we deflected as many shots as that shield did."

Steve glanced over his shoulder, though Bucky knew Father was out of range, somewhere behind
the couch. The plate of cookies was still on the coffee table, untouched.

"I'm glad you weren't alone," Steve said seriously. "And thanks for the prayers."

"What else was I going to do?" Bucky asked, and before Steve could think about answering that, "Go on, you've got work to do. Don't leave it all for your team."

Steve smiled again and touched his temple in a salute, and Bucky hung up without returning it. Steve was always saluting out of order; somebody really had to break him of that.

Bucky set the phone facedown on the coffee table, and glanced up to see that JARVIS had already replaced the view on the screen with a map showing the Avengers' current location--somewhere in Colorado--and the vital signs readouts for all of them. Hulk's heart throbbed green, while the rest of them all pattered along steadily in red.

Bucky turned to face Fr. Roche, who was standing by the end of the couch, watching him with a slightly concerned look.

Bucky waved it away. "He knows what it's like, I just--can't be distracting him while he's still in the middle of the job. I'm--he's fine, he's safe. I know that."

Father nodded slowly. "Just so long as you also know, Bucky, that there are people you can speak freely to. Now, or anytime, whether there's something dramatic going on or not. I'm happy to stay, if you still wish to have me here."

Bucky nodded obediently. Reminded, he looked down at his phone and swiped back to his text messages. There were a whole string of unanswered ones--it looked like Andrews had seen what happened on the news, or was getting updates somehow, and letting Duncan know. The last messages were, Party's over, good guys are all ok from Andrews, and thank God from Duncan.

Bucky texted, Thanks guys. It was good not being alone.

When he looked up again, Father was watching him with something too gentle to be amusement. Before Bucky could apologize for bad phone manners, Father shook his head and said, "I can see you're in good hands. I'll take my leave now, if you're all right?"

Bucky nodded quickly. "I'm--yeah. Thanks, Father. Thanks for coming all this way."

"You're one of my flock, and I didn't want to stare at that newsletter article for another moment anyway. Do feel free to call again anytime, Bucky."

"You're one of my flock, and I didn't want to stare at that newsletter article for another moment anyway. Do feel free to call again anytime, Bucky."

Bucky smiled and walked Father back to the elevator. It was only as he was stepping in that Father added, "You know you're allowed to pray anytime, too. He's always listening, whether it's urgent or not."

"Yes, Father," Bucky said, and Father gave him a look that said he knew perfectly well that Bucky wasn't going to pray outside of foxholes anytime soon.

The elevator doors closed. Bucky stood still for a moment, imagining that it was really, actually true. What if God was really right there, like a JARVIS who occupied the whole world? What if He couldn't be shut out of anywhere, but listened all the time and offered assistance if you just phrased your questions the right way?

For a second he could almost hold the idea in his head, and then it slipped away from him, leaving him with the weird leftover energy of a battle he hadn't even been in. He had been there, in a way,
even if he couldn't do anything but watch and pray, and the rush of it was running through his body now, along with a weird frisson of anticipation and dread that felt familiar.

It still took him a moment to place it, and to remember all the times he'd felt it in the months between the fall of the helicarriers and going to MEDCOM. It was the feeling that went with the end of a mission, anticipating the repair and maintenance and return to the ice.

Well. And the other thing that had usually fit in there somewhere, especially if he was hurt.

*That's good,* he thought, turning toward the room with no surveillance. *I can use that. That will help. I'll get it right this time.*

He would. He could feel it. Steve had come through his mission safe, and now it was time for Bucky to undertake his own.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](https://example.com)

I am also on [Tumblr](https://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](https://example.com)
Chapter 28

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

This is another rough one. Mind the tags and let me know if you need more information!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky went into the bedroom and gathered up the clothes-wrapped bundle from the night before. He knelt by the bed and pulled out his duffel bag full of uniforms, dumped his armful in with them, and took the whole bag to the Trigger Reduction room.

"Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS said just before he closed the door. "Would you like me to call anyone else?"

"I'm fine now, JARVIS," Bucky said. He had a plan. It was going to work this time. "No need. Thanks."

"I am here to assist anytime," JARVIS insisted, and Bucky just shut the door.

"JARVIS?" he said, when he was closed inside.

There was no answer, even when he pressed his ear to the door. He was alone, unseen and unheard.

Bucky dropped his duffel on the bed, pulling out the clothes and separating them from the stun baton and zip ties and lube, and then rummaged through the uniforms to find the belt from his fatigues. He doubled it over and tugged hard on it, but the webbed cloth held, stiff but not sharp at the edges. Just right.

It wouldn't hold much of a knot, but he could work around that. Bucky grabbed a fistful of zip ties. He fed the tail of the belt through the buckle, making a loop, and then wrapped the tail end around one side railing of the reinforced bed's steel frame. The bed had been designed to be strong enough to secure him, after all. It would do the job, even if not quite in the direction anyone had intended.

When he'd lined up a half-dozen zip ties holding the end of the belt around the bedframe, he wrapped the buckle-loop around his right hand and leaned his weight against it. The tail slipped a little when he pulled hard, but then the reinforced end of the belt caught against the plastic, anchoring it firmly. There was exactly that much give. No more.

Bucky let go of the belt, letting the loop dangle from the bed rail, and found the other items he would need.

The stun baton. The off-switch for his left arm. The bottle of lube.

Bucky put the off-switch in place but didn't activate it, and then he picked up the lube in his left hand, the stun baton in his right.

He flipped the baton in his hand, studying his setup. There wasn't going to be much slack in the belt. He'd pictured being a little further out from the bedframe, but the belt would keep him almost right
Bucky shook the stun baton to full extension, turned it down to low, and touched the tip to the metal bedframe. The room filled with a faint prickly hum, not quite audible or tangible. Bucky pressed his toe to one post of the bed, and pain ripped through him, up his leg and through his whole body as it tried to complete its circuit.

He jerked backward instinctively, taking both his foot and the stun baton away from the bed, but his whole body kept humming with potential, post-mission energy redoubled by the promise of pain and humming under his skin. His heart raced with terrified eagerness, and while he wasn't getting hard, he was intensely aware of his dick touching the inside of his underwear.

This was real. He could feel this, just like last night in the bathroom; there was pleasure waiting for him amid all the pain. He was halfway there already; the adrenaline and the mission had his mind dredging up countless times with technicians, with his own strike team while waiting for extraction--during extraction, even. He could get back there in his mind. He could do this.

He didn't have to just sit and watch, sending pleas to someone who might or might not hear. He had a mission of his own now.

This was his. His body. His plan. He was improvising a little, but you had to trust the man on the spot to adjust the plan to the conditions he found.

Bucky used a zip tie to jam the stun baton on, still on the lowest setting, before he set it down with the tip touching the furthest post of the bed. Once the belt was holding him, he wouldn't be able to reach it. He tapped a fingertip against the bedrail, like testing the heat of a stove, so that he was pulling away almost before the pain shot through him.

It was working.

He stripped off his shirt and opened his pants, shoving his jeans and boxers down to his thighs. All the better if they trapped his legs a little. His dick flopped free against his thigh, and he gave it a gentle, friendly squeeze. He rubbed his thumb over the head and his breath shook at the feeling of it, the potential pleasure so close to the surface. He was so close to breaking through the numbness. It wouldn't take much more now.

Bucky knelt, turning his back to the bed, and inched toward it carefully. He grabbed the lube from where it had fallen when he dropped it, setting it by his knee. He arranged his feet so he wouldn't immediately press either of them against one of the legs of the bed.

The railing was behind him, level with his shoulders. If he leaned back into it, the whole width of his body would be hit with the stun baton's charge.

He reached over and activated the off-switch on his left arm. His upper body pulled to the left as his arm transformed into dead weight.

His heart was beating hard now. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up from the closeness of the electrified metal behind him. He picked up the loop of the belt in his right hand and brought it over his head, dropping the simple choke-leash around his neck.

Bucky shook his head, feeling the nylon webbing settle against his skin. He leaned forward slightly, feeling it tighten with his movement.

He closed his hand on his dick and reached for the place in his mind where mission objectives used
to live. It wasn't so easy to get to anymore--there were a lot of other things cluttering up the space--but he needed to know it the right way. If this worked--when he made this work--he was going to lose track, if it was only a normal plan. It had to be more than that. It had to be a mission.

He was going to get off. He was going to do whatever it took, and he was going to get off. Pain wouldn't matter. Damage wouldn't matter.

He had to strain against the belt to pick up the lube, but he got it without setting things off early. He squirted some into his hand and gave his dick a couple of strokes.

He remembered the endless series of technicians who had opened his pants and slicked his hand while he was still shaking from a wipe. Shocked past calm and obedience into mindlessness, they had allowed him that small dose of pleasure. What he hadn't been able to do in months had been routine then, part of the procedure. He had never wondered then if he would fail.

He would find it again. No matter the pain. He would get there without handing himself over to anyone to do it to him.

He closed his eyes and let himself fall forward. The belt held against his weight, yanking him back by the throat as his body bowed. He leaned hard into it, drawing it tight. His mouth was moving reflexively for breath almost at once--with his heart beating fast, he needed the oxygen--but it took a moment for the pain to start building in his chest, pressure rising in his skull.

When his vision started to go dark and his mouth was locked wide open, his tongue trying desperately to pull in air, he remembered having Grisha's cock down his throat. He remembered being shoved face first into water, remembered a whip coiled around his throat, pulled tight with a boot at the back of his neck--

His hand moved a few times, reflexive strokes as his vision dimmed. He felt a stutter of pleasure under the urgency, but even that couldn't make him hold out any longer. He pulled back from the pressure on his throat, and at the same second he heaved in a breath fire arced through his body from his shoulders to his toes, lighting him up.

He screamed and jerked upright, swaying between pain and oxygen deprivation.

His hand was still on his dick, and he knew what he was supposed to be doing. He let out a last keening echo of that first scream and started to stroke himself.

His next breath was a sob at the pleasure that rose up from the touch, pure and perfect amid the pain. It felt familiar, felt right, like a broken bone knitting, a dislocated joint back in place. This was how it was supposed to work--this touch, these sensations.

His head fell back, and he felt the stiffness of the belt around his neck and the warning prickle of electricity close. He gulped in a breath, tightened his grip on his cock, and let himself fall forward again.

His breath was stopped as he fell against the belt, and he was faintly aware that that last breath had been cheating, but he kept stroking himself. Soon his face felt red-hot as the blood beat against his skull, his whole body engulfed with the need for air. He made himself stay--he was supposed to stay, he was supposed to stay until he really couldn't anymore, he knew that. That was the mission. Stay and keep stroking.

When the throbbing pressure-pain and the darkness were close to blotting out the pleasure, he pulled back in an uncontrolled heave.
Some instinct made him stop hard, like catching himself from a cliff's edge, when he was exactly upright. He could hear the hum of the metal behind him and for a blind instant, gasping in a breath, he was filled with terror brighter than pain, brighter than pleasure, knowing what the electricity would do to him, knowing it would rush through him and wipe him clean, knowing that there was nothing, nothing at all he could do.

Something inside him recoiled from that flash of terror, while his trembling body was locked perfectly still. There was an almost physical sensation of something snapping, and then the instant of terror was over.

He was calm.

He knew his mission.

He knew what he had to do.

There was no fear now; there was only the knowledge that he was doing what he must do. The pleasure became more and more overwhelming with every touch, and his physical responses were not under full control, but that was in keeping with the nature of his mission. He fell back and fell forward again and again, his breath cut off, fire running through him. But none of it made him forget his mission. None of it made him stop stroking his cock, wringing pleasure from his own touches as he’d been ordered--

No, decided--

No ordered, he must have been ordered--

He fell forward, all at once, slamming onto the floor to the accompaniment of a faint sound of stressed plastic giving way. His left shoulder hit first, taking most of the impact, and for a few frantic seconds he lay with his face pressed into the wood floor, still stroking himself, still trying to reach the end of the mission. But his cock was already wilting, and within a few breaths he remembered where he was, and the urgency and pleasure and pain all faded into the awareness of mission failure.

Bucky let his eyes close for a moment, his breathing slowing as he gave in to inevitability and let himself stop moving. He’d been close, he’d been so close and it had felt so good in between the hurting. He still had one hand curled around his dick and the other was still dead; with an effort he redirected the impulse to hit something into noise, letting out a low rolling groan into the floor. "Dammit."

He tipped onto his side and looked back at the bed, and the handful of snapped zip ties lying below it, the literal weak link. Material failure; understandable. He should have known his weight would be too much to be supported by something only meant to restrain normal humans, even with several of them to distribute the load.

It hadn't been him who failed, this time. Not his will, his determination, his effort. He could have gotten there if the zip ties had been stronger.

He could get something stronger next time. Next time it would work; he'd gotten close this time, close enough to really feel it. All he had to do was hold the mission in mind and use the proper equipment and he could get to his target. He could do this. He could fix himself, or at least get the job well enough along to show some results. Already he was seeing some progress. He was on the right track.

His hand was still wrapped around his slicked-up dick, and he gave it a friendly squeeze again,
starting to feel almost pleased with his results. He hardly felt anything from the touch now, but that didn't matter. He knew how to find the place where he could. He would get it right next time.

Bucky spent his session with Padfield talking about watching Steve, and watching clips of what the fight had looked like to people who saw it on the news. He told Padfield about feeling scared, feeling helpless, even about the fact that he would have taken the shot. Padfield listened and they talked things over; it was easy to fall into focusing on that, to feel how he'd felt during the mission and forget for the space of an hour that anything notable had happened afterward.

After that Steve still wasn't home. Bucky had a session with Jennifer and her array of wires and her computer screen with numbers on it that Bucky couldn't change no matter what he visualized. She told him again that it was okay. He was just starting, she said. He would get better at it.

Bucky nodded agreeably and didn't tell her that he needed to get it right now. He still had a trigger phrase rattling around in his skull that could paralyze him, and he couldn't try to fix it until he mastered this. But there was no point arguing with the schedule he'd been set. This part was under Padfield's jurisdiction; he had his own stuff to work through on his own time, at his own pace. For now he gave Jennifer a game smile, and even winked once.

When Steve did get home, he stepped out of the elevator in his civvies, shield dangling in one hand. He looked exhausted. Bucky felt abruptly guilty that he'd had such an easy day--watching on TV, hiding himself away to jerk off, sitting on soft chairs talking to doctors--while Steve was out there fighting.

"Hey," Bucky said softly, walking over to Steve with his arms open.

Steve shot him a grateful look. He tossed the shield to its hook by the door and all but collapsed against Bucky, hiding his face against Bucky's throat. For a second he was aware that if the belt could have left a mark, Steve would be almost kissing it, and then he pushed that aside, wrapping his arms firmly around Steve. It was a strange sensation, new and old at once, being the one with some comfort to offer.

"That bad?" Bucky asked.

Steve let out a long breath against his skin. "What you saw. Not good. But we secured the weapons, and the kids are out. Safe now, as much as we can assure that."

Bucky held himself perfectly steady--sniper-steady--and saw it all over again, the kid standing there with that massive gun, taking aim at Steve. But he wasn't going back there, not with Steve in his arms, not now that it was over.

"You got your team home safe too," Bucky said. "It's over now, at least for today."

Steve nodded slightly and didn't move.

Bucky rubbed his nose gently against Steve's temple, inhaling the freshly-showered smell of him, the faint echoes of sweat and gunpowder under that. He counted up the hours since the action had ended, guessing what Steve's schedule had looked like today.

"You eat with the team?" Bucky asked.

Steve shrugged listlessly but straightened up a little, looking around the apartment like he expected food, or possibly his team, to be there somewhere. "Yeah, a while ago. Someone brought us this huge bag of sandwiches while we were still sorting things out at the scene. We wound up sitting on
the ground and eating everything in about fifteen minutes."

Bucky nodded. "Dinner, then."

Steve nodded agreement. Bucky could see him trying to pull himself together, ready to shoulder one more job.

It occurred to Bucky right then that Steve was the one who handled making food appear; Bucky didn't even notice how it got into the apartment. For that matter he wasn't sure how the dishes got done, or the place got cleaned. He hadn't been doing it, and he knew for a fact Steve wasn't this neat.

None of that mattered now, though, except the fact that it was past time for Bucky to do his share.

"JARVIS," Bucky said. "Do you know what Steve usually eats when he's had a rough day?"

Steve looked startled. Bucky tugged gently on his shoulders, pulling him in, and Steve melted against him again.

"Yes," JARVIS said, "I have cross-referenced the appropriate occasions, and there are definite trends. Would you like a list?"

"Just order enough for two and let me know when it gets here," Bucky said. "Thanks."

"I am, as ever, here to help, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky glanced up. He didn't think he was imagining the pointedness of the words, but he wasn't going to let JARVIS in on his private business any more than he was letting anybody else, and he certainly wasn't going to let anything slip in front of Steve.

"I appreciate it," he said, and turned his attention to steering Steve over to the nearest couch.

"We could," Steve said when they were sitting down--or at least Bucky was sitting down. Steve was sprawled over him, without much regard for the shape of the furniture under them. It didn't look comfortable, exactly, but Steve had gone pretty much limp and didn't seem inclined to move. "Uh... TV?"

Bucky huffed. "Here's fine, Stevie."

"Sorry, I'm not good company," Steve said, but his warm weight was holding Bucky to the couch, and Bucky didn't think he'd felt this quietly, pleasantly necessary to another human being in at least seventy years.

"You're fine. Rest your eyes until dinner gets here," Bucky said.

"I'm not actually tired," Steve insisted, but the words were mumbled against Bucky's shoulder. Steve's whole body was boneless on top of Bucky's. Bucky sat still, running his fingers gently through Steve's hair as Steve dozed.

"Sergeant," JARVIS said, very quietly, just beside Bucky's ear, and Bucky knew that he was being careful not to disturb Steve. "Your delivery will be arriving in the elevator in approximately two minutes."

"Thanks," Bucky said, equally softly. He gave Steve a gentle shake. "You still not tired, pal?"

"Yeah, I'm good," Steve muttered, burrowing down against Bucky.
"You're actually asleep right now," Bucky observed, smiling.

He'd forgotten that Steve did this, but it came back to him now. Steve got to a certain point of exhaustion and then if you let him sit down he'd still carry on conversations--even keep his eyes open, if he wasn't in a secure location--but he'd agree with anything you said, no matter how ridiculous. Fast asleep.

For a second Bucky wondered if Steve could carry out whole missions like that, dreamlike and compliant, and then he thought, *No. That was just me.*

"Steve," he said sharply, giving him a shake.

Steve sat up abruptly, blinking. "What? Yeah, it's fine, Buck. I'm fine."

Bucky shook his head. "Dinner's here. I'll go get it."

Steve nodded and started to stand up, but Bucky pushed him back down. Steve stayed put for once, letting Bucky walk over to the elevator alone. The door opened just as he reached it, and there was a big white paper bag on the floor of the elevator. It was letting out Sunday dinner smells--roast chicken with vegetables, mashed potatoes and good fresh bread, melting butter and rich gravy.

Bucky's mouth watered as he brought the bag over to the couch, and Steve visibly perked up when he caught a whiff. The food was packaged up in takeout containers, but someone had put in proper silverware, wrapped up in cloth napkins, and tucked underneath the main boxes of food was an entire smoothly frosted chocolate cake in a clear plastic box, plus a six pack of beer in dark brown bottles.

"Thanks, JARVIS," Bucky said, and he grinned over at Steve as he realized they were speaking in unison.

Steve smiled back, real happiness breaking through his exhaustion. They ate together, mostly in silence except for the little happy noises Steve made while eating, and Bucky laughing at the noises he made.

Steve was in the mood to take that as a dare. He made increasingly obscene noises around his food until he was licking chocolate frosting lasciviously from his fork and Bucky was so dazed with wanting him that it was a shock to realize he wasn't hard.

That didn't matter, though. He knew how he could get his, alone, when there was time, when he finally got all the parameters right. For now all he wanted was Steve, just like this, happy and well-fed because Bucky had taken good care of him.

He reached over and grabbed Steve's hand. Bucky twisted the fork away as if Steve might want to stab him with it, bringing their bodies close in the process. Steve licked his lips and waited, and Bucky made a little obscene sound of his own and closed the distance.

Steve melted under him, letting Bucky press him back into the cushions, his mouth opening readily for Bucky's kiss. Bucky leaned in, pressing bodily against Steve; he squeezed hard on Steve's wrist and felt him let go of the fork. Bucky let go of him in turn, bringing both hands up to cradle Steve's face. He kissed Steve slow and sweet and thorough, rocking gently against him all the time.

Steve's hands settled on him, one at the small of his back, one on his thigh. Bucky moved over him just for the sensation of Steve's hands staying with him. Steve was letting him lead, but Bucky could taste how he needed this in every brush of his lips, every twitch of his fingers.
"Tell me what I can do for you," Bucky murmured between kisses, sliding his hands down to Steve's chest. He could finish the job, put Steve to bed satisfied, so he'd dream of Bucky instead of the battle.

Steve shook his head, pushing up to catch another kiss and another before he pulled back to say, "Just this, Buck."

Bucky rolled his hips, pressing against Steve's crotch to confirm what he already knew: Steve was hard. Steve wanted more than just kisses.

Steve shook his head again, picking up Bucky's wordless argument. "I don't wanna go anywhere you're not right with me, Buck. Not tonight. I just want to fool around on the couch, okay?"

Bucky vented a frustrated sigh. "Steve, you don't have to--"

"Bucky," Steve said a little sharply, freezing him in place.

Bucky met his eyes and saw Steve looking just as frustrated as Bucky felt, and more exhausted than ever.

"This is what I want," Steve said, quietly but distinctly. "Just this. I mean it. Okay? I'm not putting up with less. I'm telling you what I want and it's to be right here with you, just like this."

Bucky swallowed and nodded. He couldn't make Steve share more with him. He couldn't make Steve let Bucky do more for him than he wanted. Bucky swallowed that surge of thoughtless desire and the echo of the helpless feeling he'd had that afternoon, still unable to reach Steve, still unable to help.

He wasn't that far away, not really. He ducked his head to kiss Steve again, sweet and slow. If this was what Steve wanted, Bucky could give it to him.

Steve sighed into it and pulled him close, kissing him and kissing him until Bucky could almost forget that he had wanted to do anything else.

Chapter End Notes

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Steve disappeared early the next morning. He smiled apologetically on his way out. "This is the real mop-up: I'm going to be doing interviews all day. Pray for me."

Bucky smirked and folded his hands, and waited until the elevator doors had nearly closed to yell, "So I'll be watching the news all day!"

It was a solid five minutes later when he got a text from Steve, who must have spent that entire time deciding how to phrase it. *I won't tell you not to, but believe me, it's nothing you want to see.*

Bucky didn't actually doubt that. He'd sat through enough Howling Commandos debriefs to know how much he hated watching Steve get raked over the coals after a mission--and that had been Phillips and assorted intelligence officers. He'd rarely seen Steve facing reporters, but when he did it had all been softball stuff, looking for a few minutes of good old Captain America for the newsreels back home. Steve hadn't much liked it even so, but he'd put on his stage face and danced the steps.

Reporters demanding explanations for how the mission had gone would be brutal. Especially when Bucky couldn't stand beside him through it, couldn't drag him to some dubiously private corner after and make it up to him. Especially when on top of being useless while it was happening, Bucky knew Steve wouldn't let Bucky take care of him even after it was all over.

Steve was right. It wasn't anything Bucky wanted to see. He steered clear of the TV room, and when he couldn't distract himself anymore with PT, he took himself down to the gun range instead.

He was surprised to find the range already in use; Barton was in the farthest shooting stall, snapping off shots with his bow one after another. Bucky stayed just inside the door until Barton had emptied his quiver.

"I see you there, you can come in," Barton called out. The jabbing of his fingers as he recalled the targets so he could pull his arrows sounded like stabs.

Bucky walked over to his own locker and considered his options. He picked up a knife automatically, flipping it before he put it away. He needed to keep in practice with a variety of weapons; he couldn't always be sure he would have the S-19 in hand once he started going into the field.

He stopped trying to explain the choice to himself and picked up the M-4, taking it to the stall beside Barton's and dialing up the targets. He couldn't help seeing the violent motions of the arrows being yanked free of the floating targets in the next lane, or the tension in Barton's hands each time he reached for another one.

"No interviews for you, huh," Bucky observed. Was Steve out there taking all the heat alone? But no, Sam and Natasha would be with him no matter what, and Tony wouldn't shy away from attention.

"They trot me out every few months," Barton replied, his voice steadier than his hands. "Safe stuff. Not the day after I shot a kid."
Bucky frowned down at the M4 in his hands, running it back in his mind. He'd been tightly focused on Steve. He could have missed it.

"When did you shoot a kid?"

Barton's hand froze in the act of reaching for an arrow.

"Steve said you watched our feeds," Barton said, his voice gone flat and wary.

"Yeah." Bucky gave up on talking to the divider and leaned against the front of his stall, giving himself a look into the next one. Barton was standing utterly still, every muscle tensed. He didn't raise his head, but his eyes locked on Bucky's.

"Then you saw it," Barton said, snapping into motion and yanking the next arrow free, and the next. "Couldn't miss it. No one missed it."

Bucky huffed in disbelief. "The last one standing? Barton, I would have painted a wall with that kid's brains."

Barton froze in an entirely different way this time, snapping upright, his hand twitching on the bow like he was ready to use it as a cudgel.

Bucky shrugged, keeping an eye on Barton's hands. He could see why Barton might take a swing, but he didn't owe him as much of a shot as he'd owed Tony.

"I carry a rifle," Bucky said evenly, as though the calculation didn't still make him feel a little sick. "I don't let people take shots at Steve. I don't have a half-dozen trick bullets in my pocket every time I go out, and I wouldn't have aimed for the gun."

Barton relaxed a fraction, and Bucky concluded, looking away, "Which is why you're the one who actually does go out, and I'm the one who stays here and goes to therapy."

Barton snorted. "You think you're the only one who goes to therapy, Barnes?" Bucky glanced back toward him as Barton finished taking his arrows from the last target and added, "Also I've got way more than six kinds of arrows."

Bucky frowned. Everything he'd seen coming out of a target had looked like a normal target point. "How many kinds do you need? I mean, a Widow's Sting on an arrow--"

"It's called an electro-arrow," Barton corrected.

Bucky smirked "Electro-arrow. And I can see explosive tips, like launching a tiny grenade, but other than that--what can you even put on an arrow that doesn't make it impossible to aim?"

"It's just a matter of knowing how to aim it," Barton argued, and when he gestured with the bow in his right hand now it was purely illustrative, not even the shadow of a threat.

Bucky thought that Barton had to be just as conscious as he was of grabbing hold of this topic with both hands like the life raft it was, but that didn't mean they couldn't both ride it.

"And you're not even thinking about the possibilities," Barton went on. "Straight explosives, sure, but also smoke, tear gas--"

Bucky waved his hand. "That's all basically the same thing. I can fire a smoke canister or tear gas. Come to that I can probably get Stark to design a bullet-sized canister, same payload as your arrow."
"Net arrow," Clint went on, holding up fingers as he counted off varieties. "Putty arrow. Boomerang arrow--"

"Well I wouldn't fucking want a boomerang bullet," Bucky put in, twitching a little at the thought, but Clint just kept rolling.

"Cable arrow, that's saved my life more than once."

The image arrived in his head, instant and clear as if he'd seen it on a video feed: Barton firing an arrow with a cable attached, using it to anchor himself or maybe even catch himself while falling.

"What the hell kind of cable is light enough to shoot on an arrow?" Bucky demanded, only half-conscious of making himself sound normal, of playing the game, while he was seeing that cable in his mind, strong enough to take a man's weight, strong enough to hold him. "Probably snap if it actually got fired at a decent velocity--"

Barton shook his head. "Now you're talking complete shit. Did I not just say it's saved my life? It doesn't break."

Bucky raked a look over Barton, making it a little dismissive even though he looked pretty goddamn solid. "Not with you hanging on it, maybe, but--"

Bucky shrugged his left shoulder, making plates resettle all the way down his arm.

"I'm a little heavier."

Barton shook his head. "You're not going to break my cable, Barnes."

Naturally there was no way a plain horizontal shot would prove anything; they agreed on that right away. The negotiation that followed felt oddly familiar, featuring as it did a lot of well we should make it interesting and you're not scared, are you? even if neither of them quite got to the point of saying I dare you.

Ten minutes later they were at the bottom of one of the elevator shafts near the gun range, for a suitably vertical space. No point in proving the cable arrow could hold weight without having somewhere for that weight to drop to if it didn't.

JARVIS had agreed to hold the elevator car ten floors up. He sounded a little disapproving, but he'd agreed.

"I mean, that's still like hitting the side of a barn," Barton said, looking up at it. "For the sake of my dignity I'm picking my shot right now--I'll put it right between those four bolts on the near side."

Bucky nodded agreeably, squinting a little to make out the exact spot Barton meant, and eyeing his own part of the deal: getting them high enough in the air to make the fall interesting if the cable didn't hold. The walls of the elevator shaft had regular protrusions at each floor, and there were smaller hand- and toe-holds in the form of rings planted for workers' safety harnesses.

Barton had emptied his quiver except for a single arrow connected to a spool he'd slotted firmly into place back at the lockers.

There were five more spools just like it on the shelf behind the locker door that opened to Barton's palm. The spools were small, which meant the cable was very flexible and light; it was almost certainly nonmetallic, which would mean nonconductive...
And Barton was willing to bet his life that it wouldn't break under Bucky's weight and his combined.

Barton finished his own scrutiny of the walls and looked over at Bucky.

"Five floors up?"

Bucky nodded agreement, gauging the distances, and turned his back, mutely offering the piggyback ride he'd thrown out as an offer when Barton complained about having to climb and then make the shot.

Barton touched his right shoulder first, a warning before he hopped up, wrapping his legs around Bucky's hips without hesitation. Bucky braced himself against the weight on his back, and, more, the fact of a person who wasn't Steve getting so close, gripping him in something that could have been an attempt at a submission hold. He wasn't going to throw Barton off; that would definitely ruin the experiment.

"You gonna hold on?" Barton's chest was against his back, but his arms weren't touching. Bucky had braced himself for the feeling of impending choking from an arm wrapped high around his chest, but Barton was holding off.

"What do you call this?" Barton's thighs squeezed tighter around his hips. "I've been shooting from the back of a moving horse since I was sixteen, you don't waste your hands holding on to your ride."

Bucky bared his teeth in a grin at the concrete wall. "All right, then."

Barton was heavy, but Bucky had been used as a beast of burden in the field by more than one escort team. A couple of loaded field packs and a machine gun strapped to his back wouldn't be allowed to slow him down, and nor would Barton. He sprang up to grab the first obvious handhold with his left hand and swung up, up, toes barely touching as he threw himself higher and higher with each grab. Barton whooped with laughter behind him, keeping his chest pressed to Bucky's back seamlessly without ever using his arms at all.

Bucky found that he was grinning for real, not just baring his teeth. This was nothing like carrying anything else; Barton wasn't using him, didn't act as if he were the horse he'd compared Bucky to. This was... fun. Nothing depended on this--no mission, not even a wager. They were just playing, like children, showing off what they could do with no audience but themselves.

He settled into a rhythm that could have carried them all the way to the roof, but all too soon Barton said, "Ready..."

His weight shifted behind Bucky, leaning away slightly for the first time, the motion perfectly controlled. Barton had obviously already taken their momentum into account; offering to stop so he could take his shot would be an insult. Bucky swung to the next grip as Barton shifted minutely behind him, adjusting, and muttered, "Aim..."

Bucky looked up to see Barton holding his bow overhead, drawing the string nearly down to Bucky's flexing shoulders. He threw them up to the next grip, and at just the perfect moment in the arc he felt Barton's knuckles tap the nape of his neck as he released the arrow. It sailed upward on a beautiful trajectory and made contact with a ringing thump against the bottom of the elevator, right in the spot he'd said he would hit before they started the climb.

The line trailing from the arrow bowed gently on the way up, and drew nearly taut as it made contact. The sound of impact had barely died away before Barton, legs locked tight around Bucky's hips, threw his weight backward over the elevator shaft. Bucky was holding on with his left hand--
less prone to reflex—and he made it open and let himself be carried off the wall, swinging in Barton's grip.

He twisted as they sailed across the narrow space of the elevator shaft, locking his left arm around Barton's midsection. More importantly, that put him in position to meet the opposite side of the shaft with the soles of his feet and absorb some momentum before they bounced off. It was only after he'd done it, while he was already bringing his legs up, that it occurred to him that this was a more intimate position than before, face to face with his arm around Barton and Barton's legs still wrapped around his hips. But it felt like the closeness of wrestling, sparring, nothing dangerous lurking in it at all.

"Aw, pendulum," Barton muttered, loosening one leg to absorb momentum as they swung back. "That's the fuckin' worst when it's open space."

They didn't get close enough to the far wall for Bucky's feet to touch on the backswing. There was nothing to distract from the fact that they were dangling, five stories up, from a cable arrow clamped to an elevator five stories above them.

"Huh," Bucky said, letting himself sound impressed. "Didn't break."

"Told you," Barton said, sounding a little strained, probably from the tightness of Bucky's grip or the effort of holding up his weight. Bucky pulled himself up, hooking his right arm over Barton's shoulder and reaching for the cable.

Barton twisted helpfully, giving him the angle to close his hand on it, and Bucky hauled himself up face to face with Barton. He raised his left hand and got that on the cable too, testing the tension and texture between his fingers. It was smooth, almost soft in his grip, and nowhere near breaking under their combined weight.

Bucky met Barton's eyes with a grin. "Still think I can't break it?"

Barton glanced down—not fearfully, just making a point. "You drop me five stories, Nat's going to break every bone in your body and then let somebody who's really attached to me take over."

"I didn't say anything about dropping you," Bucky returned, wondering if Barton actually knew what it felt like to have someone start systematically breaking your bones. Some of them were tricky; there was a lot of horsing around involved to break the individual bones of, say, the wrist or ankle.

For instance.

"Then I stand by my original statement, which has now been proven, by the way: my cable arrow can hold both of us without breaking."

"You didn't say my weight wouldn't break it," Bucky said absently, maneuvering around so he was behind Barton. "You said I wouldn't break it."

Barton reached out with his gloved left hand and touched the central cable of the elevator, testing his ability to catch himself. Bucky grinned and pulled himself higher up the arrow cable, so he was a full body-length above Clint. He clamped his right hand on the cable, holding his weight.

He pressed his left wrist against the cable a foot lower down and started winding the cable around it, drawing Barton up toward him a few inches at a time. Barton let his fingers trail up the elevator cable and kept his right hand firm on his bow, his legs dangling.

When he had a solid yard of the cable wrapped around his wrist and holding Barton's weight--when
Barton was close enough to see every move even if he didn't have a sniper's eyes--Bucky flexed his left hand.

He didn't know how he knew to do it; he just knew that when he twitched his hand like this, the plates of his palm would flex, and he could cut anything.

The cable parted neatly, with just a whisper, and Bucky let his arms spread, lowering Barton to dangle from his wrist.

Barton just looked impressed, exactly like Steve Rogers, age eight, after Bucky did a handstand on the fire escape without falling to his death or kicking Steve in the face. Bucky grinned, feeling just as purely, simply triumphant as he had then.

Barton just shook his head. "JARVIS, get us down, Barnes owes me a beer for breaking my rig."

Bucky kept his right hand tight on the cable and held on to the part of this that was simple, even though he couldn't help running the calculation in the back of his mind. The cable still didn't have any trouble holding his weight.

Bucky left the elevator shaft with five yards of nearly unbreakable cable coiled neatly in his pocket, but he had to wait nearly twenty-four hours to do anything with it.

He spent the rest of the morning with Clint, who declared that it was too early to redeem his beers from Bucky but exactly the right time to teach him some respect for Paleolithic ranged weapons. They knocked off the escalating series of target competitions for lunch, and then Clint had to make phone calls and Bucky had to get back to his schedule.

He sent Steve a few texts during afternoon PT: Clint's almost convinced me to learn to use a bow and He's not bad with a rifle and, when Steve still didn't answer, Never hurts to have two snipers around.

Steve replied when Bucky was about to go into his session with Padfield: Glad you're not watching the news.

Bucky frowned at it, but he went into his appointment and talked about hanging out with Clint, making a friend or at least a teammate.

Halfway through he mentioned that Steve hadn't wanted him to watch the news, and Steve's text, and Padfield's expression betrayed something.

"You know why," Bucky said.

Padfield tilted his head. "It's his first formal press appearance since the end of your trial and your return home. He's been getting a lot of questions about you and your relationship."

Bucky stared. "But it's--they're supposed to be asking about the mission. The kids."

Padfield grimaced. "And they are. But it didn't go badly enough to derail them from the big story. Which is still you."

Bucky stared at Padfield, and then out the window, and then at the floor, working through what Padfield had said. If the mission had been a worse mess--if one of the Avengers had gotten badly hurt, or if they'd fucked up somehow--if, say, somebody had killed that kid instead of just disarming him, or if other kids had gotten killed--then the mission would have been bigger news than Bucky.
If Bucky had been on the mission--if he'd taken the shot--

There was a very cold calm waiting somewhere nearby for him, and Bucky pushed it away and said, "Steve hates personal questions."

"Yeah, I don't think today is one he's going to remember fondly," Padfield said.

Bucky swallowed hard, thinking of his morning with Clint and the cable he'd tucked away in a dresser drawer when he changed to his PT clothes. It was something he could do without consulting Steve or winning his approval, but that was no good to Steve, not directly. Not today. That was of no immediate use to anyone but Bucky.

If Steve was taking the heat for him on top of everything else, then Bucky had to find a way to help right now. If Bucky couldn't stop Steve from shielding him and couldn't get Steve to accept comfort--still, there had to be something he could do.

He looked at Padfield, who was waiting patiently for his reaction.

"I want to do something nice for Steve," Bucky said slowly. "Make sure his day gets better when he gets home."

Padfield nodded slowly. "What are you thinking?"

Bucky barely bothered pretending to try to make the numbers on the screen change during his session with Jennifer. He was occupied with the thought of what would make Steve feel better. He mapped out contingencies for his self-appointed mission, obsessively planning options given the limited range of acceptable activities.

Ten minutes before the end of the session, when he'd been staring past the numbers on the screen for a while and Jennifer had given up on talking to him, he said, "God, this is boring."

He hadn't thought of it as anything that simple, but being cooped up in the tower, cooped up in the apartment with nothing to do but the nebulous task of getting better--left behind exactly like Steve had been so many times in their old life--

He met Jennifer's eyes to find her looking mildly amused and not offended, which, he realized belatedly, she might have, since it must sound like he meant the biofeedback training and not his entire life.

"Why don't we call it a day," Jennifer said. "We can take tomorrow off, too, give it another try on Friday, okay? I don't want you to get totally frustrated."

"Sure," Bucky said, although it meant a schedule box disappearing and even less to occupy himself with tomorrow. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea."

Jennifer smiled and said, "Take the sensors off, then, you're done."

Bucky glanced one last time at the screen and noticed that his heart rate had dipped to exactly the rate she'd told him to aim for at the start of the hour. They were both laughing as Bucky helped her pack up her gear and escorted her to the elevator.

Bucky's schedule was pretty open after that, so he tracked Clint down in the common room, where it turned out to be officially late enough for beer as long as there was also food. JARVIS was as
efficient as ever at making food appear, and there was a bar in the common room with startlingly well-stocked shelves and refrigerators to get them started.

Bucky ate fried cheese and onion rings and chicken wings and drank beer with Clint. When Natasha and Sam showed up there was more beer and different food, and when Bucky said the beer seemed kind of weak Natasha started lining up shots for Bucky to knock back on a precisely regimented schedule to test her theory about getting supersoldiers drunk.

He was buzzed when Steve turned up, looking tired and drawn. Bucky had lost track of his thought-out plans and just made Steve do six shots in a row before he could have any onion rings; by the end of the shots Steve had lost the worst of the tension on his face. He always was happiest with a job to do.

Bucky leaned in and kissed him then, right there at the bar with Steve's teammates standing around. It wasn't any more than what Steve had done in front of the entire world, and Steve wouldn't push him away with them watching. Anyway Steve's mouth was wet and pink from alcohol and probably tingling a little. Steve shivered when Bucky licked his lower lip.

Bucky grinned and pushed the platter of onion rings over to him. When Steve gave him a dopey smile back, Bucky figured he had this mission in the bag.

He kept drinking to make Steve keep drinking, kept eating to make Steve keep eating. Bucky leaned casually into Steve's side and talked to the others like he didn't remember Steve was there, so Steve would talk over him and interrupt and make Bucky notice him. Bucky kissed him three more times and made him laugh twice before JARVIS declared last call.

They leaned on each other in the elevator, after JARVIS drove them out of the bar by turning the lights up inhospitably bright and playing some song about leaving a cake out in the rain at a thunderous volume. They kissed in the dim, quiet kitchen, lingering over it now that they were alone. They kissed in the hallway outside Steve's bedroom, and Bucky remembered, barely, not to push his luck. He couldn't make Steve push him away, and he couldn't try and fail. He'd gotten Steve to unwind a little; that had to be enough for tonight.

Bucky gave him a gentle push and said, "Go to sleep. You've got meetings in the morning."

Steve groaned and hid his face against Bucky's throat. "Why did I become an officer again?"

Bucky grinned and patted him on the ass. "Because you looked so damn impressive leading a column that they just couldn't resist pinning something shiny on you. And now you're punished with administrative duties. Forever."

"Cruel and unusual," Steve sighed, but he picked his head up, kissed Bucky one more time without looking too sad about it, and went in to bed.

Bucky went into his own room, and his hand brushed the length of cable coiled in the drawer when he pulled out sleep clothes to change into. He thought about it for a second, a vague stir of theoretical interest--but he'd unwound himself along with Steve, and he'd have to wreck this sleepy ease to get anywhere with that. There was no rush, anyway. He had nothing but time to kill tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes
Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
The previous evening's unwinding had definitely worn off by the next morning; he woke up tense with anticipation even before he remembered why. Steve was downright chipper, giving Bucky a cheerful kiss before he left for his meetings. Bucky did morning PT, but by the end of it he couldn't think of anything but the cable in the drawer and his next chance to get it right and get himself off.

He gathered up his supplies and headed into the Trigger Reduction room, and got to work figuring out how to make use of the new cable. He wound up tying it firmly to the bedframe with a slipknotted loop to go around his neck. He used the belt, too, wrapping it around his throat so the thin cable wouldn't cut in too sharply, and just like that he was ready.

He had the right materials. It was going to work this time.

He stripped completely, baring all of his skin to the tingling sense of anticipation, making himself vulnerable. He set up the stun baton, attached the off-switch to his left arm and activated it, and then got into position, feeling shivery with excitement. His heart was beating fast, his cock already feeling sensitive and full of potential.

Bucky slipped the loop over his head and tightened it around his neck, feeling the electrical buzz of the air behind him. He reminded himself sternly of the mission, because he would have to remember when pain and fear overcame this eagerness. He was going to get off. He had to get off.

Bucky slicked his hand thoroughly and gave his limp dick a couple of sloppy strokes. It didn't quite do anything for him, not yet, but he knew it would soon.

He leaned forward, drawing the cable tight around his throat on the other side of the buffering belt. His breath was cut off by the implacable squeeze, and in a few seconds the instinctive fear shot through him, even before the pain of hypoxia was really noticeable.

He tightened his hand on his cock and felt it start to plump up in his grip. He leaned harder into the cable, felt his mouth open and tongue protrude as he struggled instinctively for air and gave himself a rough stroke.

He didn't decide that he needed to breathe, just heaved himself backward, and there was no catching himself. He hit the bedframe and screamed on the first gasping breath he drew. Pain burst through him, burning, emptying him of every thought except his objective, the redeeming pleasure between his legs. He sobbed and stroked himself, and his cock hardened as he struggled against the pain, the tightness around his throat, until he lost his precarious balance and tipped forward, cutting off his air again.

He lost track of time, lost track of why it was happening. It had never mattered why it was happening. They would do to him whatever they chose to do, punish him for whatever they chose to punish him for. This time there was a reward buried in all the pain. He was allowed to touch himself, and his cock was hardening despite the pain of the wipe, the pain of being choked. He dared not look for his handlers, to give them any reason to take this away from him.

He fell away from the electric pain and something slipped--his knee--and he was suspended by his
neck now, his feet scrabbling, uncoordinated after the repeated shocks. His left arm was entirely nonfunctional, his right taken up with the reward which was its own mission.

His vision was going dark, his chest aching, his head pounding harder than his cock with oxygen deprivation. His vision went bright and clear for a moment. Bucky realized that he had fallen, that the repeated shocks from the stun baton had wrecked his motor control enough that he couldn't get his legs under him, and the cord around his neck wasn't breaking as he struggled.

He was also more than half hard, and had never felt anything as good as the frantic stroking of his right hand on his cock.

But he was possibly about to die--possibly before he got to come, which would be a colossal mission failure. He wrenched his right hand away from his cock and scrabbled at the cord around his throat, trying to find the place to loosen it.

But his right hand was cramped and shaky and his vision was dark and sparkling, his head throbbing. He really couldn't get any air, really couldn't get his limbs under control--he needed his left hand. He reached for the off-switch with his right hand, fumbling and lube-slick. His hearing was starting to go--his tongue was almost completely extended outside his mouth, his lips hurt, his extremities were throbbing and he couldn't--he couldn't--

*Steve is going to f*ucking *kill me for dying like this.*

The crushing pressure of suffocation smothered his last burst of thought; there was nothing but pain and darkness until there was nothing at all.

His head was pounding, and his throat hurt nearly as badly. His whole body hurt, actually, aching dully everywhere.

*Must've caught Steve's cold,* he thought muzzily, and reached down for the covers--

His arm whirred softly as he moved it, and he opened his eyes and stared at the silver shine of his left arm. For a few suspended seconds he didn't think anything, just stared at the light reflecting off it and marveled at the vividness of his dream, the impossibility of this sudden transformation of his body.

His arm. His left arm. His hand slowly curled into a fist. *The procedure is already--*

He was lying on the floor, and there was something small and silvery lying on the floor beside him, separate from his arm. The off-switch.

His eyes darted up to the steel frame of the bed a yard away. There was a cord dangling from it, the end of it neatly sliced off, but somehow it still looked like a noose.

Bucky scrambled up to his feet as it came back to him. He wrapped his right hand gingerly around his throat. There was a line of sharper pain buried in the dull ache. The cut remains of the cord and belt lay on the floor.

His left arm. He flexed just so, and the plates on his palm tilted so that he could cut through anything. But his arm had been switched off. He hadn't been able to get to the off-switch with his right hand, shaky and slick as it was.

He picked the little device up now with steady fingers, gummy with lubricant that hadn't quite dried. The device wasn't inert like it normally was when detached from his arm. There was a small red light blinking on it.
Bucky switched the device off properly and dropped it on the floor again.

It had disengaged. Some kind of built-in failsafe responding to his physical distress, no doubt. Once activated, his arm had acted autonomously to free him. Tony had saved him--Zola had saved him--from what he'd been stupid enough to do to himself.

He looked down at his body: he was naked, his shrunken soft dick leaving a residue of half-dried lube against his thighs. There was floor burn on his knees and blood on his feet. One of his toenails had torn off.

He closed his eyes, swallowing hard as that second came back to him in perfectly clarity. He had been scrabbling frantically, trying to get his feet under him, his legs useless the way they got when he'd been wiped hard. He'd torn off a toenail, struggling for breath.

His knees gave way and he crumpled, his breath coming fast and shallow, his head swimming.

He'd torn off a toenail. He'd choked himself unconscious on top of running enough electricity through himself to feel like he'd been wiped. He'd forgotten everything but his mission and kept jerking off nearly the whole time, and--

He'd almost died. He could have died. If Tony hadn't built in a failsafe for the off-switch, if his arm didn't respond independently when he needed it to... JARVIS couldn't hear him in this room. Steve wasn't even in the building. No one would have come for him until much too late. After a few hours at room temperature his brain would have rotted beyond reviving, serum or no serum.

His breath kept racing faster, hitching painfully in his chest.

He could have died. For real, forever, no thaw and prep and programming to follow, no hope of recovery. No anything except the chance of purgatory, if purgatory existed outside of dutifully-absorbed Sunday morning sermons, and even there he wouldn't see Stevie for a thousand years while he struggled to shed his sins. And for sure he would be dead in the meantime and Steve would be standing over his body after he broke the door down; Bucky would be dead and he would never get up off of this floor.

He was shaking with belated terror, and he thought distantly that it had to mean he was getting better. Even back during reintegration when he thought he might be executed he'd only been disappointed about it. Not scared. Not like this. He'd have to tell Padfield--

He pressed his face into his knees and curled his right hand around his bloody foot, squeezing on his injured toe.

He couldn't tell Padfield. He couldn't tell anyone. He had almost died alone, unseen, and no one could know. No one could know what he'd done to himself. No one could know why. If they saw--if they knew--

He sobbed a little, his teeth chattering. He was shivering, his extremities feeling numb and his head throbbing even harder than it had when he woke up. Dimly he knew that this was the reaction setting in. Some kind of shock. Adrenaline. The fear of God.

He trembled, clutching at himself to try to keep steady, but no part of him was steady. Even his left arm kept whirring, recalibrating, bracing too late for some impact, some danger.

He told himself on every breath that he had to calm down, had to pull himself together. He hadn't died, so there was nothing to be afraid of, but his body kept shaking. The enormity of it kept crashing over him--he would have died, he would have stayed dead forever--until he couldn't think at all.
Tears ran down his face and his breath heaved, and he felt small, as fragile as any civilian he'd ever had in his sights.

He tried to find that cold calm, but it wouldn't come to him. Of course it wouldn't; he wasn't in danger anymore. There was nothing he could do now, calmly, to make this never have happened. He sat and shook until he ran out of tears and adrenaline and the ability to shake. He felt hollow and thin, like an emptied eggshell waiting to be dipped in wax. It was almost like being calm, this emptiness. His breathing steadied. He looked around.

He saw the blood smeared on the floor under the bedframe, and that the bedframe was still electrified.

He couldn't leave it that way. He couldn't let anyone see what he'd done.

He stood up, feeling weak as if he hadn't eaten in days, as if he had lost half his blood and not those few streaks on the floor. He walked, slowly and carefully, to the bathroom. He stared at himself for a moment in the mirror. There were no visible marks on his throat, except for the straight red line running down the left side of his neck, an inch behind his ear. Bucky raised his left hand, mimed cutting something away with a sharp edge raised from his palm.

If he had sliced a little further forward, a little deeper... He grabbed at the edge of the sink and stared down at the light reflecting on the cool white surface until his eyes ached. Then he turned the tap on and bent over, forcing himself to drink from the running stream of water until his stomach hurt instead.

He wet the bathroom's hand towel. It was the blue of Steve's uniform and Bucky's old coat, unlike the gunmetal gray of the linens in Bucky's bathroom, or the pleasant cheerful yellow in Steve's.

Bucky took the dripping blue towel back to the bed and tossed it down on the bloodstains underneath before he crouched by the stun baton and used his left hand to cut free the zip tie that kept it powered on. When the charge died he turned his attention to washing the blood off the floor, and then off his foot. He wrung the cloth out into the toilet, flushed the bloodied water, and carefully cleaned every trace of blood from the bathroom.

When he checked the mirror, the red line on his neck was already fading. No one would see. He bundled up his supplies and got dressed again, wishing briefly for his old long hair to hide the scratch on his neck from JARVIS. There was no point hesitating, though, so he walked out into the hall with his head up. He dumped the supplies in his bedroom closet and knelt there a while, feeling exhausted and empty and cold.

He could do something about cold, at least. There were warm things in the drawers, the stuff Steve had stocked up for him in advance. He found a warm dark hoodie, which covered the scratch as well as making him feel blanket-wrapped. Thick socks, too, and sneakers, to keep his feet warm and cover the missing toenail, the red raw place already scabbed over. After he'd bundled up he sat on the edge of the bed, worn out by that short burst of activity.

He felt cold despite the clothes, and in the silence and stillness he kept remembering the sounds of his feet thumping helplessly on the floor. He felt a phantom tingling in his lips, an ache in his chest. Every so often he would take a deep gasping breath, shaking a little. The beating of his heart felt fluttery and uncertain.

He needed something. He needed Steve, he needed--

He remembered, suddenly and intensely, the first moment he had seen Steve in his new body. He
had appeared out of nowhere, impossibly strong and tall beside the table Bucky was strapped to in a cavernous torture-room. Zola--Zola who Bucky owed his fucking life to today, and how many times over--had given up tormenting him and gone away. Steve had come, had freed him, put his arm around Bucky and led him out, and...

Bucky folded forward, wrapping his arms around himself and wanting Steve's arms, Steve's touch. He craved just the sight of him, clean and good and heroic, more than he had ever wanted food or water or rest or relief of pain.

But Steve wasn't here. Steve had things to do today. Bucky was alone.

*You shouldn't be alone.* He remembered the text, heard an echo of Duncan's voice behind it. This wasn't like the other day. No one was in danger and nothing was going to happen now, but if he couldn't have Steve... he still didn't want to be alone.

"JARVIS," Bucky said, turning his head because actually looking up seemed like too much effort right now. "Is anybody home?"

"Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner are in the lab. The present stage of their work is not particularly delicate, and a visit would not cause undue disruption."

Bucky nodded and stayed where he was for a while, until the gnawing silence and the cold in his bones were finally enough to make him move. He hauled himself upright and stood for a moment to let his blood find its way back into his brain. Only then did he start moving. One foot in front of the other, no stumbling or swaying. Door, hallway, living room, elevator.

The door opened when he reached it and closed as soon as he was inside, carrying him smoothly downward.

When the door opened again, Butterfingers was just outside. Bucky stared, and he thought the bot stared back. After a few seconds Butterfingers offered him a bright yellow shop towel. Bucky took it and found that it was very soft, and just big enough to grip with both hands. When the bot reversed and headed toward the lab, it was automatic to follow.

Butterfingers led him to a different lab than he'd had arm sessions in; this one smelled of ozone. Metal work. The bot stopped in the doorway and plucked up a pair of goggles from a nearby table, turning to offer them to Bucky while blocking his path. Bucky took them with his left hand, letting his right stay clenched around the soft towel. He got the goggles on; they were tinted, and he felt sheltered behind them. No one would look at him and know what he'd done, now. He found himself wishing for his old muzzle-mask, and tugged up the hood of his sweatshirt instead, tucking his chin down into it and pulling the strings to tighten it around the goggles.

When he was properly clad, the bot let him past the door. Tony and Bruce were leaning over a worktable together, both wearing heavy gloves and even darker goggles than his. Something between them was sparking brightly, and they were quietly intent on whatever it was.

Bucky glanced around the room and spotted a counter that would have a good vantage point on what they were doing, and also on the door. He skirted widely around them and pulled himself up to sit against the wall. From here he could see the curves of metal being welded together, though under their hands and the flashing sparks he had no clear idea of what it was. He closed his own hands on the yellow towel and held on tight, letting it absorb the last of his shivering.

He squinted against the light and then closed his eyes for a while. He was aware of familiar voices--Tony's voice, fast and excited, Bruce's slow and measured--and the bot coming and going. But it was
easier to keep his eyes closed, to just sit quietly for as long as they let him sit quietly.

That couldn't last forever, of course. After some time Tony's voice, in a different register and closer than before, said, "You having a dampness problem, there, Barnes?"

Bucky opened his eyes to see Tony standing right in front of him--nearly at eye level, since Bucky was curled down small on the counter. Bucky looked down and realized that the bot hadn't been merely coming and going. It had brought more towels--a couple of dozen of them--and draped them over Bucky's feet and legs. He turned his head slightly, since the goggles and hood combined to destroy his peripheral vision, and found that there were towels covering both his arms as well, right up to the shoulder, and he thought that the hood on his head felt heavier than it should.

Tony was still standing in front of him. Bucky didn't want to move and dislodge the towels blanketed all over him. He was almost warm. He swallowed and said, "Not anymore."

Tony pointed at him. "Problem solved, then. Strawberry?"

Tony was offering a plastic bag full of yogurt-covered lumps. Strawberries, apparently. Bucky shifted his right arm carefully and Tony brought the bag to meet his hand.

"Thanks," Bucky said, when he'd plucked a handful from the bag.

Tony nodded briskly. "Bruce also wants to know if you've suffered a head injury or you're bleeding internally."

"Tony."

Bucky smiled slightly, a reflexive reaction to the tone of Bruce's voice directed at Tony. He saw through his tinted goggles that Tony saw it.

"Offer's open," Tony went on, ignoring Bruce's exasperation, "if you want to be checked for concussion or have your abdomen palpatated or anything, Bruce can totally pretend to be that kind of doctor for a few minutes."

"Or I could call a real doctor, or I could make Tony leave you alone," Bruce offered, coming over to get some strawberries from the bag. Tony tilted them toward Bruce, which reminded Bucky that his own handful was melting against his palm. He raised his hand to his mouth and licked one up. The sweet-tartness of it felt new and startling on his tongue, like he'd never eaten food before.

He savored it slowly while Bruce argued with Tony about the next phase of the thing they were building--possibly a satellite, or a remote-controlled car. Bucky thought he was missing some key terms in the rapid-fire conversation. They drifted away from Bucky to pick up more parts, leaving the remains of the bag of strawberries next to his foot.

Bucky let his eyes close again. There were hammering noises, and at one point Bruce actually shouted back at Tony, but nothing came near Bucky until he felt a warm presence just out of reach.

Bucky didn't have to look. He felt Steve hitch himself up to sit on the counter to Bucky's left. Bucky kept his eyes closed, suddenly shaking all over again. If he looked at Steve now--if he let Steve rescue him from this--then there was something he had to be rescued from. Then he couldn't just be sitting here for no reason, basking in the benign clamor of the workshop.

Steve moved slowly beside him, giving Bucky plenty of time to react. Bucky kept his eyes closed and his chin tucked down, his hands curled and still under their yellow towel covers. Steve made contact against his curled up legs, leaning across him, and Bucky's lips twitched when he heard the
rustle of plastic and realized that Steve had reached over to pilfer a snack.

"Want some?" Steve asked, settling back at Bucky's side.

Bucky shook his head slightly. He knew bait when it was offered to him, and he knew that Steve, unlike Tony, wasn't going to be distracted and go away. "Had some already."

Steve made an agreeable noise. Bucky didn't move. Didn't ask what Tony had told Steve to make him leave the morning's meetings. Didn't ask whether Steve shouldn't go back to it now that he could see that Bucky was fine. He was fine. He hadn't died. Hadn't even come as close to it as he had dozens of times in the years before.

"So this could go a couple of ways," Steve said after Bucky had listened to him eating a couple of handfuls of yogurt-covered strawberry bits. "Because I gotta tell you, I've been trying to give you space and respect your independence and everything, but I'm not made of stone. So you can look me in the eye and tell me you don't want me here, and you would've asked me to come home if you did, or I'm going to have to come over there and do something."

Bucky turned his head away from Steve completely and opened his eyes to slits, peering through his eyelashes and the tinted goggles out at the workshop. Bruce and Tony were down at the other end, heads together over something. If they were eavesdropping they were doing an unusually tactful job of pretending not to.

"Like what?" Bucky muttered.

"I figured I'd go with the old classic battle plan," Steve said, pressing closer to Bucky's side. "Show up and see what happens."

Bucky took a deep breath and it shook mortifyingly all the way in. He held it for a moment to be sure it wouldn't come back out as a sob, and then said, "Could you... not here."

"I came to where you were, Buck," Steve said, very softly. "You choose your ground, I'll meet you there."

Bucky kept still for another couple of breaths, mapping it out in his head: the fastest route and the least chance of having to look Steve in the eye. He hopped down from the counter and walked out of the lab, not looking right or left and definitely not looking back.

He kept his pace slow and even until he was past the elevators and reached the stairwell door, and then he let himself pick up speed. He jumped up onto the railing and sprang from that to the next and the next, gaining momentum as he climbed higher and higher, no sound but the clang of his left hand against every other railing, and the faint echo of someone else coming up behind.

Thirty-two floors up he swung himself over the railing and let himself through the door into the kitchen of his and Steve's apartment. He let his momentum carry him further, to the living room and the couch, and he hesitated by it long enough to get caught, Steve grabbing him from behind in a bear hug tackle that took him down onto the cushions.

Bucky flexed against Steve's weight automatically, but Steve rode him out. Bucky didn't fight, just turned his head so he wasn't jamming the goggles into his cheekbones. He felt Steve's hand on the hood of his sweatshirt, and saw Steve drop a yellow shop towel on the floor beside the couch.

"You left a trail," Steve said, snuggling down on top of him, smashing him into the cushions. He couldn't move under that weight, couldn't even shiver. "Might've been handy if I needed to track you."
Bucky probably should have said something to that, but he was busy taking small breaths, letting Steve's weight hold him together.

"Just..." Steve's voice had lost any pretense of lightness now, and Bucky squeezed his eyes shut tight, tucking his chin down. "Buck, tell me that you know you could have called me. Tell me that you know that nothing but actual combat would have slowed me down if you told me you needed me here."

Bucky closed his eyes behind the protection of his goggles and tried to think of what to say. They both knew that Bucky had gone to Tony--and Bruce, and Butterfingers--rather than call Steve. Bucky wasn't sure he could even say why, but--

"You know if there's anything you need, anything you want," Steve said softly. "You know I'll do anything for you, Bucky. You just have to tell me what that is."

Bucky froze, and felt Steve feel that reaction. He knew he was giving himself away, but he couldn't unlock his body from the awareness of the truth in what Steve said, even though Steve had no idea what he was offering.

If Bucky just told him, Steve would do absolutely anything for him. Steve would hurt him, rape him, do things they both found sickening. Steve would feel a thousand times worse than Bucky ever could; Steve loved him. Steve had had nightmares just from seeing Bucky under the off-switch, not even knowing what Bucky remembered while he was down there. Steve was untouched by the things HYDRA had done to Bucky, the ways they had molded him to their purposes. If Bucky just opened his mouth, Steve would let Bucky corrupt him in a way no one else could, and every moment of it would be torture for him. For both of them.

"You don't have to say anything," Steve murmured. "It doesn't have to be now. I just--I just need you to know that. Nothing's more important to me. Nothing."

"I know." Bucky felt smaller and more hollow than ever, as if Steve's reassuring weight might crush him if he caught it at the wrong angle. Emptied out, worn thin, but he could still protect Steve from this. He had to. "I do know that."

Some amount of time passed while he hid there, sheltered under Steve's body with his secrets safely concealed in the pit of his stomach. He didn't rest, didn't feel any better as his slow weighted breaths went in and out, but he was held in one place, and Steve didn't have to worry about him.

The quiet was only broken when JARVIS spoke, close to his ear but loud enough that Bucky knew Steve could hear him too. "Sergeant Barnes, Dr. Padfield has just entered the building. If you wish to cancel your regular appointment, I shall inform him."

Steve shifted off him, sliding down to crouch in front of him. Bucky looked at Steve's concerned face through the tinted goggles for a couple of breaths, calculating what he could get away with and what the fallout would be. He shook his head slightly and reached up to push the goggles off. "I can talk to him."

Steve's gaze searched his eyes, but he obviously didn't find any of the things Bucky was keeping hidden, because he just leaned in and gave Bucky a little kiss. "I'll go in the TV room, you can stay right here. Okay?"

Bucky nodded. Steve wouldn't eavesdrop, even if Bucky almost wished he would.

Steve squeezed his right shoulder and stood up, walking over to the elevator doors to meet Padfield.
Steve said a few low-voiced words—Bucky caught _bad day_ before he felt compelled to actually move. He sat up and tucked himself into the corner of the couch, and he watched Steve walk away while Padfield came over to join him.

With a glance at the furniture, Padfield sat down on the coffee table, as close to Bucky as he could get without actually being on the couch. "Okay if I sit here?"

Bucky nodded. "I'm—I'm not..."

Padfield gave him a solid fifteen seconds to finish that statement, but Bucky couldn't come up with anything close enough to honest to be convincing.

"Well, Steve seems to think you're having a bad day," Padfield offered. "And I notice you're not really contradicting him. You definitely seem to be having an unusual day."

Padfield gestured to their surroundings, maybe too tactful to point out that Bucky was huddled in a corner of the couch with his hoodie still pulled up, a few stray yellow towels scattered around, and probably a few pressure marks on his face showing where the goggles had been.

"And not, I think, unusual in a way that you want to _become_ usual," Padfield offered.

"No," Bucky said immediately. "No, I--"

No. He didn't want to do this again. He didn't want to feel this way, even if it meant never feeling the brief ecstatic almost-enough pleasure he'd felt while pursuing orgasm. Even if it meant staying broken. The tradeoff was obviously not in his favor. The risks were too great—not just the physical danger, but this miserable fallout, the secrets to keep, the possibility of Steve somehow finding out and being dragged in, dragged down.

No. He didn't want this to be usual. He didn't want it to happen again at all.

So all he had to do was _not do it_. He could just... stop. Accept that he wouldn't feel that again. Forget about pleasure and move on. He could have Steve and be good to him; he could be on Steve's team and fight alongside him. He didn't need more than that, not when it cost this much, and could have cost so much more.

"No," he repeated more strongly, meeting Padfield's gaze. "No. I don't want more days like this."

Padfield studied him for a moment, his gaze searching like Steve's had been. "So, you want to tell me what happened so we can do something about that?"

Bucky lowered his gaze. He should have spent all that mute, blank time putting a lie together, but... Woj had talked to him about some of the things he might experience. The best lies stuck close to the truth. He could make this work.

"I had a—a flashback, I think," Bucky said slowly. "It wasn't like when I get memories back usually, it was like it was happening all over again. Like it was happening right now, but I was awake, I was..."

Bucky shook his head and raised his left hand to his neck, not quite touching the place where the scratch had healed into invisibility.

Padfield wasn't giving much away, but he wasn't dismissing the idea out of hand. "What happened?"

Bucky gave a quick, tense smile and then thought better of it and tried to straighten his face. "I
almost died. Not on a mission, not for anything important, I just... I was restrained, helpless, and I was choking and couldn't get free, and I almost died."

Even shrouded in a lie, it was some relief to say the words out loud. Padfield grimaced, his expression tilting toward concern.

"It was--I was scared," Bucky managed to say, mostly steady even if his voice was coming out very quietly. "I've never--I can't remember ever being that scared. Even when it was--it stopped, and I knew it wasn't happening anymore and I was safe, but I was still so scared. And then just... tired."

"Fear like that is exhausting," Padfield said gently. "And your mind can make a memory feel very real. It's important to take care of yourself afterward--and let other people take care of you, if that helps."

"Accept support," Bucky muttered, remembering the press of Steve's body, the soft weight of towels covering his body.

Padfield nodded. "And for yourself--the important thing, once you're able to, is to ground yourself in the present. To teach yourself to really recognize that you are safe, and what you're remembering is in the past."

Bucky closed his eyes. Only hours in the past, but still: it was in the past. And he would learn to leave it there. He would.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr](https://example.com). I am also on Tumblr! And if you'd like to know about the other writing I do as Dessa Lux, I have a post about my upcoming book (featuring one hero who Just Wants To Help People and Doesn't Need Anyone's Help and one hero who has had some Major Traumas and is Not Okay With Sex at first, but, you know, they're werewolves so it's totally different) you can [check out this post about it](https://example.com).
Chapter 31

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The fear came back again and again through the rest of the day, like a joint that hurt excruciatingly when it was flexed a certain way but otherwise could be ignored. Each time, he practiced the homework Padfield had given him, grounding himself in the present: what can you see, what can you feel, what is real now, what is present now?

Steve was always a part of that, the scent of him in Bucky's nose, the warmth of him always within reach. Steve looked at him with worried eyes but said nothing, only staying close, giving Bucky something to steady himself on, physically and otherwise.

He slept badly, waking again and again with nightmares--old ones plus a new variation, where it was his own face looking down at him, his own face on the techs and the doctors. All of them pale and shocky and still pushing the scalpel in, still charging the stun baton, still--

He shook his head and practiced the same procedures of mindfulness and present-focusing alone in his own bed, pushing the fear and the memories away from himself. It was just a nightmare now; just another part of the past. He wasn't going to be that again, wasn't going to hurt himself like that.

When he finally woke in the light it felt like an escape. This was a new day, and he had things to do, things to do in the present that were more important than just forcing the past to be the past. He was supposed to be earning his place among the Avengers, learning to live in the world so that Steve would know he was ready. Yesterday hadn't helped him make his case. He would do better today.

There was morning PT, and gun range time, and then he wrote down some notes about how helpful the mindfulness exercises had been. As he wrote the words it solidified in his mind: that was the past, to be forgotten and left behind. This was the present, where he was making progress, doing better, accepting support. The old plan had been abandoned when conditions on the ground made it clearly untenable; he was making a new call now.

By the time he had finished his homework he was smiling, ready to find some new challenge to take on. He had some unscheduled time, so he paced around the apartment considering what his new challenge should be. Steve, sitting by the windows in the living room sketching, glanced up and offered him a tentative smile.

Bucky smiled back--I'm here, this is now, I'm doing this right--and paced back out of Steve's sight, forcing himself to focus on the plan. A new plan.

Well. What did he need to be ready? He needed to be able to handle the public, the attention. Steve had said that, when Bucky first asked about joining the team. Bucky obviously wasn't ready to be out in the middle of a crowd, but there had to be some smaller way to face the public.

Just one person, maybe. Maybe through the internet--not that awful endless scroll of Twitter messages, but... if he could just see one, or a few, if he could ask someone to choose one that wasn't so bad... He thought of the kid outside the church, holding up their hands in the shape of a heart. There had to be people like that; if he could find one, if he could start there, maybe he could get somewhere.
He went into the TV room and sat down facing the darkened screen. "JARVIS? I know people talk about me, but do any of them try to talk to me?"

"They do, Sergeant," JARVIS said promptly. "You have received a large amount of postal mail, as well as numerous emails--"

"How do I get emails?" Bucky interrupted. "I don't have email."

"This has not prevented people from guessing at your email address," JARVIS explained. "The jbbarnes@army.mil address was rendered completely unusable for the soldier actually assigned to it after your return was announced, and the decision was made to keep it active as a repository of the messages sent to you after she had transferred to another address. Far more messages, however, have been sent to the nonexistent buckybarnes@avengers.si.com email, which the public seems to have collectively invented by analogy with Captain Rogers' public address. The volume of messages was such that it was, again, considered prudent to create an email account to receive them rather than have so much traffic bouncing."

"Does anybody read them?" Bucky asked. "Or--the mailbags?"

"I review the contents of your si.com email account according to certain heuristics for detecting threats; I believe someone is tasked with doing the same for your Army account. Threatening messages are directed to appropriate authorities. Physical mail is scanned and examined by robots before being reviewed by Stark Industries interns."

Bucky tried not to think about how many people had full-time jobs reading messages for him that he'd never known about--never thought to wonder about--until just now. He also tried not to think about how many people had been threatening to kill him without him ever knowing the threat had existed. He was starting now. He didn't have to start with the worst of what was out there.

"Could I see one?" Bucky asked, steeling himself. There had to be some. It couldn't be only people who hated him, who were sending threats. "If there's one that's not..."

"Would you prefer a positive but fairly generic message, Sergeant, or a positive message with possibly significant emotional import?"

Bucky opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, considering his options, and then pulled out his phone and tapped out a message. TV room?

Steve appeared forty-five seconds later. "What's up?"

"JARVIS was just going to show me an email that might make me cry," Bucky said. "But in a nice way, apparently."

Steve mouthed a silent oh, and Bucky could see instantly that Steve thought he knew what the email was. He felt a surge of annoyance at being protected from whatever this was, but there was only one way past that. Bucky patted the couch beside him, and Steve came around and sat, stretching an arm casually across the cushions behind Bucky's shoulders.

"Okay, JARVIS," Bucky said, leaning his head back against Steve's forearm. "Hit me."

The message appeared on the TV screen, a few short paragraphs on one side and two photos on the other. One photo was black and white, and made Bucky's brain feel like it was turning inside out: it was himself, in the crisp and perfect uniform of a sergeant of the 107th infantry, his cap at a rakish angle. He was smiling broadly, crouching beside a tiny dark-haired girl in a frilly white dress. He remembered suddenly, overwhelmingly, the smell of his mother's kitchen, the patterned tile floor he
could just glimpse behind his own knees, and the way Kitty, his sister Nell's little girl, had unerringly grabbed and disarranged his pins if he held her while he was wearing his uniform.

The second picture was of an old woman— in her seventies, she must be, to have been that toddler in 1943. She bore a faint, faded resemblance to his memory of his mother, and cradled in her arms a glassed frame holding a folded American flag and a simple gold star.

_Dear Uncle Bucky_, the message began. *I'm afraid I don't remember having my picture taken with you, but I heard so many stories about you from my mother and aunts...*

Bucky turned and hid his face against Steve's shoulder, and Steve's arm curled firmly around him.

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Writing a five-line reply to Kitty took up most of Saturday; he was nearly finished and then realized that he ought to include a picture, like she had. Of course she would have seen the few pictures of him that everyone in the world had seen, but that didn't count. Kitty was family; she ought to see him in a way other people didn't.

He attempted a selfie, which resulted in a series of increasingly weird expressions captured on his phone. He deleted all of them, tipped back his head and yelled, "**Steve!**"

"**Bucky!**" Steve yelled back, like they were playing Marco Polo.

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Come here and take a picture of me for Kitty!"

He waited a few seconds, and then Steve walked in already holding his phone. "You could've just said."

"I did just say," Bucky huffed, but Steve was already looking around critically.

"**JARVIS, could you warm up the light in here? We really oughta do this by a window, it'd be—**"

"Steve, it's not art, it's a family snapshot."

"No reason not to do it well," Steve said, frowning down into his phone and moving around Bucky, checking different angles. "You could also smile, if you wanted—"

Bucky tried, but he could feel how stiff it was even before a dubious look flickered across Steve's face. This should be easy, with Steve. He should be able to smile. Didn't he smile for Steve, with Steve, all the time? But that just made him more conscious of trying to shape his face correctly, and Steve's dubious look turned to outright concern.

"I changed my mind," Bucky said abruptly, because he could already see this wasn't going anywhere good.

Steve looked up, directly at him instead of through the phone. "Buck, hang on, you just—"

"Shouldn't just be a picture of me, she knows you too," Bucky said. Steve had told him that, when he finally managed to read the whole email; he'd exchanged a few messages with Kitty after he first came to the future, and more after Bucky turned out to be alive. "Come here, I want a picture of both of us. A picture of both of us that's not all over the internet."

"Oh." Steve looked a little bit pleased, and came over to sit down so close to Bucky he was almost on top of him. He slung his left arm around Bucky, holding his phone out in front of him with his right, and leaned his cheek against Bucky's. He felt Steve's big cheesy cabaret-stage grin; he could
picture it next to his own stiff expression. Bucky started laughing, and then Steve was laughing too.

The little shutter-click of the camera went off about six times before Steve sat back, keeping his arm around Bucky.

He turned the phone and thumbed through the pictures—the first three were hilariously bad, catching them open-mouthed and squinting and a truly impressive angle up Steve's nose. The fourth one was kind of charming, in a slightly tilted selfie way, but the fifth one was actually a pretty good picture—they were looking toward each other with big smiles.

"Send me those two," Bucky said, squirming away from Steve to get back to his email, pulled up on a laptop that seemed devoid of any other programs or access, though he had a feeling if he asked for more it would be there. One thing at a time. He needed to send an email.

"Sure," Steve said. "Where's your--okay, transferring..."

The pictures appeared as little icons on Bucky's desktop. He dragged the better one into the email he'd already signed, after careful consideration, Your uncle, Bucky Barnes.

He sent the email and then looked over at Steve, who was sitting on the couch, frowning down at his phone like he didn't plan on moving any time soon.

"So I wanted to ask you," Steve said. "Tomorrow's Sunday."

Bucky nodded slowly. "We going to Mass?"

Steve grimaced. "That's the question. It's going to be even more of a circus than it was last week, coming and going both."

Bucky remembered how upset Steve had been last week while Bucky wasn't upset at all. "You don't want me to?"

Steve shook his head. "I want us to have a plan, Buck. I don't want you to get triggered like you did last week. We can try to get in quietly—or, hey, Tony's been offering to drop us in with a helicopter, or give you a ride with the Iron Man suit--"

Bucky burst out laughing at the mental image of Tony zooming him into the church through a window. Breaking it in the process, probably.

Steve smiled with one side of his mouth but said seriously, "He wants to help, Buck. He's... he wants to help."

Worried about you, Steve hadn't said, and Tony was far from the only one.

Bucky licked his lips, thinking about it. He hadn't really let himself consider what it was going to be like, let alone how to feel safe. All those people, trying to crowd in around him, screaming...

He touched his ear absently, looking down at his knees. He remembered the trip to his trial, Exley telling him to keep his head down. He'd had Andrews beside him, talking about normal things, so he couldn't hear, and he hadn't really seen...

"If you can keep anyone from touching me," Bucky said slowly. "I think--I think we can do this."

When he and Steve got down to the car the next morning, it was another big black thing with tinted windows, bigger than the last one. They found it already occupied: Clint, Natasha, and Sam were
sharing the backward-facing seat, and Bruce was alone at the end of the forward-facing one. The guys were all in suits, while Natasha wore a surprisingly modest dress, a little hat pinned in place on her red hair.

Bucky blinked at her as a memory slid into place, a dissonance he hadn't been able to put his finger on. "Women don't cover their hair at Mass anymore."

Natasha smiled that knowing not-quite-smirk of hers. "Call me old-fashioned. I thought it fit the theme."

Bucky looked around at each of the others and then over at Steve, summoning up a smile of his own. "Is Tony going to fly there in his suit?"

Steve just shook his head slightly, not so much as I have no idea. He hadn't expected this either; he wouldn't have ambushed Bucky with this.

He was pleased, though, and that let Bucky identify the growing warmth he felt himself. Accepting support, Bucky thought. Well, four extra Avengers made for a hell of a lot of support.

"We're keeping Stark in reserve," Natasha said. "If everything goes well, he won't make an appearance at all."

Bucky got into the car, sliding over to sit next to Bruce, who glanced down at the headphones Bucky was holding in both hands.

"Speaking of not making an appearance..." Bucky said hesitantly.

"It's fine, I can handle crowds," Bruce said, smiling gently. "Crowds very often find they don't want to risk handling me, though. Comes in handy once in a while."

Bucky didn't know quite what that meant, but Steve thanked him in an earnest voice, so Bucky just nodded agreement and looked down at the headphones. They would keep him safe from people yelling--no matter what anyone said, he wouldn't hear it, so it couldn't trigger him. Nothing he couldn't hear could hurt him, or cause him to hurt anyone else. Even Steve. Especially Steve.

He slipped the headphones on and turned on the music when they were within a couple of blocks of the church, and after that he closed his eyes and let the Ave Maria wash over him. Dance music hadn't seemed right for a Sunday morning.

He looked again when the car stopped, and watched as the door opened. Bruce stepped out first, and stayed just outside the car door for a moment. Letting people recognize him, and realize what it would mean if they upset him.

When Bruce moved away from the car, Clint and Natasha got out next, and then Sam, and then Steve touched Bucky's hand. When Bucky looked at him he mouthed, Do you want me to go first?

Bucky shook his head and took Steve's hand, holding on firmly as he scooted down to the door and got out of the car, pulling Steve after him.

The path up to the church was surprisingly clear, an open space a dozen feet across from the curb to the church doors. On either side the space was lined with people standing sentry. On the right they were all in uniforms--military mostly, plus a few police in dress uniform. There were men, women, different services, all standing stiffly at attention, shoulder to shoulder. On the left the line was held by civilians, mostly older, some elderly--Kitty's age, which was disorienting all over again. They all had rosaries in their hands. They were praying out loud, Bucky saw. He didn't know whether the
crowd behind them were drowning them out, but it didn't matter to him; he couldn't hear anyway. He could only see.

He dropped his gaze, not letting himself catch more than a peripheral glimpse of the signs and banners behind them on either side. His own honor guard had formed up, and Steve squeezed his hand, urging him on. He dropped his gaze to the sidewalk and didn't look around again until he was at the church steps and Fr. Roche was offering a hand for him to shake.

Bucky smiled unsteadily and took it, and realized at the same time that he felt unsteady, which meant this had worked. He could still feel.

He was a little surprised that everyone walked with him and Steve up the aisle. The pews to either side were packed, but there was a little flurry and half a row on the right side was cleared for them, the same place they'd sat last week. Bucky glanced around at the faces of the people in the pews nearby, but they all looked vaguely familiar. Directly behind them sat last week's lector with her partner and their toddler; Bucky crooked his fingers in a wave at the little one, who stared back, wide-eyed.

Bucky finally reached up and turned off his headphones. It was like coming up from underwater as he pulled them off, the pressure of isolation giving way to the Sunday morning muttering of a packed church. No one yelled, no camera shutters clicked, and Bucky knelt between Steve and Clint and didn't look back to see whether the newcomers in the church were all staring at him. They weren't a threat, not here. Not in a church.

The Mass started a few moments later, the singing startlingly loud when the pews were packed. Bucky tried to focus on the nearest voices. Steve sang like he was on a stage—which he was, in a way—and Sam and Natasha had good voices once they caught the melody. It was more surprising to realize that Clint and Bruce both already knew the hymn. The Mass was carefully normal, with a mild and even welcome to guests and newcomers from Fr. Roche at the start, and what seemed like a pointedly irrelevant-to-Bucky sermon about reconciling faith and science. Clint and Bruce definitely betrayed a familiarity with the Mass, though Bucky noticed that they stayed as silent as Sam and Natasha through the Creed and most of the prayers, and waved him and Steve past to go to Communion without them.

Fr. Roche gave Bucky a firm, approving nod as he laid the Host on Bucky's tongue. When he was kneeling in the pew again with Steve by his side, Bucky let himself think ahead. Mass was about to end; he was about to walk out to face the people who had waited an hour for another chance to scream at him, gawk at him, calculate a trajectory...

Bucky closed his eyes and tried to focus for a moment on prayer, but he didn't know what to ask for this time. He wasn't afraid of the people outside, not with all this protection around him; he was afraid of his own reaction. If he went calm again, it would hurt Steve. If he didn't go cold, but scared, or angry, something they could see—that would hurt Steve worse, and make the others feel they had to protect him. Someone could get hurt, and it would be because of him but out of his control.

He remembered Bruce turning away when Bucky had just talked about the off-switch and his arm, struggling for control, for calm. Bucky didn't know if he could do that the normal way. He thought of his arm's off-switch and wished there was some way to turn himself off just a little, just the parts that he didn't want. Just for a few minutes, while he got to the car. If there was just some way to--

To not feel like that again. To not face that danger again.

He opened his eyes, looking up toward the altar--past it, to the sacristy, the way out the altar boys had been sent through last week.
If he didn't want to feel like that again, all he had to do was not do it again. He had come to Mass, because it was on the schedule, because he wanted to see Fr. Roche and he didn't want to let anyone take this away from him. He had accepted help from Steve and the others. He had even let himself be seen by the crowd, walked right through them protected by his honor guard and his headphones.

There wasn't a reason in the world why he had to go right back out the same way. Going in through the front door--and out the same way--that was Steve's style. That was Captain America. But Bucky had never been that, and he didn't have to be. He wasn't another one of Steve; he was Steve's complement.

He didn't have to do it again. He felt a giddy relief that seemed like a revelation, like something being granted to him from above. Maybe he was being rewarded, now, for resolving not to hurt himself again. Thank you. Yes. I'll be good, I'll stay safe.

He floated through the rest of Mass with a smile on his face, singing along with the hymn even though the noise from outside the church, a low mumble like the sea through most of the service, was picking up. They expected him to just walk out where they were waiting for him.

What kind of sniper, what kind of halfway competent soldier would do that? Who would commit to a single exit route in advance, knowing it was compromised? That was a decision that had to be made by the man on the ground.

Well, Steve would. But then Steve had never been any good as an actual soldier, even when he excelled at being Captain America under the Army's auspices. Bucky looked over at Steve with a grin, and Steve smiled back, looking baffled but enormously pleased.

As soon as the procession was past them, Steve's expression turned serious. "Bucky--we're going to keep you safe out there."

Bucky shook his head and looked past Steve to Natasha. She would understand. "You want to show me the back way out?"

Natasha smiled, the twist of her lips as sharp as a knife, confident as he'd known she would be. "It would be my pleasure."

Bruce and Clint left with them--"I'll keep people out of Bucky's face, but I don't like having a chilling effect when they're not hurting anybody," Bruce said, and Clint just fell in with them without feeling any need to explain himself. Bucky was worried about leaving Steve with only Sam for backup, but they both waved him off.

"I got this, man," Sam said. "I've gotten pretty good at keeping an eye on him."

Steve didn't say a word, just gave Bucky a hard, lingering hug before he turned away to join the rest of the congregants streaming down the main aisle.

The escape wasn't particularly difficult--Bucky barely got his shoes dirty, and didn't do a bit of damage to his suit. Clint had somehow managed to tear his in three places and get dirt on his face by the time they got to the car waiting for them four blocks away, but Bucky didn't think it was necessary to point that out.

"So," Natasha said when they were headed back to the safety of the Tower. "Big plans for the rest of your weekend?"

Bucky rubbed his stomach. "Breakfast? You guys want to come up to ours and eat?"
That was how it should be, after all, just like every Sunday at MEDCOM. Mass, then breakfast with the team.

"We could get enough for Steve and Sam, too," Bucky added.

Clint snorted. "Those two aren't gonna be home for at least an hour, man. If we wait for them it's going to be brunch."

Bucky looked at Natasha and Bruce, and they both nodded agreement with Clint.

"Steve's going to want to shake hands with everyone who showed up to support you," Bruce explained. "And that's going to slow him down enough that at least one legitimate news reporter is going to get him on camera, so then he's giving an interview. Sam too, probably."

"They'll try to get Sam to say something negative about you," Natasha added. "He hasn't had as much media training as Steve, and you're not as close to him. They'll think they can get something."

Breakfast suddenly seemed less appealing, and not just because Steve and Sam wouldn't be at the table.

"Hey," Clint said, bumping his knee against Bucky's. "Reporters are gonna try, man. Doesn't mean they're gonna get anywhere. You ever seen somebody try to pull a gotcha question on Wilson?"

Bucky shook his head slightly. He wasn't even sure what that was.

"Breakfast and a show," Clint said firmly, sitting back. "Trust me."

Bucky remembered Clint's weight on his back, the grip of Clint's legs around him as Clint's arrow cable held them both up. He remembered laughing, playing, knowing that he was safe with his... teammate? Friend?

And on the heels of that thought he felt the same cable wrapped around his neck.

He thought, for the first time, of what would have happened to Clint if Steve had broken down the door and found Bucky like that. They would have known where the cable came from. Clint had been blaming himself for shooting near a kid; what would he have felt when he saw what his cable had done to Bucky? That would have been more than a few rounds on the range could get him through.

Oh my God, Bucky thought, staring down at his mismatched hands folded in his lap, forcing himself to be here, now, not there in the past. I am heartily sorry.

But he wouldn't do it again. He wouldn't do that to Clint. He wouldn't do that to Steve. He wouldn't wreck the team by wrecking them. They had all turned out for him today; he could do his part.

He looked around at Bruce and Natasha, both looking like they agreed with Clint, before he nodded firmly. He knew what it meant to be on a team; he knew what it meant to be Steve's sergeant, keeping the team together for him. "I trust you."

Bucky nearly choked on his hash browns when they cut to a view of Sam's reaction to the reporter's question. Clint howled with laughter; Bruce applauded softly.

"Well," Sam said finally, when his unimpressed look had had a few seconds to sink in. "The last time I spoke to my churchgoing mother, which was this morning when I called to tell her I might
wind up on the news with some fool shoving a microphone in my face, what she said is that she's praying for Bucky and he's welcome to Sunday dinner whenever he's ready to deal with the Wilson family in a confined space, same as the rest of the team."

Clint patted Bucky on the back, hard. Bucky managed to swallow his hash browns as the video changed to a wider shot--Steve hugging someone right in front of that black banner Bucky had seen before.

This was the first time he'd really looked at it: the words below the silhouette, the letters above. *POW MIA. YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN.*

Steve pulled away from the hug and shook hands with both of the people holding up the banner.

Bucky dropped his gaze to his plate and focused on eating breakfast, trying not to think too hard about that. *You are not forgotten.* Him and Steve, before and now. People had remembered them for all the time they were missing, and they kept remembering now, showing up at seven on a Sunday morning to stand there holding up that flag.

"JARVIS," Bucky said after a while. When he looked at the screen now Steve and Sam were taking selfies with a couple of soldiers, an airman waiting his turn. "Can we get breakfast for everybody?"

There was a pause, and then JARVIS said, "Everybody in front of the church, Sergeant?"

"Donuts, at least," Clint said immediately. "Donuts are traditional, right? And coffee."

"Steve's gotta be starving," Bucky added. "He hasn't had breakfast yet, he's not going to get out of there until ten o'clock Mass starts."

"I'm sure something can be arranged," JARVIS agreed.

When Steve finally got home, his kiss tasted icing-sweet.

Chapter End Notes

Alby’s art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](http://example.com)

I am also on [Tumblr](http://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](http://example.com).
Chapter 32

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

Extra warnings: This chapter and the next are a rough ride in a way that does not get fully resolved by the end of the chapter--if cliffhangers are the bad kind of un-fun for you, this may be a good time to take a week or so off from reading and catch up once we're at 34 or 35. There is a brief instance of I-thought-this-was-okay-but-clearly-it-wasn't misjudged consent, with not-at-all-brief consequences; more details are in the end notes, or you can hit me up if you have questions or need more information.

Also, many, many thanks to praximeter for awesome late-stage beta on the last several chapters and this one (and going forward), and for all of the putting-up-with-my-whining that entails. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sunday night, when they were alone again, Steve let Bucky go down on him on the couch. Bucky did everything right, he was sure of it, but a tension lingered in Steve's body afterward, in his hands when he touched Bucky, his mouth when they kissed. It felt like an echo of Bucky's own frustration, the way he got wound up from getting Steve off and then couldn't do anything about it, but that had to be just Bucky projecting. Steve had actually gotten off, after all.

Even after he kissed Steve good night and went to bed in his own room, he kept replaying those moments in his mind, every look and touch that told him something was wrong, that he had gotten something wrong somehow. He wanted, for a moment, to make himself stop thinking about it, to remember only that he was safe in his own bed, but he couldn't. This wasn't a nightmare, wasn't something scary; this was Steve. Steve wasn't something he ever wanted to forget.

And if something really was wrong, then Bucky had to figure out how to fix it. He couldn't just tell himself everything was fine when it wasn't; he might be safe, but that didn't mean he wasn't fucking this up.

Steve had definitely gotten off, and Bucky had definitely done the stuff Steve liked in the process of getting Steve off, so the problem had to be something else. Like the fact that Bucky hadn't gotten hard like he used to. Like the fact that he didn't come, didn't even let Steve try to make him.

Bucky flailed up off the soft, wide bed and went to sit on the floor with his back pressed to the wall, left arm whirring, his right fist clenched tight.

That couldn't be the problem. It was the obvious explanation, but if that was the problem then he couldn't fix it, because he wasn't going to go there again. He wasn't going to hurt himself, which meant he was giving up on fixing himself, so Steve was never going to be able to make him come, because he sure as hell wasn't going to--to ask Steve to--

He felt sick at the thought of it, and he knew Steve would only feel sicker. It would be disgusting, it would be obscene, to make Steve do what they'd done to him, to ask him to step into that place. He couldn't. And he couldn't let Steve guess that that was the problem, or Steve would want to solve it.
Letting Steve guess any of this would be just as bad as asking him outright.

So he wouldn't. He wouldn't let Steve guess. He wouldn't act like that was the problem, because that could not be the problem.

There had to be some other way to make Steve feel even better than he had tonight. Some way to make that instant when he went all limp and dopey last longer, be better. Some way to make him really smile, really relax. It wasn't like a blowjob was pulling out all the stops; it was barely even really sex. If he really wanted to blow Steve's mind...

Everything he could think of was a dead end: Steve used to like getting fucked, liked being naked together, liked spending the night in the same bed. All the things Bucky couldn't do.

He remembered, out of nowhere, talking to Andrews on the phone on his first day in New York; Andrews had told him to hang on to Steve, told him to ask if he needed sex tips. Because that was how people kept each other happy. It was even sort of normal to struggle with it, probably, for people who weren't him and Steve, joined at the hip for ten years before they realized they could also join at the hips. Andrews probably wouldn't even think it was that weird, and even if he did, he wouldn't guess the whole truth, or tell Steve anything.

Bucky got up and grabbed his phone. He opened up a text to Andrews--just Andrews, not the ongoing mysterious emoji-semaphore conversation including Duncan--and tried to figure out how to phrase it. The bright glow of the screen in the dark room was making his eyes prickle long after they should have adjusted, his vision blurry and his thoughts circling in the same exhausted rut over and over.

Finally he just typed, *Sex tips?* and sent it. If Andrews could figure out what Duncan meant by three caterpillars and Japan he could figure out what Bucky needed.

Bucky sat there long enough for the screen of his phone to go dark. He sat there long enough to think that it was obvious Andrews wasn't going to reply tonight, and he should get some sleep and he'd have an answer when he woke up; he was tired enough that his endlessly circling thoughts were turning to a murky blankness, but he couldn't let go, couldn't slide under the surface.

He sat there long enough to hear, faintly but definitely, the sound of Steve getting up in the night for a glass of water. He should be in Steve's bed when Steve came back, should be naked and waiting for him, not exhausted from running circles in his own head but sweetly sleepy, willing and able to be roused for more. He was half dreaming it, just awake enough to dread the part where it went wrong, when his phone vibrated in his hands and the screen lit up.

1 - **COMMUNICATE**

Bucky blinked down at the text.

2 - *Ask what he wants and do it the best you can figure out how*

Bucky swallowed hard. That was... he could do that, couldn't he? He could try. It was a place to start, at least, and Steve wouldn't ask him for things he couldn't do, wouldn't demand anything. Even if Steve wanted to try to get him off, he would never, ever stumble on the right way to go about it, and Bucky wasn't going to tell him.

3 - *More lube?*, followed by two pictures of eggplants and a thumbs up.

Bucky looked down at his own thumbs, and then he took his left hand off the phone and flexed it. Even if he didn't have a working dick, he could find ways to make Steve feel good. He could ask
how. Steve knew there was stuff he couldn't do; Steve would give him a chance to make it up to him.

*Thanks*, Bucky texted back.

*Please never send me any pictures ever*, Andrews replied.

Bucky smiled down at the phone until it went dark again, and then he slumped down on the floor and fell asleep almost without trying.

Andrews sent Bucky *eight* eggplants in the emoji text conversation with Duncan while he was doing PT the next morning, and Duncan's mostly-incomprehensible response included the party horn. Bucky laughed helplessly and sent back the hold-up hand and a moon to say, *tonight*, and then, by itself, a camera.

Andrews sent back forty-seven red-slashed circles for *NO*, but Duncan sent back a thought bubble, and Bucky was still grinning and trying to figure out how to say *I should've known you were way too interested in my love life when Martinez spilled the beans* in emoji when he went into his afternoon appointment with Padfield.

"Looks like today is a better day than Thursday," Padfield said, smiling almost as widely as Bucky, and Bucky nodded quickly.

"That's what I--I thought, on Sunday, I didn't want to have a day like that, so I did something different." Bucky tumbled out an only slightly edited explanation of his thoughts and actions on Sunday. Padfield kept smiling, nodding, encouraging him.

"This kind of thing is never completely finished, Bucky, but you're doing good work, here. You're taking the right steps."

Bucky nodded back. "I know. I can tell. It feels right."

Even his biofeedback session was easier, mostly because he gave up on doing it the way Jennifer patiently suggested and tried to do the opposite. He could make his heart beat *faster* without really trying, after all. Jennifer grinned when she caught him at it and started setting him challenges in the other direction; it meant shaking up some bad memories, but he always had Jennifer sitting across from him, the screen telling him his heart rate, reminding him that it was just a game, just practice.

He was still riding the high of knowing that he had a plan, the *right* plan, when he and Steve went to bed that night.

Steve had spent a few hours after dinner working on a mailbag, and JARVIS had doled out a couple of letters from kids for Bucky and supplied him with the guidelines for replies. Bucky had carefully composed answers, decided against attempting selfies just yet, and sent his two out in the time Steve cranked through a few dozen emails and three heavily-negotiated twitter responses which were actually typed out and sent by somebody in the PR office.

Bucky figured that this was a sign that, now that Bucky was being acknowledged to have contact with the world, he was allowed to see Steve having contact with the world. It was fun, mostly for listening to Steve arguing about commas and abbreviations with at least three people at the PR office. Even if he was no help himself, it felt good to be at Steve's side while he was working, to be on the inside of this instead of having it hidden from him.

And all the stuff Steve had been working on had been good stuff--an extension of his handshaking
and photo-opping outside the church on Sunday—so Steve was a little wound up but in a fundamentally good mood when Bucky followed him to bed that night.

He wasn't going to mind, Bucky told himself again. Steve would want to tell Bucky what he wanted. Steve loved solving problems; he would figure out what they could do so Steve could be satisfied.

"I want," Bucky said, when they were stripped down to boxers and t-shirts and lying in Steve's bed together, and then he stopped short.

Steve had said the same thing at the same time.

Bucky grinned. He and Steve were on the same page—Steve was all ready to tell Bucky what he wanted.

Steve was smiling too. "You tell me, Buck."

Bucky shrugged. "I was just gonna say I want you to tell me what you want. I can't do everything like we used to—" Steve's smile was shifting, fading, and Bucky felt a faint thrill of panic. The good day he'd had suddenly felt fragile as a candy shell, about to crack on his tongue. On Steve's.

"Steve, whatever you want, I can figure out a way, I just--I want you to be happy."

Steve looked down, shaking his head slightly. He hadn't quite stopped smiling. Bucky clung to that.

"I want you to be happy," Steve finally said. "I want--God, Buck, I want to make love to you, I--"

Bucky felt himself going cold, bracing himself not to tell no matter how Steve asked, to endure Steve trying and failing and trying and trying and trying. "I can't--"

"I know I can't get you off. I'm not asking you for something you can't do, Bucky, I just--I want to be close to you. I want to feel close to you, not just like you're..."

Bucky swallowed hard, feeling cornered, exposed. "Like I'm what."

Steve shrugged uncomfortably. "Like you're just there to get me off. That's not how it should be, Buck. Even if I'm the only one who can, that's not what I want with you. I want to touch you--and I don't mean fuck you, I don't mean anything that's for me. I want to do something that's good for you. Whatever that means now, I want to start figuring it out."

Bucky shook his head, trying to get his bearings. Two minutes ago he'd thought he knew how this would go, he'd thought he could make it go right, but now...

"Unless..." Steve said, so carefully neutral that Bucky's head jerked up, riveting his attention. "Is it--not good for you? When I touch you, I mean, obviously it's not--but is it--do you not want--"

Bucky made a pained noise in his throat and shook his head hard.

"No, Stevie, no, I do, I just--I--" He couldn't ask Steve for something that would actually work, and he couldn't think of what else he should ask for, what good even meant now. Just... nice? Pleasant? He couldn't shake the thought of Steve just trying and trying to get him off, determined not to fail even when they both knew it was impossible to succeed.

"How would you know when to stop?" Bucky muttered finally, smiling a little to show that he knew it was a dumb objection.

Steve didn't smile back. "I'll stop when I feel like I'm done, or when you tell me to. I don't want to do
anything you don't want, Buck. I don't want to pressure you, I just--you asked me what I want and this is what I want. I want you. Please. Let me give you something. Anything, I don't care, as long as it feels good to you. I'll pet your hair or scratch your back or kiss your feet, I just need you to tell me something you want.”

Bucky searched his memory for something he could ask for--something that would satisfy Steve without being more dangerous than he could bear. He had to actually like it; pretending would be worse than refusing outright.

He remembered the hours he'd spent on the couch with Steve on Friday, Steve's weight holding him together. It wasn't sex; it was the opposite of anything he could ever get off on, warm and safe. Steve's touch, like that, would keep him close and present and good.

Bucky shoved the covers back and yanked his shirt off, watching Steve's expression turn wary. Bucky shoved his boxers down while he was at it--Steve liked being naked together. Skin to skin; they couldn't get closer than that.

"You too," Bucky said, lying back on the bed. He folded his arms behind his head, trying to find the trick of lying down like he was lounging, and not like he was surrendering. Steve's eyes narrowed a little--he knew when he was being dared, even when Bucky didn't say the words. He stripped down, tossing his underwear after Bucky's.

Bucky let his gaze travel slowly over Steve's body. Steve wasn't hard, but that was what Steve had said he wanted--nothing for him, nothing about getting him off. Bucky tried to just look, without looking for anything. He remembered doing that before, tracing the lines of Steve's body with his eyes just for the pleasure of looking; even when he'd been a skinny, crooked little thing, far more bone to his shape than muscle, Bucky had loved to look at him. Now he was big and strong and obviously beautiful, and still Steve in every generous inch. Bucky looked.

When he dragged his gaze back up to Steve's eyes, Steve's expression had softened; he knew Bucky was trying. And maybe he'd been looking a little himself. His color was a little higher, and in a good way, not the hectic flush of frustration or anger.

"Come here," Bucky said softly, trying not to make it a challenge. "On top, like--like the other day on the couch. I liked that."

"Not exactly like that," Steve said, but he was already moving, laying himself out over Bucky.

Bucky let out a shuddering breath as Steve settled over him, and it struck him that Steve wasn't the only one who liked being naked together--when they did it before, it hadn't just been for Steve. It was for both of them. All that skin, all that warmth and touch, and Steve's deliciously solid weight. It was like being caressed everywhere at once.

"Better," Bucky agreed. He hooked his right arm around the back of Steve's neck, but Steve was already ducking his head for a kiss.

They kissed softly--not like kissing was new, because that had been all frantic hunger and clumsiness. They kissed like they were reconstructing it from the component parts, lingering carefully over every element. Steve's hands didn't touch him, and Steve's body was still on top of his, steady and firm, holding him in place. The everywhere touch became like white noise, letting him focus on the touch of his mouth against Steve's like there was nothing else in the world.

Nothing else mattered like this. Steve's mouth, Steve's kiss, Steve's breath. He could live on this. His skin felt impossibly sensitive, his body slowly winding up. He already knew that couldn't go
anywhere, so it was just another sensation to enjoy, all by itself, like well-warmed muscles at the end of PT, like sunshine and the good baking heat of a Texas afternoon.

Neither of them spoke, but every kiss was a communication—This? Yes? Again? More? What about-yes? Yes. Yes. And there were little sounds, breaths sighed out, breaths jerked in, the wet sounds of lips and tongues sliding and parting, and sometimes Steve would make this little sound in the back of his throat, not quite a whine. Sometimes Bucky's breath would stall in the back of his throat, coming out as a low soft grunt.

Bucky realized after a while that Steve's cock was hard against his belly, trapped between them. He could feel Steve determinedly not-moving, ignoring it, and Bucky laughed a little against Steve's mouth.

"You want to see if you can get off from just kissing?" Bucky asked against his mouth. "Doesn't count if neither of us touches your dick?"

"Just want to kiss," Steve murmured back, nipping at Bucky's lower lip. "Don't care about the rest."

"I like it, though." Bucky nipped back, harder, then soothed Steve's lip with a sweep of his tongue. "Like you getting off on me."

"Maybe I will, then." Steve squirmed on top of him, nothing purposeful enough to be a thrust; the friction all over his skin made Bucky shiver from the crown of his head to his toes, and it had to feel better on Steve's cock, rubbed between them.

"Sometime," Steve added, tilting his head for another kiss, slow and sweeping. The press of his cock against Bucky's belly was maddening—he couldn't believe Steve could have that and waste it, not even caring whether he came or not.

So he wouldn't think about it. He would just feel it—a particular pressure, another touch of Steve's body against his—and he would kiss Steve and keep kissing him, borne down under Steve's body. There was no urgency, no direction. No reason to stop, no reason to speed up.

Bucky noticed, at some point, that he was dozing off, that Steve was nudging kisses against his lips because he kept forgetting to kiss back. His mind was going dark and still, here in this safe warm place with Steve. He thought there was something important about that, but he couldn't remember what it was before the stillness swallowed him up, kisses and all.

He was aware of a closeness, a smothering sweaty weight, and he wanted to struggle but he couldn't move, couldn't even make a sound. Helpless, paralyzed, locked in this vile intimacy, someone's breath on his face and a strange hand on his cock and of course he responded to it. Of course he couldn't help but respond, his cock hard, the rest of his body frozen, a trapped cry lodged in his throat while his breath stayed perfectly even.

The hand on him stroked him slow—sleepy, he thought somehow—and the whole body he was pinned under moved against him, and there was a blunt soft nudge against his temple, breath on his ear and a low mumble. The voice was warm, and something in it unlocked his own voice, letting out the wordless sob first.

The weight on him tensed, and he cringed from the inevitable blow. The pain would come now, not just the trapping and the awful exposure. He gasped for breath and spit out a shaky, despairing, "No, please, no--"

The weight on him lifted, and he was scrabbling backward as he realized he could move, could open
his eyes--was making for the far edge of a wide, soft bed--

Steve stood on the other side of the bed, naked, horror-stricken.

Bucky froze for real, a killing cold that started at the pit of his stomach and spread outward. Everywhere but his traitorously still-hard dick, jutting undeniably from his crotch for several damning seconds before it began to wilt, untouched.

Steve had felt that. Steve had done that, and Steve had heard him. Steve knew now exactly what kind of nightmare shit got him hard, and--

Bucky raised a hand to his throat, as if that frantic pathetic plea might have left a mark like a cord wrapped around his neck.

"Bucky," Steve said, reaching a hand toward him like he was about to fall and looking gutted. Because Steve knew exactly how far he had already fallen. "Bucky, I'm so sorry, I didn't--"

Bucky did what he had to when the next word out of someone's mouth might just erase him completely: he got cold and calm and shut him up. "Don't you ever--ever touch me like that again."

Steve jerked his hand back like Bucky had shot off a fingertip, crumpling in on himself, and the split second of calm fled with the danger. Bucky couldn't stand there and watch what he'd done to Steve; he'd always known this would only hurt him, and now it was happening. He strode fast to the door, slamming it behind him. He went straight to the private refuge of the trigger reduction room, where no one could see him.

Not that it mattered. JARVIS had already seen. Steve had already seen. They knew. They knew. He had resolved to leave it all behind, to forget and move on, to accept that trying to fix himself wasn't worth what it might cost. And now it didn't matter because his body had betrayed him, making his nightmares visible, and now they knew.

He could still feel a lingering eager thickness in his cock--of course it didn't shrink for humiliation or rage, for the sensation of being sliced open for everyone to see. He closed his metal hand around his balls and squeezed until the gut-shot pain turned his fast, rough breathing to outright sobs and his dick finally went down, much too late. Steve had already seen him, touched him, heard him. Steve knew.

Chapter End Notes

Extra warning on misjudged consent: Bucky falls asleep in Steve's bed while they're naked together; it segues into a nightmare about being raped and Steve notices Bucky's arousal and touches Bucky while he's still asleep, but backs off as soon as Bucky shows fear.

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

**Extra Warnings:** This chapter has the most graphic and detailed instance of self-harm in the story so far, plus brief suicidal ideation, AND ends on a cliffhanger. More details in the end notes, and as always please let me know if you need more information or think additional tags would be useful (two have been added as of this chapter).

That said, Bucky does not die at any time in this story, even temporarily.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky woke up when he hit the door, planting his feet and bracing the full weight of his body against it. It wasn't even open, just unlatched and pushed in less than a centimeter, but he couldn't force it closed.

Steve must have dug his own heels in on the other side.

"Bucky," Steve said, his voice low and reasonable, the way he'd talked sometimes around the edges of HYDRA bases during those six months when Bucky never really saw him without bullets flying around them. Like Steve didn't know quite who or what was hearing him between Bucky's ears. "I won't come in. I just--I'm sorry. And I'm going out now. I'll be gone until at least four, so you--you can do whatever you need to do. I won't be here."

Bucky kept pushing against the door, against Steve, and the silence stretched until it was obvious that Steve was waiting for him to say something. He leaned his cheek against the door and kept silent, his mind washed clean of words. What could words do for him now? Steve knew. Steve had felt him get hard and felt him cringe, heard him beg for mercy. He couldn't say anything to undo that.

"I'm so sorry," Steve said quietly, and then the pressure from the other side of the door vanished. Bucky's weight pushed it shut again, coming to a jarring stop. He slumped against it, letting it hold him up now that he had nothing to push against, his body going limp like he'd just gotten out of a fight, though the adrenaline was still rushing through him, washing away the haziness of a night spent curled up on the floor, not sleeping or awake, not quite anything.

He counted out the seconds in his head. He couldn't hear anything outside the room to tell him where Steve was, but he knew that tone of voice. Steve hadn't lied to him, and he thought Bucky needed him gone; once he had let go of the door he'd go straight to the elevator and out of their apartment, maybe out of the building altogether.

And then Bucky could do whatever he needed to do.

Whatever that was. He couldn't make Steve not know that Bucky got hard for nightmares and fear and pain instead of for Steve. He couldn't stop Steve from figuring out everything he didn't know already about what they'd done to him and how they'd made Bucky respond; Steve was quick at putting pieces together. He would know, and then it would never not be there between them, in Steve's bed, in every touch, every kiss. He would never get away from it, and he hadn't even kept it away from Steve. He couldn't keep anything from Steve.
Except for the next however many hours. Until four. Until four, he would be alone, and he could do whatever he needed to do.

After four, Steve would be back. Steve would--no, Bucky couldn't think about what Steve was going to do. He just had to use the time that he had.

This was his last chance to handle this himself, without Steve insisting on being involved, or stopping him from trying. His last chance to prove that he might be able to fix himself, that he might still be able to keep this from landing on Steve.

And if this time it killed him--

No. It wouldn't. He knew better. He wouldn't do what he'd done last time. There were other ways.

He went directly to his bedroom, faintly aware that he was naked but moving like he was strapped into full combat gear. He had a mission, a timeline. It didn't feel good, exactly, but it felt purposeful, and that was enough to push away everything else.

He yanked open the drawer where he emptied his pockets at night. There were a handful of paper scraps Steve had doodled on, little notes he had made to himself, redrafted schedules, and four wickedly sharp knives.

There was a rack of knives in his weapons locker, slim things with six-and-a-half-inch blades just like he used to carry. They had felt familiar in his hand from the first time he picked up a knife and flipped it before pocketing it. No one had ever stopped him from bringing them upstairs from the range. No one had taken them away.

The knives were his. No one else would be blamed when he used them, not like Clint's cable. He checked each one briefly, sighting down the straight, razor-sharp edges before he wrapped them in a t-shirt and carried them to the closet. No need to cut himself before he'd even gotten started.

He'd left the supplies from the last try in the box with the DVDs. The belt and the cut cord were still there, and he shoved them aside--he wouldn't do that again, he had learned that much--and wrapped up what he needed along with the knives.

He stopped dead in the hallway, noticing something he'd missed on his way out of the room. His phone was lying on the floor, in exactly the place where Steve had spent the night the first time Bucky hid in the trigger reduction room. Steve had left it there for him, where he wouldn't miss it.

"Sergeant Barnes, if I may--" JARVIS said.

"No," Bucky said, but he kicked the phone through the door before he slammed it behind him. It skittered across the hardwood floor and landed in a corner, and Bucky left it there. He could get it if he needed it. He wouldn't be restrained this time, not like before.

It had to hurt. It had to scare him. It had to be not entirely under his control. He wouldn't choke himself, or tie himself to anything, but he wouldn't need to.

He dumped the bundle beside the bathtub and turned on the shower, running the water as cold as it would go. He stepped under it and let it blast down on him, stinging his skin, the cold quickly changing to pain and then to nothingness. He let the cold sink into his mind, let it take him back to hard-edged rooms and steel tables, impersonal hands and voices speaking past him.

When there could be no more delaying he shut the water off. He stood still for a moment, looking down at himself, pale with cold but whole. For now. His right hand shook, but his left hand was
He sat down in the tub and reached into the t-shirt bundle, pulling out the supplies he would need. The knives, one two three four in a gleaming, lethal row. The off-switch for his left arm. The bottle of lube.

His cock was shrunken with cold, but that was to be expected at this stage of the mission. First the pain, and the fear. He looked down at himself, surveying his targets.

Distal first. More pain, less danger.

He was still shivering, but his left hand was perfectly sure, picking up the first knife. He curled his right foot around, resting the top of his foot against his left knee, absently aware that the bathtub was roomy enough to make it easy to maneuver like this.

He traced the tip of the blade over the sole of his foot, noting the locations of the blood vessels, flexing his toes to feel out the musculature. He pricked here and there in the softest places, bright little sparks of pain like a lighter striking before the flame caught. There.

He pressed the knife in, sliding through meat to the nerve bundle between two bones, and the pain bloomed into a lightning strike. His leg jerked out straight, taking the knife with it; his heel and the hilt of the knife both hit the floor of the tub, and he forced his foot a little further down the blade. A whine like metal scraping on metal escaping through his gritted teeth.

He was still for a moment, panting and staring at the protrusion of blood-stained shining blade from the top of his foot, the blood sprayed across the bath. He felt awake, alive, real. Present.

Yes. This was the right way. His heart raced, his body blooming with adrenaline-heat. His right hand was perfectly steady now. He picked up another knife, keeping his right foot and leg very still. He leaned back against the edge of the tub, drawing his left leg up and tapping the point of the blade against the inside of his thigh.

Plenty of pain so far, but not much blood. Not much danger. He didn't want to actually bleed too much—he needed that blood on the inside if he wanted this to work, to have a chance of proving he could fix himself. He just needed the danger. The threat.

He traced the course of his femoral artery, appreciating the very precise mental map that unfolded in his head, telling him where to find the nerves in relation to the blood vessels. How to inflict pain, how to inflict damage; how to kill quickly and therefore how to torture slowly.

He pressed the tip of the knife in a little above the artery, probing slowly until his keening echoed back from the tiled walls around him. He had to switch to his left hand, tugging the blade out carefully exactly on the same track. He poked at the little gaping wound with his flesh fingers, watching the gentle leakage of blood, so different from the spray he would have gotten a fraction of a centimeter lower.

He adjusted his left-handed grip on the knife and found the same spot on his right thigh. He pushed the blade in—the firmer punch to get through skin, and then slowly, feeling his way, planting the blade just above the artery, nudging the tip deeper and deeper until the pain was blinding. He had to pull both hands away and stare up at the featureless ceiling, pinned in place by pure clean agony as bright as fresh blades.

After a while, when the pain steadied and he could breathe again, he curled his right hand around his cock. It was slick already with warm blood; no need to bother with the lube. He gave his cock a
squeeze and then a few strokes, keeping his right leg and foot absolutely still. If he moved or even tensed too much, if the blade slipped or he knocked it with his hand, he would slice through his femoral artery. No one would hear him if he screamed for help; no one could reach him in time.

He moved his hand very, very carefully, and his cock thrilled to the slick, hot touch. Pleasure sparked through him, riding the waves of pain, tempting him to move when he must not move at all. He pressed his heel and his ass hard against the bathtub floor, keeping his leg perfectly still while he stroked his cock in deliberate motions. He could feel blood dripping down his inner thighs, down the sole of his foot, a ticklish irritation in the midst of the ocean of pain and the growing pulse of pleasure.

The blood on his hand quickly turned sticky, half-dried, and he swiped his fingers over his left thigh, gathering more to wet his cock. It was thickening in his grip, but not hard yet. He needed more.

He opened his eyes. Two knives left; that felt more like what he needed than the off-switch. More pain. More danger. More need to keep still.

He kept his right hand curled around his cock and reached across with his left to pick up a knife. Both knives. They would only get harder to reach. He laid one flat on his chest, the chill of metal making his nipples harden. He laughed breathlessly, giddy with his near-success, and then looked down at his belly, considering his next move.

It was easy to kill someone with a stab to the gut. And, then again, really quite easy not to kill them. It was all a matter of force, speed, and above all, location. Bucky dragged the tip of the knife down the ripple of his abs, considering the map in his mind's eye. He took a few deep breaths, watching and feeling out the structures of his own body. It was surely the body whose injuries he knew most intimately; as he considered what to do next images flashed up for him, a cascade of old pain, old terror, the sight of his own guts laid open.

Diaphragm—there. Liver there. Kidneys, awkward to reach from the front, though the knives were long enough. The abdominal aorta, with all its busy branches. Any of those promised a quick and potentially lethal bleed. Lungs and heart, of course—he could maneuver easily enough around his own ribcage, given time to line up the angle, given the strength of his left hand.

He held the knife by the very end of the hilt, dipping it down to prick against his skin from where the curly hair of his crotch ended up to the hard curve of his lowest rib. Eny, meeny, miney, moe, catch a soldier by his...

He pushed instead of dipping, and the sharp point of the knife punctured the skin of his belly like it was slicing through silk. He took a careful breath, acquainting himself with the fresh new pain while just the first quarter-inch of the blade was inside, and then he eased it deeper, penetrating muscle. He felt his way through each layer until the blade was an inch deep and the pain was so intense he almost couldn't grasp the sensation anymore. It was a ringing in his ears, a bitter taste filling his mouth. His vision was so bright he felt blind.

He had to be careful with his breathing now, so he wouldn't jostle the knife. When he had acclimated to this new universe of pain—like operating at high altitude or in total darkness—he loosened his grip on the hilt of the knife, letting gravity carry it lower. It sank another fraction of an inch into his abdomen, not like a body into a river but like a body into honey, or quicksand. He stopped it before it went deep enough to threaten the aorta, clenching his compromised abdominal muscles carefully around it. It stayed put, pain rising and falling with his breath, or his pulse, or some secret rhythm that only the knife knew.

He squeezed his right hand, which had remained curled loosely around his cock through all of this,
and then he had to stop breathing entirely so he wouldn't sob at the bolt of vivid pleasure he felt, rising with the pain's tide. His cock twitched like a living thing, and he was grinning, trying desperately not to laugh. If he laughed the knife might slip--if it just got slippery with blood, or if he forgot to hold perfectly still, any of the knives might slip. He could bleed out at any moment.

He stroked himself, slick with his own hot blood, and his cock responded eagerly, easily, as if nothing had ever been wrong with it at all. Pleasure shivered over his skin, mingling with pain across every pathway and muddling up the signal. In his hand his cock was getting full and stiff, the sensations all new and very old at once. For an instant he smelled ozone and disinfectant again, but when he opened his eyes he knew just where he was, in this bright, clean bathroom, pristine but for the smears of his blood in the tub.

At least this, he thought, and didn't let himself think of what it was a consolation for. At least this works. At least I can have this.

It felt so good, so pure and simple and essential. He remembered, suddenly, being young, doing this side by side with Steve--no, no, fuck, he couldn't think of Steve. Every muscle in his body tensed, making him freshly aware of the blades in his foot, his thigh, his belly. He was suddenly jarringly aware of where he really was--in the safest room of a safe place, where Steve had left him time and privacy because Steve had seen his nightmare.

His hand closed hard on his erection, thick and firm in his hand. It was still there, not fading on him, but--he had to get his mind back to the other place. Not Steve. Not the past. Not that part of the past.

He picked up the last knife and glanced down at his blood-smeared belly, looking for a good insertion point. The first knife was a couple of inches below his belly button, entering almost perfectly vertically. A lower angle could produce interesting effects.

He let his mind fall entirely into the calculation of angles, thinking of nothing at all as he punched the point of another knife through his own skin and muscle. He wiggled it gently and felt his way along, easing it between tissue layers, so shallow that he could see the long hard line of the knife under his skin.

He remembered that suddenly, a hard-edged image in his brain. He had been lying on a cold table, and they had made little incisions, sliding probes in. he could see the metal moving under his skin as they searched. Four or five of them had still been in place when they tossed a blue drape over his midsection and squirted lube on his cock.

Yes. Like that. He began to stroke again with his right hand, letting his mind fall back to that place, the metal stuck into his body, the pain and cold, the knowledge that they could do what they liked to him. Any second someone might grab the handle of a probe and twist, stir, jam it through his insides. Any second a knife could slip. He could bump a handle with his wrist.

Any second, but not this second. This second was a flood tide of pleasure, more and more and more. It was so good, unbearably good. He could hear his breath echoing off the hard surfaces around him--cold steel, easily cleaned tile, the contoured interior of the cryo tube. All the places where he belonged.

He kept stroking, on and on, marveling at the hardness of his cock, the sharp real pleasure of it. But his balls were drawn up tight, and there was something--he needed something more. He tried jerking it faster, tighter, and then slower and looser, and then with two fingers, and then with his hand turned the other way. He squeezed at the head, he twisted his wrist, all the little tricks, and it felt good, but it wasn't--
His mind supplied, all at once, the sure knowledge of what he needed, the last little thing that would tip him over into completion.

"Go ahead, soldier."

He heard it in Rumlow's voice, panting and a little smug. He heard bored technicians say it, stern handlers who were forcing him to come again and again and again. In Russian, in English.

But not here. Here it was silent.

*Trigger phrase* he thought, but even as his lips moved around the words, he knew it wouldn't work like that. He had no authority to grant this to himself, and the mere remembered sounds of the words weren't enough. Nothing was going to be enough. *He* wasn't enough, not like this, not alone. The exultation of pleasure and progress flipped into something frantic. He had to be able to salvage this somehow, to get to the end of this mission, even if it was messy, even if--

He tugged out the knife in his thigh with his left hand, still stroking with his right. He jammed the knife in again less carefully, an inch lower on his leg, still just above the artery. The fresh rush of pain made the pleasure feel bright and new for a few seconds before it was overtaken by the frustration of not finishing. Never finishing.

He pulled the knife out and pushed it in again, slowly this time, his hand still tight on his dick but unmoving.

*Please, please, please, let me, let it be enough, I did it, I did enough, I did--*

But there was nothing. No reward for his work. No permission. No one to grant it. Not ever again.

He looked down at himself, at the mess of blood and blades he'd made of himself, his cock standing up still hard in the middle of all of it, showing no sign of subsiding. It wouldn't, now. He was as helpless as he could possibly be; even now, even with so many triggers eradicated, even in the safest place he could possibly be, he was not his own.

The fingers of his left hand rocked on the blade. He could pull it out and drive it in somewhere else. He didn't even need the knife; he could raise his left hand, twitch his fingers just so to make the sharp edge available. He could cut through anything with that.

But he couldn't *come*. All he wanted was to finish, some relief for the aching tension in his balls, the insistent hardness of his cock. Some reward for the pain he was in now, the pain they'd put him in, the pain they *required* of him, over and above his work. It *hurt* and he'd gotten so fucking close, and still, *still*, they owned him. Still he couldn't do this one small thing that should be so easy; he'd done it in his goddamn *sleep* when he was a kid, Steve had--

He felt like he was choking on it, the pain and the frustration tighter in his throat than that cable had ever been wrapped around it. He tilted his head back and screamed, holding himself otherwise carefully still. He ran out of breath quickly, holding his abdomen rigid, and had to pull in a breath and try again. Another scream, nearly a howl, and another and another, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

He was alone; no one would hear him. He could scream. At least he had that. It helped to be able to scream, and the screaming gathered its own momentum. He kept it up, on and on, until his mouth was dry, his throat ragged, the blades inside him half-forgotten. Hadn't his body always been stuck through with metal? Hadn't he always been right here?

There was something hot on his face, something wet trickling down to his jaw, dripping down his
throat. Sweat flowed freely from under his arms, down his back, ticklish streams across his skin. His cock throbbed, and even there he was sticky-wet, pre-come dripping down through the half-dried coating of blood. He was so fucking ready, and he was never going to finish, and he would always be right here. Pinned in place, awaiting release until he forgot that release was even possible.

He let both of his hands fall to the sides, his head tipping back to stare at the remote, smooth blankness of the ceiling. He breathed in shallow gasps that quickly evened out. Pain. It was only pain. Not even pleasure anymore, just an ache in his cock as it slowly subsided, and he could hardly feel that compared to all the real pain.

He would have to get up. He would have to slowly, carefully remove the knives from their places. He would have to clean out the tub, so no one would see. But not yet. He couldn't do it yet. It would mean that he was finished. It would mean accepting another failure. The last, definitive failure; he knew now that he could never succeed.

There was a tiny sound, off to his right. The sound of the door cracking open, just enough to overcome the soundproofing.

Bucky's whole body went cold with horror.

"Bucky." He heard Steve's voice only distantly through the rushing in his ears as he opened his eyes and looked down at himself again, saw the smears and splashes of blood, the protruding knives, his skin pale and damp where it wasn't livid with blood. He was wet and cold and as naked as he could be without peeling off his skin. He couldn't decipher anything in Steve's tone, all his attention taken up by the impossible awful fact.

No. Not again. Steve couldn't see him like this, too.

"No," Bucky whispered, but Steve was still talking, saying words Bucky couldn't make himself understand through the deafening awfulness. It all seemed to be happening very slowly, but he didn't have time to move, or cover himself, or think of how he could possibly make this not happen. It was like falling from the train, like watching Steve fall toward the river. He couldn't speak. The inevitable disaster loomed up.

The door opened.

"Bucky!"

Bucky closed his eyes. He didn't want to watch. He didn't want to see Steve's face.
"JARVIS!" Steve yelled. "Get Sam, tell him--trauma kit--Bucky, Bucky look at me, Buck--" Steve's hand was on his throat, big and warm and dry, prodding against his pulse.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut tighter, twisted his face further away, but Steve didn't touch him there. He could sense Steve's other hand hovering somewhere over his chest, finding nowhere safe to touch. Nowhere clean.

"Buck--Buck, oh God, what did you--JARVIS! Dr. Hernandez, too! Tell her--fuck, how many--stab wounds!"

"Steve?" Sam's voice was distant, but his footsteps were coming rapidly closer. Bucky kept his eyes closed and turned his face away. "Bucky? What--"
Bucky heard him run across the hardwood floor, his steps unevenly heavy, like he was carrying something. Into the bathroom, and, "Report, Rogers. What have we got?"

"Pulse is steady, he won't look at me, he's--"

"Okay, yeah, I see. Now get out."

Bucky opened his eyes, staring at the back wall of the bathtub. Steve's fingers spasmed against his throat but didn't pull away. "What? I can help, I--"

"Nope," Sam said implacably. "Real doctors are already on the way, triage medic is here, and you are way too close to the patient. Get out, Steve. I can't work on him with you here. Go."

Steve's lips pressed suddenly against Bucky's temple, and Bucky squeezed his eyes shut again.

"Shut the door behind you," Sam said, and then Steve let go, and Steve was gone.

There was a hard pressure against the inside of his thigh, and Sam's hand caught his chin and yanked his head around. Bucky's eyes opened on reflex.

"I don't think he noticed," Sam said, staring steadily into his eyes. "Do you want to clean the blood off your dick, or do you want me to do it?"

Bucky stared up at Sam for a second, realizing exactly what Sam knew about what he'd been doing here. What Steve almost certainly had noticed, or would notice soon, playing it back in his head, which he would. Over and over. Forever. He would never stop seeing Bucky like this, broken and filthy and turning his back on the one guy who'd loved him through everything.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't stay pinned here. There was one obvious escape route, and Bucky bolted toward it, jerking his leg to make the knife slip into the artery before he'd even thought of what that meant.

Bucky felt the hot rush of blood, saw the red spray around Sam's fingers already pressing a bandage against the other wounds. He felt his mouth fall open and his eyes go wide in horror as Sam's face mirrored his.

"No--I didn't--" but he was already suffocating, blood loss stealing his air faster than the cable around his throat ever had.

I didn't mean it, not really. But that didn't matter to the blood gushing out over Sam's hands, taking his awareness away with it.

Chapter End Notes

Additional warnings for this chapter: Bucky takes another try at self-harm, this time using knives in an extremity, thighs, and abdomen, and eventually has a brief self-destructive impulse that causes him to cut an artery, causing major blood loss.

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr! (This chapter's art coming soon!)

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 34

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

Additional warning on this chapter: Steve is very, very upset, and does not handle anything calmly or rationally, in a way that would be pretty normal if he and Bucky were both in fighting shape but may be startling and upsetting in this context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He hurt, which was how he knew he was waking up. He'd been sedated. He recognized the feel of the drugs; either there was something calming in the mix, or it was just soothing to feel like this. Another trigger session was safely over, and now he was waking up in the cot, and Woj or Andrews or Duncan would be waiting nearby when he opened his eyes.

He flexed his right hand, and realized that the IV was still in place. It was in his forearm instead of the back of his hand, like it normally was when he went under the off-switch. He opened his eyes and saw clear liquid in the bag overhead. He thought, that's okay, then, even before he worked out why he was expecting to see dark red.

Not a trigger session. Not that kind, at least, although it felt similar from this vantage point: not a waking dream but a nightmare that he had been shaken out of by blood loss and drugs and some time spent mercifully unconscious. With the drugs still pumping through him it felt a little remote, like any other horror he woke up from safe and clean and looked after.

"We already pushed two liters of blood," Dr. Hernandez said, jerking his attention to her where she was sitting near the side of his bed. Not Woj or Andrews or Duncan, but still a member of his team waiting for him.

He could feel his wounds when he focused, not just as generalized damage repaired, healing in progress but as the aftereffect of what he'd done... this morning? He felt groggy and weak and sore enough for it to be only hours ago. He glanced around the room--it was nothing he recognized, but something in the sleek and gleaming style, the familiar sound of the air circulation, made him confident that he was still in the Tower.

"It's lower octane than you usually run on," Dr. Hernandez added. "With a transfusion of that size, it's likely to bring you back down closer to human baseline for a few days, and it may slow your healing."

He cautiously tested his right and left arms, but neither was restrained by anything more than the blanket pulled up to his chin. He tried his left leg next--the unhurt foot, the one minor stab wound. Also not restrained.

He flexed his right foot experimentally. The stab through the foot had been cleanly done, and it felt securely stitched and bandaged, probably starting to knit already. He couldn't feel any restraint on his right leg, but there were a whole row of healing wounds at the inside of his thigh. He brought his left hand up to shove down the blankets covering him, struggling to do it without moving the rest of his body more than he had to.
After a few seconds, Dr. Hernandez came over to help, adjusting the angle of the top half of the bed up a few more degrees and snapping the covers down to his feet and rolling up the gown that covered him to his knees. He was bare underneath except for bandages, and he could see himself easily. He was perfectly clean.

The tide of blood from his leg had probably made the question of cleaning off his dick moot, at least. He probably didn't need to worry that she knew exactly what he'd been doing, or why.

Dr. Hernandez pointed to the largest bandage, which seemed to cover a perpendicular incision as well as the original stab. There was a fading mark above it that wrapped around his thigh--Sam must have gotten a tourniquet on. "The femoral artery was partially severed here; the rest of these were nicely placed to cause no major damage. Apart from the repair of the artery we haven't put stitches into most of them; they're deep, so we want to be sure they're healing internally rather than just closing the superficial layers, and with your usual speed of healing, even if you're somewhat off pace, it should go more quickly than standard."

Bucky nodded. Unless he was in danger of losing an extremity or suffering a hemorrhage, his maintenance teams had rarely bothered with stitches. He'd learned to be vigilant when they did, to tug out the threads before his flesh grew around them; it was unnerving, otherwise, when his body eventually pushed them out.

"These, also, were nicely placed," Dr. Hernandez pointed to the abdominal wounds. "Good clean wound tracks, no major internal bleeding or organ damage."

"I'm a pro," Bucky muttered, a flicker of black humor that might have earned him an almost-smile from Woj or Andrews. Dr. Hernandez gave him a withering look that made him suddenly aware of being naked and full of self-inflicted stab wounds in front of a lady.

"You're something," Dr. Hernandez said after a moment, tugging his gown back down and blanket back up. "We kept you under for a few hours so you'd stay still while the wounds started to knit, but in accordance with your wishes on file to be allowed to wake up as soon as possible, you're now getting only a maintenance dose of painkillers. How are you feeling?"

Bucky frowned down at the lumps of his feet, struggling to think of how to describe the state of his body without slipping into an asset-functionality report. "Feels... half-healed? Dull, not sharp. Worst here," Bucky pointed to the deep wound in his belly. "Second worst in my foot."

Dr. Hernandez nodded. "Your blood pressure is steady and you're maintaining a normal body temperature, so it's just a matter of keeping an eye on you until I'm sure you're not going to throw any complications before you heal up."

Bucky flexed each limb in turn again, considering the pain he could feel past the drugs, the barely-healing wounds, the strange place and the silence and Dr. Hernandez's steely gaze.

It occurred to him that he did not want to be here. He wanted to be somewhere familiar; he wanted to be alone with his music, to sleep this off somewhere no one was watching him, or at least no one in the same room.

He wasn't in restraints, and he wasn't in the Army anymore; even if Dr. Hernandez was on his team, she wasn't the boss of him the way Woj and Dr. Lind and the rest had been. Unless... unless he'd fucked things up more than was immediately obvious.

"Is that door locked from the outside?"
Dr. Hernandez raised her eyebrows, then shook her head. "I don't recommend actually getting up and trying it, because we just got all your blood convinced to stay on the inside of your body, but no. The door is not locked. I'm not equipped to force you to stay anywhere you don't want to stay."

"I want to go home," Bucky said, without even thinking, barely waiting for her to finish speaking. He got his left arm under him, ready to push himself up to sit, and Dr. Hernandez raised her hands in a warding gesture that made him freeze even though she was nowhere near close enough—or strong enough—to push him down.

"Hold it," she said. "If you're talking about leaving the infirmary, then we need to talk about the fact that I've only dealt with symptoms."

Bucky looked away.

"You stabbed yourself seven times," she said matter of factly, the same way she'd stripped him naked and explained his wounds. "You partially severed your femoral artery, and I can tell from the way you placed these wounds that you knew exactly where it was and what that would mean. You could have died. An unenhanced person almost certainly would have died. I can't just stitch you up and let you walk out of here without addressing the cause."

Bucky closed his eyes. "I won't..."

But what could he say? How was he possibly supposed to make her believe that he wouldn't do it again—that he couldn't, that there was no point in trying—when she didn't know why he'd done it in the first place?

He hoped to God she didn't know why he'd done it in the first place. Would Sam have told her? Would Steve, if he'd figured it out by now?

He couldn't think about Steve right now. His throat ached, going tight, and for a moment he couldn't speak at all, but if he couldn't speak he would never be allowed out of here. He'd just have to stay in this hospital bed, being supervised by people who weren't his team.

He took a steadying breath and tried to sound honest and forthright and trustworthy when he spoke. He used to do that without even trying; he didn't have to imitate anyone but his old self for that. "I won't. I won't do it again."

Dr. Hernandez just looked down at him for a long moment, and he willed her to believe him, to let him go. He wanted to offer a further argument, to convince her, but he couldn't overplay his hand before he knew what she was thinking.

After a moment she looked away, snagging a stool and perching on it so that they were nearly on a level as they looked at each other.

"Captain Rogers indicated that he may have done something to cause this," Dr. Hernandez said, her voice going gentler. Bucky stared at her, unable to grasp what that was even supposed to mean. Did she think Steve had done something? What the hell had Steve told her?

"He said that he did something which upset you very badly," she said, in a prompting tone, as if he had perhaps forgotten whatever Steve was talking about. "He was very concerned that he had triggered this. Caused you to hurt yourself."

"He didn't," Bucky said, finally realizing that Steve had drawn a perfectly straight, direct, wrong line from last night to this morning. That was Steve all over, straight through the front door, guns blazing; Bucky was exhausted at the very thought of explaining to him, or anybody, how wrong he was. "It
wasn't--I mean he--no. No. Steve didn't--he would never hurt me. Never."

Dr. Hernandez just kept watching him steadily. "If you go home, to the apartment where you live with him, do you think there would be any danger of something happening that would cause you to hurt yourself again?"

"No. He didn't cause me to," Bucky said slowly, deliberately, hoping that the emphasis and the show of calm would be enough to convince her without going into what had caused it. "I did it myself. The artery was an accident. I won't do it again."

She studied him for a moment, and then said, "Was this the first time?"

Bucky shook his head, wondering how much he was going to have to say, to how many people. His secret wasn't secret enough to keep it safe anymore, but it wasn't all the way told, either. Sam knew a piece of it, Steve another piece. But he would have to confess and confess and confess before they were satisfied.

Oh God, he would have to go to confession. Even if it hadn't been exactly the sin it looked like, Steve wouldn't let Bucky set foot in church until he'd talked to Fr. Roche about this.

At least Father couldn't tell anyone else what Bucky told him. Just like the doctors at his court martial, the only thing public would be the verdict. At least Steve wouldn't have reporters asking him about this.

How's it going, Captain Rogers, fucking a guy who's been fucked by half of HYDRA so he can't get off from anything you do to him? The people in front of the church screaming about them going to hell would have a field day with that. And even if Bucky refused to hear it, they could still get to Steve. Everything always got to Steve; he'd had a target painted on him long before he started carrying that shield.

This... this was going to get Steve right in the guts, and Bucky had already failed to stop it happening. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to think too hard about what that was going to look like. He just wanted to get a little more sleep, just finish healing, and then... then he could...

"I just," Bucky said. "I want to go home. I won't hurt myself. Steve won't hurt me."

Dr. Hernandez, when he opened his eyes, nodded slowly. "I believe you're sincere about both of those statements," she said. "But I'm still going to prescribe some precautions. First of all, for the next forty-eight hours you don't go anywhere JARVIS can't monitor you without being accompanied by someone who knows what you did today."

Bucky swallowed. "How many people is that?"

"Rogers, Wilson--who saved your life, by the way--and myself and my trauma team. I'm not sure who your friends may have told by now."

Bucky nodded. He didn't want to go anywhere anyway, except to sleep, and he didn't doubt that Steve would be stuck to him like glue once he woke up. "Okay."

"Second, you lie down somewhere and stay put until I clear you to move around, and you agree that I'm going to come and check on you every two hours until I'm satisfied that you're healing without infection or other complications."

Bucky nodded again.
"Third, you talk to Dr. Padfield sometime in the next twenty-four hours, and you tell him the truth about what you did."

Bucky winced, but he couldn't argue. There was no way around telling Padfield; if he could put it off until tomorrow--until he wasn't quite so aware of all the holes in his body and this weariness pulling at him like quicksand--that would have to be enough.

Padfield had been so pleased with him, so glad that he was accepting support. Doing the right things.

This was not the right thing, Bucky was painfully aware.

For a second he just wanted to go home, not upstairs but to MEDCOM, where he would be safe behind the gates, where he could hide from everyone and sleep this off, and then he thought about what Woj would say. That led straight to imagining Andrews, or Duncan, or even Lee or Mueller finding him the way Steve had found him.

Steve had found him.

He wanted to crawl under the bed. He covered his face with both hands, distantly aware of the discomfort of the IV needle shifting slightly in his arm.

"Barnes?" Dr. Hernandez was waiting for him to agree.

He wanted to get out of here, and upstairs was the only home he had. And as much as he'd like to right now, he couldn't hide from Padfield forever. And he'd signed that paper, so Padfield could tell Woj--and, hell, Steve could tell anyone he wanted to. Bucky's secrets weren't his own anymore.

"I will," he said quietly from behind his hands. "I'll talk to him. I'll tell him."

"All right, then," Dr. Hernandez said. "I'm gonna call a few people to help you into a wheelchair, and you're going to stay right there until we're ready for you."

Bucky nodded, too exhausted to even speak.

He asked Dr. Hernandez to let him set up on the couch. His bed was too wide; he would get lost in it and she would never find him again when she came back to check. The reinforced bed in the trigger reduction room was surely off limits now.

She arranged the throw pillows behind him and spread the blanket that was always on the back of the couch over him; it was a soft knitted thing, thick enough to be cozy. He rubbed a fold of it between his flesh fingers, enjoying the texture of it, different from hospital blankets or army blankets or the sumptuous covers on his bed.

She gave him a couple of pills to swallow, and set two more in a cup on the coffee table along with an open bottle of water. "Drink as much of this as you can, and take the pills if you need them. The IV medication will be wearing off, possibly pretty quickly. These should hold you until I come back to check."

Bucky nodded, already planning to sleep until she came back. Maybe this was a dream. Maybe he could have at least a moment of forgetting it had happened, if he could just go to sleep. If he could get there before the painkillers wore off, even better; all his wounds were only aching, for now.

He closed his eyes when she turned away from him, listened to her footsteps returning to the elevator.
JARVIS didn't say anything to him. Maybe he thought Bucky was sleeping. He thought about asking for music, but couldn't summon the words, and didn't know what music he wanted to ask for anyway.

He was right on the dizzy edge of actually falling asleep when he heard it again, the worst part of the nightmare playing over: Steve's voice.

"Bucky?"

Not the same, though. Not quite.

Bucky opened his eyes, and Steve was standing at the end of the couch, looking down at Bucky with an expression Bucky couldn't read. His eyelids were pink at the edges, tender-looking, and his hair was damp; the workout clothes he was wearing weren't anything he would have left the house in this morning. He must have gone to hide in a long shower, so no one would see him feeling whatever he was feeling about Bucky, and Bucky wished, tired and aching and irritated with it, that he would have stayed there a little longer. Bucky didn't want to see this either, not yet.

Bucky was still in his damn hospital gown, though it was mostly covered by the blanket. He still had holes in him. He still felt just about as naked in front of Steve as he'd been in the bathtub. He wasn't ready for this part.

Steve had seen. Steve knew. And Steve was not going to leave it the hell alone.

Bucky probably should have just stayed in the goddamn infirmary.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Steve demanded, riding the edge between anxious and angry. "I thought you were still in the clinic, no one told me..."

"I live here," Bucky said, as lightly as he knew how, silently begging Steve to, just once in his life, take a hint and let something go. "Don't I?"

Steve shook his head slightly, like he couldn't believe Bucky was asking. Bucky felt cold inside even before Steve said, "I don't fucking know, do you?"

Bucky's mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. There was nothing he could say now; Bucky had fumbled this, handled him wrong, and Steve wasn't going to let anything go now.

"No." Steve threw his arms wide. "No, don't fucking say anything! Why should today be any fucking different? I mean, you tried to kill yourself and I just cleaned a gallon of your blood out of the bathtub, but what's that between friends, right? We're friends, aren't we?"

Bucky wanted, very badly, to be still down in the infirmary, still unconscious, still at MEDCOM. Anywhere but here, so Steve wouldn't be looking at him like that. So he could still pretend that someday he would be well enough to go home to Steve. So maybe this could all be a shameful nightmare, a hallucination he'd had under the off-switch. He felt just about as able to move right now, his body and mind both weighted down with dread and exhaustion.

"I've tried, Bucky," Steve barreled on, sounding defeated and all the angrier for it. "I'm trying. But if you won't speak to me or--or even let me help you when you're bleeding, then I honestly don't know what the hell you're doing here, especially right now. You can't be healed up yet, why on earth did you come back here? So I could fuck something else up and finish you off?"

"It wasn't you," Bucky said, frustration breaking through his paralysis, even as he told himself not to rise to the bait when he wasn't ready to fight this all out. "It wasn't about you, Steve."
"No, of course it wasn't! Why should it be, why should anything you do have anything to do with me?" Steve was screaming properly now, and Bucky was torn between wanting to pull the blanket up over his face and wanting to stand up and deck him.

"It wasn't," Bucky repeated doggedly, determined to get across that one fact and not let Steve draw him into some wider fight. "And I wasn't trying to kill myself."

Steve threw his hands up. "Well now I fucking know you're crazy! What else did you think was going to happen after you stabbed yourself seven times? God almighty, maybe the Army should take you back, because they obviously didn't do the job right the first time."

"I wish they would." Bucky didn't even mean it to wound. It was just the truth, heartfelt as a desperate prayer. He wanted to go back where he was safe, where he couldn't hurt himself or anyone else, and Steve didn't have to know any of this.

Steve went pale like Bucky had jammed a knife into him to the hilt.

Bucky closed his eyes, turning his face against the back of the couch. Please, let that be enough. Please let Steve just stop, before either of them were hurt any worse.

"No," Steve said, sounding horribly close to sobbing, but coming closer instead of going away. "No you fucking don't, fucking look at me this time, you bastard--" he grabbed Bucky by the jaw and yanked his head around and Bucky gave in as far as to open his eyes and look.

There were tears in Steve's eyes. It was only when Bucky saw them that he realized he had none of his own. He didn't feel calm, not like that, but he was too tired for anything else.

"Say something," Steve insisted, gripping Bucky's jaw bruisingly hard. If Bucky were on his feet, Steve would have him by the shoulders, maybe shake him a little, but Bucky wasn't giving him that much to work with. "Tell me to go to hell. Scream, I know you can do that. I heard you."

Bucky frowned. "How..."

Steve let go of him, but stayed perched over him on the edge of the couch, folding his arms across his chest with his fists clenched. His voice came out hard, clipped off and quick. "Your phone has a set of emergency features. The StarkPhone model most of us have offers a lot of them, and I turned all of yours on before I gave you the phone. One of them is that certain loud prolonged sounds trigger an automatic call to your emergency contact. Screaming, for instance."

His phone, Bucky remembered, had been in the corner of the trigger reduction room. Close enough to pick up his screaming from the bathroom. Close enough for Steve to hear him when the call connected. He kept the volume turned down on the phone, normally. He wouldn't have been able to hear Steve talking back if he did.

"I thought you just sounded angry," Steve said. "I was going to ignore it, but JARVIS said he was worried about you. Said the last time you locked yourself in that room was right before you went down to Tony's lab on Thursday."

Bucky blinked a few times, but he remembered to keep his eyes open.

"Is this what you did then, too?" Steve was pressing now, not openly angry, but relentless. "Did you try it then?"

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," Bucky repeated, sidestepping the question a little. "I just... I just wanted to feel something."
"And, what, you wanted to feel getting stabbed? You haven't had enough of that yet?"

Bucky shook his head.

Steve stared him down, waiting for an answer.

"I... I wanted..." He swallowed hard. God, he wanted Steve to have figured it out. Couldn't it all have been over in that one awful second? Couldn't he have put it together while Bucky was unconscious? But Steve just kept waiting, and there was obviously no way out of this but through.

Bucky put his left arm over his eyes. Steve didn't pull it away, or yell at him not to. He wondered if Steve had found the off-switch for his arm, if he knew what it was.

"They raped me," Bucky said, because he hadn't said that to Steve, even if he must have realized it last night. It started there. "For all those years, that was the only kind of touch I got."

"I'm s--" Steve started, sounding miserable and still faintly angry, and Bucky smacked at him with his left hand, snarling, "Let me fucking say it."

Steve stayed silent while Bucky covered his face again and took a few breaths, struggling for the words.

"They got me off. Like that. When I was hurting, when I was scared, that's when they let me. Made me. That was the only way I could even feel anything. And I wanted--I just. I wanted to feel it. But it turns out I can't rape myself no matter how hard I try, so that's it. They fucking broke me for good."

The silence stretched. Bucky felt very small, and very naked, and wished again, desperately, that there was a timer ticking down, that after this Andrews would come and fetch him for PT and Steve would go away and come back in a week happy just to see him for a little while.

"Are you done?" Steve asked finally. His voice was very controlled.

Bucky nodded.

Steve yanked his arm down, and held it out of the way while he leaned over Bucky to look him in the eye. "Did you think I didn't know you were raped?"

Bucky stopped breathing.

"Buck." Steve's gaze seemed to punch right through him. "I didn't fall off the goddamn turnip truck yesterday. All that time they had you, all the things they did to you--the first night you were home, you fucking told me they broke you so you couldn't enjoy sex anymore. What the hell did you think I thought that meant?"

Bucky shook his head slightly, feeling lightheaded, barely rooted in his body. His left arm whirred through a recalibration, Steve's hand still holding it by the wrist. Bucky didn't even try to pull it free. It couldn't be true. Steve hadn't said anything. It had been his secret.

"So you just, what," Steve let go of his wrist and leaned back, and his face was a mask, cool and remote and unreadable. "You had sex with me thinking I didn't know what it meant--you let me fuck you thinking I didn't know I was the first one since the last person to rape you. And you figured you'd rather maybe kill yourself without a spotter than tell me what gets you off or let me help."

Bucky's eyes prickled with tears for the first time and he shook his head harder. "Stevie, you couldn't--"
"Like hell I couldn't," Steve snarled. "What wouldn't I do for you, Bucky? What wouldn't I do? When did I ever tell you no? When did I ever let you--"

Steve stopped sharply, but Bucky knew that last word without having to hear it, and they both knew the answer: *You let me down when you let me fall. You let me down when you let me be captured. You let them torture me and rape me for seventy years.*

"There you go," Bucky said, smooth and quiet as a knife between the ribs, because Steve had left him an opening and he couldn't pass up his chance to end this. "It's all your fault after all. It's all about you. Just like everything, just the way you want it."

Steve stared at him for a few seconds in the deafening silence after his words, and then he stood up and walked straight to the stairwell door and through it. The door closed with an undramatic hiss behind him.

Bucky stared after him and wondered if his phone was still in the corner of the trigger reduction room. He looked up at the ceiling.

"JARVIS?"

"Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky couldn't read the tone of those two words, and his voice came out small as he said, "Are you mad at me too?"

"I have been greatly concerned. To hold your self-destructive actions against you would, however, run counter to my basic programming. Mr. Stark also has a worrying tendency to try to solve his problems without outside assistance, and the results have likewise been sometimes not what one would wish. He, however, knows that he may rely upon me as a confidant."

Bucky squinted up at the ceiling, feeling somewhat reassured despite himself. "So, a little mad."

"If you would care for any assistance in developing less dangerous solutions to your difficulty, I am at your service, Sergeant."

He wondered if JARVIS could give him permission. But JARVIS wouldn't let him hurt himself like that again while he was alone, and Steve...

Bucky closed his eyes and reached for the pill cup and the water bottle on the coffee table.

"I'm gonna take these now," Bucky said. Now that he stopped to think, the pain was a lot worse, and his head hurt too. "And I want you to call Dr. H if I stop breathing or something, okay?"

"I assure you that would have been my immediate recourse in any case," JARVIS said. "But I do thank you for thinking of it."

Music started playing as soon as JARVIS finished speaking, low and sad and familiar, something he'd fallen asleep to dozens of times at MEDCOM. Bucky smiled a little and knocked back the pills. Blank unconsciousness swallowed him up soon enough after that.

Chapter End Notes
Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Bucky was muzzily semi-awake when Dr. Hernandez came to check on him; she gave up on getting any useful answers out of him about his pain level after a couple of minutes and ran some kind of scanner over his belly and thighs instead, making not-displeased noises at whatever she saw. She told him to go back to sleep, but he lay awake, shivering despite the blanket she had spread back over him.

He dozed off again into an uneasy sleep, but his dreams took a gentle turn: someone draping another blanket over him. He opened his eyes, hoping it was real, hoping it was Steve, only to discover the robot from Tony's lab. There was a messy mound of bedding on the floor, like it had stripped his bed, and maybe Steve's, and was waiting to see if he needed more than the blanket it had already added.

While he lay there looking at it, it turned away and came back with a single yellow shop towel, which it draped carefully over his head.

Bucky closed his eyes and ignored the sensation of another blanket being piled on top of him, and another after that.

When he woke up again it was to the sound of human footsteps and the awareness that he was sweltering under a mountain of covers.

"Barnes?"

Bucky looked around and found the bot had moved to the opposite side of the couch from Tony, who was standing at the edge of the room with his hands on his hips, head tilted. "Are you... sick?"

"I hurt myself," Bucky said. "Accident."

Part of it had been, anyway. Sort of. He hadn't really meant to do it, at least.

Tony nodded. "And Butterfingers is..."

"Helping?" Bucky offered. He squirmed his left arm free of the covers and adjusted the towel on top of his head.

"Sure," Tony said. "Okay. Do you... need anything?"

Bucky shook his head, although he tugged away one of the blankets as he did it, trying to move it away smoothly without sitting up. Tony broke after five seconds and came over to rearrange the covers for him; the brisk, efficient motions looked weird combined with the domestic task, but Tony showed no self-consciousness as he threw a blanket and a... mattress cover? Fitted sheet? At Butterfingers.

"Put those back where you found them," Tony said firmly, and the bot zoomed off, trailing covers. "He doesn't need those. JARVIS, for God's sake, adjust the thermostat in here if he's cold."
"The problem was not the ambient temperature, sir," JARVIS said gently, and Tony straightened up and looked around again.

"Yeah, where the hell is your--" Tony looked around at all the places within sight where Steve obviously wasn't, and then back down at Bucky. "Right, okay, stupid question. Okay. Do you need... food?"

"I'm fine, really," Bucky said. "I just promised the doc I wouldn't move until she said I could. She's gonna be back to check on me in, uh..."

"Seventy-three minutes," JARVIS supplied.

"Oh, still getting medical care from someone actually qualified. Good. Then I'll just--be in the lab. If you need anything, tell JARVIS."

Bucky nodded, and Butterfingers reappeared from wherever he'd taken the covers, rolling straight back to the couch and dropping another shop towel on Bucky's head.

"You can take the robot back, really," Bucky offered. "If you need him."

"Yes," Tony said. "Right, that's what I was doing here. Butterfingers, come on, exciting welding to do, let's go."

Butterfingers made a mournful noise, tugged up Bucky's blanket a little higher, and followed Tony out.

Bucky opened his eyes and looked around, wondering why they didn't have any regular old clocks, and then JARVIS said, "Dr. Hernandez will arrive in three minutes."

So that answered that question. Bucky considered moving, but he still had several blankets piled on top of him and it didn't seem worth the effort. He felt weighted down by more than just the covers, though his body felt better, his pain less and the dragging feeling dissipated. It was if some invisible weight had been drawn in and settled at the center of his chest.

He tried not to think about anything. The doctor was coming; he was healing. Better not to think beyond that, just yet.

Dr. Hernandez came back in, smiling a little when Bucky picked his head up at her approach. "Oh, good. I was going to be worried if you weren't properly conscious this time."

"Nah, I got that one," Bucky assured her. He tried to accompany it with a wave, but both his arms were buried under the blankets, and he couldn't immediately withdraw either one.

She made an amused noise and peeled back the blankets--four of them, as it turned out--so she could check his wounds, prodding here and there with deft hands, quick but not ungentle. "How's your pain?"

"Better," he said, barely having to think about it this time. "More of an ache."

She nodded, but caught the way he tensed when her probing touch moved south from the wound in his belly. "Pain?"

He shook his head firmly, not meeting her eyes, and she said, "Need a bathroom break?"

Bucky looked up reflexively, meeting her gently amused look as she said, "It's a good sign, that your
Bucky nodded, though she obviously didn't need the confirmation, and she levered him expertly up off the couch. He walked slowly and carefully at the pace she set, feeling the different pull of his wounds as he moved. He let himself favor his foot, not wanting to rip it open and bleed all over the floor, not wanting the pain of reinjuring himself.

Even as he did, he remembered taking his boot off after a mission and tipping blood out of it, unnoticed until then. The image in his mind doubled and smeared, and he struggled to make sense of it and realized it happened more than once: during the war, as well as while he belonged to HYDRA.

"Bucky?" That soft voice didn't belong to any of the memories, and it took him a moment to register that he was in the hallway of the apartment where he lived with Steve, in the Tower, in Manhattan, in 2015. Dr. Hernandez was at his side, watching him with concern both clinical and human.

"Sorry," he looked down at his foot, wiggled his toes. "Just, uh... just remembered. Being hurt before. Worse than this."

"Well," she said, her mouth twisting toward a smile as she started walking again. "You don't have to set a record every time."

She didn't actually insist on watching him piss, just asked him a lot of questions about it while escorting him back to the couch afterward. No, there hadn't been any blood, no, it hadn't hurt, yes, he'd been able to control his bladder just fine, thanks.

She got him settled again on the couch, pulling just two of the blankets back over him when he waved off the rest. It was only when she was walking out and broke stride halfway to the elevator that Bucky realized Steve was in the kitchen. He had his back to Bucky, and he was leaning over at the island, his shoulders hunched. His hair was dark with sweat, his shirt wet under the arms and down the spine.

Bucky felt his heart start to beat faster, and told himself it would be a good sign if he started sweating; it would mean his body had fluids to spare.

"Steve?" Dr. Hernandez said. "Do you want me to take a look at that?"

"No, thanks, ma'am," Steve said quietly. "It's fine."

She looked to Bucky, obviously waiting for some response from him, some indication of whether he was ready to be left alone with Steve. Quiet-voiced Steve, with some visible injury, which meant he'd blown out his temper, and now... now he'd come home. To Bucky.

He nodded to Dr. Hernandez, and it was only half a lie. He wasn't ready for Steve to break his heart like he was probably going to, but he never had been, and he'd survived it every other time.

She accepted his answer and looked back to Steve. "I'll trust you on that. If you're still here in two hours I'll expect to see improvement."

Steve's shoulders hitched a little, but his voice was even when he said, "Yes, ma'am."

Dr. Hernandez went to the elevator, the doors opening promptly for her and whisking her away.

Steve didn't move. Bucky watched him long enough to realize that his own breaths had synchronized with the rise and fall of Steve's shoulders. Bucky licked his lips, bracing himself to call out to him--
Steve wasn't ready either, obviously, but they couldn't just stay frozen like this forever--and then without turning around Steve said, "Buck?"

"Yeah, Stevie," Bucky said, his body melting into the couch a little at the tentative sound of Steve's voice, muscles relaxing that he hadn't known he was holding tight. "Come here and let me see."

Steve turned, and Bucky had the whole time it took Steve to walk over to the couch to take in the sight: not just the bloodied knuckles he'd been expecting, but the remnants of blood smeared across his upper lip like he'd wiped it away from his nose, and something that would have been a week-long shiner, back when Steve had bruises that lasted like that.

"What the hell, Steve," Bucky said, pushing up on his elbows and wondering where the hell Steve had managed to find an actual fight. Steve knelt beside him, chin tilting down but not really trying to hide his face. Bucky raised a hand slowly, telegraphing, and his fingers shook a little before he made contact with hot, tight skin, tracing the impact over Steve's brow and cheekbone, careful not to hurt. Steve's eyes closed and he tilted the tiniest bit into the touch, and Bucky let his fingers drift lower, brushing over his lips.

"I ran out of punching bags," Steve said, one corner of his mouth tilting up but his voice mostly serious. "And then Tony told me he had this bot I could spar with. Of course, it was made of metal, so it was a stupid thing to punch, and it got in a couple of lucky hits while I was figuring out if I'd just broken my hand on it."

Bucky blinked, the implications of that unfolding to an unexpected conclusion. Tony had punched Steve in the face for him. And Steve had let him, at least a little.

Steve went on seriously, "After that he told me you were upstairs on the couch looking like you were about to die of consumption or sadness or something and I should man up and tell you I'm sorry for whatever I did."

Bucky winced, struggling for words again. He wouldn't die, and Steve hadn't...

"I'm sorry," Steve said softly, finally meeting Bucky's eyes as he raised his battered hand to cover Bucky's, pressing Bucky's palm to his cheek. "I'm sorry. You scared the hell out of me so I was an asshole to you, and I didn't pay any attention to the fact that you weren't in any condition to yell back or hit me when I went too far."

Bucky remembered that pattern. It hadn't gone that way often--most times he could tease Steve to a truce without making a real big thing of it, but there were times they'd had to scream, or hit, or both, before they sorted themselves out. He'd been fourteen the first time he gave Steve a black eye, and although Steve had never actually broken Bucky's nose it had not been for lack of trying between the ages of fifteen and twenty.

"I just..." Bucky said, his eyes closing again as a wave of tiredness came over him. He slumped against his supporting elbow, and Steve let go of Bucky's hand to help him lean back against the pillow behind him. When he was settled he tilted his face toward Steve, eyes still closed; he didn't need to see to know Steve was there, and sure enough Steve leaned in, touching his forehead against Bucky's, his breath soft and warm against Bucky's cheek.

They'd shared plenty of secrets, tucked close like this, too close to have to see each other. "I couldn't. I couldn't tell you. I didn't want any of it touching you."

"Anything that touches you touches me," Steve said quietly. "Anything that hurts you hurts me. When you don't tell me you're wounded, that just means I'm bleeding somewhere and don't know it."
Bucky's breath shuddered all the way into his lungs and all the way out, and Steve's hand tightened on his.

"I'm sorry," Steve whispered, his hand coming up to warm the side of Bucky's face that he wasn't breathing against as he spilled words into the tight little space between them. "I'm sorry I let you fall and I'm sorry they hurt you and I'm sorry I yelled at you when you told me. I'm sorry I touched you last night and I'm sorry I left you alone this morning. I'm sorry you were ever alone with this."

"Stevie," Bucky said, because it was his whole body shaking now and he didn't want to know what his belly would feel like if he sobbed. "Shut your big goddamn mouth."

"Make me," Steve said, because what else would he ever say?

So Bucky turned his head just enough to press his lips to Steve's. He kissed Steve gingerly, catching the faint lingering taste of Steve's blood on his mouth. It felt new somehow, like this was some part of him Steve hadn't touched before. Like there had been some invisible barrier between them for weeks, months, and now it was finally gone, leaving them truly bare to each other.

They didn't push the kiss far—it wasn't that kind of kiss—and soon Bucky was brushing his lips over the bridge of Steve's nose, and the tender skin around his eye. Steve's hand slid down from his cheek to his throat to his chest; he pressed gently against Bucky's sternum, and Bucky tipped his head back, relaxing into the cushions, letting Steve touch him.

Steve tugged back the covers and then hooked his fingers into the neck of Bucky's hospital gown and looked at Bucky for permission. When Bucky nodded, Steve reached behind his neck and tugged loose the tie, pulling the gown off altogether instead of just pushing it up out of the way. Bucky was naked but for his bandages, spread out on the couch in front of Steve; his toes curled, and he dug the fingers of both hands into the cushions as goosebumps raced up his right arm and the left whirred softly, though there was no motion to calibrate for. He could only lie still and wait for what Steve would do with what Bucky offered up.

Steve shuffled down to the end of the couch, pushing back the blankets covering his feet to run his fingers over the bandage wrapped around Bucky's foot. Bucky struggled to keep his eyes open as his breath came short, not with fear, but with a feeling like he shouldn't be seeing this, even if he was the one it was happening to; Steve should always be straight-shouldered and proud, and Bucky could hardly bear to see him humbled.

But he couldn't leave Steve alone like that, either. He couldn't refuse to watch.

Steve pressed his lips to the bandage on Bucky's foot, and to the skin just above it, and then came back to Bucky's side. Steve rested one hand on Bucky's chest, over his heart, and one on his knee. He bowed his head in between, brushing his lips over the bandages that covered the wounds in his belly, and then lower, kissing down the inside of Bucky's right thigh and not missing the one wound on the left.

His cheek just brushed the head of Bucky's dick, lying soft between his legs, and if there were any goddamn justice in the world it would have felt like something. It didn't.

He wanted it to, though. He wanted...

"Steve, would you..."

Steve looked up, and Bucky's breath stopped for a second at the look in his eyes, the hunger and the intensity he'd kept carefully out of those soft touches of lips.
"Like that first night," Bucky said. "If you knew it wouldn't work, if you knew why, would you--"

Steve dropped his gaze to Bucky's dick, soft and obstinately useless. He pressed a kiss to the head of it, the same gentle touch of lips he'd given to every other place Bucky was hurt. Bucky tried to feel it that way, like his dick was just another part of his body, his hand or foot or ear, something Steve was interested in for no good reason. Someplace Steve liked to touch and kiss.

It occurred to him to worry that Steve didn't like touching and kissing that particular lump of flesh, a lightning flash of uncertainty that was swallowed up the next second in a thunderclap of recognition. Steve's eyes slipped shut, and the first little hot flush appeared on the tops of his ears and across his cheekbones, like the first hint of light in the sky after a long night. He dragged a kiss up the length of Bucky's soft cock, nuzzling at the hair at the base, which probably smelled like antiseptic but at least, hopefully, not like blood.

Steve liked doing this just fine.

He rested a hand on Bucky's stomach between the bandages, as if Bucky was going to have to be reminded to stay flat, as if he might be squirming and thrusting in a second. Then Steve curled his other hand around Bucky's cock, stroking it slowly--not like he was trying to do anything, just like he wanted to touch it all over. Like it turned him on to touch it, given the way his hips pressed in against the couch. Bucky didn't catch even the edge of pleasure from it himself; everything was almost completely numb to real sensation from the first moment Steve's mouth touched him.

But he could feel something. Like his left arm, his dick registered touch, and the warmth of Steve's gentle grip. He couldn't miss knowing that Steve was lavishing this attention on him--even though he knew Bucky was broken, and how he had come to be that way. When Steve closed his mouth on the head of Bucky's cock and sucked again, it didn't feel futile. It felt like Steve was doing exactly what he meant to do, and getting exactly what he wanted from it. From Bucky.

Bucky reached out without thinking, touching the fingers of his left hand to the corner of Steve's mouth, tracing the curve of his pink lips with shining metal.

Steve looked up at him and shifted the grip of his hand from Bucky's cock to Bucky's fingers, squeezing and stroking almost the same way: like he knew what comparison Bucky had just been making. Like he understood that his metal arm and his useless dick were both parts of him Hydra had made for their own purposes, and he wanted Bucky to know that he didn't mind either of them.

Steve closed his eyes, taking the whole length of Bucky's dick into his mouth, sucking gently but steadily.

And then he pulled off and tugged Bucky's left hand to his lips. He took Bucky's fingers into his mouth exactly the same way. Bucky felt a weird shivery tingling in his brain--not arousal, not pleasure, but something that shook down his spine and stole his breath. He couldn't properly feel Steve's mouth, but he knew that Steve was sucking on his fingers the same way he'd sucked on Bucky's cock. Taking him in, every weird and broken inch.

Bucky closed his eyes and let his mouth fall open, slowly pulling his left hand back. Steve followed it all the way up, so that when he let Bucky's fingers slip from his mouth Bucky could kiss him again immediately. The kiss was hungrier and harder this time. Bucky kept his left hand on Steve's cheek, holding him close, and Steve had a hand at the back of his neck and one resting over his heart.

"I know this is yours to bear," Steve said softly. "I know I can never be all the way inside this with you. But I'll be right here at your side, and I'll do whatever I can to help. You won't be alone."
Bucky kissed him until he had to pull back with a shaky laugh. "Wait, did you--did you just offer to walk into Mordor with me?"

Steve gave him a crooked smile, earnest as ever. "And back again. Just don't go where I can't follow, Mr. Bucky."

Bucky kissed him again hard and didn't think about how many times he already had, or how close he'd come twice in the last week. Steve had found him in the end. They were here now together, and if Steve wanted to believe that this was going somewhere, that they could beat this somehow, Bucky wasn't going to tell him otherwise. Neither of them was in any condition to fight that out now.

"We're watching the whole trilogy," Bucky informed him when he had to stop to breathe. "Extended editions. Go wash your face and make some popcorn."

Dr. Hernandez showed up for Bucky's next check an hour into the movie, and she cleared him to sit up and to eat an actual meal. That was good, because the popcorn hadn't done much to make up for the fact that he hadn't really eaten since the day before and the sight of the hobbit feasts had his stomach growling loudly enough to compete with the movie. Steve still insisted on soup and soft bread for dinner, but Bucky got to eat it leaning against him on the couch, watching the fellowship arrive at Rivendell with Steve's arm curled around him.

Two hours later Dr. Hernandez returned for another check, and by then Bucky was glad for the break, because he'd realized what was coming at the end of the movie. Steve excused himself to the kitchen while Dr. Hernandez ran the scanner over him, prodding his belly and legs and asking him about his pain level and how his stomach was handling dinner.

"I think we can skip any further checks until morning," she said finally, packing up her things and not looking at either him or Steve, who had returned to perch beside him on the couch as soon as Dr. Hernandez completed her examination. "As long as you avoid any strenuous activity between now and then."

Steve made a small choked noise, obviously coming to the same conclusion Bucky had about what she meant and not knowing whether it was allowed to be funny yet or not.

Bucky tried to find the words to tell Steve it was definitely funny, or to assure Dr. Hernandez that nothing remotely strenuous was going on tonight, and managed to choke out a garbled sound that was neither. They both gave him worried looks and Bucky started laughing, spilling out the tension of the movie, the moment, and the day. He tried to choke it back at first, but it escaped in little fits of sound, not loud, but he just couldn't stop.

He wrapped his arms around his belly, but it only twinged a little as tears ran down his face. He tried to tell them he was all right, tried to stop laughing or explain, but all he could do was shake his head at them both. After a couple of minutes Steve ushered Dr. Hernandez out. Left alone on the couch Bucky managed to get himself under control, though his face was still hot and his eyes damp when Steve came back.

Steve didn't say anything about it, just gave him a glass of water to drink and settled in the corner of the couch. He turned so he was sitting sideways, and pulled Bucky up against his chest, between his legs. That felt like a better way to watch the end of the movie, with Steve's whole body wrapped around him, and his face hidden from Steve's sight.

He did all right with Boromir dying, though he could feel the tension in Steve's body and knew that it was reminding him of too many men they'd known--and maybe others Steve had lost since, who
Bucky knew nothing about. But it was still just a movie, until Frodo set out alone and Sam followed him.

Until Sam was in the river, drowning because he wouldn't give up on reaching Frodo, and Frodo finally reached down through the water to pull him out.

Bucky remembered the Potomac, the confusion of wreckage and debris, and diving deep into the dark, swimming with a recently dislocated shoulder in search of one sinking body. Because Steve had refused to fight him. _Because I'm with you to the end of the line._

Steve's arms were tight around him, and Bucky pretended that he didn't know Steve was crying so Steve would keep pretending Bucky wasn't either. They were silent through the end of the movie, and sat through the credits without moving or speaking or looking away from the screen. By the time the DVD menu came up again, Bucky had pulled himself together, though he felt utterly exhausted.

"Come on," Steve murmured, pushing Bucky gently upright as he got up. "Time for bed."

Steve supported him with an arm around his waist, and Bucky kept a blanket wrapped around himself as Steve steered them. He was a little surprised--a little disappointed--when Steve brought him to his own bedroom, settling Bucky at the edge of his own wide bed, but then Steve said hesitantly, "If you don't mind--I could stay?"

Bucky swallowed hard and nodded, and Steve gestured to the expanse of the bed. "I won't touch you while you're sleeping. But I'll be close this way."

Bucky nodded again and then said, "It wasn't..."

Steve sat down beside him--close, not keeping a careful distance yet. Bucky leaned into him, seeking that ease they'd had a few minutes ago on the couch. Steve put an arm around him and Bucky closed his eyes.

"It wasn't just--I was having a nightmare. That was why I was hard, that was--and when you touched me, that was part of the nightmare, too. And I don't... I can't. I can't get confused about that, Stevie. You're not part of that. You can't be."

Both of Steve's arms came around him then, and Steve hugged him tight.

"I'll only ever touch you the way you want to be touched," Steve said softly. "I swear to you, Buck. If you're having a bad dream I'll stay out of it. I'll find some other way to wake you."

Bucky nodded against his shoulder.

"You have to get to sleep first, though," Steve added practically, not wading any further into that mess tonight. "You need anything else?"

Bucky thought vaguely about brushing his teeth, or putting on some kind of clothes, but even with Steve's help getting up to do anything now seemed like a vast and pointless effort. A blanket had been plenty for the last several hours, and he was about to get into bed. With Steve, who had certainly seen it all before, and had definitely kissed Bucky with a filthier mouth.

For now he helped Bucky pull back the covers and get comfortable, and then he walked all the way around the bed to strip down to his underwear and get in on the other side.

"JARVIS, lights," Bucky said, and the room descended into perfect darkness. He could still hear Steve breathing, though, and could sense his presence nearby.
The bed was probably bigger than the whole bedroom he and Steve had in the last little apartment they shared before the war. They'd kept up the farce of two beds, a careful show of propriety to no one.

And now he and Steve were sleeping the same way, for all the mattress extended the whole way between them. Bucky shifted toward the middle of the bed, just a few inches, and he heard Steve doing the same on his side. When Bucky reached out, the sound of motion against the sheets was doubled, and he found Steve's hand as soon as his own was extended.

Steve squeezed his fingers twice. Bucky squeezed back three times, and did not let go.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](http://example.com)

I am also on [Tumblr](http://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](http://example.com).
They'd gotten closer in the night. Bucky opened his eyes and realized they'd gotten a lot closer; not much more than the width of their hands separated them. Bucky was lying on his right side, like he usually did, to keep his left arm as cool as possible while he slept. He had both of his hands curled around Steve's, and Steve lay on his left side, facing him.

Steve was barely awake--Bucky didn't know which of them had woken the other, or if they were just synced up like they had been sometimes during the war.

This was as far as they could get from those moments of mutually jerking awake, alert for some threat; they were snuggled into a wide, soft bed, waking up slow. Steve was looking at Bucky with a dopey, fuzzy smile that Bucky wanted to lean in and kiss.

So he did.

Steve made a warm, pleased noise against Bucky's mouth and kissed him back, drowsy and slow. Bucky scooted closer, sliding his leg over Steve's to draw him close, rubbing his thumb against the side of Steve's hand. Steve tightened his grip on Bucky's fingers in response, but Steve kept kissing him just as softly, their mouths barely open, breath mingling until it all smelt and tasted the same and they were still just brushing lips against lips, aimless and easy.

Bucky slipped his left hand onto Steve's hip and squeezed gently, and Steve shuddered and let Bucky tilt closer, bringing their hips together. Steve was hard, just the thin fabric of his underwear between his cock and Bucky's skin. Bucky slid his metal thumb beneath the waistband, and Steve's hand closed on Bucky's.

"You sure this isn't too, uh--"

Bucky nipped at Steve's lip, and Steve pushed back hard into the kiss before he pulled away again to say, "Too strenuous?"

Bucky snickered. He felt Steve smile and had to kiss him again, warm with the knowledge that this could be a joke they shared now. The word strenuous would always make one of them look for the other and think of this and laugh. They used to laugh about sex--and during it, he was pretty sure. Maybe they could get that back, at least, even if he couldn't feel anything else.

He tightened his grip on Steve, pulling him closer and grinding against him.

"I can do this all day," Bucky said, rolling his hips as he did; his belly only twinged a little, so it wasn't even a lie.
Steve huffed and tried to look annoyed through his grin and absolutely failed, especially since he was rubbing his dick against Bucky's hip while he did it.

Then, because he could never leave well enough alone, Bucky added, softer, "This close enough for you?"

That was what Steve had said, when Bucky asked what he wanted, a couple of days ago before everything went to hell. I want to be close to you.

Steve kissed him and rocked into him. His breath was ragged and fast, puffing against Bucky's lips, when he said, "Pretty damn close, yeah."

"Could be closer," Bucky offered, tugging down on the waistband of Steve's underwear. Two metal fingers stroked the top curve of Steve's ass. They were already pressed together as tightly as they were going to get, except that Steve still had his shorts on. Steve had drawn a line by wearing them to bed, but now, if Bucky could get him to relax a little, he might be willing to let it go.

Steve made a noise against Bucky's mouth that was as much a sigh as a moan. His hips snapped in harder, the rhythm taking on some urgency.

Bucky knew enough to give him a push. He slid his entire left hand into Steve's underwear, firmly gripping one cheek of his ass as Steve writhed, guiding the next thrust of Steve's hips. Bucky took charge of the kiss, too, pushing into Steve's mouth, and Steve's mouth went slack against his, and Bucky kissed harder, gripped harder, rocked into him as Steve tried to go still.

He was rewarded with pulses of wetness against his belly; he looked down and saw that the head of Steve's cock protruding from the top of his underwear, come spilling out between them, just barely missing the bandages on Bucky's abdomen. Bucky squeezed Steve's ass a little harder, and Steve moaned and almost laughed; his hips jerked convulsively, and his cock jumped, giving up another jet of come.

Steve exhaled slowly, wiggling his ass in the way that told Bucky to let go.

Bucky gentled his grip and kissed Steve a little more, until Steve gave him a little shove in the center of the chest and pulled away. Bucky rolled over and scooted toward the edge of the bed, noticing as he did that his belly and legs hardly hurt at all, though his foot was sore when he touched it to the floor. He flexed it thoughtfully as Steve came around the bed.

"Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS said, and Bucky looked up, down at the floor, and back up again.

"Are you programmed not to interrupt until everybody's got their feet on the floor?" Bucky asked.

"I am, Sergeant. Well spotted," JARVIS said. "Dr. Hernandez is waiting for you."

Bucky glanced down at himself and winced. The shiny splatters of come he could wipe away, though the smell might linger; the friction marks were going to stay red and obvious for at least a few minutes. Steve reversed direction to the other side of the bed, where he'd dropped his clothes last night.

A couple of minutes later, Bucky was hastily washed and Steve had clothes on, and went out to usher Dr. Hernandez in to have a look at Bucky.

She breathed in visibly through her nose and shot Bucky a stern look, but she only said, "How's your pain this morning?"
Bucky shrugged and picked his foot up. "This is the worst of it. Everything else feels okay."

She nodded, and got on with prodding and scanning each injury in turn. She changed all of his bandages, giving him a wry look before she stripped her gloves off and dropped them into the biohazard bag with the used gauze and tape.

"Looks like you're healing well," she said. "And you seem to be receiving good nursing care. I'm ready to release you from medical supervision, except that there's one more thing you promised me you would do if I let you recuperate at home."

Bucky grimaced. "Yeah, I'll--I'll call."

Dr. Hernandez gave him a long, searching look. "You will."

"I will," Bucky insisted. "I'm supposed to see him this afternoon anyway, so--yeah. I will."

She nodded, and moved on to instructions on what to watch for as his wounds finished healing.

Bucky took the time to pull on clothes and brush his teeth after Dr. Hernandez left, before he went to find Steve. He didn't look at himself in the mirror, and tried not to imagine how the phone call to Padfield was going to go. Bucky would either have to puncture a friendly, normal conversation with this news, or Padfield would greet him already knowing, because Dr. Hernandez or someone had warned him. Either way, the thought of picking his phone up made his stomach twist.

He was hungry, he realized. Starving, practically. He'd barely eaten the day before, and healing burned calories. He would go eat breakfast with Steve first, just like any morning, and call Padfield after.

Steve was already cooking when Bucky walked into the kitchen. They mostly relied on ordering food, but even Steve could produce eggs and bacon and toast palatable enough for both of them, and apparently he was in the mood for a hot breakfast. Bucky was too, as soon as he caught a whiff of it.

Bucky fixed coffee for both of them, and then rummaged around for things to add to the eggs; groceries were periodically delivered by special robots who also cleaned the kitchen and living room and left a little card behind saying what they'd done. Bucky had never seen them, but Steve and JARVIS both assured him it was totally normal. So it turned out there was cheddar cheese in the fridge, an onion and a green pepper in a drawer. He grated and chopped and tossed stuff into the pan while Steve was turning toast.

Steve grinned and said, "Oh, hey, good idea," because he liked his eggs with some flavor too, but it never occurred to him to actually add anything besides a little salt and pepper.

Bucky just gave him a kiss and went to wash his hands, and pretty soon they were settling down together with plates piled high and their second cups of coffee.

"So," Steve said with a sideways smile. "This is breakfast, but then we're also going to need, what--second breakfast, elevenses--"

Bucky laughed. "Yeah, yeah, it's another eight hours of movies we need to watch today, we'd better put together a meal plan."

"Eight hours," Steve groaned, but he was smiling.

"Like seven and a half and then half an hour of happy endings for everybody, I swear," Bucky
promised. He prodded Steve through making a plan--pancakes for second breakfast, pastries and fruit for elevenses. They were debating lunch options and munching the last of the bacon when Bucky's phone buzzed.

It was a text from TOWER SECURITY: Dr. Padfield says you don't have an appointment but you should be expecting him?

Bucky winced, and beside him Steve went still. He tilted the phone, giving Steve permission to have seen.

"I didn't call him," Steve said hesitantly, which meant he'd considered it.

Bucky shook his head. "Dr. Hernandez must've. She wanted me to speak with him within twenty-four hours. I guess she decided not to trust me to call."

He wouldn't have, Bucky realized. He would have let himself just forget, start watching movies with Steve and eating all day, and, oops...

*He's right,* Bucky texted back. *Send him up.*

Steve rested his hand on Bucky's shoulder, and Bucky leaned into the touch, breathing evenly and trying not to think too much. He couldn't rehearse a story, prepare a confession. He had to wait for Padfield to ask him something, and then he had to answer. He had to tell the truth this time.

He touched his phone, wanting to ask Woj what he should do, wanting to send a string of emoji to Andrews and Duncan. Before he could do anything, the elevator dinged and the doors opened, letting Padfield in. He walked toward them slowly, his gaze taking in every detail, and Bucky looked back, searching for some clue to how this was going to go. Padfield was dressed in the same type of slightly-dressed-up civvies as always, carrying the same bag he always brought with him. He was giving nothing away, but he wasn't the one with something to confess.

Steve squeezed Bucky's shoulder and then let go as he stood, and Bucky stood with him. He couldn't read anything from Padfield's expression, and couldn't bring himself to say a word as that intent gaze moved back and forth from him to Steve.

"I can go in the other room if you want to talk here," Steve said, but he stayed shoulder to shoulder with Bucky. Not abandoning him, but staying right at Bucky's side like he'd promised.

"It's fine," Bucky said, turning his attention away from Padfield to offer Steve a smile. "We'll go in the other room."

"Actually, I think we should stay right here," Padfield said, stopping at the opposite side of the kitchen table. "And, Bucky, I really think Steve should sit in today."

Bucky opened and closed his mouth. His sessions with Woj had always been private--really private, in a way few things were. His MPs had always waited outside the door; if he'd ever been triggered during a talk session, or just flown off the handle, he could have hurt Woj badly before anyone could stop him. They'd allowed the risk, because the privacy mattered, the same way that he was allowed to meet his defense counsel alone.

Padfield had done everything the same, until today. Until Bucky had showed his hand and hurt someone, even if it was only himself.

"Sir, that's not necessary," Bucky said. "I won't, I wouldn't..."
He trailed off, uncertain of exactly what Padfield wanted Steve to stop him from doing.

"You won't benefit from not having to explain all of this over again to Steve?" Padfield's voice was steely in a way Bucky had never heard before, showing through the usual gentleness. "You wouldn't want him to be able to offer his thoughts and insights on what's going on here as we figure out how to move forward?"

Bucky dropped his gaze, unable to answer that at all. Steve shifted his weight, moving subtly between Bucky and Padfield. "If Bucky doesn't want me here, I'm not going to stay."

"With all due respect, Captain, Bucky has not been making decisions in his own best interest lately--not yesterday, and I'm guessing not last week when he had a bad day, and probably more than once before that, because patterns of self-harm don't escalate from zero to near-fatal exsanguination over a weekend."

Bucky gritted his teeth. He knew it looked like that, he knew he had to explain why it wasn't, but it was still galling to have everyone thinking that he'd meant to die and screwed it up that badly. "I wasn't--"

"Ah," Padfield cut him off with a sharp syllable and a raised hand. "No, Bucky, before you decide to tell me anything, you need to decide whether Steve is staying."

Bucky sized up Padfield's unyielding stance, facing down two supersoldiers and not giving an inch. Bucky knew the look of a guy who was sure he was in the right and didn't plan on backing down. If Bucky kicked Steve out, he doubted it would change Padfield's mind on wanting someone else in on the conversation. He would drag Woj into it just for starters, and he'd demand that Bucky tell Steve what they'd talked about and drag this whole thing out further.

Bucky laid his left hand on Steve's arm. "Sit down. You might as well hear this."

Steve gave him only a single searching glance before he sat. He wanted in, Bucky knew, even if he had been willing to defend Bucky's right to kick him out. Bucky made a gesture of invitation toward the chairs on the other side of the table, and Padfield gave a grim little nod and sat.

"Coffee, Doc?"

Padfield twitched a little smile but said, "No, I'm plenty awake this morning, Bucky. Have a seat. I'd like you to tell me what happened yesterday, and I'd like you to do it without lying to me."

Bucky sat, his chair as close to Steve's as possible, and stared down at the kitchen table. What happened yesterday was a hell of a lot to spit out over the breakfast dishes. "Maybe you better start with the night before," Steve said quietly, leaning into him slightly.

Bucky clenched his teeth. He knew that, logically, the story was going to require that to make any sense--and he also knew that the story was going to require Thursday, and the time before that, and the time before that, and the off-switch nightmares, and that last time with Rumlow, and...

"We'll come back to that, Captain," Padfield said, and his voice was a fraction gentler.

Bucky looked up and Padfield said, "Let's just get the facts of the case straight. You're not going to tell me it was a bad dream or a flashback this time, are you?"

He waited.
Bucky shook his head.

"Good. We don't need to get into reasons or feelings yet, just tell me how you actually almost died this time."

Steve tensed beside him, the muscle of his thigh tightening where it ran alongside Bucky's, his hands twitching toward fists in his lap. Despite everything, maybe he hadn't realized yet that Bucky had almost died on Thursday too.

Padfield obviously had put that together.

"Yesterday morning, Steve said he was going out," Bucky said quietly, struggling to get the words out, feeling like he was fourteen and sitting in a confessional and forcing himself to own up to his first sin of self-abuse. He was sweating, his left arm whirring softly; he'd be lucky if his voice didn't break, and pitched it lower and softer. "I had been in the room with no surveillance all night, and when he left I thought--I thought I needed to try one more time. I meant to stop, before yesterday," Bucky directed that partly to Steve, but Steve wouldn't look at him now.

Bucky dropped his own gaze. "I just wanted to try again, because I thought--I thought I'd blown my cover and I wouldn't have another chance because now Steve knew. So I went and got the knives from my room. I didn't use knives the other times, but I thought--blood would be better, and knives were..." His, only connected to him, but he wasn't explaining Thursday and Clint just yet.

He glanced up at Padfield, who gave him a calm, encouraging nod. Bucky didn't look at Steve.

"So I took the knives in the bathroom and I figured out where to put them so it hurt, and it was dangerous if I moved too much, but I wouldn't bleed that badly as long as I stayed still. And then when it hurt enough, and I couldn't move, and I knew I could fuck it up and bleed out any second and Steve wasn't even in the building to find me..."

Steve was completely motionless beside him. Bucky closed his eyes and took a breath. Well, he asked.

"I tried to jerk off," Bucky said. "And I got as close as I've been to getting off since the day the helicarriers went down, and it still didn't work. I realized that I can't make it work by myself. That's when I screamed, and Steve heard me because my phone has an app for that, apparently. But I didn't almost die until Sam was there trying to patch me up, and I moved my leg the wrong way and the blade shifted and cut the artery."

Bucky opened his eyes to see Padfield jotting down notes.

"Okay," Padfield said without looking up. "So--back during our first session, we talked very, very briefly about sex. Do you remember that?"

Bucky nodded.

Padfield looked up, as if he'd heard that, and he studied Bucky for several seconds, leaving him an opening to volunteer more. Bucky could see how the dots connected, but he didn't know what the hell to say about it without an actual question, so he waited too.

"According to my notes, you told me that you had been raped," Padfield said, dropping his gaze to the paper in front of him. "That you were able to get an erection during nightmares, but not when you wanted one, not during sex you otherwise found enjoyable. And then you said that you had explained that situation to Steve--"
There was something terrible about the way Steve, still pressed against his side, didn't flinch or show surprise at those words. Bucky kept his eyes front, focusing on Padfield and not on Steve holding utterly still in his peripheral vision.

"And that you were pursuing other forms of physical intimacy, things that you could enjoy despite your limitations. And you said that addressing your sexual difficulties wasn't your top priority."

Bucky nodded slowly. That was all basically accurate, as far as he remembered.

Padfield sat back, tilting his head. Bucky watched him look to Bucky's side, at Steve.

"Okay," Padfield said. "So I'm not going to belabor that point or cross-examine Steve to find out what lies you were telling to who. I just want to know--when did your priorities change? Two weeks ago this wasn't your top priority, yesterday you were willing to risk death to try to get off. Obviously I missed the point where you started needing advice and help on this more than you needed help with anything else. I want to do a better job of working with you from now on, so let's just walk back through that. When did your priorities change? Thursday? Earlier?"

Bucky shook his head, trying to remember the way he'd thought about it. "It wasn't like that, it wasn't--it wasn't so important, it was just something I could do. After I was cleared for weapons--"

Steve stood up abruptly and walked over to the sink. He braced his hands on the edge and stood there with his back to Bucky, and Bucky looked at him for a moment before returning his gaze to Padfield.

Padfield offered him a wryly sympathetic look, but didn't take back the question.

"I had access to stuff in the weapons lockers. I thought I could use a stun baton," Bucky explained, focusing on Padfield. "That's--I couldn't damage myself that badly with one, but that's what they used on me sometimes, so I thought it might be enough. Hurt enough."

Padfield nodded. "So you tried that the first time--when?"

Bucky had to count back, picturing his schedule grids. "Monday--a week ago Monday, at night."

Padfield looked down at his notes, tapping his pen against the page. "So after Sunday. After you were triggered."

Bucky shrugged. "I just--I just thought I could. It wasn't more important than--"

"You got out of my bed," Steve said, not loudly, not angrily. He didn't turn to face them, but Bucky couldn't do anything but watch him.

"You got out of my bed," Steve said, not loudly, not angrily. He didn't turn to face them, but Bucky couldn't do anything but watch him.

"I told you that I was worried about you," Steve said. "I said I didn't want you to join the team because I wanted you to be safe a while longer, and you waited in my bed with me until I was asleep, and then you went where I couldn't hear you and you hurt yourself exactly the way they used to hurt you."

"It wasn't..." Bucky said, and stopped before he could go any further down that road. He was bracing for a blow, and he didn't think Steve would actually hit him, or repeat yesterday's yelling, but he couldn't bring himself to say it again, either.

No one said anything for the space of several breaths. Bucky watched Steve's shoulders rise and fall; he saw the shift of weight that preceded Steve turning to face him.
Steve came back to the table, but instead of sitting down he went down on one knee beside Bucky's chair. He looked up at Bucky and tapped his finger against his face, just below his lower lip, just above the point of his chin. Like he didn't know whether he was asking for a punch or a kiss.

"Say it. I can take it. Just say it."

Bucky couldn't look away from Steve's eyes, dark with hurt and the anticipation of hurt and so much more.

"It wasn't about you," Bucky said, holding Steve's gaze. It had been easier to slide a blade into his own belly, but this was just as necessary. "I wasn't thinking about you, I just--I just wanted. I just wanted to feel it, and I thought I could, and you were sleeping so you weren't going to know the difference."

"I didn't know," Steve said. "Doesn't mean I didn't wake up hurt."

"I woke up in my fucking closet," Bucky snapped, before he knew he meant to do anything other than agree with Steve and apologize. This time Steve flinched, and Bucky felt awful as soon as he saw it, as soon as the words were out of his mouth. They poured out anyway, like something worse than blood bursting from a wound that had been festering for days.

"I wanted to hide, I wanted to go back, I had the shakes like I had a fever of a hundred and three and you were sleeping like a baby the whole time, so don't fucking tell me I hurt you."

"And if I could just interject here," Padfield said, and Bucky looked to him like he was the cavalry coming over the hill; he saw Steve's head whip around the same way.

"Bucky, the fact is that harming yourself, for any reason, whether it was life-threatening or not, is a cause for concern. I'm worried about it, Steve is worried about it, and I think you're worried about it yourself even if it's easier to lash out at Steve for the way he expresses himself. You agreed to see me because you're aware that it's a problem; I'm here and Steve is here because we want to help you address that problem."

Bucky gritted his teeth and looked down. Steve settled in his seat at Bucky's side and swung his knee out to touch lightly against Bucky's.

No one said anything until Padfield prompted, "Bucky? You look like you have an objection to that."

Bucky shook his head. "You're right. I shouldn't have. I knew better. I just--I just have to not do it, I know that."

"Sure," Padfield said, sounding skeptical and almost amused.

Bucky looked up sharply. "It's fucking obvious. You just said--"

"I said it's cause for concern," Padfield interrupted. "Show of hands, who in this room thinks that if I tell Bucky that what he must do is never inflict pain on himself ever again, even if that means never getting off ever again, then Bucky will no longer feel the need to inflict pain on himself?"

Bucky swallowed hard but kept his hands in his lap. He saw Steve close his left hand into a fist, but he didn't raise a hand either, and neither did Padfield.

"And who thinks, if I gave that order, it would lead to Bucky feeling like he has to lie and keep secrets, the way he's already been doing?" Padfield was already waving his hand in the air as he
spoke.

Steve raised his hand more slowly and grimly, and Bucky slumped back in his seat, acknowledging defeat, as he put his own hand up.

"Good, we're in agreement," Padfield said. "Bucky, when people do something painful or unpleasant, they do it because something motivates them. Hurting themselves accomplishes something. Some people hurt themselves because they need to feel a sense of control, or because physical pain is easier to handle than emotional pain. You just told us that you hurt yourself because it's the only way you know of to experience sexual pleasure. Sex is a powerful motivator. People endanger themselves in all kinds of ways to obtain it. I'm not going to tell you not to want it. I'm not going to tell you not to pursue it. I'm going to tell you that I want to help you figure out safer ways to get what you need, and help you address the underlying problem so maybe in the long term you can have more options than you have right now."

Bucky just stared at Padfield for a moment, trying to get his head around that. "You're saying... What, it's okay to--to--"

"I think, medically speaking, the knives are probably not a great idea," Padfield said. "Definitely not without a spotter. But we talked about this, right? You told me about that trigger that stopped your heart. That worked out okay because you were surrounded by people who were prepared to deal with that situation. There are people who do this kind of stuff for fun, believe it or not, and they've worked out a lot of ways for people to hurt or scare themselves, or other people, without anybody sustaining serious injuries, even without a healing factor like yours."

Steve was holding very still at his side, and Bucky could not look over. "I don't..."

Padfield just waited.

"I meant it," Steve said quietly.

*Let me help*, Steve had yelled at Bucky the day before. He'd thrown the words at Bucky like a punch, but Bucky couldn't doubt that he'd meant it. Steve had made a life of insisting on doing his fair share.

The thought of it made him want to hide, to switch himself off. Steve had told him, after all: *anything that hurts you hurts me*.

Of the two of them, Bucky knew he was the one who could handle hurting himself on purpose. Steve would be hurt by seeing Bucky hurt, and it would be that much worse for him if he were complicit in it. And while *you must not* wasn't going to make him stop wanting to try, Bucky could go a long damn time without being willing to hurt Steve just so he could get off.

Bucky shook his head, and he felt Steve's posture tighten beside him even before he said, "I don't want anyone spotting me. Maybe JARVIS can monitor, or I can make sure I have my phone for emergencies."

"Good," Padfield said, like he didn't notice Steve at Bucky's side radiating hurt at this fresh exclusion. "Those are good ideas, Bucky. That could cut down a lot of the risk. Now let's talk about what did work for you; by the time we're done talking today I want you to choose one thing you're going to try in the next few days. Something small. I know it's frustrating, but partial success is still success at this point, okay?"

Bucky shrugged and nodded. Steve, beside him, didn't move and didn't speak.
By the time they'd finished dissecting all of Bucky's experiments since he'd come to the Tower, Steve was standing by the sink, though with his hip against it, so Bucky could still see half his face when he looked. Partial success.

Padfield looked between them with a faintly challenging air, but he didn't tell either of them what to do about it. "Bucky, this was a lot. I want to give you some time to process and to work on things, so why don't we skip tomorrow's meeting and I'll see you on Thursday. You can call me in the meantime if you need to talk about anything. All right? Anytime, for any reason, just call and I'll do whatever I can to help."

Bucky nodded, and got to his feet to walk Padfield back to the elevator, giving Steve time to walk away.

When Bucky came back to the kitchen, Steve was still at the sink, washing dishes. Bucky plucked the towel off his shoulder and started drying at his side. He went slowly, wanting the quiet of it to last. He wished for an industrial sink full of dishes to get through, a whole day of KP with Steve beside him and his headphones on, so they couldn't talk and couldn't fight and just had to do this all day.

But all too soon Steve rinsed his hands for the last time and turned the tap off. While Bucky was still polishing up the frying pan, Steve took that deep breath that meant he had something to say.

Bucky kept his eyes on his work and waited for it. Whatever Steve was going to say, Bucky had to hear it.

"We both know I don't like this," Steve said quietly. "Not you lying to me before, not you trying to do this alone now. But your doc was right. It's a lot to process. So..."

The elevator dinged, and JARVIS said, "Second breakfast has arrived, Captain, Sergeant."

Bucky lowered the frying pan and looked across it at Steve, torn between admiration and accusation. Steve must have texted the order while Bucky was still hashing things out with Padfield. "You timed that to the fucking second."

Steve gave him a smile that was almost genuinely happy and turned away. "We got eight hours of movies to watch, Buck. Timing counts."

Bucky stared after him for a moment, torn between love and delight and a painful awareness that he didn't--couldn't--deserve this. He did nothing but hurt Steve, and still...

Bucky set the frying pan down and called after him, "Did you get any with chocolate chips?"

"Have I seen you eat pancakes at any time in the last two weeks?" Steve called back.

"You gonna--" Bucky started, colliding with Steve saying, "I was wrong."

That night, Bucky lay on his back in bed, feeling sleepy and slow from a proper hobbit's schedule of meals, warm and content with the knowledge that at least one war had ended right. Steve was at his side, arm's length away, and Bucky caught the rhythmic sound of his hand moving under the covers and smiled: he recognized without even trying that Steve was rubbing his stomach, not anywhere lower.

"You gonna--" Bucky started, colliding with Steve saying, "I was wrong."

Bucky stared up at the ceiling for a few seconds, letting the utter seriousness of Steve's tone sink in before he turned his head to look.
Steve was still staring up toward the ceiling.

"You were wrong," Bucky repeated. "Waited my whole life to hear you say that, pal, and now I have no idea what you're talking about."

Steve snorted. "I'm sure you've got a list of options. But I meant--last week, when I told you to wait. When I decided that you were going to stay off the team, just because I'm selfish and wanted to keep you safe."

Bucky turned onto his side, laying his right hand on Steve's chest. "That's not why I did it."

Steve shrugged--not agreeing but not arguing. "If my bad decision wasn't life-threatening, that doesn't mean it wasn't a bad decision. I was wrong to make that call for selfish reasons--and honestly, if you feel ready to fight, I want you at my side. I always want you with me. Whaddya say..." Steve finally turned his head, offering Bucky a crooked smile. "You willing to follow some dumb punk from Brooklyn into another fight?"

Even handling rifles again hadn't been as real as this: looking Steve in the eye and knowing exactly what he was signing up for, all over again.

He remembered, so vividly all of a sudden that he could smell the damp wool of uniforms and the stale beer, when he'd stood in that bar in London and answered the same question. He had thought he knew, then, what he was letting himself in for. He had been in the trenches, seen men die and battles lost; he'd been captured and tortured and suffered things he hadn't wanted to tell Steve about. He had thought he knew what there was to be afraid of.

It was almost funny, now, how innocent he had still been then. How worn and used and scarred he'd thought he was, and how young and new and untouched he'd still been. He wondered if there was still farther he could fall, if he would find himself looking back on this moment and marvel at his own innocence.

But the answer was the same now as then. As it was in the beginning, is now and forever--

"Yeah, Steve. Always."

World without end, amen.
Chapter 37

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

Warning for... Catholicism?

Also, I hate to do it, but it turns out posting twice a week is A Lot, and it's eating into my time for things like... writing the rest of the story... so as of now, I'm dropping down to posting once a week, on Sundays.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky felt sluggish and slow the next day even though the pain was gone, and he couldn't tell whether it was because he was still replacing blood or because the previous day's seven meals were weighing him down. At the same time he kept thinking of what was coming next--Steve wanted him on the team, he was going to join the Avengers, he was going to have a job. The thought brought with it a volatile mix of terror and eagerness that was all too familiar from the start of a mission, the night before a battle or a raid. This might kill him, but he was going in.

He wondered if he had been lying to Steve after all, if he'd had to try hurting himself because he knew no one else was going to do it. Not because he wanted to hurt, but because he needed some danger to face, some threat to make him remember that he was alive.

He and Steve both went easy on breakfast, talking more than they ate, and Steve explained to him what it actually meant to be on the team. It wasn't like the war. They were a defensive force, not offensive; with HYDRA smashed into as fine a powder as Bucky and Steve could manage, they had no known targets to go after. They had to wait for an attack.

"When you think about it," Bucky said, frowning at Steve over his coffee. "Avengers is a pretty goddamn pessimistic name for a bunch of people protecting the earth."

Steve sighed and shook his head like it was an argument too well-worn to bring up again, sitting back from the table a little. "Take it up with Tony, it was his idea. Something he said to Loki during the Chitauri invasion."

Bucky tilted his head. "Loki, like..."

Steve winced. "Yeah, the planet is called Asgard."

Bucky sat back. "You're shitting me. Thor is--Thor?"

Steve spread his hands, nodding.

"Thor is real?" Bucky demanded. "Thor is real and people get excited about you?"
Steve snorted. "No accounting for taste, I guess. Speaking of which--I gotta go talk to Tony about getting you on board, plan some training so you can get used to working with the team before--"

Steve cut himself off and knocked wood.

*Before we need you,* Steve had almost said. It could happen any day; Steve's life might be mostly training and PR and hanging around with Bucky, but he--they--were always waiting for the next shot to be fired. No war, but that just meant there could never be a real victory, or a peace that meant anything.

It was as familiar as the edgy anticipation, that sense of constant low-grade threat. That had been his whole existence for so long; every time HYDRA woke him up, it was because there was a mission. He had had downtime--time to anticipate, or to catch a breath or two in the aftermath--but no illusion of normal life, no time that didn't center on a mission. Nothing to lose but his own existence, and that was just more of the same.

"Buck?" Steve said softly, squeezing his shoulder.

Bucky looked up, summoning a fraction of a smile for Steve's concerned look.

"If you want more time," Steve said. "We can do this at your pace."

Bucky shook his head. "No, we can't, because nothing's going to stop you from going out there, and I'm not going to stay behind again. It's just--it's a nasty kind of war to be fighting."

Steve nodded grim understanding. "That's because it's not a war. It's just the world."

Bucky shook his head, although Steve wasn't wrong. "It's funny how people think you're the optimist."

Steve squeezed his shoulder again, smiling slightly. "I tell the truth as much as I can, that's all. Even to myself."

Bucky meant to wave him off, send him to figure things out with Tony, but the grimness hadn't really gone out of Steve's expression, and Bucky couldn't let that go. "You tell it to anybody else? I know you've been going easy on me, but--you talk to Sam about this stuff? Natasha?"

Steve shrugged and sighed, waving a hand vaguely in a gesture Bucky knew much too well.

"No," Bucky insisted. "Steve--maybe nobody did the number on you that HYDRA did on me, but you shouldn't--you shouldn't be alone. You shouldn't have to carry it alone. Maybe that wasn't the best example, yesterday, but it helps a hell of a lot to have somebody to talk to who's not in the middle of it and--"

"Buck," Steve said, sliding his hand down from Bucky's shoulder to his wrist, stopping his gesturing hand.

Bucky hesitated, trying not to show that he knew he'd fucked that up. Pushing Steve to take care of himself was never the right way to do it. Pushing Steve to take care of himself was never the right way to do it. Bucky had gotten damn rusty at that; he used to be better at maneuvering him.

"I know," Steve said quietly. "Sam had basically this same conversation with me, except with more yelling, after I came home from leaving you in Texas the first time. I've, uh... I've been talking to a therapist twice a week ever since. I mean," Steve ventured a wry smile, "except in the past three days when I've talked to her about fourteen times."
Bucky opened and closed his mouth, and finally said, "You never told me that."

Steve's mouth twisted and his eyebrows rose, but he didn't actually say, *Do you really want to talk about who didn't tell who what?*

"I didn't want you worrying about me, at first," Steve said. "And then it--" he looked away, frowning. "I don't know, it seemed like bragging. Fiona told me the very first time that there was nothing really wrong with me, clinically--I just needed someone to tell things to. A confessor of sorts. And that's--it's not like that for you."

Bucky didn't point out that Fiona wouldn't have stood a chance in hell of convincing Steve to come back and talk a second time if she said anything else. Fiona sounded like a smart woman.

"Doesn't have to be life-threatening, right?" Bucky waved one hand, trying not to ruin Fiona's work in getting Steve to think it wasn't a big deal. "It's good, though. I'm glad you've got someone to talk to who's not in the line of fire with you."

Steve nodded, looking down into his coffee. He took a sip before he said, "I know I never--never would've said this before, but thanks for worrying about it, Buck. There was a long time there when... well. Thanks."

When no one worried. When everyone who knew Steve thought he was indestructible Captain America.

"It's nice," Bucky said quietly. "Nice being here and knowing what there is to worry about. And it'll be nicer when I can do something about it, so go talk to Tony."

Steve's lips twitched, and almost before he spoke Bucky recognized the way he used to take the more seasoned Commandos' lead while still gamely upholding the principle that he was in command. "Hey, Sarge, what a good idea. I'm going to go talk to Tony."

Bucky raised his hand in the laziest possible salute, and Steve shook his head, leaning in to give Bucky a kiss before he headed out.

Left alone with his thoughts, Bucky couldn't stop feeling the anticipation of traveling toward a combat mission, and with it, the urge to get right while he had time. Steve's words kept rattling around in his head: *a confessor of sorts,* Steve had said.

Not an actual confessor, obviously. Bucky wasn't sure whether Steve bothered going to confession these days, or if his conscience was made of the same stainless steel it always had been. Maybe Steve was going around in a constant state of defiant readiness to meet his maker.

Bucky, on the other hand, should probably get his ducks in a row. After the last few days... even if he weren't going into combat any time soon, he didn't think he could go back to Mass and look Fr. Roche in the eye, take the Host on his tongue, without confessing first.

It felt almost normal, almost routine, to call and ask for Fr. Roche this time.

"Bucky! I was just thinking of our visit last week. I've been wishing we'd had more time to talk."

"I, uh," Bucky swallowed. "Yeah, I wanted to talk some more. To... to make my confession, actually."

The tone of Father's voice shifted as he said, "Of course, I'm glad to hear it if that's what you need.
I'd like to come and see you, is that all right?"

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Yeah, I--" he laughed softly, almost silently. "I don't have anything else on my schedule today."

"Give me an hour, Bucky. I'll be there. And remember, I'm not the only one you can talk to--He's always listening."

"Yes, sir," Bucky agreed. He went so far as to fold his hands after hanging up the phone--he'd always felt that that was necessary when he was a kid, that the act of pressing palm to palm and interlacing his fingers was like picking up a receiver and asking the operator to connect him to Heaven. Anything he thought after that would be heard, or at least transmitted.

All that occurred to him was one of the book titles on the list of things he hadn't read that Andrews had summarized for him. *Are you there, God? It's me...*

Bucky shook his head and unlaced his fingers to reach for his phone. God wasn't the only one he could talk to. He opened up his text messages--there were a few new emoji exchanges between Andrews and Duncan, and in his private text string from Andrews, an unanswered, *Awfully quiet over there, you okay?*

There was a text from Woj, too, from shortly after Padfield left the day before. *Talked to Padfield. I'm here if you need a second opinion or a friend.*

He texted, *Thanks* to Woj, and *I will be* to Andrews, and a champagne bottle and a gun to Andrews and Duncan.

A second later Andrews replied in the emoji chat, *TELL ME THAT ARMORED BAG OF DICKS COUGHED UP AN S-19.*

Duncan replied a few minutes later with a string of party horns, followed by a separate text that said, *YOU LOSE, ANDREWS.*

Bucky frowned at his phone and texted back, *Was this a week-long game of emoji chicken? and after a few seconds, Did you just imply that Tony Stark is secretly 170 pounds of dildos in a metal trench coat?*

When Fr. Roche arrived, Bucky took him into the library; it was only when he sat down in the chair he usually sat in for sessions with Padfield that he realized it felt the same. Confessor indeed.

Fr. Roche sat down in the seat Padfield usually took; when he pulled out a stole and slipped it on over his black clothes, Bucky felt suddenly out of place in the chair. That wasn't how this should work.

"Should I kneel?"

Fr. Roche smiled gently and gave a little shrug. "You should approach the sacrament in the way that will allow you to focus on what really matters."

Bucky frowned, searching for what really mattered. He settled for sitting forward a little, assuming the same posture he'd had when sitting on a hard chair or the edge of his bunk back at MEDCOM. He crossed himself and bowed his head, and when he was still Father said softly, "In Jesus' name, let us begin, James."
Bucky nodded, counting back to his last meeting with Father Guzman before he left.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been a couple of weeks since my last confession."

He saw Fr. Roche silently sign the cross in his direction, and took a breath. "I, uh--I..."

Bucky frowned, stuck on more than just the reluctance to admit what he'd done. "I don't know what sin it is exactly, but I know I... I know it was wrong."

"Well, make your confession, and we can work out the particulars as we need to," Father said easily.

Bucky put his head down again, focusing on his folded hands. "I... on Monday morning, I stabbed myself eight times. It wasn't a sin of despair--I wasn't trying to kill myself, I never meant anything like that. I was just trying to--" his face went hot, but he pushed on. "To jerk off."

Father made a low noise, and Bucky looked up to see him frowning, rubbing one knuckle over his lips. He met Bucky's eyes and gave him a questioning look, not shocked or disgusted, merely inquiring. "Is that your usual manner of self-gratification?"

Bucky looked down again, feeling his face go hotter, a squirm of shame curling through him at having to talk about this, and at what he was going to have to say. "I can't--I can't. Perform. Unless it hurts. They did that to me, they--they broke me like that."

Father nodded slowly. "And Monday was the first time you hurt yourself?"

"No, I. A few other times," Bucky said, rubbing his head. "I should've--I should've maybe confessed before. But it wasn't--"

He swallowed and shook his head. "It was bad before too," he admitted. "It wasn't knives, but I still--still hurt myself pretty bad. But this time Steve saw. A bunch of people saw. I had to get stitched up. Needed a blood transfusion, the whole works."

"Ah, yes," Father said. "Our sins do always become more pressing when we're caught in them."

Bucky's fists clenched in instinctive defense, and he forced his fingers open enough to fold his hands together again, struggling to speak truth, to explain himself properly. "I wasn't..."

Bucky searched for words and didn't find any way. He couldn't say that he would have confessed, or even felt much need to, if not for Steve finding him, Steve knowing. If he'd managed to clean himself up, even if he'd had to ask Dr. Hernandez for some stitches, as long as Steve didn't know, he wouldn't have said a word. He would have thought he was still doing right, keeping it away from Steve.

His fingers dug into the backs of his hands, emphasizing how mismatched they were, but for once his left arm stayed quiet. He could hear the quiet shushing of the air circulating, and nothing else.

Father waited a while, and then said, "I can see a few ways in which this might be pressing on your conscience. First, although you insist that this was not a sin of despair, it was still a harm you did, unjustly and unkindly."

Bucky shook his head. "I wanted--"

"As they say on television: Cool motive, still murder--or a very grave assault, at least."

Bucky was startled into looking up, and he found a slight smile on Fr. Roche's face. He dared to
focus on the humor rather than the condemnation. "I... missed that show, so far."

"You'd like it, it's set in Brooklyn," Father said, then turned serious again. "But the point is: even if you had a reason that you felt was important, you still shed the blood of a child of God, not in self-defense or out of some dire necessity, but because you chose to do so."

Bucky nodded slowly. "I... it felt necessary, Father. I needed it. I guess that--that was--"

"Yes," Father said. "We'll get to the sexual sin in a moment. But it was also, if I'm understanding you correctly, a sin of deceit. You have been lying to others, by omission or explicitly, until you were unable to keep up the lie."

Bucky nodded. "I just--I didn't--I wanted Steve out of it, Father. I didn't want him hurt by it. He--he couldn't--" Bucky pressed his face into his hands, remembering the sound of Steve's voice, Steve's frantic hands. "It hurts him, seeing me hurt. I didn't want to do that to him. I tried to protect him from it."

Father sat back slightly, raising his eyebrows. "That doesn't sound as if you repent of anything except failing to lie more effectively, James."

"I wouldn't," Bucky said quietly. "I wouldn't. I'd go to hell for it if I could just keep this from touching him."

"Very noble," Father said dryly. "But as you have found, you could not keep it from touching him. He found out--and, from what you've said, I'm guessing he found out in a much more upsetting way than you telling him the truth ever could have been."

Bucky pressed his eyes shut and kept still, like taking a punishment, waiting for it to be over; he tried to relax instead of bracing against it, to listen to Fr. Roche instead of coming up with arguments. He'd asked for this. He wanted to make things right.

"This is a lesson we learn again and again, all of us," Father said gently. "There is a reason we are commanded to be truthful. There is a reason we are tempted to lie. The truth isn't easy; it is very often ugly. But it is necessary. Frequently it is inevitable. You hurt Steve, you hurt yourself. Of course you had good intentions. Everyone has good intentions. But unless you understand that your action was wrong, you cannot learn from it, you cannot repent it, and you cannot be absolved of it and move forward."

Bucky gritted his teeth but nodded, not letting himself talk back. If he believed any of this he had to believe that Father knew what he was talking about; he knew he was in the wrong, even if he didn't know how to believe it or repent of it for real.

"Now, let me ask you this--is this the only part of your recovery which has been unpleasant or painful? Is there no other way in which you are still--as you said, broken? Nothing else that might upset Steve?"

Bucky opened his mouth to deny it, and thought of Steve sitting by his side while he was under the off-switch. Steve had had a nightmare about that, but Bucky had still been ready to ask him to do it again. Had been furious when Padfield said they were going to stop, called up Woj and argued about it and never once thought about what it would do to Steve to keep going.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, and shook his head. "He--he saw. There's a trigger phrase that makes me... he saw. I asked him to see."

"And this triggering that you asked Steve to witness," Father said, gentle and slow, like a very sharp
blade being inserted. "It was not a matter of sex?"

Bucky remembered how that session had ended, the flurry of images he'd chased down in the dark before Steve put him under. "Not--it wasn't supposed to be. It scared me enough that--but no. It wasn't. Not that Steve saw."

"Mm," Father said. "So we arrive again at you lying to Steve. Specifically, it seems to me, that you have been deliberately excluding him from anything to do with sex."

Bucky shook his head sharply. "Hey, no, we--we have sex, I--"

"Do your marital duty by him?" Father said wryly.

Bucky shrugged stiffly and sat back, folding his arms across his chest. "I do."

"By engaging with him in an activity that you cannot find pleasurable," Father said, like that was supposed to mean something.

"Well it can't get either of us pregnant, so," Bucky waved a hand, frustrated into not caring that it was a priest he was talking to. "What difference does it make if I like it? Hell, it's all still adultery--"

"Fornication, at worst," Father corrected firmly. "Neither of you is married to anyone else, so it can't be adultery. And it is true that your union has not been solemnized, but as I am not permitted to offer you the sacrament, I am willing to accept your sincere commitment to each other--witnessed, after all, by most of the world thanks to the photographs taken outside your court martial--as the equivalent of a marriage. There is a reason that I have been willing to accept that your consciences were clear when you attended Mass, James. The fact that I accept that your love for another man includes a genuine commitment worthy of respect doesn't mean that I think the sixth commandment is entirely without meaning."

"Well, I'm not cheating on Steve," Bucky said stubbornly.

"Not with anyone else," Father said. "But you have been withholding this from him. The purpose of sexuality is not only to create children, and it is not bound up in marriage as some arbitrary rule to limit how much fun you can have. Sexual pleasure is God-given, and it is meant to be shared, that it may deepen the love you have for your partner and bring you closer together. You have withheld that from Steve--worse, you have allowed Steve to share that with you without sharing it in return."

"It's not--I can't," Bucky said. "I can't do it. The only people who can make me feel anything are the ones who raped me, and I can't--I can't--" Bucky lost track of the words, fighting down a wave of something close to panic, something close to the need to fight, to defend himself, to--


Bucky put his face in his hands and let the sound of Father's voice wash over him. He remembered the feel of sitting in a pew, remembered the smell of the old varnished wood and faint lingering whiff of incense, the feeling of being folded into something much older and larger and more powerful than himself, sheltered like a child. Safe at home, as long as he could be forgiven and still belong there.

"I know that it's frightening," Father said softly. "I know that you have been hurt--that sin is not yours to bear or to repent, Bucky, I want to be clear. What was done to you was not your fault. The fact that it has affected you deeply, continues to affect you, is not your fault. And yet, everyone must do right from wherever he finds himself. Do you understand? If you choose to abstain entirely, if you ask Steve for a relationship of chastity because you're not ready, there would be no sin in making that choice. I feel certain that Steve would make that sacrifice if you asked it of him."
"And after you came home...?"

"He--I wanted to try. I thought I could, with him, maybe I could--and I didn't want to make him stop, just because I couldn't get off on it. I wanted that with him, that's--that's as good as we could do, what the hell is wrong with that? I love him, I gave him that, we were together. I can make him feel good, I want to do that."

"Yes," Father said patiently. "But you didn't share the reverse with him. You didn't even tell him that you were trying. You didn't let him take any part in your pursuit of pleasure."

Bucky remembered Steve's mouth on him, when he was lying on the couch. Futile. Sweet and good and close, but nothing near what he really needed. Because he didn't want Steve mixed up in what he needed. Steve had said it himself the other night, before everything went to hell--It's like you're just there to get me off. That's not how it should be.

"You didn't let him see you vulnerable. You didn't let him see what you really needed. I know that it's frightening, Bucky. Intimacy can be frightening even for people who haven't been hurt intimately; letting another person in that far can be frightening. But I also know that you trust Steve deeply, and I think he has proven to you that he is worthy of that trust. We are commanded to use the gift of sexuality in the right ways; it is not always easy. But I want you to understand, at least, what your sin has been, so that you can see how it can be mended."

The night Steve had fucked him, he had wished for it. He had wished Steve was hurting him, so he could get off on it. He'd never felt like a filthier sinner than when he realized what he wanted.

"Father," Bucky said quietly. "I--the things I'd need him to--if one of us is going to be hurting someone. It should be me. It should be on my conscience."

"Bucky," Father said gently. "What Steve chooses to do is for him to make his peace with. If he acts out of love for you and in cooperation with your needs and desires, I can assure you that he will be undertaking the moral opposite of rape, no matter what form his actions take. If there are things he cannot do, it will be for him to say; if his conscience is uneasy with his choices, that will be up to him to refuse or repent. You can only be honest with him about what you need, and invite him to share it with you in whatever way you are both able to share it. But if you love him--if you have committed yourself to him--you owe him the chance to share that with you. Even if it's ugly. Even if it's difficult. Even if it fails."

Bucky said nothing. There was nothing to say, nothing but a new depth of guilt and shame to fall to when he thought he'd already reached the bottom of it. He had been selfish, when he told himself he was protecting Steve; he had only protected himself, and he hadn't even done that right, hurting himself worse every time he lied to Steve, every time he hid himself from the one person he trusted to find him.

"Do you understand, now, how you have sinned?" Father asked. "Against God, against the man you love, against yourself?"

Bucky nodded.

"Then confess," Father prompted. "Confess, and beg forgiveness with all your heart, so that you can be reconciled and begin again."
Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Bucky had gone hoarse before he finished making his confession properly, and it cracked twice during the Act of Contrition. Pushing out the words was a strangely physical effort, and by the end of it he felt drained, sinking back into the couch with his eyes closed as Father murmured the words of absolution.

That felt real, too, in an oddly immediate way. Like he was cleansed of something. Like he'd finally told enough of the truth to accomplish something.

"Don't get up," Father said, standing up and then reaching down to sign the cross on Bucky's forehead with his thumb. "Take some time to pray, and rest. I can find my own way out."

Bucky opened his eyes long enough to meet Father's gaze and nod, and then he let himself just sit a while. His penance wasn't as easy as saying a few Hail Marys--not even a few hundred. But he found himself praying anyway, without even folding his hands. It felt like a weary echo of the moment when he'd fallen to his knees watching Steve in danger, instinctively crying out to something that might or might not be listening, which would hear him no matter what he did with his hands, this once.

"Please. I'm sorry. Please. Let me get it right. Please."

He heard Steve come in from the elevator, but lay still, hands open, until he sensed Steve close. Only then did Bucky open his eyes to find Steve crouched in front of Bucky's knees, giving him such a Steve look, all silent serious focus, that Bucky couldn't help smiling a little, his heart aching with love for his guy, who just kept coming back for him despite everything.

He opened his mouth, and the words waiting on his tongue were the only ones he could say, after the last hour. "I'm sorry. For all of it. I'm sorry."

He half-expected Steve to wave it off, to tell him it wasn't his fault or he didn't have to apologize, but Steve held his gaze steadily and then nodded. "I forgive you."

Bucky's breath shook a little. It felt like being at high altitude, or under some searing light; he couldn't stay in this space, this feeling. He sat up a little, reaching out his right hand, and Steve took it, helping him resettle himself on the couch and sitting down beside him. The touch and the movement, and Steve beside him on the couch where he belonged, made it easier to feel like this was his ordinary life, to say something that belonged to ordinary time.

Steve had gone out to talk to Tony, and been gone for hours. So. "What'd Tony say?"

Steve tilted his head. "He wanted to know why now, and I told him you'd done something self-destructive that made me think you needed work to focus on. He said he knew the feeling and he'd expected you to join the team a week ago and then ruthlessly sicced the PR people on me. They have a forty-page plan for handling you joining the team, and they made me read it and give feedback."

Bucky tried to picture a public relations plan that went on for forty pages. Did it include different contingencies based on just how mad people were about Bucky joining up? Did it include lists of the people most likely to try to kill him for it?

He forced himself to imagine something positive, however improbable. "Do I get a Twitter?"
"That's somewhere down the flow chart after the first time you do something," Steve actually raised his fingers to make air quotes, as if his irritated expression didn't convey it, "'visibly heroic'."

Bucky tilted his head in agreement. No point in him having a Twitter just for people to yell at. They were doing that just fine by email.

"So everything's green lights," Steve said. "Except that Sam asked me not to make it official until he has a chance to talk to you. I don't know if you remember..."

"I remember. He saved my life." Bucky remembered the look on Sam's face as the darkness overtook him, the kind of horror that comes with understanding precisely what you've just witnessed. He felt an echo of it himself, sick at the thought of being responsible for it. He hadn't actually seen what Steve looked like, finding Bucky like that, but Sam--

"Is he okay?" Bucky asked. He should have asked sooner, should have thought about it. He hadn't been doing great at looking much further than the end of his own nose for the last few days--definitely not further than Steve, right in front of him--but what he did had touched other people, too, left marks that couldn't be scrubbed clean as easily as the bathtub.

"Yeah, he's handling it. He took the day off after the doctors took you downstairs, went up to his mom's place and stayed there for a day. It must have reminded him of being a PJ, seeing you like that, but he's okay now. He just wants to talk to you before anything's official. Okay?"

Bucky nodded. Sam had a right to ask--Sam more than anybody. No one else knew that Bucky was the one who made the knife slip. No one else knew how close Bucky had really come to killing himself, or why. As far as Bucky knew, Sam had kept that secret, but he shouldn't have to, not if it could hurt him. Not if he was alone with it.

"Can I--can I talk to him now? Is he--"

"Yeah, he's downstairs," Steve said. "He said he'll be around, whenever you want to go down and see him."

Bucky nodded. That was right. It was for him to go to Sam for this, not Sam to come to him, when this was Bucky's fault, and he when he wanted to make amends for the part of it that hurt Sam. "I'll--I'll go. Yeah. Okay? I--we need to talk, but--"

Steve hugged him, cutting off the anxious tumble of words. Bucky let himself hang on for a moment, hiding his eyes against Steve's throat. Then Steve shifted back, pulling Bucky up to his feet as he did, and Bucky squared his shoulders and set out.

Sam looked fine when he opened the door to Bucky, sharp-eyed and neatly dressed other than a stray smear of flour on one sleeve of his shirt. The warm, sweet smell of something baking wafted out from the apartment behind him, making everything feel safe and homelike, but Bucky knew that he didn't know Sam well enough to read the signs with any certainty.

"Come on in," Sam said, smiling a little. "I made cookies, come on."

"I'm sorry," Bucky blurted as he followed Sam toward the kitchen, not wanting to risk letting everything be smoothed over before he could say it.

Sam stopped in his tracks and turned back.

"I'm sorry," Bucky repeated, squaring up, the momentum of confession still pushing him a little. "I
must have scared you."

Sam shook his head slightly, but his expression was still amiable, and he beckoned with one hand, not rejecting Bucky's apology. "We're not doing this without some sugary baked goods, man. Ten more feet, come on."

They sat down at the kitchen table, and Sam poured coffee for both of them while Bucky studied the plate heaped up with cookies, staying still with an effort. He didn't quite manage to stay quiet, but some vestige of the manners he'd learned as a child at least supplied him with a safe topic of conversation. "Are these the ones Steve messed up?"

"Honest to God, the man finds ways to screw up baking that I did not know were possible," Sam said, passing a mug to Bucky. "And I'll be happy to tell you all about that in a minute, but--I didn't ask Steve to send you to talk to me because I'm mad, or because I blame you for me having a rough day, okay?"

"I did it, though," Bucky said, forcing himself to lay it bare, because he knew Sam knew and he wasn't going to lie, or invite Sam to lie, even if only here between the two of them. "I was--I was jerking off like that, and when you said that, I moved, I made myself bleed--"

"I spooked you," Sam said, shaking his head. "Which I should have known better than to do, about a million times over. You were still bleeding and I threw the consequences in your face, like you needed something else to be scared of right then. I meant to reassure you, but I just made it worse--it was a split second, and I made the wrong call and startled you into hurting yourself worse."

Bucky was thrown off balance by Sam admitting fault. He opened his mouth to insist that it had been his own doing, not Sam's, that Bucky was the one who had to apologize. But Sam had asked him here, and had obviously thought of this; he remembered Steve saying *I forgive you*, the relief it had been not to have his apology dismissed, and chose his words more carefully. "I understand. It was a mistake, it happens. I was lucky to have you there at all."

Sam's shoulders eased down a little, and he grabbed a cookie from the plate, pushing the rest a little closer to Bucky at the same time. Bucky picked one up and took a bite, letting his eyes fall half-shut as the perfect soft richness of it hit his tongue.

When he opened his eyes again, Sam was looking down at the cookie he'd taken a bite from. Clearly that wasn't all Sam had to say.

"I still want to reassure you," Sam said, glancing up. "Now that you're *not* actively bleeding under my hands, I do want you to know that what I saw, and anything I concluded from what I saw--that's only between you and me. We don't have to talk about it. I know it wasn't your choice to have me there seeing you like that. I just want you to know I'm not going to be talking to anybody else about it, either."

The words felt oddly familiar; it took Bucky a moment to place the sensation, and then he recognized that Sam was on his team in this. He wasn't just Steve's friend, this was something he did just for Bucky. Maybe that meant Bucky needed to step up and be on Sam's team, too, just like he needed to remember to look after Steve.

"Except that you'll tell *your* therapist." Sam's expression froze for a second, and Bucky added, gaining confidence, added, "Steve told me you talked him into seeing somebody--good work, by the way--so I figure you're in the club."

Sam relaxed another increment and smiled. "Okay, yeah, except my therapist. But that's confidential,
Bucky tilted his head to the side agreeably. "I got so many people who are allowed to talk to each other to coordinate me I kind of lose track, but yeah. I know. I believe you."

Sam nodded, studying Bucky; his lips parted like he was on the verge of saying something, then closed again, like he'd thought better of it, or like he thought he shouldn't.

Bucky hesitated before taking another bite to say, "Ask, if you want. You earned that much."

Sam shook his head. "It's just nosiness, it's not--"

Bucky snorted. "Everybody's this polite in the Air Force? Natasha doesn't know what color underwear you're wearing on any given day? Because in the Army we didn't let a guy slide after he did something this stupid without asking a few questions."

There was a hesitation where Bucky felt like he'd overbalanced. Maybe it wouldn't work; maybe Sam wouldn't accept the line Bucky had thrown to him.

Sam shook his head and sat back, and the looseness of his posture let Bucky breathe. "I just--Steve never talked about his sex life, but he seemed..."

Bucky cringed inside, but he'd pushed for this. He would probably get more from Sam than he would from Steve.

"He seemed pretty happy," Sam said. "For a minute there, at least, and then kind of worried. I don't know exactly what this was about, but--"

"I was raped," Bucky said. It was getting easier to say it that way, to put every different thing that it was over all the years and handlers and techs, all the different circumstances and all the ways it played out, into that one neat little box of a word.

Sam's expression went serious and still, and it occurred to Bucky that Sam maybe didn't hear the time frame of the past tense, there.

"Not, like. Not recently. Before the helicarriers. But it was more than once--kind of a lot, over time, and it messed up my, uh... my responses to things." His throat went tight, and he felt a burst of frustration at how hard it was to say--but Sam wasn't a priest or a doctor, Sam was something like a buddy, and buddies were allowed to give you shit for being incapable. He forced himself onward anyway; Sam still deserved the explanation. "I was trying to keep Steve clear of all of that and just--take care of myself. And you saw how that turned out."

Sam raised his eyebrows. "That's what I saw."

Bucky nodded firmly. "Steve didn't know. And now he does, and my therapist, and probably Steve's therapist, and--" Bucky waved his hand. "Now I gotta work on it. But I..."

Bucky looked down. It had seemed right and necessary when he was talking to Fr. Roche, but the thought of talking about it with Steve--asking Steve to do a hell of a lot more than talking--was still paralyzing.

"Can I..." Bucky rubbed his face and then reached for his coffee, wrapping his hands around it before he forced himself to look up and meet Sam's gaze. "Actually, can we just skip to the part where you tell me that of course Steve is gonna want to do whatever it takes to help me out with this, even if it's fucked up and..."
Bucky waved his hand, uncomfortably aware that there was no way he could be vague enough for Sam not to have a real clear picture in his mind of what Bucky was getting at.

Sam sat back, rubbing one hand over his mouth. Bucky looked closely, but he didn't think Sam was about to puke, so that could have been worse.

"He will," Sam said finally. "You know and I know that he will. Whether he can do something like that to you, whether it's good for him--man, I don't think he wants to see that much of your blood on the outside of your body ever again, so I hope whatever you're trying next is a little less..."

"A lot less," Bucky promised. "But... I guess that's what I'm asking, really."

Sam shook his head again. "You tried being with him and keeping him out of it, and that ended with you in surgery, him destroying punching bags and getting his ass kicked by robots, and me watching an entire season of *The Great British Bake Off* on my mama's couch. It's a good show, but, man, no. Not again. I am putting my foot down."

Bucky smiled slightly and nodded, feeling a strange thread of hope in Sam's easy humor, like it might be that simple to put what he'd attempted behind him.

"And you tried not being with him at all," Sam added. "Don't even go there, I'm not ready to spend another six months running around after Steve running around after you, and Natasha might just kill you both. So that's out. So I guess whether it's the best thing for him or not, you're gonna have to at least try having sex with the dude who's been crazy about you since 1934."

"Well," Bucky said. "When you put it like that."

Bucky took some of the cookies back to Steve, who crammed one into his mouth whole as soon as Bucky set the plate down on the coffee table. Bucky smiled and sank down onto the couch, and Steve sat back with him, slinging an arm over his shoulders. Bucky closed his eyes, struggling for the words to ask what he had to ask. What he would rather die than ask.

"Was Fr. Roche hard on you?" Steve asked softly.

Bucky opened his eyes, huffing out a little laugh. Steve had asked him almost exactly the same question the first time he saw Bucky after the end of Bucky's punishment detail for almost killing Andrews and pointing a rifle at Duncan.

"He didn't assign me any KP," Bucky said. "He just... he had a pretty clear idea about what I did wrong, and it wasn't what I was expecting."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "What were you expecting?"

Bucky's mouth hung open wordless, and then he shook his head, sitting up to escape Steve's arm, letting his head hang.

Steve let out a breath and sat up beside him, not touching but side-by-side.

"The worst thing I did wasn't hurting myself," Bucky said quietly, hauling up the truth again and laying it out, like laying bricks in a wall, like starting a new foundation. "The worst thing I did was try to keep you out of it. Excluding you from that. I was selfish, not letting you--"

"What?" Steve sounded disbelieving en route to furious, and Bucky had to look over at him because he couldn't trust what he was hearing. "That fucking--how dare he--"
"Steve, you're talking about a priest," Bucky said, feeling a little awed.

Steve surged up to his feet. "I don't care if I'm talking about the pope or your mother, nobody has a right to tell you--after what you've been through--nobody has any damn right to tell you that you have to do anything with anybody."

"That's what you wanted," Bucky said, looking up at him and feeling all off-balance.

"It doesn't matter if I want it, it matters if you want it. And not because somebody said that you have to or you'll go to hell--"

Bucky shook his head, putting his face in his hand. "Steve, Fr. Roche isn't a bully you need to protect me from, and neither is God. Or the pope, or my mother."

Steve blew out a breath. "God rest her soul."

"Yeah." It occurred to him how glad he was that his parents and sisters had all been dead long before anyone found out what had been done to him. Steve knowing was plenty bad enough.

Bucky shook his head. "Point is, he made me see that even if I hadn't set you up for walking in on maybe the worst sight of your life, it was dumb and selfish to try to keep you out of this and handle it alone. I should have at least laid it out for you so you'd know what I was doing, maybe get a sanity-check on my plans. I should have trusted you enough to ask for your help."

Steve could argue and bluster all he liked; Bucky knew it was true. He knew this was right.

Steve studied him in silence for a few seconds, taking in Bucky's certainty the way he used to accept intel. He knew when to rely on what Bucky told him. "That's what you're doing now?"

Bucky nodded. "I need your help, Steve. I can't do it alone--you heard what I told Padfield."

Steve shook his head. "I know that you're asking. What I want to know is--do you trust me, or are you just backed so far into a corner that you'll try anything?"

"Yes," Bucky said decisively, trying not to give Steve any opening to argue on this.

Steve shook his head and turned half away, and Bucky lasted about another five seconds watching the set of his shoulders and listening to the silence before he gave in to the impulse to argue back. Damn Steve for knowing, once every hundred years or so, when to shut up.

"Jesus, Steve, yes! Yes, I'm stuck in a trap here, you can see that. Yes, I'm only asking because I tried every other thing I could think of and I only hurt myself and you. Yes, I trust you, or I still wouldn't be asking now. You're the one I want next to me when my back's to the wall."

Steve snorted, but he met Bucky's eyes again. "You always were trying to keep me out of fights."

"Yeah, and I should've learned by now that you always find one no matter what I do." Bucky smiled a little and sat back against the cushions, spreading his arms in invitation. "So? Wanna do something stupid and dangerous with me?"

Steve's eyes narrowed, but Bucky could see the smile lurking at the corners of his mouth. "This is going to be the Cyclone all over again, isn't it?"

"Probably, uh," Bucky considered the options for what he might actually ask Steve to do. Not the fucking knives, obviously, and he wouldn't need a cable, but an accessory or two would probably
make it easier on both of them. The stun baton was still in his closet, though the thought of handing it over made sweat break out on the back of his neck. "Probably safer?"

Steve shook his head and looked around the room. He grabbed a sketchpad and pencil and then sat down next to Bucky again, flipping to a blank page. "We're going to make it safe, Buck. We're not doing anything without a clear plan."

Bucky blew out a breath, relief wiping that thrill of fear away. He didn't have to decide on his own what to hand over. Of course Steve would take over; of course Steve would strategize. Ten minutes into this he'd have a map and be moving figures around it, complete with codenames and countersigns. "Aye aye, Cap."
He couldn't move, could barely breathe. Hands pawed at him, bore him down; he was naked, helpless, his left arm a dead weight and the rest of him no more use. Fingers invaded his mouth, his ass, prodded the seams of his arm and all of his scars, pinched and teased. He was panting, whimpering, but he couldn't form words, couldn't make a sound any louder than that.

He was hard, helplessly straining toward the touch of those cold, cruel hands--and then one hand, harder and stronger and hotter than the rest, closed on his throat.

"Look at me, Soldier."

His eyes flashed open, but the room was dark, and he could barely make out the face above him, just a gleam of eyes. That hand tightened further.

"Tell me the codeword."

For an instant there was nothing, just blank terror of the question, the inevitable consequences of failure. The hand gripped tighter, and some unremembered briefing rescued him, the words falling from his half-numb lips. "Green, green, please--"

The hand on his throat tightened further, still not quite cutting off his air. Another hot hand found his cock, stroking him hard and fast.

He keened helplessly at the sensation, trapped between those two relentless grips and knowing that worse was coming. The sensation from his cock was overwhelming, intense as pain and edged with it from that too-tight grip, the steady pressure on his throat.

"Please," he gasped, just to know he could speak. It wasn't as scary when he could scream, pain didn't hurt as much, someone had told him that. "Please, green, green, please, green--"

The hand on his cock stopped, the grip on his throat slackened, and he could feel something worse looming up--mission failure--he couldn't--"Please, green, please, I'll do anything, please, sir, please--"

The hands were gone altogether in a rush of cold air, and the room was suddenly flooded with light; he threw his left arm up to shield himself and realized he could move it. He wasn't restrained, he was on a bed--Steve's bed--they had found him in Steve's bed, he had brought this to Steve's bed--

He recognized the sound of familiar breathing in the quiet room, and the last piece of reality snapped into place.

There was no them in Steve's bed. Just him and Steve. And not Steve anymore, because he'd pulled away.

Bucky closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against the back of his wrist, letting his hand curl into a fist and not bothering to look or touch himself as his cock wilted. He closed his right hand in the sheets to still the fine trembling that still ran through it, steadying his breathing as his racing heart
slowed.

Fuck, that had been close.

"Buck?" Steve sounded shaky with worry, and exactly two meters away, a distance he would never keep if what he was fretting about was anything other than Bucky's malfunctioning brain.

If Bucky looked at him he'd be standing by the bed again, horrified and lost like the time before. Still wearing those soft pajamas he'd worn to bed, his hands raised palm out, fingers twitching as he restrained the urge to touch.

"It's fine," Bucky said, not lowering his arm, but the frustration woke up with the words, blotting out what relief there had been in waking up. He had been so close, and Steve was supposed to get him there, made up his whole elaborate plan to get Bucky there, and then he had stopped. Bucky hadn't asked him to, Bucky had been repeating that damn codeword for all he was worth, but Steve had stopped.

Bucky looked up, and Steve was exactly where he had expected him to be, looking like Bucky had expected him to look, his expression and stance open and anxious. Somehow the familiarity of it just made the frustration even more sourly inevitable. He had known Steve couldn't bear doing this, hurting him. He had known, and still he had let himself be swept up in the idea that Captain America could fix anything.

He didn't even try to keep the bitterness out of his voice as he snapped, "Why'd you stop? I was almost there."

Steve recoiled, his brow coming down and jaw firming up as worry hardened into stubbornness. "Why the hell do you think I stopped? You were terrified, you had no idea what was going on."

Bucky closed his right fist harder, and his left arm whirred, bracing. "Yeah, Steve, that was the fucking point."

"No," Steve said sharply. "No, we agreed to do this safely. That was the whole point of the fucking safeword--you were only supposed to be saying it if you knew what was going on and you were okay--"

"I can't be okay, Steve." Bucky shoved the covers back, getting out of the bed on Steve's side. The air was chilly on his sweat-damp skin, making everything feel more real, more final. Of course this was the way it ended, but Steve wouldn't admit it; Steve never did admit when he was wrong. Steve backed up a step and Bucky followed him. "I was supposed to say green if I wanted you to keep going and I wanted you to keep going so I said it! What fucking part of that can you not get through your skull?"

"The part where you had no fucking idea what you were saying, Bucky! Don't tell me that was acting, don't tell me you knew it was me touching you and not--"

"Oh, is that it?" Bucky sneered, boiling over with the urge to fight, to score a point, to crack open Steve's armor. "You just can't stand the thought that I'll get off on somebody else raping me? You want that one all for--"

Steve's fist caught him square in the mouth, snapping his head back, and Bucky came up snarling as his whole body flushed hot. Rage burst out of him like steam from a broken pipe, with a rush that felt like relief. He launched himself at Steve, not even aiming properly, just flinging his whole body like a blunt object. They hit the ground hard, and Steve was struggling under him even before they were
down, grabbing at his softer wrist and trying to knee him in the balls.

Bucky spit blood in his face and punched him left handed in the pit of the stomach. Steve seemed to fold up around the blow, flinging Bucky off with a jackknifing kick. Bucky lunged back at him and Steve was already up, colliding with him again and forcing them away from the bed; they bounced off the doorframe and kept going, together and apart and right back together in a blur of violence.

After a while Steve seemed like he might let up. They were both bleeding now, breathing in heavy gasps, and Bucky was aching all over, but it wasn't enough. When they broke apart Steve stood still, just watching, like he was ready to be the bigger man and walk away, and Bucky couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let Steve go, couldn't bear to hear Steve say you were right, it's no good, forget it. Couldn't bear to watch Steve be defeated by this.

But the only way to put that off was to keep Steve fighting.

Bucky stalked toward Steve, back into grappling range, snarling, "Green, green, please sir, green--" until Steve kicked him in the stomach. He was knocked into a wall in a burst of plaster dust, and the fight was back on as he surged toward Steve again. It felt different this time, desperate, and a familiar calculation popped up as he was struggling to get a hold of his opponent: Target is fighting defensively. Target resists doing critical damage.

There was an impact, and a moment when he didn't know where he was; he panicked a little, making helpless high sounds and struggling. He was pinned--the helicarrier was going down--mission failure--

Something soft hit his head, sliding away with an incongruous velvety brush against his cheek, and he turned his head to stare at it, breath and cries caught in his throat.

It was a throw pillow from the couch, torn and leaking stuffing. He was in the TV room--what was left of the TV room. Jesus, it looked like the Hulk had been here. The shelves were smashed, DVDs in a drift of broken plastic cases all over the floor, the TV impressively shattered.

And Steve, sitting by the humped, broken shape of the couch, had his head tilted back while he waited for his spectacularly gory nosebleed to stop. He was at ease, catching his breath. The fight was really over this time.

Bucky looked at himself then--the remains of the coffee table were lying on his chest, and his head was throbbing nastily. Minor concussion--probably from hitting his head when Steve threw the coffee table at him--followed by brief disorientation.

"Okay," Bucky said, pushing the slab of wood aside and letting himself go limp in the slight body-shaped depression in the wall behind him. "Well. Fuck."

"No," Steve said wetly, a little flattened, not looking at Bucky but not missing a beat in responding to him either. "Not tonight, you've got a headache."

Bucky stared for a second, absorbing the joke, and the fact that Steve was still here, still joking with him, still--

God, of course Steve wasn't going to give up. Of course Steve wasn't going to walk away.

That was when the real relief hit him, when he really shook loose of the nightmare, and the giddy rush of it filled his lungs and burst out of his mouth. It emerged as a laugh--mostly a laugh, close enough to a laugh--helplessly loud, almost screaming it despite the way it made his head throb worse. He threw the pillow at Steve's face, and Steve didn't manage to bat it away in time.
"Fuck you," Bucky managed, when he could speak instead of shrieking, though laughter still bubbled around the edges of his words. "You're not allowed to throw the first punch at the guy who got raped, you asshole."

Steve tried to snort and choked on it, coughing for a few breaths and glaring when Bucky laughed harder. "Thought that's exactly what I was supposed to do, what with you yelling green all over the place. Jesus, Buck, you scared me. I said red, okay?"

Bucky's chest went tight at that, the laughter evaporating as quickly as it had come and leaving him in silence, looking over at Steve looking back.

This was worse than Steve ending the fight by walking away. The fight was over and Steve was still here, looking at Bucky through his eyelashes, too honest, too utterly defenseless. It was so obvious how easily Steve could be hurt when he had blood dripping right down his throat, his skin deathly pale under it.

"I told you," Bucky whispered, feeling the old painful resignation settle over him again. There was no keeping Steve out of a fight, no protecting him. "Told you I wanted to keep this away from you."

"And I told you I didn't want you dying on me," Steve said, like that was all there was to it--like the one followed necessarily from the other. "So the first try was a bust. Nightmare wasn't a shortcut worth taking. We'll figure something else out."

Bucky let his eyes close for a while, waiting for the pain in his head to die down. He was so tired of this, so tired of fighting and hurting, so tired of seeing Steve hurt. He just wanted... He wanted...

"Don't go to sleep," Steve said after a moment, his voice already sounding less blood-clogged. "I'll throw this pillow at you, and it's all bloody now."

Bucky's lips twitched up in a short, involuntary smile, but what he said was, "It wasn't all bad, though."

Steve didn't say anything for a while. He didn't throw the pillow, and Bucky didn't open his eyes.

Finally Steve asked, "Which part wasn't bad?"

"Falling asleep with you," Bucky said quietly. "On purpose, knowing you knew. If I had a nightmare--you already knew, and it might turn into something good." He barked another little laugh, dry and tired. "Foolproof. I forgot Erskine and HYDRA built better goddamn fools."

Steve made a little pained noise, not a reply but the sound of exertion. Bucky opened one eye to see him pushing up to his feet. Steve hobbled over to Bucky and offered him a hand, and when Bucky just stared up at him, he said, "Come on, Buck. I still know, and it can still be something good even if it's not this. It's three in the morning, and I'm not letting you sleep by yourself with a head injury."

"That's a fuckin' line," Bucky said, putting his hand in Steve's and letting himself be pulled up. "And I know it is because I used it on you about a hundred times."

"Steal from the best," Steve agreed solemnly, and then he leaned in. The kiss was nothing special--blood-wet and coppery, but with no layer of triumph or desperation. It was the kiss of just-another-night, the kiss of we're-still-here-anyhow. It had all gone wrong, and Steve wasn't giving up, so Bucky couldn't give up either. Bucky leaned his forehead against Steve's and they both breathed for a moment, holding on to each other and gathering their strength for the trek back to bed.
Bucky woke up in the process of curling up like a pillbug, covering his head with his arms, desperate not to be seen. It was the rush of please, no, don't see, don't notice me that woke him.

Moving hurt like he'd been beaten all over, which woke him up a little further. He had been beaten, and--

"Buck?"

Bucky realized exactly what had just happened and wondered how long he would have to stay like this to convince Steve to go away--but no. Steve wouldn't. They'd established that much last night.

Bucky gave in and forced his arms down, lifting his face so Steve could see him. He tried not to look like he was bracing for anything, but that drumbeat of please don't look, please don't see was still thrumming in his pulse.

Steve was lying carefully still on his side of the bed, bruised face cradled on one arm, watching Bucky like there was something to see there, like he wanted to remember this. Somehow Bucky had realized in his sleep that he was being watched, and tried to hide.

But there was no hiding anymore. Not from Steve. Steve knew all of it, everything.

Bucky felt sick and raw all over again as he remembered his own voice, meanly chanting, green, green, furiously taunting Steve with the idea that this could be safe. That Steve could do this without becoming what he hated. And Steve had kicked him in the gut, had given back as good as he got, every blow, until he finally rung Bucky's bell hard enough to keep him down.

"I'm sorry," Bucky said in a small, strangled voice. For flinching, for what he'd asked of Steve the night before, for what he'd done when Steve pulled back. He knew Steve wasn't a rapist; he'd thought that maybe the battle between Steve's goodness and his stubbornness would end in Bucky's favor, but... Of course not. Steve wouldn't, couldn't, hurt him. Not like that.

"Hey, hey," Steve's hand rested tentatively on his right shoulder, and Bucky tensed and curled closer at the same time. Steve scooted in and tugged the blanket up, like Bucky was cold. Maybe he was; he could feel himself wanting to shiver. "Buck, hey, come on. I threw the first punch. And it's me, anyway. You never have to apologize to me."

"I lied," Bucky confessed, guilt crawling in his gut and over his skin, his throat tight with it. "When I--when I said green, I was--I rehearsed it in my head, I made myself know I had to say it. You made a rule and the whole time you were telling me how it was going to work I was figuring out how to get around it, because I wanted what I wanted and I didn't--" Bucky groaned, the full impact of it hitting him harder than any punch. "I didn't care. What you wanted. Fuck, Steve, I'm sorry, I'm--"

He pulled away, trying to back out of Steve's bed--what right did he have to be in Steve's bed, to have Steve trying to keep him warm, when he was the one who'd lied and cheated last night? He hadn't cared what Steve wanted, just wanted to get off no matter what he had to do to Steve to get there. He'd tried to trick Steve into giving it to him, tried to force him, tried to punish him when he wouldn't. If he'd succeeded, he would have been the one raping Steve.

"Bucky." Steve caught him and rolled onto him, and Bucky froze under his weight. The pressure woke up assorted bruises and strains, but that didn't matter nearly as much as Steve being there, keeping him. They were positioned awkwardly, Bucky on his side and Steve facedown over him, but Steve just squirmed like he was making himself comfortable for a long nap.

He touched his lips to Bucky's cheek, his jaw.
Bucky let out a breath, almost a sigh. The resistance went out of him. He had confessed, after all, so the rest was up to Steve. When Steve touched his chin, Bucky turned his head to be kissed. It was just a brush of lips; Steve didn't take it too far.

_Steve_ didn't have anything to prove.

"We tried it," Steve said softly. "It didn't work. Okay? It wasn't okay, it wasn't safe, it didn't work. We'll try something else when you're ready to try again."

Bucky closed his eyes, turning his face away again under the gentle onslaught. He was perilously close to tears, and he had no right to cry when this was all his fault, but he couldn't summon any fight into his voice. "Stevie, we fucking wrecked the place. I could have killed you."

Steve snorted and kissed him again, behind his ear, and then a vulnerable spot on the back of his neck. "Not fighting like that you couldn't. That wasn't the Winter Soldier I was fighting last night, that was _Don't You Call Me Jimmy_ Barnes. You weren't trying to kill me. In fact..."

Steve's voice trailed lower, and he slid off of Bucky, keeping one leg thrown across him to hold him close while he went nose to nose, looking into his eyes and giving him no room to get away.

"I think you liked getting punched," Steve said softly. "Or at least, you felt like you deserved to."

Bucky tilted his head into the pillow and raised one shoulder in a shrug, turning up the corner of his mouth. It wasn't a smile so much as a gesture in that direction. "I mean, I did. Deserve to."

Steve's mouth tightened into grim determination, and Bucky tensed in response, bracing for a repeat of the night before in miniature, but Steve turned gentle again the next second. "No. I'll say it as many times as I have to say it, Buck. We tried something, it didn't work. The fact that we hurt each other is part of what didn't work. So now we know that. But you--you're never gonna deserve to be punished for any part of this."

Bucky closed his eyes and shook his head, the dull ache of it wobbling along with the movement. Steve had this backward; punishment was the only thing he deserved, and Steve's goodness was the thing that just kept happening to him, all inexplicably, instead.

"Can we--" In the middle of asking for it, Bucky realized what he needed, and how badly. "Can we just fuck, please? Your way, for you--"

Steve didn't answer, didn't even move. Bucky kept his eyes shut and the words kept tumbling out. "I'll do it however you want, kiss the whole time, anything. I'll be here with you. I just--please, Stevie, we tried my thing, and I need--I need you too, I--"

The urgency clawed at him, the need to be good and gentle, to give Steve some shadow of what Steve kept giving him, turned violent inside him. If Steve told Bucky he didn't have to make it up to him he was going to crack into a million pieces right here in Steve's bed.

Steve shut him up with an open-mouthed kiss instead, and Bucky almost sobbed into it, feeling a rush of relief. Steve would at least let him try.

"Shh, shh, let's take it easy," Steve murmured, pulling Bucky over on top of him. Bucky was naked, Steve still in the blood-spattered pajama pants that had survived last night's fight mostly intact. They were soft against Bucky's thighs and limp cock. He lined himself up so his dick lay against Steve's--not hard yet either, through the thin barrier of skin-warm cotton.

Steve drew him into a kiss, soft and coaxing. Bucky went where Steve wanted him, letting his
weight blanket Steve's body, kissing him like this didn't have to go anywhere. Easy. Slow.

His mind didn't stop ticking. He needed more than this. He needed to give Steve more than this. Steve's hands stroked down his back, gentling him, but Bucky worked his body against Steve's, sucked at his tongue and curled his fingers in Steve's hair. Everything Steve liked, every invitation he'd ever learned to give.

It took longer than it should have, but Steve responded, his breath getting fast and ragged as he squirmed under Bucky's weight. Bucky dragged his mouth from Steve's and shifted lower, rubbing his morning stubble against Steve's throat to make him groan. He kissed over Steve's collarbones with plenty of tongue and teeth, using his metal thumb to tease one nipple, until Steve was panting under him, blushing all the way down, his hips rocking up--

Steve froze.

Bucky went still too, and he realized what it was even before he saw the embarrassed flush rising on Steve's cheeks, the way Steve's gaze darted away from his. Steve wasn't hard.

He could see Steve didn't know why; Steve felt bad. He could feel--had felt--that Steve wanted this at least enough to go along, at least enough to let him try. Bucky knew all of that.

It didn't matter to the panic that punched through his chest like a cold wind through bullet holes. No, no, no, fix it, fix this, you did this, you ruined it, you ruined him--

Bucky's face froze halfway into an attempt to tease Steve out of it, make a joke, make him smile, and he knew that his expression was all wrong. Steve's embarrassed flush gave way to widening eyes and worry even before Bucky choked out, "Let me--Stevie, I can--please--"

Steve's hand settled warmly, gently on the back of Bucky's neck. "Just--hold still a second, Buck. Let me think."

Bucky opened and closed his mouth, but he didn't speak, and didn't move. Steve closed his eyes, tilting his chin up. Bucky watched his lips as they parted and compressed with his thoughts. He knew when he saw one corner turn up, when Steve's hand squeezed on his neck.

Steve opened his eyes just a sliver, watching Bucky through the lashes, and he said, "Okay, Buck. Go ahead. I'm all yours."

It was Steve, but it still felt like a trap. Bucky could make this worse so easily; he could ruin Steve so much more. Bucky kept holding still for another second and then he moved up instead of down, finding Steve's mouth for a kiss.

Steve made a little noise against his mouth, a warm sound. His hand slid down from Bucky's neck to the center of his back, right under his shoulder blades. This was good, then. Steve liked this. Bucky kept his eyes closed and kissed him, making his mouth softer and sweeter the more desperate and cold he felt.

Steve relaxed under him, warming up enough to move again, and that was good. That meant he was getting it right. The panic in his chest began to ease, letting Bucky fall into the rhythm of this, until it felt almost familiar, almost normal. He knew what to say, too--just what Steve needed to hear to make this work.

"Doesn't matter, right?" Bucky murmured, dragging his lips warmly down Steve's throat. The words felt right on his tongue, like the recitation of a familiar prayer. "Doesn't matter if anybody gets off at all. We're here, we got each other, we're feeling good. That's all we need. Just want to be good to
"You are," Steve murmured, warm and loose, pushing his hips up when Bucky's hand found the top of his pajama pants. "You're all I need, Buck."

Bucky breathed in the smell of Steve's skin and tried to believe it. He eased down Steve's pajama pants and slid his hand gently, so gently, over Steve's cock, down to his balls. Still no response there, but Steve spread his legs for the touch, stroking his hand encouragingly on Bucky's back. No hesitation now.

Bucky kissed his way lower, until his mouth found Steve's cock. He brushed his lips teasingly over that softest skin, feeling the little twitches of it, listening to the hitches in Steve's breathing. When he'd explored a little--not so fast that he might be neglecting anything, not lingering so long that he seemed to be waiting for more response--he took Steve in. The taste of him was familiar--Steve and sex, skin and sweat--but so was the limp weight on his tongue.

He looked up at Steve's face, and found Steve looking down at him with a crooked little half-smile, and for the first time Bucky remembered this. It hadn't happened often, but enough times that they both learned the steps. Before the serum, a few times when Steve was getting over being sick, or when he'd been pushing himself too hard, there had been times when Steve couldn't.

And Bucky had done this: made love to him anyhow, without making too much fuss over it. Sucked him like this, like Steve had done for him that first night and when he was laid up on the couch. Steve had known to do it because Bucky had done it for him, but Bucky had never recognized it until he was here again, with Steve's cock in his mouth.

Steve's hand came up to rub over the short fuzz of his hair, and Bucky closed his eyes and got to work sucking Steve's cock. He made it sweet, keeping the suction mostly gentle, and threw in little bursts of furious sucking when Steve's fingers tightened against his head. He used his left hand too, cradling Steve's balls, stroking the base of his dick when he had his lips tight around the head. He even earned some response from Steve's cock, felt it thickening a little in his mouth.

It wasn't long before Steve's hand on his head shifted, coming around to cradle his cheek. "Come here, Buck. Let me kiss you some more."

Bucky let Steve's cock slip from his mouth and settled on top of him again, kissing Steve and stretching out over him.

This time when he murmured, "This is good, right? We're good," he almost even believed it.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr! (This chapter's art coming soon!)

I am also on Tumblr! And I have a new book coming out (full of angsty gay werewolf hurt/comfort) which you can find out about here!
After PT and the gun range, Bucky had homework. The TV room was out of commission—the scale of mess and destruction were beyond the scope of the usual secret robot cleaning service, evidently—so Bucky sat down in the library with the laptop that didn't do anything but email.

He had a message from Steve now. Please review the following, and then a list of Avengers operations over the past few years. The text for each was blue, underlined, which meant he could click on them.

Bucky took a deep breath and tapped on *Chitauri invasion led by Loki, New York.*

A new window opened on his screen, with rows of new icons: documents, videos, photos. He clicked on *After Action Report: Rogers* and settled in to find out what it was really like being an Avenger.

He was not at all surprised that the job involved being uselessly furious at Steve for doing stupid shit that could have gotten him killed. It was a homey, familiar feeling amid all the strangeness. As he read more about the invasion he had to conclude that it had at least been necessary, given the scale of the threat—Jesus, the *good guys* had almost nuked New York.

He picked his phone up and scrolled to his conversation with Andrews. *Not that he's not a bag of dicks, but Stark did fly a nuke into space to save my hometown.*

A few seconds later Bucky got an answer. *Yeah, he's not all bad.*

*Come visit sometime, I'll show you the gun range and you can drink all the liquor he pays to stock in the bar.*

It had hardly occurred to him before he found himself issuing the invitation, but after he hit send he realized that was something he could hope for. Maybe his team—his *friends*—would come visit sometime, let Bucky show them his city, or at least the one building in it that he could navigate safely.

*Maybe I will sometime.*

Bucky grinned, but Andrews followed up with, *Been spending a lot of time on the range? Or the bar?*

Meaning, Bucky knew, *Is that why you haven't been saying much?*

Bucky blew out a breath. *I was laid up a couple days. Finally did something dumb enough for Steve to let me on the team.***

The three dots appeared and hung around for a while. Bucky was about to make himself look through photos of the invasion and its aftermath as a less-agonizing alternative to staring at his phone when the next text appeared. *Guess that's why Woj wanted to know if you ever seemed like you might want to hurt yourself outside the self-destruct trigger.*
Bucky swallowed hard, feeling embarrassed and protected all at once, like he was eight years old and his dad was standing with one hand on his shoulder and one hand on Steve's, drunkenly giving the big kids a piece of his mind about picking on his boys.

*What'd you tell him?*

*That he'd have known the same day if I ever did,* Andrews replied promptly. *Must be all those superheroes you're hanging out with these days. Bad influence, obviously.*

Bucky snorted, glancing over at the screen of his laptop again. *That's right. Steve's been rubbing off on me.*

*Told you I didn't want sex details, man.*

Bucky blew out a breath, feeling relief and a different shame all at once. Andrews definitely didn't know, then, or that wouldn't have been the joke he made. He was still smiling at his phone and thinking about what else to say when JARVIS said, "Dr. Padfield has arrived for your appointment, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky looked up and pocketed his phone. "Yeah, let him in."

He heard Padfield's footsteps approaching, but didn't think of what that meant until he heard those footsteps pause outside the TV room. Bucky stood and then hesitated. He couldn't make Padfield not see, couldn't lie about how it happened, so what point was there in rushing out there?

He was still standing by the couch when Padfield reached the door. Padfield looked him over, and Bucky raised a guilty hand to the back of his head, probing at the last of the sore spot there.

"So that looks like there's a story to it," Padfield said after a moment.

Bucky nodded. "I, uh. I changed my mind about Steve helping, and I thought I knew a way to make it work completely on the first try, and it didn't work. I fucked it up."

Steve wasn't here this time; Bucky could assign the blame where he wanted to.

Padfield looked skeptical, so Bucky explained, feeling once again like he was eight years old and standing next to Steve, both of them with bloody noses and dirt on their clothes. "Steve threw the first punch, but I goaded him into it."

Padfield sighed, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. "You remember we talked about incremental goals? Partial success?"

"Yeah, but..." Bucky trailed off. He couldn't actually point to any good reason to think Padfield had been wrong about that.

"Yeah." Padfield raised his head and waved toward the chairs where they usually sat for sessions. "Well, let's get started. Clearly we have a lot to talk about today."

When Bucky ventured out of the library after his appointment with Padfield, he found Steve in the TV room with a big industrial gray trash bin on wheels. The bin was empty so far. Steve was standing there holding a bloodstained pillow with half its stuffing trailing out, an unreadable look on his face.

"That'd be a fuckin' weird souvenir to keep, Stevie."
Steve threw it at him before Bucky could read any other reaction on him. Bucky swatted it back, not at Steve, but into the bin.

Steve nodded, turning away and looking around at the rest of the destruction. "Tony said it's not a problem to have someone come up and redo this whole room, but I don't feel right not cleaning up our mess. Figured we could sort out what we can keep, what actually needs replacing."

He stirred a foot through the drift of smashed DVD cases as he said it. Bucky pictured for a half-second the process of sorting through every one to see if the disc had broken or not. He shook his head.

"Pitch all of those, Steve. I got mine from MEDCOM, that's half of what you had here anyway. We can replace the rest."

Steve looked over his shoulder at Bucky, sizing him up for the space of a couple of breaths before he nodded and bent to scoop up an armful of DVDs. Bucky knelt beside him.

It was a relief to focus on something simple for a while instead of figuring out what to do with the homework Padfield had assigned him. Not quite as soothing as washing dishes, but if this was what he could have right now, he would take it.

They emptied and refilled the garbage bin twice. The last trip was just for the couch, after they broke it up more comprehensively so they could pile it in. That process inevitably turned into a race once they split the couch in two where it was broken; they each rushed through tearing the fabric and frame apart with their bare hands. Bucky didn't use the cutting edge on his left hand. It would have been unfair.

It was a tie, Bucky was going to insist to the day he died.

When they had dumped the couch and returned the bin to the loading dock, they came back to the echoingly empty room and looked around. Steve ran a hand through his hair as he ducked his head, almost shy.

"We've got a team dinner tonight. Attendance mandatory for Avengers who are in New York."

Bucky stared at him, tempted to ask whether that included him and knowing better than to do it. It felt too soon, too easy, to count himself a part of the team when he hadn't even spoken to most of them about it, but Steve wouldn't have said it like that if he didn't mean Bucky to count himself in.

Still. "I, uh. I haven't finished the reading."

Steve snorted, losing his hesitancy; he must have expected Bucky to resist harder. "Lucky for you it's dinner, not a final exam."

"No, because that'll be," Bucky waved a hand vaguely. Aliens or robots or mad scientists, and they knew not the day nor the hour.

Steve nodded. "And the reading won't matter for that anyway, so--dinner. Unless you've got other homework you have to work on?"

It actually took Bucky a few seconds to remember that before cleaning up in here with Steve, he'd met with Padfield. He did have other homework to do.

He felt his face heat a little and didn't meet Steve's eyes as he said, "Uh, no. That can wait. I think I
want your help with that, anyway."

Steve's jaw visibly clenched, like he was bracing for a fight, and Bucky found himself thinking, *No, no, not yet.* That was silly, though, because he was the one who knew that it wasn't going to go that far. Not yet, not until they had done the work to get there.

"So dinner, then," Steve said, saving Bucky from trying to explain what his homework actually was.

Bucky nodded and let himself be carried along in the wake of Steve's plan.

Of course, like all of Steve's plans, there was a whole piece of it in the middle that was supposed to be covered by heavy gunfire and everybody throwing everything they had at the problem without Steve having to do more, organizationally speaking, than lead them all to the right spot and turn them loose.

Bucky was sitting between Steve and Clint. Sam and Bruce and Tony and Natasha rounded out the table. They were eating Thai food, which was pleasantly distracting from the conversation that ebbed and flowed around him; even Steve was exerting himself to talk so that Bucky could be the one mostly hanging back in silence. They all piped up, though, even Bruce sometimes. They were comfortable with each other. They were a team, and Bucky knew when he was being welcomed, even if he didn't quite have it in him to jump in and draw the focus to himself.

In a relatively quiet moment, while Steve was talking to Sam on his other side and Bruce and Tony were having their own conversation, and Bucky was trying to figure out what he'd just picked up with his chopsticks, Clint asked him what he'd been up to lately.

Bucky stared down at his food so he wouldn't look at Steve or, worse, Sam or Tony, as the truth flashed through his mind. He wasn't going to touch on having been hurt, didn't dare draw any reaction about that stuff from the others that would give more away. He reached for something else he actually had been doing recently, not the most important, but the one that he could most easily turn into a leading question to get Clint talking.

That was easy enough, with a second's thought. He could see the whole blue underlined list in his mind's eye. Steve had said this wasn't a test, but attention to the briefing was never wasted.

Bucky looked Clint in the eye and gave a wry smile. "Steve sent me a bunch of Avengers stuff, so I've been catching up on what I missed with you guys. I'm still halfway through the invasion of New York--I haven't even really read the stuff about Loki yet."

Clint's eyes narrowed slightly. His smile, which had been friendly and easy when he asked, went tense and crooked. Bucky sensed Steve freezing beside him, and Natasha's attention sharpening on him.

Clearly Bucky needed to have been briefed more than this; everyone at the table knew something he didn't about what he'd just said. Bucky kicked Steve hard, and Steve jumped a little.

"I didn't think it was--" Steve cut off sharply.

Clint snorted and shook his head, releasing a little of the tension in the room. Bucky figured it was safe to pop whatever it was he'd picked up into his mouth. It was spicy and crunchy, but not bad.

"I thought you knew," Clint said, digging into his food again and elbowing Bucky lightly. "Loki, he-"
Clint gestured at his own head with his chopsticks, sending a few grains of rice flying. "He got me on his team for a while. The other day—I figured that was a formerly brainwashed sniper bonding thing."

The whole invasion had lasted only days; Bucky recalled some vague mention of Clint being captured by Loki when he arrived, but Loki had only had him for maybe seventy-two hours. On the other hand, Loki was an alien, or a god, master of illusions; there was no telling what he could have done in three days, what they might have felt like to Clint. The pointed lightness of his own description, measured against Natasha and Steve's reactions to Bucky sticking his foot in it, gave a hint of how bad it had been.

He felt torn between horror and a sick temptation to talk shop, compare notes.

Bucky pushed both of those reactions down and looked around the table for some guidance on how he was supposed to respond. He found a lot of unhelpfully intent expressions looking back until he met Steve's gaze. Steve he could read, at least: *Sorry*, and a helpless look that meant something in the neighborhood of, *It was always too soon to tell you and then I forgot you didn't know.*

And if he'd forgotten to tell Bucky that, who knew what he'd forgotten to tell the others? Had he really warned them about the drawbacks of bring Bucky onto the team?

Bucky bumped his shoulder lightly against Clint's and reached over with his chopsticks to pick a grain of rice out of his hair. Monkey see, monkey do, ha. "Nah. I don't know if I'd qualify."

Clint gave him a sharp, startled look, and it was Bucky's turn to offer that crooked smile, trying to make his voice as light as Clint's had been as he offered his own confession. "I, uh. I'm not all the way un-brainwashed yet."

Clint raised his eyebrows. Bucky heard Steve draw breath to object, or explain, or otherwise pull him out of the line of fire. He put his foot firmly on Steve's toes and pressed down hard. *Don't you dare.*

Bucky glanced around the table to see that no was reacting very dramatically to that; they were all still watching him, waiting for more. Natasha's arms were folded. Tony was sitting back in a pose of studied nonchalance, but his gaze was sharper than after Bucky started all of this by mentioning Loki to Clint.

Bucky looked down at his own plate, pushing food around. "It's not... I still have a trigger phrase active. Not a bad one, but anyone who knows it can drop me. It paralyzes me."

In his peripheral vision, he saw Clint wince, and Steve pushed his knee against Bucky's leg, silently offering to take over. Somebody drew a not-quite-silent breath, quickly cut off, and Bucky didn't look up to check their reactions.

"That was one of the first they uncovered, wasn't it?"

Bucky looked up to meet Natasha's calm, thoughtful gaze. He remembered her voice taking over when Steve couldn't read to him anymore. *And of course there were no nuts, nor even hawthorn-bi-berries. Nor Thai food, back then.*

He nodded. "It, uh. It's a hard one to beat."

She tilted her head consideringly. "Your handlers used it regularly, didn't they? They set that hook deep. The others were probably contingencies, maybe only ever meant for a single use."

Bucky blinked, remembering *Sputnik*. It was surreal to be politely discussing his brainwashing over
Thai food. "Uh, yeah. Probably. They used the off-switch a lot."

Steve twitched beside him, and Bucky couldn't remember if Steve had known that part. Maybe the information just sounded different to him now, knowing what he knew. Knowing for sure, anyway. Bucky took his foot off of Steve's so he could bump their knees together, reassuring him right back. *I'm here now. You don't have to see me like that.*

"Well, anyway, it's not like that makes you different from anybody else," Tony said briskly.

Bucky looked up again, raising his eyebrows. Tony was sitting forward now, and Bucky had the feeling that whatever calculation he'd been doing while he was quiet had been completed, but the answer didn't sound right. "Yeah? You all have programmed--"


Bucky raised his eyebrows and pointed toward Bruce.

"Oh, that's the opposite problem," Bruce said, the corners of his mouth turning up. "There's no way to stop the other guy. But there's an almost infinite array of chemical cocktails that would make me change straight into an uncontrollable rampage. We've all got our weak points, Bucky. That's kind of why we're on a team. We look out for each other."

Bucky grimaced, glancing down. "Okay, well. Look out for me being useless if somebody broadcasts a sound at me--"

"Headphones," Steve said promptly. "We could rig you some kind of noise-canceling thing, with earpieces for your comms on the inside, so you can only hear us--"

"And then all somebody has to do is hijack our comm channel or pull off whatever's covering his ears, and it's easier because he's out the use of his ears," Tony put in. "I mean--it's not the worst idea, if we think that's an actual threat, but we should also be prepared for the eventuality, right?"

Tony leaned in toward Bucky, holding his gaze like there was no one else in the room. Like they were alone in his lab. "Worst case scenario, somebody triggers you. So when you say paralyzed--do we need to be prepared to get you on a ventilator?"

It took Bucky a moment to recognize that his input was required. "Uh, no, they--they used it to--" Steve was very still and very quiet at his side, and Bucky immediately abandoned any attempt to describe even the relatively innocuous uses of the off-switch. Steve didn't need to hear that, didn't more fuel for nightmares about it. "No. I just can't move at all. The autonomic stuff keeps ticking, but nothing voluntary works."

Steve cleared his throat, startling Bucky into looking at him directly. "You actually... I think you can roll your eyes? I think you did, anyway, when--"

"Oh!" Bucky remembered the moment, Steve stumbling over introducing him to that Heinlein book. He never had picked it up to read it properly. "I didn't know you could see that."

"Well if we've got eye movement--" Tony said, at the same time Bruce said a little sharply, "What on earth were your doctors--"

Tony and Bruce stopped short, looking at each other for a second, and then Tony frowned and looked between Bucky and Steve. "Okay, yeah--if you've got eye movement, how come no one
knew that before now? The Army docs found this--what, months ago? Weeks, at least? You're obviously still being exposed to it on a controlled basis, I've seen the sensor data--why hasn't somebody rigged an eye tracker for you?"

"Well, my eyes are closed when I'm under," Bucky said slowly.

Tony waved that off. "If Steve can see the motion, I can rig a camera that can see it. And if you've got voluntary eye movement, you can talk to us."

Bucky opened his mouth to argue, and stopped right there, staring at Tony as he worked out what Tony was saying, and what that meant. He could use something like Morse code, spell out messages; he could do something. He could scream, if only with his eyes. He could...

Tony raised his eyebrows. "What? Are you struck speechless by my obvious genius? Because if so, never Google Stephen Hawking, okay?"

"Steve--" Bucky tugged at his sleeve.

"Got it," Steve said, and pulled out an actual pen and notebook to write down Google Stephen Hawking while Bucky struggled to work out what to say to Tony, to explain how important this was, while Tony was dismissing it as obvious.

"We stopped trying to desensitize the off-switch trigger because I wasn't getting anywhere with it," Bucky explained, the words rushing out once he started. "The other ones, the ones that messed with my thinking, they taught me some lucid dreaming stuff, and that made me able to recognize the trigger and get out from under, but this one--that doesn't work. They've been trying to teach me biofeedback instead--"

"Because you need to be able to control your body to get back control of your body," Tony cut in, nodding as he caught Bucky's drift. "But this is an actual voluntary muscle movement you can make, so if you could practice using that to actually communicate, that'd give you a big damn lever to push."

"Yeah." Bucky ran a hand over his short-clipped hair. He wouldn't need the electrodes. He wouldn't need someone else judging when he got too scared; he could just say so. "Yeah. I could--I could tell you when I need to stop, I could..."

He could control the off-switch himself, as long as he could trust the person on the outside to do what he asked. And if he could communicate, if he had someone he could trust with him while he was under the off-switch, it wasn't only the sedative that he could ask for.

Steve could do anything to him, while he was under, and he'd be helpless and scared, which meant he could be turned on, too. It would mean making Steve see him that way again--more than just see him, touch him while he couldn't respond, while he was further from Steve than he'd ever been when he was trying to get Steve off--but if he could communicate, maybe...

Bucky glanced over at Steve, and found Steve carefully not looking at him; a second later Steve looked over deliberately, meeting his eyes without flinching. Refusing to flinch from this.

They both knew what he could use the off-switch for now. What he could ask Steve to do while he was under. But Steve had had nightmares about Bucky under the off-switch even before, and their last try at messing around with Bucky's nightmares had been bad enough. They were going to have to talk about this--Steve would insist on it, Bucky had no doubt--but this was definitely not the time or place for that.
Bucky shook his head slightly, forcing a little smile, before he looked around the table. Everyone was watching him, and he could see various degrees of calculation from all of them, except for Tony, who had his phone projecting designs into the air so he could manipulate them in deft little motions.

"Okay, so," Bucky squinted at it; it looked like a visor right now, annoying to wear anytime he wasn't under the off-switch. "Could I have some kind of version of that to wear in the field? I get triggered and go down, and it moves into place so I can let you guys know I'm all right?"

"Let us know you're all right, hell," Tony said absently. "You can help coordinate. No need for you to fall down on the job just because you've fallen down on the job."

"Your visual memory's gotta be as good as mine," Steve put in immediately. "You can help keep track of where everyone is, make sure we're covering all the angles."

"Welcome to the still useful during your worst nightmares club," Bruce said dryly.

"You will have t-shirts tomorrow," Tony put in, doing something to the projection to make the visor change shape, shrinking down to a wire and then expanding again. "Size extra-large and... extremely stretchy. Do you prefer to go sleeveless on the left, Barnes?"

"When the arm's getting heavy use, otherwise it overheats."

Bucky sat back and shot a sideways smile at Steve, who offered him a helpless smile back. It was obviously best to just let the Avengers happen to him; at least he was practiced at that.

Dinner turned into lingering around the table for hours, everyone telling stories. Bucky managed to tell a couple of good ones, and choked back the memories that would have made for bad ones.

He got lost for a little while, losing the thread of Clint's voice as he fell into the memory of what had happened when he came back particularly beslimed from a mission and tracked muck into the safehouse. Getting shoved into a cold shower had only been the beginning; by the end he'd been...

Well. Shivering and bloody in a bathtub, dazed with the combination of pain and orgasm. He was intensely aware of his cock lying against his thigh even when he pulled himself back to the present, to Steve's shoulder pressing warmly against his. He glanced around the table, but no one seemed to have noticed much of anything; that much of what went on in his head could remain his own secret for now.

He carefully didn't look over at Steve, and Steve didn't do anything more obvious than continuing to lean in against him until Bucky started talking and smiling again. By the end of the meal he was feeling almost genuinely at ease, relieved and a little hopeful and surrounded by his team.

Bucky thought Steve might let it go completely, but when they were alone on their own floor that night, heading desultorily toward bed, Steve stopped in the doorway of Bucky's bedroom. "You said, earlier."

"You wanted my help with something," Steve prompted. "Your... homework."

"Oh, uh," Bucky glanced at the bed, and saw Steve looking even more grimly square-shouldered when he looked up again. "No! No, not--not that kind of homework, I swear. It's just thinking, or... maybe talking. If you... if you don't mind talking about it."
"Oh!" Steve deflated a little, and looked nervous instead of determined. "Oh. Yeah, okay. So..."

"So, how about after lights out." Bucky shooed Steve off to go get changed.

"Hey, Sarge, we should talk about that in bed, after lights out," Steve said as he turned away, and Bucky snapped off a salute at his back and went to brush his teeth.

Steve was already in Bucky's bed when Bucky came back out, lying on his back with one arm flung over his head, like he wanted to be ready to cover his face as quickly as possible.

"Look, it's just like the other day with the damn list of rules," Bucky said, coming over to lie on the bed, switching the lights off on the way. "Except we're not going to do anything, so nothing can go wrong. And it's not rules, it's--"

The word Padfield had used stuck in his throat, even though it wasn't actually dirty. It just sounded so soft-edged and sweet, so nice and so utterly wrong for this. Fantasy.

"Just... just imagining, what it'd be liked if it worked, that's all," Bucky said. "It's not a big thing, Steve, just. Just getting an idea of what it'd look to win at this thing. If we could."

Steve curled toward him as Bucky sat down on his side of the bed. For all his brave words, Bucky couldn't quite bring himself to lie down. He leaned against the headboard, drawing his knees up. His eyes were adapting quickly to the dark, but Steve's face was still half-obscured.

"Okay," Steve said. "That's--you should probably take lead on that, Buck. You know what you need."

Bucky tried to choke back his instinctive response to that--it wasn't going to be anything as sensible as words, and snarling at the first thing Steve said wasn't going to help this process along--but a frustrated little noise escaped his throat.

"Buck?" Steve was lying flat and looking up at him, a constant reminder that this wasn't, couldn't be, the real thing. Their positions would be reversed, for that.

Bucky shook his head, forcing himself to be patient. Steve hadn't spent half an hour going over this with Padfield. Steve had no idea how it felt, no matter how much of the facts he'd been told. "No, I know, you're right, I just--I can't know. I need to not know."

"Sure," Steve said. "But like you said--we're not doing any of this for real, we're just talking, right? It's not going to work, it's not real. So... can you tell me what it's like not to know?"

Bucky exhaled, closing his eyes and thinking back, trying not to get stuck into any one memory, to explain it without getting caught up in remembering, pushing himself toward that calm, cold place where none of this mattered, even if he couldn't actually get there. "It's... not knowing. Not just what they're going to do next, but what they could do, how far they might go. Everyone... everyone who got me off, I knew they could wipe me, ice me. Kill me, or near enough that I wouldn't know the difference."

There was a little silence, and Bucky waited for what Steve was going to say about that. They hadn't talked about it much, just the two of them without Padfield running the show.

"That's... a pretty tall order," Steve finally said, and for a second all Bucky got from the words was his own relief that Steve wasn't going to dwell on the past. "I gotta convince you of that?"

Bucky shook his head sharply. "You're--I know you too much to believe you're like them, that you'd
"Don't start that again," Steve interrupted. "You didn't know me when you were having that nightmare. And you didn't know me for a minute after that--when we were fighting, you remember?"

Bucky had started to panic when he was pinned--or thought he was pinned. He'd gone right back to the helicarriers, when Steve was only his mission. He let himself fall into that memory; violent and painful as it was, there had been no stain of sex in it at the time.

"I was thinking of when I didn't know you," Bucky said quietly. "When I was pinned, on the helicarrier, you remember? You lifted that goddamn girder off me. But when you started coming toward me I didn't know what you were going to do. I was at your mercy."

"So I could've done it then," Steve said. "If I'd decided to--" there was a little pause and then Steve's voice came out hard-edged and resolute. "To have my way with you instead of setting you free."

Bucky actually had to look at Steve for that. He was staring grimly up at the ceiling, and Bucky riffled back through everything he'd ever said to Steve about how this worked. "You wouldn't have to, uh." Bucky swallowed. "You wouldn't have to get off on it. You could use something else, or--I was hurt enough right then, I wouldn't have had to be fucked."

"So that day, when you didn't know who I was, when you were pinned down and helpless and already hurt..." Steve's voice was still hard and steady in the way that meant Steve was forcing it, but that was the whole point, wasn't it? Steve would have to force both of them through this, and the first step was making Steve think it through.

Bucky let himself remember that moment. His frantic strategizing had turned to static as Captain America came closer, his own options dwindling down to the unbearable, the unthinkable.

"Maybe you went around the other side of it, lifted it up just enough so you could reach my pants." Bucky caught the thread of it, letting it melt into the stream of all the other memories that blended so seamlessly into one another. If he didn't bother to try to make sense of it, it was easy to remember how it would go.

"I couldn't even see you. I'm trapped, I can hardly breathe and I know I'm failing my mission but when you touch me I can feel it, it's real. And you don't stop, you just keep going and going and maybe I try to kick you and you just pin my leg down and keep going and it doesn't stop, it keeps feeling like that, like it's really happening. And I get hard, I get--"

"Close," Steve interrupted sharply. "But not all the way there, not until I tell you you can. Isn't that right?"

Bucky's breath caught a little, startled that Steve had remembered that part--but of course Steve knew. Bucky had told him the necessary words before they'd tried the nightmare shortcut. It would be a shock, though, to hear those words from his mission, when Bucky didn't know him.

"Yeah," Bucky whispered, his chest feeling weighted. "Yeah. Only when you said."

Steve nodded and then said sharply, "Go ahead, soldier."

Nothing happened, of course, but Bucky gasped anyway at the certainty in Steve's voice.

He opened his eyes and found that his heart was racing a little, his whole body tensed. It was a relief to look at Steve and know him, to know that stubbornly squared jaw. That was Steve pushing himself through.
"And then I'd come," Bucky agreed, and as flatly as he could he added, "Hooray. Travel back in time to a crashing helicarrier and we've got this in the bag."

"And then freeze time so we don't die in flames while I've got my hand down your pants," Steve added, looking over at him with the faintest glimmer of humor.

"Come on, Steve," Bucky huffed, letting himself actually smile. They'd done it, even if all they'd done was talk all the way through it without either of them crying. It really did feel like he'd succeeded at something. "It's a fantasy."

"Well..." Steve rolled toward him. "Congratulations, I think we found a fantasy more depressing than The Hobbit."

Bucky yanked his own pillow out and smacked Steve in the face with it. Steve just laughed and didn't even bother to fend it off.

"I'm just saying!" Steve yelled as Bucky hit him again and again. "For something that's supposed to be a goddamn bedtime story, it's fucking grim!"

"Gonna give you nightmares?" Bucky held off on the next smack with the pillow, and Steve's expression lost some of its humor.

"It might, yeah."

"Well, I'll be right here," Bucky promised, sliding down to lie with his head on his own pillow. He offered his hand and Steve took it, bridging the distance between them.

That felt like succeeding at something, too. And this part was real.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And I have a new book out, so if gay werewolf hurt/comfort marriage of convenience romance sounds interesting, you can read the first couple of chapters here.
Chapter 41

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the late posting and, uh, for this chapter in general.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve had done a really good job cleaning out the bathtub. Bucky couldn't see a speck of blood anywhere.

Looking down at it, Bucky opened his mouth to say so. Steve would hear easily enough. He was just on the other side of the open door, listening for trouble.

The words stuck in Bucky's throat. He looked down at the stuff laid out on the edge of the tub: mag cuffs for his ankles, the off-switch for his arm, and a stun baton.

The plan today was to keep it simple. Bucky had come up with the simplest thing that might possibly work. He could try again with the stun baton, with Steve on hand to give orders and permission. Steve didn't have to lay a hand on him; he didn't even have to see. He was in the other room, with his phone and a sketchpad, so Bucky could at least pretend that he wasn't just sitting on the other side of the open door with every sense trained on Bucky.

Bucky closed his eyes, breathed in, breathed out. This was right. It was necessary. Everybody agreed.

If involving Steve in this felt not just scary and sickening but wrong and dangerous in a way he couldn't make anyone understand... well, he could use that.

It was just like one of those dimly remembered nightmares where something bad was about to happen but you couldn't warn anyone, couldn't speak, just kept running frantically--couldn't really run either, couldn't find the person you needed to tell--

God, he hoped he was remembering a nightmare.

Bucky stripped without opening his eyes, dropping his clothes on the floor and sitting down in the bathtub. He wasn't going to make a mess, probably, or not much of one. Being here again was useful for the way it took him back to the last time. He could feel the cold, the fear, and that moment when he'd been certain that this could work. He didn't have to trigger his memories of anything that happened before, he just had to get back to five days ago.

He grabbed the off-switch and affixed it to his left arm. It made a little chirp when he turned it on; so Steve would know--

Bucky turned his face to the side, pressing it into the cool smooth surface of the bathtub. He was alone, and his left arm was a dead weight, pinning him down. He was alone and he had to do this. He couldn't speak to anyone or find anyone, just had to do this thing--this mission he'd been set.

He grabbed the stun baton and dropped it onto his belly. It was a harmless little impact to start things
off, like a slap to get his attention. The mag cuffs were next. He snapped them into place around his ankles, and the heavy clunk of them against the bathtub covered any sound someone in the next room might have made.

Stun baton, then. He powered it up to the second--no, third--setting and hitched his feet closer and making the mag cuffs thud against his ankles, spreading his knees as wide as they could go. He touched the tip of the stun baton to the inside of his thigh, just above the single healed knife wound on that side.

The pain made his body jerk, his feet kicking out violently as his body bowed, his hand spasming tight on the baton. His breath went out of him in a rush and he could feel every millimeter of his skin, suddenly alive with potential in the wake of that pain.

When the first shock faded enough to let him breathe, he rubbed the inside of his wrist and the heel of his hand over his dick, shivering at the pleasure of it. He was responding already, and he knew what had gone wrong before. He could make it work this time.

He turned the baton and tapped it against his belly, making a whine whistle out between his teeth. His hand was shaking--his whole arm, everything--but the confines of the bathtub made it easier to brace himself, and a flash of memory spurred him on, bringing him the image of how this had gone once, or many times, before, when it wasn't his own hand on the baton. He touched the tip of it just below his left nipple and arched against the pain with a strangled sob. The stun baton slipped from his grip, but he could feel the menacing weight of it against his side as he reached down to grab his dick.

The pain was still singing through him, his hand still shaking, but his dick filled when his trembling fingers skated over it. He started stroking himself, feeling the pleasure flow into the pain and through it, and he hardly noticed the pain fading as the pleasure mounted.

An impatient foot tapped somewhere nearby, and his eyes flashed open as he remembered his mission. He jerked his hand off his cock and picked up the stun baton again, catching his breath as he looked down at himself, his cock standing up hard, his left arm hanging useless and his ankles hidden in the weight of the mag cuffs.

He extended the stun baton between his thighs and touched it to the thin skin on the arch of his foot, screaming as the pain struck him. The first shock of it made his cock wilt a little, but when he grabbed it again, seeking the pleasure in the pain, he found it. He stroked himself frantically, knowing that he had to hurry. His handler wouldn't wait forever, and there was no knowing what would come next--the ice or reconditioning or another mission. If he didn't finish first he wouldn't be allowed to.

He couldn't bear to take his hand from his cock, but when that foot tapped again outside, he knew he had to do something to move things along. He turned his head and butted it against the side of the tub. It was only a glancing blow--no leverage, no momentum, but he hit just the right spot on his brow, and the bright shock of pain felt a little like electricity jolting through his skull. Like being wiped, so he could get on with his mission. And here he was, alone and hurting and ready.

His hand kept moving through it, stroking faster and faster, and his balls were getting tight now, the pleasure of it coiling higher and tighter. He could feel it coming, he could feel it, but he needed--he needed--

"Please," he gasped, a tiny, strangled voice. He'd been given orders, a mission. He had to ask for what he needed, but his handler was already impatient, and after this was over they would--
"Go ahead, soldier," Steve said.

Bucky's eyes flashed wide open as relief flooded through him—he was safe, he was rescued, Steve would free him and get him out of here. At the same time his hand kept desperately stroking his cock, trying to finish before--

He was watching, dreading what was going to happen and hoping he could beat it anyway, when his cock went numb under his hand, the pleasure evaporating instead of coming to a head, but he also felt a weird, muscular spasm. There was no pleasure, just a feeling of involuntary movement, and he stared in open-mouthed shock as he came all over his belly. The sudden absence of pleasure, the mechanical feeling of this release, felt like he'd fallen into some horrible new kind of dream, some programming he hadn't known he had, waiting to spring on him at the worst possible moment.

He hadn't even known he could fail like this.

"Hey, Buck," Steve said, coming into the bathroom, his voice all soft and warm and pleased.

Bucky couldn't raise his eyes from his hand, still wrapped around his shrinking dick. The evidence of his ejaculation was spattered over his belly, but it might as well have been snot for all it meant. He'd come, and it still hadn't worked. There was still nothing. His fast breathing wasn't slowing, and the lights were so bright.

"Hey, hey," Steve said softly, sitting down on the edge of the tub. That should have made the light dimmer, but didn't. Steve was his own light. Bucky couldn't look at him.

Steve's hand pressed gently to his cheek, cradling his face, one thumb at the corner of Bucky's eye. Bucky blinked rapidly, feeling the warning sting of tears building. He shook his head a little, though he didn't know if he was saying no to Steve or to himself. His throat was tight; he couldn't make himself clear to either of them, so it hardly mattered.

"Shh, hey, it's okay," Steve said softly, keeping his warm hand on Bucky's face. The weight of the stun baton was lifted off him first, and then the off-switch was deactivated, freeing his left arm.

Bucky brought it up instantly to his face, his fingers overlapping Steve's as he tried to hide his face, and the noise that had been caught in his throat burst loose as a sob.

Steve's fingers tightened against his face, and Bucky squeezed his eyes shut as Steve curled down lower over him, making more soothing sounds.

Bucky shook his head harder, pressing metal fingers against his eyes, but the tears were already leaking out. Another sob followed the first, horribly loud as it echoed back from the hard surfaces of the bathroom. He raised his right hand and grabbed at Steve, but didn't pull him closer or push away. He sobbed again and again, his face going hot with compounding shame as the tears streamed over his cheeks.

"Okay, hey, okay," Steve was murmuring, and somehow he got the mag cuffs loose, because they fell away from Bucky's ankles, leaving him naked and unmoored in the bathtub. There was only Steve's body left to cover him, and Bucky folded forward over his knees, trying to escape and sobbing louder, uncontrollably. Tears ran freely past his squeezed-shut eyelids, past his metal fingertips, dripping into the tub.

Steve was still talking, there was a warm hand on his back and one on his ankle, but Bucky couldn't quite hear the words over the pounding of blood in his head. After everything, after so long hiding, after all Steve's determination to help, Steve was fatal to the whole thing, which meant--
Bucky let out a wailing howl like a proper banshee, and the hands on him moved as Steve's arms closed around him, awkward lump that he was. Steve was nuzzling at his hair, kissing the crown of his head. When Steve spoke again Bucky couldn't help hearing the words even over his own stuttering sobs.

"It's okay, Buck, it's okay. I know it was a lot, I know, but it worked, huh? It worked, so it's gonna be okay. You're okay, I'm here."

Bucky screamed then, exactly like he had the first time he was in this goddamn bathtub. This time his howl of useless rage trailed off into snotty choked coughing and another sob. And this time Steve was right here, and it was still no good.

"Okay, shh, okay, yell all you want, get it out," Steve murmured, and that made it impossible somehow to scream again or even cry properly. Bucky just made tiny keening noises, half choked, wanting to squirm away from Steve's gentle touches at the same time that he wanted to hide himself inside Steve's body somehow and never return to his own wretched skin.

Bucky gasped for air and found himself trying to shape words out of his helpless crying. "It di--I can't--I can't--"

"Shh, shh, we'll talk about it later," Steve said softly. "It's okay, it's over now. You're done. I'm here, I've got you."

Bucky shook his head hard. "That's the--the--Steve, it--"

Steve pulled back a little, and Bucky found he could cry out loud after all, sobbing loudly as he squeezed his eyes tighter shut, bringing both hands up to hide his face. He shook his head again behind them, but Steve caught his wrists in a gentle but unbreakable hold.

"Hey, hey, Buck--it's me, it's okay. If you need to tell me something, I'm listening."

Bucky gave a smaller shake of his head and curled in again, until Steve's wrists were pressed against his knees.

"I'm right here, Buck. I'm not going anywhere, I've got you."

"You don--" Bucky coughed out a few more shattered sobs that seemed to come all the way up from his balls, shaking his whole body on the way. "You don't, you can't, Steve, you--you can't--"

Steve's thumbs stroked up and down the insides of his wrists while Bucky sobbed, losing track of words.

"Why not?" Steve said finally, softly. "Why can't I, Buck?"

Bucky screamed again at that, down at his useless dick, between his scarred thighs, and the tub below threw it right back in his face. When he ran out of breath he gasped and sobbed some more. Steve was still holding his wrists. His face was tingling and his head hurt and none of it mattered because this was never going to work.

"Buck?" Steve repeated. "Tell me what happened."

"It didn--" Bucky sniffed hard, spat snot between his thighs and coughed. "It didn't. Work. It didn't work."

His shoulders hunched as he said it, curling up around his ears. Steve was going to tell him it
obviously had worked--Bucky had come, after all. What more did he want? Did he even remember what an orgasm was supposed to feel like? Maybe they would all feel like that now, maybe that was all there was left for him.

"Okay," Steve said quietly, and kissed the bare nape of his neck. "Okay, then we'll figure out what went wrong and you can decide what you want to try next."

"I can't," Bucky insisted. "Steve, I can't, I can't--"

"That's the thing, pal," Steve said softly, finally letting go of Bucky's wrists. For a second he thought Steve had understood at last, and was going to just leave him to his stupid, snotty misery, but then he felt a strong arm sliding under his upraised knees, and the other curling around his back.

Bucky shook his head but didn't struggle as Steve hoisted him up against his chest. He didn't sob loudly enough into Steve's shoulder that he didn't hear Steve's murmur in his ear. "You don't have to do any of this yourself, 'cause I'm with you."

*To the end of the line.* World without end, amen.

Bucky shook his head and kept crying, and let Steve carry him to bed like a child.

Bucky had a feeling he was supposed to object at some point to being fussled over. Steve cleaned him up--a warm cloth to wipe away the evidence on his belly, a cool one for his face--and Bucky lay still for it, his sobs dying away into blank exhaustion. After that Steve rubbed his fingers over Bucky's buzzed hair until Bucky couldn't stand avoiding his gaze anymore and turned onto his side, facing away. Then, after a pause, Steve started gently rubbing his back, and when Bucky didn't tell him to knock it off he just... didn't.

If it had been the other way around, Steve would have argued and pushed back and insisted he was fine. Bucky felt, vaguely, the impulse to do the same; it was the right thing to do. But he wanted Steve to fuss over him and touch him and he didn't want to be alone, so he kept his mouth shut and got what he wanted for as long as he could stomach getting it.

After a while he recognized the same reaction he'd had after every other attempt failed. He had felt crushed and hopeless and shaky like this, and he hadn't wanted to be alone. Having Steve there didn't make him feel better, really--not yet. But it was better than being alone, and he could see the way the wind was blowing. In a little while he'd feel better, and eventually he would want to try again.

He blew out a breath, felt himself relax in some way he hadn't known he was holding tight. Steve's hand paused in the small of his back.

"Yeah," Bucky said, knowing that Steve had to be dying to say something or do something that wasn't just playing nursemaid while Bucky had his fit over this. "Yeah, go ahead."

Steve stayed still behind him for another moment. When Bucky didn't say more, Steve moved his hand around to Bucky's chest and pulled him to lie on his back, looking up at Steve. Bucky met his eyes as steadily as he could. Steve looked intent, focused, ready to take on the problem and fight through to a solution.

Seeing him made Bucky feel tired and cold. Bucky wasn't ready to take on anything, or even to follow Steve while he did. Bucky reached sideways for the covers, and Steve's expression softened. He lay down next to Bucky and gathered him close, and Bucky sighed and let his eyes sag shut.
"Go on," Bucky insisted, mostly into the pillow. "You gotta have something to say, pal."

"Well, I'm trying to skip over all the stupid stuff," Steve said. "Takes a while. You know me, there's a lot of stupid I could say right now."

"Just ask me what happened," Bucky said, tucking his forehead against Steve's shoulder. "Ask me why it didn't work."

Steve's hand ran over his hair, cradling the curve of his skull. "Can you tell me how it didn't work, first? What are we up against there?"

Bucky twitched, feeling that thread of doubt again. This was going to sound stupid, impossible. Steve was going to tell him to just--

"Hey, come on, Buck," Steve said softly. "I think I'd know if it did work. Whatever happened, it wasn't what you needed or wanted, so it didn't work. But I gotta know what you didn't get."

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut and said as steadily as he could, "I couldn't feel it."

He felt Steve's hand twitch on his back, and his face went hot with the shame of complaining about it and how much worse he was about to make his complaint by explaining, but he pushed on.

"It--it made me come, everything worked how it was supposed to, except when you--when I heard your voice--you gave me permission, so I could get off, but I knew it was you and I knew I was safe with you, so it--everything shut off. I couldn't feel it. Because I wasn't scared anymore."

Steve went completely rigid, and Bucky knew he'd gotten the full implications of what Bucky was saying: Bucky's first orgasm since he got free of HYDRA had been ruined, and it was Steve who ruined it.

"It's," Bucky said, not knowing what to say to make Steve stop being made of stone beside him. "It's--I mean at least I--"

"Jesus, Buck," Steve muttered. "Don't tell me it wasn't that bad, I know what it fucking feels like. I would've cried when it happened to me if I hadn't been so mad."

Bucky pulled back to look Steve in the eye at that. "Who..." he felt a sudden panic, a surge of frantic guilt as he searched for the memory. "Was it me, did I--"

"No, no," Steve shook his head. "No, I did it to myself, by accident. I think you were at Basic at the time? You were gone somewhere, anyhow, and I was working two jobs and trying to get myself fit enough to enlist every spare minute I had, doing Charles Atlas exercises and all. I was dead on my feet most of the time, but--yeah, it was while you were at Basic, because I had a letter from you, that's what got me thinking. And I was jerking off for the first time in days, thinking about--"

Steve cut himself off so sharply that Bucky knew exactly what fit in that space: something Bucky couldn't do for Steve anymore, something Steve used to like imagining Bucky doing.

"Me fucking you," Bucky said quietly, and the rest of it slid from the darkness of forgetting out of his mouth without him really knowing what he remembered until he heard himself say it. "I'd give it to you real hard and wild, when I just got home and we both needed it too bad to be careful about the neighbors hearing or who was gonna have bruises where, right? That's what I was thinking about, when I thought about you."

"Yeah." Steve blew out a breath, smiled a little and shook his head again. "Thinking about it,
halfway acting it out, one hand on my dick and the other playing with my ass, thrashing around on the bed. Except I wasn't quite worked up enough not to care if anybody heard, and I was right on the edge when I thought I heard someone bang on the wall. So I froze, yanked my fingers out, except I came anyway and it just felt like... nothing. I was so shocked I just stared at my own dick like it was a damn trainwreck, didn't even think to start touching myself again."

Bucky snorted. He could picture it perfectly. Steve, back then, all slim and sharp-featured, covered in sweat, his cock looking twice as big on that skinny body, his red-knuckled hands going still, and then the stunned look coming over his face. Perfectly good hands, perfectly good cock, nothing stopping him, and too flustered by his own body to do a thing with it.

Bucky tried, tensing up against it, but a second snort of laughter escaped him, and then a giggle.

"Buck! It wasn't funny!"

Bucky howled, and Steve smacked at him ineffectually and kept arguing like Bucky might not hear how close he was to laughing himself under the play of outrage.

"It was the first time I'd gotten it up in days! I knew I wasn't gonna have another chance any time soon, and I was so fucking mad at myself I didn't know what to do."

"Liar," Bucky hiccupped, pushing back at Steve's hands, rolling right on top of him to straddle his waist. "You always know what to do when you're mad, Stevie."

"Well, yeah," Steve admitted, sagging into the mattress. "But jerking myself raw because I was fucking mad about screwing up coming didn't help any. I still couldn't get it up again that night and I was too sore to even try touching myself for two days after--and getting into a fight every one of the next eight days didn't help either. But it gave me something to do until I could forget about it, so I wasn't dwelling on how scared I was of screwing it up the next time I got around to touching my own dick."

Bucky went still, his laughter dying away as he realized that Steve had shifted neatly into tactics while Bucky was laughing at him. Something dangerously like confidence--in Steve, not himself--rushed into the empty place the laughter left behind. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we know what went wrong, and we can't fix it right now, so there's no point dwelling on it," Steve said briskly, and God, he meant it, he meant they were going to fix it somehow. Steve was going to fix it, and Bucky was going to follow him.

Steve pushed up under Bucky, going for an arm bar and pin, and Bucky fought back automatically, spinning them off the bed, every other thought quieted in the face of a fight. He evaded Steve's hold but failed to secure his own. Steve struggled like an eel, tipping the bedside table onto them, whacking Bucky with a yanked-out drawer, but this wasn't like the frantic, mindless fight of the other night. Bucky kept his eyes on the prize; he got Steve pinned against the wall, one wrist pressed to the nape of his neck, Bucky's legs locked around his.

"And?" Bucky panted, pressing against him. "Why're we fighting?"

"Because you've moped enough," Steve said, sounding calm and in control despite his position. "Time to start training. You've got a job to do, remember?"

Bucky held him there for a few more seconds, but he couldn't imagine a better offer. Training, work, something he might not fuck up over and over until he'd rather die than fail at it again.

"Yeah, okay." Bucky stood up, shifting his grip on Steve to pull him to his feet without breaking
Steve turned to face him, flushed and grinning. His gaze dropped to Bucky's mouth and Bucky licked his lips, suddenly aware that they hadn't kissed anywhere during the proceedings.

Steve sucker-punched him and took off running. Bucky snarled and chased Steve's laughter all the way down to the Avengers' training gym, when he finally managed to push him up against a padded wall and take that kiss Steve owed him.

The punch he got in a little later.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes hurt/comfort gay werewolf romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 42

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for your patience while I got this chapter ready! We should be back on the regular Sunday update schedule now. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky sat in an armchair across from someone who he'd never met, who was about to ask him a lot of personal questions, and he found that it was familiar, even comfortable. Steve had tried give him advice about where to look and how to smile, but Natasha cut Steve off and took him away.

Now it was just Bucky and a nice lady in a skirt suit and pearls. All Bucky had to do was pay no attention to the cameras, which was easy enough. He'd been on camera one way or another for most of the last four months, and nothing he said here could get him hanged.

"So," she said with a smile. "I think the obvious place to start is your relationship with Captain America. How's that going?"

Bucky smiled right back. "Aw, well, me and Cap have kind of a love-hate thing going on. I mean, you can't say no to that uniform, right? But the guy's bossy as hell and it's pretty hard to have a relationship with somebody who's just there to fight aliens and mad scientists."

The nice lady looked faintly startled. Bucky smiled wider.

"Me and Steve Rogers, though, we got a good thing going."

"Me and Steve Rogers, though, we got a good thing going."

"Well, yes and no," Bucky said, leaning back, getting comfortable. "He was always a hero--one of the first times I laid eyes on him he was five years old and standing up to kids twice his size picking on someone else. But yeah, I got in ahead of the rush."

Bucky shot a sideways glance toward the door Steve had left through when Natasha pried him away from Bucky's side, then back to the nice lady, not quite winking as he added, "Lucky me, huh?"

The woman smiled warmly. "Very lucky! Do you think the rush has stopped now?"

"He certainly is!" The woman's smile was wider now, betraying something other than warmth, and she leaned in a little, her voice going low, confiding, as if she was letting him on a secret. "He's very well-liked by his teammates, for example. Sam Wilson, the mysterious Natasha Romanov, even Tony Stark, who is well known for having a very active social life--do you suppose they've been giving him any private lessons about how things work in the modern world, while you've been away?"
Bucky could hear the insinuation in her words clearly enough, but she hadn't quite asked, *Do you think Steve is fucking around behind your back with any non-brainwashed non-murderer superheroes?*

If he insisted Steve wasn't, wouldn't--and Steve wasn't, he *wouldn't*, no matter how fucked up everything was with Bucky, no matter how long they were unable to have sex the way Steve really wanted because Bucky was fucking broken--

No matter how quick Steve was to go to Sam for comfort--

Bucky shook his head a little, propping up the corners of his mouth into something like a smile. "I mean, I guess they tried, but I think my team at Fort Sam Houston did a better job getting me up to speed, honestly. I was gone for seventy years and Steve still hasn't learned to dance."

"Oh, yes, let's talk about your time being treated at MEDCOM," the woman said, following his lead smoothly. "You became very close to your treatment team there? Did you... dance with them?"

Bucky knew he was supposed to play it off with another smile, but he could feel his face trying to twist into a snarl, remembering how Andrews had been angrily protective of him even before Bucky had understood why. How kind they'd been, how patient--reading *The Hobbit* to him--and now the way she said the words made his sillier orientation sessions into something dirty, just because the guys showed him a little of how it was done nowadays.

He wanted to shout at her that they were good men, honorable men, and remembered on the verge of saying it that he wasn't to mention their names. They weren't like him and Steve and the others, they weren't supposed to have their names and faces plastered all over the news. Andrews and Duncan and Mueller and Lee didn't need people knowing that about them, that they'd been buddy-buddy with the Winter Soldier, even if it was their job.

"We, I mean..." Bucky said, and the faltering words were more damning than blurring something out, worse than his continued frozen silence. He searched for the right thing to say and caught himself wondering what Natasha was doing with Steve right now, how she was keeping him distracted--hadn't Steve said she and Sam sat on him to keep him from Bucky once?

He shook his head a little and was answered by a hard double-knock on the window to his left; instantly the lights shut off, and the smiling woman put her hands up.

"You did great, Bucky, that was really good for a first try."

He blinked at her, still struggling with the trapped, frozen feeling and the anger just behind it. He closed his eyes and took a breath as he reminded himself that she wasn't *really* a reporter, and the camera wasn't broadcasting to anywhere but the PR team.

"Thanks, Ms. Potts," he managed after a moment. He frowned, remembering part of what she'd said, and why he hadn't expected it from her, even in the guise of Invasive Reporter #1. "You--you mentioned Tony. As someone who might, uh, with Steve..."

Ms. Potts gave him a commiserating look. "Well, believe me, I get an even more crude version of that question about *him* every time a reporter thinks they can get away with it. And it's something you'll want to have a quick answer to, so you can move past it and on to the next thing--but your pivot there really wasn't bad for a first try."

Bucky ran a hand over his hair, trying to place why her praise felt familiar, and then remembered Woj telling him that staying calm for ten seconds was *great*, was a *success*. "Guess that means I've
got a lot more tries ahead of me before you turn me loose, huh?"

Ms. Potts smiled and stood; Bucky instinctively stood up with her.

"Maybe not as many as you think--I'm sure you'll pick it up quickly. The brief for today was just to
give it a shot and see how far you got--your regular trainers from the PR department will watch the
footage and see where you need to go from here. So you're done with step one of Avengers media
training!"

She said it like it was something to celebrate, and not like something that left a stirred-up whirl of
unpleasant thoughts knocking around his brain--but that wasn't unfamiliar, either, as the end result of
sitting in a quiet room answering questions.

He followed Ms. Potts to the door and shook her hand as Steve walked up, with that long stride like
he was trying not to let himself hurry. Ms. Potts turned away quickly, clearing the way for Steve to
give him a quick, hard kiss, dispelling without words all those nasty insinuations.

Then Steve pulled back, grinning. "We got about a thousand more things to work on, come on."

Steve hadn't been exaggerating about the thousand things, and only about five of them were combat-
related.

"You already know how to fight and shoot as well as you need to," Steve had explained with a
shrug. "I know you'll listen to me in the field when things get hairy, and it's not like we're doing
parade drill maneuvers out there, so we don't actually have to practice that much all together. We
have tactical exercises whenever we get the chance, but honestly it's more like getting a football
game together than real training. Everybody on the team's already expert at the actual fighting; that's
why we're all on the team."

Bucky would keep up PT and his sessions at the firing range, and Steve was working on scheduling
some tactical exercises as soon as possible so he could get used to working with the others en masse.

But it turned out that the vast majority of what Bucky had to do to get ready to go into the field with
the Avengers was about making sure he looked like an Avenger instead of a HYDRA assassin. That
was why he had to do media training, even though Steve swore up and down that they would keep
him away from cameras and reporters until he felt okay talking to them.

It was also why Bucky was sitting in a conference room listening to four people in suits--business
suits, not Steve's stars and stripes or Natasha's fitted black combat number--debate his costume
design.

"We want to get you back to Bucky Barnes," one of them--Theresa--said blithely, like that wasn't
something he'd already been working like hell at for months.

"Away from the whole--" She waved at a screen, showing an image of him on a freeway in DC,
masked and toting a heavy rifle. "Winter Soldier image, which obviously is not a positive for
civilians on the ground or the wider audience."

"Sure," Bucky agreed, staring at himself, a little transfixed.

He remembered doing that, but it was hard to remember being that, like memories of being a little
kid. What he'd been thinking, why he'd done it, was already becoming something he could hardly
understand.
"A secret identity is obviously out the window at this point," the guy across from Theresa--Nathan--added. "Although if you'd like to adopt a special themed identity as an Avenger, that would give us something to work with in terms of developing a new look."

All four of the consultants looked briefly hopeful. Bucky wondered for a moment if Steve was finally getting his revenge for Bucky's fascination with the red-white-and-blue getup.

He shook his head. "I, uh... I think Bucky Barnes is about all the new identity I can handle right now."

"Well, at least you cut your hair," Hayley said, looking down. "We could go for the standard non-costume costume look, but all black is..." She glanced up at the image of Bucky rampaging through DC and shook her head. "Not going to work. We need to get you into colors."

Bucky glanced down at himself--he was wearing a gray hoodie over a faded black t-shirt and dark jeans, all stuff Steve had bought for him before he even got here. He thought longingly of his camo fatigues, still packed in a bag in his room upstairs.

"I liked..." Bucky started, and glanced up when he sensed them all going still again. He wasn't sure if they were afraid of him or just desperate to get some kind of input, but every eye was fixed on him. Bucky gave them an apologetic half-smile and shook his head, running a hand over his buzz cut which was getting a little fluffy, close to needing a trim. "I was just thinking... I liked the Army. Being in a uniform, not having to choose. Looking like everybody else."

"Unfortunately the Avengers have never really gotten into the cohesive team look concept," Nathan said, sounding like he had been pushing futilely for a cohesive team look for long, weary years. A lineup appeared on the screens, replacing the unnerving image of himself.

Steve was in his stars and stripes, Tony in his red-and-gold suit. The Hulk was big and green and nearly naked, Natasha was in black, and Clint wore black and a muted dark purple. Sam circled around to red again, accented with gray, and Thor's armor was silver under his red cloak.

"There's a lot of red on the team," Hayley offered.

Bucky winced and didn't touch the red star on his shoulder, covered by two layers of shirts and the only flash of color he'd worn as the Winter Soldier. He shook his head decisively. "Red's for targets."

"Okay, not red, we're getting somewhere," Theresa said. "If we want to visually connect you with Captain Rogers, we could do blue?"

Bucky looked at her, and then around the table; everyone looked poised, ready, like they were going through a script everyone but him had rehearsed. He waved his hand at the screen. "How about you put up the old picture of me in my blue jacket from 1945 and tell me what it's gonna look like now that you've improved it six ways from Sunday?"

Two pictures popped up instantly: one was an old photo of Bucky, tinted to show the colors of the blue jacket and dark brown pants and boots that were now on display in the Smithsonian. The other was a sort of fashion plate drawing showing a figure in a sleeker, shinier blue and brown getup.

Bucky was not going to be able to tease Steve about how well his uniform showed off his ass anymore.

Bucky gave up on looser pants--if Steve had never gotten them, Bucky didn't like his own odds--and went at the really obvious thing he might be able to get changed. "I need the left sleeve off. The arm
overheats if it's covered, and it's not like it needs any protection."

Theresa and Nathan looked dubious in such a well-bred way that Bucky knew their objection was about reverting to the Winter Soldier look. The fourth guy at the table flipped to a new fashion plate picture, showing Bucky's arm exposed with an altered design covering the red star. Bucky settled in to negotiate.

Bucky felt a fluttering in his stomach, halfway between anticipation and nerves, as he headed to his next preparation session. This one was taking place on the 58th floor, because there was no space left in his and Steve's apartment that blocked JARVIS from observing, and Bucky still didn't want his trigger phrase on the record if he could avoid it.

He shouldn't have been feeling whatever it was he was feeling about going under the off-switch today. He knew what would happen—he'd done this literally hundreds of times—and nothing was going to go wrong. Steve would be with him, and Bucky would have the new little gadget Tony had made for him.

"Here, let's do a basic test," Tony said, holding out the two delicate metal pieces, jerking Bucky away from his thoughts. "There are a few ways to manually trigger it on, but it also responds to you going limp. I set your voice command to Assist On, go ahead and try it."

"Assist On," Bucky repeated, and the pressure against his temples increased slightly as spindly metal pieces stretched in front of his face.

"Close your eyes," Tony prompted.

System calibration, a neutral female voice said in Bucky's ear. Look down. Look up. Look left. Look right.

Bucky followed each instruction precisely, glad for the distraction of something to do.

Look up then down for yes, the voice prompted, and Bucky tried it. Yes detected. Look left then right for no--no detected. Look toward the sound you hear next.

A faint chime seemed to come from ahead of him, high on the right. Bucky looked toward it, then toward the next sound, low center, and on and on.

When he heard another sound beside him, Bucky looked toward it without opening his eyes, causing the headset voice to say Mismatch at the same time Steve was saying, "Hey, Buck. Am I late?"

Bucky opened his eyes, blinking as the metal pieces retracted from in front of his eyes, readjusting to using his eyes to see instead of to point.

"No," he answered Steve, belatedly, just as Steve was starting to look worried.

More worried. Steve was always going to be worried about testing the off-switch again.

"No," Bucky said more strongly, mustering up a smile as he felt that stupid fluttering in his belly again. "You're right on time, pal. Everything ready in the other room?"

Steve nodded. "I checked it all out. Got the sedative kit ready, and--" Steve raised a slim paperback book. Have Spacesuit--Will Travel.

"Guess we're ready to go, then." Bucky raised his hand to touch the metal pieces at his temples,
which were clinging gently but persistently to his skin. He looked toward Tony, who was frowning into a holographic display as though he’d been utterly distracted from them, though Bucky was sure he hadn’t missed a word. "Tony? Anything else I need to know about this thing?"

Tony shook his head, not looking at them but also not hesitating to respond. "Nothing I know that I can tell you yet--take it for a spin and then we'll have some data to work with. JARVIS will translate for Steve for now, we'll get you wired into comms or something once we know it actually works when you're under the trigger phrase." He waved at them dismissively. "Go, go on. For science."

"For science," Bucky agreed solemnly, still fighting that bubbly feeling that he shouldn't have been feeling. There was nothing to be anticipating here, just something necessary for his recovery and his qualification to join the team.

The feeling didn't stop, though, as he walked down the hall with Steve, as he sat on the cot to take his shoes off and then lay down, getting comfortable. He watched Steve's face instead of the needle while Steve got the IV set in the back of Bucky's hand; the grim resolution on Steve's face lasted about halfway through the process, and then the corners of his mouth twitched.

"I got something on my face, Buck?"

"Yeah, there's this huge ugly thing sticking out in the middle, right above your mouth," Bucky said, letting his nerves come out in a smirk. "You oughta get that looked at, probably."

Steve snorted, shaking his head a little but not otherwise dignifying that with a response. His hands stayed steady, getting the tube in place and taping it down. Only then did he look back at Bucky, meeting his eyes with a seriousness that made the smile slide off Bucky's face.

"Buck," he said. "Are you..."

Bucky caught Steve's hand with his, ignoring the ache from the tube plugged into it as he squeezed. "It's gotta be tested, pal. When we know if it works, then we can talk about it, huh?"

Because if Tony's eye-tracking gadget worked, if Bucky could talk from under the off-switch, then it wouldn't only be useful in the field, or for helping him eventually beat the trigger. If he could talk to Steve while he was under the off-switch, then Steve could touch him while he was under, take advantage of the waking nightmare that waited for Bucky down there, and get him off without Bucky having to get hurt in real life at all.

If he could talk to Steve, convince him he wanted it, there could be something really good in the midst of the nightmare, not just an unwilling and unfulfilling side effect. He could have Steve with him in the worst place he'd ever been, and Steve still wouldn't have to really see it. It couldn't touch Steve, locked inside Bucky's skull while he was unable to speak, or cry, or flinch, and let it out.

But first they had to test the gadget that would make it possible. Bucky let go of Steve's hand and snuggled into the pillow under his cheek, pointedly getting comfortable. "Come on, Rogers, let's get this show on the road."

Steve smiled a little. "Hey, Sarge, we should probably get this show on the road."

Bucky closed his eyes, not responding otherwise, trying to quiet that stupid feeling of anticipation still stirring in his belly, and then there was a voice, and then he was trapped.

There was no transition--no voices, no touches, no sense of place, not even pain, just the awareness that he was implacably trapped in the dark. He would never escape, never see light again, never be able to so much as move or speak. He was their creature, their tool, and they would simply lock him
away in the dark whenever he wasn't useful.

And then there was a voice pushing through the darkness, through the walls and locks and ice that hid him away.

"Buck? Give me a yes if you're okay to stay or a no if you need to stop."

Steve. Steve was here, Steve was--Steve was in the dark with him, they had Steve.

Bucky tried desperately to look toward him, but the darkness didn't diminish, and his eyelids didn't so much as crack.

"Buck? Up and down for yes, left and right for no, pal. You with me?"

He couldn't let Steve think he was alone. He looked up and down, and heard another voice, crisp and British and distant, translate it for him. "Yes."

They could see inside his closed eyes? Who was that? If they could see in his eyes, they couldn't miss Steve, they would never let him escape, they--

Steve was speaking, Bucky was distantly aware, trying to tell him something or asking something, but Bucky couldn't hear him over the crushing sensation of hopelessness, like a fog between him and everything outside his body.

He was alone there for a time. He didn't know how long, drifting in the dark with nothing but the certainty of his imprisonment and the fear of what might come next, what they might do to Steve. He had almost persuaded himself that Steve wasn't really there, that Steve was safe--there was something he was supposed to be remembering, he thought, about Steve, about safety, but he couldn't bring it into focus.

And then someone touched him. Not just someone. Steve. Steve's hand was on his, squeezing his fingers, and that meant Steve was here, really here, not just an imagined voice, not at some safe remove. Steve was here, and they were here, too, watching, choosing their moment. He heard the whine of a charging stun baton, the heavy sound of the mag cuffs, and he knew they were coming for Steve, and Bucky couldn't warn him.

Except there was something. His eyes, he could move his eyes. Steve had told him how to signal.

Bucky looked from side to side frantically, desperate to warn Steve before they could get to him, and he heard that distant British voice reciting dispassionately, "No. No. No. No."

Bucky was scrabbling at the sheets, looking for something or just trying to hold on. He was sitting up before he was fully awake, gasping for breath, eyes wide.

Steve.

Steve was there, perched on a stool beside the bed, his hands spread wide like he was ready to catch Bucky but didn't dare to touch. Bucky stared for a moment, trying to place where he was, why Steve had that awful look on his face, sick and scared and uncertain, and then it came back to him.

Not a nightmare, or not just a nightmare. They'd tested the off-switch, and... well. This was probably what came of not going under for a while. He was out of practice at focusing--and Steve hadn't ever coached him through a tough trigger reduction session.
Bucky slumped over, bracing his elbows on his knees, hiding his face in his hands for a moment. Had he ever told Steve not to touch him while he was under? He thought he had, but he hadn't been responding to Steve's voice, and... it wasn't like any other rules applied to Steve the same way they did to anyone else. He must have thought it would be all right, and it had snapped Bucky out of his spiral enough to remember to tell Steve to make it stop.

A little rustle of movement reminded Bucky that Steve was still at his side, and he glanced up to find Steve had lowered his hands to his lap. His head was down, but Bucky could see enough of his face to know that he was pale and stricken and blaming himself, imagining God knew what.

"Hey," Bucky said, checking that his hand was already free of IV tubing before he reached out. "Stevie, hey, it's okay. I'm here, I'm--come here, you idiot, you can touch me now, I know where I am."

Steve reached back tentatively, but as soon as Bucky grabbed his hand and squeezed Steve was lunging at him, wrapping his arms around Bucky and crushing him close. Bucky held on just as hard, letting out a shaky sigh of relief at the warmth of Steve's arms around him, chasing away the last vestiges of what he'd found down there under the off-switch.

It hit him then, as he breathed in the smell of Steve, a little sweaty under his clean clothes, what else this test had been for. They'd been checking whether the eye-tracker worked, and giving Bucky another round of practice under the off-switch, but as a first step to using it for something else. A way to get him off, without Steve having to really hurt him.

Judging by the way Steve was clinging to him now, Bucky didn't think that option was on the table anymore. And when he thought of his own reaction to Steve's touch, down there in the dark...

"So that option's out," Bucky said against Steve's shoulder, and Steve squeezed him tighter. Bucky loosened his grip with one hand to run it up and down Steve's back. "Hey, we had to try, right? Now we know."

"I'm sorry, Buck," Steve said softly.

Bucky nodded against his shoulder and forced himself to say it now, while they were both fully aware that there was really no other choice left. "Guess it's gonna be you and a stun baton, then."

Steve jerked a little. "Is that..."

"Pretty standard," Bucky said, forcing his voice even. He couldn't let himself stall or he'd keep putting it off until something blew up, and he couldn't do that again. "Reliable option, especially if it's... just for my benefit. Hit me with it until I'm down, get my pants open, voila."

"Voila." Steve repeated in a choked voice, sounding close to the kind of laughter that was hiding something uglier. "Buck, will it--you'll know it's me. How..."

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut tighter and forced himself to say what he'd known forever. He remembered recognizing it back at MEDCOM, when they first started tackling his triggers, and it never got any less true.

People who were trying to do the right thing were always the most relentless. Steve had taught him that before anyone else.

"I'll know it's you," Bucky agreed. It felt like a betrayal, like cruelty, but it was only the truth, and he was too tired to resist it anymore. There was just no other way, and Steve, of course, wasn't going to quit, so Bucky might as well tell him.
"That's exactly how I'll know that you aren't gonna go easy on me, Stevie. If it's what I need, you'll hurt me as much as you have to, to make it work. We both know that. That's scary enough, pal, believe me."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](#)

I am also on [Tumblr!](#) And I have a new book out, so if gay werewolf hurt/comfort marriage of convenience romance sounds interesting, you can read the first couple of chapters [here](#).
Steve didn't say anything, which was no surprise. There wasn't anything he could say, and Bucky couldn't take it back.

They couldn't stay in the little protected space forever, either. After a few minutes there was a little tap at the glass, and Bucky picked his head up to see Butterfingers in the corridor, claw tilted inquiringly.

"Come on," Bucky said quietly, without looking straight at Steve's face. "We--I gotta go see Tony, tell him how it went. I can meet you upstairs."

Steve raised a hand to touch him, and Bucky went carefully still, waiting for it, allowing it.

Steve's hand dropped away without making contact, and Steve nodded and turned away. Bucky followed him a step behind; Steve hesitated outside Tony's lab, and Bucky shook his head, waving him on. "Go on. I'll be up in a minute."

Steve nodded, mouth working, and Bucky reached out this time, catching Steve's hand and giving it a squeeze. Steve squeezed back hard, then turned away fast and walked to the elevator without looking back.

Bucky took another second to settle himself, dragging his thoughts back to Tony's part of this. Bucky would need to tell him about how the device had worked, maybe set up a few more pre-programmed terms so he could say things other than yes and no.

Tony was all business, breezy and bright as ever, until they were finished. Tony was nodding to himself, poking at a display, speculating about more shapes Bucky could make with his eyes to signal words, and then said, "You find out how to say something rude to Cap with a two-word vocabulary, there? He got a bee in his bonnet?"

Bucky shook his head. "He just... it's hard to see me like that, I guess. And it wasn't my best trip under, I panicked fast."

Tony gave him a skeptical look. "Yeah, I've noticed that when he's worried about you, that's when he gets the hell away from you as soon as possible."

Bucky glanced toward the glass wall of the lab, which would have given Tony a perfect view of him telling Steve to go on without him. He shrugged tightly, compressing his lips against the temptation to give some answer. It would only be an opening for Tony to poke and prod, and Tony might be on Steve's team--and Bucky's team, once he jumped through all the hoops and checked all the boxes--but this actually wasn't his business. Steve wouldn't want Tony knowing any more than Bucky wanted him to.

"Go talk to him, at least," Tony said, shooing him. "He's had a solid twenty minutes to be stoic about it, go dazzle him with your twenty-first century communication skills. If you have some, I assume you got therapy and they covered that? If not, JARVIS can make suggestions, and his first suggestion will be not listening to me. But go do something, that raincloud over his head fucks up the climate control for the whole building."

Bucky rolled his eyes, but smiled a little at the warm feeling he got knowing Tony cared enough for
Steve--for both of them, maybe--to stick his nose into something he could have ignored. Especially when he wasn't insisting on knowing what it was all about.

"As a favor to you, I guess," Bucky said. "Since you make me such cool gadgets. If you make me a new scope I'll cook him dinner, too."

"What's wrong with your scope?" Tony demanded immediately. "What--your accuracy is already inhuman, what--"

Bucky just smiled wider and walked out, sauntering to the elevator in a pointed show of unconcern.

As soon as the doors closed on him, Bucky let his shoulders tighten like they wanted to, and looked up for JARVIS. "Take me to Steve?"

He tried to guess what he was going to find, and it occurred to him first that he might be walking into an ambush, if Steve had decided to put Bucky's suggestion to immediate use. He felt a faint flutter of the stupid anticipation he'd felt before the off-switch session, but mostly he felt tired as he considered the logic. It would be the most advantageous moment, tactically, and Steve's sense of tactics had always been a strength even greater than his perfect body.

Bucky felt sick then, because he knew that those tactical instincts would have suggested the same thing to Steve, and Steve wouldn't have felt even Bucky's faint shadow of anticipation at the possibility.

Bucky hadn't looked at Steve's face when he stepped back, but he hadn't needed to see it to know how horrified Steve would feel at what Bucky had said, and how guilty. How much he was going to hate doing this for Bucky, and how determined he'd be to do it anyway.

Bucky took a deep breath, steadying himself and trying to push the thought away. Steve was fine. It wouldn't be an ambush. And if it was--then that was what he wanted, and Steve would make it work. Bucky wouldn't argue.

The elevator door opened. "Steve? Steve, where--"

Bucky stopped short when he saw Steve in the chair he liked by the windows. The Silmarillion was closed on the arm of the chair. The drawing models were crumpled together on the floor a few meters away, and Bucky didn't want to think about what pose Steve had felt compelled to reject so thoroughly.

Steve didn't look up or speak. He still hadn't said a word since Bucky explained to him how it was going to work.

Bucky thought, Well, that's fair, as his stomach sank.

He hadn't meant to put everything on Steve. He had said he would try not to, anyway. And he'd let other people help him with the easy parts, but that just left all the worst things for Steve.

Bucky ran a hand over his hair, his arm recalibrating with a soft whirr as he did. He took a breath, steeling himself, and then walked across the room. Steve stayed curled up tight, giving Bucky no opening, but Bucky had never needed much of one.

He perched on the arm of the chair and leaned sideways against Steve's knees, bracing himself with one arm on the other side and letting his head hang low enough that he could see Steve's face.

Steve closed his eyes.
Bucky felt a flash of old times, all the tactics he'd used to stay friends with the stubborn, angry kid Steve had been. He went limp, resting his weight precariously on Steve's knees. He didn't say anything, just watched Steve's face and waited, hanging draped across him.

"I ain't scared of you," Bucky said softly, when he recognized that he had to make the first move because Steve wasn't going to.

Steve exhaled a little--disbelief, not surrender. He stayed locked up tight and didn't open his eyes.

"I know you," Bucky insisted quietly. "And, yeah, okay, I know you'll do scary shit because I need you to. But I also know why you'll be doing it, and that you won't do it until you're sure it's what I need. You don't scare me all by yourself, Steve. It only gets scary when it's the two of us together. I'm only scared of you when I'm also scared of me."

Steve opened his eyes then, meeting Bucky's gaze instantly even though he was half upside-down. "That's some barracks lawyering bullshit, there, Sergeant Barnes."

"Come on, pal, I had to learn something from going on trial. Don't fear the gun, fear the asshole who picks it up and points it at my head, right? It's your turn to be the weapon, that's all."

Steve didn't quite flinch, but the effort of not doing it made his expression hard. It was exactly what Steve had demanded the chance to do for him, but they hadn't put it in such bald terms before.

Well, fuck it, the cards were on the table now. Bucky couldn't hide what it meant anymore, couldn't even dress it up as something else, so he was just going to have to convince Steve to actually do it.

"You don't have to tell me it's an ugly thing to ask anybody to do, pal," Bucky added.

He could see Steve start to object, to insist he knew what he'd volunteered for, and Bucky went in for the kill. He could almost feel the knife scraping against Steve's ribs as he twisted it.

"It's why I tried so goddamn hard not to ask."

He saw the understanding go through Steve, saw the grim determination settle over him. Steve's hand settled on his side, steadying him and not flinching from the touch, and Bucky shivered in every kind of anticipation, because this was it now.

Steve was going to make this work for him if it killed them both.

Steve's expression softened a second later and he squeezed the hand on Bucky's side. "Not today, pal."

Bucky swallowed, nodded, and his voice almost didn't shake as he said, "Don't--don't tell me when. Just do it."

Steve squeezed harder, hushing him. "I got it, Buck. I have any questions, I'll ask."

Bucky squirmed a little closer, and Steve finally unfolded enough for Bucky to slide from his knees into his lap, such as it was in this position. Steve gave a little oof sound but also wrapped his arm around Bucky. The silence was thick as cotton wool and about as suffocating. Bucky knew better than to let it go on indefinitely.

He shrugged his left shoulder, getting it to let out a little whir, and said, "You still touch up the paint on your shield yourself, don't you?"
"Yeah," Steve said, frowning a little like he thought Bucky was going to bring this back around to the same topic they'd already disposed of. "Not up here, though. I have a room down by the gym, properly ventilated."

Bucky tugged the sleeve up and over his left shoulder and said, "Think you could paint something on there? PR says I have to have a new design before I go out in the field with this thing showing."

Steve nodded, finally summoning up a tired smile. "Okay, Buck. Guess we'd better get that done tonight. Wouldn't want you out there dodging death rays with wet paint on your arm."

There was more than enough time for the paint to dry, as it turned out. Bucky had another four days of practice with cameras and simulated crowds, and played a few rounds of make-believe world-saving with the rest of the team, while the idea that he was one of them, that he would fight alongside them, started to settle in his head, hardening into truth. Steve had to touch up his shield and Bucky's arm both after one of those, and fussed over the exact diameter of blue around the matching white stars until Bucky stuck his right hand down Steve's pants.

He had just enough training time to feel like he would be training forever--nowhere near enough to feel like he had learned much of anything--before he was on a Quinjet with the rest of the team, wearing his brand new costume and getting a fast briefing from Steve as they made the short hop down to Philadelphia.

Steve ran a hand over Bucky's hair, which Bucky had trimmed just the day before, so it was still soft and short as velvet. "Still don't like you having no head protection."

"Don't recall you liking it in '45 either, but you knew better than to argue and it wouldn't have saved me anyway," Bucky said.

Steve nodded acknowledgment, tugging his own helmet into place. "Still don't like it. But this is gonna be fine. You'll be up out of the way."

Bucky nodded. He knew, thanks to spending the better part of a week training to think about this stuff, that it wasn't the first mission the PR people had wanted for him. Just about any other contingency was preferable to them than an op that put Bucky on a rooftop with a sniper rifle.

But the Avengers needed a sniper's cover while they went in to bail out the Philly PD who were way over their head against some maniacs downtown with HYDRA weapons. Steve made the tactical assignments, not PR, and Bucky was going to be on containment, with Clint on another building across the way, and Sam or Tony to ferry them around if they needed to shift positions.

Bucky was pretty sure that Steve knew that he would drop his assignment and close in if something went totally haywire, but they didn't bother arguing over that. Just over the fact that he'd be safer doing it, when he did it, if he had a helmet on.

Steve dropped his hand, his expression turning serious, and Bucky leaned in and kissed him to cut off whatever he was about to say. They had a mission to get through; that was enough to be worrying about right now.

As it turned out, though, the mission itself was mostly boring. Bucky waited in his perch while Clint waited in his; they were both silent, listening to the radio chatter from the others, but while there was a tense moment or two, the whole thing went like clockwork. It was barely half an hour before Steve and the others had secured the scene and a flood of uniforms were rushing in, taking away the shooters, helping victims.
Tony was securing the weapons while also barking orders about dealing with the structural damage done to a couple of buildings, and Steve was directing people here and there, doing his best to ignore the cameras that were starting to push in closer.

He still had his shield on his arm, but after a few minutes he made some gesture that must have reminded him it was there; he slung it onto his back, and Bucky caught a glimpse of bright, shining blue. He'd known the tech that lit up like that for a long damn time, and he went cold at the sight of it on Steve even if he didn't know what that little item was going to do.

He heard Clint curse in his ear and felt that cold horror solidify into calm with the certainty of what he'd seen.

"Rogers," Bucky said, running for the edge of the roof he was on, "freeze. Clint--"

"Gotcha," Clint returned, already firing. Bucky caught the flying end of a cable arrow as it struck the edge of the roof and rode the cable down until Clint fired another for him to switch to, and then a third.

He hit the ground while people were still milling around. No one had seen, no one had noticed, and now he had to plunge into a crowd of people, every face turning toward him, a few voices rising--but none of that mattered. He had to get to Steve. He was aware of Clint's voice in his ear, reporting what they'd both spotted, but he spared no focus from getting to Steve.

At least no one attempted to stand in his way.

Steve had actually listened to him, at least. He was standing frozen where Bucky had last seen him, his arm still upraised from slinging his shield onto his back. His eyes shot to Bucky when there was no one left between them, and Bucky remembered that Steve would want him to think of the innocent bystanders. He shouted, "Everybody down! DOWN!"

Nearly everybody in earshot was in uniform; they responded instinctively to the authoritative roar of his voice. Steve, of course, remained standing. So did a cluster of people in his peripheral vision, but there was nothing Bucky could do about them. He clapped his gloved right hand to the bare nape of Steve's neck and shoved him to his knees as he used his left hand to reach down and grab the thing stuck to the inside of Steve's shield, yanking it free and closing his metal fist around it as he pulled it as far from Steve as he could get it.

A red armored hand closed around his wrist, hauling him off his feet and straight up into the sky; he just had time to think, This won't help if it's an EMP-- and then the blast went off and they were both falling like stones.

But he landed on his feet, for a second, before the inert Iron Man suit crashed down on top of him. Even that didn't hit his head, so Steve wasn't going to be able to tell him a helmet would have made a difference.

Nobody died, and his own injuries were the worst anyone sustained--broken ribs and some hairline fractures in his pelvis that he wouldn't have distinguished from the general mishmash of bruises and minor internal bleeding if the medical people hadn't scanned him so carefully. It was nothing he couldn't walk off, which he had known as soon as Steve pulled Tony off him. Even his arm rebooted itself after a few minutes.

But there was no point arguing with Steve's insistence that he needed to be checked out; after the last several months it seemed entirely routine to submit himself to the care of doctors. The strangest
moment was when Steve came into the hospital with him instead of handing him off to a team just inside.

But this hospital wasn't an army facility, and the doctors here weren't his team.

Bucky felt the cold calmness melt away by slow degrees as he was prodded and x-rayed by people trying their best not to cause him any further pain or damage, always with Steve hovering nearby. It left him shivering, and feeling shaky and tired long after he managed to stop. The routine of being cared for was deceptively familiar, an illusion of being right at home that cracked painfully every time he caught a lingering stare or had to supply information that his own medical team would have known already.

Still, they were the good guys, and they were doing their best. By the time they'd sorted out his various injuries, a couple of hours had gone by, and Bucky was tired and in pain but otherwise steady enough. Steve kissed him goodbye and headed out to face the media frenzy Bucky's first mission had kicked off.

"Tell 'em I've got internal injuries and eight broken bones," Bucky suggested. It was technically true. "Maybe I can get a candlelight vigil out of this."

"Oh, you're gonna get lit up one way or another," Steve muttered. "I'm dealing with the reporters. You get intensive PR training with all of this as your object lesson."

Bucky winced and reconsidered asking for morphine.

But no sooner had Steve cleared the room than Clint was leaning in the doorway. He'd managed to pick up an impressive bruise on his forehead somehow, but looked otherwise unharmed. The sight of him sent up a cool rush of relief in Bucky's chest. He wasn't alone among strangers after all; Steve might have to leave, but his team was still here.

"Come on," Clint said, casually, as if this wasn't a rescue at all, "jet's leaving if you want to get home before somebody figures out what room you're in and tries to break in and get pictures."

Bucky was on his feet before Clint finished speaking. He would have walked right out in the hospital gown if Clint hadn't offered him a pair of soft scrub pants and a t-shirt.

He was mostly healed by the time they got back to New York. He walked without limping from the Quinjet to the elevator; it hurt, but in a way he could ignore, a dull healing throb that only sharpened if he breathed too deeply, and then only a little warning twinge.

When he got back into his and Steve's apartment, he could tell the secret cleaners had come by, less secretly than usual. There were some extra blankets folded on the back of the couch, and balanced on top of those was a shiny new phone that looked just like the one he'd had in one of his many pockets when Tony landed on him. It had given him a deep black bruise and a few interesting little lacerations, and between the EMP and the impact it was entirely nonfunctional.

This one lit up with dozens of messages as soon as he unlocked it, and he smiled a little at the cascade of concern from his team, from Woj, from Kitty, from Padfield and Fr. Roche.

There was even a text from Steve. _Are you home yet? I'll be heading back soon._

Bucky lay down on the couch and raised the phone to take a picture of himself. He didn't cover himself with a blanket, not wanting to look too much like he had after his last trip to the infirmary, but he didn't try too hard to look fully recovered, just smiling a little. _Safe and sound._
The dots indicating that Steve was typing appeared and disappeared twice before a message finally came through, but it was only, *Good. See you in an hour or so.*

Bucky shook his head fondly, picturing Steve on the Quinjet, tired of carefully choosing his words for reporters and unable to turn off the instinct. Bucky sent him back a thumbs up emoji and then scrolled through his other messages, answering them as succinctly and reassuringly as he could, which got him into a brief war of incoherent emoji messages with Duncan.

He closed his eyes just for a minute, waiting for the next reply to turn up. The next thing he was aware of was the sound of the elevator doors opening and Steve stepping out. He didn't open his eyes right away; Steve was walking softly and hadn't immediately called out to him. If he wanted to wake Bucky up, there was no need to step on his line.

Bucky caught the very soft sound of Steve setting the shield down in the entry area, and then a few more quiet footfalls, bringing Steve just to the edge of the living room area, still several meters from where Bucky lay.

"Sergeant." Steve's voice was cold and sharp, and Bucky jerked up on reflex, already flushing with the anger and shame of Steve putting him pointedly in his place in front of the others. He froze there on the couch, staring, his breath coming fast from more than just the bolt of pain that unwary movement had sent through his body.

Steve had already shed his red-white-and-blue uniform. He was in black fatigue pants and a black t-shirt now, plain black boots on his feet. Dangling casually from his right hand was the black bar of a stun baton.

Bucky dragged his gaze up to Steve's face, half needing to reassure himself that it *was* Steve standing there.

Steve--Captain Rogers, more like--looked back at him, face set in grim lines. That was Steve before a mission he didn't like--a mission he wasn't going to let Bucky argue with him about anymore. *Sergeant.*

"I'm not going to chase you," Steve said, in that same hard tone. He snapped the stun baton to full extension and used it to point to the spot on the floor in front of him. "Come here. Kneel."

Bucky stared, his heart still racing. He waited for some cold calm to take over for him, but there was nothing. Steve couldn't scare him in *that* way, apparently, which just went to show how wrong his subconscious was about what was truly dangerous. Bucky stood up, unable to tear his gaze off of Steve. He was acutely aware of his bare feet, the thinness of the scrub pants and t-shirt.

He felt every one of his healing injuries as he walked toward Steve, step by deliberate step. Steve had been with him in the hospital. Steve had seen all the scans. Steve knew every place he was already hurting, every point of vulnerability.

He remembered, as he crossed the distance between them, the day of the helicarriers. He and Steve had been a little further apart than this; he had been braced for battle, only his mission directives in mind. Steve, in his gaudy uniform, carrying his shield, had stopped and looked at him almost pleadingly and said, *Don't make me do this.*

There was no wavering in Steve's gaze now. He had set the shield down out of sight.

Bucky folded himself down to kneel where Steve pointed, his breathing already a painful pressure against his healing ribs, his vision bright and sharp with the rush of adrenaline.
Steve held out something with his left hand: the off-switch for his arm. Bucky took it, keeping his gaze steady on Steve's. He attached it to his arm and flicked it on, anticipation curling sick and hot in his belly as his arm went dead.

"Tell JARVIS that you want this," Steve directed.

Bucky licked his lips. He hadn't spoken a word since Steve had walked in, and he didn't think Steve would allow him many once they started. But Steve wasn't asking for permission or reassurance now. Not directly.

Bucky didn't look away as he said, "JARVIS, Steve is going to hurt me now. It's okay. I want him to."

"Understood," JARVIS replied. "Privacy mode is engaged."

Bucky closed his eyes.

Steve let him draw in half a breath before the stun baton hit him, a hard blow angling across his chest that knocked him back onto his ass. He fell awkwardly to the left under the weight of his disabled arm before he realized that the baton hadn't even been powered up. Bucky's eyes flashed open just in time to catch Steve's boot in his chest. His right arm came up on reflex, going for the inside of Steve's thigh, and Steve stomped down on his ribs at the same time the stun baton connected with the tender inside of Bucky's elbow and a blaze of electric pain raced up his arm.

He tried to scream and it came out hoarse and strangled with the strain on his ribs, his breath mostly knocked from him. Steve didn't waste time, jamming the stun baton into his armpit like a cattle prod, making him jerk and scream and leaving his right arm twitching and nearly as useless as the left.

Bucky was shaking his head helplessly, trying to squirm out from under the boot on his chest, but it only earned him another flurry of blows, some powered, some not. They rained down on his flanks and the insides of his thighs, whatever he exposed while trying to protect something else.

He was breathing in something close to sobs, the pain and the sudden viciousness of it emptying his mind of all else. He couldn't so much as raise his arm to shield his face, could only squeeze his eyes shut and look away.

A hand hooked into his pants and he let out a high scream, abruptly certain of where the stun baton would fall next, forcing its way in where it shouldn't be. He couldn't take it, and he tried to beg, tried to protest or bargain, but his twitching fingers couldn't shape the simplest signal and his tongue was thick and useless in his mouth. He looked from side to side as rapidly as he could, but no one translated the signal.

His pants were torn away, and even his efforts to curl up to protect himself were useless. The stun baton jammed in at the top of his thigh and stayed there for a solid second of blinding fire coursing through his body and brain.

He screamed through it, and screamed again at the next contact, a hand gripping his cock. He shook his head, trying again to beg, but he couldn't make a sound except hoarse, wordless cries.

There was a pressure against his chest—the stun baton, inert but holding him down like a seatbelt while that relentless hand stroked his cock. Somebody spat on him a couple of times, making the slide of that hand wetter, and he realized dimly that he was getting hard.

"Feel that?"
The hand on his cock didn't stop, and he did feel it—the strange and familiar surge of pleasure in the midst of the dizzying, mind-erasing pain. His cock was stiff now in that fierce grip, his balls getting tight, his whole body awake and alive with anticipation threaded through the pain.

There was a dangerous whine beside his ear, and he could feel the crackle of potential an inch away. The hand on his cock tightened. "Answer me. Do you feel that, soldier?"

His attempt to speak was only a helpless whine, but he nodded frantically and pushed his hips up, trying to comply, begging for more.

The stun baton clicked off, coming to rest against his throat. It didn't quite cut off his air, and the hand on his cock started moving again, stroking him mercilessly. He was fully hard now, aching with it in a thoroughly different way from the slow-fading pain everywhere else.

He gasped when the stun baton was lifted from his throat, his eyelids fluttering almost open before he squeezed them shut again. Better not to see. Better not to know what was coming.

The stun baton slapped against the back of his thigh as someone's knuckles pressed in against his balls, and he whined, thrusting up helplessly again. They would know how close he was. If they meant to punish him by not letting him finish, it would be now, they would take it from him if he couldn't get there quickly enough, and he was almost, almost there, but not quite.

"Look at me."

His eyes flashed open before he understood the words, and for an instant the face above him was just a face, clenched jaw and grimly furrowed brow and intent blue eyes.

Steve.

Bucky gasped in a different way, and Steve's hand moved; Bucky arched at the shove of the stun baton's handle against his ass, a whine escaping him.

"That what you need to get there?" Steve asked, his voice as hard as his hand, still relentlessly jerking his cock. "You need me to fuck you raw with this thing? Light you up from the inside?"

He would do it. There was no question. He would do anything; he had already done more than Rumlow had needed to, because Steve wouldn't risk this failing. And still his hand was moving on Bucky's cock, and still he kept up the hard-edged pressure of the stun baton, not painful yet and almost feeling good, for all the hideous threat behind it.

"Please," Bucky gasped, squeezing his eyes shut, hurting and helpless, gone beyond fear into the place where he knew there was no use being afraid, because there was no escape from this. And wanting despite all that, wanting more, wanting to get there, to feel what he could only feel when he was here. "Just--just say the word."

Steve spit on him again, wetting the slide of his hand, dragging it out while Bucky tried not to struggle, tried not to make Steve make it hurt more. The sound of Steve's hand on him was the normal kind of filthy; it was only everything else that was the sick kind.

"Please," Bucky repeated, the pleasure climbing and a new fear creeping in--if it didn't work, if something went wrong, if Steve had to work harder to make him... "Oh fuck, Steve, please, please, say it."

Steve's thumb swirled over the head of his cock, a little move that Bucky knew down to his bones, sending another thrill of horror and pleasure through him now. Steve's other hand shoved the stun.
baton harder against his dry, closed hole, sending a bolt of pain through him even without electricity.

"Go ahead, soldier."

Bucky let out an animal sound, a groan rising into a cry as it happened. He came, sheer animal pleasure hitting that peak and wiping out all thought, all other feeling. His cock jerked in Steve's grip, his tight balls squeezing as he emptied himself in wracking spasms that went on and on and on.

He didn't realize it was over until he heard a clatter, off to his left, and opened his eyes to see the stun baton skidding across the floor. The next second the off-switch was removed from his left arm, and Steve's forehead came to rest against his, putting Steve's face too close for him to really see. Steve's hand cradled his cheek, wiping away wetness where it leaked from Bucky's eye.

"Okay?" Steve whispered. "Was that--did that work, Buck?"

Bucky let out a hoarse little sound that could have been a laugh, and he nodded and closed his eyes. Mission complete. Which meant it was after-action Steve, now, not Captain Rogers.

"Okay." Steve kissed his cheeks, his forehead. "Okay. Then no more hurting for a while, right?"

Bucky nodded.

"Did I break anything?" Steve's other hand skimmed over his right arm, squeezing his wrist, his hand. Bucky obediently flexed his fingers, and wiggled his toes while he was at it.

"Just my losing streak," Bucky muttered, and Steve let out a startled little laugh. Bucky tilted his head automatically, going for the sweet smiling kiss that sound deserved.

Steve gave it to him, a series of quick little kisses, sounding sloppy and wet though neither of them even used tongue. Finally Steve pulled back to say, "I'm gonna take you to bed now, and you're gonna let me."

"Yes, sir, Cap," Bucky muttered, half-opening his eyes and smirking as he did, making it the opposite of Steve's cold Sergeant.

Steve shook his head, but he kissed Bucky one more time before he maneuvered Bucky into his arms and picked him up. Bucky leaned his face against Steve's shoulder, laughing a little again as he was hoisted into the air.

"Fuck," he whispered. "Fuck, Stevie, it worked. You did it."

"Anything for you, Buck." Steve's body shook with something that could have been a submerged laugh or just exhaustion, but his grip was firm. "Anything."

Bucky knew he was going to feel worse later about how far he'd pushed that promise, but for now he just hid his smile and let Steve take him to bed.
Bucky didn’t quite fall asleep, but he was nowhere for a little while, drifting on the sweet aftermath of pleasure and Steve's closeness. He let Steve peel the t-shirt off him, a lot more gently than he'd removed Bucky's pants, and then a warm washcloth ran gently over his chest, cleaning away every trace of come.

Something softer touched his chest, and Bucky opened his eyes to see Steve's lips pressed right over his heart.

He smiled. "Sap."

Steve snorted and looked up, and he smiled back so wide and bright that Bucky's breath caught with the shock of it. It was like stepping into the sun when he’d been expecting the middle of the night; for a second he felt dizzy, like the ground beneath his feet had shifted. But Bucky felt good, and they'd done what he'd been trying so long to do, so why shouldn't Steve be smiling at him?

Steve leaned further over him and kissed him properly, soft and lingering. Then he sat up a little more, giving Bucky a chance to get his bearings. Steve was perched on the edge of the bed at Bucky's side, a whole tray of supplies set out on the bedside table.

He remembered the way Steve's ma used to line things up at Steve's bedside when he got sick, and let out a little laugh. "I got some bruises, Steve, not the flu."

Steve smiled but shook his head. "If I mess this part up, it can feel like the flu, or worse. I gotta take proper care of you, after, make sure you know it's all over and we're good now. And--and if it's not, you gotta tell me that, so we can make it better."

Bucky frowned. "Since when does getting beat on make you feel like you’ve got the flu?"

Even when he was human, he didn't remember anything like that. After battle he'd felt like shit sometimes in a way that went deeper than any injuries he sustained, but that was way beyond what they’d done tonight. Steve hadn't even drawn blood, and Bucky had finally gotten off, and now he was thinking about fucking battlefields. He rubbed his forehead, trying to push away the thought, to get back to that sweet floating feeling.

"I read some books," Steve said, sorting through stuff on the night stand. "JARVIS had some suggestions. It's different when it's like this--it's not just like getting beaten up, when it's sex and it's something you asked for from somebody you love. You can wind up feeling pretty bad after."

He offered Bucky a bottle of water, and Bucky realized he hadn't had anything to drink since the dinky plastic cups of water back at the hospital. He turned to lie on his side and took the bottle from Steve, tipping his head back as he chugged it.

Steve kept talking. "I remembered you said--after the first time, you--you felt like you had a fever, you felt like you wanted to run away. Turns out that's something that happens to people when they do stuff like this. Not always, but sometimes. It helps if the person who does it to 'em takes good care of them after."

Bucky felt queasy, and not just from the stomach full of water. He lowered the bottle and handed it to Steve, who took it and offered him an energy bar instead. Bucky shook his head, feeling too
unsettled to put anything else in his stomach, though at the same time he realized he hadn't eaten anything since before the mission and he ought to be starving. He bunched up the pillow against his shoulder and put his head down, curling in on himself a little.

"I, uh..." Bucky shook his head, letting his eyes close, and heard and felt Steve scooting closer. Bucky twisted toward him to hide his face against Steve's thigh. "I forgot I said that to you."

He'd yelled it, really, during that appointment with Padfield that Steve had stayed for. He'd forgotten everything about what he'd said when he got mad except that he'd hurt Steve.

"I didn't," Steve said simply, running a hand over Bucky's velvet-short hair. "That's why you got me, pal, to make this a little easier on you. That's all I want, is just to make sure you get what you need without having to hurt yourself too much for it, you know? And I mean physically, but... the rest of it, too. You shouldn't feel bad about needing what you need. People need all kinds of weird stuff. Some people can't get off without stuff like this, some people need... special clothes, or toys, or all kinds of things. It's not bad. It's not even all that weird."

"I dunno," Bucky said, after mentally ranking that as a high-middling effort among all the horribly earnest things Steve had ever said to him. "You seem like you got the special clothes and the toys covered."

Steve huffed, but Bucky felt the little motions of him unlacing the boots, followed by the muffled thumps of him kicking them off.

"Figured I should dress the part, at least this first time. I didn't want to mess it up for you again by not being willing to go far enough, or not... selling it, I guess."

Steve moved around beside him, getting out of the black shirt and fatigue pants. Bucky opened his eyes when Steve settled beside him again, wearing nothing but the clean pair of underwear he'd had in his go-bag for post-mission.

"You were plenty convincing," Bucky assured him, laying a hand on Steve's bare leg. He was definitely just Steve now, every inch safe to touch.

"Good," Steve said. "And... is this convincing, too? Are we back to just us, now?"

Bucky looked up at him, reading the real question in the tense set of his face. "Am I still scared of you, you mean?"

Steve lips quirked in a sad half-smile. "Yeah, that's what I need to know."

Bucky shook his head. "I told you. I'm only scared of what I can make you do. I know you won't hurt me when I'm not asking for it."

Steve's eyes closed softly, and he blew out a breath. "Okay. Good."

Then he grabbed the energy bar again and said, "I am gonna cram this down your throat if you don't eat, though. Your blood sugar's gotta be fucked and after-action dinner isn't for another couple hours."

Bucky sighed but grabbed the energy bar. His stomach was feeling a little more settled now. As soon as Bucky took the thing Steve moved around to get all the way on the bed, curling himself around Bucky and propping him up enough to eat comfortably.

"That in your book too?" Bucky didn't really object to having Steve to lean back against, Steve's
arms around him, but it wasn't exactly standard procedure for the flu.

"Mm-hm, skin contact releases endorphins," Steve said, rubbing his chin against Bucky's shoulder like he could squeeze a few more endorphins out of Bucky right there. "Very important."

"I'm gonna have to read this book," Bucky said, closing his eyes and rubbing back against Steve a little.

He was bruised up and warm and still feeling good and loose from coming, and this could all be something normal, almost. Plenty of times he and Steve had taken turns getting each other off; plenty of times there was a little wait between the one who went first and the one who went second.

If he could get Steve going now, it would almost be like he hadn't asked Steve to do something that disgusted him, like it wasn't weird or bad and nobody had to read a book or lay in supplies for it. They could just act like it was all right, like all of this was all right.

Steve rubbed against him, letting Bucky feel his cock behind the soft layer of his underwear. "That's really not what I was going for, Buck, I swear."

He didn't sound like he wasn't willing to go there, though.

"I know, pal, you're not real subtle when you've got a plan. But..."

Bucky squirmed, and Steve squirmed, and Steve's half-hard cock snuggled up against the crack of Bucky's ass, warm and heavy through the softness of Steve's underwear.

"Might as well while we're here, right?"

Steve made a dubious noise, though his hips rocked enough to give the lie to that. "As long as it's just because you want to, Buck, okay? I don't need it to be fair or anything like that."

"Pretty sure we had the argument about nobody earning their keep from anybody else in 1939," Bucky muttered, reaching back to tug at Steve's shorts. It was an awkward angle, but he wasn't getting them off without convincing Steve to take them off anyway.

"That was different." Steve swatted Bucky's hand away only to tug his underwear down, squirming around as he kicked it off. When he settled again he curled one arm around Bucky's hips and snuggled his cock right up against the crack of Bucky's ass.

Bucky let him get comfy and then twisted around to face him, stopping any protest about it with a kiss. The move brought his left hand into position to curl around Steve's cock, which also stopped Steve saying any actual words.

Steve made a pleasantly gut-punched noise against Bucky's mouth, and Bucky kept at it, stroking him and kissing him, tangling their legs together and tugging at Steve's hair a little with his free hand. He let himself get lost in feeling normal, feeling good, forgetting everything else. It could have been 1943 by the time Steve sighed his name and came between them, thrusting helplessly into Bucky's grip.

After, they lay together, a little sticky and sweaty and breathless. It occurred to Bucky that he ought to find that cloth Steve had used, clean Steve up, and the rest of the string of logic followed in a wordless rush.

"Hey." Bucky tugged gently on Steve's hair. "Did your book say anything about how I should take care of you?"
Steve opened his eyes, a little wrinkle between his brows. "Hm? You don't have to--"

Bucky shook his head and softened his hold. "Stevie, come on. I'm the one who asked you to do something you don't like so I could get off on it. I know you. I know it had to be hard for you."

He searched Steve's eyes for the guilt he remembered feeling for hurting himself, the guilt he knew had to be gnawing at Steve for hurting someone he loved, someone who wasn't fighting back.

Steve managed to just look sleepy, though, smiling at him. "I'm okay, Buck. If you're happy, I'm happy."

Anything for you, Steve had said. Bucky made himself smile despite the unease twisting inside him at Steve's lie. This wouldn't work--not for long--if Steve kept pretending it didn't bother him to do this. Bucky didn't dare let him get away with it if he kept it up.

But for now, right now, with the bruises still throbbing on Bucky's thighs, his arm still sore from the burns at the joints... He could let it go right now. He could be happy, so Steve could be happy, for tonight.

"I'm happy," Bucky promised him, making himself go limp. "Long as you're happy."

"That's us," Steve said, closing his eyes and tugging Bucky closer. "Perpetual happiness machine here."

Bucky snorted against Steve's shoulder, but he let himself rest there, just for a while.

The after-action dinner turned out to be a firm Avengers tradition. Once the immediate aftermath was over, the team would gather and eat together. It wasn't debriefing, wasn't really a celebration.

"It's sort of traditional that we're all still exhausted when we eat together," Steve explained as they plodded down the stairs to the common floor. "The first time was after the Chitauri invasion--we were all still in uniform, still filthy. I think I might still have been bleeding, actually. But we found this place somehow still open and selling shawarma, and we all just sat down and ate until we couldn't eat anymore. We barely knew each other, Clint had just come out of being brainwashed, Tony had just about died, but we all ate together and after that... we were a team, somehow. It's not exactly the same now, but it feels strange anytime we don't do it after an action--especially if somebody's been hurt."

Steve glanced at Bucky's midsection, reminding him that before Steve beat the hell out of him, he'd also gotten a little squashed by Tony falling on him wearing a few hundred pounds of dead armor.

"Plus it was your first time out with the team, so," Steve pushed through the door to the common floor, leading Bucky out as he added, "There's probably gonna be cake."

They weren't quite the last to arrive. Sam and Natasha were on a couch across from Tony, who was flanked by Bruce and a black man Bucky hadn't met before. His posture, even sitting on a couch beside Tony and Bruce both slumping in evident exhaustion, screamed military, and Bucky felt a strange sense of homecoming at the same time his own shoulders and spine straightened up.

He was instantly aware of being barefooted, and regretted letting Steve convince him that pajama pants and a hoodie were suitable attire, even though Natasha was wearing the exact same thing and Sam and Tony's jeans and t-shirts weren't much more presentable.

"Oh, hey, Rhodey's here," Steve said, reaching back to catch Bucky's hand and draw him closer to
the cozy little arrangement of chairs. "He usually shows up if Tony gets hurt. Rhod..."
Steve had suggested, accompanied by cake, something layered and densely chocolatey and intricately decorated. It made Bucky think a little wistfully of the last cake he'd had at MEDCOM, a slab of plain yellow cake with white frosting and *Congratulations* written on top.

He wound up abandoning his slice halfway through, nudging it close enough to Steve that he picked it up and ate it without seeming to notice where it came from. He was talking to Sam, who was sprawled in an armchair picking at his own slice of cake, and Bruce, who had a second piece balanced on his knee where he sat on the floor.

Tony, who had shared his slice of cake with Pepper, was draped across a couch with his head in Pepper's lap. Rhodes ended up sharing the couch Steve and Bucky were on, and when the first flurry of cake-consumption died down Steve agreed to keep time so Bucky could do shots fast enough to be a little tipsy. It felt faintly scandalous, in Rhodes' senior-officer presence, but Rhodes wasn't actually his CO and Bucky had certainly earned a drink.

He kept it up until he found himself leaning toward Rhodes and saying quietly, "I never would've been any kind of officer, but I would've stayed, if they let me. M'glad the Air Force kept you."

Rhodes took a sip of his drink and studied Bucky thoughtfully before nodding. "Sergeant's life, on base, that's not such a bad gig, huh? Regular hours, regular--regs, not like this place."

Bucky glanced over at Steve, assuring himself that he was safely distracted talking to Sam. Steve looked back at him and passed the bottle, and Bucky took a quick shot and handed it back. Turning his attention to Rhodes again, Bucky said carefully, "It's not--this is not--a bad gig. Either. Better than my last one, for sure."

Bucky grinned a little too wide, trying to show that it was okay to joke about who he used to work for.

Rhodes smiled back at him but it looked kind of sad around the eyes.

"No, no, definitely better," Bucky insisted, because he couldn't let Rhodes think he wasn't glad to be here. "Maybe--maybe sometimes a little bit the same? But better. Steve's better than--than anybody else. Steve loves me. And I love him, so that's--that's not--" Bucky shook his head, pushing away a word that had no place here. "It's good. It's good here. It is."

"Yeah, man, I know, I get you," Rhodes said gently, putting one firm hand on Bucky's shoulder. "Sometimes it's just easier to be a soldier than a hero, though, huh? All orderly and shit, things make sense. You don't join the Avengers for things to make sense."

Bucky snickered at that, then started laughing harder, shaking his head, dizzy but anchored by Rhodes' hand on his shoulder.

"No," he gasped. "No, that's--that's definitely not why."

When had following Steve ever made anything *simpler* in his life? But he wasn't ever going to stop, either, and the vast absurdity of it and the funny floating feeling in his head couldn't be put into words. It escaped in laughter instead, the kind that wouldn't let go of your lungs.

Tears came to his eyes, but he couldn't stop laughing, and then Steve was there, his grip a whole different kind of anchor from Rhodes' hand. "Come on, Buck, we oughta get to bed."

Bucky shivered, thinking of Steve all in black, his unwavering gaze. "Not yet," he mumbled, his laughter draining away. "Not--"
"You need some rest, that's all," Steve said quietly, loosening his grip but staying close. That was his Steve, his Steve who loved him and wouldn't--wouldn't ever...

"Come on, come to bed." Steve leaned away, and Bucky realized that he was already on his feet, a little way away from the couch, with Steve's arm around his shoulders. Rhodes was pretending not to watch, but he looked up when Bucky waved. He couldn't salute--he wasn't a soldier anymore, and Rhodes wasn't in uniform anyway--but he gave the most serious nod he could, with Steve curled half around him.

Rhodes nodded back and it felt like dismissal, like being released. So then there was nothing at all to hold him steady except Steve, and Bucky let Steve have him. He swayed into Steve's grip and followed Steve to the elevator to ride it back home.

"I do," Bucky said quietly against Steve's shoulder. He wasn't properly drunk, just tired and loose, so it was easy to say what he knew was important. "I do love you. So much, Steve."

Steve's arm around him tightened, and Steve's head ducked down close to his. "Lucky thing. It'd be pretty awkward for me to love you as much as I do if you didn't give a damn."

Bucky nodded against his shoulder. If he didn't love Steve, if he didn't want this... that didn't bear thinking about it, and he could hardly imagine it anyway. Loving Steve, wanting him, was right at the core of everything he knew about how to be himself, how to be any kind of person at all.

Maybe he hadn't loved Steve, back before MEDCOM, before he was reintegrated; he sure as hell hadn't before the helicarriers, when he was nothing but a weapon. But he had remembered. He had learned to feel it again, and Steve had been waiting patiently for him. Steve would always wait for him.

Steve guided him to bed, and Steve's foresight in choosing clothes for dinner meant that he didn't have boots on to take off. Bucky just wiggled out of his pants and sweatshirt, shoving them to the ground in the time it took Steve to climb in the other side of the bed. He tucked his face into his pillow and was asleep before Steve could look into his eyes.

Bucky was back at MEDCOM, but nothing was right. His team was gone, or changed. He was escorted everywhere by people who waved signs and shouted words he couldn't understand, even though they were crowding all around him. He went to Exley's office, not sure if it would be Exley or Rhodes behind the desk, or if they had been somehow the same person all along, but when he stepped inside it was Banner waiting for him.

He was wearing a uniform, but it was an American one with Russian insignia, and it fit him all wrong. He was too quiet, kind and patient but not taking command at all, until suddenly he noticed Bucky was wearing only his underwear. Then the Hulk burst forth, shredding his strange uniform, sending buttons and medals flying as he roared in rage.

Bucky stood still for as long as he could force himself to, but then he thought of how much it would hurt if the Hulk decided to punish him. He turned and ran--or tried to, but he couldn't move faster than a slow walk, with his shouting escort still tight around him. He struggled back toward the barracks, hoping he could find Andrews and Duncan, or at least his headphones, but he was in the PX and strangers with babies in their arms kept getting in his way when he tried to leave. Just on the edge of his hearing a voice was speaking in Russian, and his spine was crawling with terror of what it might say next.

His escort went suddenly, horribly silent just when he needed them to be blocking out that dangerous
voice. Bucky tried to see around them, to see where the voice was coming from, and then his eyes opened and the person speaking to him was Steve.

Bucky flinched, clapping his hands over his ears without thinking--not Steve, it couldn't be Steve saying the trigger words. Anyone but him.

Steve jerked back, his expression crumpling into anxious hurt, and Bucky realized he was awake now. It had been a dream.

He slid his hands in to cover his face, rubbing at his eyes as he said, "Did I make a sound?"

"No," Steve said. "You were quiet, and still, just... shaking a little. I could tell."

Bucky lowered his hands to look at Steve. "Did it look like the off-switch?"

Steve shook his head, smiling a little sadly. "No, Buck. It just looked like you having a bad dream real quietly. I've seen you do it a hundred times."

Bucky scooted away, sitting up and rubbing a hand over his hair. The dream was already fading into incoherent fragments, the fear of it evaporating in the morning light. All he was left with was that sense of searching for something, of a safe, familiar place turned strange and threatening.

He remembered what he'd been saying to Rhodes, about how he would have liked to stay if they'd let him, about that twinge of homesickness he felt sometimes for MEDCOM. But his home was here now, with Steve, and Steve wouldn't change on him. Steve was himself, all the way down.

He pushed his circling thoughts away, shook his head and looked over at Steve. "Sorry. It was a weird one. It's sort of... hanging on."

"I know the feeling," Steve assured him, sitting up as well. "Come on, let's go eat. You're gonna have a busy day, PR's got you for hours."

Bucky groaned, remembering the important part of yesterday, the mission that he'd flung himself right into the middle of. He followed Steve out to the kitchen, leaving the last shreds of the dream behind.
By the time he went into his session with PR, he was feeling pretty good, with a solid meal inside him and the memory of Steve's goodbye hug. He'd checked himself over in the shower and found that only a few marks remained from the day before, and a little cautious stretching revealed that his soreness was nearly gone as well.

"All right," he said with a wry smile, sitting down at the conference table. There were more people present than usual, but all of them were at least a little familiar from previous sessions. "Let me have it."

Teresa took point. "Obviously this is not ideal, but the good news is that no one was hurt worse than you were as a result of your actions, which means that over time the story is going to have absolutely no legs. Captain Rogers and Mr. Stark have already both done a certain amount of damage control and as soon as you approve it, the Avengers will be releasing a statement on your behalf which should close the matter as far as any credible source is concerned."

Bucky narrowed his eyes. "There a lot of incredible sources yapping about it?"

"Tabloids gonna tabloid," a young woman further down the table piped up. Bucky thought her name was Isla, or Izzy, something like that. "To say nothing of the speed of a fake news story on Facebook."

Bucky's eyes narrowed, trying to picture which one Facebook was, but he shook it off after a second. That wasn't the relevant detail. "What are people saying I did?"

Teresa sighed. "There are about as many versions of it as there are people saying it, but the core of the most popular false story is that you exerted some form of mind control over Captain Rogers to cause him to hold still while you attacked him."

Bucky was actually too stunned to be angry for a few seconds. "They think I--they think I did that to Steve?"

Teresa raised her hands placatingly. "No one really thinks that, it's just--it makes a sensational story, and since you've barely been seen since you came to New York, and haven't spoken publicly at all, people can make things up. There's a vacuum, people try to fill it. In the first week or so there were a dozen of these kinds of things going around, but..."

Bucky looked down at his fingers, flexing each one in turn. He was in control, not in a dream, not paralyzed. "But that's what they settled on. Mind control. Me controlling Steve."

Both his hands closed into fists, and he struggled to keep his breathing even. How could he have even joked about that last night? Called Steve a weapon that he aimed? He felt sick at the thought of doing it, and the thought of someone doing that to Steve...

"How do I stop it," Bucky asked, or demanded. His voice came out harsh and sharp, like his metal fingers digging furrows in concrete.
There was a little pause. Bucky forced himself to look up; Teresa was looking at Nathan, and after a second Nathan looked at Bucky, grimacing apologetically.

"You can't, not entirely," Nathan said. "You can't prove a negative, and chasing that bait wouldn't do any good. We need to release your statement about this incident, for today. But if you want to work on normalizing your image... we could set up an interview, maybe. Radio? There's a woman with a radio show here in New York who was always very sympathetic to your side while you were in custody and during your trial. She's let us know that she'll accommodate you in whatever way necessary if you'll talk to her on the air."

Bucky was nodding even before Nathan finished speaking, not letting himself think about what it would mean, his words being heard by people all over the city--all over the world, probably, once the internet got going. He had to stop this. He couldn't let people think that he--that Steve--

"Okay. Yeah. When?"

"We'll have to talk to her about topics, questions that are okay or off-limits, and then we'll do some practice with you. But we should be able to schedule it within the week."

Bucky nodded. "Okay. How do I get ready for that?"

There was another little shuffling moment, everyone at the table looking to everyone else.

"We have a list of likely questions, and we can work on answers you're comfortable with for those," Teresa finally said. "First, though, we just need to get your press release about yesterday finalized."

After PR he checked his phone and found a message from Steve. Sorry, stuck in strategic analysis all day. See you for dinner?

The corner of Bucky's mouth tucked up. Yes, dear.

The strategic analysis must not have been all that intense, because Steve's string of tongue-stuck-out emoji came through almost immediately.

Reminded, Bucky switched over to his group text with Andrews and Duncan and sent a bunch of eggplants, rockets, and party horns intermingled randomly.

They sent back more party horns and grinning, blushing, and sweating faces. When Bucky sent a little camera he got nothing back for long enough that he took a selfie, lips pursed and hand extended like he was blowing a kiss.

That got him a selfie of Andrews glaring--out of uniform, in civilian digs somewhere--and one of Duncan looking unimpressed. He was in uniform, and the little glimpse of a familiar base building over his shoulder made Bucky's heart squeeze strangely.

He went and got some PT in before lunch, and sent a picture of his pasta to Steve, which got him a picture of three pre-made sandwiches and a bag of chips in return.

After lunch he had a couple of hours to review possible interview questions on his own before the PR people made him practice answering them out loud tomorrow. He stayed at the kitchen table to go over them, faintly hopeful that Steve might escape his strategy session early and interrupt him.

There were a lot of questions about his relationship with Steve, which he'd already had some practice with in his PR training so far--but there were also a lot of questions about his time at MEDCOM, his
court martial, and what the verdict meant.

Because people wanted to know what kind of crazy he was, or had been, and whether they could be sure he wouldn't be that again. Bucky felt himself slipping into something like a trigger state, feeling far away from his own body, his eyes scanning over the questions again and again. PR wouldn't know the true answers to some of these questions; outside of MEDCOM, the team who examined him during his court martial, and the Avengers, no one knew about the trigger words--not just how to use them, but that they existed. That one was still active.

That there was no knowing if there were more, just waiting for him to be turned into a weapon again.

Dozens of people knew as much as he did about his triggers. But somewhere out there, there could be someone who knew more. And if they listened to this interview, they would know...

"Sergeant Barnes?"

Bucky startled--not awake, but out of the dream, or--whatever that had been. He looked up at the ceiling, feeling relieved to be set free of it, and hoping that the reprieve would last. "JARVIS? Did you--was I--"

"You appeared considerably distracted, Sergeant," JARVIS said. "Dr. Padfield has arrived for your appointment."

Of course. He had an appointment today. Padfield could help him make sense of things, or at least keep him from falling inside his own head. He nodded, and he'd barely finished the motion before the elevator doors were sliding open; JARVIS hadn't actually asked his permission to let Padfield in this time, and Bucky was glad not to have to wait.

"Hey, Doc," Bucky called out, gathering the pages of questions back into their folder. "You weren't stuck in there long, were you?"

Padfield shook his head, coming over to the kitchen table to meet Bucky. Despite an annoying shakiness in his right hand, Bucky managed to get the papers all put away before Padfield reached him, so there was nothing to slow them down from heading back to the library like normal. Padfield didn't say anything until they were both in their usual chairs, and then he looked Bucky over like he was trying to spot...

Bucky considered how many different things Padfield might be able to see evidence of, if he looked closely enough--injuries from Tony falling on him? Injuries from Steve, afterward? What PR had said this morning and what Bucky was going to have to do next? Bucky realized after a moment that he was just sitting there, frozen with his mouth open. He met Padfield's eyes, hoping to be set free again.

Padfield was watching him with a little smile, eyebrows raised. "Don't know where to start?"

Bucky shook his head, though Padfield was the furthest thing from wrong. "Yesterday was... yeah, a lot of things happened yesterday."

"You want to tell me the best thing first, or the worst thing?"

That would require him to know which thing was best and which was worst--coming, after all this time, had to be best, but worst...

That first sight of Steve, all dressed in black with the stun baton in his hand, flashed across Bucky's mind. But that couldn't be the worst thing. He hadn't really been in any danger, and that had been the
plan. He'd gotten what he wanted.

"Best, I guess," Bucky said, grinning down at his hands and then at Padfield. At least he knew what that was. After a second of focusing on it, the feeling of it came back to him, the warm good feeling after, when he was in bed with Steve. "Steve, uh--we--I got there. Got off. After the mission, when Steve came home, he--he got me there."

Padfield smiled back. "Hey, that's great, that was a big goal for you. Had you guys talked about it beforehand, what you were going to do?"

Bucky nodded. "I told him what to do, to make it work, and I told him to surprise me, not to tell me when."

Padfield's expression tensed slightly, going careful and closed off.

Bucky quickly shook his head. "He--it was okay, he gave me the chance to say no and everything, he did everything the right way. He told me he read books and stuff, so he knew how to make it good after and everything, took real good care of me. It was good."

Padfield nodded slowly. "It seems like there's a 'but' here somewhere."

Bucky blew out a breath, shrugging stiffly and looking away, but Padfield just waited quietly for him. He tried to think of something to say that would satisfy Padfield, something that he could bear to spit out, but the words circling around in his head narrowed down to just one thing and before long he had to say it. "I know it's not--I know I can't control him and I have to let him try, but I just--Steve said he was fine with it and it didn't bother him, but he's not--he can't be okay with it. I know he can't. I know him."

"Okay," Padfield said slowly. "Well, you're right that you can't control how Steve feels. But you can tell him you don't want to do this again until you're sure that he's really okay, that it's not affecting him in the way you're concerned about."

Bucky shook his head a little at that; something about how simple Padfield made it sound just crackled in his brain like electricity, but he couldn't put words to it.

"Do you have any idea how you can be sure of whether it's having a bad effect on Steve?" Padfield asked, still in that slow, patient tone, like it was simple.

"Talk to him, I know." Bucky ran a hand over his hair, thinking about the pages of questions and answers he'd already reviewed today, all the meetings and trainings. Life had been easier when nobody expected him to fucking talk all the time.

"Yeah," Padfield said. "So why don't we work on ways you could start that conversation."

Padfield left him with an actual written list of things to try saying to Steve, although half the appointment had consisted of Padfield shutting him down every time he tried to tell Padfield he already knew what Steve would say to every one of these openings.

"You have to actually talk to him," Padfield said firmly. "You have to actually listen to what he says when you do, and then you have to act on that. Otherwise you're having a relationship with your own imagination, not with Steve."

Bucky had conceded the point and walked Padfield out to the elevator. He barely had time to work on not expecting anything at all when he heard the doors open again. Steve walked in wearing his
slightly-dressed-up civvies, khaki pants and a blue collared shirt. He gave Bucky a tired but happy smile and made a beeline for him.

They met in the middle of the kitchen, hugging each other hard.

"Sorry," Steve muttered. "Meant to be back sooner. I didn't want you to be on your own so much today."

Bucky huffed out a breath. "Wasn't hardly, I had an entire morning in PR and Padfield just left."

"Yeah, I saw your statement went out," Steve said, squeezing him a little tighter. "Not the kind of not-on-your-own I meant, though. The stuff I read said it was important to be checking in the next day."

Bucky shook his head against Steve's shoulder and, after another second, pushed back from the hug. "I still don't feel like I've got the flu, pal. Honest, I'm fine."

Steve looked at him searchingly, then nodded, and before he could say anything else, Bucky added all in a rush, "I'm not sure about you, though."

Steve stopped short at that, and Bucky winced. That wasn't one of the things on the list of things to say. He wasn't supposed to guess what Steve felt, or thought.

"I mean," Bucky tried. "I just--I'm worried. About you. About whether it was bad for you."

Steve's expression softened, and he smiled a little sheepishly. "It wasn't, Buck. Honestly. I kinda thought it would be, but by the end there I didn't mind it at all, not when it was what you needed."

All the practiced words rattling around Bucky's head abruptly went quiet, and he could only echo, "What I needed."

Steve nodded firmly, leaning in a little closer. "Yeah, pal, I mean--it's still nothing I'd want to do because it's fun for me, but you needed me to do that for you, and I was glad to be the one getting you there."

Bucky touched the paper in his pocket, his lips parted as he searched for the right words, the way out of this as the walls seemed to close in around him. He grasped at the first practiced sentence that came to mind. "You--was anything... not what you expected? Anything you want to tell me or talk about?"

Steve reached out, curling one hand around Bucky's arm. "Hey, it's not for me to--"

"Answer the question," Bucky snapped.

Steve snorted, dropping his hand. "Okay, okay. Took me by surprise when you didn't fight back, I guess--I was expecting to have to hurt you more, to be honest, but you went down so easy I was a little worried I wasn't--"

Steve stopped abruptly, as if Bucky had shouted, but Bucky was pretty sure that the incoherent loudness was only happening inside his head; he could feel his teeth grinding together and knew he hadn't made a sound. He didn't know what sound he would make.

Steve reached out to touch him again, and Bucky slapped his hand away hard. Steve rocked back a step, frowning.
Bucky couldn't quite breathe, or was breathing too much, but his voice sounded level when he said, "You think I should've fought back."

Steve's lips parted, but it was several long seconds before he said carefully, "You didn't do anything wrong, Buck."

"Didn't I," Bucky breathed. "I'm the one who told you what to fucking do, Rogers. I'm the one who-who aimed you. Because I..."

He looked away, unable to speak, unable to do anything but stand his ground in the grip of the memories that were all suddenly jostling at the forefront of his mind.

"Because you needed it," Steve said quietly.

Bucky closed his eyes and screamed right over him, wordless and wild.

But he didn't fight back. He had been allowed to scream, most of the time, but he had never been allowed to fight back.

"Rumlow," Bucky said, half aware that he was standing in the kitchen talking to Steve, half back there in the big communal shower, in the chair, on a table...

"Rumlow, that's what he--I didn't even understand, not for months, not until you--but he thought I needed it. Deserved it. To come one more time before I died. Grisha--the fucking techs--they would--for me, they said, for me, because I needed it."

Bucky was aware, faintly, that he was yelling. He wasn't sure who he was yelling at; he felt like he was impossibly far from anyone who could hear him, and no one could help even if they did hear. It didn't even matter. He couldn't stop. The words pumped out of him like arterial spray.

"Because they made me fucking need it and then they could touch me, hurt me, do anything, and it was what I fucking needed. It was maintenance, so they didn't even have to--to hate me, to want to hurt me, they just did it, and I could never--never--"

Never fight back. Never say no. Never say that he didn't want it, that his pleasure wasn't for them to command, that it wasn't fucking worth it at the price of pain and strange hands touching him, having his own body used against him, when all he wanted was--was--

Bucky heard his own harsh, panting breaths and realized there was no other sound in the kitchen. He looked around for Steve and found him sitting on the floor near the kitchen sink, sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest and his hands curled around his ankles. When Bucky took a step toward him he curled down smaller, resting his chin on one knee and rounding in his shoulders.

It was a submissive posture, but there was no cringe on Steve's face. His expression was patient, waiting Bucky out. Not waiting to get his licks in, not defending what he'd done or telling Bucky what he should have done, not frightened of Bucky, just...

Bucky couldn't remember Steve ever making himself that small when he really was small. Maybe not ever, period. It was strange enough to derail Bucky's thoughts completely.

When he'd stood there staring at Steve long enough to remember what he'd been yelling about, he just felt tired, and empty, and all too aware of every single memory he'd recovered of someone touching him in a way he didn't want, didn't ask for. The impersonal touch on his hand when a tech dumped lubricant in his palm so he could jerk himself, the rough stroke of Rumlow's grip, the pain and the shiver-shocky aftermath of whatever else they had done to him. There was no part of his
body that didn't crawl with filthy memories.

And now, all brand new and belonging only to him, and not the soldier he'd been then: a queasy sense of something like anger and shame at once. The knowledge that he had been utterly open to them, utterly helpless against them, and they had invaded his most secret places and made it feel good to him when nothing else did.

It was so much worse than the memory of how it had hurt. The hurting had ended, but this new feeling just kept rolling through him, fresh and immediate and suffocating.

"Steve," Bucky said in a small voice. "I don't--I don't want you to be one of those people. I never--please, not again, don't say... don't tell me I..."

"I won't," Steve agreed quietly. "You decide what you need, you decide how you get it. I won't push you, I swear to you. I don't want to be one of those people either, Buck. Not ever."

Bucky nodded, folding down to his knees. He wanted to shiver, or to be sick, but his body felt more numb than anything, as if the inability to feel had spread out from his dick to cover his entire skin. As if he was feeling too much inside, at the memories of what they'd done to him, what he'd made Steve do, to feel anything else.

"Buck? Can I come sit next to you?"

Bucky nodded. He was still on his knees, hands braced on the floor and head hanging, but he let himself fold down to lie curled up on the cool tile. He watched while Steve scooted closer without standing up, and it probably should have been funny, and it wasn't at all.

Steve stopped with his hip next to Bucky's face, and Bucky squirmed until the top of his head pressed against Steve's jeans. He knew he should sit up, or speak, or offer Steve his hand, but he just lay there, struck dumb by the brand new horror rushing through him.

Steve didn't move either, and didn't speak. But Bucky had known him a long time; he knew the way Steve's breathing sounded when he was trying not to cry, or not to sound like he was crying.

Bucky should say something, probably. He was the one who started this, insisting that Steve couldn't be okay with it, and now he had made Steve be not-okay with it.

He flexed his fingers, just to prove he could, but he didn't push himself up off the floor. He didn't even look up at Steve to catch a glimpse of his face. He didn't touch Steve, and Steve didn't touch him, and the afternoon faded into twilight, and then into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Alby’s art for this story is [here on Tumblr](http://example.com)! I am also on [Tumblr](http://example.com)! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](http://example.com).
When Steve finally moved, Bucky's eyes flashed open, the gray daze clearing from his mind as he watched Steve drag one arm across his face. He stood up almost before that motion ended, and Bucky pushed himself up to sit; the impulse to follow Steve was irresistible.

Sitting up was as far as he got, though. His head swam, and he didn't know whether he was more ashamed of everything that had happened, that he couldn't stop feeling, or of himself for kicking up such a fuss over it now. It wasn't like he hadn't known before now what they did to him; how could he explain the way it suddenly became real to him, one random afternoon in their kitchen?

Steve came back and sat down next to Bucky, leaving enough space between them for two bottles of water and a box of protein bars.

"If you eat, I'll eat," Steve said, tucking his hands into his lap.

Bucky snorted softly. Not an order, and not Steve telling him what he needed; this was a much older tactic, and one Bucky had mostly used on Steve. But the disconnected weak feeling in his head wasn't settling out entirely, so it wasn't just that he'd been lying still too long. He'd also missed at least one meal, and adrenaline burned a lot of energy. He did need to eat.

He reached into the box and plucked out one of the bars, ripping it open and biting off a corner without letting himself think about it. Steve didn't reach into the box until Bucky had done that much, whether to make sure he was keeping up his end, or to avoid their hands brushing against each other.

It was familiar, sitting together and grimly making their way through unappetizing rations. Sometimes they'd pressed closer, sometimes they'd remembered to keep a little distance. Sometimes they'd sat back to back, keeping watch, or face to face across a table or a fire.

When they were each on their second protein bar, Steve said, "We both gotta sleep sooner or later."

Again, not an order. Not even the question: Where are you going to sleep? Where do you want me to sleep?

Bucky closed his eyes and thought longingly of the space under his cot back at MEDCOM. But that would leave Steve... where? In New York? Outside the gates? He thought of Steve sleeping in the hallway while Bucky slept under the bed in the no-longer-unmonitored room here.

"Couch cushions," Bucky said, eyeing the box and wondering if he could make himself eat a third protein bar. "Put 'em on the floor."

Steve made a little choked noise like he'd tried to laugh and got a piece of protein bar down the wrong pipe. Bucky reached over and pounded on his back without thinking and Steve coughed and put his head between his knees. Bucky's hand settled between Steve's shoulder blades by reflex, and he left it there as Steve's breathing settled.

After a while he realized that they were both holding utterly still, barely breathing as they each tried not to spook the other. Bucky closed his fist on Steve's shirt, pulling it tight and giving a little tug.

"Come on, pal."
Steve nodded, but didn't move until Bucky stood, pulling him up. Bucky let go before he wound up with his arm around Steve—not yet, not now. He turned his back and Steve followed him into the living room, where they moved in familiar concert to push back the coffee table and strip all the cushions and pillows from the couch, arranging them in a rectangle on the floor that was distinctly smaller than either of their beds.

There was a folded blanket on the back of the couch, and Steve retrieved a second one from inside an ottoman. He sat down on the floor to take off his boots and belt, and Bucky did the same with the whole width of the cushions between them. He glanced over when he'd done it, and Steve gestured for Bucky to take his pick of spots.

Bucky lay down with the couch blanket, closer to the couch, with his head toward the kitchen. Steve waited until he was settled, entirely covered in his blanket, and then lay down on the outer row of pillows facing the other way—top to tail, as if they'd been whispering and giggling together too much and someone's mother had come out and made them split up. As if they'd had some kind of spat, and one of them had flipped around to sleep at the other end of the bed.

Bucky turned to face toward the couch and listened to Steve's quiet breathing all of six feet away, and eventually he slept.

Bucky woke up with the distinct smell of Steve's feet in his nose, so before anything else he knew they'd fought the night before. He cracked one eye open and saw his metal arm resting over Steve's calves, the tight weave of Steve's dress socks, and that was enough.

He wriggled his toes, and, when that got no response, scooted his foot over to rest against the side of Steve's throat.

Steve huffed but didn't push it away, and still didn't touch him. "Morning, Buck."

He sounded... all right. Not too apprehensive, not angry. Cautious. Bucky took a few breaths that smelled of Steve's feet, home, the morning after, and tried to figure out what the hell to say, or do. He wanted a scalding-hot shower, months and years and decades too late, and he never wanted to take his clothes off again. Also too late.

The images mostly didn't come back to him, but the feeling was lingering in his gut and on his skin—the knowledge of what they'd done, what they'd made him do. What he'd made Steve do. The skin-crawling wrongness of everything.

Bucky sat up, drawing his knees up and curling his arms around them. Steve stayed where he was, lying flat, stretched out on the cushions, watching Bucky.

"I'm sorry," Steve said quietly.

Bucky shrugged, not quite able to tell Steve he had nothing to be sorry for even though he knew none of this was Steve's fault. "Me too, pal."

Steve grimaced and sat up, scooting away as he did so they still had more than arm's length between them.

"I love you," Steve said, holding Bucky's gaze like Bucky would disappear if he looked away. "And whatever you—want, whatever you want to happen going forward, you just say the word."

Bucky let his gaze shift away from Steve's, looking over Steve, the cushions, and himself before he met Steve's eyes again. Shame was going bitter in his mouth, but Steve was the last person who
deserved Bucky snarling at him about this. He made himself smile a little, even though he could feel it coming out tense and wrong. "You think I'm the guy who should be making that call? I think I just established pretty clearly that I don't know what the fuck I want, or how to fix this."

Steve tilted his head. "You wanted something that turned out to be a bad idea, Buck. It took you a while to realize how bad it was for you, or why. That doesn't mean what you want doesn't matter anymore, even if it takes you some time to decide what that is, or be ready to try for it. What you want is still up to you, no one else."

Bucky rubbed his eyes, bitterness dissolving like it always did in the face of Steve's weapons-grade sincerity. What it left behind wasn't much to go on. He had a schedule, he knew how the day was supposed to go, but... "I don't want to do interview prep today, how about that?"

"Oh," Steve said. There was a little silence, and Bucky could almost see the progression of Steve's thoughts from what had happened last night when Steve said just the wrong thing to what might happen if Bucky went and got needled with impertinent practice questions today. "Yeah, you know what, I think I can get your boss to give you the day off from that."

Bucky snorted, then paused, considering. "Who is my boss for that stuff?"

Steve shrugged. "I guess... if it's in your capacity as an Avenger, could be me and Tony, or... the team as a whole? If it's in your own right as Bucky Barnes, technically the PR team is working for you. So if you and I agree that you can take the day off, that's got to be good enough for anyone."

"Good," Bucky echoed, with only a little edge. "Well. Then I'm going to go take a shower."

Steve nodded, and stayed on the floor for as long as he was in Bucky's sight or earshot.

Once he was scrubbed as clean as soap and water could make him and had all his clothes on, it was a little easier to identify the off-balance feeling that still nagged at him. Bucky went out to the kitchen to fix himself breakfast, and Steve was sitting at the kitchen table, licked-clean plate in front of him while he frowned at a tablet.

He swiped away whatever was on the screen as soon as he noticed Bucky, the frown clearing into an open, concerned expression. Bucky detoured from his path toward food to go to Steve, leaning over the back of his chair instead of pulling out his own. Steve stayed still and let Bucky wrap both arms down around his chest, pressing his face into Steve's throat and nuzzling in.

Only then did Steve relax a little, his shoulders softening under Bucky's arms, his head tilting to rest against Bucky's.

"I'm sorry, Buck," Steve said softly. "I should've..."

Bucky shook his head. "My idea, and it was a bad idea. I thought we settled that."

"Yeah, but I did research, I thought I knew what I was doing, and I didn't. I should've."

"Yeah? They got books about how to do this stuff with your best guy when he's spent most of a century being raped and tortured and brainwashed and he's still so crazy that he doesn't know which parts of it he can bear to remember?"

"You're not crazy," Steve said, and finally raised a hand to touch Bucky, curling firmly over his right shoulder. "You're recovering."
Bucky tensed at that, gripping tighter, pressing his forehead into Steve's collarbone upside-down. He'd been recovering for a damn long time already, and Steve didn't say it like it was a demotion, exactly, but Bucky had just made a pretty spectacular show of how stable he wasn't. "Am I--do you want me off the team, then? If I'm..."

Steve was already shaking his head, and brought his hand in from Bucky's shoulder to the nape of his neck. "No, we did settle that. This isn't--I mean, as long as you can still trust me to know what the hell I'm asking of you in the field. This is you and me, not--I know you're just as capable as you were yesterday, and I know if something goes down you won't--this won't be a problem. Although if it is, if you think you need to stay out of something, you tell me, okay? As soon as you know it's a problem, you tell me. Or Tony, or... just don't let us send you into something when we don't understand how bad it's going to be for you."

Bucky nodded. "I... I'll try, yeah. But that's... what about you and me, then? Are we... because it wasn't your fault, Steve. I don't want you looking at me like it was your fault, or..."

Steve twisted, pushing up against Bucky's weight, and Bucky let up enough for him to get out of his chair and turn under Bucky's arms to hold him. Steve held on hard, like he had to physically impress everything he felt onto Bucky's skin, and Bucky held on right back, letting himself feel all over again how solid and sure Steve was--enough for both of them, even now. Bucky hadn't ruined that.

"I'll do better for you," Steve said in his ear. "But if--if you don't want it getting between us, then I won't let it. We won't let it. Okay?"

Bucky nodded and tightened his own grip. That was what he'd needed to know. He had Steve; they hadn't broken that. As long as he had Steve, they could manage everything else.

He was going to have to talk to Padfield about it. He was going to--God literally help him--probably have to talk to Fr. Roche about it. But there was only one time he'd talked about this to someone and it was easy, and Bucky wanted to talk to him again, to go back there in the little way that he could, even if it was never, after last night, ever going to be easy again.

Bucky texted Woj and then went to the gym to keep himself busy until Woj had time to call him back.

When his phone rang he sat down right there on the end of the treadmill to answer it.

"Barnes, hey," Woj said, in that easy, neutral voice that took Bucky right back to his office at MEDCOM, the place and time where he hadn't hesitated to talk about things because he didn't yet remember how to be hurt by it. "What's up?"

"I..." Bucky hesitated. Woj wasn't his therapist anymore; it wasn't Woj's job to have Bucky spilling all the worst things that had ever happened to him in Woj's lap. "Can I... as a friend... can I ask you about something... bad and fucked up?"

There was a little pause, and then Woj said, "Sure. Thanks for asking first, Barnes. Is it something bad and fucked up that we've talked about before, or something new?"

"I... it's something I didn't understand how bad it was when we talked about it," Bucky said, forcing the words out past the new shame, the new awareness of how much he was asking when he asked Woj to listen to this. "We didn't... really talk about it. Because you asked if it was bothering me and I said no."

"Ah," Woj said. "Okay, I think I'm getting the picture. Go ahead."
"I... I just..." Bucky tried to think of what he even wanted to ask, what he wanted Woj to explain to him. He couldn't become the old him, impervious to all of this, just by talking to Woj, and Woj had never really been in the business of making the inside of Bucky's head okay. He'd taught Bucky skills to deal with all the not-okay, and watched over him when he just had to wade through it. He felt like he was up to his neck, now, the weight of it crushing him from all sides.

"They," Bucky said, his voice dwindling. "Woj, when I... when HYDRA... they raped me. A lot."

The last few words came out as a cracked whisper, but Bucky knew Woj heard him; he sighed softly down the line.

"Yeah," Woj said gently. "Yeah, they did. You, uh... you understand that differently now than you did then?"

"I feel it," Bucky said, then quickly shook his head. "Not like--not physically like I--I just... what they did to me, what they---they took from me. Even when it didn't hurt, it was--they--they took something from me that I didn't even know was mine. I didn't even know that that was worse, or different, from other stuff they did, but--but now I remember and now I--it's like it just happened, because now I can feel it, and I don't know how to make it stop. I just want to stop."

"Stop what?" Woj asked, and Bucky knew that perfectly calm tone. Maybe it was fucked up, but it made him feel safer, knowing that Woj thought there was something dangerous here.

"Stop--feeling it. Stop knowing, stop... stop it from changing things, because I was--I was so fucking close to being okay, and now I--I just want to hide under the bed and I was fine the other day. I was out with the goddamn Avengers a couple days ago and now I can't even talk to people."

"You're talking to me," Woj pointed out. "You're doing a really great job talking to me, Barnes. I know it doesn't feel great right now, but the stuff you're articulating right now--you're miles ahead of where you were the last time I talked to you. Light years ahead of the first time. And if you can understand something, if you can put words to it, you can start working on dealing with it."

"Yeah, okay, but how," Bucky demanded, frustration breaking through his misery. "How do I..."

"Well, you talk to your therapist, for one," Woj said gently. "But it's okay to start by talking to your friends, and I'm glad you got in touch. But... as much as we hate to admit it around here, because we're all about getting a soldier combat-ready... this stuff doesn't just go in one direction. You don't just march in a straight line from trauma to recovery and then it's over and never comes back. You'll have good days and bad days, and this is--I think this is a big step forward that feels like a big step back. But it comes from being in a better place, and being ready to process things that you couldn't until now. So you may just have to give yourself time to process."

Bucky let out a rough breath, thinking of days, maybe weeks or months of that--just going through his schedule and hiding away where he was safe, everything on hold while he waited for some nebulous thing to happen in his brain. "I don't want to take time to process, I want to get laid without HYDRA being involved."

Woj made a choked noise that Bucky realized, after a second, was an only partially successful attempt to hold back a startled laugh.

He was stunned for a second--Woj was laughing at him--and then Bucky started laughing too, the kind that came out in body-shaking howls. The kind that meant it's not really funny but I'm alive and I'm not alone. He'd laughed like this with Steve more times than he could remember; it was one of the better ways the Howling Commandos had earned their name.
The soldier had never laughed. The soldier had never much noticed whether he was alive, and had never been glad not to be alone.

After a while, he wore himself out enough to stop, and he sat and breathed roughly and listened to Woj breathing on the other end of the line.

"Okay," Woj said, "so--to address your concern--I'm going to assume that no HYDRA personnel are literally present when you get laid these days."

Bucky snorted, choking back a giggle, and said, "No. Not like that. Not..."

He would explain, if he had to, about the pretending. About Steve getting dressed up like Rumlow, bringing a stun baton into their living room and telling him to kneel.

"Okay," Woj said. "So... then it is just you and Steve. And whatever difficulty you're having, whatever issues you're carrying... that's not them anymore. That's you. Your trauma is yours, your scars are yours, your memories are yours. They did that to you, and that's on them. That's not your fault. But it belongs to you now, okay? You decide how you're going to handle it. They don't get to dictate shit anymore. You do. And you do that knowing that you have the trauma that you have and the scars that you have, and maybe that limits your options. But the choices are yours now."

Bucky stared at the wall, abruptly remembering what had happened before the first time Woj told him he'd been raped. That was after the first time he'd gone under the off-switch, when he'd been stuck in that hell for hours. They had been able to see how scared he was, even if they didn't know exactly why. He remembered Exley saying, We tortured you, and replying, It was me. I did it to myself.

"Oh," he said, realizing what they were going to have to do. What he was going to have to ask Steve to do. Because no matter how badly it had gone last time, it was the only way to have someone other than Steve do the hurting that Bucky needed.

"Okay," Bucky said. "Yeah, Woj. Thanks. That... makes sense."

Bucky spent the rest of the day wondering how he was going to tell Steve what he needed, but after they'd eaten a quiet dinner together, Steve walked out of the room and came back with two little silvery objects in his hand.

The off-switch rig that let him communicate when he couldn't move or speak. Steve had beaten him to the punch.

"Even if we're not trying for anything else," Steve said quietly. "Practicing is the only way to break the trigger. If... if that's a goal that you're still pursuing."

Bucky nodded slowly, all off-balance at having it offered when he'd been bracing himself to ask. Because Steve had said even if we're not trying and that meant trying was on the table. "You... it scared the hell out of you. You hate seeing me like that."

Steve nodded, shrugged. "I, uh. I think anything we try is going to be pretty rough on both of us, at this point. But this way I'm not hurting you, right? I'm with you, but I'm not... one of those people. And you have the rig, so you can tell me to stop if it's more bad than good."

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Yeah, if--if you're with me, that's... about as good as it's going to get."

It would be them hurting him, when he went under. His memories, his past, the scars his brain still
carried around. Steve would be outside all of that, seeing none of it. He would be able to touch Bucky, but none of it would touch Steve. And no matter how much he remembered it, Bucky's past would stay in the past; Steve would be waiting here for him in the present every time he woke up.

"Not, uh..." Bucky trailed off, his eyes still fixed on the glinting silver metal in Steve's open hand. "Not tonight, though?"

Steve let out a little breath and said, "No. Not tonight."
Chapter 47

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve made himself scarce when Fr. Roche came over to hear Bucky's confession on Saturday, which was something of a relief. Steve's mood wasn't meshing particularly well with the muddle of nerves and hopeful anticipation Bucky felt; he wasn't sure whether he had to confess anything, but there was definitely something in him to be reconciled, and he knew that one way or another Fr. Roche would help him get there.

Steve, on the other hand...

"He, uh," Bucky grimaced apologetically. "I told him he wasn't allowed to get into a fight with you over me, so..."

Fr. Roche chuckled. "Well, there is certainly a proud Catholic tradition of biting one's tongue and showing up for Sunday Mass anyway. Proud in the theological sense, possibly."

As in the deadly sin. It was certainly Steve's, if anything was.

"But unless you think he was inclined to throw a punch, I think I could likely hold my own," Fr. Roche added. "And whatever he's upset about, he might have a point, you know. Steven is known for his gift of persuasion; perhaps I, too, am meant to receive it."

Bucky shook his head. "He's mad because--well, first he was mad about you telling me I had to let him try, if we were going to have sex at all. Didn't like the idea of anybody telling me what I oughta be doing in bed."

Fr. Roche snorted. "Also a proud Catholic tradition, despite scripture making some fairly clear points on the subject."

Bucky dared to smile a little back. "Yeah, I mean. I calmed him down on that. But then it, uh..."

Bucky looked away, swallowing a flicker of anger, remembered from that night and still fresh whenever he thought too much about what they'd done to him. "It didn't go so well. We tried a couple things that didn't work, but then the one that did... I... I realized, after, that it wasn't what I wanted. Doing it like that was worse than it not working at all, and..."

He trailed off, and Fr. Roche didn't fill the silence. In a session with Woj or Padfield--in an interrogation--it would have been a silence meant to push him to speak. But sitting on the couch with Fr. Roche beside him, a plate of cookies on the table with exactly two missing, it just felt like they were sitting together quietly.

He supposed Fr. Roche would say they were both waiting for Someone Else to speak.

"Often," Fr. Roche said after a time. "Even ideally, according to many theologians, the act of sex is not without results which carry on after the act itself is over. Children, of course, are the main example--the joyous physical union resulting in a new life, which is itself a cause for joy. But in between the conception and the joyous arrival, there is work, and very often there is pain."

Bucky stared down at his hands, reflecting that Steve wasn't going to be any less angry on being told
that he'd knocked Bucky up with... what, exactly? The clearer understanding of what it meant that he had been raped?

"In your case," Fr. Roche went on, meditatively, "it seems to me that the fruit of your efforts, thus far, has been mostly to learn what you don't want, or what doesn't work. And it is only you who can say whether that is worth what it has cost you in suffering, or whether it would ever have been possible for you to find that out in another way. But I hope that it has brought you and Steve closer together, to share the discovery of these things."

Bucky frowned; that didn't sound quite right, but it wasn't wrong, either. He tried to imagine figuring any of this out without Steve involved. Would he still just be trying to find the right way to zap himself with a stun baton? Jerking off alone with something that hurt and a recording of a voice to tell him when he could come, and maybe still trying to keep it all secret? That would have put him further and further away from Steve, but just averting that wasn't what Fr. Roche was talking about.

"If you feel that you have not been brought closer by it, or if you're not sure," Fr. Roche added, "perhaps it would not be entirely out of place to point out another truth that goes along with the matter of fruitfulness, which is that it is possible for sex to be too, ah, goal-oriented. It is meant to be a shared pleasure, after all."

Bucky frowned, actually looking over at Fr. Roche for the first time in a while, as he said, "That's the whole--"

He stopped, staring at Fr. Roche's mild, patient expression, and remembered how he'd defended it the first time. *I wanted to be with him, if that was all we could do.*

For all his worrying about Steve, about whether Steve could handle what Bucky needed from him, he hadn't made any effort recently to take care of what Steve needed or wanted. And it was true what Fr. Roche had said—they'd both been focused on what would work for Bucky, not just feeling good together. The best he could think of recently was when Steve was taking care of him right after that time with the stun baton, and... he doubted Steve remembered that even as fondly as Bucky did, at this point.

And of course, after what Bucky had said the other night, slapping away Steve's hand when Steve tried to touch him and yelling about what Hydra did to him... of course Steve wasn't going to ask him for anything, or try to start anything. They'd managed to sleep in the same bed last night, brushed up against each other comfortably enough, but Steve wasn't ever going to so much as hint at wanting more than that until Bucky got his head out of his own ass and told him he wanted to. Not after everything had gone so far wrong already.

Bucky finally looked over at Fr. Roche with a crooked smile. "Yeah, Father. Good point."

Bucky spent the next hour or so, while Steve was still out somewhere with Sam, planning his approach.

Not talking about things at all obviously wasn't going to work—they'd done that from the time Bucky came home from MEDCOM, and it hadn't gotten them much of anywhere. And Steve would argue if Bucky said straight out that he had been neglecting Steve and he wanted to do something that was good for him. Bucky couldn't see convincing Steve to fuck him, or let Bucky get down on his knees for him, without so much discussion that they'd be lucky to get to the good part before it was time to leave for Mass in the morning.

Bucky wasn't even sure he could endure Steve on top of him, inside him, with any convincing
semblance of enjoyment; just thinking about it left him feeling a little sick, and angry at himself and Steve and everyone who'd fucked this up for him. There was no way he could hold it together through actually doing it, and if he tried it and Steve caught him faking anything, it would only make everything worse again.

What they needed now was something different. Something that didn't feel anything like what they'd already done--him and Steve, him and Hydra, any of them.

The solution was fairly obvious. He and Steve had switched places plenty, back when both of them had working dicks. Bucky didn't want another round of Steve's mouth on him--that would be too tender and careful and get them nowhere it hadn't already--so that just left Bucky fucking Steve.

Steve used to like that. He had been all pricklely and standoffish about how much he liked it, when he was small, and then too shocked by how good it felt to be anything but wide-eyed and stunned, after he got big. There hadn't been time to do it much, and it seemed to be something a lot more intense for Steve than it was the other way around, so they hadn't done it much. Bucky was pretty goddamn sure that Steve would still like it just as much, though, and for his own part, Bucky could at least enjoy getting to take Steve apart like that.

The fact that his dick didn't work--probably never could, for something like that--was an impediment, but he'd worked around Steven Grant Rogers and His Goddamn Attitude Circa 1937, and he'd worked around the entire Second World War and its spirited attempts to keep them from ever having two consecutive hours alone together. He could work around this.

And when he imagined doing this, unlike the other way, the squirming in his belly was something like the butterflies he used to have, planning how to get Steve alone somewhere private, how to carve out the time for more than hurried kisses and handjobs. Even knowing he wasn't actually going to get off didn't kill the little thrill of excitement, and that had to mean he was on the right track.

Bucky checked Steve's bedside drawer first, critically eyeing the half-full bottle of lube Steve had used to fuck him. He had a feeling this was going to require... more. There was some in his own room--a couple of different kinds, in fact, had been stocked in the bedside table when he moved in. He went and examined them, considered quantities and consistencies, and decided that combining the available stockpile ought to be enough to get them there, with a comfortable margin for error.

No reason to delay, then.

Bucky timed the arrival of dinner and Steve pretty well, and kept Steve talking about Sam until they were halfway through the meal. Finally, though, Steve asked a little warily, "How'd it go with Father?"

"Good," Bucky said easily, not bothering to look up. "Squeaky clean state of grace, and he gave me some real helpful things to think about, so I decided I wanna fuck you tonight."

"I mean, if you're up for it," Bucky added cheerfully, acting like he'd heard nothing. He waggled the shiny fingers of his left hand in illustration of how he planned to be up for it and not bothering to hide his smile; winding Steve up on the way to getting what they both wanted was just a fun bonus. "I don't wanna pressure you, pal. Just thought it'd be nice to do something that was actually fun for both of us. And I seem to remember it used to be pretty fun to blow your mind like that. Plus I know how much you like my left hand."
After another second Steve managed to say in a determinedly matching casual tone, "It's called fisting, actually, Buck. If you're gonna use your hand."

"Oh, is it?"

Bucky knew that, actually. Andrews had made sure he learned all the words that meant something nowadays other than what he might think, as well as all the old words that weren't used anymore.

"Yeah," Steve said. "Yeah, it's... you want to do that?"

Bucky actually did look straight at him then, raising his eyebrows a little, still smiling, still hopeful, because Steve hadn't said no, hadn't even said are you sure. "Yeah, pal, I don't think either of us misunderstood that part."

Steve tried to glare, but he was blushing the absolute prettiest pink over his cheeks and the tops of his ears and his lower lip was begging to be bitten. "Buck, you..."

"I just haven't been thinking," Bucky said. "Got all wrapped up in making this work for me and forgot about making it work for you. And I forgot that I gotta be keeping an eye on that, because you never will, not when you're worrying about me."

Steve's expression tightened a little. "I don't..."

He didn't actually finish the protest, though, just trailed off, and then he actually did bite his lip. Bucky could see him deciding not to pick a fight just for the sake of fighting. That meant he was actually listening, which meant Bucky was going to get his way.

"You want to, huh?"

Bucky grinned. "Yeah, Steve. I want to. You want to?"

Steve studied him for a few seconds, and then, finally, the corners of his mouth turned up a little. "Yeah. Yeah, Buck, I want to."

"Okay." Bucky felt a shivery kind of eagerness, without fear, without anxiety. He knew what he was going to get from this, what he was going to get to watch Steve getting from this. It might not be everything, but it was something he could want in a completely uncomplicated way. "You can take a shower while I do the dishes, huh?"

"What, do I smell--" Steve cut off abruptly as he obviously gave some thought to whether he smelled, and where, and he blushed brighter. "Yeah, okay. It's a plan."

Bucky was waiting with the assortment of lubricants and a couple of the blue towels from the guest bathroom, when Steve came out of his shower, a sunny yellow towel (which Bucky had rejected as far too likely to show stains) wrapped around his hips. Bucky smirked; Steve rolled his eyes and dropped the towel, but he was already blushing again, or still. He was actually nicely pink all over, from the warmth and the scrubbing.

"You got behind your ears, right?" Bucky asked as Steve strolled over, his blush deepening as he peered at the bottles tucked into the crook of Bucky's arm and took in the strategically placed blue towel already spread out on top of the sheet.

"Why, what're you planning on doing to my ears?" Steve replied.
"Well, depending on how you wind up positioned, I'll probably have plenty of time to see behind 'em while I'm working my fist up your ass," Bucky replied blandly.

Steve looked down at the jumble of plastic bottles before his gaze darted to Bucky's left hand, and then to his face. Bucky bared his teeth in a mostly-smile, and he watched Steve's pupils widen and the flush deepen across his cheeks.

He couldn't help leaning in for a kiss, and one kiss led to another, which led to Steve making those noises he made when he was already way too wound up this early in the proceedings, embarrassed but right on the edge of not caring. If Bucky let him run... well, in the old days if Bucky let him run when he got like that, they'd both get off without even undressing properly. Now, it would probably just bring things to a sudden and uncomfortable halt when Steve remembered that this wasn't the old days.

Bucky broke the kiss, giving Steve a little push back and saw that his dick was well on its way to hardness. He'd timed that about right.

"On the bed." Bucky jerked his chin in that direction.

Steve moved faster than he ever had to follow an order, landing on his elbows and knees, his ass correctly placed above the towel. He tugged a pillow down but stopped short of burying his face in it.

Yet.

Bucky set the bottles of lube down just to the outside of Steve's right foot, checked that everything was arranged the way he wanted it, and then he knelt behind Steve. He was still fully dressed, and he saw Steve shiver a little when the denim of Bucky's jeans pressed against the bare skin on the insides of his knees and calves.

Bucky made a small approving noise. Steve moved up from a shiver to a deliberate wiggle, shaking his ass a little, like Bucky might not already be staring at the pink valley between his pale ass cheeks. He was scrubbed clean, tailbone to balls, smelling of nothing but skin and soap.

Bucky put his hands on Steve's hips to steady him and leaned down to kiss his tailbone and the tops of his hips. Steve went carefully still under him, like he was trying not to react too much, and Bucky wasn't gonna let them get started off like that.

"Breathe, pal, I'm not doing anything scary yet."

Steve's breath went out in a whoosh and his posture adjusted, his knees sliding out a little further, his back bowing deeper. Bucky peppered kisses over the cheeks of his ass, keeping his hands on the backs of Steve's thighs, his thumbs just shy of brushing Steve's balls. Steve made little impatient noises, wriggling under Bucky's attentions.

"Hey, you gonna take your shirt off? You probably want to take your shirt off at some point."

Bucky glanced down at his left arm, which was already bared to the elbow, and wondered exactly how much past his fist Steve thought he was going to get tonight. Still, he'd gotten Steve relaxed enough to be bossy, which was a good first step.

"Your wish is my command, pal." Bucky straightened up on his knees and peeled out of his shirt.

"Tell you what, you can decide about my pants, too."

"Off," Steve said immediately, and Bucky snorted and ditched his socks as well before he returned to
his position between Steve's knees, wearing just his drawers. He pressed his thighs and calves all along the insides of Steve's and leaned over to kiss down the line of his spine, letting Steve feel how they were mostly skin-to-skin now. He felt Steve relaxing a little further under him at the contact, and he almost hated having to pull away partially in order to press his mouth to Steve's tailbone, and the tender places below it.

Almost.

Steve let out a startled little sound that was hilarious and hot at once when Bucky's tongue brushed over his hole, and Bucky grinned and kept at it, licking and nuzzling at him. He was as clean as promised, and already a little relaxed, like he'd fingered himself in the shower--just to be sure he was absolutely clean, Bucky was sure. He wasn't going to complain about Steve jumping the gun, not when it was that much easier to persuade those stubborn little muscles to relax, softening under Bucky's tongue and lips. Not when Steve was all hot under his mouth and making those sweet little noises, trying not to squirm with both of Bucky's hands on his hips.

"Oh, fuck," Steve gasped, and Bucky knew that tone of voice in every cell of his body. He didn't think, just reached down with his left hand to find Steve's cock, hard and hot and pressed tight against his abs.

"Fuck," Steve gasped at the touch of Bucky's hand, and Bucky grinned and kept working his tongue against Steve's opening as he started to jerk him off in slow pulls, just barely tight enough.

He kept cussing as he pressed back against Bucky's mouth, thrusting into the unyieldingly gentle grip of his hand. It didn't take long before he was trying to fuck himself on Bucky's tongue, whining and snarling.

Bucky closed his grip on Steve's cock just the tiniest fraction and brought his right hand up to his mouth, pressing a fingertip inside as he licked. He was all but counting down in his head like he'd just pulled the pin on a grenade.

*Boom.* Steve shoved into his grip and came, utterly silent as his body seized up with the force of it, clenching around Bucky's finger and under his tongue. Bucky gentled him through it, still stroking and kissing, slower and slower, until Steve gasped in a shaky breath.

It was Bucky's turn to be still, then, waiting for Steve to catch his breath, waiting for the spike of oversensitivity to pass. It didn't take long, although Bucky would bet it wasn't actually through yet when Steve turned his head and said, "I think if you're planning to fist me you gotta get more than a fingertip in."

Bucky bit him for that, a mean little chomp right on the undercurve of his ass. Steve yelped and twitched, but when he relaxed out of the instinctive flinch, he was that little bit more at ease.

"Patience," Bucky said, giving another little lick that made Steve's breath hitch. "I'll get there when I'm ready."

"Not when I'm ready?" Steve demanded, but he didn't push this time, nestling into the sheets instead. Bucky gave him another lick for that and rocked the finger he had inside, grinning at the shock that went through Steve at the feeling.

"If I thought you had any goddamn sense about what *ready* meant, maybe," Bucky said. "As it is, you're just gonna have to wait for me."

Steve huffed overdramatically, but he relaxed a little more, too, letting his head hang down while
Bucky went back to licking and fingering him. He let himself get a little lost in it. There might have been nothing in the world but Steve's body, the noises Steve was making, the little shivers that ran through him. He felt it stoking something in his own body, something that couldn't be satisfied.

The hunger was there anyway, driving him onward to do more, taste more, feel more. He grabbed the lube and slicked his metal fingers before he pushed two of them in, an easy glide into the velvet heat of Steve's body.

"Is that," Steve gasped, but the jerk of his body meant he already knew, could already tell exactly what was inside him.

"Promised, didn't I?" Bucky curled his fingers, stroking deep inside, and Steve groaned and pushed back into the touch. Bucky kept it up, still licking where he could as he began to stretch Steve open for real, moving toward what they both wanted. Needed.

He added more lube along with the next finger, and Steve shuddered and swayed, forcing Bucky to reconsider the logistics. He would have had to anyway; he wanted to be able to see Steve's face when they really got into this.

Keeping his metal fingers pressed in to the hilt, he drew back from Steve's ass to look down at him for a moment. He was sweating, his fair skin visibly flushed even from behind. His cock was hard again--no surprise--and his hands were fisted in the sheets. Bucky worked his jaw consideringly, and found the phantom of soreness that meant he had been at this for longer than it felt like.

"Okay, Steve," Bucky said softly. "I want you on your side now, can you just fall over real slowly for me?"

Steve's laugh was a little wild, but he nodded immediately, no hesitation, no confusion. "Which way?"

Bucky gave him a little nudge with his right hand, and Steve nodded and folded over with his face toward Bucky, his breath hitching as he went. Bucky kept his fingers inside all the way, doing his best to keep them completely still relative to Steve's body, but it still changed the angles inside him.

When Steve was curled on his side, he looked up at Bucky with wide eyes gone dark with need. His face was flushed and his lips bitten red, and Bucky had to kiss him again. It was a bit of a stretch, keeping his fingers where they were and getting his mouth to Steve's, but Steve curled tighter, cooperating, his breath shaking out of him before their lips met.

"You're really fucking pretty, you know that," Bucky muttered. "I wish--"

"Please," Steve interrupted, too greedy for this to even worry about how it could have been different. Bucky laughed against his mouth and pushed him back down to the bed. "All right. I've got you. Keep that leg pulled up for me, huh? And try not to kick me in the throat if you can help it, you'll jostle my hand."

Steve made a noise that was probably agreement, or at least acknowledgement of the hazard. Bucky went to work for real now, slicking his fourth finger and starting to work it against the rim of Steve's opening, stretching all that super-strength muscle to admit him. It seemed like it couldn't possibly work until it was slipping in, a wet slide and an obscene sound, the clutch of Steve's body around his fingers which would not, could not yield to such a soft, organic pressure.

Steve sobbed and his hips jerked and he was coming again, his cock jerking untouched under the shadow of his pulled-up thigh. Bucky curled down, catching the bitter taste on his tongue before his
lips closed on the head of Steve's cock. He moved his fingers--all four, Jesus--in the slowest possible motions as Steve kept coming, his ass clenching tight around them. Bucky felt every pulse of pressure, every squeeze, and Steve was panting above him, his breath becoming a whine as his orgasm finally trailed off.

Bucky tilted his head back to look. It would be worse this time to move his hand, so he kept his fingers still, waiting for the pained look to fade from Steve's face. When he opened his eyes, Steve looked buzzed, like he was drunk on this, like he was halfway out of his mind. Bucky just stared for the space of a couple of breaths, caught up in being allowed to see, in Steve allowing this, reveling in it, and sharing it with him.

Bucky swallowed hard, reminding himself that he was supposed to be the one keeping a cool head here. "More?"

"More," Steve agreed, and then on a wild little laugh, "Green, green, go."

Bucky considered biting him for that, and then he ducked his head and sucked at his half-hard dick instead. Steve's whole body jerked, tightening up again around Bucky's fingers as he let out a startled cry.

"Okay, okay, fuck, stop that," Steve gasped. "Just fuck me, Buck, just--one thing at a time, pal, I--I can't--"

Bucky drew back and pressed kisses to Steve's belly and thighs instead, rewarding him for saying words Bucky wouldn't have thought he knew, once upon a time. Then he had to draw back and figure out where the lube went. He added more, a thicker blend, to the gleaming-wet metal of his hand before he started moving it, in and out in twisting motions that brought his knuckles to the stretched pink rim again and again.

Steve kept making noises Bucky couldn't quite interpret, pain and pleasure and overstimulation and stubbornness. They all mixed together with the driving need that coiled down Bucky's spine, burning in his belly and dancing over his skin.

"Oh," Steve gasped, "oh, I can--now, now, Buck, do it, I can feel it, I can take--"

Bucky pushed and felt Steve's body yield to implacable, impossible metal, the widest part of his left hand pushing inside. Steve was making little high noises that resolved after a second into, "Yes, yes, yes, go--"

It was Bucky who stopped, then, just staring at the place where his hand--the fist of HYDRA--disappeared into Steve's body, Steve stretching to take him in. He could feel Steve inside, the heat of him, the strength even in those secret muscles, something he would swear was the beating of Steve's pulse against his fingertips. He was inside Steve, the very worst part of himself joined to Steve and Steve still wanted more, wanted all of him. Bucky didn't think he could possibly feel it more if it was just his dick; his whole brain felt whited out, wiped blank.

His thumb was still on the outside, stroking absently over the spot behind Steve's balls, and he watched his own hand pour more lube. He watched his thumb fold in, dimly heard Steve gasping encouragement, and he drew his hand back slightly to fold his thumb in and push again, slow and steady.

Steve's leg flailed, but he caught it with one hand, the other reaching out wildly for Bucky, grasping at his right arm until Bucky caught his hand and held it still. He kept pushing with his other hand, in and in and in to the wrist, his entire hand inside. Steve's hand gripped his right hand almost as tight,
and Bucky had to let his own head hang, panting at the sensations.

Dimly he thought that this was supposed to be intense for Steve, that it didn't make any sense to feel this overwhelmed when his dick was still utterly limp between his thighs, but he couldn't quite catch his breath somehow. Everything he'd ever done with that hand flashed through his mind, gruesomely overlain with what he could do now. He could literally tear Steve apart, he could...

He tilted his hand inside, rubbing a little with the heel of it, and Steve groaned low in his throat, his grip on Bucky's other hand tightening and loosening. Bucky dragged their hands down until he realized he couldn't do both at once, and then he tugged free of Steve's grip to get his hand between Steve's thighs.

"Oh, fuck," Steve gasped. "I--Buck, I can't--"

"You can," Bucky informed him, his hand closing gently on Steve's cock, still only half hard. He found himself speaking quietly, as if he were in some sacred place, but he didn't let himself waver; Steve needed his certainty right now, and he needed this to be good for Steve. "You're going to, pal, you're going to come while I fuck you. Aren't you?"

Steve brought his hand down to meet Bucky's, moaning as he tangled his fingers with Bucky's. "Do it, then. Do it, make me. Oh--"

Bucky started to move both of his hands, fucking Steve with the metal one as he stroked him with the other. It didn't take long before Steve was hard, his eyes gone glassy and lost in the tide of sensation. That was all right. Bucky had him. Bucky wouldn't let him get really lost, not for long. He just needed Steve to feel this, to bring it to completion for both of them.

Steve moved in little jerking starts and stops, wanting to writhe and then coming up against the unyielding solidity of Bucky's mental hand inside him, moving steady as a piston. Steve's leg shot out again, but Bucky managed to duck enough that it wound up hooked over his shoulder, and after that Steve had a hand free to press to Bucky's cheek, to the side of his head, fingers scrabbling for a grip on hair too short to even muss.

Bucky just kept going, fucking one hand into him, stroking with the other, relentless, until Steve's broken noises turned into a rising tide, rushing higher and higher. Steve wailed at the crest, his cock jerking between their hands, his ass clamping down on Bucky's hand and wrist. Bucky turned his head and kissed the thigh slung over his shoulder, gentling him through it until Steve went limp and probably semi-conscious, judging by the faint, erratic fluttering of his eyelids.

Bucky watched him, letting his own hunger collapse into tenderness at Steve's utter surrender. He started trying to ease his left hand free, which roused Steve enough to make a discontented noise. Bucky laughed, and it came out rusty as if he'd been screaming. "Sorry, pal. Can't just leave it there all night."

Steve slung one arm over his face and nodded behind it, and Bucky twisted his hand free as gently as he could. Steve didn't make a sound, but he also didn't breathe until Bucky's hand was free. He let out a gush of breath then, and Bucky glanced at his left hand long enough to confirm there wasn't any alarming quantity of blood on it. He wiped it clean on the second towel and cleaned Steve up well enough to last until they could shower. All the time he was attending to the practicalities, he was grinning wide, feeling like he wanted to whistle, wanted to dance, except that he didn't want to do anything at all that would distract Steve right now.

Bucky tossed the towel away when he was done with it and maneuvered out from under Steve's leg
to lie down facing him. Steve's eyes fluttered open, still more pupil than anything. He hooked his leg over Bucky's, and Bucky set his metal hand at the small of Steve's back, helping him keep them together.

Steve was smiling—not a huge dopey grin like Bucky's, but something small and drowsy and contented, weird and perfect in the aftermath of this particular debauchery. Bucky had to kiss him just a little, soft touches of lips, because he wasn't ready to not be physically connected somehow. It had felt so good, so right, to be so deep inside Steve, the two of them part of one thing. He didn't ever want it to be over.

"You okay?" Steve mumbled after a little while. "Was it--you didn't mind doing that for me?"

Bucky laughed softly, thinking of the world of difference between this and everything he'd done, with Steve or without him, to try to get off in the last month. "I don't mind a bit, pal. I'm aces."

"Okay," Steve agreed, pliant the way he only was when he'd been fucked half senseless. "Just taking turns, right?"

Bucky thought of what he'd asked Steve to do for him and then pushed it aside, snuggling closer. He didn't want to feel anything but this, warm and close and satisfied with Steve, basking in the reflected glow of pleasure. "Yeah, well, I'm not done with my turn yet."

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
All through Mass the next morning Bucky was flooded with memories of dozens, maybe hundreds, of other Sundays spent exactly like this: trying not to make eye contact with Steve Rogers so neither of them would start laughing about the mischief they'd gotten up to recently. He and Steve sat rigidly side by side throughout the service. They might have made it home free if Bucky hadn't stopped to shake hands with Fr. Roche before ducking out the back way again.

"Thanks, Father," Bucky said, "for the--"

Steve, at his side, did not about-face quite quickly enough to hide his sudden scarlet blush, and Bucky cracked up, bringing a smile to Fr. Roche's face as well.

"I see it did you both good," Fr. Roche said, and Steve started to make a choking noise that would have had Bucky genuinely worried for his health, back when.

As it was, Bucky just nodded, trying to suppress his own grin down to something presentable, and nodded before he turned to steer Steve away, pounding helpfully on his back as they went.

They made it to the car before either of them quite burst out laughing, and it took a long time to die down--Steve kept trying to scold, which only made Bucky laugh harder. When they finally subsided they leaned against each other, slumped back in the seat. Bucky stared his window, but he kept catching glimpses of Steve's smile reflected there. It felt like the night before carrying on, everything easy and good between them, and he let himself settle into it, as if everything could stay this way forever.

They were nearly home when Bucky's phone buzzed with an incoming text, and he grinned as he pulled his phone out to see if it was Andrews or Duncan, already considering what emoji to use to convey this feeling.

It wasn't one of his guys. It was Kitty.

Bucky had only exchanged a few texts with her, nearly as carefully composed as their few emails. She had texted to say she hoped he was all right after his first Avengers mission, and he had assured her that he was before Steve got home, and then...

Well, he hadn't heard from her since.

_Hi, Uncle! I'd like to chat with you soon if you have a chance. Phone or a visit? I'm free anytime, let me know if you can pencil me in._

It seemed perfectly reasonable; Kitty was family, and he thought he'd like to talk to her. And if she
was asking like this, there was probably some reason she needed to talk to him: press bothering her, or something like that, so of course he couldn't say no.

He was still smiling as his thumbs twitched toward a response--words, not emoji. He stilled as he realized that he didn't know whether, or when, he could pencil her in. He didn't have a schedule for this week; he didn't have any idea what it would look like if he did. Outside the bubble of this morning with Steve, he had no idea what was awaiting him.

Was he back in Avengers training now? Was he going back to PR to prep for that interview? Should he be making a box labeled *Trigger Reduction*, or was that just *Trying to Get Off*, now?

"Buck?" Steve said softly. "Something wrong?"

Bucky felt somehow cold and panicky at once, like his brain was trying to launch two different reactions to the problem of his week--the rest of his life--yawning vacant and unpredictable ahead of him.

He shook his head, but he couldn't make himself speak. Nothing was wrong. Kitty was fine. Wasn't she? What if...

He tilted his phone toward Steve, forcing himself to watch Steve's face instead of rereading the words of the message. Steve's forehead crimped in concentration that didn't ease when his eyes flicked up from the phone to meet Bucky's. He studied Bucky for a moment and then said, "Not sure how to answer, huh?"

Bucky gave a jerky nod. It sounded normal, manageable, in Steve's voice.

Steve's hands closed around his, and Steve's expression eased, offering him a crooked little smile. "How about that. Bucky Barnes doesn't know how to talk to a lady. Want me to give it a try?"

Bucky smiled back unsteadily, more for the warmth of Steve's hands than the thin joke. Bucky Barnes hadn't known how to talk to a lady for decades now; if he hadn't already had Steve crazy about him, he'd have been out of luck for good.

Steve raised his eyebrows, and Bucky remembered that Steve had asked a question. He nodded.

"Okay," Steve said, shifting his hands around Bucky's so his thumbs hovered over the screen of Bucky's phone. "How about... *I'd love to see you, but I'm not sure about my schedule yet.*"

Bucky jerked at the key word, and Steve's hands squeezed gently. "Yes or no, Buck?"

Bucky nodded sharply, and watched Steve tap out the message, adding, *I'll let you know asap* at the end. "Okay?"

Bucky squirmed his own thumb up to hit *send*.

Steve didn't say anything more about it when they got home, just prodded Bucky through making a solid breakfast, eggs and bacon and most of a loaf of bread toasted and stacked up on a plate. Bucky's mind went quiet as they worked; the steps were obvious, and everything had to be done in order and on time to get all the food on the table. He might not know what was going to happen this week, but the next twenty minutes were decided as soon as they began.

He sat next to Steve while they ate, letting Steve's steadiness and the warmth of the food seep into him. A full belly was like an anchor, fixing him here and now. He sighed in relief as he sat back
from his empty plate, even though nothing had really been solved. Nothing was wrong to begin with; he'd just gotten a text from Kitty.

Steve took their plates, pressing Bucky's shoulder to tell him to stay where he was. Bucky turned his head to watch—if Steve was going to wash them, Bucky was going to join him, it would help more than sitting here—but Steve only set the dishes on the counter before he went to rummage in a drawer. Bucky tilted his head back, looking up at the ceiling and trying to think of nothing at all.

He wasn't going to panic just because he didn't have a schedule. It didn't change anything, really. The coming week would happen no matter what—and the week after that, and after that, and a whole vast future marching toward... what?

Steve sat down beside him, jerking his thoughts firmly back to the present. He thwacked down a pad of paper on the table, along with a ruler and a pair of nicely sharpened pencils.

"So," Steve said, bumping Bucky's shoulder with his. "Let's see about getting you sure of your schedule, huh, pal?"

Bucky just looked at him for a moment, and then turned his attention to the things in front of him, freeing a sheet of paper from the pad and drawing in the basic outlines while Steve sat quietly beside him. Once he was in motion some of it was easy enough; he had a scheduled appointment with Padfield on Monday, and he could sketch in guesses for his next few appointments. PT and meals for the whole week were easy enough.

He was vaguely aware of Steve doing something with his own phone while Bucky was drawing those boxes and labeling them.

When he was finished, Steve said without looking up, "Tony wants to get into energy source research on your arm—he says Tuesday afternoon, if you've got a spot? And PR wants you for as many daytime hours as you're willing to give them, in blocks of no more than two hours. And you'll want some gun range time, and I think we'll have a team thing on Thursday, late afternoon."

"Oh," Bucky said, his grip on the pencil tightening while he did not let himself look over at Steve. This was good. This was his week, and he would only worry about this week. "Okay, so..."

He started sketching things in, and Steve nodded along in his peripheral vision. "I oughta call Dr. Hernandez," Bucky muttered, as his week began to fill up. "Tell her about using the sedative last week, and..."

"Yeah, we'll want a few doses on hand, huh?" Steve said, leaning a little harder into Bucky's shoulder. "What looks good for trying that? Maybe... Tuesday evening?"

Soon, but not too soon; he could get used to the idea without dying of anticipation. Bucky nodded and drew another square, and, after a short hesitation, labeled it Off-switch: Steve.

Steve let out a little breath, not quite a sigh, and then tilted his head, ostentatiously studying the schedule. "There we go, then. When do you want to see Kitty?"

Bucky studied the few open spaces left on the schedule and reached for his phone.

When he got down to the gun range, after he'd finished his schedule and watched a movie with Steve and eaten lunch, Clint was already there, in the far stall. Unlike the last time Bucky had found him here, when he was working off the aftermath of a mission, Clint immediately leaned back out of the stall and smiled. "Hey, man. Want to try a new weapon and get your ass kicked?"
It sounded... appealing, actually. A different way to lose himself than just sinking into the mindlessness of firing.

"Sure," Bucky said. "Maybe I'll time travel to the prehistoric and need to know, right?"

Clint pointed at him with an arrow held between two fingers. "You think you're joking, but you're not. There's a few bows in the middle lockers, grab whatever looks good. You're not gonna have a problem with the draw, but you want a glove if you're putting your right hand on the string."

Bucky fetched a leather glove from his own locker, and then opened the unmarked lockers to find an assortment of bows racked there. A few were already strung, squared-off complicated-looking things with pulleys and multiple strings. But there were also some stored unstrung, slim and simple. Bucky let his fingers trace over a few of them until he found his hand curling around a grip. It was nothing like holding a rifle, but it felt right.

"Good," Clint said, from closer than Bucky expected, when he lifted the bow from the rack. Clint reached past him to pull out a drawer and fished out a little packet from inside—a bowstring, and then grabbed something that looked like a skipping rope with little rubber rings at either end. "First step, you gotta unite your stick and your string into a weapon without breaking either of them."

"What the hell, Barton," Bucky said, watching Clint's deft hands through the process of stringing a bow, but he was already smiling.

An hour later, after he'd broken three bowstrings on his left arm and, on the third bowstring, also the pair of safety glasses Barton had made him put on after breaking the first two, Barton was doubled over laughing helplessly.

Bucky prodded at his face and confirmed that none of the stripes he'd taken from broken strings were bleeding and said, "Okay, so I could switch grips, couldn't I? Draw left like you?"

Clint let out a last wild howl and shook his head, pushing himself upright with an effort. "I don't say this often, but I think it's time for a break from the bow. Let's get out some rifles before somebody really gets hurt, okay?"

Bucky heaved a put-upon sigh, but he handed the unstrung bow back to Clint to put away, and went to get his S-19. Clint, still letting out periodic tiny giggles, unstrung his own bow and put it away, bringing out a similar rifle, though Bucky could see where the grip and sights had been subtly modified to make it exactly perfect for Clint.

They lined up together, resetting the targets for a considerably longer range, and put on hearing protection. Clint let out one last burst of giggles, which made Bucky grin and threw off his breathing, but eventually all was quiet but the muffled popping of the rifles as they took their shots.

Bucky settled into a pleasant kind of calm—not the blankness of purely mechanical repetition, when he was keeping as much of an eye on Clint's targets as his own, but something... relaxed. Happy. Range time with Andrews and Duncan probably would have felt something like this, if they'd ever let him have a weapon. And if he hadn't ever pointed one at them, though that was kind of the same thing.

Clint didn't miss, and neither did Bucky, despite the moving targets' best efforts. When they'd each gone through a couple of cartridges, they paused to reload and let the barrels cool a little while the targets constructed new challenge patterns.

"Just not the same without wind," Clint said from his stall, accompanied by the minute sounds of him
checking over the rifle. "Maybe some sleet in your face."

"Or sun," Bucky agreed. "Sun right through the goddamn scope, I don't know how many times I got set up on a shot at the exact angle of the sun."

"Ha! Fucking rifle-henge, yeah. 'Course you need a pretty wide open space to replicate that shit without getting civilians in the way."

Bucky nodded agreeably. "Tony said something the other day about some building he's got upstate that he wants to set up as an HQ for us that's not in the middle of Manhattan."

"Yeah, sounds nice," Clint said. "You ever think about just striking out on your own, though? Like, you and Steve, you want a place of your own someday?"

Bucky closed his eyes for a second, trying again to push away the thought of that someday, the white space beyond the schedules. He groped for an actual answer to the question, instead, thinking of the succession of variously small tenement flats they'd shared.

"We tried that some, before the war. Don't think we'd beat these digs on our own, even if..." Bucky trailed off, not wanting to go into just how far he was from being ready to live anywhere less secure than the home of the Avengers, or how terrifying that thought suddenly was--that someday he would be well enough, and then what?

"Mm, yeah," Clint said. "For now, definitely. No rush, right? But at the end of the day this is a job, you know? At some point you gotta go home from your job. Like, not today, not tomorrow, but..."

Clint sounded awfully certain about that for someone who, as far as Bucky knew, also lived in the Tower. He wondered for the first time, exactly where Clint had gone for his few days of post-mission stand down, and who it was who waited for him there, but he wasn't wrong even if Bucky didn't want to think about it yet.

That was the first step, though, wasn't it? The fantasy of how it could work? He and Steve had done that with sex stuff, and... well, it had been a necessary step, anyway. Bucky tried to imagine it, something safely unreal, and found that he still couldn't.

"Steve's never gonna quit, not while he's of use to anybody. Probably just plans on dying in harness." Bucky considered that, and added, "Again."

Clint snorted. "Kind of sounds like it's up to you to be the counterbalance, then, huh? I know you've barely started, but do you wanna do this forever? Don't you wanna, I dunno... Settle down somewhere? Or travel to places that aren't being invaded by aliens or something?"

Bucky shook his head. He thought of that moment in one of his defense counsel meetings, when Colonel Griffin had held out the idea that he could stay in the army, be a normal NCO, have a house near base with Steve. How long would he have kept that up? Ten years, twenty? He had to already have all the seniority he could possibly accumulate. Would he retire at some point? Hell, would he age?

He thought back further than that, to the moment when Steve had found him, perched on the railing at the Grand Canyon. Steve had asked him, Do you remember when we talked about this place? Are you enjoying the view?

He still wasn't sure he remembered talking about it, in particular, but he knew he and Steve used to talk about stuff like that. When we're grown up and When we're rich and When this is all over. They were grown up now, and unimaginably rich by the standards they'd had back then, but... when
would it all be over? When would it be time for all the stuff they'd planned back then, those innocent kids they'd been, even in the middle of the war? When would he be recovered enough, when would it be safe enough--when would the whole world be safe enough to spare him and Steve?

*It's not a war,* Steve had told him, when he was first explaining the whole idea of being on the team to Bucky. *It's just the world.* But did it have to be on Steve's shoulders forever?

Steve was supposed to be the healthy one, but could he see any further ahead? Did he imagine anything beyond a week's schedule? And if he didn't, how the hell was Bucky supposed to do it for both of them?

"Maybe," Bucky finally said.

The targets flashed green, and he could think about nothing but aiming and firing for a while.

Later, hanging around in one of the big gyms with Steve and doing the kind of very important training that he had always privately thought of as *shield-skipping,* that conversation with Clint still echoed around in Bucky's head.

*Because there's so much open space in there without any brains,* a little voice like Steve's helpfully informed him, but open space just made him think of the Grand Canyon, round and round in circles. Maybe the real Steve would have a better answer for him; maybe Steve already had a plan.

"You got any idea where Clint goes when he goes away?" Bucky asked, just after Steve made a throw. They both stood very still, watching it whiz around, bouncing from wall to wall to ceiling to floor and up again, leaving the steel target plates ringing.

The shield made a pass on Bucky's left, so close his left arm automatically recalibrated, but Bucky stood his ground and let it fly by, continuing the pattern.

"Someplace out of the city, I guess," Steve said, which covered literally everywhere in the world that was not New York City or, possibly, if Steve was feeling charitable, London or LA. "He never says, and I don't think that's an accident--he likes people to think there's nothing to him that isn't obvious." Steve stepped slightly backward, reached out, and caught the shield as it made a pass overhead. "But there's a reason he and Nat are friends."

Bucky nodded and held his hand out, and Steve passed the shield to him. He took it in his left hand, hefting it thoughtfully as he visualized the first few ricochets, and then made his own throw, the trajectory angled opposite Steve's.

"Thinking about getting away for a while?" Steve asked. "There's a few places we could--"

Bucky was out of practice; he had to duck, automatically reaching out to draw Steve down with him, as the shield made its first overhead pass.

"Does Captain America get leave time?" Bucky asked, watching the shield's next few bounces. Steve caught it when it came close again, then handed it off to Bucky with a *you need the practice* expression that was worse than any insult. Bucky bared his teeth and tried it again.

"I don't really get paid, and I'm more or less in charge," Steve said. "So, yeah, I go where I want, and I want to go where you want to."

"A weekend?" Bucky probed. The second try was working better, flying around the room in a red-blue-silver blur but showing no sign of decapitating him or Steve. "A few days?"
Steve shrugged, tearing his eyes from the shield to look at Bucky. "Could go longer if you--"

"And if aliens don't invade?"

Steve frowned, turning fully toward him and focusing. "Buck? Is that... do you want me to..."

Bucky shook his head, and stuck his left hand out to catch the shield as it took a bounce toward Steve, who didn't raise his own hand or even look. "Just thinking ahead, that's all. Wondering what's down the line."

Steve smiled slightly and his hand found Bucky's on the grip of the shield, tangling their fingers together. "You and me, pal. All the way."

Bucky leaned his forehead against Steve's and shook his head a little. Clint wasn't wrong. One of them had to think about this stuff, and it was pretty goddamn obvious that it wasn't going to be Steve. Bucky was just going to have to cover the gap, guard his flank, just like he always had.

He didn't have any idea how to do that, but it wasn't like the future was gonna jump through a wormhole and start shooting. They had time yet, and now that Bucky knew it was there waiting he could start figuring it out somehow, and sooner or later he'd bring Steve in on it. Steve would figure it out with him once Bucky said it needed figuring, just like everything else.

"You and me," he agreed, before he pushed the shield into Steve's hand and turned to watch where he threw it next.

Kitty came to dinner on Monday, by herself, bearing a cookie tin. Bucky had already showered off the residue of the day--his session with Padfield, explaining the way things had gone the last few days, had been more exhausting than PT and his PR session combined. He was feeling warm and an oddly pleasant kind of tired, as if he'd put in a hard day's work.

And now this: dinner with his niece, who he dimly remembered as a baby, who had grown up in his absence and had lived through all the years he'd missed with Nell and Becca and Trudy and his mom and pop.

Steve took the cookie tin and her coat with a polite murmur, and she smiled brightly at Bucky and opened her arms, so he stepped forward into a hug. He barely dared to close his arms around her--she was old and sweet-smelling and felt fragile to him--but she showed no hesitation, gripping him tight as she pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Hello again, uncle."

"Sweetheart," Bucky muttered, images of his mother and sisters flurrying incoherently through his mind, the women and girls he'd loved and never, ever hurt. "Please, just Bucky. I won't tell your ma."

She snorted and stepped back smiling. "I expect I'll be seeing her before you do, but on your head be it, then. Bucky."

"And I'm Steve," Steve added, returning to his side and offering his hand.

Kitty shook it, looking back and forth between them. "I wish I could tell you what my ma, or any of them, would have thought of you two. I hope they would have been happy for you--and they're not here and I am, so let's say that. I'm happy for you, and so proud to call you both a part of my family."

Bucky's throat went tight, and he could see Steve's blush rising in his peripheral vision. Before either of them managed to say a word, Kitty laughed, tugging her hand free of Steve's and waving it away.
"All right, that's enough of humoring a maudlin old lady. Steve, what did you do with those cookies? According to ancient family tradition, they're Bucky's favorites, though I did my grandson's favorite variation as well."

Up to that moment, Bucky couldn't have said what his favorite cookies were, unless he named the ones Sam and his mom made, for a lack of any other special ones he could think of. But at Kitty's words, he remembered the buttery smell, rich and sweet with the faintest hint of salt, of his mother's shortbread cookies, pressed with tin molds into spirals and seashell shapes. Those were the cookies he should have been arranging on a good plate for company.

His mouth watered, and he reached out for Kitty, steering her toward the kitchen as he said, "You're not gonna tell me I'll spoil my dinner if I have a cookie first, are you, Kitty? You can go back to calling me uncle if you want to try that."

Kitty laughed. "I'd never, Bucky. Here," she picked up the tin, which Steve had left on the kitchen table, not even opened, because Mrs. Rogers had done her best but Steve had never had a single social grace. Bucky steadied the tin while Kitty pulled the lid off, and the scent of the cookies almost overwhelmed him in the sudden rush of memories.

His ma's kitchen came back to him as if he was there again for a moment, warm and bright and loud, full of family--including Steve as much as any of them--and these cookies. She almost always had a batch of them in the jar, ready if company should come by, or if her son should show up with a skinny, underfed friend in tow.

"Oh," Steve said. "Those cookies. I would've hidden them away if I realized, Kitty."

"Shame on you," Kitty said, beaming, as she swatted at Steve. "And the second layer, under the wax paper, those are chocolate-dipped, so you can tell me which you like better."

"All of 'em," Bucky managed to croak out.

When Kitty gently took the tin from his hands he remembered to actually reach out and take a cookie. He turned half away as he took a bite, feeling on the edge of some abyss of feeling. Steve's arm curled around him--he was aware of Steve saying things in a bright, friendly voice that meant he thought Bucky needed him to draw fire.

The cookie, thankfully, was just a cookie once he was holding the first bite on his tongue. It tasted familiar and right--and like Kitty had just done the baking this morning, rather than just boxing up last week's leftovers for him and Steve--but it didn't make the rush of memory any worse than it already was.

Thank Heaven for small mercies, Bucky thought as he chewed. It was what his mother would have said, right before she gave his face a brisk rub with a dishtowel and scolded him for not being a better host.

"That's great, Kitty," Bucky said, turning back to face her again, smiling. "Amazing. Just like Ma's, I swear."

Kitty reached out and squeezed his hand gently. "Maybe a little too much, huh?"

Bucky shrugged, unable to answer that. Would he have wanted not to rediscover that trove of warm, sweet memories?

Steve said, "Maybe dinner before any more, though, right? Have a seat, you two, let me just get the plates."
There was bread and salad and drinks already on the table, and Bucky poured Kitty a glass of wine while Steve brought over the plates that had been keeping warm in the oven.

"Oh, this looks lovely," Kitty said, shooting Bucky a slightly sideways look.

Bucky raised his hands, relaxing into it. "We didn't cook a bit of it, I swear. But we're getting pretty good at putting stuff on plates."

Steve settled into the seat across from Bucky, Kitty between them, and said, "Grace, ma'am?"

Kitty nodded and folded her hands, taking a deliberate breath before she crossed herself. Bucky and Steve followed suit, lagging only slightly as she led the prayer, and after that it was a flurry of tasting and passing this and that.

"Reminds me of going to your folks' for dinner on a Sunday, Buck," Steve said. "I mean, we're not quite as loud, but--Ma and I were never very formal about meals, with one thing and another. Sitting down and saying grace and having everything all set out, that always reminds me of your ma's dining room."

Bucky nodded. "Kitty, did you keep going for Sunday dinner? Was it still like that?"

"Lord, I wasn't ever excused until the Sunday after I got married, and only because we were honeymooning," Kitty said with a smile. "Next Sunday you can bet we were right back in place, and I thought Harry's eyes would roll right out of his head, trying to keep track of everyone--he'd been invited a few times before, as my fiancé, but I think everyone was going easy on him until it was official."

Bucky had to ask about Harry then, a little hesitantly in case he turned out to be gone, but Kitty said she'd only left him at home so she could have Bucky all to herself this time, and she'd be happy to bring him another time.

"Or you could come to our place, if you don't mind only being one floor off the street instead of ninety-five. We're not tyrants about it, but we do a big dinner most Sundays, and of course you and Steve would be welcome anytime."

Bucky pictured another item he could pencil automatically into every week--Sunday Mass, and family dinner. Fixed points to guide him along through whatever that future was, and a whole collection of people who led ordinary lives, with jobs they went home from every night. Harry and Kitty probably knew about getting to the end of a job and retiring, didn't they? He and Steve could learn a thing or two.

"Yeah," Bucky said, realizing he'd let the silence stretch with Kitty and Steve both watching for his reaction to the invitation. "Yeah, I'd... sometime. I'd like that. Soon. But you gotta give me the rundown on who's gonna be there, then."

Kitty smiled and squeezed his hand. "Well, Harry and I have three girls and a boy, and all of them are married, so..."

After that he mostly just had to listen, memorizing names and relationships while Kitty told him stories of her family, filling in the lost years.

He told a story or two himself, about Kitty's mother, Nell, as a child and things that happened during Kitty's babyhood. Steve chimed in as well, keeping things light and easy all the way until they were setting out the cookies again along with the cake they'd gotten for dessert.
Bucky got up to fetch coffee and distributed it around the table, and when he settled back into place, Kitty gave him a serious look. "You know I did have a reason for coming to talk with you, Bucky."

Bucky took a sip of his coffee, nodding as he braced himself.

"People worked out pretty quickly, after the Army made the announcement, that I was one of your closest living relatives. Steve had warned me, a while back, so I thought I was prepared for it, but..." she shook her head. "There's no being prepared for that. Steve arranged for some people to watch our house and keep the reporters off, and your public relations people took over managing the mail and things, so I didn't have to deal with all of it."

Bucky cut a look over at Steve, who was turning a cookie in his hand, evidently very busy searching for just the right corner to take a bite from. Bucky nudged him under the table, pressing his foot against Steve's, and Steve glanced up at him without raising his head and shrugged the tiniest bit. *No reason for you to worry about it,* Bucky could just hear him saying.

"That's good," Bucky said, focusing again on Kitty. "I'm--I'm glad there was someone to help you with everything, so you didn't have to face it alone."

Kitty smiled, nodding. "Only now--now that people have seen you a bit, it's getting all fired up again, especially with the way things went the other day, and then that statement but nothing else from you. And so the PR people thought it might be a good time for me to grant an interview, just to be a harmless old woman and talk about you back then, and about getting you back and all. Fluff, but they think it would help."

"And you--" Bucky could feel his mind whirling in a thousand directions at once, trying to find some sinister angle to this, but he couldn't quite latch on to any. Mostly all he could think, given the exhausting ordeal of his PR meeting today, was, *Oh, thank God, maybe I can put it off a little longer.*

Kitty smiled fondly, and he felt warmed, as if his mother had smiled at him. She patted his hand. "I'm happy to get some use out of being an old lady, if you don't mind me sticking my nose in. And I thought we should talk about what I'm likely to say, and whether there's anything you'd rather I didn't discuss. Plus I had this feeling that Steve might not have told you I was at your trial, let alone how much he helped us, and that's not something you should find out from a magazine."

Bucky shot a sharper look at Steve, who continued to stare down at his cookie for several seconds before peeking at Bucky through his eyelashes. Bucky huffed and rolled his eyes.

"Definitely tell 'em you were always my favorite niece, for starters," Bucky said, taking another cookie to fortify him. "For the rest--did they give you a list of questions?"

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is [here on Tumblr!](https://www.tumblr.com)

I am also on [Tumblr!](https://www.tumblr.com) And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, [over here](https://www.tumblr.com).
"So," Padfield said on Tuesday morning. "I hear you have some plans for this evening that Dr. Hernandez is kind of concerned about."

Bucky grimaced. His talk with Dr. Hernandez about the off-switch, his need for a supply of sedatives, and his emphatic refusal of medical supervision had had a distinct air of well, we both know you'll do something really stupid if I say no, but this isn't a good idea. He should have known that wouldn't actually be the end of it.

"I didn't, um," Bucky rubbed his forehead. "I didn't tell her the whole plan."

Padfield nodded. "So it's a sex thing."

Bucky looked away, feeling a momentary surge of rage--the same he had felt toward Dr. Hernandez, even though he hadn't wound up having to explain that part. I don't want HYDRA involved and I don't want you, either.

But it wasn't like he hadn't given everyone reason to be concerned.

He slumped back in his chair at that, the weight of everyone's care almost more than he could bear. "Yeah. It's a sex thing."

Padfield just nodded, and waited.

"That makes it private," Bucky said firmly. He was not going to be pushed on this. "I'm not--Steve's not--it's ours, okay? It's mine. The trigger is--maybe they implanted it, maybe it's your job or everybody's fucking job to decide how to get it out of me, maybe you all get to--to--poke your fingers in that because--"

Because that's what I need. He didn't, couldn't say it. He shook his head sharply.

"But it's mine. For as long as it's stuck in my head, it's mine. And if I can use it to have sex that's mostly not traumatizing for me or Steve, then I'm gonna fucking use it. That's my choice. I don't have to ask your fucking permission, I don't have to let anybody watch. Tony rigged me up a thing so I can communicate, JARVIS can call for help if I'm over-sedated, Steve knows CPR. It's safe enough, we agreed it's safe enough for us to try. So we're going to try."

Padfield nodded again. "Good."

Bucky's mouth was already open to argue again, but he didn't have anything to say to that. "What?"

Padfield leaned forward a little again. "Good. You're right; it's yours. You get to decide if you want to choose to be triggered like that. It may be unpleasant, it may get you exactly what you want. Either way, I think you owning it is a good first step toward you getting control of it. And you're right--there are things that are obviously safe enough for you, given your physiology and the response you'll get to an emergency in this building, that wouldn't be safe for anyone else. That's why Dr. Hernandez agreed to dispense several sedative doses, and it's why I'm not taking any of the
measures I would be required to take if I believed you were a danger to yourself."

"Oh," Bucky said, and it hit him all of a sudden that he was going to let Steve put him under the off-
switch tonight, that he was going to dive headfirst into all the worst things he remembered them
doing to him and let Steve be right there with him for all of it. He folded forward, dropping his head
into his hands, as the tide of indignation went out and he remembered how wrong all of this could
go. "Oh, fuck."

Padfield made a wordless noise, not unsympathetic. "Want to talk about it?"

Bucky curled his arms around his middle and started working on putting together the words.

He and Steve had negotiated the venue like it was the goddamn Malta Summit—not the sovereign
territories of their respective bedrooms, not the poisoned battleground of the guest bedroom where
Bucky had conducted his prior attempts. Not the living room, where Steve had succeeded so
disastrously.

Eventually Bucky said, "Someplace with windows. I want to open my eyes when it's done and see
daylight," and after Steve had pointed out the length of sunlight hours in mid-February and Bucky
snapped that he fucking knew when the sun set. They had very nearly escalated that into an
argument that would put the whole thing off.

After they cooled down they settled on the gym, on a pallet of blankets, with a few of the machines
scooted aside to make more space. They were high enough above the light pollution that if Steve
turned the polarization filters on the windows the right way, Bucky would be able to see the sky, and
maybe even stars if the weather cooperated.

It was, naturally, snowing so hard Bucky could barely see as far as Central Park when he sat down
on the folded blankets on Tuesday night. He stared out at it, telling himself that it looked different
from Russian snow, from Austrian snow, from the snow in the Alps; he wished he was back at the
Grand Canyon, that they were doing this beside a little fire with the star-studded desert sky stretching
endlessly above them.

Steve sat down beside him on a cushion. "Ready?"

Bucky shrugged and fished the halves of his off-switch visor out of his pocket as he tried to think of
what it would even mean to be ready. Surely he wouldn't feel this jangling of nerves, hope flickering
through his visions of everything that could go wrong. Still, the moment was here, and he was here,
and it was going to happen.

"No. But that's never really stopped me before."

Steve snorted softly. "Hey, gimme a kiss before we get started."

Bucky leaned in and obliged him, resting his hand on Steve's thigh and brushing their lips together.
Steve curled an arm around him, squeezing tight, but didn't deepen the kiss.

"I'm with you, Buck," Steve said softly. "Every step of the way, no matter where this takes us. I'm
with you."

Bucky nodded, eyes closed, and rested his forehead against Steve's for a moment. He did his best to
empty his mind, to imagine nothing, and when he was at least superficially calm he pulled away and
lay down on his back.
Steve's hand touched each of the visor-halves and brushed over his face; Bucky wouldn't have been surprised to feel him trace a cross on Bucky's forehead. Steve dispensed his own kind of benediction.

"Okay," Steve said, his voice low and gentle, like Bucky was sleeping and Steve didn't want to startle him awake. "You tell me when you're ready to stop."

Bucky nodded slightly and made the series of eye movements that would translate to Sedate me for the visor, knowing that Steve would see and understand.

"Okay," Steve repeated, and then the recorded voice, and Bucky's body transformed into a prison—one he'd been in plenty of times before. He could almost hear the door slamming shut, almost smell the wet concrete and old blood.

But not really. Really he was here, with Steve, and he knew that. He did know that. What he actually heard was the tiny sound of the visor extending over his eyes.

He signaled Okay. They'd set it so the words would show up on a tablet instead of being interpreted out loud—Bucky hadn't wanted to hear his own protests in some mechanical voice.

"Good," Steve said softly, and Bucky felt Steve's hand again, on his chest, and Steve's lips brushing his.

For a second it felt nothing but good; Steve's scent was on every breath, and he couldn't mistake Steve's touch for any other. He lay still, his mind as inert as his body, and felt nothing but Steve leaning down over him, Steve's fingers brushing his cheek.

He wondered what would happen if he just stayed right here in this quiet dark, if no memories boiled up out of the depths to torment him. Could he have it like this? Motionless, helpless, but alone with Steve even in his own mind?

No sooner had he thought it than memory leaked in like the first whiff of acrid smoke warning that there was a disaster at the end of this road. The echo of a laugh lingered in his ears. They had thought it was funny when he dared to hope for anything.

Of course this couldn't be easy. Of course he couldn't be alone with Steve—in his own mind least of all. Too many others had already been here, and left their imprints behind to continue their torments even when Bucky was free everywhere else.

Sensations followed, creeping in and then impossible not to notice. There were too many hands touching him, and his body was bare and exposed on a cold table, rearranged for the convenience of whoever was close enough to grab hold. He tried to flinch, to brace himself; he tried to fight, to scream, but he could never escape those hands. All those fucking hands kept touching him, and their voices washed over him, some gloating, some bored, none of them remotely concerned with what their asset thought of how they handled it. They wouldn't stop. They would never stop.

There was a voice in his ear, low and firm. "You with me, Buck? You feel me touching you? That's my hand on your belly right now, you feel that?"

Steve. It was Steve, Steve was here, but he shouldn't be here. He shouldn't see this. They would get him too—they would do this to him, and Bucky couldn't let that happen, but he couldn't move.

Steve, Bucky signaled with his eyes, because Steve would understand. He wanted to say it, wanted to feel his lips and tongue shape Steve's name, wanted to touch Steve just one more time before—before--
"That's right," Steve murmured, lips brushing Bucky's cheek. "It's me, I'm right here with you. And they can't hurt me. Nobody can hurt me. I'm here just for you."

But the techs were laughing. Rumlow was laughing, gloating about how he'd gotten Steve on his knees and what he should've made him do while he was down there. He would do it this time. He was whispering it in Bucky's other ear. He was right there; he and Steve had to be practically shoulder to shoulder over Bucky's body.

"I'm just here for you," Steve murmured. "Just feel me, pal, feel me touching you. Feel my hand? It's going up now, you feel that?"

He did, he felt Steve's hand rubbing slowly up his chest, but there were still all those other hands on him, cold and hard and cruel, forcing him open at both ends. His mouth was full so he couldn't speak if he wanted to; they were fucking him, splitting him open. That hurt, but it was just pain, just violation, just something he'd survived again and again. It was almost background noise compared to Rumlow leaning over his other side, cold and hard and smelling like he smelled, gun oil and hair gel, talking in Bucky's other ear so he could hardly make out Steve's words.

"Gonna make him scream," Rumlow growled, and Bucky went cold with horror, and felt the skin of his arms tighten into goosebumps. "He hasn't had the practice you've had at keeping quiet, soldier. He doesn't understand the procedures. But he will, won't he? You'll show him how all of this works."

Bucky tried to shake his head, feeling sick with fear. He didn't know if it was worse if Rumlow meant they would demonstrate on him in front of Steve, or if they would say the words and strip away his control and then force him to do it to Steve himself, but it didn't matter. He wouldn't survive either. His eyes tracked frantically back and forth, no no no no no.

"Bucky," Steve said, sounding far away even though Bucky could feel the warmth of him all down one side of his body--was he already on the table? Were they bound together already? "Buck, listen to me. I'm here. I'm right here. I'm not leaving you, and no one can hurt me. Do you feel me? Do you hear me? Do you feel this?"

Steve's thumb brushed over his nipple, a shocking thrum of heated pleasure in the middle of the pain and cold dread of what was to come. Steve was trying to make it good, to give him something good, in the middle of all this. Bucky couldn't tell him no, not now, not when they were both caught and it might be the last chance they ever had.

Yes, Bucky signed with his eyes. Steve could see him. Steve would know; he was the only one who would understand what Bucky was saying. Yes. Steve.

"Good," Steve said, and there was more, a warm reassuring ripple of sound in Bucky's ear, something that connected with the warm hand on his chest and Steve's finger and thumb, teasing and tugging and drawing out little shivers of pleasure even while Bucky was being fucked, being raped, and Rumlow's cold fingers were digging in and he could smell Grisha's breath, could hear the sizzle of the stun baton.

He wanted to cry. He couldn't cry. It wasn't fair that Steve was going to suffer this, be tortured, raped, maybe killed, and he couldn't cry.

Steve Steve Steve, he repeated, over and over, because at least he could do that much. At least he could remember Steve's name, for as long as they let him remember.

"That's me," Steve said, and his touch started to slide down Bucky's body. There was another touch,
wetter, against his cheek—soft and still somehow, despite the cock driving into his mouth, cutting off his air. He tried to only feel that, only the brush of Steve's lips, only Steve's hand.

They were going to find Steve. Any minute they would realize, they would know that Bucky was feeling something good and they would know Steve was here. They would take him, they would--

Steve's hand closed on his cock, warm and steady and solid, and Bucky wanted to howl. He wanted to see, one last time. He was getting hard in Steve's hand and he wanted to see it, but he could only feel, and there were too many things to feel. Horror and pain and Steve's mouth brushing the corner of his, Steve's hand stroking him, coaxing pleasure through the pain like a flower growing through a crack in concrete.

"I've got you," Steve was saying, fuzzing in and out like a radio in the middle of the cruel laughter and Rumlow's cruel whispers and the racing rush of blood in Bucky's ears. "I'm here. I've got you."

He tried to cling to Steve's voice, to hear it more than anyone else's, to feel Steve's hand on him more than any other. It was almost easy—he couldn't mistake Steve's touch for anyone else's, and Steve was so much warmer than the others.

That made sense because--

No, no, he just had to focus on Steve and try to drown out the rest. He couldn't think about why.

He tried again to move, to push toward Steve, to fuck up into that familiar grip, but he couldn't move a muscle, couldn't respond in any way except the one way completely out of his control. His cock was hard in Steve's hand, jerking in response to the sweep of Steve's thumb, and Bucky couldn't do a damn thing about it, couldn't move, couldn't stop hearing Rumlow in his other ear.

"Bet he looks pretty going down on you, you think he'll do that for you? Let us all watch? Let him think we don't even see him until he's given us a good show? When he's done, that's when we'll take him, make him do the same for all of us."

No no no, Bucky signaled, Steve Steve Steve didn't hear Rumlow at all, didn't know his cover was blown. Steve was still nuzzling his cheek, oblivious to the danger, still stroking Bucky through it like nothing else mattered. There was a horrible part of him that couldn't help feeling how good it was, the pleasure of Steve's touch rising in him, filling his body. At least—at least—it wasn't worth it, he'd never trade Steve's safety for this, but--oh God, at least he could feel it one more time. At least he had Steve here with him.

"That's it, pal, God, you feel so good," Steve was murmuring. "You with me? You feel what I'm doing?"

Steve yes, Bucky signaled, because God, it did feel good, but he didn't have a signal to warn Steve. There was just the one that would make Steve stop, and he didn't want Steve to stop, to misunderstand and leave him alone here, even if that would mean Steve was safe. Bucky gave into the pleasure, to his own selfish greed to feel this, to feel Steve's touch and respond to it. Steve, Steve.

"That's me," Steve muttered, stroking faster now, slicker somehow. His touch was still so warm, and it felt so good, even though Bucky couldn't move, even though this was going to cost them everything when it was over. Bucky could hardly feel anything else now but Steve's hand on him, could hardly hear anyone speaking past the blood rushing in his ears and the filthy sound of Steve's hand on his cock and Steve still whispering in his ear.

He just had to feel this, remember this, keep this one moment when all the rest crashed down. Steve.
"Yeah, pal," Steve whispered. "Go ahead. Go for it."

He wanted to yell, wanted to howl, but the sound bottled up in his frozen throat and the feeling escaped the only way it could. He came, his cock jerking in Steve's grip, spurting everywhere. He couldn't see but he could smell it, hear it; he could feel the way Steve kept stroking him through it, and for a moment Bucky forgot everything, forgot what had to happen next, and let himself float in the pleasure and relief and closeness.

Steve's lips were pressing against his cheek, right at the corner of his mouth, and Steve was so warm--had to be practically on top of him--kissing his eyelids, his forehead. "That's it, pal. That's it. You just sleep now, okay? When you wake up I'll be here. For now I'm gonna send you to sleep."

*Oh,* Bucky thought. *Right.*

But before he could think any more about it, the sedatives blotted him out entirely.

Bucky opened his eyes and stared up at the moon. Clouds were scudding across its face; sometimes all he could see was the glow of it through the gray, but he just kept watching, knowing that it was important that he could see it, even if he couldn't remember why.

It was all right; he could keep watch like this as long as he needed to, with Steve lying half on top of him, breathing soft in his ear, and blankets covering him where Steve didn't. There was no place else he needed to be, nothing else he needed to do, but to watch the moon and feel Steve breathing against his chest.

Then Steve stirred a little, nuzzling against his jaw. "You 'wake?"

"Nope," Bucky said, keeping his eyes on the moon. He had to keep his eyes on the moon; if he looked away, if--

He jolted into full awareness then, and squeezed his eyes shut. It had worked; it had been awful and better than he could imagine all at once, and he didn't think he could put any of it into words.

"Ah," Steve muttered, sounding more awake. "Now?"

"Now, yeah," Bucky sighed, turning his head toward Steve, bracing himself for whatever he was going to see--but Steve was just watching him, his gaze steady and calm.

Bucky looked back, hoping that Steve would see what he needed to see, wouldn't ask him yet to say anything.

Steve gave the tiniest nod, acknowledging everything that had just happened and setting it aside for right now; no need to debrief a mission when they were still in the field. They were both in one piece. That was enough.

The corner of his mouth curled up, and Steve said, "Wanna hear something awful?"

Bucky raised his eyebrows. "Do I?"

Steve pushed up enough to brush a kiss over Bucky's mouth and whispered, "Happy Valentine's Day, pal."

Bucky stared at him. "You're shitting me."

Steve shook his head and reached for a phone, raising it to show Bucky the time and date: 11:23 PM,
February 14.

"You," Bucky said. "You--"

Steve cracked first, grinning, and then Bucky started to laugh and couldn't stop, flopping back against the window as he shook with it, snorting and gasping. Pretty soon Steve was laughing too, gasping out, "I woulda brought flowers, but--"

Bucky smacked at him, shaking with laughter, "Shut it! Shut--you're the worst--"

"Oh, the worst, huh--" Steve was leaning in over him when they both heard what they were saying and stopped, like a skip in a record, like film sticking in the projector.

The moment teetered in the silence while neither of them could stop thinking about exactly what worst meant, when it came to people who'd put their hands on Bucky.

He shook his head sharply, blowing a frustrated little raspberry. "Fuck it. You are the worst, in your- -your weight class. They might've fucked me, doesn't mean I'm not allowed to have standards."

Steve smiled cautiously back. "Standards, huh? Well, it's good to try new things."

Bucky grinned, sitting up and shoving at Steve's shoulder. "I always had standards, pal. They were just always shaped like you. Kinda squirrelly and crooked, that's all."

"Me," Steve started, but he couldn't even pretend proper outrage and just cracked up again.

"You," Bucky agreed. "I mean they straightened out your spine okay, but they still left you pretty bent in every other way, pal. Can't even throw that shield straight."

Steve was still snickering. "It's a circle, Buck, you can't--"

"That's what I'm saying, straight guy would've just gone for a gun. Although those trajectories aren't exactly straight, either."

Steve blew out a breath. "Well there you go, nobody's straight around here. Breaking news, read all about it."

Bucky shook his head and kissed Steve's cheek. "When did you remember it's Valentine's Day? Were you planning this?"

"Nah, I was waiting for you to wake up and checked my email," Steve said. "Got the annual big email from the people who open my mail, bunch of photos of the valentines, and then it occurred to me to wonder when Valentine's Day actually is."

Bucky shook his head, though he also wondered if the people opening his mailbags could scrape together enough nice stuff to send him a picture of, or if it was all... he didn't even know. Blackened flowers and small animal carcasses, probably. He shook off the image, then thought of a more sensible way to eradicate it.

"Lemme see this email you got. I need to know who's sending valentines to my fella when I haven't even had a chance to get him something special myself."

"Well, if it's any comfort I didn't get you anything either," Steve said, slinging an arm around him. "I mean, except, you know, hopefully a nicer-than-average nightmare."

"Fishing," Bucky muttered, but he twisted to give Steve a little kiss and added, "Barely a nightmare
at all, pal, honest."

Steve looked skeptical at that, and Bucky rolled his eyes and squirmed, trying to get comfortable under his arm and against the glass. "Fine, a nightmare with some really good parts and some extra-nightmarish parts that we can discuss in the morning. Meanwhile, why the hell are we still on the floor in the gym?"

Steve snorted and hugged him a little closer. "I dunno, was I supposed to be the brains of this operation? You gotta tell me that stuff, Buck."

Bucky huffed and struggled free of the blankets Steve had tucked over him--as if he were suffering a bout of pneumonia instead of a bad dream, a good handjob, and a dose of sedatives. "Come on, we're going to bed and you're gonna let me eyeball the stuff your adoring fans sent you so I can figure out how to romance you right in the 21st century."

"Aye aye, sarge," Steve agreed, holding his hand up and letting Bucky haul him to his feet. Steve let himself overbalance just a little, leaning into Bucky once he had his feet under him, and Bucky stole a quick kiss, dazed with the rush of standing.

"Hey," Steve said, softer. "What do you think, was that maybe okay?"

"Maybe," Bucky agreed. He smiled a little and kissed Steve again, leaning into him right back. "Yeah, maybe okay, Stevie."

Steve grinned like Bucky had just given him the moon, and Bucky couldn't help feeling like maybe he had.

Chapter End Notes

(like Steve, I did not plan the timing. I just noticed it when I started working out the actual calendar dates for this section of the story and figured... why not? :D)

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 50

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

No chapter next week (I'll be out of town and also I am nearly out of stuff already written to be confident of posting on time!) so we'll be back in two weeks with Chapter 51!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky woke up in Steve's bed with Steve already gone; the usual breakfast noises were audible from the kitchen, but Bucky's schedule didn't require him to be up for at least another twenty minutes. He didn't think Steve was headed anywhere in a hurry this morning, but he would come back in and say so if he was.

In the meantime, Bucky could just stretch and sprawl across the bed he'd shared with Steve last night, after they'd had sex and talked a little. They had come in here and looked at kids' drawings of red hearts and tons of flowers and stuffed animals and candy which were all being donated to hospitals and homeless shelters. They'd talked a little, not about anything important, and eventually Steve had been in the mood enough to let Bucky give him a handjob, and they both agreed not to look too closely at the time so it could still have been Valentine's Day and they were square. It was the same evening, anyway. That counted. They were practically like regular people.

Except...

Bucky frowned up at the ceiling, playing back over the evening. He remembered all of it, allowing for the jumbled mess of nightmare that was the off-switch part, Rumlow's threats against Steve adding an exciting new wrinkle to his old stock of memories. He remembered that he'd actually come with Steve's hand on him, Steve's voice in his ear, and that had been enough to jolt him out of his flashbacks for a minute before Steve sedated him.

It was all there. It was all fine. But there was something missing--something that hadn't happened?

Something that was supposed to happen?

He couldn't place it, and after a few minutes of that he figured he'd ruined his lazing-around-in-bed opportunity and got up, visiting Steve's bathroom and pulling on enough clothes to make breakfast no more hazardous than usual.

Steve grinned at him when he wandered in. "That's my shirt."

"What, you want it back?" Bucky kissed him briefly and went to fix his breakfast. "Trying to get me naked when the sun's barely up?"

"I don't know why that should be any more indecent than wanting you naked at any other time of day," Steve said thoughtfully.

"It's not," Bucky assured him without looking up from the toaster. "Just inefficient. Places to go, stuff to do. Obviously, or you could've stayed in bed with me and seen me naked right there."
Steve was silent a little too long, and Bucky did look then. Steve's smile had faded, his eyes searching as he looked at Bucky. "Should I...? You seemed all right."

"I'm all right." Bucky went to him and gave him a slightly longer kiss. "I was all right last night and I'm all right now, pal. I just meant what I said, we got things to do today."

Steve nodded, and Bucky could see the moment when he decided to take Bucky at his word and refocused. "Speaking of, PR wants us within the next hour--they've got a version of Kitty's interview for us to review. They want to post it today, have it in tomorrow's paper."

"Post..." Bucky frowned down at his plate as he carried it over to the table. "Online? Before anybody buys the paper to read it?"

Steve smiled a little. "It's the New York Times, Buck, they're not depending on you and Kitty to sell papers. Also there's some... paywall? Something. People have to pay online too. And this way they get the scoop quicker--and you get the good publicity quicker, which is the whole reason Kitty talked to a paper and not a magazine."

Bucky blew out a breath, nodding as he sat down. They had had that whole discussion of the logistics when Kitty came to visit--the Times had offered good terms and quick turnaround, and the whole thing was more controllable than a TV interview. It had all been more carefully strategized than any mission he could remember Steve leading back during the war; it was more like what other people had done around him, shaping everything they did into something heroic.

*Propaganda*, they called it, more when the other guys did it than when they did; it was another part of war that HYDRA had never really stopped, either--still shaping narratives around what he did even when he himself was missing from the story. Bucky couldn't help grimacing at the thought, even if this particular propaganda was mostly honest and in a pretty good cause.

Steve's expression turned worried. "If there's anything you don't like in the article, Buck, they've got people--"

Bucky shook his head and focused on eating. "No, it's nothing. It's fine."

"Hey," Steve said softly, and Bucky had to look again.

Steve raised his eyebrows pointedly. "Is it actually nothing?"

Bucky rolled his eyes. "It was a stray bad thought, that's all. Just--yeah, Steve, actually nothing. Not making any plans to assassinate New York Times reporters."

"Oh," Steve said, turning back to his own breakfast. "That's, uh... I... Fiona told me they're called intrusive thoughts? Some kinds of bad thoughts. Especially the ones that sound really right and reasonable, sometimes, until you think about it and..."

Bucky shoved food into his own mouth and chewed instead of saying anything about how smart Fiona was for somehow convincing Steve both that there was nothing wrong with him and that he had *intrusive thoughts* that he needed to be on guard against.

When Steve looked at him again, Bucky nodded. "Woj called 'em that too. Made me practice picking 'em apart, figuring out the logic and which part of it was bad."

Steve nodded eagerly. "Yeah! Yeah, the--implications, and presuppositions, and all that. It's a real interesting exercise sometimes."
Bucky hid his smile in another mouthful of food. He was really going to have to meet this Fiona sometime, who'd been disguising cognitive reframing strategies as *a real interesting exercise* for Steve. He should probably bake her a cake.

The most surprising part of the article was right at the start.

"I had been photographed for newspapers dozens of times, maybe more than a hundred, by the time I was ten years old. After that it mostly stopped, but the first five years after the war, a lot of people took an interest in our family--in Bucky, of course, but also because of our connection to Steve. My mother said that it stopped when she and her sisters started to look older than the pictures of the boys. That was when they cut Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers loose from their family and made them these historical figures. And now look at me! I could probably play their grandmother in a movie."

There were photos to prove it, too: one of Bucky's sisters and five-year-old Kitty in a dress not much different from the one she'd worn in that picture of Bucky, next to a picture of Kitty today. At the center of each photo was the same framed gold star, held by Becca in the first picture, and Kitty in the newer one.

It had never occurred to Bucky to think of the family he left behind, back then, being hounded in that way. It wouldn't have been like it was now--he and Steve had been simply heroes, and the press wasn't like this new world where everyone had a smartphone camera and a twitter account--but it was a strange continuity with his own experience, and made him glad all over again that his parents and sisters had never had to deal with the mess of his resurrection.

The rest of the article was the stuff they'd talked about with Kitty; she shared some memories and family stories, and talked about what it was like to have first Steve, and then Bucky, return from the dead after decades of knowing them mostly by their famous deaths. Bucky nodded along with all of it. Steve had a few quibbles and the PR people raised a few other issues, but Bucky let it all go by, his thoughts moving in other directions.

Mostly he was thinking about how grateful he was to Kitty for taking this on, drawing attention that in some ways she understood better than he did. He had already thanked her, and would again, but it didn't feel like enough. He wanted to do something for her, give her something. Bake her a cake, except he was sure she could bake cakes a thousand times better than anything he could do.

He was still thinking about it when Steve headed off to another meeting and Bucky went on with his rearranged morning, getting in his PT time and then another shower.

*Flowers*, he thought, as he was getting dressed, thinking of dates and birthdays, buttering up his ma or surprising his little sisters. *I ought to get her flowers.*

"JARVIS," he asked, standing in the kitchen with his hands on his hips, eyeing his schedule and considering what he could further rearrange. "Do you know anything about how I get my hands on money?"

He knew that he *had* money--he had signed a bunch of forms that authorized Steve to handle his back pay, which had been a disorientingly large, bold-faced number. He'd signed over his current pay, which sounded nearly as ludicrous, to Steve at the same time. Now he was retired and presumably getting a military pension. It was all in accounts somewhere; there would be numbers, passwords, cards. Steve would know, but Steve was busy, and Bucky wanted to do this himself.

"If you are referring to cash," JARVIS said, "the usual method is to visit an automated teller machine
and insert a debit card. If you will check the second drawer of the desk in the living room..."

Bucky moved before JARVIS finished speaking, and pulled out an envelope labeled BUCKY'S CARDS in Steve's handwriting. There were a couple of credit cards--debit cards?--inside, each with a bit of paper taped around it giving the PIN. They were all set to... he squinted at the string of numbers, trying to make sense of it, and then it clicked. His mother's birthdate.

There was an ID in there, too, labeled AVENGER at the top, with his information and a picture of him and a faint holographic sheen. Bucky turned it over a few times, wondering what tech Tony had hidden inside it, then shrugged and tucked it into his pocket with the other two cards.

There was also, Bucky noticed, an envelope labeled PETTY CASH.

That had to be meant for Bucky; Steve wouldn't have labeled the envelope for himself, and no one else was going to go looking through his desk drawers. Bucky opened the envelope and drew out a few bills--twenties, tens, a five and some ones--and folded those together next to his cards in his pocket.

"Gonna need a wallet," he muttered. He still had his military ID in a drawer in his room; he could put that in with the other. But that was a problem for tomorrow. Now that he had money, he had an errand to run.

"JARVIS," he said, tipping his head back. "Where's the closest place a fella can go to get flowers? I mean, in person, where I'm there and the flowers are there and I can buy them with money that's not just a number code on a website."

He knew about that method of buying flowers thanks to an important orientation session with Andrews called Apologizing To Your Wife For Not Going To Iowa For Christmas. He had also learned about buying limited edition nail polishes and fancy chocolates on the internet, but those seemed less applicable to this situation.

"There are two florists located within the building. Mr. Stark prefers the one on the second floor, which is prone to be somewhat less crowded."

Bucky nodded. "That one, then. How do I get there?"

JARVIS gave him the directions, projecting a map in the air at the same time; he would have to switch elevators on the sixteenth floor. JARVIS promised to get him an elevator car to himself, but from the elevator he'd be in a public space for about fifty yards before he reached the florist shop. Anyone could be walking around down there, and anyone could come into the shop.

"Headphones," he decided, and went to retrieve his. He walked back to the elevator with them in his hands, and hesitated one more time at the doors, looking up. "You aren't going to tell Steve and ruin the surprise, are you?"

"Captain Rogers is in a meeting," JARVIS said primly. "I will contact him only if there is a problem requiring his attention, or at your request."

Bucky smiled, even though the this is probably not a great idea bells were already starting to ring in his head. "Thanks."

He boarded the elevator and put on his headphones, and by the time he'd gotten his music cued up he was on 16 and had to change elevators. He hesitated in the doorway, still half-sheltered on the threshold as he took in the hallway--the empty elevator JARVIS had promised him already had its doors open directly across from him.
In between there was wide open space, and a few people in suits, wearing employee badges around their necks. A few were absorbed in their phones; two looked toward him curiously and then quickly away.

Bucky gritted his teeth and took the three quick strides across to the next elevator, turning on his heel as the doors closed. His heart rate was rising; he forced himself to breathe evenly, to listen to the music in his ears. He could do this. He had to be able to do this.

No one would expect to see him at a florist's shop; no one would be lying in wait for him with nasty signs. No one would try to grab him, or try... anything else. He didn't have backup watching his flanks—not in person, anyway—but it didn't matter. He was just going to buy some flowers. He wasn't even leaving the building.

The elevator doors opened again, this time on a wide hallway with shops on either side, people walking here and there in all different kinds of clothing, intent on their own errands. No one looked toward him—he was just a guy getting off the elevator.

He got off the elevator. He kept his hands jammed into his pockets, chin tilted down but eyes up as he navigated toward the florist's shop. No one seemed to really notice him. He had plenty of shiny surfaces to use to watch behind him. One or two people maybe were looking toward him, maybe broke stride or even stopped, but if they called out he didn't hear it, and the bulk of the people around remained set in their own patterns of motion, intent on their own errands.

Before he was ready for it, he'd arrived at the shop. It was a little dimmer inside than the main concourse, and crowded with bouquets and vases and balloons and flowers in buckets. There was a black woman behind the counter, maybe in her forties. She gave him a wide, welcoming smile and wave, but didn't say anything. Bucky stopped short and blinked at her, waiting for her expression to change as she recognized him.

It only changed to a slight confusion—he was staring—and she mouthed, *Can I help you?*

She might have said it out loud. He still had his headphones on, his ears pumped full of something bouncy and bright and synthesized from the... 70s? 80s? Maybe the 90s. It all kind of blurred together in the middle.

Bucky swallowed. He really had not thought this through. He glanced over his shoulder—no one else had come into the little shop, though the door stood open and people were passing through the hallway in front.

Cautiously, he turned down the music until he could hear people's footsteps and indistinct voices over it, and then he said, "I, uh, I need some flowers."

Her smile returned to its original width and brightness, and he was faintly able to hear her say, "Well, you're in luck. We sell those here. What kind did you want?"

"Uh," Bucky looked around the little shop wildly, trying to see different kinds of flowers instead of cover and obstacles and possible improvised weapons. He'd gotten so stuck on the idea of doing this that he hadn't actually thought through what it was he meant to do. Bad planning. This was why he didn't usually plan his own ops.

He stepped closer to a display and focused intently on it instead of letting his mind go down that path. Red petals. Green leaves. Green stems. Orange petals, shading to yellow. He breathed in through his nose, smelled flowers and cut stems and water and plastic buckets. He was in a flower shop because he had wanted to get some flowers for Kitty, and for Steve, too.
"I, uh," he dared to look at the florist again. She was still behind her counter, and her smile had shrunk to something kind, letting him glimpse that the first smile was a performance for a customer. "I need to thank someone--my niece. And... and I forgot Valentine's Day, so I wanted something for my, uh..." His brain went blank as he tried to think of the generic word for what Steve was to him, and he blurted out, "Steve."

The woman looked him up and down for a moment, and Bucky pressed his hands against his thighs inside his pockets, trying to keep his shoulders down and his expression calm. She had to be about to recognize him, and once she did...

"Mr. Stark likes to stand right here," she said finally, gesturing to a spot at the end of the counter. "So I think the sightlines must be good."

Bucky opened his mouth and closed it a couple of times and then took a few quick steps to the spot she had indicated. It did have good sightlines, including a fisheye mirror that would allow a person working behind the counter to watch the door and allowed him to get a good look at the back area of the shop he couldn't otherwise see.

The woman behind the counter was already gathering flowers from buckets, assembling a bouquet of bright flowers in shades of orange and yellow. He thought of Kitty holding it the way she'd held his gold star; some of the flowers were even kind of star-shaped, but the bouquet was bright and cheery.

"Yeah," he said belatedly. "Yeah, that looks nice."

She glanced up from her work and smiled a little before looking back down. "Good. I hate it when people argue with me about flowers. Thinking they know what will look good or what things should cost, hm."

Bucky shook his head in agreement, too glad to be rescued from his own unpreparedness to argue at all. He glanced around the shop and said, "Oh, what about--"

The florist looked up at him, then followed his gesture toward some boldly-colored flowers, multiple blooms growing on each bloom in deep indigo, red, and golden yellow. "Those? For Steve?"

They reminded him, abruptly, of Steve's paints from when he was in art school, the way he would mix pigments to get any color he needed, even if he double-checked his tints with Bucky sometimes.

If the florist said something while Bucky was looking away, he missed it, but she came out from behind the counter to collect most of the contents of the bucket he'd pointed to, and some sprigs of small white flowers as well. She deftly arranged them into a vivid spray of color, dotted with tiny stars.

Faster than Bucky could have believed, there were two bouquets wrapped up in green paper and tucked into white boxes, and the florist moved over to the cash register. Bucky recalled the numbers he'd seen on the website when Andrews ordered flowers, and reminded himself that he was in Manhattan, in Stark Tower, in the shop Tony himself preferred.

He managed not to actually choke when the total popped up, but he did make a small noise that had the florist giving him a sympathetic look. "Want me to put it on Mr. Stark's tab?"

Bucky shook his head determinedly. "I can, uh--" he spotted a little card showing logos next to the cash register, and recognized one of them from one of the cards in his pocket. He pulled it out and offered it to her, and she nodded and swiped the card, then turned it over and glanced at the back.

"You're supposed to sign it, so no one else can use it," she informed him. Bucky glanced down at the
card, uncertain how that would stop anyone, but she was already saying, "But I think I can consider you positively identified. Sign here, please."

Bucky signed the slip neatly and handed it back, exchanging pen and paper for the two white boxes. "Thanks for everything, ma'am."

The woman smiled again, waving him away in a regal sort of dismissal, and Bucky turned away, stepping aside and raising the boxes to half-shield his face as someone else came into the shop. He stepped out hurriedly, making for the elevator in long strides. He was inside and headed up before he realized that he hadn't turned his music back up when he left the florist's shop--anyone could have shouted at him and he would have heard what they said, but no one had shouted at all. No one had noticed him, or let on if they did.

He had done it. He had bought flowers.

He was back in the safety of his and Steve's place before he realized that he still had to do the part where he gave the flowers to their intended recipients. Setting the boxes and his headphones down, he looked up toward JARVIS. "How do I send flowers to Kitty, JARVIS?"

"Mr. Stark employs a courier service," JARVIS informed him. "If you'll place the flowers in the elevator, I will direct them accordingly."

Bucky knew that that was taking a hell of a shortcut, but on the other hand, Kitty would probably get the flowers faster than any other. He went and found a sheet of Steve's drawing paper to write a quick note thanking Kitty for all she'd done, and opened up the box to tuck it in with the bouquet, then set the box in the elevator.

That still left Steve's flowers. Of course, Bucky could just leave them on the table and wait for Steve to come home and find them, but he was sort of on a roll now. Steve was somewhere in the building at a meeting; Bucky could find him and surprise him.

Bucky glanced up. He could ask JARVIS for Steve's location, and JARVIS would give it to him, to the centimeter, but he felt suddenly certain that that was cheating in a way that asking JARVIS to send Kitty's flowers wasn't.

Anyway, Bucky had been the most feared assassin of the last century; if he couldn't track his quarry in a single building when Steve wasn't even evading him, he should retire now and devote himself to learning to bake his ma's cookies as well as Kitty did.

He glanced at the time, wracking his brains for a recollection of where Steve had gone, what he'd said, when they parted after their meeting with PR. That had been on the 55th floor, which seemed to be all briefing and conference rooms and possibly only for the Avengers' use. Bucky didn't think he'd ever seen anyone else in the halls there, the way there had been office workers waiting for the elevator down on 16.

Of course, maybe they just all cleared out when they knew he was going to be around.

There was only one way to find out. Bucky got the bouquet from its box, arranging the green paper to protect the wet stems without hiding the blooms, and headed to the elevator. "JARVIS, 55, please."

"At your service," JARVIS said as the doors closed and the elevator started to move. No questions, no advice. Clearly he understood that Bucky meant to do this on his own.

He didn't see anyone when he stepped out at 55, but when he listened, there were signs of life down
the corridor and around a corner. Bucky followed the signs to what appeared to be the only occupied meeting room, but before he’d reached the door he recognized the voices: Clint, and a couple of the PR people, though not anyone who had been in Bucky’s meeting.

Bucky peeked in anyway once he reached the door. Clint was facing away, but as soon as Bucky looked in he jumped up like his ass was on fire. "Sorry, Barnes needs me. One sec."

He darted to the door and Bucky stepped back, giving him room to get out of the room, and out of the sightline of the people inside.

Clint pulled the door shut behind him, eyeing the flowers with interest. "You know you're carrying those like a rifle, right?"

Bucky glanced down at the bouquet cradled in his right arm and shrugged. "How else am I supposed to carry them?"

Clint waved his hands in nothing that resembled a reasonable way to hold flowers and then shrugged agreement. "Yeah, okay, fair. You don't want to look like a bride coming down the aisle--unless you and Rogers are heading to City Hall to get married and you came to get me to be best whatever, in which case I question your judgment but I don't even care as long as it gets me out of that meeting."

Bucky wrinkled his nose in a sympathetic grimace. "I was with PR for a couple hours already today and I'm pretty sure I don't want to find out what would happen if we got hitched without giving them a year of advance warning. Just looking for Steve to give him these, you seen him?"

"Aww, Valentine's Day," Clint muttered, pulling out his own phone. "Dammit, dammit, I--uh, yeah, Steve's on 57 I think? I didn't actually see him, technically, but--yes, yes, fucking repeat my last order, come on, it's gotta get there yesterday."

Clint didn't look up from his phone, so Bucky backed away slowly until he reached a stairwell door and slipped through without a sound. It was probably better if he wasn't still standing there when Clint realized what he'd given away.

On the other hand, maybe it was a sign of trust. Maybe Clint only kept the person he was sending a belated Valentine's Day gift to mostly secret; maybe Bucky had passed some kind of test since yesterday, and now he was allowed to know.

Somehow Bucky doubted that. He pushed it out of his mind as he jogged up to 57.

He emerged onto a floor he'd never visited before. It was a maze of corridors, like 55, small rooms lining the hallways. Here, though, the lighting was softer, and the doors didn't have windows. The carpet was a little thicker, muffling his footsteps, and Bucky had an uncomfortable sense of intruding on something private, almost sacred. He hesitated at a cross-corridor, instinctively hesitant to knock on, or listen at, any of the closed doors he could see.

He was starting to seriously consider going back home to wait for Steve, or at least up to 58 to find someone else to ask, or talk to, when one of the doors opened. Bucky hurried back behind the corner, out of sight, but he knew he hadn't been fast enough even before he heard Sam call out, "Bucky? That you?"

Bucky took a breath, bracing himself, and stepped back into view of Sam, ten yards down the hallway.

Sam started walking toward him, and Bucky saw his gaze light on the flowers and the way Bucky was gripping them. More like a weapon than ever, he knew, after that defensive impulse.
"You know you--"

"I'm holding them like a rifle," Bucky said impatiently. He could suddenly see this whole silly errand unfolding into some kind of quest, having to go from place to place answering riddles and solving puzzles before he could find Steve. He just wanted to give his best guy flowers, not steal away the One Ring, for God's sake. "We're not getting married, I'm just late for Valentine's Day, so if you've seen Steve--"

Another door opened, behind Bucky. Before he could turn or make another doomed attempt to get out of sight, Steve said, "Hey, Buck! What are you doing down here?"

Bucky turned on his heel at the first word, because he knew that particular brightness in Steve's voice. It went with the faint signs of strain he could see on Steve's face, the careful way he was holding himself. It was no surprise when he saw a middle-aged woman step out of the room behind Steve; she might as well have been wearing a sign that said _My name is Fiona and I've been making Steve talk about shit._

Bucky turned on his own smile and brandished the flowers, _not _like a rifle. "Happy Valentine's Day, pal. Only one day late."

Steve's face did that thing that meant Steve didn't know how to feel, or felt too many things at once, but when he smiled again it was a little closer to real. The whole thing had been worth it just for that, and Bucky walked toward him without a thought. Steve met him halfway, taking the flowers with one hand and curling the other arm around Bucky to tug him close.

Steve didn't kiss him, just leaned his face against Bucky's, pressing close--hiding himself, just a little, when he'd probably spent the last hour feeling much too exposed. Bucky wrapped both arms around Steve and held on, closing his own eyes against the impulse to check what Fiona was thinking about any of this. He could stand here and be Steve's hiding place for as long as it took, and he didn't care what anyone thought of it.

Still, he couldn't help listening. He heard the soft sounds of Sam and another person--Sam's therapist?--walking away down a cross-corridor. There was no sound from Fiona's direction at all.

Steve took a step back after a couple of minutes, taking a deep breath and smiling at Bucky, his eyes only a little shiny. "Thanks, Buck. This is--where did you get these?"

"Went shopping," Bucky said with a shrug, rocking on his heels a little. "JARVIS told me where to find a florist. And my bank cards. But I picked out the flowers myself--sent some to Kitty too, in case you think I made a special trip just for you."

"Yeah, wouldn't want me to start thinking you like me," Steve agreed, and then he did dart in and give Bucky a quick kiss. He turned as he drew back, putting his shoulder to Bucky's and gesturing back down the hall. "Buck, this is Fiona. Fiona, you, uh, probably recognize this guy."

"I do," Fiona said, walking forward. She was petite, with gray hair cropped nearly as short as Bucky's, but she moved with an assurance that reminded Bucky of Sarah Rogers; this one wouldn't let Steve get away with anything. She offered her hand to Bucky and he shook it without hesitation. "It's good to finally meet you."

"You too, ma'am," Bucky said, smiling and trying to say with his eyes what he wasn't about to say out loud with Steve right there: _I know he needed you, still needs you, more than he'll admit to anyone including himself. Thank you for being here for him._ "Thanks for putting up with this fella, he tends to explode if he doesn't get to vent often enough, so I'm sure you've been catching a lot of
heat."

Fiona laughed a little even as she was giving Bucky a stern look. Oh, yeah, she had his number. "Steve is a delight to talk to, honestly."

Bucky winked. "Hey, that's what I always say myself. Nothing more delightful than this guy."

"Okay, I don't have to stand here and take this kind of sarcasm," Steve said, tugging at Bucky's arm, still curled loosely around him. "I'm taking my flowers and going home, pal."

"Aww, Stevie, come on," Bucky said, turning to herd Steve toward the elevator in the guise of following him. "Don't be like that just 'cause you didn't beat me to buying flowers."

"See you, Fiona," Steve called out without looking back, letting Bucky move him toward the elevator. The doors opened for them as soon as they reached it, and when they were properly inside Steve turned and reached for Bucky again.

There was nothing perfunctory about the kiss this time, and Bucky gave back as good as he got. He wanted nothing but this, Steve in his arms leaving everything else behind. Neither of them spoke or moved until the doors opened again, and then they broke apart just far enough to get out of the elevator.

Steve looked down as they moved, catching sight of the flowers again, and a funny sweet look passed over his face. When he looked at Bucky again, his expression was almost shy.

"You know, Buck... time was, if you brought somebody flowers the day after you spent an evening with them, it was how you told them what a swell time you had, and angled for another date."

"Oh." Bucky stared at the flowers, feeling that piece of memory click into place and thinking about what it could mean. He had had a good time last night, after all. Steve was still looking at him a little hesitantly, but he wasn't wary. He wasn't hoping for Bucky to say no so he wouldn't have to. It had gone well, after all. He hadn't even...

Oh. It finally dropped into place, the thing he'd known was missing when he woke up. He hadn't freaked out afterward, either right after or this morning; he still wasn't freaking out now, thinking about it. No shakes, no awful feeling of guilt and shame and blackness swallowing him up. The bad stuff had been bad while it happened, but it had stayed where he left it.

He thought of how it might be if they did it again: another nightmare picking up where the last one left off, another bad dream where Steve was beside him all along, touching him so sweetly through the phantom pain. Where he was frozen, but Steve could still hear him, still reach him. Where Steve was with him.

And then he would wake up, and Steve would be with him.

Bucky was smiling when he met Steve's eyes again. "What if that's still what it means?"

Steve tugged him into another kiss, harder and hotter. "Then you'd better go get your schedule while I put these in some water, pal. We've got a date to pencil in."

Chapter End Notes
Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter Notes

Okay, Chapter 52 is still not ready to go, so the posting schedule from here on out is officially "Posting on Sundays when there's a chapter ready to post" which will happen when it happens. But! I put in the tentative total chapter count so you can all see we're properly into endgame-ish territory now. And thanks for everyone who's stuck with this story for the last eight months! Hopefully it won't be too much longer now...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As soon as he went under, Bucky could feel that it was going to be one of those sessions with the off-switch. Almost effortlessly, he stayed focused on the feeling of the blanket he was lying on, the small sounds of Steve breathing beside him, the lingering sulfur scent in the air from the matches Steve had used to light a couple of candles.

The candles were real beeswax, apparently; he just liked them because, unlike the other candles Steve had ordered, they didn't smell like having a perfume bottle shoved up his nose. These just had a nice faint honey scent to them, above the warm smell of melting wax.

Yes, Bucky signaled without prompting, and then go and Steve for emphasis.

No point hanging around hoping for the nightmare to start, not when he could have something better. Not when he knew there was going to be something better, something worth staying calm for, if he could just stay.

"Yeah?" Steve sounded only a little wary, mostly hopeful. "You're okay to touch?"

Yes go yes, Bucky insisted, regretting that he couldn't just roll his eyes without the eye-tracker trying to read it as a word.

Steve didn't dawdle, though, setting a hand in the middle of Bucky's chest as he bent closer. Bucky felt Steve's breath puff against his cheek, and then the soft press of a kiss just below the edge of the eye-tracker.

Steve, Bucky signaled. He was gonna have to get to work learning the eye movements for alphabet-spelling, just so he could call Steve a sap without wasting a pre-programmed eye-gesture on it.

Although if it came to that, it did seem like the sort of word that was likely to come up often.

"That's me," Steve muttered, his hand rubbing a little at the center of Bucky's chest. "Still good, pal? Still here with me at home?"

Yes yes, Bucky insisted, keeping his eyes well away from signaling danger to tell Steve he was sliding into panic or immersed in a nightmare.

Steve laughed softly, an actual laugh, and Bucky felt like he had another candle lit inside him, glowing warm with pride at that.
"So impatient," Steve scolded softly, kissing Bucky's forehead, his ear, the corner of his mouth. "What'd you tell me? I'll get there when I'm ready, pal."

Bucky wanted to groan, remembering how he'd teased Steve the night he'd fisted him. If Steve meant to drag things out like that...

Bucky couldn't stop him, could barely even argue about it. He was entirely at Steve's mercy. Steve could take the eye-tracker off him, or ignore it, and Bucky would be trapped down here with nothing to do but wait for what Steve was going to do to him.

Steve being Steve, he wouldn't take the eye-tracker away, but as for ignoring it...

**Go go,** Bucky tried, and all it got him was another little huff from Steve and a press of lips against his own unresponsive lips.

"I just said, pal," Steve murmured. "I'll get on with it when I'm ready, huh?" But his hand moved lower, down over Bucky's stomach to the hem of his t-shirt. "So impatient, aren't you?"

Yes, Bucky agreed, just for the reassurance of hearing Steve snort at that. He was listening, even if he didn't listen.

Steve kissed the line of his jaw, his throat, and Steve's fingers finally slid up under his shirt, warm on his chest, gliding upward until Steve was teasing his nipple. Bucky wanted to catch his breath at the dart of sensation, the feeling of it tightening. His body responded, even when he couldn't control it.

"Mm, you do like that, huh?" Steve murmured. "Feeling that, pal? Feel me?"

Yes yes go, Bucky insisted. He could feel the threads of panic starting to unfurl in him, because he wanted to react so badly and couldn't, couldn't move a muscle except to say simple words with his eyes. Couldn't catch his breath, couldn't moan when Steve did it again, and again, and then Steve's mouth was on him and Bucky wanted to arch into it. He wanted to yell, because it felt so good, so real and possible, and he couldn't move at all.

He felt a shift in the air, a warmth and presence as if Steve moved to straddle him, bent down over him—or did he? Was that a nightmare, or real? He couldn't see, couldn't touch, and he didn't know exactly where Steve was, even when Steve spoke again. "Stay with me, Buck, let me see if I can--"

And then his shirt was being pushed up, and Steve's hand flattened over one side of Bucky's chest while another touch skated up his skin, accompanied by a different warmth. Steve's nose, Steve's lips, dragging along his skin as Steve breathed—it had to be Steve. None of his nightmares were ever this warm.

There was another touch at his nipple, wet and soft this time, and Bucky strained to move, to push into the touch, to let out a sound of triumph, but there was nothing. He was still frozen, still trapped, and could only signal with his eyes when he gave up trying to move: **Steve yes Steve.**

"That's me," Steve agreed, his breath puffing out and chilling the place he had licked, wet crinkled skin going stiffer.

But the cold opened a crack in Bucky's carefully maintained focus, and Bucky knew what was on the other side of it. It was okay; he was at home, with Steve, safe. He just had to remember that. He just had to concentrate and stay calm. He'd done it before. He could do it with Steve. He could stay right here, where Steve was murmuring nonsense against his skin, kissing and licking and petting.

Bucky kept trying to move—or he thought he was trying, at least, but maybe he was just thinking,
imagining--with every touch, every new thrill of pleasure. When Steve said his name he answered yes and go and Steve, and he focused on being here in his body, here with Steve, here at home with the beeswax candles burning and a blanket under him.

The weight of what was outside that little circle of focus kept building, like snow piling heavier and heavier on a tent, bowing the canvas, muting every sound. The cold leaked through, and the pressure was unmistakable. The tentpoles creaked and the air got thick and Steve didn't notice a thing. Steve was kissing his way lower now, one hand stroking the insides of Bucky's thighs over his pajama pants.

That was real too, at least as real as the dark and the cold outside their tent. And if this was the last night--if they were going to take that zip line tomorrow--then at least they had tonight. At least he could be warm wherever Steve touched him. He just couldn't move, couldn't give anything back to Steve or warn him about the snow. But he could let Steve know that he was still here for now, that he wasn't buried in that snowbank yet.

Steve Steve Steve, he signaled, and Steve laughed against his skin, a bright sound that almost covered the creaking of the tent.

"All right, Buck, all right," Steve said, as if Bucky had asked him for something in particular, when all Bucky wanted was to know that they were both here together. Steve wasn't making love to a hollow thing, already frozen, already fallen. Bucky was still himself here and now.

He felt another breath of cold as Steve drew his pants down, then heat as Steve's hand closed on his cock.

Again he wanted to move, felt the impulse to move, his hips wanting to drive up into that touch, his spine wanting to arch. His lips and throat wanted to gasp, his hands wanted to reach for Steve, to anchor himself or to draw him closer.

He wanted a kiss more than air, and there was no signal for a kiss. He had yes and no and go and stop and Steve and danger, but nothing that could say how his lips ached for one more kiss, how his own breath was cold and lonely in his mouth.

Steve, he tried, but that just got Steve humming back, giving Bucky's cock a little squeeze and stroke and nuzzling low on his belly.

Steve yes stop, he tried.

Steve froze. "Buck? What--shit, we need to get you more words."

Yes, Bucky agreed. Steve's hand was still on his cock, Steve's mouth still too far away from the lonely frozenness of his own lips.

"Okay," Steve said. "You aren't saying stop again, so--it's okay that I'm still touching you?"

Yes, Bucky signaled, feeling annoyed and relieved all at once. It might take forever to tell Steve what he wanted, but Steve was talking to him, really talking to him, and listening to him, not just--just doing things to him. It was easy to stay focused on being here with Steve like this.

"You said yes stop," Steve said thoughtfully, "so... what I was doing wasn't bad, but you want me to do something else?"

Yes, Bucky repeated. Steve's hand on his dick rocked a little, absentely squeezing, like Bucky was something to occupy his hands while he was thinking, or just like he didn't want to let Bucky's hard
on get away from them.

"Something I did before, or--shit. Yes or no, something I did before?"

Yes, Bucky repeated, and he felt Steve moving over him, Steve's hand leaving his dick only to be replaced by a broader pressure, still gentle--Steve's thigh slotted between his, Bucky thought, as Steve stretched out over him.

"Something like," Steve nuzzled against his cheek. "This?"

Fuck. He knew, the fucking punk, and he was teasing. Bucky wanted to laugh and wanted to snarl and threaten to kick his ass all at once.

He settled for signaling yes danger Steve.

Steve laughed softly. "This is the part where I'm supposed to remind you that I'm safe and nobody can hurt me, right?"

Bucky though his body might actually catch fire from the sheer furious urge to flip Steve over and show him just how safe he was, but then Steve's lips were brushing over his, warm and soft and sweet, and Bucky had to signal yes yes yes just to make sure there was no mistaking.

Steve's hand found his dick again--Steve had to be twisted kind of awkwardly over him, but that was all right. Steve could handle it. He jerked Bucky off slowly, kissing his cheeks and his forehead and throat but always coming back to his mouth, and Bucky forgot whether they were at home or in a tent, whether there was sun or snow outside. He was busy saying yes yes as the pleasure built with every stroke of Steve's hand and every thwarted attempt to push into it or kiss back.

He could only say yes Steve yes as the sensation lit up his body, drawing tight even when he was frozen and helpless. He couldn't tense a single muscle, his heart didn't even race like it should, but Steve stroked him and kissed him, a hint of tongue and a flick of his thumb perfectly coordinated, and Bucky's dick jerked in Steve's grip, all on its own.

"Hey, how about that," Steve muttered, lips dragging against Bucky's throat and Bucky didn't know if he was going to want to kill him more if he was teasing or if he actually forgot.

Steve yes Steve Steve go go go.

"Huh?" Steve mumbled, lips dragging against Bucky's throat and Bucky didn't know if he was going to want to kill him more if he was teasing or if he actually forgot.

Steve yes Steve Steve go go go.

"Go--oh, yeah, pal." Steve kissed him again, his grip tightening and strokes speeding. "Go ahead, Buck."
Bucky wanted to gasp, wanted to howl, at the rush of pleasure suddenly flaring brighter and hotter and better as it finished. His orgasm felt like it was yanked out of him by Steve's hands, Steve's words, leaving him... Well. Leaving him still motionless on the floor, but now feeling all warm and loose and easy.

"You need some more kisses?" Steve muttered, his voice still warm and happy as he nuzzled at Bucky's cheek. "You wanna stay with me a little while? Stay awake?"

Yes, Bucky said first, because he always wanted another kiss, and because Steve sounded so pleased with himself. But once Steve had pressed a kiss to his lips, the balance tipped the other way. Bucky wanted to be able to kiss back, to hold him, not to stay down here in the dark where he couldn't.

No stop stop stop, he said, and Steve's hand was on his immediately, fiddling with the tube planted there.

"Okay, pal, there you go."

"Yeah, see how you like it," Bucky muttered, grinning, as Steve flexed under him, trying to hold still and wait for Bucky's kisses and touches. He had his eyes closed, but his eyelashes kept fluttering, and his wrists tensed and relaxed again and again under Bucky's unyielding metal grip. Still, he didn't actually try to raise them from where Bucky was pressing them to the bed.

"Yes," Steve said, his lips curling up in a smile. "Yes, yes, Bucky, yes."

"Well, I can't say no to that, can I," Bucky said, and gave Steve another kiss, gave his cock another slow stroke.

Steve let out a whine—which Bucky ignored, because it wasn't one of the six words Steve was allowed to say—but then remembered to let his mouth go slack again. Bucky trailed kisses away from his lips, nuzzling at his skin where it was flushed bright pink and fever-hot.

Steve was barely sweating, just enough to add a tang to the warm-guy scent of him, and Bucky could just breathe him in like this, rub himself all over Steve if he wanted to. He could look, just look and look at all that pink-gold skin with the sun shining on it, at the way his chest rose and fell quicker now, the way his lips parted even though no sound came out.

"Bucky," Steve said, then licked his lips, struggling to fit what he wanted into the six words he had. "Go, yes, Bucky, go."

Bucky squeezed on Steve's cock, big and firm and hot in his hand, and stroked again, slowly as before.

Steve groaned. "Fuck, would you--"

"You trying to say something, Steve?" Bucky kissed his chin, his cheek, just missing his mouth each time. "You know I can't understand if you don't use your words."

"Fuck," Steve whined, and then, "Bucky, Bucky, yes go yes--"

Bucky gave him a kiss for that, stroked him faster with one hand and squeezed hard on his wrists with the other. "Now I know you can't move a muscle, Stevie, so it's okay if I let go, isn't it? You gonna be okay?"

"Yes, yes yes," Steve gasped, twitching like he wanted to push up into Bucky's hand and then
remembered to hold himself still. Moving wasn't allowed--wasn't fair, because Bucky couldn't when it was his turn.

"Okay," Bucky said, loosening his grip on Steve's wrists. "If you're sure, pal..."

"Yes yes yes," Steve insisted, pressing back into the bed with his whole body from his heels to his hands. "Bucky, yes yes--"

Bucky moved down, now that he could, to kiss and lick over Steve's chest, and Steve went quiet and rigid with the effort of holding still. Bucky grinned against his skin again and kept it up for a while, even jerking him off a little again, like maybe that was as far as he meant to go. Steve hadn't gotten any further, last time, after all. He savored the way he got Steve's dick to jump in his hand, watched the twitching of Steve's lips and the motion of his closed eyes under the lids.

This time Bucky got to see, and Steve--

Steve wasn't allowed to see, or move, or touch, or speak, and like a switch had flipped in Bucky's brain, that wasn't fun anymore, wasn't any kind of payback that he wanted.

Bucky froze, his throat tight and mouth dry, every muscle locked. Steve had something about having a plan, what to do in case Bucky wanted to stop--all Steve had to do was say stop three times--but Bucky hadn't thought he needed a signal. Why should he? He didn't have to do anything scary or difficult, and he could say whatever he wanted. He could say--say--

Bucky dragged his hand up to settle over the back of Steve's right hand and pinched it right where the IV would go if Steve had one. Steve frowned but still didn't move or open his eyes, and Bucky pinched again and whispered, "Come on, Stevie, wake up."

Steve's eyes flashed open at once, and he pushed up on one elbow--his left, leaving his right hand under Bucky's.

Bucky unfroze in the same second; he could almost hear the rifle-crack of ice breaking, or maybe that was just the impact when he lunged forward to kiss Steve, wrapping his arm around Steve's shoulders with his other hand still curled around Steve's cock. It was no kind of kiss, messy and uncoordinated, teeth scraping lips, because Steve wouldn't stop talking while Bucky was trying to kiss him.

"I'm here, I'm here," Steve gasped into Bucky's mouth, and he was grabbing at Bucky's shoulders, his neck, thrusting up into Bucky's hand.

Bucky pulled it together enough to jerk him off in quick strokes, and it didn't take long before Steve was coming over his fingers. Bucky gasped and went limp right along with him, relief sweeping through him that didn't make a goddamn bit of sense.

They sat there, huddled together and clutching each other, and Bucky thought they were going to have to throw all their clothes in the laundry, and that maybe he should read that book of Steve's after all. He should have been able to just play a silly game without ruining it halfway. He should...

He should never ask Steve to do it again, to kiss and touch him when he couldn't respond, when Steve had to look at him like that and--

Steve's arms tightened around him, and Bucky realized he was shaking.

"Sorry," Bucky muttered. "I don't know why I--"
Steve snorted and squeezed him tighter. "You thought it'd be fun, and it was, and then it wasn't. Like the Cyclone, except you couldn't shut the ride off when you realized."

Bucky exhaled something that was almost a laugh, even while his stomach tightened as that moment came back to him, when he watched Steve, stubborn and with a cast-iron stomach, go so pale he looked green. And the awful minutes that followed, Steve white-faced and stubbornly clinging to what dignity had been left by the time they made it off the ride. "Too bad for everybody sitting behind us."

Steve snorted. "Yeah, well, at least we cleared out the innocent bystanders this time, huh? Just you and me here, pal. Nobody to impress. Change your mind as much as you want, I'll come with you wherever you want to go. It's not like I didn't get off, huh?"

"I was gonna go down on you," Bucky muttered, not knowing whether he felt sullen or wistful about it.

"Oh you were, were you," Steve replied, nuzzling at his cheek, refusing to take any of this seriously, and Bucky knew that in a minute the feeling like lead in his belly would break up and drift away before Steve's determination. "No reason you can't do that some other time. Or in about ten minutes, if you're that set on it."

"Greedy," Bucky muttered, but his mouth was already curling toward a smile.

"For you, always," Steve agreed, and then licked a wet stripe right up the side of Bucky's face like the asshole he was.

The second time Bucky went out with the Avengers for a mission, hardly anyone wound up noticing him at all, even though he stuck as close to Steve's side as he could the whole time. They were in Ohio, trying to track down whatever tech was being used to make gravity stop working from time to time in small areas; Tony and Bruce were somewhere nearby doing something technical to track the tech when the rest of them wound up floating off the ground, looking around for something to attack.

For a second it looked like they'd found a target--something streaking in fast, on a ballistic trajectory, looking white-hot. Before Bucky could do more than raise his left arm to peer at it through his fingers, Steve's hand clamped down on his arm and Tony's voice burst over the comms, "That's a friendly! Friendly, stand down!"

And then Thor landed dead in the center of the gravity field, hammer first, red cape fluttering around him. The rest of them dropped to the ground. Bucky managed to keep Steve on his feet, Sam caught Clint, and Natasha managed to tuck and roll and make it look deliberate.

Thor beamed at them and called, "I have encountered a situation like this before!" And then a guy in a purple and silver cape came out of nowhere and things got very briefly exciting.

Only briefly, though; other than the tech, he wasn't much of a menace. The guy and his cape were being taken away by some kind of SWAT team while Tony and Bruce and Thor and some scientist Skyping in on Thor's phone were still trying to figure out if the guy had been using HYDRA tech or Asgardian tech or some kind of actual magic. They'd found the device he'd used, and they did all agree that it was definitely deactivated when they locked it in some kind of shielded box and boarded the Quinjet for the trip home.

The small crowd of local news crews and people filming the action on their phones all wanted to hear from Thor; Tony pushed his way into the frame to get his say while the rest of them submitted
to Sam asking how their knees, ankles and backs felt and Bruce ran some scanner Tony had
designed over the ground to make sure no water or gas lines had been disturbed. No one was going
to have a word to say about what Bucky did or didn't do this time, and he felt nearly as relieved by
that as the fact that the whole thing had been wrapped up without anyone being hurt.

Clint and Natasha took the pilot and co-pilot seats and Sam pulled out his phone to call back the
pointedly unnamed someone he'd been talking to when they got the call to assemble. That left Bucky
and Steve sitting shoulder to shoulder, both keeping their eyes on the thing in the box and the
ongoing debate about where it came from and how exactly it did what it did.

The crisis was over, but Bucky was still feeling on edge in a way that was all out of proportion with
the unanswered question of how the thing worked. No one had gotten hurt on their watch, and Steve
was right at his side this time, not off getting grilled by reporters, not--

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut and let the thought crystallize: Bucky wasn't going to go home alone
after this mission, and Steve was not going to walk in the door in black fatigues, holding a stun
baton. That wasn't going to happen again. It wasn't what the end of a mission meant anymore.

"Buck?"

He felt Steve's breath on his cheek, the word barely audible, and only to him. But it was more than
enough to tell him that Steve had noticed something. It reminded him, too, of their first trip together
in a Quinjet, when end-of-mission memories had been battering at his head. Steve hadn't had a place
among those memories, then.

Bucky forced his eyes open, made himself look over at Steve, returning a wry half-smile to Steve's
faint frown of concern.

"Just... remembering," Bucky said softly. "Stuff that's not gonna happen again. Post-mission."

He saw Steve get it. His frown cleared to an utterly blank expression, and in the next second Steve
was smiling back at him, a challenge in his expression. "Guess we'll have to give you something else
to be remembering next time, then, huh?"

Bucky's lips parted, and he raised a hand to his temple, where the eye-tracker still clung, just in case.

Steve raised his eyebrows and bit his lip--willing to take no for an answer, but excited to give this a
try.

"Oh," Bucky said, because what the hell else could he say? Steve was even right, as far as that went.
Having a new thing to associate with end-of-mission would work a lot better than just trying to forget
about what had happened after other missions.

Still, for right now the association was the old one; the collision of anticipation and dread and post-
mission adrenaline was the wrong kind of familiar.

"It doesn't have to be," Steve started, but Bucky shook his head.

"No, I--I want to, just--gonna be a rough ride, so I'm gonna need you to be reminding me that you're
safe. Might not remember all the words to tell you."

Steve was looking concerned, and Bucky shook his head again, digging his shoulder in against
Steve's. "I want to. I want you, I just--" Bucky gestured at his own head. "It's all riled up right now,
and that's exactly what I gotta unlearn. Just--just keep telling me you're safe, that's all."
Steve's expression firmed into determination, and the echo of the Steve he could be afraid of made him want to shiver a little. But Steve curled an arm around Bucky's shoulders, tugging him into Steve's warmth.

"We're both gonna be safe, Buck," Steve said in his ear, sternly determined. "Nobody's gonna hurt you on my watch. Not even you, not even in your own head. I've got you."

Bucky didn't think Steve could actually make Bucky's flashback-nightmares leave him alone just by saying so, but on the other hand Bucky wouldn't exactly put it past him. He leaned into Steve, and focused on the weight of Steve's arm around him and the good parts of what was to come.

By the time he was down in the dark he was strung tight enough that he was thinking this might have been a mistake after all. The Quinjet ride, and the time it had taken to shower afterward--together, because Bucky couldn't let Steve out of his sight, gripped with the insane certainty that Steve would change the plan if they were apart--was more than enough time for Bucky to get wound up much too far. But he kept insisting on sticking with the plan, that he wanted to, and Steve didn't refuse him.

And now he couldn't move, couldn't see, and was struggling to cling to his awareness of where he was: in the apartment in the tower in Manhattan with Steve. He was a little cold, and there was nothing much to smell; he hadn't let Steve stop to set up the candles and all that, hadn't even dried off very carefully after showering.

He couldn't tell if he was really shivering, or just remembering shivering. It was so quiet, so still. This was one of the worst ways they had used the off-switch--shutting him off and then just leaving him somewhere until they were ready to deal with him, letting him lie there anticipating it.

He strained to hear, to catch any sign of what was coming, and his whole body went cold when he heard a familiar footfall.

No, not Steve. Not Steve inside his head, not Steve joining them, he couldn't, he couldn't.

Yes, he signaled with his eyes, Steve Steve no.

"Bucky!" Steve was above him, but that tone of his voice was too warm to fear--Bucky recognized that, even if he couldn't quite place it.

Steve, he signaled. Steve.

"Buck, thank God I found you," and Bucky tried to open his eyes--there was something about that, something not quite right, but Steve was here. Steve found him.

"I didn't know they had you, pal, I swear I never would have left you if I knew," Steve was saying, and he could feel Steve's hands at his wrists, tugging. Bucky tried to move too, tried to help push himself up. But he couldn't move a muscle, and Steve couldn't break him free either.

"Looks like we're gonna be stuck here a minute," Steve said. "You okay, pal? You hurt anywhere?"

O-K, Bucky spelled out. Y-O-U.

"Yeah, I'm okay too, not a scratch," Steve assured him, leaning low over him, so close that Bucky could feel his warmth, welcome in the cold of--of--wherever he was. It didn't matter. Steve had come for him. Steve would take him home, as soon as they figured out how to get him free.

For now though, he couldn't move no matter how he tried, and Steve's body was over his, warm and
sheltering. Steve's hand cupped his cheek, and Steve's lips pressed against his forehead, and then against his mouth. Bucky felt himself stirring, responding to Steve's closeness here, when they needed to escape and he couldn't do anything about it. He tried harder to move, but all that happened was that Steve moved, settling a little lower over him and pressing his thigh between Bucky's, warm and solid against his dick as it thickened.

"Oh, hey," Steve said, rocking his thigh as he seemed to notice. "That's a way to pass the time until we can get out of here, huh?"

Steve, Bucky signaled, because spelling out, Situational awareness, dumbass, would take forever.

"Nah, it's okay," Steve said, sounding exactly as stupidly confident as he had a thousand other times. Bucky strained to move if only for the satisfaction of smacking him, but Steve went on airily, "You know how it works here, pal. Nobody but you can see me or hear me."

Oh God, no, please no. Steve was a hallucination. Bucky was on the table alone, still waiting for the technicians—they were going to put him into the ice once they were done with him, but there was no knowing how long they might drag things out while he was helpless. Steve's warmth was only in his head.

"And nobody can hurt me," Steve went on softly, his lips brushing right up against Bucky's ear. Bucky still heard, perfectly, the sound of Steve tugging his shield free from the harness on his back, the thump of it hitting the surface just to one side of Bucky's head.

"And I'm not going to let anyone hurt you," Steve said, and Bucky recognized the weird half-deadened sound of Steve speaking under the shelter of the shield. It had to be real, but how--

"Tony made an upgrade for me, remember?" Steve added, sounding cheerful again. "Nobody can see me if I'm holding the shield. Nobody but you."

Like the ring, Bucky thought, and that, somehow, gave him his handhold on reality. Apartment, Manhattan, Steve, post-mission, and Steve was trying to keep him from spiraling into something unbearable.

He spelled out nerd almost without thinking, and Steve let out a delighted little laugh that made his whole body brush tantalizingly over Bucky's.

"You're the one who likes those books," Steve said, nuzzling at Bucky's cheek. "I thought you'd appreciate the homage."

Asshole, Bucky added, but he wanted to laugh himself--it was almost more maddening than not being able to scream, feeling the impulse to laugh while his body stayed leaden.

"Sorry, is my silly fantasy getting in the way of your awful flashbacks?" Steve muttered, kissing at Bucky's jaw. "You want me to shut up and let you be scared in peace?"

No no, Bucky insisted immediately. He hesitated for a second, trying to think of a succinct way to tell Steve that he appreciated it but that it still might not work, that if he was going to get off he was going to lose his concentration and spiral no matter what Steve did.

"Buck?" Steve murmured, giving him another soft little kiss. "Still with me, pal?"

He was, for now, and that was all he could really worry about. Yes Steve go OK.
Steve snorted softly. "Okay, reading you loud and clear there. Just remember--nobody else can see
me, and nobody else can hurt me, and I won't let them hurt you either."

OK OK.

Steve laughed and kissed him again, and Bucky distracted himself from his inability to kiss back by
focusing on holding that in mind. Steve was safe, and Steve wouldn't let anyone hurt him. Steve had
found him, Steve had come back for him, and even if he was stuck on a table, even if there were
technicians coming back any minute, Steve was here and he wasn't going to let anything happen.

Steve moved to kissing Bucky's throat, but he left one hand on Bucky's face, his thumb resting over
Bucky's lips as if he had to remind Bucky to keep quiet. Bucky focused on the touch, the slight
pressure, while Steve was kissing his way down Bucky's body. This was Steve. Steve was with him,
Steve's touch resting on his lips while Steve's lips brushed over his nipple and down to his hipbone.

"Here we go," Steve muttered as he closed his hand on Bucky's cock. He was half-hard already,
tingling with readiness even before Steve touched him, and now Steve was stroking him and
pressing kisses to his thighs, his hips, everywhere but where Bucky wanted his mouth the most. He
was dawdling like they had all the time in the world, and Bucky was aware simultaneously that they
did have plenty of time, home and safe after a mission, and that they definitely didn't.

The creeping dread pressed in on his awareness. No one was coming to interrupt Steve--no one
outside Bucky's brain, anyway. But Bucky was trapped inside, and there were a lot of ways things
could go bad in here if Steve kept giving it time to happen. And if he got scared enough, if it got bad
enough, he'd have to tell Steve to stop, and they would win.

Hurry, he spelled. Steve.

Steve let out a little laugh and kissed faster, making obnoxious smacking noises against Bucky's skin,
but Bucky still couldn't laugh, couldn't move. Couldn't reach for him, to push him away or pull him
where he wanted him. Bucky struggled, frustration warring with dread--it was starting, it was
coming, and he couldn't miss this, not again.

Steve now.

"All right, pal, all right." He felt the ticklish touch of Steve's breath first, and his own breath should
have caught, his hips should have jerked. His dick twitched a little, maybe. He couldn't be sure, and
it was lost in the next second when the press of Steve's tongue to his cockhead whitened out all other
awareness.

It was like the first breath after drowning, like the calm after the wipe; he couldn't tell if he was
actually trembling or only knew that he should be. Steve's mouth was familiar, necessary, but Bucky
had gone so long without it that it felt shocking and new. He wanted to gasp, wanted to sink his
fingers into Steve's golden hair, but he couldn't. He couldn't even look, couldn't even see his own
cock hard against the wet pink softness of Steve's lips and tongue.

He could only feel it. Steve's tongue worked against his cock for a moment, and then Steve's lips
closed around the head. Steve's fingers moved from just pressing against Bucky's mouth to tracing
them, then pushing ever so slightly between, sharing some little echo of the feeling with him.

Go Steve go go go yes.

Steve hummed assent around his cock, and Bucky definitely twitched at that, his cock surging in
Steve's mouth while the rest of him stayed frozen. Steve sucked harder then, taking him deeper, and
It felt so good he couldn't think at all. Steve had one hand on his thigh, dipping down to play with his balls; the other was still on his face, rubbing softly at his lower lip. He could smell his own sex-smell, could smell Steve's shampoo and warm skin, and he knew there was something else, something he was supposed to be worried about, but he couldn't hold it in his head when Steve was so focused on driving him out of his mind.

He tried to gasp, tried to grab at Steve's hair, he was on the ragged edge. *Steve go Steve go go.*

Steve sucked harder, and his thumb traced a shape on Bucky's cheek: the same shape as the eye-movement pattern that meant *go*. Steve was giving him permission. He had a fraction of a second to think it wouldn't be enough, but he also knew what Steve wanted, and that was as far as he got in thinking about it before he was spilling into Steve's mouth, his body still stubbornly frozen except for his cock pulsing away.

Steve kept sucking him, swallowing around his cock, his thumb brushing over Bucky's lips like a kiss, or like a reminder to be quiet.

He had to be quiet, didn't he? That was--he had to--*Steve danger*, Bucky signaled, not sure what the danger was or where, only remembering that he had to warn Steve.

"Nah, pal," Steve said, his voice gone a little rough from sucking him. Steve's hand moved from his face, and Bucky heard the familiar sound of Steve's knuckle tapping against the inside of his shield, still propped up near Bucky's head. "Safe and sound, remember? None of the bad guys can see me or hurt me, and I'm not gonna let anyone hurt you."

Right. There was no actual danger, only the danger of Bucky panicking, because he and Steve were at home practicing with the off-switch after a mission, and Bucky had thought it was going to be bad. He had felt it in his bones, he had known he was going to get lost, except...

He wanted to laugh then as he realized it, wanted to tell Steve and couldn't bear the thought of lining it up letter by letter. Steve, meanwhile, was moving up over him, settling lightly on top of him, just enough for Bucky to feel the warmth of Steve's skin pressing on his. Steve was kissing his face again, making little soothing sounds, and he was *hard*. Bucky wondered what it would be like to feel Steve rub off on him, but he'd rather be able to touch, able to *talk*, so he had to get this over with.

*Sleep now,* he spelled out.

Steve laughed softly against his cheek. "Sure thing, Buck. See you when you wake up."

Bucky woke up with Steve half on top of him, hard against his hip, and he smiled before he'd even opened his eyes, turning his head to nuzzle against Steve's jaw. "Was I out long?"

"Half hour," Steve said, maneuvering for a real kiss. "Gonna have to tell Dr. Hernandez, the pharmacologist--"

Bucky rolled his hips up, grinding against Steve, and Steve shut up and kissed him harder. Bucky twisted under him and Steve gave way, rolling onto his side so Bucky could throw one leg over his and get a hand between them.

"Liked it this time, huh?" Bucky muttered against Steve's mouth as he started jerking him off. "Good time had by all?"

"Definitely a good time had by you," Steve replied, rocking into Bucky's touch. "And I missed it. Missed sucking you off. So, yeah, I liked that."
“Missed you sucking me off too,” Bucky agreed, kissing harder, stroking faster, because he could touch and taste and move, finally, and give as good as he’d gotten. It didn’t take long before Steve was grabbing at him, pulling Bucky half on top of him just so he could grind up under Bucky’s weight and make a mess of both of them when he came.

Bucky eased over to the side, looking to see if the Man with a Plan had thought to bring a towel into the gym along with his shield. He had in fact brought an entire laundry basket—clean clothes for both of them and an extra blanket, with a couple of soft towels on top. Bucky prodded Steve in a sticky spot, and Steve groaned but tugged the basket closer, so Bucky could clean them both up a little without having to crawl over him to do it.

When he snuggled back down next to Steve, he said, "I figured out why it works with you. Why you can keep me from panicking and no one else ever could."

"They didn't touch you," Steve said, nuzzling at Bucky's cheek. "And if they did they'd feel like strangers. And they weren't using your dick to focus your attention, which has been the best way to manage you since—"

Bucky huffed and poked Steve in the ribs for stealing his breakthrough, not to mention the sheer gall of saying that like Bucky hadn't had to make strategic use of orgasms to keep Steve in a sweet enough mood not to get himself arrested or killed on a daily basis from 1935 to 1941. "When'd you figure that out?"

"Today, when it worked," Steve said, shrugging. "When I could tease you and you stayed with me."

"Oh," Bucky said, relaxing into Steve's body. "That's all right then. Long as you weren't keeping secrets."

"Never, pal," Steve said. "Especially not when..."

Bucky picked his head up and looked at Steve frowning at the ceiling. "When?"

Steve refocused on him and shrugged, still frowning a little. "I just don't know if it's a good thing or not. We can use it to get you off and have a good time doing it, and that's good, but the trigger..."

"Is gonna break," Bucky realized. They could only do this so many times before it wouldn't work anymore—he could already take it almost for granted that he wouldn't panic badly under the off-switch, and that Steve would bring him back if he did, and he could already talk to Steve while he was under. It wouldn't take much more to break the trigger.

"Yeah," Steve said. "Unless we're training you to stay under."

"Aw, shit," Bucky said, letting his head fall against Steve's shoulder. "It is a hell of a positive reinforcement, isn't it."

"It is," Steve agreed with a sigh.

Bucky turned it over in his mind, looking for any reason other than but it feels good and I don't want to stop to believe that the danger of reinforcement wasn't reason to call a halt.

"I used to dance," Bucky said. "Under the obey-handler trigger, the guys would tell me to do stuff, and I would dance with them. It was fun, I liked doing it. But I still knew that I wanted to be able to tell them to fuck off."

He expected Steve to point out that the fun of a quick jitterbug in the lab wasn't exactly the same...
kind of positive reinforcement as the orgasms he'd gone months and months without, but all he said 
was, "Okay."

Bucky picked his head up again, frowning.

Steve smiled a little. "It's your call, Buck. It could go either way--maybe we're breaking it, maybe 
we're reinforcing it. Hell, maybe it's a wash and we're not accomplishing anything other than a good 
time. But you say whether we do it or don't. If it seems like it's hurting you and you don't realize it, I 
won't hesitate to say something, but it's always going to be your call, and I don't think we're there 
yet."

"Oh," Bucky said. He smiled a little. "We're still on for tomorrow night, then?"

Steve nodded. "Long as we don't dose you more often than every eighteen hours, we're good. That 
reminds me, I gotta send the data to Dr. H about your response." Steve looked around like he was 
going to grab his phone and do it right then.

"JARVIS," Bucky said, "could you tell Dr. Hernandez everything she needs to know about my 
sedative response today?"

"I shall send a full report," JARVIS agreed.

"There," Bucky said, kissing Steve until he stilled. "Now you got nothing to do until team dinner 
time but lie here with me, huh, pal?"

"Not a thing," Steve agreed, smiling again.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is 
also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 52

The weirdest thing about finally doing the long-prepped-for interview was that the interviewer, a radio host named Trish Walker, had agreed to come to the Tower for it. They were in a conference room where Bucky had had PR training dozens of times, including yesterday when it was already set up as a radio studio.

He smiled cautiously at Trish as she settled herself across from him, the big microphones between them. "Hard to believe this is really happening."

Trish, a petite blond with her hair in a ponytail wearing a slightly more feminine version of Bucky's jeans and hoodie, gave him a dimpling smile. "Well, technically it's not, because we're not going live. So any time you need a break, you can say so, and--I'm sure your PR people went over this with you, but we set up ground rules about what things will be edited out if you say something you don't intend."

His PR people had, in fact, gone over it with him in fairly excruciating detail: what would definitely be cut if he asked for it to be, and what Trish reserved the right to air even if he didn't like it. There were extensive contracts, laying out everyone's stipulations.

One of the stipulations--well, two of them, he supposed--were sitting off to one side of the room. Bucky had been assured the microphones wouldn't pick them up from there unless they spoke loudly, and Bucky and Trish could both see them in their peripheral vision.

Bucky wasn't actually sure whether Steve would be any good for his intended purpose, since all his attention seemed taken up with Ms. Jones and her black leather jacket. Ms. Jones looked wary enough for all four of them, though. Their styles couldn't have been more different, but Bucky was reminded overpoweringly of Peggy, and he was sure Steve was too.

And despite how small she was, and how much she had to know about what both Steve and Bucky were capable of, she didn't look intimidated in the slightest. She'd sized each of them up at a glance and then thrown herself into her seat, and now Steve was perched beside her like he was trying desperately to think of how to open a conversation with a pretty girl.

Bucky smiled and shook his head and returned his attention to Trish.

Her smile had gone a little crooked--she'd obviously seen where he was looking--but she didn't say anything about it, just, "Ready?"

"No," Bucky said. "That a problem?"

Trish looked thrown for a second, then smiled wider. "Not really, we'll edit."

Bucky nodded and flashed her a thumbs up, and Trish pressed a couple of buttons and settled into a posture that was very clearly radio host at work. "I'm here at Avengers Tower with Sergeant James Barnes, who some have called the Winter Soldier--"

"Please," Bucky said, leaning in slightly, though not across the invisible line of too close to the
microphone, which he had been drilled on yesterday. "Call me Bucky."

Trish laughed, moving a little as she did to keep it just the right volume on the recording, but her eyes were bright and direct as they met Bucky's. "All right, Bucky! Clearly you're sitting down with me because you're ready to finally speak for yourself, so is there anything you'd like to say first, before I start asking questions?"

Bucky nodded, turning his head slightly to take a sip of water and steady himself and remembering not to clear his throat audibly. This part he had definitely rehearsed, although not with Steve in his peripheral vision.

"Yeah, I'd just like to thank all the people who have shown so much support for me, and for Steve, and for both of us together, and to say that I'm glad as hell to be home after all this time. Or, you know, at least the next borough over from home." Bucky smiled, and Trish smiled back but didn't make a sound, leaving him to fill the silence. "Uh, that's it, really. I'm not campaigning for anything. I get why people are interested, but I honestly don't have that much to say."

"Oh?" Trish said, still with that bright smile. "Why do you think people are interested?"

Bucky was hit with the sudden awareness that however sympathetic she was, Trish was not on his team. Trish wanted him to say something interesting.

Bucky looked down at his hands so that he wouldn't look around for Steve on the first goddamn question, and rifled through his practice questions and answers.

"People are always interested in what's unusual," Bucky said, haltingly at first and then with ease as he found his familiar rhythm from all that practice. "You know--dog bites man or man bites dog. People have heard plenty about bad guys, people who have done awful things. But none of those people used to be Captain America's best pal--and none of those people stood trial and were acquitted for the reasons I was."

Bucky met Trish's eyes, checking whether he was going on too long, but she nodded, her smile encouraging, so he kept talking.

"People can understand a World War II commando soldier, and they can understand an enemy operative doing awful things, and they can understand a prisoner of war who's been tortured and coerced, and they can understand a guy who's happy living openly with his best guy, and they can understand an Avenger. But when all of those are the same guy, that's... that's news. That's interesting."

Trish nodded, smiling. "You are not wrong! And of course, one of the things that makes you interesting is the company you keep--Steve Rogers has been of interest to the public for a very long time now, and you've been at his side for a lot of that."

Bucky couldn't help glancing over at Steve then, and he smiled at the deliberately goopy expression on Steve's face, rolling his eyes as he returned his attention to Trish. "Yeah, well, you know what they say. Behind every great man there's a not-so-great guy running after him trying to watch his back while he does something stupid."

Trish laughed. "I'm not quite sure I've heard it put that way before! Judging from his few statements about you, I think Captain Rogers might quibble with that not-so-great, but I know what you mean. There's never been a public statement about your relationship, or not one in words. The two of you did make yourselves pretty clear back in January, outside your court martial. Do you have a preferred term to describe what you are to each other?"
That... wasn't quite the question on their relationship that Bucky had been bracing for, and he wrinkled his nose as he considered. "No, not really. I mean, the beauty of the grand gesture is everybody knows, so we never really have to tell people? To each other, we're just... us."

Bucky didn't want to say best guy, somehow, even though it was what they called each other most. It felt too much like telling people what he called Steve in bed, even though he didn't actually call Steve anything different from usual in bed. Still, it was theirs, not a common phrase everybody used.

"Boyfriend sounds like we're kids going steady," Bucky said, shrugging. "Partners sounds so... dry. And we aren't planning on getting married anytime soon, so those words are out."

"And given the time you grew up in, your relationship wasn't something you talked about much when you were younger, either, was it? You probably didn't introduce him to your family as someone you were romantically involved with."

"Well, definitely not when I was six," Bucky agreed, taking another peek at Steve as he said it. He was sitting back, looking relaxed and amused. Bucky had to be doing all right, then. Steve would look worried if Bucky were blowing it.

"But, yeah, when things became romantic between us, that wasn't something we ever imagined telling our families about. There were a few people we knew--clubs we went to--but there it was pretty much the same thing. We walked in holding hands and people knew the score."

"So are things pretty much the same between you as they were back then? Were you able to pick up where you left off in your relationship?"

Bucky's practice did him some good then; he wanted to laugh at the absurdity and he wanted to say Yes, of course, but by the time he'd taken a breath and repeated the question over in his mind he knew neither of those was the answer he actually intended to give.

"Obviously we're both a lot different than we were then," Bucky said in a measured voice. "Steve not as much, thank God, because if I hadn't recognized him, even after all these years, I don't know where I'd be."

"When you say recognized," Trish jumped in when Bucky paused to formulate the next sentence. "What do you mean, exactly? Did you know who he was when you fought in DC?"

Bucky pressed his lips together and stared at the base of his microphone for the space of a deep, careful breath. It wasn't the worst way he could have been asked about this, and he'd known he would have to say something about it. Still, for a second he was in that chair again, surrounded by technicians, and the blond across from him was an old man in a suit, telling him he had to go out and shape the world one more time.

"No," Bucky said. "No, I... I didn't know who I was, at that point. The first time Steve saw my face, he said my name, and I had no idea what that word meant except that I knew it meant something. I knew he meant something. And that was the beginning of me being able to break away, to get out from under the conditioning. Everything they did to me, everything they messed with in my head... they couldn't quite take away Steve."

Trish seemed taken aback for a second, but she was smiling when she said, "True love saved the day?"

"That's the oversimplified, dismissive way to put it, I guess," Bucky said, making his own voice flatly serious. "No person exists in a vacuum. We all define ourselves in relation to other people."
Maybe it's work, or an organization, or a religion, or a sexual orientation--but all of that comes down to how we relate to other people."

He had stolen Trish's smile, and he was pretty sure that that was word-for-word something Woj had said to him once. He redirected a little, softening his tone.

"I got a hell of a lot of therapy while I was recovering in the Army, and that was one of the things that we talked about, how becoming a person again, a whole functional person, meant figuring out where I fit in relation to other people. Steve was a big piece of that, obviously, but the Army itself, the reintegration program, was really the part that saved me. I had a place, a uniform, a routine. I had work. I had people around me."

He didn't dare say I had a team. He couldn't draw that kind of attention to them. Even letting people realize how important some of the individual guys who'd helped in his recovery were to him could lead to them being tracked down. He didn't intend to send reporters or protesters to any of their doors.

"But Steve gave me the first step, yeah. Steve knew that I was a person, that I wasn't just a machine, or materiel. And even when I didn't know anything else, I knew Steve. That's true love if anything is, isn't it?" He smiled at the end, a little apologetically.

"It definitely is," Trish said, entirely seriously. "But, as you pointed out, it's not just love that helped you get back to where you are now--when you reported in to the Army, you were put into a program of rehabilitation known as reintegration, which is the standard of care for returning prisoners of war. Aside from that, and one photo of you in a coffee shop, that's basically all we know about what happened to you at Fort Sam Houston for three months. Can you tell us anything more? You said you got a lot of therapy."

"A lot," Bucky said, smiling, making it lighter than it probably should be. "A lot of therapy. I really had to learn how to be a person again--I knew how to be a soldier okay, so that was the best place for me to be starting, but it took me a while to get the rest back. I was recovering a lot of memories--it had been six months since the last time I was--"

Bucky stumbled, remembering at the last second that PR had decided that he should absolutely not use the word wiped to describe what had been done to him.

"Uh, the last time HYDRA... did the stuff they did to me that made me forget things. I was physically pretty healed from it, and I had remembered some stuff, but a lot more came back once I came in. When I was safe, and actively working on getting better instead of just surviving."

"Amnesia--excuse me, disorders of memory--is one of the things that was mentioned in your court martial verdict, which is the only thing the public has heard about your condition and what exactly you had to recover from."

Bucky wanted to look away, wanted to hide, but he kept his eyes on Trish, letting her keep talking her way toward an actual question.

"In full, the verdict stated that you suffered from," Trish glanced toward a paper in front of her, but it was pretty obvious that she had this memorized. "An array of induced pathologies including psychosis, dissociation, disorders of executive function, disorders of memory, and assorted other induced dysfunctions. And that was why you were found not guilty, because of those conditions. Other than memory problems, do you still struggle with any of those?"

"I, uh," Bucky swallowed hard. He'd never really thought about those words, other than the not guilty part. Woj hadn't been big on labeling everything that was wrong with him--were the triggers
disorders of executive function or other induced dysfunctions? What exactly was dissociation?
Psychosis had something to do with hallucinations and delusions--did his off-switch memory-dreams count, the way he lost track of what was real and what wasn't?

He had practiced for this question, even if he hadn't expected that barrage of words. He knew this. He just had to breathe and remember the right answer.

"I'm still receiving therapy," Bucky said slowly. "For, uh. For some of that. My, uh--the doctors treating me--haven't focused on--on naming everything, or cutting it up into categories, just helping me deal with it. For the court martial, obviously, they had to--" Bucky felt himself back there for a moment, sitting in a chair and answering questions from a blank-faced panel of doctors, telling the truth without much strategy at all.

He looked down at his hands, the cuffs of his soft sweatshirt, the knees of his jeans. He was here now; he was out, he was safe. He didn't have to answer these questions to save himself from something worse.

His mouth worked as he struggled to think of what to say, what Trish and the people listening to her show really wanted to know. He'd practiced this part too, but all those easy practice sessions felt far away now, and the people listening--thousands, millions, far beyond any crowd that had ever gathered around him--seemed very real.

He reached for the cold, calm detachment that had engulfed him before in dangerous situations, but it didn't come to him now, when he wanted it. The room was utterly silent, utterly safe, and that meant he had to answer on his own. He hardly remembered what the question was anymore.

"The things I'm still, uh, working on," he said finally. "They're... they're things that make life difficult for me. And maybe for Steve, because he--" Bucky looked over to see Steve watching him with a guarded expression, and that meant it had to be obvious to everyone in the room how he was floundering.

That wasn't bad, necessarily. They had told him in practice that it was better to sound like these things were difficult, to convince people. If he was too comfortable talking about it, it would sound like a lie.

He was probably knocking that out of the park, at least.

"But I, uh," Bucky refocused on his hands and the microphone. "I'm not--the things I was dealing with that could make me dangerous to other people, that--we dealt with that while I was at MEDCOM. After the court martial I was evaluated for that, to be sure that I wouldn't be a danger to anyone if I was released. So it's not that, it's just... me. Trying to get well and get on with my life."

Trish nodded. Her expression had turned gentle, which was almost worse than that worry-line on Steve's forehead. "Why don't we take a break, and then come back and talk some more?"

Bucky didn't have time to reply before Steve jumped up in his peripheral vision, making a beeline for him. Bucky smiled a little and nodded. He let Steve haul him up and hustle him out of the room and across the hall to the soundproofed and secure "green room" where no one but him and Steve were allowed to go while Trish was in the building.

"What the fuck," he mumbled into Steve's shoulder as Steve hugged him tight. "What the fuck, we practiced this, I practiced, I--"

"No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy," Steve replied into his ear, and he kissed
Bucky's temple and nuzzled at his hair. It was getting long enough to fluff out noticeably around his head, not quite long enough to lie down yet.

"I should get a haircut," he said, still leaning into Steve, feeling wired and exhausted at once, like he never wanted to move and like he had about thirty more seconds before he was going to have to push Steve away. He could just about stand to think about his hair right now. Nothing else.

"If that's what you want," Steve agreed, like the change of topic didn't surprise him at all. "Or you can grow it out. Don't have to decide right now."

PR liked him having it short, but they probably wouldn't care as long as it was short enough not to look like the Winter Soldier's hair. They'd probably love it if he grew it long enough to style like he had during the war.

"There's gotta be a barber shop in the building," Bucky said, turning his head to rub his hair against Steve's throat. "Tony gets his hair cut, he can't be sitting around like a plebe in a corner shop somewhere."

"His barber comes in every third week, sees a few of us," Steve murmured. "I'll put you on the list, huh? He's good."

Bucky nodded and thought about the whir of clippers, the way it made his head feel light and the velvety feeling of a fresh buzz cut. He breathed in sync with Steve. He didn't think about anything else for a little while.

The rest of the interview was easier, as far as the questions Trish asked and the stuff he talked about, but he never managed to forget again that this was real and not practice. People were going to hear the things he said and make their judgments about him based on that.

He managed not to freeze—PR's drilling had done that for him, as surely as rifle drills had kept him moving the first time he faced enemy fire—but he also didn't dare look over to see what expression was on Steve's face.

When it was over, Trish offered him a handshake and a smile, kind if not quite pitying. "I know you feel like that was awful, but you're not going to believe how many people are going to respond positively to this. It's really going to help people understand who you are and what you've been through."

Bucky managed a small, tight smile. "That's the plan, right?"

Trish's smile froze, but before Bucky could make things any more awkward, Steve made a small pained noise. Bucky's head whipped around to see Steve and Ms. Jones also shaking hands, or at least holding their hands clasped between them.

Ms. Jones was smiling with the kind of sweetness that preceded an uppercut; Steve looked dazed and possibly half in love.

Bucky and Trish lurched toward them at the same instant, Bucky saying, "Steve, I--" at the same moment Trish said, "Well, Jess--"

Steve and Ms. Jones abruptly disengaged, and Steve didn't tuck his right hand behind his back quite quickly enough for Bucky to miss that the skin around his knuckles had gone red. There were a few more bright, polite exchanges, and then Trish got Ms. Jones out without quite giving the appearance of hustling her away.
Bucky turned from watching them disappear out the door to see Steve looking down at his hand, flexing his fingers. The red hadn't faded yet, and Bucky frowned and took Steve's hand in both of his. "What the hell did she do?"

"Shook my hand," Steve said, and he laughed a little. "Gave me the secret handshake, I guess. She's, uh... she's in the club, Buck. She's gotta be. Not the same way we got there, I don't think--we'd know, wouldn't we? But her grip's as strong as mine, and she wasn't even putting her arm into it. She could've broken my hand just like that."

Steve's voice was wondering and not a little infatuated, and then his gaze settled on Bucky and the look in his eyes only got warmer. He turned his reddened hand to hold Bucky's instead of just being held, and he squeezed gently.

"You did that, Buck. She and Ms. Walker obviously had no intention of letting on what she could do, but she listened to you talk for an hour and at the end of it--she let us know."

"I don't know that the fact she could break your hand makes her a great judge of anything," Bucky pointed out, but it was a little heartening. Ms. Jones hadn't come in looking to be impressed; she had been there to protect Trish. And she was somebody who obviously knew how to protect herself, staying under the radar this long. It was a big gesture of confidence from a tough test audience.

*It went fine,* Bucky thought, trying out the idea. *It's going to go over all right.*

It still felt dangerously optimistic, and he still felt like his brain was a suitcase whose contents had been thoroughly jumbled by rough handling, but the idea was probably worth trying.

Bucky had carefully planned the rest of the post-interview day. He went down to the gun range first, letting the muffled sound of gunshots in his ears take away the echoes of his own unsteady voice.

Clint came in when he'd been there for a while. He said nothing, just set up in the next stall, and Bucky remembered that Clint didn't do interviews often and hated meeting with PR. Steve didn't like talking to reporters, but he was good at it, and while he had never been less than understanding about Bucky's apprehension, it was pretty obvious he also considered this something that was wrong with Bucky.

Clint, though. Clint was right here by his side.

Bucky went on shooting until he was nearly at the end of the schedule box designated for the gun range, and then he spent some time breaking down and cleaning his weapon before he put it away. When he'd shut the locker doors on it and turned away toward the door, the rhythm of Clint's arrows paused.

"If it's bad," Clint said. "If you need to get away for a while--say the word. I know a place that'll be pretty quiet for the next few days."

Bucky nodded without speaking, confident that Clint would perceive his answer without words, and headed out of the gun range and back upstairs. His next schedule box was lunch with Steve.

The interview was airing late that afternoon--timed for people to listen to it during their evening commutes and for the evening news shows to pick it up and dissect it, drawing yet more people to listen to the recorded version of the interview.

Steve wanted to listen--he seemed to regard it as his duty to listen--and no one thought it was a good
idea for Bucky to be alone while it was airing. He went down to Tony's lab, where Tony and Bruce did some tests Bucky could swear they'd done before. Butterfingers laid a shop towel over his knee, and Bucky smiled and patted the robot; it then returned every few minutes with another towel. Tony didn't notice until the stack was eight high, and then snapped, "What--where is he even getting those--" and tore off to investigate the supply closet Butterfingers had been raiding.

Bucky stayed where he was with the sensors, Bruce, and the stack of shop towels. Bruce dug an assortment of snacks out of Tony's desk drawer, and when Tony returned to find them snacking on his weird dried fruit and spiced cashews, he threw his hands in the air. "Betrayed on every side!"

"I left you the pistachios," Bruce said peaceably, and Tony stalked over to his desk, pulled out another bag of nuts, and came to sit with them again, sharing the snacks around. Butterfingers appeared a moment later with napkins, and Tony just sighed and took one.

Steve arrived before they'd quite demolished the supply of snacks, and he was beaming with a little telltale pinkness around his eyes. "It was great, Buck. You sounded great, and--Pepper listened with us, and she thought it was real good. Nathan and Theresa were over the moon. Twitter's going nuts, they let me say a little and retweet some of the nicest messages."

Tony abruptly looked to one side--some display invisible to the rest of them--and then hastily wiped his hands. "Speaking of Pep, I should--Bruce, can you--"

"Mm-hm," Bruce said absently, shutting down the last of the sensors and dismissing Bucky with a slightly sad smile and a wave. Bucky nodded to him, patted Butterfingers one last time and returned the neat stack of shop towels, and then stepped into the bear hug Steve was obviously dying for. He leaned into Steve's solidity, holding on back and trying to believe it: that he had won some nebulous battle today, shifted a tide.

None of it felt real except Steve, and Steve was happy, so that had to be all right.

Bucky spent the rest of the evening on the couch with Steve, eating a celebratory dinner he barely tasted, watching movies he didn't remember, punctuated with dispatches from PR full of good news he could hardly process. It wasn't, he thought, exactly like going cold in the face of danger; he smiled and laughed at the right things, leaning cozily into Steve. He meant it. He meant to be happy. But it was all happening at some remove, to someone else--to the Bucky Barnes who belonged to the world like Captain America, maybe.

Maybe that was the trouble. He didn't have another name to hang on that guy. He couldn't take Bucky Barnes off the way Steve could slough Cap and become himself again. When Bucky stepped out of Bucky Barnes to let him belong to the public, there was nothing left but a shell, observing everything from some strange distance.

He made a mental note to tell Padfield about this, though he had no doubt Padfield would ask him all about how his day had gone. They'd discussed it enough beforehand, after all. In the meantime he drifted through getting ready for bed, through kissing Steve good night and settling down to sleep beside him.

The nightmares didn't have any trouble bringing him right back to himself, though. The first one shouldn't have been as terrifying as it was--he was naked on the street down below the Tower, that was all. No one was laughing or pointing, but he could feel their eyes on him, and he didn't have time to find clothes or even cover himself because he had to get to the mission, except he couldn't remember where that was, either, so he was just running, looking, and all the people kept looking back, getting in his way, and--
He woke with his heart pounding, gasping for breath. Steve was alert beside him, reaching for him, but Bucky shook his head and lay back down. It took longer than it should have to push the dream aside and settle down to sleep again, but he managed it.

Until the next dream—-the off-switch—-and the dream after that—-something clinging and horrible he couldn't remember—-and the dream after that—-Steve, laughing, holding a scalpel.

He gave up on going back to sleep after that one. Steve was still dozing, and Bucky slipped out of bed and wandered the apartment, dim and night-quiet, until he sat down next to the windows in the gym. The little blanket pallet was there all the time now. He lit a couple of the candles and breathed in the faint honey smell of them, and watched the reflections of their flames in the window as he looked out over the city from a safe height, secure behind the glass.

Steve came and sat down beside him before the sun was even up. Bucky leaned into him and said, "Clint says he knows a place out of the city, where it's quiet."

Steve curled an arm around him and said, "Let's go, then."
Chapter End Notes

Alby’s art for this story is [here on Tumblr](https://artgroves.tumblr.com)! This chapter's art coming soon!
I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

This chapter has NSFW art, so choose your reading environment accordingly.

Also, welcome to the end of Act IV! All that's left now is the Actual End! (Yes the Actual End is about five chapters, look at the scale of this thing.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Quinjet landed in a snowy field, a little way from a farmhouse surrounded by an assortment of outbuildings. Steve was looking around curiously, trying to work out what was special about this place. Bucky just watched Clint, waiting for him to actually say what this place was.

Clint looked from Steve to Bucky thoughtfully. "You didn't tell him? About Valentine's Day or anything?"

Steve jerked his gaze to Clint at the words, and then to Bucky.

Bucky shook his head, letting himself smile with his eyes and keeping his mouth steady. "You didn't mean to tell me. And I could've been wrong."

"Sure," Clint said, giving Bucky a knowing look. Neither of them could miss a target that large, and they both knew it. "Okay, well, welcome to my humble abode, guys."

He went straight to the hatch and hopped out at that. Steve looked at Bucky, frowning in confused betrayal. "Valentine's Day?"

Among other things, it was more than a week ago now.

Bucky shrugged. Steve would get over it, and it really hadn't been his to tell. "Figured he kept it secret for a reason."

He grabbed the duffle he'd hastily packed with... probably most of the things he'd need for three days away from home, and followed Clint out the hatch. Steve was only a few steps behind, shouldering his own bag.

Bucky glanced around, looking automatically for vantage points; the three of them made a neat little silhouetted line, strung out single-file as they walked in each other's footsteps. There wasn't a good spot for a sniper, though--not a sniper who wasn't him or Clint. The trees were a long way back, and the snow on the roof of the house and barn were both undisturbed. Approaching from the air, Clint would have been able to survey every inch of the farm and confirm it was clear.

Bucky felt something uncoil in his spine, and looked around again, enjoying the morning light glittering on the snow, the chilly blue of the wide open sky. He could see why Clint kept this place a secret; it was a refuge from everything else, safe and separate.

Then the front door of the house burst open and a child of indeterminate gender ran out, wearing a knitted hat, thick coat, and boots over what looked like pajamas. "Dad!"
Bucky stopped short and glanced over his shoulder at Steve, who looked more poleaxed than he had a right to after a solid couple of minutes to consider the possibilities. Meanwhile Clint was laughing, scooping the--boy, probably--up out of the snow, and catching a little girl with an unzipped coat but no shoes before she made it off the porch steps.

"Hey, kids," Clint said, hoisting them both up. "So I brought Cap and Sergeant Barnes with me, how about if they watch you while Mom and I go on our trip?"

Bucky felt Steve go rigid behind him, his horror vibrating right through the meter of air that separated them. Bucky was pretty sure that Clint wouldn't entrust his own beloved children to him and Steve, but he was also trying to think of who to call for advice. Andrews? Izzy was practically just a baby, and these children were... larger than baby-sized. Did any of the others have kids? Did Woj?

Both kids' heads swiveled to look at them, eyes wide and bright. The girl looked up at Clint and whispered, "We're supposed to go to Auntie Lisa's, though."

"Oh, well, okay, I guess you guys can still go to Auntie Lisa's, then," Clint agreed, glancing up and winking in Bucky and Steve's direction. "We'll just leave these guys here to hold down the fort, then, how's that?"

The little girl nodded agreement, and the boy wriggled down to stand on his own feet. He said seriously, "There's plenty of firewood, and the generator is all gassed up, and we picked the herbs this morning so you don't have to do any chores."

Bucky nodded, trying for equal solemnity. "Thanks."

Clint rolled his eyes, hauling both kids up onto the porch. "Come on, I'll give you guys the tour before we take off."

Clint's wife was named Laura, and seemed to take the appearance of two supersoldier houseguests in stride, as much as Bucky could tell as she marshaled two children and assorted luggage. Clint showed them the kitchen, pantry, and downstairs food storage, the laundry room, and a comfortable, bright bedroom on the second floor with an attached bathroom, too neat to be anything but a guest room.

"First aid kit is under the sink, and there's a bigger one in the kitchen. I'm leaving the Quinjet, but if you need to go to town the truck's in the barn, keys are on the hook by the door. See you Monday night!"

It seemed like they'd barely glimpsed the inside of the place before the Bartons were out the door, pulling away through the snow along a barely-visible track. When they'd disappeared through a narrow gap in the trees, Bucky looked over at Steve, standing beside him on the wide porch.

He looked as off-balance as Bucky felt, but he met Bucky's eyes with a smile. "Well, Clint wasn't lying about the quiet."

Bucky smiled too. "Cold, though. Come on inside."

Steve didn't even argue about that--neither of them much liked being cold anymore. There was a room on the west side of the house that was pleasantly bright and had two battered couches and a big fireplace with a good supply of wood stacked up beside the hearth. It didn't take long to get a fire going, and once they'd both basked in front of the heat for a while, other features of their little hideaway became obvious.
"We have to fix our own lunch, huh," Steve said idly.

Bucky snorted, though he'd been thinking pretty much the same thing. "We're getting soft, living with Stark."

Steve shrugged and looked over at him. "I dunno, Buck. Your ma and mine, then automats, then rations and chow halls. Not like we ever did much cooking for ourselves."

Bucky arched an eyebrow. "You wanna tell whoever it is that cooked that pot roast last week that they're next thing to an army ration?"

"I said my ma," Steve pointed out, rolling his eyes. "And yours! The Army was obviously the low point there."

Bucky had a brief, awful sense-memory: the smell and texture of the gray-brown paste he'd been fed for optimum nutritional efficiency. It had been given to him, toward the end, in a little plastic tray with sections molded into it. That had been what nudged him toward eating frozen dinners, when he was first on his own: the tray was the same, even if the contents were disconcertingly different. They were the closest thing he could find to rations in the outside world.

Bucky pushed away that memory--no need to spring that on Steve--and simultaneously upped the urgency of eating some actual food to wash the remembered taste out of his mouth.

"Well," Bucky said, standing up and tugging Steve to his feet. He was frowning a little, like he'd noticed Bucky remembering. Bucky summoned up a grin and added, "Don't say we've hit the low point until we get through feeding ourselves for a few days."

Lunch was almost disappointingly easy. They had turned out to be completely competent to thaw and heat some frozen soup (from a container not conspicuously labeled with "FOR DINNER" and a future date), and there were a couple of loaves of fresh bread that clearly needed to be eaten promptly, so it was just as well they were there.

Steve was left obviously in need of a challenge, and sure enough they'd barely cleaned their dishes before he said, "Hey, why don't we go have a look around outside?"

Bucky glanced over at him. "A look around, or should we pack survival rations?"

Steve made a thoughtful noise, obviously considering the same impressions Bucky had gotten about the lay of the land and just how much of it there was. "Well. Snacks, probably. Phone's got a compass in it, we should make sure the batteries are charged."

They stuffed their pockets with granola bars and cookies along with their phones, and headed out into the bright, cold day. It wasn't even especially cold once they'd gotten moving; the wind was only a fitful breeze, and the sun was shining down warmly enough to start melting the snow at least out in the open.

Steve set out purposefully, following the vehicle tracks and mapping out the route of the gravel drive from the front of the house to the trees, and then to the road. They didn't actually go that far, stopping once they were close enough to see occasional cars going by through a screen of trees. Then Steve looked around and plunged off the snow-topped gravel and into the woods, marching along like he'd forgotten absolutely everything he'd ever known about stealth.

On the one hand, of course there was no need for stealth here, on vacation on a friend's rural property on a sunny Friday afternoon. On the other hand, there was such a thing as having a
modicum of pride in your professional skills.

Bucky fell back a little, drawing on everything he'd ever known about moving undetected. He started walking in Steve's footprints while Steve forged ahead, and set out to see whether he could make himself so quiet, so invisible, that Steve would stop to wonder where he'd gone. It wouldn't count if Steve just looked around for him; he had to actually think that Bucky wasn't there. Bucky knew Steve well enough to spot that difference in the set of his shoulders, the angle of his head.

It took nearly ten minutes, but it happened. Steve stopped in his tracks, looking around with a frown, then looked back. Even then it took him a couple of seconds to spot Bucky in the shadow of a fir tree.

The look of startled recognition, a target suddenly noticing his presence, set off some reflex in Bucky's brain. He launched himself at Steve without a thought, tackling him into the snow, which was a thin layer over mud and decaying leaves.

Steve snarled happily back, nearly laughing, and fought to get a grip on him, and they wound up rolling around, bouncing off trees, alternately cursing and laughing. One of them would try to get to his feet, and the other would haul him down again. It didn't take long before they were both soaked and streaked in mud. They kept going anyway, until a heavy truck rattled by on the road, jerking both of them back to awareness of their surroundings.

They sprang apart instantly, and Bucky spun to put his back to Steve, and knew Steve was doing the same. He scanned the surroundings, but everything was as it had been, innocent and still. It was just traffic, just a road thirty yards away.

By the time he was aware of that, Bucky was also aware that he was muddy and wet, and the warming sun didn't reach them so well under the trees. He glanced over his shoulder at Steve, who was looking at him with a sheepish half-smile. Steve said, "You wanna..." and nodded in the general direction of the house.

Bucky nodded. "Done enough cold, wet marching for one lifetime, thanks."

Steve grimaced and nodded agreement, then reached out and took Bucky's right hand in his left, striking out for the brightest daylight. They walked in the open back to the house--close to the trees, because neither of them could quite abandon the available cover. Still, they were out far enough to let the sun shine on them with all the warmth it could give.

Their soaked clothes were steaming in the cold air by the time they climbed back up the farmhouse's porch steps. They barely had to exchange a glance before they started stripping right there on the mat, getting out of their muddied boots and coats and jeans before they could track dirt onto Laura Barton's clean floors. The memory of what their mothers would have had to say about such behavior was far more chilling than the February air.

They hurried inside in their underwear, each carrying an armload of boots and dirty clothes. Steve paused to elbow the front door shut again, and Bucky struck out immediately toward the laundry room. Clint had indicated the doorway off the kitchen, but Bucky hadn't gotten more than a glimpse of a washing machine through it.

It was a pleasant, warm little spot, as it turned out. The laundry room also housed the back door, which had panes of glass to let in the sunshine, but more to the point there was a utility sink and a drying rack, plus two hanger rods complete with several empty hangers each. Bucky set his boots on the mat just inside the door and started hanging up his jeans and coat--once they'd dried he could probably brush the worst of the dirt off.
Steve caught up with him pretty quickly and got to work hanging up his own things beside Bucky's. Bucky stepped back to get out of his way and took a look at the laundry machines. They weren't unlike the ones he'd used in laundromats before he went to MEDCOM, and he thought he could work out pretty well how to get his clothes wet and clean and then dry, although he was aware that there were further subtleties to the process. He didn't know if it was possible to break a washing machine or dryer by doing it wrong, but he didn't want to risk it.

"Huh, what's through here?"

Bucky jerked back from his study of the washer's settings to see Steve peering at a second door off the laundry room, which Bucky had scarcely noticed. It looked like an exterior door, tightly sealed and solid—but it had a lock that needed a key from this side.

A key hung at adult eye-level beside the door frame—the sort of arrangement that was only meant to deter a kid from getting in there unsupervised.

"Clint didn't say anything about any part of the house being off-limits," Steve said thoughtfully, studying the locked door and the key.

"Cooper said he already picked the herbs today," Bucky said. There were some green bunches of things hanging up in the kitchen, above the fridge, and this was the southern side of the house. "Greenhouse, I bet. Kitchen garden."

Steve glanced at him, a little mischief lighting his expression, and said, "We better make sure nothing needs to be watered."

Bucky rolled his eyes. They weren't even really doing anything they shouldn't, but Steve couldn't be expected to last three whole days without sticking his nose into something that wasn't properly any of his business. Might as well let him get his thrills from this instead of... God only knew what he'd find to keep himself busy by the end of the weekend.

"Better check then, pal," Bucky agreed, waving a hand at Steve and the key.

Steve flashed a grin and took it down, unlocking the door and hanging the key up again before he actually turned the knob. "Coming with me?"

Bucky let out a long-suffering sigh, but moved to stand right behind Steve's shoulder, so he'd see inside at the same time Steve did. Despite the logic he found himself bracing for something, his fingers twitching for a weapon.

Steve pushed the door open, and even before he could see anything, Bucky felt himself relax at the rush of humid warmth and the smells of rich soil and green things growing. The space was drenched in sunlight, a sloping glass roof and two glass walls letting in light.

After walking outside in the wintry woods, the profusion of green was almost disorienting. Plants grew out of pots, climbed up strings, and trailed from hanging baskets. What seemed like a chaotic jumble resolved into carefully organized rows and levels once Bucky stepped inside, lagging a step behind Steve. The floor was oddly springy underfoot; the walkways were covered with rubber mats honeycombed with holes, made to let water run through.

There was actually a surprising amount of open space right in the middle of the little greenhouse. Bucky stood among the ranks of plants with Steve at his side and looked up to see the clear blue of the sky and the glare of the low winter sun. The warmth seemed to sink into his bones in a way different from being in a well-heated house. He could feel the sun on his face and smell green things
growing. Spring was well underway in Texas right now, while winter was hanging on in New York, but in the greenhouse it was full summer.

"Huh," Steve said, but the thoughtful noise had Bucky's eyes wide open, looking over at Steve. That wasn't a neutral sound from Steve, not when he said it like that. That was Steve evaluating the tactical possibilities of his surroundings.

Steve switched on an innocent look when he met Bucky's eyes. "I was just thinking, it's a nice spot. Warm, and you can see the sky. Stars, probably, tonight. And there's more than enough room to set up a bedroll."

Steve wasn't thinking about camping out. Steve was thinking about the nicest possible spot for Bucky to get laid.

Bucky felt vaguely scandalized, even though he knew he'd packed appropriate supplies. If it wasn't here it'd be someplace else--the floor by the fire, or that quilt-covered bed in the guest room.

"Oughta be easy to clean up," Steve said, still in that innocently thoughtful tone. "Candles can't really set fire to anything if they get knocked over."

Bucky looked at Steve again, squinting. "I don't know if you've noticed, pal, but I don't exactly move around much."

"No," Steve agreed, looking studiously skyward. "But I was thinking I might."

Bucky folded his arms across his chest. "You have a plan."

Steve shrugged, meeting his eyes with a crooked smile. "I have a plan."

Steve had offered to tell him, but Bucky decided he'd rather not know the plan in advance. He didn't need to, not when it was Steve's plan--and when Bucky's part of it consisted of lie there unable to move, get hard, get off.

Bucky found a waterproof tarp in a closet and laid that down over the rubber matting, then made up the familiar blanket pallet over it while Steve was upstairs, allegedly getting the supplies together for his plan. Bucky was carefully not listening for any sounds he made up there. He set the candles up, finding safe places among the plant pots for them.

He didn't think they would be necessary, in the overwhelming summer-garden smell of the greenhouse, with the afternoon sun shining down through the glass. Still, there was no need to go messing with more variables than necessary. The candles helped, so he would light the candles.

When all that was in place, Bucky pressed the eye-reader pieces into place on his temples and stripped out of his clothes, folding them all up neatly and setting them in the duffle bag that had held the blankets and candles. The warmth of the greenhouse made it perfectly pleasant to be naked; the shiver that ran through him was all anticipation.

Before he had to put too much effort into not speculating, he heard Steve come through the laundry room, bare feet making only the slightest sound on the floors. It was just enough sound for him to be sure that Steve was barefoot, and his mind flashed to the opposite possibility: Steve all in black, combat boots on his feet, and in his hand the black bar of a stun baton.

The image had no more formed than it was shattered by Steve walking into the greenhouse wearing nothing but the form-fitting gray undershorts he liked, his dick an obvious bulge but not really tenting
them out yet. Other than that Bucky could see every inch of his skin, and the only thing he was carrying was a pump bottle of lube.

Bucky's ass tightened reflexively, and he couldn't keep the wariness off his face or out of his voice. Getting fucked while he was under was something he'd thought was obviously a bad idea, too obvious to have to point out. "Steve..."

Steve looked startled, and glanced down at the lube as if he had no idea how it had gotten into his hand, and then he was dropping to his knees, straddling Bucky's thighs and dropping the bottle with a dull sound beside them. "No, hey, no, not that, Buck. Not that. Other way around."

Bucky blinked at him, struggling to work out what that meant although he knew it should be obvious.

Steve smirked and stood up again, quickly stripping out of his shorts and returning to straddle Bucky's lap. He grabbed Bucky's right hand and guided it between his legs, and Bucky couldn't help the startled noise when he felt the wetness around Steve's hole, the hot skin there so, so soft. "You..."

"I'll do all the moving," Steve said. "How about it, Buck? You ready to lie back and think of how nobody can see me and nobody can hurt me and all I want to do is make you feel good?"

Bucky rocked his fingers, still staring wonderingly at Steve; one fingertip slipped into him almost without effort. Steve had been upstairs getting himself ready for this. "Jesus fucking Christ, Steve."

"That a yes?" Steve asked.

Bucky growled and kissed him hard, and Steve kissed back just as fiercely, bearing Bucky down until he was lying flat. Bucky kept his hands down like he was helpless already, but his mouth was still moving hungrily against Steve's, and Steve just kept giving him everything. Bucky's body hummed with wanting, everything lighting up in him except his dick, stubbornly inert against his thigh.

Then there was a voice in his ear chanting certain words in a certain cadence, and his body turned to lead at the same time his dick finally gave a twitch and started to harden. Steve kept kissing him after his mouth went slack, softer now, his hand firmly cradling the back of Bucky's head. His hips settled lower over Bucky's, his cock brushing against Bucky's, and, oh, hell, they were both getting hard together, every bit of friction that ran through Bucky running through Steve just the same.

The groan Bucky wanted to let out at that stayed locked in his throat, and his lips stayed uselessly still under Steve's. It took a moment for him to remember that there was another way he could express his opinion. It was another minute before he could drag his attention away from the friction of lips on lips and cock against cock.

Fuck Steve.

"Yeah, that's the next thing on the agenda," Steve agreed, brushing a kiss against his cheek. His hand disappeared from under Bucky's head, and then it was curling around Bucky's cock, pressing their shafts together as they hardened. "Just gotta make sure you're good and ready. Been waiting for this, I want to get it right."

It wasn't going to take long to be ready; Bucky felt lightheaded even lying flat on his back, and his cock was hard in Steve's grip, under the friction of Steve's cock. Yes yes now.

"Yeah?" Steve breathed. "Because this feels pretty great too, I didn't realize how much I'd missed this."
Bucky's whole body ached with the thwarted effort to writhe, to push up into Steve's grip, to grab his hips and kiss him. It did feel good, unspeakably good, to know that they were both in the same place, that this was good for both of them at the same time.

He had an odd, sharp memory of getting hard alone, back when he was hiding his efforts from Steve, and he couldn't believe he'd ever thought something like that could be good enough, or even worth trying. That never could have become this.

Steve bent low to kiss him, his knuckles sliding against Bucky's skin as he kept stroking them together. "Okay?"

Steve Steve yes now.

Steve laughed softly and kissed him one more time. "Yeah, that's kind of how I'm feeling."

Steve straightened up, leaving him untouched by hand or lips, without the covering closeness of another body. There were a few little plastic clicks, and then Steve's touch came back to Bucky's cock, slippery and cool. Bucky thought he would choke on the groan he couldn't voice, that his muscles would tear and bones would break with the thwarted desperation to push up into Steve's loose grip.

Then Steve's hand settled at the base of his cock, holding him steady, and the head of his cock pressed against heat, familiar and half-forgotten all at once.

Steve Steve Steve.

"Yeah, pal," Steve said, sounding a little breathless. "Me too."

He moved, then, sinking down onto Bucky's cock, and Bucky would have howled if he could have made a sound. It felt good, felt amazing, after all this time, and somehow knowing that Steve had figured out how to make this happen for him, for them, was still almost better than the part where he was going to come in about two minutes because he had not remembered how amazing Steve's ass was.

And then Steve's hand came to rest on the center of Bucky's chest. Steve wriggled just a little bit, finding the best angle, and he made that noise, soft and cut-off and somehow surprised just like he had been every time. His face would be flushed, his lips parted, a little slack with pleasure. Bucky remembered it vividly, that moment every time Bucky fucked him when Steve started to really feel how much he loved it.

Only Bucky couldn't help things along this time except by having a hard cock jutting up out of his useless body. He couldn't even see, and he didn't think he'd ever seen Steve like he would see him now if he could just open his eyes: in daylight, under the blue sky, riding Bucky and taking his own pleasure.

He wanted to see, and the tide of longing came with a faint sensation of something giving way, finally snapping under the strain.

Bucky opened his eyes and saw Steve staring down at him. His cheeks were as bright a pink as Bucky had pictured, although his mouth was hanging wide open.

The eyepieces of the tracker folded back against Bucky's temples; his left hand twitched involuntarily at his side as his arm came back online. His dick was still hard in Steve's ass, but he didn't dare move or make a sound. If he was safe, if he wasn't helpless...
It was obvious Steve hadn't had a plan for this, and Bucky's brain was as utterly frozen as his body suddenly wasn't, a wash of panic that for once wasn't useful at all.

In the next second Steve's eyes narrowed, his mouth snapping shut as his jaw clenched. His hands moved, one covering Bucky's eyes, and the other resting just a little heavier than a touch on Bucky's throat.
"I know you wish you could move right now," Steve said, his voice gone low and hard. It was the voice that gave orders when things had gone to shit and he didn't have time to argue, when he grabbed his tin foil captain's rank with both hands and made it real.

"I bet you want to move more than you want anything in the world, don't you?" Steve went on, the hand on Bucky's throat pressing down just a little harder. "More than you want to breathe."

Bucky gritted his teeth and pressed his ass and heels into the blankets as hard as he could, his body going rigid with the effort of obeying.

"But you can't," Steve went on, rolling his hips just enough to make Bucky aware that he still had his cock in Steve's ass and this was still happening, because Steve was going to make this work.

"You can't move. You can't move, and you can't make a sound, and you definitely can't look, because this all ends if you put one toe out of line. And I've waited a long fucking time for this, Buck, so you're not going to fuck it up, are you? You're not--going--to move."

Bucky's hands curled into fists at his sides, and he squeezed his eyes shut tight under Steve's palm. He couldn't say a word now, with Steve's hand tight over his eyes and Steve's hand on his throat, but he didn't need to. Steve would feel his desperate effort to cooperate in every trembling inch of his body. Please, he thought, almost a prayer. Please, please, please.

Steve's movements got faster, more assured, as Bucky kept still, barely breathing. Bucky was half-afraid to even feel the pleasure of it, to even notice that he was still hard. Steve was quiet except for the occasional satisfied sound as he took his own pleasure from Bucky's body--that was why this had to work, after all, really. This was what Steve wanted, and as long as Bucky stayed still and quiet under Steve's hands, as long as he did exactly as he was told, Steve could have this.

Steve's hands pressed down harder as Steve's movements sped up, and Steve growled, "You don't move, and you don't--come."

Bucky's breath caught, and it made him aware that he could catch his breath. He didn't breathe after that, clinging to his control and feeling much closer to coming than he had before Steve told him he couldn't.

Steve kept moving over him, the muscles inside him rippling hot and tight around Bucky's cock, the moment stretching and stretching until Bucky thought he couldn't possibly hold out any longer. He was going to move, or scream, or wake up from this impossibly good dream, or--

"Fuck." Steve barely voiced the word, and Bucky felt the wet spatter of Steve coming over his belly as the tightening of muscles around his cock turned rhythmic. Steve was coming on Bucky's cock, and Bucky couldn't think at all, even to remember how this could still go wrong.

Steve's hand pressed down on the center of his chest again, and Bucky realized it wasn't on his throat. He hauled in a rough breath that cut off sharply when Steve clenched down on his cock, one deliberate ripple of muscle.

"You have one minute, Buck," Steve said, his voice coming out hard again. "You come in the next sixty seconds, or you don't come at all. Fifty-nine, fifty-eight..." Steve kept counting down in perfect one-second increments, riding him in tiny motions. Permission, orders, and Steve was still in control. All he had to do was...

Bucky never heard Steve say anything below forty-seven, his senses whiting out in the rush of shocking pleasure.
When it was over he opened his eyes again--Steve's hand had lifted away at some point, allowing Bucky to blink up at the shocking brightness of the blue sky framed in green.

He lowered his gaze to Steve's face, blazing nearly as bright as the sun off the snow outside, but much easier to stare at. Bucky was grinning, and Steve was grinning back, looking like he'd just taken a hill. Possibly a mountain.

"Was that it?" Steve said. "The trigger, is that..."

Bucky pressed his lips flat, considering. "Well. Uh. When I... at MEDCOM..." He was still inside Steve, Steve was still sitting astride his hips, and he could smell their sweat and sex over the smells of dirt and growing things. It was an effort to think of the clean, careful methods his team had used. "They would... after the first time I broke through a trigger, we would test it again and again, for days afterward, to make sure it was... fully eradicated. And the trigger did work to start with even if I broke out, so I'm not really free of it yet."

"Well," Steve said, his blazing grin turning thoughtful and a little wicked. "I guess it's a good thing we've got nothing else to do for the next three days."

Bucky failed to break through the next two times they tried it, though both times he felt as if he was right on the maddening edge of it, like a sneeze--or an orgasm--that never quite arrived.

The actual orgasms did arrive, though, for him and Steve both, so it wasn't a total loss, even if it was frustrating.

Sunday night, he opened his eyes on the stars through the roof of the greenhouse with Steve riding him. He couldn't look away from the blaze of light, which was like nothing you saw in the city, even high above most of the light pollution where they lived. He'd never been allowed out at night at MEDCOM, but he suddenly, vividly remembered the night he'd sat on the railing at the edge of the Grand Canyon. He was sure there had been far more stars visible that night, but they had been only pinpoints of light in the sky, a way to tell the season and the time while he waited to make up his mind.

While he waited for Steve.

Now, he was barely aware of Steve slapping his arm's off-switch into place, disabling it almost as soon as it came online. Steve's hand settled firmly over his throat, and Steve said, low, "You know the rules. You move a muscle or make a sound, I'm getting out the gag and the blindfold."

Bucky was faintly aware that those were not exactly the rules they'd settled on; Steve was allowing him the sight of the stars now, when he could understand that they were vast and beautiful and nearly as awe-inspiring as Steve's ass working on his cock.

Steve's voice wavered a little from its sternness when he said, "God, Buck, look at you, you're so--"

Bucky glanced at him then, and saw something like what his own wondering face must have looked like in Steve's expression. Steve closed his eyes and came, and Bucky watched him instead of the stars until he opened his eyes again and pressed down on Bucky's throat.

Chapter End Notes
Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr! This chapter's art coming soon!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
Bucky and Steve's phones were waiting for them on the kitchen table when they got home Monday night. Bucky hadn't wanted his--he'd had it turned off since the interview aired--and Steve had left his behind in solidarity. Clint had his phone, and both he and Natasha knew where Steve and Bucky were, so in an emergency they would have been findable.

It was occurring to Bucky, belatedly, that he probably should have sent some kind of text or email or something to everyone who was likely to contact him after the interview aired, to let them know he was all right. He turned on his phone warily, half expecting it to blow up in his hand from being too full of messages. Steve stood beside him, handling his own phone just as gingerly. Their duffle bags were still at their feet, and they still wore their boots and coats.

But when the recent messages started popping up, none of them seemed worried: Andrews, Duncan, Mueller, Woj, and Kitty had all sent messages that said something along the lines of Hope you enjoy your weekend! Let me know when you're back!

Steve made a baffled noise as he looked through his own messages, and Bucky looked up. "Does everybody know you were out of town for the weekend too? Did somebody--" Bucky looked up. "JARVIS?"

"You will find that a PR team member with access to Captain Rogers' Twitter account made a brief statement on your behalf."

Steve frowned, tapping quickly at his phone, and then smiled. "Oh, that's... that was helpful, then."

He showed Bucky the tweet: Thanks for all the good wishes, folks! Bucky and I are taking the weekend away from our phones, so don't worry if we're quiet for a few days.

It showed a reply below it from what looked like Sam's official account. I literally do not know where they went for the weekend, please stop asking. They're fine, that's all any of us need to know.

Bucky scrolled down and discovered another reply, this one from Natasha's official account. I do know where they are. You will not find out. Ask me only if you're willing to face the consequences of annoying me.

Bucky frowned and turned the phone to show that one, and Steve snorted. "Yeah, things happen to people who annoy Nat on the internet. I try not to ask, I think it's better if I don't know."

Bucky handed Steve's phone back and unlocked his own, checking each little thread of messages. Before the one from Andrews that obviously indicated that he'd seen Steve's tweet, there was a series of other messages.

Hey, heard you on the radio. Well, heard a recording of you on the radio on the internet. You sound good, man, I'm proud of you. You aced the final for Staff Sgt. Andrews' Introduction to the World.

Mind you, speaking of connecting with people, I miss you, Barnes. I know you got a life to get on with, but I earned a ton of leave time following your ass around and Cara's never been to New York, so we're gonna be in town next week.

No pressure, but I'd love to be able to introduce you to her and catch up a little. Also I think you
promised me booze on Tony Stark's dime.

"Buck? Did something bad get through?" Steve's arm came around his shoulders, tugging him close, and Bucky shook his head and tilted the phone to show him.

Steve squeezed him tighter. "We've got three or four guest rooms," Steve said. "We can get an empty one furnished up nice for them. Or there are visitors' suites down on 81, if you'd be more comfortable with them on another floor."

Bucky took a breath and nodded against Steve's shoulder, trying to steady himself against the rush of feeling. "I should've invited him, I..."

Steve shook his head. "He knows you've had a lot to deal with, Buck. He knows you wanted to see him, but his schedule's harder to work around than yours, so he saw the chance and took it. Doesn't mean he thinks you wouldn't have asked, or you don't want to see him."

Bucky nodded again, partly because he believed it when Steve said it and partly because he knew he had to just tell himself he believed it until he actually did. He opened up a reply text message. You mind sleeping under Stark's roof while you're drinking his booze? Steve and I have plenty of space and a real big TV.

It had been a day and a half since Andrews texted him, but the reply came back almost immediately. Canceling hotel reservation, collecting on bets. See you next Tuesday!

The next morning, Bucky had his overdue appointment with Padfield. He'd canceled Friday's session by text message--via JARVIS, since he'd already quarantined his phone at that point--explaining that he was going away with Steve. Padfield had, at least for the purposes of text messaging, agreed that that was a good idea.

Sitting down with him Tuesday morning, Bucky thought it really had been a good idea, and not just for the breakthrough he'd made. He actually had to stop and think for a minute to remember what had seemed so all-consuming back on Friday.

"Oh," he said, when they'd concluded the pleasantries and Padfield asked him how the day after his interview had gone. "It was okay. I felt kind of..." Bucky struggled to put words to it. "Kind of far away from everything? Not totally blanked out, like that time after the crowds, but just... weird."

Padfield nodded. "And how did you handle it? I know you had a plan for the day."

Bucky nodded. "I just stuck with the plan. I was never alone for the rest of the day. Steve and I watched some movies, and it was okay, I just kind of felt like... I wasn't exactly there. Like there was something between me and everything else. Is that... Trish mentioned in the interview, and it got me thinking about what to call everything. Was that dissociation? Or when I go calm, is that it?"

Padfield tilted his head. "If you find it helpful to label it that way, then yes. It's not an inaccurate label. But feeling a little separate from people and the world around them is also something that many people experience after a difficult day or an experience that took a lot out of them. I don't like to draw bright lines, and say this counts and this doesn't. If that word is a helpful tool for you, to say, ah, this is what I'm experiencing, then by all means. But if it makes you more anxious about yourself or about that sort of experience when it happens, then there's not much value in it."

"Oh," Bucky said again, a memory stirring up from long ago. "When I was a kid, I... my dad drank, and sometimes he got mean with it. Not always, not most of the time, but... if he hollered at me, or smacked me, even though it didn't really hurt that bad, or if I heard him saying nasty things to my
ma... I think I felt like that sometimes for a while after. Even if I was with my sisters, or with Steve, and I was okay and I wanted to be happy with them and relax, I couldn't, sometimes. Couldn't feel like it was okay now. Like I was still trying not to feel, even if it was the next day and my dad had sobered up and gone to work."

Padfield nodded. "Then that's a response you learned early, in response to stresses like that. And sometimes responses like that are a problem, and sometimes they're just how you respond. Was it a problem for you on Friday?"

Bucky shook his head. "I wound up having nightmares all night, which was a different kind of awful. That's when Steve and I decided to go away for the weekend, to just... try to reset."

Padfield nodded. "And did that work well?"

Bucky couldn't help grinning, probably a little too wide. "Yeah, it was... It's so dark in the country, we could see so many stars at night."

Padfield smiled politely. "It's definitely something you can't see around here."

"Also," Bucky said, "Steve and I worked a lot on my off-switch trigger."

Padfield's smile twisted to something that was a shade too professional to be a smirk, and Bucky sat back and laughed out loud.

"Well, now, that does sound like a worthwhile trip. You want to talk about that?"

"I'm beating it," Bucky said, feeling almost shy about that part. It shouldn't be for him to go away and work on this and then just tell his doctor when he succeeded--except that that was exactly where he was now, and exactly what he was doing. And it was working.

Padfield looked nothing but pleased. "That's great. Do you want to tell me more about that? Strictly the, ah, trigger-breaking progress, I don't need to hear too much about your methodology."

Bucky laughed again, longer this time, but eventually he pulled it together so he could give something like a report.

Wednesday he was at the gun range with Clint. They'd been working side by side in silence for twenty minutes when Clint said, "Laura says she can't tell where you guys had sex, so good work on the cleanup and you're welcome back anytime."

Bucky's shot hit fully a half inch away from center, and Clint crowed with laughter.

Bucky waited until Clint had started firing again before he said, "So that means you don't know where in your house we had sex, huh?"

Clint's rhythm broke, and his arrow hit nearly an inch off, and Bucky grinned so wide his face hurt.

Thursday morning, he and Steve picked out stuff for one of the empty guest rooms. They had chosen a room with actual windows, incidentally the furthest one from the room where Bucky had done his awful experiments.

The process was an extreme version of their soft, easy lives here in the tower. It wasn't even on Tony's dime; Bucky forgot sometimes that with back pay and all, he and Steve themselves were as
Still, part of the ease came from Tony anyway. They sat on their couch in front of the big TV while JARVIS showed them options: color-coordinated sets of sheets and towels and rugs; easy chairs and cushions; bedframes that coordinated with nightstands and incidental tables. They bickered over colors and designs, but it was just a matter of choosing from six or eight things JARVIS showed them.

Bucky was dimly aware that doing this kind of shopping on the unfiltered internet would have led to an overwhelming infinity of options, and the idea of trying to do this sort of shopping in actual stores didn't even bear thinking about. Getting mobbed would probably be a relief from the fluorescent lights and the pressure of making choices while standing in a dizzying cacophony of noise and color and people.

As it was, it took about twenty minutes which they spent drinking coffee with their feet up, and seventeen of those minutes were Bucky making stupid objections to draw Steve into standing on his I went to art school authority. Steve figured out what Bucky was doing halfway through, but that didn't make it less entertaining. It definitely didn't stop him from getting mad about color combinations and rounded corners.

"Excellent choices," JARVIS said, when they finally settled. Bucky suspected he hadn't offered them any that weren't excellent, but JARVIS was supportive like that. "I shall arrange delivery for the earliest convenient time."

Of course, just when Bucky was starting to feel really decadent about the whole thing, JARVIS said, "Excuse me, you are needed," and then it was all gearing up and jumping in the Quinjet and fighting weird murderous robots in Florida for the rest of the day. Bucky supposed that it all evened out in the end.

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Friday morning--after discovering that the guest room had been completely furnished while they were in Florida fighting robot things--Bucky had an early PR meeting, right next door to Steve's PR meeting. Steve shot him an encouraging look as they parted, and Bucky returned a cautious smile.

Then he saw his PR people. Theresa and Nathan were beaming; Isla actually jumped to her feet when she saw him, clasping her hands in front of her heart. "Sergeant! Someone made a video!"

Bucky blinked and edged toward his seat. There was coffee and a platter of donuts and muffins. He suspected he was going to need fortification for this, even if he had just eaten breakfast with Steve. "I mean, I know there were reporters around, filming us...?"

"No, no--I mean, yes, there is a ton of footage of you in the fight, which is how someone made a compilation of every time you shot a robot that was coming up on Cap's blind side and dubbed over it with a clip from your interview--that thing you said about running after him, trying to watch his back--and it's already been viewed almost a million times! You're going viral, this is so great!"

Bucky started dumping sugar into his coffee and looked to Theresa and Nathan for an explanation from someone slightly closer to his own age and enthusiasm level than Isla was. Slightly.

"This is gold," Theresa said firmly. "This is publicity we can't buy and can't prep you to create. Someone else, not even one of our sock puppets, an actual fan in the wild, edited together this video that has caught all kinds of attention and become the main thing people are talking about after yesterday's incident."
Bucky nodded cautiously. That did sound good, although he was a little concerned about the idea of a *fan in the wild*.

"And," Nathan picked up, "the video's focus is on you doing what you're best known for back in the war--protecting Captain America. Even better, this is now the association millions of people will have with seeing you holding a sniper rifle, rather than the events in Washington last year."

_The events in Washington last year_ was as disturbingly bland as the _fan in the wild_ was disturbingly... disturbing.

Bucky nodded warily and said, "Does this mean I don't have to say anything else about yesterday?"

"Oh, no," Isla said brightly. "This means you're going to the press conference today! Everyone wants to see you and hear from you."

Bucky grimaced, taking refuge in a long sip of sweet coffee before he said, "That sounds like I'm being punished."

Isla looked actually crestfallen, like she had somehow actually thought that he would be pleased about this, and Bucky felt bad for ruining her excitement. "No, hey, I'm kidding, I know it's not a bad thing."

Isla smiled cautiously, and Bucky was aware that he was probably being played--she worked for PR, she had to be at least as good at manipulating people as, say, his three younger sisters had all been by the time they could talk--but, well. Growing up with sisters had made him who he was, and he was a guy who wasn't going to be able to say no to that face. He might as well go face the firing squad with good grace.

Friday afternoon they were celebrating Bucky's triumphant turn answering two questions from the press with one sentence each (Yes, I saw the video, and I think it's pretty amazing how people can make movies on their phones now).

It was a private celebration just for him and Steve, so Steve brought out the stuff he'd only talked about, back in the Bartons' greenhouse. A gag, and a heavy blindfold, and the mag cuffs, as well as the off-switch for his arm.

Bucky, surveying the supplies, felt a shiver that was more anticipation than dread. Much more. He didn't let himself ask whether it was _too_ much; Steve would make it work no matter what. That was what Steve did.

"So?" Steve said, walking his fingers back and forth between two items. "Blindfold or gag? I don't think it's a good idea to use both, yet."

"Blindfold," Bucky said immediately, hoping they would never need the gag.

"Right, obviously," Steve agreed, leaning in to press a quick kiss to Bucky's mouth. "Just thought I'd check. Let's get this set up, huh?"

The blindfold was thick, lined with something like fur, and pressed gently but implacably against his eyes. There was no using the eye-tracker with this, but the whole point of it was that he wouldn't need the eye-tracker--not for long.

Probably. If he couldn't break through the trigger, he wouldn't be able to communicate at all, with his eyes covered and the rest of his body frozen. The weight of the cuffs on his wrists was nothing to
that soft pressure over his eyes.

When Steve played the trigger, and his body went limp, he had a frantic moment, moving his eyes uselessly up and down, side to side, trying to signal: *Steve, Steve, okay, yes, no--*

His lips parted and he gasped, and then bit his lip, remembering that he wasn't supposed to speak unless he really needed to. And he *could*, which meant he'd broken the trigger in seconds, this time.

"Well, how about that," Steve murmured, bending down to kiss him while Bucky struggled to keep his mouth still. "Let's see what I can do with you, huh? Now that you're at my mercy."

Steve could, as it turned out, do whatever he wanted. Since he wanted Bucky to have a good time, that worked out well for both of them.

There was a crowd in front of the church Sunday morning, but it felt different than in past weeks. There were fewer signs. There were a lot of cameras--phones held up and also proper cameras. The lines of people keeping a path open up to the church doors were still there, but the people leaning around them were waving, smiling, shouting cheerfully.

Bucky still had the noise-blocking headphones on because he didn't want to think about whether or not he still needed them. But he was tempted to take them off, to hear what people were saying. He looked over at Steve to see him smiling, nodding, waving. It had to be good stuff, then.

As soon as the front doors closed behind them, Bucky got the headphones off; he could still hear the presence of the people outside, but he thought they'd quieted a little with him and Steve out of sight.

Fr. Roche was right there, and came over to them with a smile as Bucky folded up his headphones and tucked them away. "Our prodigals return! I hope your break was refreshing for both of you."

Steve's smile froze--Steve was probably doomed to think about whatever sex they'd had most recently every time Fr. Roche said anything at all to him. Bucky grinned and shook Father's hand. "Yeah, it was. Hardly felt like Sunday, though, so it's good to be back."

"Good to have you," Fr. Roche agreed, and with an amused look at Steve, he turned away to the next people coming through the door.

The routine of the Mass really did feel like coming home all over again. Everything was just where he'd left it and proceeded exactly according to plan. If it was another five years before he came back he would be able to find his place just as readily.

Bucky was smiling by the time the Mass ended, feeling stronger in some way he couldn't quite articulate. He left his headphones in his pocket as he walked up the aisle with Steve; it was Steve who hesitated in the vestibule. He didn't ask, just looked over questioningly.

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Just, you know, be ready if it goes horribly wrong."

Steve grinned at him. "Always, Buck."

Bucky rolled his eyes, shaking his head, and pushed through the door to step outside unprotected.

The first thing he noticed, with a feeling almost like disappointment, was that the crowd had gotten smaller. It was still definitely a crowd, and not just a random accumulation of people on a city street--but the hour while he was inside, with his location known, hadn't led to more people showing up to yell at him.
The ones who were there actually went sort of quiet when they saw him—like they were all trying not to spook him, knowing he could hear.

Bucky grabbed Steve's hand and headed down the steps, looking around and smiling, waving with his free hand. The noise started up again, louder, and while he could see a few angry faces, everyone around them drowned them out with cheering. He thought for a second about stopping to speak to someone, but then they were at the curb and the car door was open in front of him, and he thought, *One thing at a time.*

Still, as they headed home in the secure quiet of the car, Bucky felt that strength humming through him, still waiting. He felt like he'd gotten all geared up for a mission, and then his target had died in an actual accident before he had to do anything at all—which was a pretty gruesome thought to apply to something that felt so good, but also the most apt comparison he could think of. He was ready to do something difficult, and Mass hadn't been.

So maybe he could find something else to do, then.

"Hey," Bucky said, nudging Steve as he pulled out his phone. "What do you think of seeing if Kitty and Harry mind us dropping by for Sunday dinner?"

Steve looked startled, and then pleased. "I think that's a great idea, Buck."

Bucky grinned and sent a quick text, and Steve was already leaning forward to knock on the partition and tell the driver their new destination before Bucky had even gotten a reply.

It was an affirmative, of course. With party horn emojis. Bucky hadn't even known Kitty knew how to use those, but he supposed that if a hundred-year-old guy could figure it out, so could Kitty. She had grandkids to show her, too, although Bucky couldn't regret having Staff Sergeant Andrews' Orientation to guide him.

He dashed off a few emoji to Andrews at the thought, and got back a string of thumbs up and mugs of beer.

"Oh," Bucky said. "Shit, Steve, what do we bring to dinner?"

Steve looked equally caught out, and Bucky tapped out a quick text asking Kitty what would go well with whatever dinner was. She replied, *Just yourselves!*

Bucky snorted and showed Steve the message. "My ma would rise up out of the grave to give me a smack if I did."

Steve snugged an arm around Bucky's shoulders, as if already warding off Winifred's wooden spoon. "Flowers?"

"Yes!" Bucky had done flowers once already, he could do flowers again. "We just gotta find a place to stop between here and there."

Steve flapped his free hand, dismissing that, and leaned forward again to tell the driver that they needed to visit a florist en route.

"Look at you," Bucky said, smirking when Steve settled back, his arm around Bucky again. "Giving orders to your driver like a damn swell."

"This again," Steve said, rolling his eyes, but with a little smile playing about his lips. "Don't you get it by now? Only one reason I ever wanted to be rich, and it was so I could give you everything. So
I'm not gonna pretend I'm not, if it means skimping on something I could be giving to you."

Bucky stared at him for a moment, a little awestruck. "You just... say stuff like that, Rogers."

Steve's smile widened. "I kissed you in front of the entire world, Buck. You think I'm not gonna say sweet things to you?"

Bucky shook his head, and didn't bother to explain that it wasn't that it was sweet that threw him, every time Steve said something like that. It was that it was plain truth.

He settled back against Steve's side. "So this time I got you with me, I'm gonna take advantage of your expertise. What colors, do you think? It was all kind of yellow and orange, last time."

"Hm," Steve said, but he turned his attention to it like any tactical problem, and Bucky could just sit back and watch him go until it was time for Bucky to execute whatever plan Steve came up with.

The flowers were a hit, and it was clear that Kitty had briefed everybody from Harry on down, and probably read them all the Riot Act about don't act weird to Uncle Bucky, he's family coming to Sunday dinner, just be normal.

That or all Kitty's kids and grandkids were genuinely this unimpressed with him and Steve but simultaneously always on their best behavior. Bucky knew which story he found easier to believe, though.

The great-grandkids were all under the age of five and Bucky was willing to believe that they genuinely were totally unimpressed. It was obvious that no one had told the oldest two, who definitely seemed old enough for cartoons and being obsessed with superheroes, what Steve and Bucky did at their jobs. They were just Uncle Steve and Uncle Bucky and the kids said their shy or exuberant hellos according to their personalities and then got on with trying to sneak bits of dessert off the kitchen counter before they'd sat down to dinner.

The kids being kids seemed to help everyone else forget that the new people at the table might be anything special--by the time Bucky had a toddler shoved into his hands to be held still while his mom tried to clean fistfuls of Jell-O off of him, he really was just Uncle Bucky at Sunday dinner.

It felt strange and a little dangerous, but good. It felt like real life, not just a step in some recovery plan.

When Kitty hugged him goodbye, her kiss on his cheek was followed by a murmur in his ear. "So, will we see you next week?"

Bucky nodded. "Aliens and evil robots permitting, yeah."

Kitty let him go with a wry smile, so he thought she knew exactly how much of a joke it was and wasn't.

Monday was a regular day, or should have been, but every ordinary thing had an anxious drumbeat running through it. Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

He and Steve had trigger-practice sex, and it went as badly as any attempt had since the first time in the greenhouse. Bucky did fight his way free, eventually, but the first thing he said, when he could get his voice working, was, "Stop, make it stop, stop."
"Shh," Steve said, freeing Bucky's wrists and tugging off the blindfold, "shh, it's okay, it's over now, I've got you, we're done."

Bucky shook his head, but Steve's answer had been enough to remind him that that wasn't how it worked now: Steve wouldn't sedate him to cut off the spiraling thoughts running around his skull. Bucky curled into Steve, pressing his face into Steve's shoulder and breathing in the smell of sex and sweat and their own place.

They should get up and go to bed, Bucky knew. They needed to clean all of this stuff up before morning. Andrews--and Mrs. Andrews, Cara--would be here tomorrow.

"What if," Bucky said, and then couldn't say more. What if it isn't the same anymore? What if it is the same? What if I don't know how to be his friend, what if he's not on my team anymore, what if Cara hates me, what if, what if--

"We'll handle it," Steve said quietly. "That's what we do, right? We'll figure it out. If anything goes wrong, we'll fix it."

Bucky nodded, working at believing it in his muscles as well as his brain. Because it was true, and it didn't even matter that Steve didn't know for sure what Bucky had been going to say because Bucky didn't know either. Whatever happened, he had Steve on his team, and Steve would make it work. He didn't have to do this alone--even the things that were supposed to be good, would probably be good. He had Steve with him, so he could do this.

He felt excitement then, unfurling like some determined little weed popping out of a sidewalk crack. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow."

"Yeah," Steve said, and Bucky could hear his smile without seeing it. "Yeah, Buck. Tomorrow."
Chapter 55

Chapter by Dira Sudis (dsudis)

Chapter Notes

Please note: this chapter features the LAST BIG CLIFFHANGER of the story. The final chapters are written and will be posted next Sunday, so if you're in no mood for suspense this week, come back then!

Duncan, Mueller, and Lee had all been happy to report on Andrews' and Cara's preferences in snacks and drinks, and Bucky was reasonably certain that they were not fucking with him. He got flowers from the shop down on the second floor to put on the kitchen table and in the freshly decorated guest room. There was beer and iced tea in the fridge and a plate of cookies and a cake set out. The ninja cleaners had come through recently, but Bucky paced around neatening things up anyway.

Steve was standing very still by the couch, watching, like he thought if he moved Bucky would try to neaten him up. Bucky considered it for a few seconds, eyeing Steve's clothes, but he was dressed pretty much like he always used to dress when he came to visit Bucky at MEDCOM, so it was about what Andrews would expect. Anything else would look contrived, like...

Well, like Steve had gone to some special effort.

Bucky looked at Steve again, actually meeting his eyes this time instead of just scrutinizing him as an element of décor. "Am I out of my mind?"

"No more than usual, probably," Steve said with a little smile. "And if you are, it's because you're halfway into your Ma's. I'm just waiting for you to start hollering for Bucky to comb his hair and the girls to put on clean dresses."

Bucky narrowed his eyes at Steve's hair, which was looking as unruly as ever. "Speaking of--"

"Gentlemen," JARVIS interrupted, which was probably for the best, "Staff Sergeant and Mrs. Andrews have boarded the elevator."

Bucky wheeled to face the elevator, his hands closing into fists. He took a step forward, then hesitated, then--

The door opened, and Bucky grinned, hauling in a long-overdue breath, at the sight of Andrews standing there grinning. He was in civvies, and there was a woman at his side, but for a moment all Bucky could see was Andrews: the very first person who he had understood was on his team back at MEDCOM.

Bucky crossed the space with his arms open, and Andrews laughed, coming to meet him in a hug. He squeezed Bucky tight for a moment before easing away with some firm back-patting.

"Look at you," Andrews said, drawing back to do just that, his hands on Bucky's shoulders and his eyes bright with something like pride. "Out here saving the world from evil robots and then kicking
back in your swanky apartment. You're doing all right, huh?"

"Yeah, you know," Bucky face ached from the width of his grin. "I'm hanging in there, can't complain. Could be worse."

"That's good, putting a good face on it," Andrews agreed. "Don't wanna offend the management, huh?"

"Aw, Steve knows I miss you guys," Bucky said, and Andrews laughed again, slapping his shoulder hard.

"Speaking of," Andrews said, dropping his hands off of Bucky and turning back, reaching with one arm for the woman still hesitating a few steps from the elevator doors. She had warm brown skin, darker freckles across her cheeks, and a mass of dark curls, and she was smiling almost as wide as Andrews was. "Let me introduce you to my real true CO."

She rolled her eyes, but smiled as she stepped in under Andrews' outstretched arm, pressing up against his side. At the same time, Bucky felt Steve step up close beside him, and leaned his shoulder against Steve's.

"My wife, Cara. Cara, Bucky Barnes. That other guy you've already met, right?"

"Good to meet you, Bucky," Cara said. "Steve, good to see you again. I'm glad it's under better circumstances now."

Bucky looked from Cara to Steve, who was looking sheepish. "I... forgot to tell you?" Steve offered.

Bucky jabbed a finger--from his left hand--into Steve's side and turned back to Cara. "Let me guess, you were at my trial? Because apparently everyone I don't know I already know was at my trial?"

"Well, if it didn't go as well as it did, Eric would've needed some moral support," Cara said, her smile going small and crooked. It took Bucky a second to realize that Eric was Andrews.

"And you," Bucky said, turning on him. "You have a first name?"

Andrews snorted. "Not to you I don't, Sarge."

"I see how it is," Bucky said, shaking his head but not bothering to fight his grin to put on even a parody of a mournful look. "I invite you into my home, I bake cookies for you..."

"You did not," Andrews said, torn between disbelieving and gleeful.

"I asked Kitty to make cookies, which is practically the same thing," Bucky corrected himself, backing up as he did to allow Andrews and Cara to actually come into the apartment. Steve swooped in to pick up their bags, just a duffle and a small suitcase.

He raised his eyebrows pointedly at Bucky over their shoulders, and Bucky had no trouble interpreting it. All that fretting about what your ma would say and you haven't offered them a seat or a drink or showed them their room yet?

Bucky tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Come on, come in--do you want to sit a minute, or I can show you your room, let you settle in?"

"I could use a minute," Cara said, smiling a little apologetically, and Bucky nodded quickly.

"Sure, here--so, kitchen, living room, and down the hall here--" Bucky named rooms as they passed
them, ignoring the closed doors as if they didn't exist, until they got to the carefully-decorated guest room. "This is you guys."

He stepped back to let Andrews and Cara go in, watching their reactions for some sign of whether he'd done this right, or if he could expect his mother haunting his dreams to scold him for being a poor host for the next week.

Cara's lips parted as she looked around; Andrews stepped back through the doorway to knock his fist lightly against Bucky's shoulder. "You call this a guest room? You're gonna spoil us for hotels, man, this is great."

Bucky grinned in relief and glanced over at Steve, who had followed them down the hall. Steve rolled his eyes at Bucky, as if this reaction had been the only one possible, and passed Cara's bag to Andrews just as Cara squeaked, "Oh my God, this bathroom!"

"Now you've done it," Andrews muttered, shaking his head with a smile. "She's been wanting to redo ours, now it's gonna have to be up to Tony Stark's standards. Thanks." Andrews hesitated, then closed a hand on Bucky's right shoulder, the one where it was easier to feel a squeeze. "Thanks, man, really. This is great. And now I gotta go make sure my wife's not cheating on me with the fixtures."

"Good luck," Bucky said, and left them to it.

Once Andrews and Cara had emerged from the bathroom and had coffee and cookies, it was time to show them around the Tower—or at least Bucky's favorite parts of it.

"This," he said proudly, "is the best gun range in Manhattan."

He was expecting Andrews' grudgingly impressed look, but not the instant gleeful light in Cara's eyes.

"Ooh," Bucky said, grinning. "Yeah, let's get you guys set up to fire a few rounds, huh?"

Andrews looked over at Cara, who was grinning as she looked all around at the setup, and sighed. "I thought I was gonna be the big man, right, took her shooting when we got engaged. I was all I want you to understand this stuff, know how it works. So of course she joins the ladies' target shooting league and starts kicking ass and taking names."

"What, it's fun," Cara said. "For me, anyway, because it's a hobby! It's your job, I get it." Her humoring tone was obviously calculated to get exactly the eyeroll it got from Andrews. Then she went for the kill. "You don't have to shoot with me if you don't want to compare in front of Bucky, hon, I know how it is."

Andrews closed his eyes, pressing a hand to his face, and Bucky patted him on the shoulder in commiseration. "Steve and I don't shoot at the same time either."

Andrews glared at him and said, "Just for that, I want a go on the S-19."

Bucky grinned, dropping his attempt at a sympathetic face. "Yeah, I figured. Come on, hearing protection and safety glasses for the unmodified humans."

Steve rejoined them when Bucky took them up to the bar. It was late afternoon by then, a perfectly reasonable drinking time, and the kitchen would send them up all kinds of crispy fried things to go
with the drinks.

That was what Bucky figured it was when he heard the elevator doors open while they were all halfway through their first drinks and Bucky was still explaining the system of beating his and Steve's metabolisms to Andrews and Cara. He was half right; the smell of crisp hot onion rings floated over to him. Steve, beside him, glanced over his shoulder and went still.

Bucky looked up for a reflection, and realized that it was Tony, walking toward them with a wide tray on his shoulder. Bucky didn't let himself pause, saying, "So it works best with shots, but we've figured out Steve can do it with beer if he's drinking one of those crazy ones with 15% ABV--" and then Andrews froze because Tony had stepped into Andrews' line of sight when he went behind the bar with their snacks.

Tony set the tray down in front of them, waving a hand dismissively. "I'm not here, obviously, because obviously I have a virtually infinite number of better things to do than play waiter for my houseguests' houseguests. But, hypothetically, if you had run into me while visiting, and if, hypothetically, I had asked you what you think, as a working soldier, would be a good way to try to make reparation to members of the military who suffered for my decision to take Stark Industries out of the business of war... any thoughts?"

Bucky leaned his right arm on the bar, ready to physically reach between them if Andrews took real offense to Tony--who was, Bucky judged, being sincere behind his fast-talking flippant screen. Andrews didn't know him or have any reason to give him the benefit of the doubt, so this could get ugly.

Andrews shot a sideways glance in Bucky's direction, too quick for Bucky to even try to communicate anything, if he could even figure out what he wanted to say. Bucky looked past him to Cara, who had her cocktail held to her lips; she met Bucky's eyes and he knew she was prepared to throw or spill her drink if she needed to create a distraction. He smiled a little at her, and she shivered an eyelid, not quite a wink.

Andrews rubbed a hand over his mouth, considering, and then reached over and flicked his nail against Bucky's arm; the little metallic tock was the only sound in the room. "You figured out how to mass-produce these yet?"

Bucky grabbed his drink and took a sip, tension draining from his spine. Those were decidedly not fighting words.

"Nope," Tony said. "Because--" Tony reached over and flicked Bucky's arm in almost the same spot. Bucky raised an eyebrow at him and Tony just grinned. "This is a one-of-a-kind piece of technology from a whole other galaxy and we're still not sure how a bunch of Nazi mad scientists got their hands on it. It runs on Tesseract tech, so beyond a certain point how it works is--" Tony waved his hands in exasperation, "fucking indistinguishable from magic, even for me. If there's anybody on the planet who could get a handle on this, they're doing a good job of hiding, because I don't know about them, and believe me I'd have hired them by now if I did."

Andrews gave a little nod and tilted his head, like, So? You're letting that stop you?

Tony spread his hands. "Obviously I can build a machine that does what our friend's arm does--my suit is as sensitive and articulate--but the suit only works because," Tony raised a hand, wiggling his fingers, "I'm actuating the movements of body parts that I still have. Happily, that's the part I have mostly figured out--" Tony reached over again and didn't flick, but tapped on the top of Bucky's shoulder, where flesh met metal. "The interface. I mean," He met Bucky's eyes, "the version you've got is--not optimized for the user's comfort, let's say."
"I was there," Bucky said, tipping his bottle at Tony. "I wouldn't wish it on anybody either."

Tony nodded and absently picked up an onion ring, taking a bite before he continued. Steve immediately reached past Bucky for a handful of fries, and Andrews took another onion ring from the same basket Tony had taken his from.

"Anyway, I've got a pretty good idea of the neural connections required now and how to replicate that humanely, probably. If only I could find somebody to put in a good word for me with, say, an organization responsible for a disproportionate number of people dealing with recent traumatic amputations in this country..."

Andrews raised an eyebrow. "I'm an MP, Mr. Hypothetical Billionaire, I can't exactly get you in the door other than maybe in the literal sense."

Tony shrugged, conceding the point with a wave of his onion ring. "If only someone else in this room still had the phone numbers of half of MEDCOM's brass in his phone from when he was negotiating his boyfriend's stay there..."

Bucky glanced sideways to see Steve hastily swallow a mouthful of half-chewed French fries. "Tony, of course, you should've told me--"

"I'm not here," Tony said, cramming the rest of the onion ring into his mouth. "But if I were, this would be me telling you that I think I might have something in the works. We should talk about that sometime when you're not entertaining and--" Tony started walking backward, aiming himself unerringly for a door behind the bar, "I'm not running out the door to meet Pepper. And also not here bothering you at all. If any gorgeous CEOs happen to ask."

Tony shut the door behind him, and there was another silence, until Andrews looked over at Bucky and said, "What the fuck is up with your landlord, man?"

Bucky grinned and shrugged. "He's like that. He grows on you."

Bucky realized, afterward, when they adjourned to sprawl on the couches and nurse their drinks, that he and Andrews had maybe both been a little worried about what would happen if they ran into Tony. Because now that it was out of the way and nothing bad happened--maybe even something good happened--they were both even more at ease.

They stayed there until close to midnight, occasionally refreshing drinks or ordering up more snacks, but mostly just talking, telling stories, laughing. Cara and Steve seemed equally relaxed, happy to get to know each other, and it was good. It was normal.

Bucky remembered evenings like this, just a precious few of them where it all worked out this easy, at queer clubs before the war. There, he and Steve could lean into each other and be understood, and their friends could do the same, and everything was good. They belonged, and they weren't alone, and all they were to each other didn't have to be a secret that was never allowed past the door of their apartment, safe as long as it was locked up and hidden away.

"Hey," Bucky said, swirling some ice in his glass and trying to remember what he'd been drinking. "Hey, we oughta go out somewhere tomorrow. All four of us. You've never been to the city before, we should show you a little of it. Get out of this tower for a minute."

There was a second of silence, just enough for Bucky to be aware that no one had been expecting him to suggest that and they were all trying to figure out whether he meant it.
"I mean," Bucky met Andrews' eyes, leaving Cara and Steve out of it for a minute. "Come on, if I could go to Starbucks when I was only half deprogrammed, I gotta be able to manage a little field trip now, right?"

Andrews gave him a crooked smile back, and Bucky felt a rush of relief. Andrews wasn't going to say, No, it's too dangerous, I'm not taking my wife out in public with you.

"Yeah," Andrews said. "Maybe go do some cultural shit? Nobody's gonna hassle you in a museum, and Cara's got a list of stuff she wants to see as long as my arm."

Cara rolled her eyes and smacked the arm in question. "Yeah, okay, because you don't want to see any of that stuff."

"I didn't say that," Andrews grinned at her, a little wavering and sloppy. "I just said you had the list, babe."

Steve snorted softly, almost in Bucky's ear, and Bucky turned to look at him. Steve was smiling at him, fond and a little proud, and he said, "It's true. I just about never get bothered in museums, even when I can tell people have recognized me."

"It's not a hundred percent the same thing," Bucky pointed out, but he couldn't help smiling back at Steve, couldn't help hoping that it would be all right, that he could go out and do something with his best guy and their friends and spend an hour being normal.

"Close enough," Steve said, not even arguing about it, and Bucky had to kiss him then. It wasn't long after that before they all headed back up to their floor, Andrews and Cara to the guest room, Steve and Bucky to Steve's room.

When they were settled down in bed together, Steve nuzzled against Bucky's cheek, dropping sweet little kisses that weren't going anywhere. "So, which museum are we gonna go to tomorrow?"

Bucky snorted and shrugged. "Like I would know? Which one would you recommend, Mr. I-Went-to-Art-School?"

"Mm," Steve said. "Doesn't have to be an art museum, necessarily. There's Natural History, Air and Space... there's the Transit Museum, that's kind of neat."

Bucky squinted at him in the dark. "Is that the one that you can see from our windows? And don't tell me you can see lots of museums because we're on the 91st floor, I mean the one that's across the street?"

Steve shrugged. "Nothing wrong with staying close to home."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "I think I can handle a few blocks, Stevie. What's the next closest?"

Steve's face tensed slightly, calculating distances, and he obviously didn't like the answer from the way his nose wrinkled. "Uh, technically the Paley Center, but MOMA's right across the street. MOMA would be good, wouldn't it?"

"That depends on why you don't wanna go to the Paley Center."

Steve huffed. "It's a museum of media--TV and radio. They got all my newsreels, they got that goddamn radio show that replaced Peg with Betty Carver. It's the museum where people are most likely to treat me like an exhibit."
Bucky wrinkled his nose. "Well that's out. MOMA, though. You used to like that one before. I guess Modern's a whole new kind of Modern now, huh?"

"Yeah," Steve said, smiling slightly. "But they kept a bunch of the old modern stuff, too. You can see what you recognize from the last time we were there."

It could have felt like a test, a challenge, but instead it felt like continuity. Like they'd gone a few years ago, and of course Bucky would have forgotten some and remembered some. Like they were normal guys who went to museums sometimes, because they lived in the greatest city in the world and you couldn't always be taking that for granted.

"Okay," Bucky agreed, giving Steve another little good-night kiss. "I guess we'll see."

They slipped out of the tower quietly, taking some basement levels and tunnels and reaching the street two blocks away. They were casually dressed and bundled up, and Steve had pointed out that that meant they were half in disguise--people thought of Bucky wearing an Army uniform, or his Avengers gear, or the suits he wore to church. A guy in a winter coat and sunglasses with his buzz cut covered by a wooly hat wouldn't automatically register as Bucky Barnes.

Steve was using the same technique, although he admitted he'd used it enough around the city that people recognized his leather jacket and sunglasses and ball cap, so they were likelier to recognize Bucky if they were next to each other. They had Andrews and Cara with them, though, and they weren't going to try to walk four across in Midtown like tourists, so Bucky didn't actually walk next to Steve much, and if anyone noticed them on the way to the museum, they didn't give any sign of it.

The museum itself was... familiar and not. He was distracted enough cataloguing what he did and didn't remember that they were a few galleries in before he quite realized that he was walking around with his face bare in a place where strangers could see him.

The strangers seemed to be looking at the art, though, not him or Steve or their friends. Bucky tried to stay focused on the people he was with, the stuff they were looking at. He couldn't help keeping a constant mental catalogue of exits and escape routes, available weapons and potential threats, but he kept it down to a dull roar. A few times he noticed Steve doing a stern Captain America Disapproves face, or tipping a nod to a security guard, and at one point Steve waved Bucky and Cara and Andrews off as they were moving from one room to another, and fell back alone.

Bucky heard a few shutter-click sounds from behind them, hushed voices still betraying excitement, and Steve being polite and very quiet. Steve caught up after only a few minutes, and murmured, "Sometimes you just have to give them something. And there was a kid."

"Sap," Bucky muttered back, hooking his arm through Steve's and keeping him close for the next several galleries.

They didn't drag it out long. Bucky did remember from before that a trip to an art museum with Steve could easily take up a whole day, but after an hour or so they moved into the café on the fifth floor for coffee and pastries. It was still early for lunch, so the place was mostly empty, and they were able to get a table that wasn't readily visible from the doors.

"Now," Andrews said, "I've been holding off for sixteen hours. You want to see some real art?"

Bucky raised his eyebrows, but took Andrews' phone when it was offered, and found it open to a photo of Izzy Andrews, age two, standing proudly next to a crayon-scribbled wall. Bucky laughed, startled and too loud for the hushed café, and leaned over to show Steve, who grinned.
"Oh, here, there's--" Cara came around the side of the table to lean against his other shoulder, flipping through photos to show the best ones. Bucky laughed delightedly, telling stories about Kitty and his sisters at the same age in exchange for their stories about Izzy. He was aware of being let into something precious; all the time he'd been at MEDCOM he'd never seen a picture of Izzy, never even knew her name. But he was allowed into this part of Andrews' life now, because they were friends.

Mostly, though, he was aware of laughing so hard he couldn't drink his coffee.

Bucky and Steve left Andrews and Cara in the café to decide where they were headed next. Bucky wasn't sure if people were staring more, as they made their way down to street level, or if he was noticing it more because he didn't have his friends, and the art, to focus on.

A woman in a suit, flanked by a security guard, met them on the second floor with an expression that told Bucky he wasn't imagining it.

"A... number of people have congregated outside the doors," she said without preamble. "Your car is waiting at a staff exit. I can escort you there when you're ready to depart."

*Please depart right now* just barely remained unspoken.

Steve's jaw clenched, and even though they were on their way out Bucky could see Steve being tempted to take their goddamn time about it, just to protest them being pushed out when it was the jerks of the general public who were causing a problem.

Bucky grabbed Steve's hand with his left one and squeezed hard enough to derail *that*. "Yes, we were just on our way out," Bucky said flatly. "Thank you."

The woman looked nervously between them, and Steve's conscience caught up with him as he recognized that it wasn't her fault and she was in an awfully awkward position. He put on a little smile. "Lead the way, ma'am."

She nodded, getting her own smile in place, and set out briskly through a gallery and into a stairwell, where another security guard was waiting to open an unmarked door and usher them through. They came out in a narrow corridor that smelled of paper and dust. Half the doors were open, people working at desks and worktables—some on computers, some examining what Bucky supposed must be valuable works of art. Only a few looked up as they passed, and they were moving fast enough that Bucky didn't think any of them had time to realize who was going by before they were out of sight again.

They went into a freight elevator, and it was just him and Steve and this lady in a suit who was almost certainly *not* a Black Widow. Still, Bucky glanced over at Steve and caught Steve looking back at him, sharing the same thought. It felt like they were being disappeared, and neither of them knew where this car that was supposed to be waiting for them came from.

The freight elevator let them out at a loading dock, and there was one of the familiar big black cars pulled up in a space big enough for a delivery truck. Standing next to the back door was Isla, tapping intently at one phone with another phone in her other hand.

"Oh," Bucky said, relaxing slightly; he felt Steve do the same at his side, tension going out of the air between them. If Isla was here then it was clear where the car came from, if also a little alarming that PR had caught wind of their whereabouts and was concerned enough to send Isla with a car and two phones. "Hey, Isla."
Isla didn't look up. "Hi, Sergeant, Captain. In the car, please."

She didn't sound worried, exactly, but she also very clearly didn't have any attention to spare for them. Bucky made a "we're about to get scolded" face at Steve, who made a mulish "we were in the right" face right back. Business as usual. Bucky led the way to the car, opening the back door and gesturing Isla in ahead of him.

She shook her head slightly, tapping something with her thumb, so Bucky climbed in and took his seat on the backward-facing bench. Steve got in and sat beside him, and a moment later Isla followed and sat down facing them, absently pulling the door shut behind her.

The car got into motion almost immediately, and Isla finally looked up from her phone. "You didn't do anything wrong," she said firmly. "It's just--one of those things. For whatever reason, when somebody tweeted about seeing you in the museum, it took off like crazy, and people started congregating. You should've been okay on a weekday morning, it's not like it's high tourist season, but--" Isla shook her head with a grimace for the unpredictability of human behavior.

They turned onto Fifth Avenue, and Isla said, "Yep, perfect, squeeze together on that side, smile like you had a really fun morning--"

Bucky was still blinking, but Steve seemed to get what Isla was going for. He scooted over and pressed Bucky up against the door and window, throwing an arm around Bucky's shoulders.

Bucky smiled, looking over at Steve as he did, and there was a flurry of shutter clicks from the other seat. "Yes, perfect. Captain, we're going to do a tweet from you, have a look."

She turned her phone toward them, keeping a firm grip on it. There was a picture of the two of them, Steve looking at the camera and Bucky looking--a little besottedly--at Steve. There was a big church visible through the window, an obvious landmark indicating that they weren't in the museum anymore.

The text of the tweet said, *Had a great time at @MuseumModernArt today, thanks for saying hi!*

Steve nodded. "Looks good. Was it--the people I signed autographs for? Did one of them...?"

Isla shook her head, her expression turning a little soft, even while she was looking over the tweet one more time before tapping on the screen. "No, someone tweeted a few creepshots from across the gallery of you guys talking to people."

"*People,*" Bucky said. "Did they--were there pictures of the people we were with?"

Isla looked startled, then switched phones and tapped rapidly at the screen. "You were--okay, okay, the team at the office is on that--yeah, there are some partial pics, but people weren't really focusing on them. Do you want to send another car for your friends?"

Steve and Isla were both looking at him, like he could make this call.

"Uh," Bucky said. "Fuck." He pulled out his own phone and tapped a message.

*Somebody tweeted pics of us in the museum and it went nuts. You and Cara are in some of the shots. You want extraction?*

Andrews tweeted back promptly. *We're on it. Already changed looks, no one seems to be noticing us.*
A photo came through a second later: Andrews was wearing a flat cap and heavy-framed black glasses; Cara had her hair loosened from the smooth twist it had been in before, fluffed out into a big mane around her head, and she was wearing bright, dramatic makeup in metallic reds and oranges.

Bucky raised his eyebrows, impressed. *You guys been hanging around with secret agents or something?*

*I could tell you but then I'd have to kill you.*

Bucky grinned and turned his phone to show Isla and Steve.

"Awesome, great, I'll let the team know they're looking out for themselves," Isla said, nodding briskly.

Steve's arm tightened around Bucky's shoulders, and Bucky sighed and smiled over at him. "Always something, huh?"

Steve smiled back and gave him a quick little kiss. "Never boring, that's for sure."

Once Steve and Bucky were safely back in the tower, PR didn't need them for anything in particular. They went to the gym for a while, playing around with the shield and challenging each other to various feats on the climbing wall, setting courses with only two or three grips between the bottom of the wall to the top.

Bucky left his phone out where he could hear it; Andrews texted him a few times with photos showing his and Cara's progress through New York, seeing the sights. When he got a picture of their lunches at some little bistro, his stomach growled loudly enough to remind him that supersoldiers had to eat too, and he and Steve hit the showers after arranging a big lunch to be sent up to their floor.

When they'd eaten they collapsed on the couch together, and the next buzz of Bucky's phone revealed that Andrews and Cara were in another museum. He tilted the picture to show Steve. "Which one's that?"

"The Met," Steve said instantly, and then, "Oh, you know what-- JARVIS, can we get the Virtual Met in here?"

"Yes," JARVIS said. "Though the effect might be more convincing and less confusing in an empty room."

"Virtual Met?" Bucky asked.

"Well, the museum makes a ton of images of stuff from the museum available online," Steve said, tugging Bucky to his feet and leading him toward the unused guest rooms. "And Tony--he'll say he just had the foundation fund it, but Tony did a ton of actual work on it--put together this thing where the images can be projected so it's like actually being in the museum, they got the Met to let them do all these extra recordings to make it work. They license it to schools and stuff, so kids who can't get to the museum can still experience the art, give them all the projectors they need to set it up and everything."

Steve opened the door of a room that had, the last time Bucky saw it, been just another bedroom, with pale green walls and soft carpet underfoot. Now for all he could tell it had marble floors and extended impossibly beyond where he knew the walls to be, and the white walls were hung with art.

"What the hell," Bucky whispered, stepping inside. It was dizzying to feel the carpet still there
beneath his feet, and the acoustics of his whisper matched a much smaller room. Steve wrinkled his nose too. "JARVIS, kill the flooring?"

The Met suddenly had the same plush carpeting as their guest bedroom. Bucky shook his head, feeling slightly dizzy--Tony hadn't perfected making it sound like a museum gallery, evidently--but he let Steve lead him to the nearest painting, the same one Cara had been standing next to in the photo Andrews sent. Bucky leaned in, staring at the texture of the paint, but no matter how closely he looked, it still looked real. "Jesus, Tony."

"Yeah," Steve agreed, sounding frustrated and fond all at once. "Here, let me show you some of my favorites?"

Bucky nodded, and mentally settled in to spend a long afternoon at the museum with Steve.

It was a lot like he remembered it, Steve tugging him by the hand to show him one piece after another, excited about colors and brushstrokes and light. Bucky could almost forget that they weren't actually in a museum, other than it being softer underfoot than any museum he'd ever set foot in.

He still felt slightly off-balance from time to time, when he noticed all over again contrast between the sight and the actual size of the room around him, but he had Steve to lean on, and Steve to distract him from that discomfort. And they were safe here, secured away from strangers and the great uncleared masses.

Every so often he got another text from Andrews, photos or just a few words describing his and Cara's progress through the Met and then out into the city again. Bucky found himself automatically plotting them on a map; he and Steve were standing in front of a painting of a guy cutting hay with a scythe when his phone buzzed again, and Bucky figured he was about to get a comment on the New York subway system.

It was a photograph.

It was not a photo of the subway.

Well, Bucky thought, studying the image with all the careful attention Steve ever gave to a painting. Guess I still go calm in danger.

The picture showed Cara, her hair disarranged and makeup smeared, with tears on her cheeks that belied her grim expression. She was holding a sign; he could see scrapes on her knuckles around the edges. She had put up a fight.

The sign read:

Soldat

Come alone.

Chapter End Notes

Alby's art for this story is here on Tumblr!

I am also on Tumblr! And my alter ego who writes weird gay paranormal romance is also also on Tumblr, over here.
For the second time that day, Bucky was dressed incognito as he walked through the city, but this time he didn't have Steve at his side, or Andrews, or Cara. He only had a tiny weight on his left arm, and a very small bump behind his left ear. That was practically nothing; he was as good as alone, as far as anyone could tell.

Maybe he was really as alone as he looked, even. Going down into the tunnels, bypassing the police crawling all over the place where hostages had been forced off a subway car, down and down toward the place where they were being held... it would be hard for anyone to reach him here. Not quickly. Maybe not at all, depending on the depth of concrete and metal between him and them.

But it didn't matter. They had Cara and Andrews and a handful of random civilians who'd had the bad luck to share a subway car with them, and they wanted Bucky. It was pretty clear how the math worked on that.

Bucky didn't think. He didn't try to plan. This was going to happen. He would do everything he could. If it wasn't enough, if he wasn't ready, if they had a trigger he hadn't beaten...

It didn't matter. He had to try. Steve and the others would know how to mop up after him, whatever went wrong, and it was all for the best if he didn't know anything about those plans. All he had to do was his part.

He stopped at the last turn in the tunnel before he would reach the door they had described to him. He looked down at himself. He was wearing his dark hoodie and dark jeans--but on his feet he had his old tan combat boots, Texas dust still clinging to the soles and embedded in the rough leather. He didn't know if it would help anything, but he hadn't stopped to second-guess the impulse.

"Buck?"

Steve's voice was in his ear, conducted through the bone of his skull from the tiny communicator freshly implanted in it. He thought of another hostage situation, when Steve's voice in his ear was his only connection to help or sanity. He'd expected to die then, had thought Andrews might already be dead.

And here he was again. Just like old times.

"Yeah," he breathed, barely a sound.

"I'm here," Steve said, nothing else. Here, in Bucky's ear, not here in the tunnel; Bucky would have heard him if he were anywhere near this deserted branch of God knew what underground system.

But if Bucky could hear him, that might be enough. Bucky shrugged his left shoulder, letting the plates of his arm shiver through another unnecessary calibration. He could feel the tiny weight of his arm's off-switch, waiting to be triggered remotely if--

"Yeah," Bucky sighed again. No more stalling. Cara was waiting for him. If he could get Cara out of this alive, that would be something.

He stepped around the turn with his empty hands at his sides, braced for anything, but all that awaited him was a heavy steel door on the left side of the tunnel, halfway along. Bucky walked forward slowly, looking for anything that might be concealed, but there was nothing--and no cover for twenty yards to either side of the door, either. They'd chosen the spot well.
Bucky warily approached the door. They hadn't bothered to conceal the shiny button of a camera pickup; it was affixed dead center, right above the door.

"Soldat," said a voice that didn't cover the click of a lock disengaging. "Come in."

Bucky pressed his lips together and reached for the door. The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood up a fraction of a second before he made contact, too late to warn him. Pain ripped through him, blue-edged fire, and his arm went dead, while the implant behind his ear gave a final-sounding chirp and went utterly silent. The little off-switch dropped away from his arm, falling down into the sleeve of his hoodie.

Bucky stood there panting, knees locked to keep them from folding, as the pain faded.

"Soldat. Do not make me repeat an order."

Bucky stared at the concrete for another second, not resisting, just finding his balance. He knew this place: following orders would bring unbearable pain, but orders had to be followed. There was no alternative.

Bucky reached out again and pushed the door open in a single movement, not stopping to see if the pulse would be triggered again.

It was not. He stepped through into a damp, rusty-smelling room, not very large. There were a lot of people in the room, three of them holding weapons, but Bucky's attention was riveted on the fourth hostile, as casually dressed and empty-handed as Bucky himself. He was standing on the other side of a table that dominated the room, and right in front of him was a very familiar device, all pads and wires and straps.

It as a field calibration device. A chair without a chair.

The man standing over it was no one Bucky recognized, not by face or name. There was a faint familiarity in his body language, maybe, as he stood there watching Bucky with a particular kind of arrogant irritation. This wasn't the confidence armed men had sometimes had around him, sure they could handle what he might do. This wasn't the haughty assurance of command, correctly certain that they could control him. This was just someone who thought he was the smartest man in the room, and that that alone should count for something.

He must have been a goddamn tech, no one Bucky had thought would be an ongoing threat--but of course he knew how the machines worked, and of course he knew--

The tech smiled slightly, smug and confident, and said a word in Russian that hit Bucky like another jolt of electricity.

"No," Bucky breathed. How had he forgotten this? The long trigger, the worst one, truly implacable.

The tech said another word, another, while Bucky looked around desperately for a way out.

Cara was in a corner, a gun pointed directly at her; Andrews was beside her, one eye swollen shut, blood trickling from a cut on his forehead, badly bruised and with his mouth duct taped, but alive, alive and helpless with that gun pointed at Cara, more guns pointed at innocent bystanders--and they were in a concrete box, where ricochets might kill anyone, everyone, even if one particular body could be shielded from a direct hit.

None of which would matter when this fucking tech got to the end of those fucking words, but Bucky couldn't disarm the one with the gun on Cara, couldn't--
He broke, turning and going for the door, already knowing it was useless, with his arm dead and his comm silent. Still, he could not stand still, he could not be triggered in this room, with these hostages and these hostiles and the weapons and the goddamn field recalibration unit--

Another, stronger pulse of electricity slammed through him, making him stumble back against the table, and the voice was still speaking, still--

"No," Bucky whispered again, squeezing his eyes shut as his limbs twitched with the aftershocks, *No, no, no*--

And then he opened his eyes and everything was very simple. He stood and faced his commander.

"*Soldat*?"

"Ready to comply." The words had another shape on his tongue, but that was no concern of his. He awaited orders.

"Come," the commander said, beckoning with an open hand.

The soldier went to him.

"Stand still," the commander said, and then slapped the soldier hard across the face. The soldier allowed his head to be turned slightly by the blow, but didn't move otherwise, not even to bring his head back to look straight ahead.

"Say, *Hail Hydra*.

"*Hail Hydra,*" the soldier echoed, but somewhere a memory was stirring. *Simon says--Simon says go*--

Not relevant. Only orders were relevant.

"Pick up a gun," the commander said, gesturing to the table. The soldier reached for the smallest of the weapons, a simple handgun, and knew by the weight when he picked it up that it was loaded, the cartridge full of 0.45 caliber bullets. Overkill for the ranges available in this cramped space, but less overkill than everything else on the table.
"Open your mouth," the commander said, "and--" he gestured, demonstratively, and the soldier obeyed, putting the end of the barrel against his soft palate, the top of the barrel resting against his tongue and lower teeth. He maintained eye contact with the commander as he did, in case of further non-verbal instructions.

Behind him there was a muffled furious noise, a man's voice, distantly familiar but wordless, and then a hard double thump--gun butt against head against wall--and several tiny gasps from around the room. No other sounds.

None of that was relevant. The soldier awaited further orders, fingertip resting safely on the trigger guard.
"Good," the commander said after a moment. "Take the gun out of your mouth."

The soldier did, wiping the barrel dry on his opposite sleeve without pointing it at anyone. His left arm was a dragging weight, but he would compensate for it automatically if he had to.

"Now," the commander said. "Turn your back to me."

The soldier did; he was now facing two captives, a dark-skinned woman with tears running down her face, her bright makeup smudged and smeared, and a bruised and bloodied man who was clearly struggling to stay conscious, eyelids flickering as his head lolled to the side. Quickly backing out of the soldier's line of sight was a man holding an AR-15.

"Kill those hostages, soldat."

The soldier stepped forward. The weapon he had chosen was best at point blank range, and a short shot would minimize ricochet in a confined space.

He kept moving forward until he was nearly toe to toe with the woman; as he brought the gun up to firing position, she sucked in a breath and said--something, in Russian, in a certain sing-song intonation, her voice wavering but--

But she got it right. His muscles turned to water, the weapon falling from his fingers as he dropped to his knees. He was face to face with Cara and Andrews then, his own eyes wanting to close just like Andrews', and Cara's eyes were wide. She hadn't expected--something. Hadn't expected--

She didn't know he'd nearly beaten this trigger. It was supposed to be insurance. It was supposed to stop him if he--

"Soldat!"

Bucky's left arm came back online and he raised it just in time to block a burst of fire from the thug on that side. He grabbed the dropped gun with his right hand and fired under his left arm, his eyes still on Cara's, then twisted, rising into a crouch to shield them both as he brought the gun up and fired once, twice, dropping the other two armed men.

He came to his feet and stalked toward the tech, whose eyes were wide, starting to see the limitations of being the cleverest man in the room. He was reaching for one of the other guns on the table, and Bucky slammed his own weapon down on the trembling hand. Bones broke, the crack of them loud in the silence; none of the hostages were so much as breathing.

"Anything else to say?" Bucky asked, staring down the tech.

His stunned expression turned furious. "Hail--"

Bucky shoved the gun into the tech's mouth and fired one more time.

He let the weight of the body drag the weapon from his hand as it dropped. The hostages from the subway, huddled on the floor at the far end of the room, stared at him, though one of the sharper ones was reaching for the AR-15 held by one of the fallen thugs.

Bucky shook his head slightly. "Better leave that--"

There was a familiar metal-on-metal clang from the door: the shield smashing the hardware of the lock.
"It's okay, everybody," Bucky said, turning to face the door and spreading his empty hands; he could hear his voice coming out flat and only now did the adrenaline really hit, his heart suddenly racing, blood rushing loud in his ears. "Captain America's here to save the day."

Steve shouldered through the door almost before Bucky finished speaking, and he took in everything in a sweeping tactical glance. Bucky just stared at him. He was in civvies too, more or less--Bucky was pretty sure his jacket was zipped up over the top half of his uniform, so he had some body armor on his torso, same as Bucky had under the hoodie.

His throat was bare, though, and his ears. They were a little pink with cold or something else, and Bucky probably shouldn't be staring at the tips of Steve's ears but it seemed important right now.

Steve called over his shoulder, "Hostiles are down! Medical, wounded hostage!" and then he walked in, shield still on his arm.

He didn't break stride, didn't look again at any of the hostages. He came straight to Bucky and backed him up against a cold concrete wall; he didn't quite meet Bucky's eyes until they were touching and Bucky was already giving ground. Once their eyes met there was nothing else in the world except Bucky's pounding heart and Steve.

Steve was here. Steve was here, and it was over, and nobody died who shouldn't have. Steve pushed their foreheads together as he pinned Bucky to the wall with his weight. His hands were still at his sides, the shield angled against the wall.

Bucky wanted to cling to him, but once he started he was never going to fucking stop, and there were people all around them.

Fuck, he was probably going to have to tell someone what happened. Explain it, make it sound sane. He thought of Isla, eager and hopeful and earnest, and he shut his eyes.

"Come on," Steve said, low, "come out of here, you're not staying in here."

Bucky shrugged, just to feel how Steve's weight was pressing his shoulders into the concrete wall.

"Come on," Steve said, and turned, getting his left arm around Bucky's shoulders to guide him out. Stark was by the door with his suit on but faceplate open, talking quietly to someone--there were medics working on Andrews but Bucky saw Andrews wave the hand that Cara wasn't holding. Still conscious.

"He," Bucky said faintly, but Steve was prodding him through the door. Bucky glimpsed the retreating figures of the other hostages, blankets around their shoulders, accompanied by Clint and Natasha and Sam, and a handful of police officers.

Steve steered him the other way, down the tunnel and around a corner to--nothing, just a little blind spot, just barely out of sight of the crime scene.

"Buck," Steve breathed, and the shield clanged against the floor as Steve dropped it to hold on to him with both arms, trying to crush his ribs right through his body armor.

Bucky held on back, clinging fiercely, tucking his face down against Steve's jaw.

"Buck, God, you--I thought--"

"Cara," Bucky said, his voice shaking a little like hers had. "Andrews, fucking genius, he--he taught her the off-switch, he must have. She used it, broke me free. I had a gun on her and she remembered
"Jesus Christ," Steve breathed, and it sounded very much like a prayer.

"Yeah," Bucky agreed. "Yeah, I--"

Steve turned his head, shifting his grip on Bucky, and Bucky picked his head up to meet the kiss, hungry and desperate and a little too hard. Bucky surged into it, adrenaline finding an outlet. His fingers dug in against Steve's coat and the uniform jacket underneath, then moved higher, searching for some part of Steve he could touch, until he had both hands on Steve's cheeks, thumbs brushing restlessly over Steve's ears.

They were kissing roughly, frantic and sloppy, trying to breathe each other's breath, to be as close and connected as they could, to hurt and love in equal measures. It was the only real thing in the world, the only thing he could feel after being turned upside down and inside out in the last hour. Now there was just Steve, just kisses and the need for more. Bucky hardly noticed when the rest of their bodies joined in, grinding rhythmically against each other.

Steve's hands clamped down on Bucky's hips, holding him to the wall as Steve thrust into him. Bucky tipped his head back and groaned, trying to keep it quiet but not caring too much whether he succeeded. Better to warn people off than have them come around the corner right now. He wriggled against Steve's grip, pushing back, and Steve growled, "Don't you fucking move," and dropped to his knees.

Bucky looked down, the thought just forming in his mind, But I can't-- and then Steve was jerking his jeans open and down and Bucky finally recognized that feeling of pressure and need. His dick was hard.

"Don't," Steve said, his voice low and absolutely commanding. "Move."

Ready to comply, rose to Bucky's lips, but he bit down on them rather than let the words out, and he was rewarded with the heat of Steve's mouth on him and groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. It almost hurt to be still, every kind of urgency running through his body--the fight had been over too fast, the triggers coming too quickly on top of each other and then Steve--and now Steve was sucking him, wet and hot and tight, exactly like any other time when they'd been barely hidden somewhere anyone might find them.

The effort of being still, of obeying, mingled with the need and the desperate relief and all became a sideways kind of pleasure that he felt more than the actual ordinary pleasure. Not that it mattered; Steve was giving him all of it and it was all what he needed, almost too much to bear. It couldn't last, and it didn't.

He came in Steve's mouth, his body going slightly out of his control for the second time in about ten minutes--it had all happened so fast--and crumpled down to his knees after. Steve's hands guided him down, controlling his descent, and Bucky got his own hands on Steve's face again, kissing him hungrily but softer this time, sweeter. He still felt like he was existing in some strange sideways world but at least Steve was here with him, mouth bitter with Bucky's come.

Bucky reached down to get Steve's pants open. Steve made a noise, maybe protest, maybe just surprise, but he didn't push Bucky's hand away, curling a hand around his head instead. Steve was hard in his hand, and Bucky knew from the way Steve's breath caught at the first touch that he wouldn't need much to get there.

"Don't worry," Bucky whispered, "Don't worry, Stevie, this is just taking the edge off. I'll fuck you
when we're home, huh, I'll--"

Steve's breath stopped entirely and he came over Bucky's fingers, clutching hard at Bucky's hip and the nape of his neck. Bucky stroked him through it, his brain catching up with his own words, and he started to laugh, dizzy with the sharp turns everything had taken.

He'd done it. He'd gotten hard, gotten off, without having to hurt, without having to be tied down, without being under the trigger, at least while he was doing it. Just once, that didn't mean he was cured--it wasn't exactly like they would ever replicate these conditions--but it was a start, a crack in the wall, something to work with.

Steve was shaking too, and Bucky, lost in euphoria, thought that Steve must be laughing too.

Then Steve's hand tightened harder on his neck, and Steve shook his head sharply, his forehead against Bucky's, too close for eye contact. Bucky's laughter went flat then. He didn't bother trying to pull back and look; he knew why Steve was holding him so hard. He closed his eyes and wiped his hand clean so he could put his arm around Steve.

"Hey," he said softly. "Steve, hey, I'm--it's--"

"This isn't supposed to happen anymore," Steve whispered, and that was enough to shock Bucky silent. Neither of their lives had ever had much to do with supposed to.

"You're supposed to be home, this is supposed to be over," Steve hissed. "I couldn't--I just--"

Bucky thought of the shock that had gone through him, the way the line must have gone dead all at once for Steve.

He thought of the other time, the first time. Steve's voice in his ear through Exley's phone, Andrews unconscious on the floor and a gun in Bucky's hand. He and Steve had never really talked about that, about what it had been like for Steve to be going about his life in the real world and then get that phone call, plunging him into Bucky's nightmare world from a thousand miles away where there was nothing he could do.

Bucky held him tighter. "Hey," he said softly. "Hey, it was okay. I mean, it was fucked up, but Cara helped me out, and it's over now. I was on my way back to you. I was coming home."

"Buck," Steve said, and then they both froze at a sound from back down the tunnel, back the way they'd come, different from the low distant sounds they'd both been aware of. Footsteps emerging from that room and stopping just outside as none had before.

They moved without another word, without hesitation, getting themselves decently back into their clothes, Steve grabbing his shield and stepping out first with Bucky at his back.

Tony--out of the suit now, wearing jeans and layered t-shirts--was standing with Cara just outside the door, both of them watching intently whatever was happening inside. Bucky stepped up to Steve's side just as the paramedics rolled a stretcher out with Andrews on it in a neck brace.

Bucky took a quick step forward, then froze as Tony raised a hand sharply, palm-out. Everyone else had just looked at him--including Andrews, though that was only a matter of opening his eyes. Bucky moved forward at a careful, measured pace, shoving his hands into his pockets, rounding his shoulders to be as small as possible.

"Hey," Bucky said, when he reached Andrews' side. He looked bad, his face bruised and cut up, red marks still showing the outline of the duct tape gag over his mouth, but his eyes focused on Bucky's.
"Sorry."

Andrews snorted, and made a tiny motion like he wanted to shake his head, only to be thwarted by the bracing. He looked toward where Cara was standing, and Bucky looked toward her.

"You saved us," she said, shaking her head.

"You saved everybody in that room," Bucky insisted. "You--both of you--I owe you. Everything."

"Oh," Andrews muttered. "In that case..."

Bucky grinned, recognizing the teasing tone.

"You'll have to supply them something other than the most comfortable private hospital room in the city and the best post-concussion sunglasses money can't buy," Tony put in, breaking the moment enough for Bucky to notice that the paramedics were obviously impatient to move things along, although not frantic, not pushing them aside.

Bucky stepped back, right into Steve. "You got this one, then, Stark?"

"Yeah, yeah, you two go the hell home. Cops'll want to talk to you, they'll be less cranky if you're easy to find, huh?"

Bucky glanced into the room--there were cops there, taking pictures and so on. Bucky frowned, noticing that one object was missing. The field calibration device.

He looked at Tony again, who had obviously followed the direction of his gaze and was looking pointedly innocent, but made a small gesture of crushing something between his hands. Bucky looked again, and realized that the crumpled bits of metal and wire on the floor used to be the field calibration device, before someone in an armored suit got his hands on it.

"Come on, places to go, very nice doctors to see," Tony said, turning away to shepherd Cara away, leading the paramedics after them. Bucky looked to Andrews, who flashed him a thumbs up and a crooked smile as he was wheeled away.

Then he reached behind him and caught Steve's hand.

"Come on," Bucky said, not bothering to look back; Steve's hard grip on his hand said everything he needed to know. Steve was with him. "Let's go home."
Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

Holy shit, we made it! :D

The cake was enormous.

It had to be, not only to celebrate the occasion, but to feed everybody who'd crammed in for the party.

Bucky had come back to MEDCOM for two weeks of intensive Trigger Reduction, now that the long trigger was on the table; the tech had had the words written down on a card that was found on his body afterward, which meant that the words were bound to get out at some point. Breaking the trigger as soon as possible was imperative, and the MEDCOM team had been successful with the rest, so they were clearly the best qualified, and in the most secure location.

They let Steve stay with him this time, though--in a barracks room with bunk beds.

It had been surprising, after spending all his time in New York being intermittently homesick for MEDCOM, to find out how small and uncomfortable the beds were, and how much he hated being unable to share a mattress with Steve and also able to roll over without someone falling out of bed or sustaining a concussion.

A minor concussion. It was fine. By morning, anyway. No harm done.

Coming back hadn't felt like coming home, not really, not now. It felt like going to visit somewhere familiar--a relative's house or a hotel that held fond memories. By the end of two weeks Bucky was thoroughly ready to actually go home, in every sense.

He'd managed to listen to the long trigger a dozen times without reacting at all that day, which was good, because it seemed like the majority of everyone he'd met in the 21st century had been given a pass to come on base tonight and join the party.

They were back in the little mess where Bucky had been eating his meals the last couple of weeks, and by the time the towering cake was brought in--covered not only with green army men but an assortment of tiny plastic Avengers--everyone had broken into little groups to talk.

Andrews, still wearing those sunglasses of Tony's, was holding court in a corner with Cara on one side and Pepper on the other. Tony and Bruce were deep in conversation with Exley and Lind and Dr. Chestek. Sam and Clint were hanging out with Duncan, Mueller, and Lee, and they'd mostly finished giving Sam shit about being Air Force. Steve and Natasha were watching, with decidedly different kinds of fascination, a conversation between Thor and Fr. Guzman that was, to all appearances, perfectly cordial. Kitty and Harry were talking to Woj and Mrs. Woj.

Bucky himself had gotten pulled to one side by Isla, who had demanded to look at his phone. He hadn't argued; he knew better. He looked away when the cake was wheeled in, and Isla squeaked and then pressed his phone back into his hand.

An app he didn't recognize was open. Twitter. The account was named @SgtJamesBarnes and after
his name was a little blue circle with a check mark inside. The picture in the corner was him and Steve, kissing outside his court martial.

Bucky looked at Isla. "You've earned this too," she said cheerfully. "If you don't want to use it we can handle it for you like we do Captain Rogers', but we feel you're slightly less likely to go around picking fights, so if you want to, it's all yours. You could post a selfie, if you want, or just say a few words, maybe about--" Isla gestured toward the cake, by which Bucky figured she meant the whole party and what it was celebrating.

He was finally free of his triggers, finally really free of HYDRA.

"Not a selfie," Bucky said slowly. It shouldn't be a picture just of him--even the picture for the account wasn't him alone. Bucky might want to change it to something more unique than the same picture the entire world had already seen, but he wouldn't argue with the content.

It wasn't just a celebration for him, after all. It wasn't like he'd done any of this alone, like he could possibly have done any of this without his team--both his teams, all mixed up now and gathered together.

"Hey," Bucky called, and though the room was noisy with conversations, every head turned toward him.

Bucky blinked at the sudden focus, but waved his phone. "Isla's gonna take a picture. With the cake. Everybody gather round."

Steve and Natasha moved in perfect unison to plant themselves between Thor and Fr. Guzman; Pepper jumped up to help Tony and Exley direct and arrange the scientists, including Bruce. Clint and Sam, with Duncan and Mueller and Lee, started drifting toward the middle of the room, pushing and shoving and talking trash about who belonged where in the picture.

Bucky looked to Andrews and Cara, and abruptly reconsidered.

He met them before they'd gone far and said quietly, "Is this--should I not do this? I wanted a picture for Twitter, but--"

But that would mean showing faces. It would mean exposing all of them to an enormous amount of attention.

Andrews snorted. "You've got some news to catch up on, Barnes. You been on blackout while you were in here again?"

Bucky shrugged. It hadn't been a blackout, precisely, but... well. He hadn't been watching the news, that was for sure.

Cara reached for Bucky's hand. "Eric and I and a few of the other hostages have been on TV already, talking about what you did in New York."

"And the rest of the guys have been on too. Once they had my name the press tracked down the rest, and the Army cleared 'em to talk about what a great guy you are. No details about treatment, nothing confidential," Andrews added quickly. "Just, you know. Personal human interest blah blah blah."

"Oh," Bucky said, and then he turned to Isla, at his elbow, narrowing his eyes. "Did they say anything I'm gonna have to go on TV and talk about?"

"Not in a bad way," Isla said immediately. She seemed a little relieved to have that cat out of the bag.
"Just good things! People might ask, but we'll go over all the footage once you're back home."

"Great," Bucky said, wondering how many more interviews he had ahead of him. He'd been lucky, clearly, to be back here at MEDCOM for a couple of weeks; maybe by the time he got back to New York something more interesting would have happened.

"C'mon, Buck, you're holding up the show!" Bucky turned toward Steve's voice and realized that even Andrews and Cara had taken their places now; everybody was standing there on the other side of the cake table, with Steve in the center, holding out his arm in the space where Bucky would fit.

Isla gave him a nudge, and Bucky moved, ducking under the table and popping up next to Steve. He didn't have to be told to smile, only tried not to laugh as Steve kissed his cheek and everyone else crushed in close around him, a dozen hands on his shoulders at once.

The shutter clicked and clicked and everyone was talking around him, and Bucky couldn't stop smiling. He'd never felt warmer.

He and Steve slipped out of the party before midnight, and Bucky was almost surprised when they just went to a car, an ordinary rental, instead of being smuggled out. The rest of the New York contingent would be taking Tony's private jet home at some point, but Steve had said he had a plan, and Bucky didn't mind how they got home as long as they were going.

He dozed in the quiet of the car--it had been an exhausting two weeks, even before the party--and woke close to three in the morning. He was abruptly and acutely aware that they were driving west, even before his eyes made sense of the desert they were driving through.

"Steve?"

"Go back to sleep," Steve said, reaching over to squeeze his thigh. "I've got this."

He still sounded pleased with himself, and Bucky figured he could sleep next to Steve in the car as well as their bed, so he didn't bother to argue.

He woke again to daylight and a vaguely familiar parking lot. Steve was next to him, drinking coffee from a thermos, and he grinned and offered it to Bucky.

He waited until Bucky had his mouthful before he said, "Happy birthday, Buck."

Bucky just stared at him, counting days, but of course Steve was right. Today was the tenth of March: his ninety-eighth birthday.

Bucky swallowed eventually and said, "So what'd you get me?"

Steve snorted and leaned in for a quick kiss, then said, "Come on and see."

Bucky kept hold of the thermos as he got out of the car. The sky seemed strangely vast above them, and the shapes of the scrub around the gravel lot were prodding at something in his brain.

He put it together a few minutes later, halfway down the path, and grabbed Steve's hand with his free one. Steve held on tight as they kept walking. Of course he remembered this place the same as Bucky did, except that Steve had already been capable of feeling fear the last time they were here.

They walked together all the way to the railing of the lookout, and stared out at the vastness of the
Grand Canyon lit in the early morning sun. Bucky couldn't speak, could hardly think, for a long time. He just looked, seeing all the color, all the beauty, that had made no sense to him before.

Finally he croaked out, "Is this--are we just--"

"I brought camping gear," Steve said. "If you want to give things a few more days to settle down back home, we can have a real good look around. Sleep under the stars. Maybe do some other stuff under the stars."

Bucky laughed, weirdly close to a sob, remembering that night in the greenhouse, looking up at the vast sky above him. Out here there would be nothing between them and the stars. It wasn't exactly the tourist season yet; there would be places where he and Steve could be alone with all of this.

"Yeah," Bucky said. "Yeah, that sounds good. We oughta see it right--we came all this way."

"We should take a picture first," Steve said. "Something to remember, huh?"

Bucky didn't think he'd ever forget, but he knew he would want to look at this moment again and again. He stepped in closer to Steve and turned to face the sun.
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